Small World Big Picture

Expedition Everest
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“A Season on Everest”

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Back into thin air: Ben Webster is back on Mount Everest, determined to get his Canadian team to the top

By Ron Corbett
Sunday, March 21, 2004
Page: C5 (Weekly Section)

The last time Ben Webster stood on the summit of Mount Everest, the new millennium had just begun. He stepped onto the roof of the world with Nazir Sabir, a climber from Pakistan, and stared at the land far below. The date was May 17, 2000.

Somewhere beneath him, in a camp he could not see, were the other members of the Canadian Everest Expedition, three climbers from Quebec who would not reach the summit of the world's tallest mountain. As Webster stood briefly on the peak -- for no one stays long on that icy pinnacle -- stories were already circulating he had left the other climbers behind, so driven was he to become the first Canadian of the new millennium to reach the top of Everest.

He would learn of the stories later, and they would sting. Accusation followed nasty accusation, the worst perhaps being that the other climbers had quit on him, so totalitarian had they found his leadership.

When Webster descended from the mountain, he walked into a firestorm of negative publicity that bothers him to this day. At times in the ensuing four years he would shrug, and say simply he was the strongest of the four climbers, the only one able to summit the mountain that day. End of story.

At other times, he would speak of different goals -- personal versus team -- and how they got mixed up on that expedition, with other climbers putting themselves ahead of their shared purpose.

And there were occasions when he would just say: That's Everest for you. On most Everest expeditions, infighting can make even the nastiest reality show seem genteel.

On that May morning, Webster knew only that he had achieved -- 152 years after Everest was formally recognized as the world's tallest mountain -- one of the great feats of human endeavour. He had climbed to the top of the world.

And he could hardly wait to do it again. This weekend, Ben Webster and three other climbers -- Hector Ponce de Leon, A.J. Lock and Shauna Burke -- are in Nepal, getting ready to climb Mount Everest.

For Webster, this latest expedition is an opportunity to earn the favourable press that eluded him in 2000. An intense man, who sometimes has little time for social niceties and who can rub people the wrong way without even knowing it, he still insists the expedition four years ago achieved everything it set out to accomplish.

"That expedition was a success, no matter how the media chose to portray it at the time," he says. "Not everyone on the team reached the summit, but one member did. It happened to be me, but we reached the summit. That was the goal, and we did it."

Webster is 41 and was raised in Toronto, although he spent most of his summers as a boy at his grandparent's cottage near Pembroke. He loved the outdoors and it wasn't long before he was working as a guide at various summer camps in Algonquin Park. He quit university after two years so he could guide and rock climb full-time.
By his mid-20s, in what he describes as "a very lucky break," he was working for the government of India, which was looking for ways to boost tourism to the more remote areas of the country.

"I did many first descents of some of the most beautiful white-water rivers in the world," he says. "The Indian government would send me to these places, to check out what was there, and whether it could be a tourist destination. I was only in my 20s, and I had the perfect job."

He worked for the Indian government for five years, before returning to Canada to become an "outdoors bum." Three years ago he moved to Ottawa, which he said was the perfect location for his burgeoning expedition business -- easy travel links to major cities along the north-east seaboard, yet a short drive from the Gatineau Hills and the famous white-water runs along the Ottawa and Gatineau rivers, where he once worked as a teenager.

It was perhaps inevitable that Webster would take a stab at climbing Mount Everest, no matter where he relocated. Like most serious climbers, the mountain for him has a magnetic attraction.

"I feel very confident of our abilities to reach the summit. Of all of us reaching the summit"

"There is something exotic about Everest," he says. "I grew up reading about it as a boy, about Hillary's expedition, and the forbidden kingdom of Nepal, about the sherpas; how could you not want to go there and try to climb that mountain?"

He still cringes, though, when questions are asked about his first trip up Everest, and says there was simply no way the other climbers on the 2000 expedition could have reached the summit. They tried, failed, and then blamed him.

And so, when the opportunity came to go back up Everest, he decided to do things a little differently. This time, he would bring along a couple of ringers.

Ben Webster stands in front of a frozen ice fall and strikes a pose for a television camera. The camera pans from the ground up, moving slowly as first his cramponed boots move into the frame, then his ice pick, then his beaming face with his hat and sunglasses removed.

Webster is shooting promotional shots for the Discovery Channel, which is sponsoring his Everest expedition, and which will air a six-part documentary on the climb this fall. As he strikes a new pose for the camera, the other climbers on his team look at the frozen falls, debating whether to climb.

"I think the far channel is too soft," says Ponce de Leon, pointing to one of the frozen tributaries. "We climbed it two days ago, but now it's starting to melt. I wouldn't go up there today."

Which leaves two other channels of the frozen Mont Morency falls, just north of Quebec City. Ponce de Leon straps a pair of crampons to his boots and heads to one of the frozen tributaries. The other two climbers walk with him.

Ponce de Leon began climbing when he was a boy, scampering up the base of volcanoes near his native Mexico City. When he was 11, his father took him on his first real climb, to a 5,400-metre volcano 90 kilometres outside Mexico City.
"I pestered my father until he took me," remembers Ponce de Leon. "He had never climbed before, but he read up on the sport and went and got the equipment we needed. It was really rather nice of him to do that for his son."

After that climb, Ponce de Leon was hooked. He climbed everything he could in Mexico and by his mid-20s had dropped out of university and was working as a professional guide for several expedition companies in the United States. Now 36, he lives in Spain. He has climbed to the summit of Everest twice, once from the north side, once from the south.

"This looks solid," says Lock, when they are standing directly in front of a wall of ice. "Who's going up first?"

Lock is one of the world's top high-altitude climbers. There are 14 mountains in the world over 8,000 metres high, and the Australian has climbed 10 of them, including Everest. There are fewer than a dozen people in the world who have climbed the "14 summits" and with luck, the former Sydney cop will join that select group in the next three to four years.

"It didn't start off as a goal," he explains. "I was sitting around one day, when it dawned on me I had already climbed 10 of the 14 mountains. It seemed silly after that to not try and get the last four."

So it became a goal, one that drives him and sustains him, although Lock admits he is pushing the envelope a bit at 42 and there are only a few years left to try and complete the sweep.

The last climber is Shaunna Burke, 28, a PhD student at the University of Ottawa and a former professional skier from Quebec. She is also Webster's girlfriend and the only one of the four climbers never to summit Everest.

"I am looking forward to the expedition, although of course I'm nervous," she says, staring up at the sheet of ice in front of her. "I have trained properly, and I think I'm mentally prepared. The only thing left to do is see what I've got, when I'm finally up there on the mountain."

Ponce de Leon ends up being the first climber to jab his crampons into the ice, and as his teammates watch him climb, a group of tourists stop and speak to another nearby climber. He runs a climbing school at Mont Morency and knows Hector, A.J. and Ben. One of the tourists asks why the television camera is there.

"Those people are climbing Everest," he says. The man who asked the question nods his head, suitably impressed.

"Everest," he says, "good for them."

"No," says the teacher. "Everest. Bad for them."

Between 1921 and 1996, 144 climbers have died trying to reach the summit of Mount Everest. In 1996, in one day alone, five climbers perished on the upper reaches of the mountain, among them two expedition leaders and a guide.

What happened that day was featured in an IMAX movie, and was the subject of the bestseller Into Thin Air by journalist Jon Krakauer, who was there writing a story for Outside magazine when the tragedy happened.

There was talk after 1996, of banning commercial trips up Everest, or imposing a ban on climbing altogether, but nothing came of it. The lure of the mountain is too strong, the Nepalese economy too dependent on globe-trotting adventurers, to turn back the clock to a time Everest was unscaled.

The mountain was first identified as the world's highest in 1852. Until then, no one suspected Peak XV, as it was called by the Indian government, was noteworthy. Its top was often obscured by clouds, the body of the mountain hidden by other mountains, its base located in the forbidden kingdom of Nepal.

Using the angle of the mountain's rise, triangulation from six other sites in India, and simple math, the mountain was measured in 1852, at 29,002 feet. Using lasers and satellites more than 100 years later, it was determined the old measurement was short by 26 feet. The currently accepted height of the mountain is 29,028 feet, or roughly the cruising altitude of an Airbus jetliner.

The mountain would be named Everest, after George Everest, a former surveyor general of India (the mountain was known locally, in Nepal, as Deva-dhunga, or "Seat of
and it was not long before people began trying to climb it.

One hundred and one years would pass before anyone succeeded. In that time, 24 men died attempting to reach the summit. Fifteen expeditions failed.

When Sir Edmund Hillary and sherpa Tenzing Norgay finally reached the summit on May 29, 1953, the feat had long been considered impossible. Landing on the moon seemed more attainable, and news of the successful climb was front-page news around the world four days later, coming out the day of Queen Elizabeth's coronation. The news set off huge street parties throughout England.

The world was filled with possibilities again. And adventurers flocked anew to Everest.

Hector Ponce de Leon sits in the restaurant of the Hotel de Gouverneur in Quebec City, and says sure, he's thought of it. Any serious climber has.

"You are always aware that you might not come back," he says. "Any climber who tells you differently is lying. Anything can happen up there."

And yet, although he makes a living climbing mountains that take your breath away -- a participant in one of the most dangerous sports in the world -- Ponce de Leon says he has never thought of quitting. He has rarely even been scared.

There is no hint of bravado when he says this. It is not a boast. Not a challenge.

It is hard to explain for those who view life differently, but Ponce de Leon says that when he is climbing a mountain there is no place else he would rather be. When you have that feeling of contentment, that feeling of belonging, it leaves little room for fear.

"I do not have a death wish," he says. "It is the exact opposite. If I turned my back on climbing, that would be a death wish, that would be hating my life. On the mountain, I have no fear because I know I am exactly where I should be. I wonder if the people who say this is crazy can say the same thing."

Lock feels the same way, although he is given to more swagger than Ponce de Leon. When asked why he wants to climb Everest, for the fourth time, he says: "I like the view." (The comment is reminiscent of George Mallory's famous quote when being pestered by a journalist who could not understand why the Englishman wanted to climb Everest. "Because it is there," answered Mallory.)

Lock says there is really no way of explaining the lure of high-altitude mountaineering until you have tried it. He didn't start climbing until he was in his mid-20s, but he was hooked within months, quickly spending all his free time training in New Zealand (there are few mountains in Australia), and planning one major expedition a year.

"It really does become a passion," he says. "It sort of takes over everything."

Like the other climbers, Lock is single, although he was married once, to a primary school teacher in Sydney. The marriage lasted three years, until his wife said it was time for him to choose between her or the mountains.

He made his second attempt up Everest shortly afterwards.

As Krakauer puts it in Into Thin Air, virtually every climber since Hillary has tried to climb Everest the same way -- by laying siege to the mountain.

Webster's expedition will be no different. The group will spend 10 days trekking to what is known as Everest base camp, a multi-national tent city erected every spring 17,600 feet up the mountain.
Sherpas hired by Webster will then set up four camps higher up the mountain, each approximately 2000 feet higher than the last.

The camps will be supplied with bottled oxygen, food and tents, and over the next month Webster and the other climbers will move from camp to camp, acclimatizing themselves to high altitude.

They will spend some nights at Camp 2 and Camp 3, then back to Base Camp to rest up. This training schedule will culminate in a trek to Camp 4 where they will bunk down in preparation for what is known on Everest as "summit day."

Normally, climbers get only one try at summiting Everest, setting off from Camp 4 early in the morning, or even in the middle of the night, and later that day taking their best shot at reaching the top. They will not have the energy left for a second try.

Webster estimates summit day for this expedition will fall between May 8 and 12. A lot will depend on the weather, and how the climbers have performed in the weeks leading up to summit day.

And even if the unexpected fails to materialize, there is still the expected to deal with. At more than 8,000 metres above sea level, in thin air that has one-third the oxygen supply we are accustomed to, no one performs at peak on summit day.

"You have to see it to understand what that air does to you," says Lock. "You watch elite athletes struggling to reach the summit. They take two steps and then they have to rest for 15 minutes. You don't know how you'll perform until you're there."

Ben Webster is on the phone, giving a last interview he says he is too busy to do in person. Too many things to do. He has to "multi-task" -- speak to a reporter while getting the last of his gear ready for shipment to Nepal.

"I'll be a different person when I come back," he says, by way of an apology for not being able to meet. "Right now, I have to concentrate on the trip. That's where my head is at. We'll have a beer in June, and you'll see I'm a different person."

He says the reporters who covered the 2000 expedition should have met him afterward as well. They would have seen a different Ben Webster, not the driven expedition leader who had to lay down the rules and make decisions on what was best for the expedition.

The events on the mountain four years ago still galls him. It tarnished what should have been the greatest achievement in a life spent searching for outrageous challenges. You should be praised for summiting Everest. Not attacked.

So this time, he is determined to do things differently. The two weeks spent in Quebec City, training with Ponce de Leon, Lock and Burke have hopefully brought the climbers together and made them a cohesive team.

"I have two of the best high-altitude climbers in the world on this expedition," he says. "I feel very confident of our abilities to reach the summit. Of all of us reaching the summit."

You can hear in his voice how badly he wants that to happen. How he wants to put the past behind him, and stand again on the roof of the world, vindicated and renewed.

It is like that for many people who climb Everest. It is not merely a physical challenge or proud achievement. It is something more innate. Something more transcendental.

