

## Descent from the top of The World



*Lee on the summit 5.37am 24<sup>th</sup> May 2008*

I was numb. Numb through the physical effort of the last nine and a half hours climb, and numb emotionally the mental strain of concentration for the last three days had drained me of all thoughts of triumph and celebration. The only feeling I had was pain. Pain in my gloved hands, booted feet, exposed ears, exposed cheeks and any other part of exposed flesh. Flesh laid bare to the forty miles per hour wind that blew wickedly on top of the world was beginning to turn hard. The first signs of frost nip, no wonder, with the wind chill factor the temperature was about  $-75^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Already I had no feeling in the fingers of my left hand, the price of removing my big down mittens to handle a frozen camera for the precious summit photo. After fifteen

minutes suffering pain, I shouted to Pasang Sherpa we had to go.



*Lee and Pasang Camp II after summiting*

Pasang was in worse condition than me, his oxygen mask had frozen earlier on, meaning he was on the summit with no oxygen. The almost equivalent of being at the altitude of an intercontinental airplane's cruising altitude. He was suffering badly, the cold eating him alive. I pulled him to his feet and urged him to get down fast, "don't wait for me get just down!" I shouted over the wind.

He moved fast and disappeared down the snowy traverse. I got myself together, clipped back onto the fixed line and bound after him, guessing that my oxygen bottle must be getting low by now. As I skirted round rocky outcrops and buttresses, I was upset to see him hanging on the Hillary Step a bundle of fixed lines in his hands, suffering even more, as he let ascending climbers get over the final rocky bivalve hump of the step. I shouted over the wind to him, not to worry about them "get down" I shouted moving my mittened hand repeatedly downward. I could see through their goggles that the ascending climbers' eyes were filled with summit fever; nothing was going to get in their way. I had to move into a small chimney in the rock to let them go past.

I began to get cold through inactivity. Once again I felt the cold creeping up through my fingers and toes into my hands and feet, slowly and painfully; like bindweed strangling a nettle. I got frustrated and angry each time one of these climbers reached me. They struggled to work out which of the many fixed lines to clip their jumar onto. "It's the orange line, you idiot! – the same as you've just climbed the step with" handing them the orange rope now with a solid hand.



*Summit Ridge*

After maybe forty minutes and ten climbers, Pasang descended and I lost sight of him over the step. I went to get over and was turned back; three more climbers were coming over. I was getting worried my oxygen was getting low, but now was my chance to get over the Hillary Step. I got over the bivalve, turned into the rock and down climbed to a small snowy notch.

I was surprised and disappointed to find Pasang on his knees huddled over his pack. The climbing ethic of the expedition was to climb unguided. Each team member carrying their own loads of equipment and gear to each successive camp. These camps established by our sherpa team. Pasang was with me on summit day to carry spare oxygen and keep an experienced eye on me. Though he never climbed with me, always thirty yards or so behind. I urged him to get to his feet saying 'you can't stay here'. He came to life and disappeared around a rocky corner and down over towards the South summit. I followed at my own pace, then I realised it was daylight the sun's rays bright and warming; I had no goggles or glasses on, as I'd climbed through the night. I was worried about the real danger of snow blindness. I stopped and half got into an icy crevasse, there I took my pack off and still with numb hands I fished inside either for my goggles or glasses not caring which was coming out first. I found my goggles, put them on and with pack back on my back got to the small snowy col before the icy steps of the south summit.

Again, I was dismayed to find Pasang knelt down over his pack. He was desperately but with no success trying to break off the ice from the inside of his mask. We changed over my oxygen bottle and he said this bottle had to last, it had to get me down to South Col at 7,955 metres, we were at 8,700 metres. We ascended snow steps up to the South summit and traversed over to descend.

On the other side of the summit I got a view of South Col, far, far below. “My God, that’s miles” I thought as I screwed up my eyes to pick out tiny dots of yellow and orange which were tents set amongst the brown rocks so far below. Suddenly I was overwhelmed “I can’t do this”, I thought to myself. Then I remembered the old climbing cliché ‘the summits only halfway’ and that most people die on descent on Everest, many just give up, sit down and die.

Pasang was long gone, a figure getting smaller and smaller but easy to see; a dark shape set against the pristine whiteness of the snow. I got my focus back, and thought about my next move. ‘If I just get to the end of this fixed line (to the ice screw anchoring it to the snow) I’m getting down’. I broke down the decent into small manageable bits – almost like a pitch on a big multi-pitch rock climb. As my focus and thoughts came back I wondered where another member of the team had got to on the mountain; Wally Riesinger from Canada. He had become my partner on the mountain. We always seemed to be together on the trail. We had spent a pensive afternoon together in a tiny tent at South Col, the last two team members left with any opportunity in making a summit push. In the tent at South Col as we’d waited for the afternoon to turn into evening and then night. The time at which we were set to make our exit from South Col and onto the mountain proper, we’d shared a sleeping bag wrapped round the both of us and had pooled all our food.

After a long while and continuing down a steep snow slope from the rock step. I was approaching the area known as The Balcony; the top of the snow couloir which led down to South Col. I heard a ‘Hi Lee’ and turned round to see Kenton Cool twenty yards above me, “Did he [Sir Ranulph Fiennes] get up?” I shouted up to him. “No 8,3” he replied meaning of course that he had turned around at 8,300 metres. Kenton and Rob Casserley were Sir Ran’s guides on Everest this year. ‘That’s a real shame, poor bugger’ I shouted back, as I turned and walked down to The Balcony in earnest.