In 1926, Sir Francis Younghusband published a book on the ill-fated 1924 Everest expedition that claimed the life of George Mallory, a national hero in England who had...
made two previous unsuccessful attempts to scale the mountain.

"To Mallory, Everest was the embodiment of the physical forces of the world," wrote Younghusband. "Against it he had to pit the spirit of man." Twenty nine years after Mallory's death, the spirit of man finally won. This spring, it will be tested once again.

An Armchair Look at the Everest Bid

When Sir Edmund Hillary reached the summit of Mount Everest in 1953, it took four days for news of the accomplishment to reach the outside world.

This spring, it will take seconds.

"We are probably going to be the most technologically advanced expedition ever to go up Everest," says Ben Webster. "People will be able to follow our expedition, in real time, for the whole ascent."

Algonquin College, although not an official sponsor of Webster's expedition, is behind the latest innovation in high-altitude trekking. The college has even set up a website that will allow people to follow Webster and the other climbers as they scale Everest, using a virtual model of the mountain and global positioning systems (GPS) that will update the whereabouts of the climbers every 30 minutes.

"The technology is simply amazing," says Kent MacDonald, dean of business at the college and an early supporter of Webster's expedition. "The digital rendering of Everest, I'm told it's perfect. You really do feel as if you're there."

Webster approached Algonquin last year, intrigued by the college's growing reputation as a leader in new technology. He explained that he wanted to be "fully wired" when he went back to Everest, wanted to broadcast live images and data from the summit, to go live over the Internet, to let people follow the progress of all the climbers at all times, maybe even record heart rates and other medical information.

No problem.

"We have partnered with a couple of local hi-tech companies to make all this work," says MacDonald. "Skywave mobile communications has handled the GPS satellite communications and we have been working with March Networks as well. We're all quite excited to see how the technology works up on the mountain."
'I never pictured it quite like this. The moon isn't as bleak as this ': Base Camp takes Valerie Pringle's breath away, but as Tom Spears writes, the broadcaster isn't gasping at the magnificent view or cushy lodgings.

By Tom Spears  
Saturday, April 10, 2004  
Page: D5 (City Section)

Nothing -- not an armful of books on Mount Everest, not pictures, not all the interviews in the world -- prepared broadcaster Valerie Pringle for the bleakness of base camp, 5,363 metres above sea level.

"I can't even describe it. I've read every Everest book I can get my hands on. I've been interested in the subject for a long time. I never pictured it quite like this. The moon isn't even quite as bleak as this.

"You're sitting on this gravel pits, with some of the boulders the size of Range Rovers and the rest the size of breadboxes. You sort of scramble and it's all hilly. And there's 600 feet (180 metres) of ice beneath you, and there's barely enough flat space to put down one little tent."

Somehow there are 10 or 11 expeditions squeezed together with tents, prayer flags, chunks of snow-covered rock and ice. People scramble around like Gollum, the rock-climbing creature in Lord of the Rings.

At the edge of camp there's the Khumbu Icefall, "just this jagged mass of ice that's on the move. You look at people going through it as they have been the last couple of days, teams going up, and they look like ants ... The teams just vanish in the size of this thing."

"You're surrounded by these mountains that are so close you could touch them. It's something else."

It took Pringle 13 days to walk the 43 kilometres from the nearest airfield to base camp. That gave her time to acclimatize; the air at base camp has only half as much oxygen as air at sea level.

At 50, she considers herself to be in pretty good shape. She takes fitness classes, but doesn't hike or climb, and had to buy hiking boots for her trip.

"I look up at the mountain and think: 'These people are out of this world.' There's a world of difference between the trekkers and the climbers." And the Sherpas "blow you away" with their ability to zoom around under heavy loads.

She admires them enormously. "I cannot imagine the hardship that these people can put up with. I find base camp incredibly cold and difficult.

"It's so hard to breathe; it takes such physical exertion: I am impressed by the people who can do it ... They have to be very focused. Sometimes selfish. Sometimes so driven to be able to make it to the top."

You wouldn't tempt her to climb, though.

"The icefall is the first part you have to go through and it's really scary ... It's such a volatile and dangerous place. I have three kids. I'm completely untrained and quite frankly, it's just so damn hard, uncomfortable, difficult, cold ...

"It's no walk in the park just because something like 1,500 people have done it."

Forget about the climb: Even base camp is no summer day in Algonquin Park.

First, there are the five layers of clothing. It's cold up there -- base camp is higher than any point in the Rocky Mountains.

Then there's the bathroom tent. "Hideous," Pringle says.

"As cool as this sat phone is -- 21st-century stuff -- I cannot tell you how 13th-century the toilets are, and I'm washing my hair in a bucket."
The Doctor's diagnosis: The condition is critical: Ottawa adventurer Ben Webster is leading an Everest expedition that is about more than making a successful ascent of the world's tallest mountain; it is also about making a documentary he hopes will be a cut above the rest. To make that happen, Webster, 41, has chosen teammates Shauna Burke, 28, of Ottawa; Hector Ponce de Leon, 36, of Mexico; and A.J. Lock, 42, of Australia. Citizen reporter Pauline Tam follows the story.

By Pauline Tam
Saturday, April 10, 2004
Page: D1 (City Section)

One of the most dangerous jobs in the world belongs to a man known simply as the Khumbu Doctor.

Every spring, before the arrival of high-altitude climbers, the Khumbu Doctor wrestles the world's tallest peak, and wins. With little fanfare and large doses of stoicism, the middle-aged Sherpa arrives at the foot of Mount Everest, and carves a trail through a river of ice -- a shifting glacier, the most feared obstacle on the mountain.

Without the Khumbu Doctor, there is no way through the Khumbu Icefall, the first of many deadly trials awaiting Everest climbers.

No one knows this better than Ben Webster. In the four years he has been climbing Everest, Webster has repeatedly witnessed the Khumbu Doctor hopscotch uphill through a maze of twisted ice towers. Each 30-tonne ice boulder teeters overhead, and can topple without warning.

If that's not enough, add the danger of being swallowed by bottomless crevasses. Since 1963, when an American climber was crushed by an avalanching ice block, more than 20 people -- mostly Sherpas whose homeland surrounds Everest -- have died at the Khumbu Icefall.

Remarkably, during 25 years as a paid contractor, the Khumbu Doctor has not let the Icefall get the better of him. Western climbers such as Webster speak with awe of his skills.

In early April, before the first expeditions arrive at Base Camp, the Khumbu Doctor sets a route out of ladders and rope, creating bridges across gaping crevasses.

Often, in the tradition of devout Buddhists, he will throw rice as an act of blessing, before attempting to cross the Icefall.

During the two-month climbing season, the Khumbu Doctor may move through the Icefall as many as a half-dozen times a day. As climbers negotiate the various sections, his job is to adjust the ladders as, beneath them, the glacier groans and undulates. The adjustments are particularly important later in the season, when warm weather widens crevasses and forces parts of the glacier to collapse.

A season on Everest begins and ends with the man climbers call The Doctor.

One of the first things Webster does when he and his expedition arrive at Base Camp is seek a consultation with The Doctor. It's Sunday afternoon and the last of the ladders have just been secured, allowing the season's first climbers to ascend.

The Doctor's diagnosis gives Webster reason for extra caution. Because of an abnormally dry winter, the Icefall is splintered in fits and starts. There are more crevasses, ladders, and tottering ice blocks than usual, compounding the risk.

Webster already suspects as much. During his 13-day trek through the Himalayan foothills, he glimpses Everest from the village of Namche Bazaar, and notices it is uncharacteristically bare. His observations are confirmed several days later when, from the hamlet of Dingboche, he catches sight of jet-stream winds hammering the 8,848-metre peak. The high-speed currents appear to scatter what little snow remains at the top.

Indeed, since March 18, when Webster's expedition started in the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu, the weather has been unseasonably hot, soaring to highs of 30 C. Veteran climbers who recently completed Himalayan expeditions report no snow or rain for more than 20 days. They have never seen conditions like this in the region.

In Namche, which sits at an altitude of 3,446 metres, Webster is already making calculations about what the conditions will mean on Everest's upper shanks. An intense, driven man, he doesn't believe in leaving
anything to chance. While his colleagues prefer to focus on immediate tasks, Webster is always planning ahead.

"Things that you do now will affect how things go six weeks from now," he explains.

Having led two previous Everest expeditions, Webster knows dry conditions mean a more technical climb.

Without ice or snow to use as a foothold, climbers have to gain purchase on bare rock. On the other hand, they don't have to worry about pushing through knee-deep snow.

But the Himalayas are notorious for late-season storms. One of the most infamous happened in May 1996, when nine climbers died during a rogue storm that slammed Everest's peak. Accounts of the disaster were later immortalized in a half-dozen books, including Jon Krakauer's Into Thin Air.

The weather isn't Webster's only challenge. Unlike his past expeditions, which were about reaching the summit, his goal is also to make a documentary. With funding from Discovery Channel Canada, Webster is producing a six-part TV series providing an intimate look at what it takes to climb Everest.

His pitch to the network involves an ambitious plan to shoot detailed footage of his team and their struggles above 8,000 metres -- known as the "Death Zone." The series also promises a gritty, behind-the-scenes look at an Everest expedition. Webster is certain this approach will set his documentary apart from others in the genre, notably the 1997 IMAX film by David Breashears.

"If you watch the IMAX movie, very little of it is actually shot above Camp Two," says Webster, referring to one of the four rest stops above Base Camp, along Everest's Southeast Ridge.

"We're going to attempt to tell the story of where the real drama takes place, higher up on the mountain."

Given that the network is spending more than $1 million on the expedition, Webster has chosen his partners carefully. As well as being experienced climbers, his teammates have to be comfortable in front of -- and behind -- the camera. Since they will likely be without a professional videographer near the summit, the climbers also have to handle camera equipment in extreme cold and altitude.

The climbers Webster has chosen are Hector Ponce de Leon of Mexico and A.J. Lock of Australia -- two professional Himalayan climbers with a record of five Everest ascents between them. The third climber, Shauna Burke, is a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa and a former competitive skier.

Last fall, Burke climbed to Camp Two at 6,500 metres as part of her research on the psychology of Everest mountaineers. On this expedition, she plans to conduct more research, while juggling the responsibilities of climbing and filming. As the only climber who has never summited, she has spent much of her time on the march to Base Camp preparing herself mentally for the challenge.

A small army of support staff are accompanying Webster and his team to Base Camp. They include Mike Swarbrick, an audio-visual technician from Ottawa; Frank Vilaca, a freelance cameraman from Toronto; and Matt Arentz, a physician from Vermont who specializes in high-altitude medicine. Also on the trip is a production team from the Discovery Channel, among them journalist Valerie Pringle. Another contingent of locals -- including eight climbing Sherpas and four cooking staff -- round out the expedition members.

The journey to Base Camp begins in Kathmandu, where the group narrowly avoids a general strike. The four-day stop gives them a last opportunity to buy supplies. While some food and equipment has been shipped ahead, the expedition still leaves the Nepalese capital with four tonnes of gear -- most of it food.

In all, more than 50 loads -- each the size of giant hockey bags -- are transported along the 50-kilometre route to base camp. Like most expedition leaders, Webster relies on a combination of airlifts, yaks and porters for the task. Having twice organized a caravan of men and beasts from Lukla airstrip -- the staging ground for most Everest expeditions -- he has learned to take minor complications in stride.

Before leaving Kathmandu, the climbers visit the Baghmati River. From its eastern bank, they have a clear view of Pashupatinath, the city's most important Hindu temple, where families cremate their dead.

Webster and his team watch as a body shrouded in orange cotton is laid on a concrete platform, next to a funeral pyre. Because there is almost always a body-burning at the temple, any ritual tends to be brief. Just before the pyre is lit, a chief mourner -- usually male -- touches a torch to the pyre as a final gesture to the deceased. Once cremated, the remains are scattered in the river.

Having witnessed a number of such funerals, Lock has learned to respect the starkness of a Hindu cremation.
"It's a reminder that we are all mortal and that some day, sooner or later, we will all end up on that cement block. So all the more reason to go out and live your life to the full."

A forthright man with a crisp manner, Lock does not consider himself religious. But after nearly 15 years of climbing in the Himalayas, he has become well-versed in Asian customs and beliefs. In particular, he feels an affinity for the spirituality of the Sherpa people. "I like the very non-radical aspect of Buddhism," he explains.

Lock views the steep trek up to Base Camp as a chance to reconnect with his spiritual side. Considered the heart of Sherpa country, the Khumbu Valley is home to a prominent monastery as well as an array of Buddhist monuments.

Interspersed among barley fields and pine forests are stupas (shrines), mani stones (rock carvings) and prayer wheels -- all decorated with prayer flags. In keeping with Buddhist custom, Lock passes the monuments on the right, since the left side of the body is considered unclean. "It's as much to keep the Sherpas happy, that we are being respectful of their religion, as it is for my own belief system," he says.

The trek also allows Lock to reflect on how the region has changed since his first visit in 1991. Unlike many longtime visitors, he is not saddened by what he sees. While still primarily an agrarian region, the Khumbu has become irrevocably tied to the tens of thousands of trekkers and climbers who visit the region annually. Increased tourism has led to the introduction of hydroelectric power which, Lock believes, has slowed the pace of deforestation. Tourism has also raised awareness of hygiene, to the point where squat toilets have become a fixture at the growing number of teahouses in the valley. While there have been noticeable price hikes, the teahouses still offer relatively inexpensive food and lodging.

To Lock, these benefits outweigh the growing pains. He prefers the rural lifestyle of the Himalayas to the big-city pressures of his native Sydney. "I find the whole experience very meditative, especially the climb. I'm a much more relaxed and comfortable person after having spent some time here."

Lock isn't the only one to use the trek as an introspection. As she walks the trails, Shaunna Burke pictures herself on the mountain. Inevitably, her mind turns to the dangers posed by the Khumbu Icefall.

"It's a combination of visually seeing and at the same time, trying to feel what it's going to feel like when I'm on the mountain -- to visualize the discomfort that I will face, and to see myself overcoming that discomfort," she says. "Once I get to the mountain, it will be almost like I've gone through it already, and it won't be as hard on my body mentally."

By contrast, the last thing on Hector Ponce de Leon's mind is the challenge ahead. A sincere and reflective man, Ponce de Leon prefers to live in the present, taking comfort in the daily routine of camping and hiking. He relies on his experience -- he has been climbing since age 11 -- to maintain self-discipline.

Ponce de Leon has another reason to focus on short-term goals. In Namche, he develops a debilitating pain in his lower back that makes it difficult for him to stand. Dr. Matt Arentz prescribes stretches, which help manage the pain.

Ponce de Leon admits the injury is an early test of perseverance. "Every person on this trip will have moments when they have a hard time finding the motivation to keep going," he says. "So I try to be honest about this and think of strategies that will help me overcome them. I try to think about the rewards at the end of a hard climb, or how I will feel after the experience is over."

Other than Ponce de Leon's injury, the team's health concerns are relatively standard. A few members report mild stomach bugs -- an inevitable side-effect of limited sanitation.

While the gradual hike uphill helps the group acclimatize, some climbers -- including Webster -- can't avoid catching coughs and colds.

A strong walker, accustomed to the altitude, can cover the 50 kilometres from Lukla to Base Camp in two or three days. But having just arrived from sea level, the group is careful to keep a slower pace. This gives their bodies time to adapt to the increasingly thin air.

By the time the expedition reaches Lobuche -- the last hamlet before Base Camp -- technician Mike Swarbrick is taking twice-daily doses of Diamox, a drug used to treat glaucoma that also helps reduce the headaches associated with altitude sickness.
Even though he won't be going higher than Base Camp, Swarbrick can't afford to get sick. His job is to set up the large cache of communications hardware that will transmit information about the expedition to TV networks, newspapers and websites in Canada. He will also be in charge of maintaining the electronics that keep the climbers in contact as they progress up the mountain.

In fact, with a plethora of gas-fired generators, solar electrical systems, satellite phones and computers at its disposal, the expedition -- and its tent city at Base Camp -- resembles a minor military operation. As well as a communal kitchen and mess hall, there is a tent for communications, and another devoted to entertainment. The latter is outfitted with a DVD player and a collection of movies that include The Godfather trilogy and the Lord of the Rings series.

Webster's immediate priority is to finalize the logistics needed for the climbing team's first attempt through the Khumbu Icefall. In keeping with Sherpa tradition, he has consulted a Buddhist monk to determine the most auspicious day to begin the climb.

Sherpas won't climb until a puja, or cleansing ceremony is held, and western climbers defer to them on this bit of protocol. The ritual, led by a lama, or head monk, is a petition to the gods for good weather and safe passage. Before the puja, however, the team has an evening to rest -- and maybe even enjoy a movie.
Ice in their veins: Ottawa adventurer Ben Webster is leading an Everest expedition that is about more than making a successful ascent of the world's tallest mountain; it is also about making a documentary he hopes will be a cut above the rest. To make that happen, Webster, 41, has chosen teammates Shaunna Burke, 28, of Ottawa; Hector Ponce de Leon, 36, of Mexico; and A.J. (Andrew) Lock, 42, of Australia. Citizen reporter PAULINE TAM follows the story.

By Pauline Tam
Saturday, April 17, 2004
Page: E1 (City Section)

Climbers must overcome fear, test their faith.

Even for a seasoned athlete such as Shaunna Burke, the spine-tingling chill of fear feels like no other kind of cold. It sends her heart racing, but saps her feet of body heat to the point where she can sense her blood run cold, even in sub-zero temperatures.

A former competitive skier, Burke has learned not to buckle at the first tremors of fear. Instead, she finds practical ways to conquer them. After suffering from frozen feet on her first foray through the Khumbu Icefall, Burke spends the next day fine-tuning her climbing gear.

Among other things, she inserts a layer of foam between her boots and crampons. The extra insulation is designed to protect her against the chill of Mount Everest, but it also minimizes fear-induced shivers.

Every mountaineer has a story about fear. Fear triggers mistakes, but also commands respect for the mountain. For the high-altitude climber, the best cure for fear is experience. This means climbing is a constant test of faith. It is also a reminder of one's vulnerability.

Andrew Lock never forgets this lesson. Despite having climbed 10 of the world's 14 8,000-metre peaks without supplemental oxygen -- placing him in a select group of the world's best alpinists -- Lock doesn't like to trumpet his achievements. Like the Buddhist Sherpas of Everest, Lock believes pride invites misfortune.

He remembers a solo expedition seven years ago, when fear nearly licked him on an ascent of Broad Peak. The hulking 8,047-metre vertex in the Karakoram Range of Pakistan is known for its three summits, which are linked by a long, tortuous crest -- steep and heavily corniced.

While elite mountaineers don't consider Broad Peak unusually difficult to climb, Lock was raising the stakes by ascending without oxygen tanks or a support team.

At one point near the summit, Lock found himself on a vertical rockface pitched precipitously over a 4,000-metre drop. He stopped to peer at the void below and froze in terror. It didn't help that altitude was clouding his judgment, making him feel dull and uncertain.

What's more, the climbing season was winding down, and there was no one but Lock on the mountain. The all-encompassing solitude made him feel feeble. For the first time, he grasped the frailty of the human condition.

Surrendering to his fears, he began lowering himself down the mountain. "It became very clear that any slip was going to be fairly fatal," he recalls.

But Lock didn't descend too far before he had a change of heart. He stopped to study the rockface in more detail and confronted his inner demons. "I started asking myself whether my fears were justified. And when I talked myself through and looked at things rationally, I knew it was within my climbing ability."

Though exhausted and starved of oxygen when he reached the summit, Lock savoured the victory of having acted quickly and decisively. As soon as a climber loses the ability to make decisions, he loses the ability to survive. That, to Lock, is a key to conquering fear.

"On every expedition, there's a point at which you may find yourself very scared for whatever reason," he says.

"The challenge is to work through those fears. I feel most happy with myself when I overcome my personal fears on those mountains."

The season's first climb through the Khumbu Icefall, above Base Camp, is all about managing fear.

For Lock, that means approaching with humility, emptying his mind of distractions, and using logic to talk himself through each obstacle. Burke uses a different strategy. She starts preparing the night before by invoking the physical agony she is about to face.
By bracing herself for the worst, she feels she is ready for anything.

With leader Ben Webster busy handling logistics at Base Camp, Burke, Lock and Hector Ponce de Leon set off for a practice climb on a clear, cold day last week. The climb is in preparation for a subsequent ascent that will take them from Base Camp at 5,363 metres to Camp One at 5,900 metres.

Because they have lived for generations in the Himalayas, Sherpas are physiologically adapted to the rigours of altitude in ways most westerners are not. Over the next few weeks, as Sherpas shuttle food and gear, progressively establishing four camps above Base Camp, Webster and his team will make repeated forays up and down the mountain to acclimatize before the summit push.

The morning of the practice climb starts at 5:30 a.m. with a 10-minute walk from the team's camp to the foot of the Icefall. The structure is safest in pre-dawn, when the ice bridges and overhanging ice blocks are mostly frozen. As the day wears on and the sun intensifies, chunks of ice the size of office buildings can shift and tumble without warning. In the passage of a day, crevasses can open and close again as the Khumbu Glacier twists and undulates. No one can predict where or when this may happen.

The Icefall isn't the only challenge. It has been four days since Webster and his teammates arrived at Base Camp, where there is half the oxygen available at sea level. Despite being top athletes, the climbers need time to acclimatize, and their bodies won't let them forget it. Ponce de Leon fights stomach cramps, Webster battling acid reflux, and Burke has a dry, raspy cough.

Even Lock -- a man not known to be vocal about what ails him -- admits to a sore throat and sinus congestion.

Just about everyone feels lethargic; a simple walk to the mess tent can leave them wheezing.

The destabilizing effects of altitude mean the first climb is long and arduous. Burke is fearful of pushing too hard, yet she forces herself to move at a consistent pace.

Last fall, as part of her research on the psychology of Everest climbers, she interviewed two mountaineers who explained their mental strategies for high-altitude climbing. Burke learned that many climbers rely on "triggers" that help them keep pace. Some, such as Ponce de Leon, sing or hum to maintain a rhythm. Burke prefers to count silently. The recitation of numbers generates the momentum she finds particularly useful for crossing crevasses along horizontal ladders.

Compared to what Burke faced on Everest last fall, the route through the Icefall is considerably longer. Between ladders, she must squeeze through awkward clefts of ice and negotiate serpentine slopes. On exposed sections, she is protected by fixed ropes -- long stationary lines anchored in snow and ice that span the crevasses alongside the ladders.

When she crosses these bridges, Burke doesn't give herself time to be afraid. She takes a deep breath, steps on the ladder without hesitation, and forces herself to place one foot ahead of the other, fixing her gaze on each rung in front of her. Often, she will coach herself with positive words: "This is OK. You're OK. There are people around you. It's no problem."

The last thing Burke dwells on is the stark reality that she is walking on air, with nothing but a bouncy aluminum ladder separating her from a seemingly bottomless void.

Along her uphill crawl, Burke's dread of being crushed by frozen blocks heightens when she notices an ominous ice boulder, precariously upright but leaning more as the morning wears on. Everyone who passes remarks that it appears ready to collapse. Since there is no way through but to walk under it, Burke follows the climbers in front of her and bolts across the overhanging block. "The longer it takes you to go under it, the more chances you have of it collapsing on you," she explains.

As she plods upward and listens to the glacier's squeals, Burke works to remain focused. It isn't easy when every step leaves her short of breath, her body screaming in pain. What's more, intermittent crashes and rumbles in the distance can rattle the nerves of the most composed climber. But avalanches aren't the only distraction. A more intense, if silent, pressure comes from her fellow climbers.

By nature, mountaineers are a competitive fraternity. Nowhere is the tension between rivalry and sportsmanship more evident than on the Khumbu Icefall. Inevitably, there are fitter, more skilled and better-acclimatized climbers sharing the route with Burke.

Etiquette dictates that faster climbers have the right of way, particularly when they cross ladders. This can be demoralizing for slower climbers.

Even if she doesn't mean to, Burke sometimes finds herself trying to keep up with faster climbers such as Lock and Ponce de Leon.
When that happens, Burke is careful to slow down. A disciplined climber knows the difference between taking acceptable risks and pushing one's luck.

Annabelle Bond learns this lesson the hard way. The 35-year-old British climber is among those scaling the Icefall the same day as Burke. A few days before, Bond met Webster and agreed to be featured in his documentary for the Discovery Channel. The deal meant a camera crew would follow Bond throughout her first attempt to reach Everest's summit.

On her foray through the Icefall, Bond is accompanied by Lock, who records the climb on film. Unnerved by the presence of a camera -- not to mention a fast climber -- Bond finds herself struggling. Four hours into the climb, she starts hyperventilating, and is forced to return to Base Camp. Later, in a journal entry, Bond attributes the mishap to poor judgment.

"I think it was just the first day, having the cameras on me combined with a huge physical exertion of speeding through the Icefall is what caused this," she wrote.

"Hopefully, I'll start forgetting the camera is there and just be filmed with a runny nose ... as Everest is the type of mountain that requires your full attention."

By contrast, Burke's slow, steady pace pays off. In all, it takes her six hours to climb most of the Icefall. She stops short of the last major obstacle -- the most difficult ladder on the route. Climbers who have scaled it bemoan the uncontrollable wobbling that comes with having five vertical ladders lashed together by plastic rope. It is the only way past a 15-metre wall of ice.

When Burke eventually returns to Base Camp, she is elated but exhausted. That night, she has no trouble sleeping for 10 hours. Technician Mike Swarbrick wishes he were so lucky. Despite taking Diamox, a medication that helps the body metabolize oxygen at high altitude, Swarbrick regularly wakes up gasping. If his body isn't struggling for air, it is rattled by avalanches throughout the night. The seemingly endless releases of snow and ice from Everest and other nearby mountains cause the ground to shudder and crack. It's a reminder that Base Camp may sit on a bed of rock, but not far from the surface is a roiling river of ice.

The next two days are devoted to rest as Webster and his climbing partners prepare to ascend to Camp One.

Despite the high spirits that prevail, the team's physical health takes a turn for the worse. Webster develops sinus congestion. Lock exhibits flu-like symptoms, and cancels a second practice climb. With the departure of the production team from Discovery, the expedition is temporarily without Dr. Matt Arentz, who accompanies the contingent on their return trek.

At Base Camp, Swarbrick worries openly about Lock. "I did a visual on Andrew and his eyes were bulging and bloodshot. You could tell he was in distress."