At The Balcony, I began to relax a bit. I sat down and began to strip out of my down suit tying the body and arms of it around my waist. Close to me lying on the snow was a large blue bag. Slowly it dawned on me the blue bag contained a body. A climber had died today. This really brought home to me the tightrope I was walking between life and death, here in the 'death zone'. I later found out it was a Swiss climber who had attempted to climb Everest without oxygen. I decided not to linger and started going down the fixed line leading me into the snow couloir, before long I came across another body.

I knew this was Scott Fischer, a guide who had perished in the 1996 disaster. When one night, thirteen people had died on the mountain. I paid my respects and seeing his body made me more determined to get down to South Col.

The snow couloir just seemed to go on and on. I just wanted it to end, I was so thirsty I hadn't now drunk any fluids for over fourteen hours. I caught up with Pasang, he had recovered and we chatted briefly and he bounded down the couloir. I carried on a lot slower than him, adrenaline beginning to wear off and dehydration and exhaustion taking hold.

Then to my left I came across another body. A figure clad in a blue down suit, his chest and head thankfully covered by scree, the rest of him laid bare to the elements. Next to him sat a figure; it was Rob Casserely. I then remembered Rob had mentioned to me some weeks ago about a dead friend of his. He was paying his respects to a good friend. We looked at each other through our goggles. I took his gloved hand and squeezed it, the only action I could think of to show my respect and sympathy. He simply said 'thanks Lee' and we descended, leaving his fallen friend to his eternal resting place.

Finally I got to the bottom of the couloir, and was pleased to get on the hard packed snow of South Col. Before long the tents of South Col or Camp IV came into view and I thought "I know I'm really close if I can read the brand names on the tents". In time I could do this, I was 'home' relatively safe and in comfort of one of our two tents. I went into the tent that I'd shared with Wally and there was no sign of him, or his sleeping bag.

I felt exhausted, and crawled into the tent. I was met with the second part of a double whammy, not only had Wally gone (He'd descended back to Camp II after turning around at the Balcony after getting the onset of frostbite) and taken his sleeping bag, my inflatable sleeping mattress had a puncture. I had already decided to spend the night here at South Col, Camp IV, to recover and make the long trip back to Camp II the next day. I was faced with the uncomfortable prospect of sleeping purely on the tent's ground sheet above the large stones that made up the ground at the Col, and of course with no sleeping bag.

Most of the afternoon, I was preoccupied with trying to hydrate amongst the long fits of coughing, which seemed to only cease once I'd vomitted. As darkness fell I checked my oxygen bottle to make sure I had enough to last the night, I made myself as comfortable as possible, still in my down suit, which gave some padding from the stones. I must have drifted off to sleep, because the next thing I knew I was awake at four in the morning. I was covered in ice. Exhaled air from my oxygen mask damo with my lungs' moisture had covered the front of my down suit. It sintered and cracked as I sat up. I started coughing again, but a little more controlled than yesterday. I laid there for a few hours trying not to notice the aches and pains from lying on the ground, waiting for day light to come.

At around seven in the morning I walked out of my tent, the enormity of what I'd just achieved beginning to sink in. I walked with confidence from my tent to the sherpas and said to them that I was going down. I was feeling good and made my way with swagger out of camp; only to lose my footing and trip over a catering size tin of Spam! That was just on piece of various bits of rubbish left behind by other teams. 'Not cool' I thought, and I quickly got up, rubbed my knees and walked out of camp a bit more meekly.



*Lhotse Face*

I made it down to base camp via the Genva Spur and the Lhotse Face, and spending another night at Camp II, and all was well.

I had summited in the worst weather conditions the small five day summit window of this year had given. I had climbed unguided, the only member of the seven man team to summit and it had taken me sixteen and a half hours round trip from South Col. I was lucky, my oxygen was down to just 5 psi and all I'd suffered was nerve damage in five fingers and four toes, oh, I'd also left my head torch on the summit!



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Lee Farmer is a professional mountaineer who has climbed mountains on all the worlds' continents. He is a specialist in extreme environments and has led expedition teams in the humid heat of jungles to the extreme cold of the Polar Regions.

He is the 180<sup>th</sup> Briton to summit Mt Everest, and has been to the South Pole three times. He was made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) in 2008 and is a schools' ambassador for the Society.

If you want to understand the passion of climbing mountains, what drives climbers to it, how they cope with everything from pain to sleep deprivation, deep weariness, fear, sickness and fighting both the elements and the clock, this is your chance. Audiences are captivated by Lee's 'no holds barred' lectures giving the listener real insights to; life on expedition, the experiences, the drama, and his own intense drive and the ability to re-motivate when there seems no point in going on.

Lee is a regular media figure. He has co presented on BBC Radio, and appeared on both BBC Television and Independent Television. He has been featured in national, regional and local newspapers and business publications. When not facing the world's most feared mountains, he settles for rock climbing, travel writing and taking people into world's mountains for teambuilding and personal development.

When not in a tent on expedition, he lives in Berkshire with his long suffering, but understanding wife, Nicola, and four cats. For further information please go to his web site: [www.leefarmer.co.uk](http://www.leefarmer.co.uk) or contact him directly on 01635 253929 or 07760 153677.