With the deteriorating health of his team and the expedition ahead of schedule, Webster delays the climb to Camp One. "It's minor stuff," he says. "It happens on an expedition. It's one of the reasons why this place is so hard on people. You're never 100 per cent. Your body breaks down with the altitude and you end up catching stuff. If you're not willing to suffer a little bit, then you won't do very well here."
As climbers on Everest rise into thinner and thinner air, they have an unusual friend: fear.

This is the point where climbers can least afford any extra physical work. Every movement of the body takes energy they don't have -- each footstep, each kilogram of gear.

Yet fear, which is unavoidable on a mountain that has killed dozens of experienced climbers, is not the enemy we might suppose.

The body shifts into a state of arousal when it meets anxiety, explains David Dozois, who teaches psychology and psychiatry at the University of Western Ontario.

Anxiety or fear "is not a dangerous thing," he said. "It's just the body kicking in a response that is helpful."

Adrenaline starts to flow as part of the familiar "fight or flight" reaction.

Blood flow to the stomach decreases, freeing up extra blood supply to the muscles. That brings more physical power, though it also creates the feeling of "butterflies" in the stomach.

The mind focuses itself more sharply on the danger at hand, driving out other thoughts.

All this equips you to meet danger and overcome it, or to run for safety. But there's a limit to how long your body can keep up this effort.

"If the stress continues for a long period of time -- not just a climb, but for a period of weeks -- the body sort of becomes exhausted. It begins shutting down to deal with it." Soldiers in combat can suffer fatigue of this kind as a war drags on.

This is a form of protection. "Long-term chronic stress and arousal can relate to a lot of different problems, such as hypertension," Dr. Dozois explains.

"But certain personalities thrive on that sort of stimulus, too. There are people who are sensation-seekers, who want to go bungee jumping ... Adrenaline is a good feeling and they want that."

The fear of Everest's very real dangers -- cold, wind, falling ice, lack of oxygen -- isn't likely to paralyse or exhaust the climbers, he believes, because they won't be on the mountain long enough.

In fact, they'll keep getting the adrenaline to keep them from falling asleep at the wheel.

"It's funny because our society tries to deal with anxiety.

We try to minimize it, which is interesting because other cultures don't do that as much. They try to accept that as a fact of life rather than try to changing it.

"In our society we try to get rid of those negative feelings when they really are quite adaptive" -- in other words, when they help our bodies deal with threats.

The key to performance is to get the amount of anxiety right, he adds.

You want a moderate amount. "Too much and it will impair your performance. Too little and you're bored.

"The perception of threat is not a thing that is dangerous."
More than 40 teams from around the world are attempting to climb Mount Everest this spring. The majority intend to scale the world's tallest peak from the North Face in Tibet. Another 17 teams -- including Ben Webster's expedition -- are climbing the South Face in Nepal.

Of the two routes, the North Face is considered the more difficult climb. It was first attempted by British adventurers George Mallory and Sandy Irvine in 1924. The men disappeared near the summit, leaving unanswered a question that mountaineers have debated since: Did they reach the top?

A number of expeditions have attempted to find answers, but the most dramatic discovery happened in 1999, when climber Conrad Anker stumbled upon Mallory's body. Mallory's injuries suggested he and his climbing partner fell together, but there were no signs of Irvine nearby. There was also no sign of the team's camera, which may contain photos that could solve the mystery of whether the men reached the summit.

The search for the missing camera is part of an expedition this spring, sponsored by EverestNews.com. The goal is to find Irvine, retrieve the camera he is believed to have carried, and reconstruct the final events of the men's summit bid.

Among the other North Face expeditions are:

- A 20-member Russian contingent led by Viktor Kozlov, who is attempting to summit via an unclimbed route up the centre of the North Face; - Gheorghe Dijmarescu and Lakpa Sherpa, a husband-and-wife team from the U.S. who are attempting to climb Everest and K2 in the same season.

The South Face of Everest was the site of the historic first summit in 1953 by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. The route they pioneered, along the Southeast Ridge, was also the site of a blizzard that killed nine climbers in 1996. Accounts of the deadly climb were later immortalized in a half-dozen books, including Jon Krakauer's Into Thin Air.

The disaster was witnessed by filmmaker David Breashears, who was making an IMAX movie on the mountain. When disaster struck, Breashears put aside his camera and devoted his team's resources to a rescue effort.

This year, Breashears and the renowned U.S. mountaineer Ed Viesturs -- who was also on the 1996 expedition -- are revisiting the site of the disaster. They will ascend the mountain to shoot images for a Hollywood film.

Other teams on the South Face include:

- Ryan Bendixen, a U.S. climber attempting to be the first person with high blood pressure to reach the summit; - Three alpinists from Quebec: Claude St-Hilaire, Mario Dutil and Maxime Jean;

- An eight-member Chilean expedition, led by Rodrigo Herman Jordan and including Annabelle Bond, who is updating the team's progress on EverestNews.com; - A five-member expedition of Mexicans and Canadians, led by Andres Delgado of Mexico.
Global warming has been taking the heat for a lot of environmental calamities on Mount Everest: melting glaciers that are slowly retreating into oblivion, swelling meltwater streams that trigger flash floods and the gradual disappearance of inland fresh water.

But mountaineers clambering along the Khumbu Icefall to reach Everest's summit shouldn't blame climate change for the freak snow storms, avalanches and collapsing ice blocks that can leave them frozen in their tracks. That's simply the chilly reality of glaciers, says Roger Bilham, a geologist at the University of Colorado. “That is what glaciers do, that is their karma -- to collapse,” says Mr. Bilham, who was on the 1996 IMAX expedition to Everest.

"The glacier is retreating because of global warming but it's not making climbing more difficult ... (Climbers) should expect hazards and I believe the hazards are probably less than they were 50 years ago because they're having to walk across less ice to get there."

Coupled with global warming, caused by greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere, a decreased amount of precipitation and snowfall over the past 30 years means the glacier isn't being driven downhill. In fact, it's retreated up the mountain about five kilometres in the last 50 years, according to a 2002 United Nations Environment Program study.

For climbers, that means it now takes an extra two hours just to reach the glacier. But for scientists, the melting glacier is more than an inconvenience, it is a harbinger of things to come.

"It's potentially disastrous," says Paul Andrew Mayewski, director of the Climate Change Institute at the University of Maine and co-author of Ice Chronicles: The Quest to Understand Global Climate Change. "It depends on how high the rivers swell and how long they stay in that state. There is the danger of rapid outbursts and during those rapid outbursts, the streams may very well be significantly higher than their channel edges and there's the possibility of widespread flooding."

It's a threat that's exacerbated during monsoon season, when a combination of torrential rains and glacial water can be deadly, he says, pointing out "there are towns that have been washed out."

Glacial water exits through streams at the base of the glacier or melts within it and forms large lakes held in by dams made of ice. But if the dam is breached, by erosion or a large block of ice, thousands of cubic metres of water per second can be released with devastating effects to communities and the ecosystem.

And, says Mr. Mayewski, the intense velocity of the water charging through deep channels can cause landslides and dislodge boulders, sending them soaring through the air and destroying tenuous bridges used by climbers and residents.

UNEP scientists, working with experts from the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, based in Kathmandu, have used satellites and ground studies to pinpoint 44 glacial lakes in Nepal and Bhutan that are so swollen, they threaten to burst their banks in a few years.

Not only are there threats from how Everest's glaciers are disappearing, but also from what their absence signifies to the region.

The melting ice is critical for Nepal because it pours into many of the rivers that are the country's primary source of drinking and irrigation water. If these ice fields and glaciers dry up, Nepal and India would have to depend on the unreliable monsoon rains for water.

"The resource is dwindling," says Mr. Mayewski, comparing glaciers to large storage containers. "As the ice melts, the water is lost forever into streams and eventually into the ocean."
In the path of white thunder: Dodging avalanches at Camp 1: Ottawa adventurer Ben Webster is leading an Everest expedition that is about more than making a successful ascent of the mountain; it is also about making a documentary he hopes will be a cut above the rest. To make that happen, Webster, 41, has chosen teammates Shaunna Burke, 28, of Ottawa; Hector Ponce de Leon, 36, of Mexico; and A.J. Lock, 42, of Australia. Citizen reporter Pauline Tam follows the story.

By Pauline Tam
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It starts with a sharp crackle, piercing the silence of daybreak. In his tent, Ben Webster wakes with a jolt, and grabs his ice axe and boots. Instinct and fear tell him to run -- even though there's nowhere to go.

In another tent, Hector Ponce de Leon springs from his sleeping bag, and waits for what he knows will come next. He prays it will not land on him.

Another 30 seconds of rumbling follows. Then, the mountain roars like a jet engine, rocking the midriff of Mount Everest. About 60 metres above Camp One, massive swells of snow and ice explode over the cliffs of the Lho La, a pass off the west shoulder of the world's tallest mountain. The avalanche disgorges a gargantuan cloud of icy dust that sweeps across the valley, where several groups of climbers have set up camp.

Hearing the explosion, Pat Falvey, the leader of an Irish expedition, grabs his camera and shoots out of his tent. Near the latrine, he spots teammate John Joyce tearing for cover with his pants down. Just then, a powerful blast of snow and wind rushes across the camp. Falvey has just enough time to duck in his tent, but Joyce isn't so lucky. Seconds later, amid the spindrift, Falvey finds Joyce covered in snow, still trying to adjust his pants. The two men burst into giddy laughter, grateful to have escaped harm.

Avalanches are not normally a laughing matter. They are the single biggest killer on Everest. In total, avalanches - including some that trigger falling ice blocks or icefall collapses -- have claimed nearly 60 lives, a majority of them on the Nepalese side of the mountain. One of the more deadly tragedies happened in 1989, when five Polish climbers were buried in an avalanche near the Lho La.

On his third night at Camp One, when Ponce de Leon hears the pre-avalanche crackle, his mind immediately turns to the ice boulders perched several hundred metres above him. He knows that if an avalanche sends them tumbling, Camp One will be obliterated. Fortunately, the epicentre is farther away -- though not far enough for the climbers to escape the aftershocks.

Ponce de Leon has witnessed his share of avalanches, but he still feels helpless during the 30 seconds before a windblast slams his tent. Webster is more succinct. "You go from being sound asleep to being absolutely terrified," he says.

At 5,900 metres, Camp One is nestled in a terraced clearing between Lho La and Nuptse, a 7,860-metre peak. The camp lies at the end of the Khumbu Icefall, and stretches into a valley known as the Western Cwm.

The Cwm (pronounced "koom") leads to the upper end of the Khumbu Glacier, where a majestic amphitheatre of rock and snow rises steeply.

From the two dozen tents at Camp One, climbers can peer up the valley toward a steep wall of ice known as the Lhotse Face, on which Camp Three is pitched. They also get their first glimpse of the astounding southwest face of Everest.

For his team's first acclimatizing climb, which takes them 637 metres higher, Webster intended to spend just two days at Camp One. But since Easter Sunday, when the team left Base Camp, gale-force winds and heavy snowstorms have battered Everest, making it impossible for Webster and his teammates to descend. It is nothing short of a miracle that the climbers' tents are not blown away amid the relentless, howling winds.

By daybreak on Tuesday, when the avalanche from the Lho La pass caps a restless night, more than 25 centimetres of snow has fallen on Camp One.

The accumulated snow weighing on ice is a common cause of avalanches. Indeed, much of the snow along the Western Cwm comes from avalanches that tumble into it from the walls of mountains on either side.
But a more dangerous type of avalanche happens when ice blocks the size of buildings topple without warning.

As they plunge down the mountain, the boulders gather such size and speed that level ground cannot slow them. "This is actually what we're most afraid of," says Ponce de Leon.

He may be familiar with the sounds of avalanches, but in his 25 years of climbing, Ponce de Leon has had little luck pinpointing whether one is nearby or far away. In the mountains, the echo and bounce of sound can fail even the most finely tuned ear.

On Wednesday morning, as Ponce de Leon, Shauna Burke and Andrew Lock prepare to cross the Western Cwm leading to Camp Two, a second avalanche erases any trace of a trail through the valley. Along the Cwm, with the ramparts of Nuptse and the Lho La looming over him, Ponce de Leon treads gingerly and remains alert for any sign of movement on the mountains. "I got ready -- if I heard any sound -- to run and try to get out of the avalanche path," he says.

If fast-moving snowstorms contribute to avalanches on Everest, the rapid cycle of thaw and flash freeze doesn't help either. This is particularly true in the Western Cwm. While cold and icy at night, the valley transforms into a solar oven by day. At noon, the sun's rays gather and concentrate, reflecting off the walls of Nuptse and the western buttresses of Everest. While the ambient temperature may be near freezing, the valley can heat up to almost 40 C. A climber who views the Cwm as benign underestimates the hazards of solar glare and heat stroke.

To minimize their exposure to sun and heat, Ponce de Leon and his teammates are careful to dress in white long-sleeved shirts, and drink plenty of water. They also leave Camp One early in the morning, before the sun becomes unbearable. Meanwhile, Webster stays behind with cameraman Frank Vilaca to shoot footage for the documentary.

In addition to the weather extremes, the Western Cwm is a minefield of crevasses. This complicates the seemingly easy walk, especially because fresh snow can obscure an abyss. While the wider crevasses are joined by ladders, the narrower ones are generally hidden. When climbers come across them, they must hop over unroped. Such an obstacle reminds even the most experienced climber not to take anything for granted on Everest.

Because Camp Two sits at 6,500 metres -- 600 metres higher than Camp One -- Ponce de Leon and his teammates only stay for a few hours before returning to the lower camp. The gradual ascents and descents may seem tedious, but it helps the climbers adjust to the rigours of altitude. Over the next few days, as high-altitude Sherpas ferry gear up the mountain, Camp One will be dismantled and serve as a weigh station, while Camp Two will be transformed into Advance Base Camp, from which the climbers will eventually mount a push to the summit.

The weather finally clears on Thursday, giving Webster and his teammates their first opportunity to descend to Base Camp. On their way down the Khumbu Icefall, the group pauses near an ice boulder that, Webster observes, leans like the Tower of Pisa. As the climbers wait for Vilaca, the cameraman, to set up a shot, the Icefall suddenly lurches beneath their feet, throwing everyone off balance.

"It scared the bejeezus out of us and we ran like hell," Webster says. "We regrouped and decided that maybe the shot would look better from a different angle."

It's a sober reminder that the Icefall is never solid.

On their return to Base Camp, the climbers receive news of casualties. The first concerns a 14-year-old Sherpa, who is hired to haul loads for the expedition. Late one night, a concerned fellow Sherpa summons Dr. Matt Arentz, the expedition's 28-year-old physician, to treat the young porter, who complains of a headache. Arentz prescribes Diamox, a medication that helps relieve headaches associated with altitude sickness. Not long after that, the teenager starts vomiting and staggering around camp.

Arentz, a Vermont native with experience in high-altitude medicine, quickly determines the porter is suffering from cerebral edema. The condition refers to a swelling of the brain that causes vomiting, headaches, confusion and problems with balance. Without proper treatment, it can be deadly.

Normally, cerebral edema can be treated by immediate evacuation to lower altitude. But because it's past midnight, Arentz rules out descent as an option -- at least until morning. Instead, he helps his patient to a makeshift bed in the kitchen tent, puts a mask over his face and begins administering oxygen. Arentz also gives the porter an injection of dexamethasone, a steroid used to ease inflammation.

While Arentz knows little about his patient's background, he suspects the porter had never climbed as high as Everest Base Camp before he made a dizzying 2,700-metre ascent in 48 hours. The rate is more than four times faster than what is recommended for westerners not used to the altitude of the Himalaya.
As he tends to his patient, Arentz can't help wondering if the pressure of being paid by the amount he can carry contributed to the porter's predicament. "The porters seem to think they're superhuman," says Arentz. "They seem to think the normal rules of ascent don't apply to them."

By dawn, after a long night during which Arentz wakes him up every hour to check on his patient, the young man makes enough of a recovery for the doctor to send him down the mountain. With another Sherpa escorting him, the porter descends about 750 metres -- about two days' walk through the sharp drops and steep climbs of the Himalayan foothills -- to the village of Pheriche.

There, Arentz hopes the teenager will seek follow-up care at a clinic staffed by volunteer doctors. "I told him to take his time coming back."

The young Sherpa isn't the only one to develop acute mountain sickness.

On the same day Webster and his teammates return to Base Camp, John Joyce -- the Irish climber who narrowly escaped an avalanche at Camp One -- is evacuated to Kathmandu. At Camp One, Joyce had suffered from stomach cramps but his condition deteriorated as a result of exhaustion, sleep deprivation and the effects of high altitude. After spending two weeks at the base of Everest, Joyce abandons his first attempt to reach the summit, and plans to return to Ireland.

Joyce's departure comes one day after a female climber falls and breaks four ribs, collapsing a lung in the process. The climber -- a member of U.S. filmmaker David Breashears' expedition -- was crossing a boulder field at Base Camp when she was hit by a large rock, lost her balance and plummeted. Doctors at Base Camp determine she is in critical condition and authorize a helicopter rescue.

The next morning, a Russian-made chopper circles above Base Camp before touching down on a makeshift landing pad -- an increasingly common, though no less dangerous, feat on Everest. As the climber is loaded on board, destined for a hospital in Kathmandu, the chopper blades fight against thin air.

Because of low air pressure, there is little lift for takeoff at high altitudes. Last year, two people were killed and several others injured when a helicopter flying low over Base Camp slammed into a glacier. The rusting frame of the crashed chopper still sits near the camp's rocky moraine -- a reminder of the risks taken, particularly by the Nepalese people, to support mountaineering on Everest.

Watching the early morning evacuation, Arentz reflects on the dangers of the mountain. "It's a reminder of what a treacherous place this is, and how far away you are from something more than rudimentary medical care," he says.

Aside from the emergency treatment he provides the young Sherpa, Arentz spends most of his time treating minor health problems related to being in a developing country. On his return from Camp One, Webster's persistent sinus congestion worsens, exacerbated by travelling up and down the mountain. Webster has trouble breathing and clearing his ears. He also exhibits flu-like symptoms that sap him of energy.

Arentz diagnoses a viral infection -- a similar strain that previously hit Andrew Lock and himself. His best guess is that they caught the bug at one of the filthier rest stops along the trek to Base Camp. Arentz prescribes Webster a cycle of antibiotics and advises plenty of rest.

But for someone as fiercely driven as Webster, letting down his guard is not an option. He is reluctant to hand over responsibilities to his teammates, and downplays the effect of his illness on the expedition. "Nothing has changed because I have a sinus problem," he says.

The only climber who isn't sick is Ponce de Leon. After overcoming debilitating back spasms early in the trip, he appears to be the lone member of the expedition who has maintained not only good health, but also an unflappably good cheer. On his return to Base Camp, Ponce de Leon strikes an easy camaraderie with other expeditions, particularly those from Chile and his native Mexico. His longtime friend, Andres Delgado, the leader of a Mexican-Canadian expedition, marvels at Ponce de Leon's good humour, particularly when he drops by Delgado's camp for visits.

For his part, Ponce de Leon finds it therapeutic, after spending days at higher altitudes, to give himself time to relax and rejuvenate. He knows it won't be long before he will once again subject his mind and body to another round of punishment.

"I've seen more than my share of climbers -- very good climbers, very strong climbers -- who, when they're down here, still have their minds up there," he says. "All through the day, they're talking about this and that up on the mountain. They just burn themselves out mentally and emotionally by not being able to disconnect from that."
The Lhotse Face is not a place to be caught in bad weather. It is a steep, near-vertical wall of ice, slanting 50 degrees along 1,130 metres off the side of Mount Everest. Snaking down the frozen expanse is a line of fixed rope, divided into sections and tied to screws bolted into hard blue ice.

Even in the best conditions, one false move can send a climber hurtling down the vertiginous sprawl to a yawning chasm at the base. Over the years, this unusually wide crevasse has acted as a body basin for climbers who have plummeted to their deaths.

On the morning Ben Webster and Shaunna Burke leave Camp Two to climb the Lhotse Face, nothing foreshadows bad weather. Unlike the windswept snowstorms of the past week, the sky is clear and the sun shines bright. There is barely a whisper of wind in the thin air.

For Burke, who is attempting her maiden climb up the face, conditions can't be more perfect. Having never ascended higher than Camp Two at 6,500 metres, she is anxious to test herself against this forbidding obstacle. Her goal is to reach Camp Three, near the top of the Lhotse Face, before returning to rest at the lower camp. Until this point, Burke has been toiling in a canyon. Now, for the first time in the expedition, she will be surrounded by more sky than earth -- a sign that the summit is at last within reach.

But as she climbs, Burke realizes she has vastly underestimated the Lhotse Face. No matter how high she gets, the steepness of the icy slope doesn't seem to let up. It doesn't help that high winds have blown off much of the snow on the face. The remaining calcified ice provides Burke with little grip for her crampons, making each step a prolonged and deliberate effort.

Webster had predicted as much. At Camp Two a few days before, he was already anticipating a technical climb. "You actually have to kick real hard and cut right through the ice to gain any kind of stability," he said.

But now, three-quarters of the way up the Lhotse Face and six hours into their ascent, Webster is focused on another hazard. While taking a break from climbing, he peers down the Western Cwm and notices a haze settling over the valley. When he looks up, he can make out wispy cirrus clouds rolling over the Himalayan mountaintops.

Unsure of whether they are a localized air mass or a brewing weather system, Webster seeks a second opinion. He makes radio contact with cameraman Frank Vilaca, who can see the vista from Camp Two, and learns that a storm is rapidly closing in on them.

Because Camp Three is within sight, Webster's first instinct is to continue climbing. But 15 minutes later, the clouds turn into a raging blizzard. Thankfully, the winds are light, but visibility is so poor that Webster has trouble seeing the lengths of rope in front of him. He calls off the ascent in favour of a careful descent.

Burke is relieved by Webster's decision -- until she starts inching her way down the treacherous slope. Unlike the climb up, during which Burke can clip a safety device to the rope and haul herself up, the descent is more of a controlled slide. Other than a single strand of fixed rope coiled around her arm, Burke has little support. The white-out only compounds the risk of her spilling down the mountain, particularly if she were to lose her footing. It doesn't help that fatigue makes her doubt her own strength.

Burke's fears are reinforced when a climber in front of her tumbles and disappears from view. All she sees is a puff of snow and feet flying in the air. "He was really lucky because there was a big knot in the rope and it stopped his fall," she says. "He didn't injure himself too badly, but it definitely made me focus a little harder."

By the time she finally returns to Camp Two, her legs are ready to give out on her. For the first time, she inspects them more closely and notices a dramatic change. Her athletic build -- developed over years of competitive skiing -- has started to deteriorate under the high-altitude stress of Everest. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her legs. "I'm used to having skiers' legs so I'm used to having quite a bit of muscle on them," she says. "But they're a lot smaller than they used to be."

It isn't just her leg muscles that have atrophied.
Near the end of her sojourn at Camp Two, Burke notices her body is in constant pain. The throbbing is everywhere, but seems sharpest in her legs and upper back. The soreness makes her feel weak and lethargic.

To Burke, it’s a sign that the lack of oxygen on Everest is causing her body to cannibalize itself. Her fear is that if enough muscle is eaten away, she will be too weak to make the push to the summit.

"I think what scares me the most is what's going to happen once I get into the altitude," she confides. "I don't know what my body is going to do, and I know at any moment, it could shut down."

Burke isn't the only one to be confronted with physical frailty.

In another expedition, Mexican climber Juan Pablo Gomez develops a ruptured blood vessel in his retina, causing his right eye to hemorrhage. The injury -- a common side-effect of high altitude -- makes it difficult for him to see clearly. Gomez first notices the damage the morning after he returns from Camp Three, where his team spent the night acclimatizing.

On his return to Base Camp, Gomez consults Dr. Matt Arentz, the physician on Webster's expedition. Arentz examines Gomez and determines the rupture is serious enough that it will take up to two months at lower altitude for the eye to repair itself. Arentz recommends Gomez descend the mountain and stresses the risk of further damage if he continues to climb.

The prognosis leaves Gomez torn. On the one hand, he isn't ready to abandon the climb. But he must also consider the possibility that by ignoring his injury and continuing his bid to reach the summit, he could put himself and his teammates in jeopardy. He decides to get a second opinion from another doctor at Base Camp. The last time Arentz sees Gomez, the climber is still mulling over his dilemma. "The reality is that if he went down the mountain now, he would be done with the expedition," says Arentz.

Such conflicts between individual desires and team goals are a perennial test of character on the mountain. It is the part of the Everest trial that separates a high-altitude mountaineer from a mere climber.

For that reason, Webster is resolute when he declares, at the start of his team's second acclimatizing climb, that the eight-day trip to Camp Two will be a critical milestone in the expedition. Next to the summit bid, it will be the longest stretch the climbers spend on Everest's upper shanks.
With Burke at his side, Webster struggles to Camp One, where the pair spend the night.

Waking up the next morning, Webster steels himself for an agonizing day through the tortuous crevasses and delirious heat of the Western Cwm. Instead, he reaches Camp Two in less than two hours -- a personal best.

Webster views his achievement as a sign that his body is shaking off the infection that has slowed him for the past two weeks.

By now, Camp One has been stripped of most tents as food and gear are moved to Camp Two. Set in an icy moraine on the upper end of the Western Cwm, Camp Two is a smaller version of Base Camp, consisting of a kitchen/dining tent and a half-dozen sleeping tents.

Because it will serve as the primary rest stop, where the climbers organize themselves for the summit push, Camp Two is also known as Advance Base Camp.

Over the next few days, as the weather vacillates between morning sun and late-afternoon snowstorms, Webster spends his time shooting footage for the documentary with cameraman Frank Vilaca. Burke, a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa, takes the opportunity to interview climbers for her sports psychology research. Much of the work of setting up Camp Three falls on Lock, Ponce de Leon, and the expedition's four climbing Sherpas. Ponce de Leon takes the extra step of helping the Sherpas fix a 600-metre climbing rope above Camp Three, to a section of the Lhotse Face known as the Yellow Band.

At 7,200 metres, Camp Three is considered the most dangerous rest stop on Everest. It sits on a steeply angled shelf near the top of the Lhotse Face, and requires climbers to perform the back-breaking task of carving their tent sites into the slope. As a result, the tents sit on a precarious slant that, in addition to being uncomfortable, can be deadly.

In 1996, a Taiwanese climber died from injuries suffered at Camp Three, after he toppled 20 metres, and plunged head first into a crevasse. It was early morning, and the climber had left his tent wearing only the smooth-soled liners of his mountaineering boots. While at the latrine, he lost his footing and tumbled down the Lhotse Face.

He was still alive when a Sherpa came to his rescue and helped him down the face. It was then that he collapsed and died.

The hazards of Camp Three are underscored one night when hurricane-speed winds rip across the summit of Everest, blowing away a tent belonging to the Mexican-Canadian expedition led by Andres Delgado.

By the eighth day, when Webster and his teammates make their way down to Base Camp, the weather has cleared enough for the climbers to film their descent. At one of the wider crevasses along the Western Cwm, Burke suddenly catches a crampon between the rungs of a ladder. The crampon is wedged so tight she can't pry it loose.

With her fellow climbers holding the safety rope taut on either side of the crevasse, climbing Sherpa Mingma Tsiri makes his way across the ladder to where Burke is suspended. The added weight of having another climber on three ladders lashed together with rope creates a bounce that unnerves Burke. As Mingma Tsiri attempts to wrest the crampon free, Burke does all she can to avoid peering down the crevasse. "I knew if I looked down, I'd start to panic," she says.

The high-wire rescue is successful, but only after Mingma Tsiri helps Burke out of the crampon. This allows her to cross the ladder safely, while the resourceful Sherpa wrenches the crampon free.

Watching Burke through the ordeal, Webster marvels at her composure. "She was a real trooper," he says.

It is late evening by the time the climbers finally reach Base Camp. Burke has just enough energy to devour the curry dinner prepared by the expedition cook. She then retires to her tent for 10 hours of uninterrupted sleep. Compared to the punishing conditions at the higher camps, the thicker air at Base Camp -- not to mention the thicker sleeping pads in her tent -- makes Burke feel as though she has checked into a luxury hotel.

The next few days will be devoted to rest, as the climbers prepare to mount a push to the summit. While Lock and Ponce de Leon remain at Base Camp with the support staff, Burke and Webster plan to descend 1,000 metres to the hamlet of Dingboche.

"The idea is to get down into thicker oxygen, just to let your muscles heal," says Webster. "With a little time in the valley, I should come back stronger."
Algonquin's brains put anyone on Everest, no sweat: An Algonquin College 3D website lets you accompany the climbers -- in 3D -- as Richard Starnes reports.

By Richard Starnes
Saturday, May 8, 2004
Page: E11 (City Section)

Anyone who has dreamed of climbing Mount Everest will soon be able to do so in complete comfort, total safety and without leaving the house.

They will be in no danger of losing their breath from lack of oxygen, although they might gasp when they take the virtual 3-D trip up the mountain; it takes only 20 seconds.

The tour comes courtesy of several departments of Algonquin College, which have teamed up with Ben Webster, his climbing partners, and two Ottawa tech companies to develop a website that is tracking the adventurers every step of their way to the summit.

Algonquin school of business dean Kent MacDonald describes the task of turning Webster's idea into the live website as "almost like climbing a mountain."

"We tried going up one trail and it didn't work. So we went up another until we got to where we wanted to go," he said.

Glenn MacDougall, director of learning and teaching services, remembers well how the route was negotiated.

"Ben wanted to know if there was a way to track the climbers' progress on an immediate basis. Sending daily dispatches and e-mails from the mountain had been done before. But they are not instant. What Ben wanted was something in real time."

So MacDonald and MacDougall went to work assembling a team at the college made up of experts in multimedia design and satellite delivery, including David Briscoe, the co-ordinator of geographical information systems.

MacDonald found two Ottawa technology companies ready to provide the equipment for information to be instantly relayed from the mountain to servers in Ottawa.

Skywave, a manufacturer of small satellite transceivers, provided three boxes that can be attached to a knapsack or on a pole above a climber's head. Switch them on and they pinpoint exactly where the climbers are, and beam the spot's latitude, longitude and altitude to the Skywave satellite and back to Ottawa. Messages come in every 15 minutes and the website records where the climbers are.

At the same time, the climbers' health is automatically monitored. That comes courtesy of March Networks and the sophisticated medical equipment they provided, which allows the climbers to measure their blood pressure and oxygen saturation levels at various altitudes. The information is then recorded onto a Palm Pilot, dumped onto a laptop, and fired off to Ottawa via the satellite feeds.

It was originally intended that this material would be included on the website. But a serious snag was identified: The information comes in the form of a plethora of numbers that would be too difficult for a casual observer to understand.

That doesn't mean they will be wasted. Once the climb is completed, the college and a team of teachers from the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board will get together to design a program to be taught to high school students in the fall.

The health numbers, interpreted by members of the college's nursing faculty, will become a component of that program, which will run in conjunction with a documentary being broadcast on the Canadian Discovery Channel.

All of this contributes to what is being touted as the most intimate look at a climb in Everest history.

The website, compiled by Algonquin graduate Louisa Lambregts and her development team, has a host of other visuals on offer.

Top of the list is the ride up the mountain, with the help of some astonishing 3-D digital animation. Material for this came in the form of hundreds of pictures of the Himalayas taken by a Swiss company.

The photographs have been overlapped to provide what MacDonald calls a "digital animated rendering" of Everest and a Digital Elevation Mapping file.
"It is with this rendering that we have managed this amazing fly-through," he says.

Browsers will also be able to regularly read postcards from Webster, pick photographs beamed back from the mountain, and incorporate them in their own e-mails to friends. They will even be able to enter an Everest contest.

The website is at www.algonquincollege.com/everest/.
Rivalry and the waiting game: Climbers have to cool their jets, but competition heats up

By Pauline Tam
Saturday, May 8, 2004
Page: E10 (City Section)

From this point, weather is everything. It will dictate when the last camp is set up, and signal a brief opportunity for climbers to make their move.

Historically, May 10 has been an auspicious day to reach the summit of Mount Everest -- though there have been deadly exceptions. The next window of opportunity usually falls on May 23.

Until there is a break in the weather, Ben Webster and his teammates will bide their time at the base of Everest.

This week, hurricane-force winds shut down the upper mountain, thwarting the ambitions of climbers anxious to ascend. Many -- including Webster and Shauna Burke -- have left Base Camp and descended 1,000 metres to the hamlet of Dingboche. In the thicker air, their oxygen-deprived bodies have a chance to heal before the summit push.

From Dingboche, Webster can see wind whipping snow off Everest's peak. But at Base Camp, the forecast is even less promising. The word circulating among teams with access to a paid weather service is that high winds are to remain for the next week, as a jetstream parks itself just south of Everest. After that, the system is expected to move north, and hover indefinitely over the world's tallest peak.

As he convalesces, Webster reflects on the implications of the forecast. A successful push to the top of Everest requires the jetstream to be far enough away from the peak to produce at least 48 hours of clear, calm weather.

From the beginning, Webster had counted on being one of the few teams that could take advantage of an early stretch of fair skies to scramble up the mountain. But with each day, his team's lead dwindles as others catch up. By the time Webster gets that elusive opportunity to mount a summit push, at least 10 other expeditions could be jockeying for position.

The last thing Webster wants is to be caught in a convoy, which can lead to dangerous bottlenecks on the summit ridge.

According to Jon Krakauer, author of Into Thin Air, crowding played a role in the infamous tragedy of May 10, 1996, when nine climbers -- including two experienced guides -- died during a rogue storm near the top of Everest.

Aside from safety considerations, Webster has other reasons for wanting to beat the rush.

In addition to reaching the summit, he and his climbers are producing a documentary that aims to include detailed footage of their struggles above 8,000 metres.

The goal is not only to capture their own experiences in the "Death Zone," but to follow other expeditions as well. The added complication of filming while climbing requires Webster and his teammates to move ahead of other teams.

"We can't ask anybody to alter one iota of their climbing plans to accommodate our filming," says Webster. "So the onus is on us to ensure that we put our resources ahead of schedule and ahead of placement so that we can capture their experience up on the mountain."

He is not the only one vying for a lead position. Among the strongest contingent at Base Camp is a team led by David Breashears, the director of a 1997 IMAX film about Everest. Like Webster, Breashears is on the mountain to film and climb. Accompanied by renowned mountaineer Ed Viesturs, Breashears is ascending Everest for the fifth time to shoot images for a Hollywood film.

When Webster discusses Breashears, there is an edge in his voice that hints at rivalry. Even Hector Ponce de Leon -- the most mild-mannered climber of the group -- sounds uncharacteristically defensive.

The undercurrent of competition is no doubt heightened by Breashears' celebrity among Everest climbers. During the murderous storm of 1996, Breashears was filming his IMAX movie on the mountain.

When disaster struck, he put aside his camera and devoted his team's resources to a rescue effort. Since then, Breashears' reputation for magnanimity has preceded him. Climbers at Base Camp seem to revere him like a tribal elder.
Over the past month, Breashears and his climbers have consistently moved ahead of other teams, breaking trail in lockstep with a group of Mexicans and Canadians.

Together with an army of climbing Sherpas, the teams have been responsible for fixing roped lines up most of the mountain. Their efforts have benefited Webster and his teammates, who have followed closely behind them.

This subtle manoeuvring reinforces a pecking order that inevitably develops on Everest: The stronger teams not only lead, they earn the privilege of dictating how access to the mountain will be managed. Often, the team leaders with the most experience are conspicuously vocal about what should be done on the mountain. This tension between personal agendas and the normally selfless, considerate spirit of mountaineering only intensifies as the summit push approaches.

Hoping to avoid gridlock on the mountain, Breashears takes advantage of a lull last week to call a meeting at Base Camp. The idea is to discuss plans for the summit push. Representatives from at least 10 other teams show up, but Webster and his teammates are not among them.

The meeting falls on a day when the team is on an acclimatizing climb.

Nonetheless, at the meeting, Breashears learns that through the efforts of Webster's team -- namely Ponce de Leon and two climbing Sherpas -- a 600-metre rope has been fixed halfway between Camp Three and Camp Four, the last camp before the summit.

To complete the job, the teams agree to join forces. Over the next three days, during a brief spell of clear weather, they pool together rope, equipment and manpower. A convoy of 20 Sherpas (about two from each team) is sent to establish safe passage between the two highest camps. Webster's expedition is notably absent from the effort.

"We fixed 600 metres of line above Camp Three, which is more than our share," says Ponce de Leon.

The task of fixing rope isn't easy. On their way up the mountain, the Sherpas are beaten back by winds of up to 160 km/h. Visibility is so low on the way to Camp Three that the Sherpas are forced to retreat to Camp Two. There, the winds are so strong that several tents are shredded and destroyed.

The ropes that are finally fixed stop near the entrance to Camp Four, which sits on a vast, featureless plain known as the South Col. It is here, at 8,000 metres, that climbers typically spend their first night at heights where their bodies lose all ability to acclimate. The longer a climber stays at this altitude, the more likely illness or death will occur. For this reason, Camp Four is the start of the Death Zone.

As news of the fixed rope to the South Col reaches Base Camp, Ponce de Leon, Andrew Lock and the expedition's support staff prepare to send a team of Sherpas up the mountain. As soon as the weather clears, the Sherpas will ascend to Camp Four and set up the expedition's final camp.

At Dingboche, Webster receives updates from Base Camp by radio. When asked about Breashears, Webster downplays his rival's efforts at team work.

"He (Breashears) has kept his own agenda very close to his chest because he has to go out and film," says Webster.

"But it has been pretty well established now that he wants to get up there first so that he doesn't have any other teams around for his filmmaking. I guess that affects what they're trying to do with this Hollywood film. But my guess is that Breashears is going to be in a position where he'll be saddled with other teams, whether he likes it or not."

Meanwhile, another drama is unfolding on the mountain. Undeterred by high winds, the six climbers belonging to the Mexican-Canadian expedition led by Andres Delgado forge ahead with a final climb before the summit push.

By Wednesday, Delgado manages to reach 7,900 metres -- just short of Camp Four -- while two other climbers go as far as 7,600 metres. The remainder of the team attempt to reach Camp Three, before turning back to Camp Two.

Hearing about Delgado's ascent, Webster dispatches a Sherpa to catch up with the team, and film their climb. As one of the most aggressive expeditions on Everest this year, Delgado and his teammates have captured the attention of Webster and his documentary team.

One reason is that unlike other teams -- including Webster's -- Delgado and his climbers are committed to reaching the summit without using canned oxygen.

However, recent tensions within the group have also made them an expedition to watch.

In a letter to his family in Ottawa, Mike Swarbrick, Webster's audio-video technician, outlines his observations about Delgado's team.
"There are some who think this team will become a 'train wreck' on the mountain due to infighting, a lack of experience over 7,000 metres, and the fact that they will not be using supplemental oxygen, so they have become prime targets for our cameras."

The irony is Webster himself is no stranger to disharmony on Everest. He is the first to argue that in the volatile atmosphere of high-altitude mountaineering, disputes have a way of being blown out of proportion -- to the point where they sometimes create a misleading impression of antagonism.

In 2000, while leading his first expedition to Everest, Webster and his three teammates from Quebec bickered constantly. As the summit push approached, the animosity degenerated into open fighting, with the Quebecers accusing Webster of being selfish and insensitive. Journalists who were on the expedition chronicled the squabbles at length.

The resulting negative publicity had a lasting impact on Webster. To this day, he remains tight-lipped about what went wrong, and blames the media for distorting their coverage.

Webster also remains wary of journalists -- despite the fact he continues to court them. "I think I took away from that experience things that still sit with me, that I feel badly about," he says, refusing to elaborate.

Nonetheless, the publicity from that climb led to a second Everest expedition.

A year later, Webster was hired by a U.S. dot-com company to guide a female climber to the peak of Everest. It was a task he performed successfully, even though he himself stopped after reaching Camp Four because he felt too weak to climb. Webster admits the experience taught him to know -- and accept -- his own limitations.

Earlier this week, when Webster is asked to reflect on the progress of his latest expedition, he goes out of his way to praise his fellow climbers.

Compared to his previous summit attempts, Webster has never felt more confident.

"I feel very comfortable with what we've been able to put in place. The energy around the expedition is extremely high at the moment, which is a really good sign. And part of that is a tribute to the quality of the people involved," he observes.

"I say all this with the complete knowledge that we could be having this conversation 48 hours from now and any number of things could go wrong.

"But at this point, things look extremely good."
The push to the summit: Ben Webster of Ottawa sends his two professional climbers toward the peak, while he and Shaunna Burke lie in wait at Camp Two. Pauline Tam reports.

By Pauline Tam
Friday, May 14, 2004
Page: F1 (City Section)

After more than a week of anxious waiting, the caravan up Mount Everest has finally begun.

Anticipating a brief spell of clear skies this weekend, at least 10 teams -- including Ottawa resident Ben Webster's expedition -- have hastily left Base Camp for Camp Two, from which climbers will attempt a well-timed push to the summit.

If all goes well, Australian alpinist Andrew Lock will be the first of Webster's teammates to reach the summit this weekend. He is expected to be followed by Hector Ponce de Leon of Mexico.

The two Canadian climbers, however, have postponed their summit bids. Webster and his girlfriend, Shaunna Burke, will remain at Camp Two and wait for a second opportunity to make their move. The plan has long been in the works, but was finalized on Monday, when the climbers agreed to launch a summit bid this week.

Traditionally, the season's first ascents have been made by skilled climbers who -- along with a small army of Sherpas -- do the tough work of breaking trail. Often, they set safety ropes at strategic points near the summit, paving the way for less-experienced climbers to follow.

In the case of Webster's team, the varying levels of experience among the climbers is a factor in orchestrating a two-pronged push. But Webster believes the strategy also bolsters his team's chances of reaching the summit, while capturing the experience for a TV documentary. "In case there's bad weather or high winds kick in, you're able to come back with a second push," he says.

The plan is in keeping with the way the expedition has unfolded.

Over the past six weeks, as the team has acclimatized by climbing up and down the mountain, Lock and Ponce de Leon have consistently kept a more aggressive pace -- largely because they are stronger climbers.

As professional Himalayan mountaineers, Ponce de Leon has twice ascended Everest, while Lock, on two previous attempts, stopped short of the summit to rescue other climbers. In 2000, while leading a commercial expedition, he finally reached the peak of the world's tallest mountain.

As the leader of a four-man team, Webster also made it to the top of Everest that year -- the only climber in his group who did. The ascent was a struggle by any measure.

Ostracized by his teammates due to infighting, Webster languished at high altitude for more than a week. While waiting for the right climbing conditions, he came dangerously close to depleting his team's supply of bottled oxygen.

In the end, he reached the peak alongside four Sherpas and a Pakistani climber, but not before staying on Everest for 10 days -- double the time it takes most mountaineers to mount a summit push.

The following year wasn't any easier. Hired by a U.S. dot-com company to guide a female climber up Everest, Webster successfully devoted his energy and resources to getting his client to the summit. But he stopped after reaching the last camp before the peak because he felt too weak to climb.

This uneasy battle with timing and nature underscores a dilemma that Webster could face again this year: While patience is part of a summit bid, those who wait too long not only risk the possibility of missing their chance, they also get progressively more exhausted from spending too much time at altitude.

Webster admits if a second opportunity doesn't turn up by the end of the month, he and Burke are "out of luck."

For Burke, who has never climbed to the top of Everest, the uncertainty creates extra stress. Her greatest fear is being trapped in a holding pattern on the mountain. Last month, when she spent most of an eight-day climb at Camp Two, Burke not only endured the pain and lethargy of being at high altitude, she noticed a dramatic deterioration in her athletic build. She worries that if enough muscle is eaten away, she will be too weak to make the push to the summit.
Despite her fears, Burke, of Ottawa, has accepted the delay with grace, says Webster.

"To see a window appear and not be given the opportunity to actually go and get it can be, I imagine, very disappointing ... She understands that for the (good) of the expedition, she's going to have to wait."

Meanwhile, as Webster had suspected, a convoy of teams is jockeying for position. In the lead is a team led by U.S. filmmaker David Breashears, who is ascending Everest for the fifth time, to shoot images for a Hollywood movie. Accompanied by renowned mountaineer Ed Viesturs, Breashears and his climbing partners also aim to reach the summit this weekend.

Though Breashears has openly expressed a desire to move up the mountain first -- allowing him to shoot footage without crowds on the summit -- few climbers seem willing to honour the request. At least three other groups, including the one led by Webster, are intent on arriving at the top of the world around the same time as Breashears and his team.

The rivalry is likely to complicate Webster's own filming plans. In addition to sending his teammates to the peak with a crew of Sherpas as cameramen, he has assigned another group of Sherpas to document the summit bids of four other teams. Almost all of them intend to reach the mountaintop this weekend, putting added pressure on Webster's rations of bottled oxygen, not to mention his team's limited manpower.

"That was always the worst-case scenario," says Webster. "We were hoping that the teams would be staggered over the course of the month of May, where I could follow different teams without exhausting all our people at the exact same time."

Logistics aside, there is the inevitable danger of crowding near the summit. Bottlenecks could slow even resourceful climbers such as Lock and Ponce de Leon. They could also increase the risk of weather change, frostbite or problems with oxygen tanks.

In the end, the best-laid plans still hinge on weather. The forecast this weekend is for the hurricane-speed winds of the past eight days to subside. By tomorrow, the jetstream that normally sits atop Everest is expected to move far enough north to produce at least a day of low winds. At the same time, the sunny skies of the past week could give way to heavy snowfall. Because the jetstream is the catalyst for dramatic forces of nature on Everest, snow doesn't worry Lock and Ponce de Leon as much as high wind.

The next 48 hours will determine whether these conditions pay off for the expedition's best climbers.
One day to the 'Death Zone': Hector Ponce de Leon and Andrew Lock, Ottawa filmmaker Ben Webster's two strongest teammates, plan to make their push to the summit tomorrow. Now, writes Pauline Tam, if the weather would only co-operate.

By Pauline Tam  
Saturday, May 15, 2004  
Page: E7 (City Section)

Some are gambling that today will be summit day. Others are betting on improved weather tomorrow.

Because Mount Everest has its own micro-climate, even the most up-to-date forecast can't accurately pinpoint when that elusive window of opportunity will emerge.

At Camp Four -- the last rest stop before the top of the world -- at least four teams were to set off last night, defying the ferocious winds around them. But Hector Ponce de Leon and Andrew Lock have elected to wait for more forgiving conditions.

At Camp Three, where their tents are carved into the near-vertical Lhotse Face, the two strongest climbers from Ben Webster's expedition are holding off their summit push until tomorrow. Reports from three weather services -- gathered and analysed by technician Mike Swarbrick at Base Camp -- suggest the winds will die down to 35 km/h today. By tomorrow, the winds should be half that speed.

The 10 teams jockeying for position on the Everest massif are waiting for the moment when the jetstream moves far enough away from the mountain to produce a brief spell of stable weather.

Aside from Lock and Ponce de Leon, three climbers from Quebec and a team of Mexican and Canadian climbers are also at Camp Three, preparing for an ascent tomorrow. For experienced Everest climbers, there is every reason to stall the journey to Camp Four, and keep their stay there as brief as possible.

Situated in a vast, featureless plain known as the South Col, Camp Four is a forlorn mix of windswept boulders and bulletproof ice. While the camp, at 8,000 metres, is the launching pad to the summit, it also marks the start of the "Death Zone." At this altitude, climbers lose all ability to acclimatize. The longer they stay, the more likely illness or death will occur. For that reason, most climbers avoid spending the night at Camp Four, preferring to use it as a place to rest and rehydrate.

The deadly conditions aren't the only reason to avoid high camp. The ascent to the South Col is one of the most strenuous parts of the climb. To get there, climbers must surmount a cliff of brittle limestone known as the Yellow Band, then work their way up the Geneva Spur, a jagged fin of rock where crampons tend to slip. From the top of the Geneva Spur, climbers drop about 30 metres to the barren expanse of the South Col, where the winds can be stronger than those at the summit.

Camp Four is, quite likely, the most desolate place on earth.

While the summit is less than three vertical kilometres from the South Col, the route is a tangle of hazards. A misplaced step on loose rock, slippery ice, or the knife-edged summit ridge can lead to a fast, fatal plunge down the mountain.

It doesn't help that the climbers -- even when fed bottled oxygen -- have the mental capacity of a child at this altitude. Their speed can average less than four metres a minute. Babies crawl faster than that.

On this expedition, Hector Ponce de Leon hopes to surpass that pace. From the South Col, his goal is to reach the peak in six hours -- about half the time it takes the average mountaineer.

For most climbers, summit day typically begins in the dark. Many leave the South Col around midnight, and trudge across the plain with nothing but their headlamps to illuminate the way. They then climb through the night, and into the early afternoon. Some 12 hours later, their ascent finally ends at the vertex. This is Andrew Lock's plan for himself.

By contrast, Ponce de Leon is confident he can leave the South Col at dawn, and still make it to the summit by noon. On his first ascent of Everest in 1996, unforeseen delays led Ponce de Leon to leave high camp at 7 a.m., and reach the peak six hours later. Two years ago, while working as a commercial guide, he left Camp Four at 2 a.m., and made it to the top in eight hours. "And we were going slow because we were fixing lines and I was taking care of clients," says Ponce de Leon.

Having grown up in the mountainous regions of Mexico, where he scrambled up volcanoes as a teenager, Ponce
de Leon is better suited to the rigours of Everest than any climber on Webster's expedition.

The idea behind a daytime summit push is linked to Webster's TV documentary. Rather than having cameras follow him in the dark, Ponce de Leon wants to provide an intimate account of his struggles above 8,000 metres. The only way to do that is to film during the day, "I think we'll be able to get footage pretty much all the way up the summit," he says.

When Ponce de Leon initially floated the idea to his teammates, the Sherpa cameramen assigned to accompany him had misgivings. Even the veterans worried about factors out of Ponce de Leon's control, such as crowding near the summit ridge. The longer the climbers are held up, the greater the risk of rapid weather changes, which typically happen in the afternoon.

For his part, Ponce de Leon has assured the Sherpas that he is willing to abandon the plan -- and follow the same climbing schedule as Lock -- if the forecast suggests even the slightest chance of unstable weather. "I'm only going to be doing it if everything seems right for it," he says.

Meanwhile, at Camp Two, Webster is in constant radio contact with his teammates. He is also monitoring the progress of the Sherpa cameramen covering the summit bids of four other teams. They include a group of Chilean and British climbers, the Mexican-Canadian team, the three climbers from Quebec, and a 36-year-old diabetic from the U.S.

Through the Sherpas, Webster also receives reports that the climbers led by U.S. filmmaker David Breashears have abruptly postponed their summit bid. The team, which is on the mountain to film a Hollywood movie, was intent on being the first to reach the summit, and had enjoyed a narrow lead. But from their position at Camp Five -- an extra rest stop the group established at 8,300 metres -- Breashears and his teammates have mysteriously returned to Camp Two.

Webster speculates the tempestuous winds above the South Col may have played a role in their retreat.

Having chosen to postpone his own summit bid, Webster is focused on co-ordinating the efforts of his fellow climbers. From Camp Two, where there are reserves of bottled oxygen and other supplies, he can also be ready to move up the mountain in case of an emergency.

Webster plans to remain at Camp Two at least until his teammates make it back safely from the summit.

As for Shaunna Burke, who has also delayed her summit push, the prospect of waiting for the next window of good weather means she must maintain discipline.

Earlier this week, she accompanied her teammates to Camp Two, but has since returned to Base Camp. The extra climbing keeps her acclimatized while allowing her body to conserve energy. She has found that too much time at Camp Two weakens her athletic build, to the point where she worries about being too weak to climb.

Even as the first wave of climbers get ready to touch the top of the world, another group is preparing to move in behind them.

The Everest quest is far from over.

**Martin Boileau**

Martin Boileau, 39, is a Canadian member of a seven-man expedition led by Andres Delgado of Mexico. He is among the climbers being followed by Ben Webster's documentary cameras as they attempt to reach the summit of Everest. The following is an edited journal entry written by Boileau just before his team left Base Camp for its summit push. It was posted on his team's website at www.everest2004.ca

Needless to say that almost on the eve of the conclusion of such a great project, I am feeling very nervous and my sleep at night is disturbed. Up to now, being on this expedition has given me plenty of time for reflection. It is when one is subjected to extreme conditions that emotions come up to the conscious mind and become more felt. I think that it is the reason why I love mountains so much. When the body is reaching its limits, the mind becomes aware of the deeper emotions and begins to understand what is driving the person. In ordinary life, we go about our daily affairs wearing a shield that we have built to cloak our emotions because usually we do not want to feel them. Because of this, one day we wake up completely lost, not knowing anymore where we come from and, still worse, where we are heading. But after eight hours of effort on a steep slope, where a single misstep may cost you your life, that shield comes down, consciousness is enhanced and one begins to read inside oneself as in an open book ...

Why in the world has such a high mountain attracted me away from my family for three months and with risk to my life? Am I crazy, masochist, or worse, an idiot? ... The best answer that I can give is that one does it to feel really alive. ...
Nowadays ... instant gratification (for) the least effort has become almost everyone's objective. ... The only thing that counts now is the end goal and not the work done to get to it.

For me, the road travelled to reach a goal is even more important than the final result. It is noble to be proud of what has been done, even though it may not always be possible to finish the job as was intended.

(To be happy in life, one must find fulfillment in every step along the way because the goal itself may be elusive ... carpe diem). ... I still remember with strong emotions our farewells at Dorval Airport when I left March 5. My spouse, Joanne, with my daughter, Gabrielle, in her womb, and her son, Alexandre, had accompanied me. This was the most painful parting that I had ever experienced in my life. ... At the eve of my departure for the Everest summit, all that pain and sadness has come back to help me remember that life must continue after this expedition. The life in Joanne's womb is inspiring me to be prudent. To be a father is the dream of my life and I intend to be back to fully assume this responsibility.

At the same time, I feel joy to finally have the opportunity to test myself against this monster that has been haunting me. At the same time, I fear that perhaps I won't be able to meet my own expectations. Those of others are not important to me, because it is a match with myself. I must now apply myself to focus entirely on this challenge in spite of the crowd surrounding me in Base Camp.

This is my last message before I leave for my summit quest.

See you soon,
Martin
Climbers begin dance with death: Two of filmmaker Ben Webster's teammates are to set off for their summit bid today. They won't be alone, and as Pauline Tam reports, that could cause some major problems in the 'Death Zone.'

By Pauline Tam  
Sunday, May 16, 2004  
Page: A7 (News Section)

Hours before the first member of Ben Webster's team is set to climb to the top of the world, the radios crackle with dubious news. Two climbers from a U.S. outfitter, who were on their way down after successfully reaching the summit of Mount Everest, are missing.

Webster hears the news at Camp Two. His teammate, Hector Ponce de Leon, gets the news while preparing for his summit bid at the South Col. Without hesitation, Ponce de Leon, rushes out of his tent to offer help.

The situation has climbers on alert. As twilight approaches, everyone shares the same thought: If the two climbers aren't accounted for by day's end, those getting ready for a summit push will be on search-and-rescue duty instead.

Fortunately, the climbers are located in the last hour of daylight. At Camp Four in the South Col, the staging area for summit bids, they are greeted by Sherpas with fresh bottles of oxygen, then escorted to their tents. After climbing for more than 20 hours above 8,000 metres, where there is one-third the oxygen available at sea level, their dull minds and cold, ravaged bodies are capable of little more than staggering into sleeping bags.

When Webster hears the climbers are safe, he breathes a sigh of relief. Anything that happens to a climber affects many others near the summit. For that reason, every team's movements are of interest to Webster and his group. The fact that they are filming the ascents for a TV documentary makes the progress, or setbacks, of their fellow climbers even more significant.

Since Friday, when more than 40 people launched their summit bids by climbing to Camp Four, Webster has rarely left the radio. Yesterday, he was up for most of the night, monitoring developments, and relaying them to his teammates.

"People who are climbing, they like to know where everybody else is to get a handle on what's taking place," says Webster.

As of yesterday, at least three teams were reported to have reached the summit, and were on their way down to the South Col. They include a group of Chilean and British climbers, who are being followed by a Sherpa cameraman belonging to Webster's documentary team.

The progress reports are critical as Australian alpinist Andrew Lock attempts to be the first of his teammates to reach Everest's peak. He and two Sherpas were to leave Camp Four late last night. If all goes well, Lock could reach the summit in time to greet the dawn.

He is to be followed by Ponce de Leon and two Sherpas, who were to leave around 4 a.m. today. Ponce de Leon, a seasoned climber from Mexico, plans to reach the summit in six hours -- about half the time it takes the average mountaineer.

While the climbers are experienced Himalayan mountaineers -- they have a track record of three Everest ascents between them -- the pace that Lock and Ponce de Leon keep will depend on factors out of their control. With at least three other teams planning to move today, crowding could lead to lineups and delays.

What's more, not all the tricky points along the summit ridge have been fixed with safety rope, making it hard for weaker climbers to move up and down quickly. Even for skilled climbers such as Lock and Ponce de Leon, leapfrogging past someone on the summit's slender wedge is not a good idea. The situation could also be complicated by their filming duties, which could slow their pace as well.

With the jetstream expected to move far enough north to produce clear skies and low winds, the plan is for Lock and Ponce de Leon to reach the summit, then descend more than 2,300 metres. They are expected to join Webster at Camp Two by sundown.

The average climber who reaches the summit would be stupefied by such a pace. Most are defeated by the cumulative effects of altitude, exhaustion and lack of sleep after descending 850 metres to Camp Four.

But if all goes well, an ascent to the top of the world and back to mid-camp will be all in a day's work for the expedition's two strongest climbers.
Two make it to the top: Almost 50 climbers -- including two of Ottawa filmmaker Ben Webster's expedition team -- met at the top of Everest yesterday. The pair set a great pace, and shot some great footage, Pauline Tam reports.

By Pauline Tam  
Monday, May 17, 2004  
Page: B3 (City Section)

The top of the world seemed like a United Nations gathering yesterday, with almost 50 climbers from 10 countries lining up to take in the view from 8,848 metres. Appropriately, five Greek climbers at the summit of Mount Everest planted a flag to commemorate the Olympic Games in Athens this summer.

Savouring their victory under clear, almost windless skies were Andrew Lock of Australia and Hector Ponce de Leon of Mexico, the strongest members of Ben Webster's expedition. The professional Himalayan climbers, each accompanied by two Sherpas, made separate ascents, but were reunited at the summit.

Ponce de Leon raised the stakes by starting his summit push later than most climbers. After leaving high camp at 3 a.m. yesterday, he was still able to get to the top in slightly less than half the time it takes the average climber. Shortly after 10 a.m., he arrived to greet Lock, who took just under 12 hours to climb the final 848 metres between the last rest stop and the summit.

The climbers relayed the news of their ascent to Webster at Camp Two, about 2,300 metres below, who was monitoring his teammates' progress by radio. They also told Webster, who is producing a documentary for Discovery Channel Canada, that they were able to capture much of their ascent on film.

"In both cases, they did a wonderful job, shot some great footage," says Webster. "We actually took a glimpse at some of the footage that was brought down from the ascent yesterday and we're ecstatic. We've got some real world-class footage on this project, so we're real happy."

According to Webster, the climbers remained at the summit -- where they were to spend the night resting with the help of bottled oxygen.

To avoid an overnight stay in the Death Zone, above 8,000 metres, Lock and Ponce de Leon had planned to descend to Camp Two -- a herculean pace for climbers suffering from the accumulated effects of altitude, exhaustion, cold and lack of sleep.

Yesterday marked the second time in four years that Lock, 42, had reached the top of Everest along the southeast ridge -- a route famously pioneered in 1953 by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. Before that, Lock had twice attempted an ascent but was thwarted just below the peak. Both times, he sacrificed his summit bid to help climbers in distress.

Ponce de Leon, 36, had climbed to the summit twice before -- the first time along the north face in Tibet, the second along the southeast ridge in Nepal.

On his first attempt in 1996, Ponce de Leon was climbing with his friend, Andres Delgado, when Delgado lost consciousness high on the mountain. Ponce de Leon nursed his comatose friend for 36 hours, until he finally found a syringe of steroids, and gave Delgado the injection.

To this day, Delgado -- who is also on Everest as the leader of a Mexican-Canadian expedition -- speaks with gratitude about how Ponce de Leon saved his life.

When Mike Swarbrick, a member of Webster's support staff, heard the story, he promptly wrote about it in a letter to his family.

"There are those, like Hector, who will risk their lives to help another, and there are those who can't. The rest of us can only hope that if this test ever comes our way, we'll be the kind to stick around and help."
Masters of the mountains: University of Ottawa doctoral student Shaunna Burke shared the anxiety and exhilaration of Everest climbers as they made their way to the summit in recent days. Now it is about to be her turn as she and Ottawa climber Ben Webster prepare for their own final trek to the top, reports Pauline Tam.

By Pauline Tam

Wednesday, May 19, 2004
Page: B1 (City Section)

Almost overnight, Camp Two has become a ghost town. Except for Ben Webster and Shaunna Burke, few climbers remain at the site where, last week, more than 100 climbers successfully launched a push to the summit of Mount Everest.

Most of them -- including two climbers from Webster's expedition -- have descended to Base Camp to celebrate their victory. The parties started three days ago, after the first climbers to reach the top made it back safely.

But Webster and Burke are still waiting for their turn.

Having postponed their summit bids to support the efforts of their teammates, they are finally preparing to climb themselves. The plan is to be at 8,000 metres for an all-night push starting late Friday. By Saturday morning, they hope to have ascended the final 850 metres to the top of the world.

Like their teammates before them, Webster and Burke plan to film their climb to the summit and back for a documentary produced by Discovery Channel Canada.

At least two other teams plan to reach the summit this weekend. All are chasing a second spell of clear weather that will likely be the last before the monsoons hit the region, officially ending this year's climbing season.

From reports gathered and analysed at Base Camp, Webster has learned the season's first storm -- a tropical cyclone moving east toward Everest -- is arriving earlier than usual. Forecasts suggest the world's tallest peak won't be pounded by high winds, but the system will bring rain or snow. The only dry weather is likely to be above 7,500 metres.

Having never climbed to the top of Everest, Burke, 28, is hoping the storm will keep its distance until Saturday afternoon. This would at least give her a chance to reach the summit by Saturday morning. "We definitely won't go if there's any potential of a bad storm coming in," she says.

The past week has been wildly emotional for Burke. At Base Camp, she stayed close to the radio for reports about her teammates, Hector Ponce de Leon and Andrew Lock, as they made their way up the mountain. She shared their anxiety and exhilaration as if they were her own. "I actually found it extremely hard hearing a lot of the stories about what was going on, and knowing that some of that could happen to me," she says.

The greatest tension came when Burke learned about a rescue near the summit. The news reached Base Camp Sunday afternoon, while Ponce de Leon was on his way down the mountain.

At around 8,700 metres, he came across Tom Masterson, a 59-year-old mountain guide attempting to reach the summit without oxygen. When Ponce de Leon came across him earlier in the day, Masterson appeared to be struggling. But after more than 15 hours in the thin air above 8,000 metres, Masterson's altitude sickness had deteriorated to the point where he was stumbling and hallucinating.

Despite repeated pleas by his teammate, Andres Delgado, Masterson refused to abandon his climb. But together with Ponce de Leon, Delgado finally persuaded Masterson to accept some bottled oxygen, and descend the summit ridge.

Two hours later, with Ponce de Leon and Delgado as escorts, the distressed climber arrived at Camp Four, where he was treated for symptoms associated with a swelling of the brain. By then, both Masterson and Delgado -- members of a Mexican-Canadian expedition -- had abandoned their attempts to reach the summit.

Masterson wasn't the only member of his team who needed help. On his way down from the summit, fellow climber Luis Espinoza suddenly noticed his oxygen bottle was empty. Luckily, Andrew Lock was on hand with an extra bottle.

Of the seven climbers in the Mexican-Canadian expedition, only three made it to the summit last Sunday.

Among them was Martin Boileau, a 39-year-old ophthalmologist from Quebec, who became the first Canadian to reach the top of Everest this year.
Meanwhile, as Webster prepares for his second ascent to the top of the world, he admits to fatigue. Having spent the last week co-ordinating the summit bids of his teammates, he is starting to feel the effects of both altitude and sleep deprivation.

"I'll sleep tonight and hopefully recharge a little bit and get focused on the next push," he says.
The leader of a Canadian expedition to Mount Everest says he believes a U.S. climber is dead after the man collapsed from severe altitude sickness near the summit Tuesday.

The unidentified male climber was last seen at 8,500 metres near one of the final obstacles before Everest's 8,850-metre peak, Ottawa resident Ben Webster said yesterday. Little is known about the climber except that he was reportedly registered with a Nepal-based outfitter Cho Oyu Trek.

"He hasn't returned under his own power. Nobody has seen him in two days so he's presumed dead at this point," said Mr. Webster.

According to the Sherpa who relayed the incident to Mr. Webster, the climber may have lost consciousness while those around him tried to help. But with limited resources to mount a rescue, the two climbers had no choice but to leave the man, said Mr. Webster.

"They packed him up in clothing and (left) a flask and tried to communicate to him that they would try to get back or get help to come back. He was unresponsive." Since then, no climbers have attempted to mount a rescue effort from Camp Four, the closest rest stop at 8,000 metres.

"Nobody had the resources or the energy to go back up and look for this guy so the understanding is after two nights ... at 8,500 metres, the prospects are very dim," said Mr. Webster. If the fatality is confirmed, it will be the first on Everest this year. To date, 179 people have died on the world's tallest mountain.

According to Mr. Webster, an Argentine climber and a Nepalese Sherpa working for another expedition were nearby when the climber showed symptoms of high-altitude cerebral edema -- a swelling of the brain caused by lack of oxygen.

Early signs of cerebral edema include headaches and nausea; in advanced stages, it can cause vertigo, vomiting, hallucinations and delirium.

Climbers who don't descend swiftly can die from the illness.

It's unclear whether the climber had access to bottled oxygen or was attempting to descend when he collapsed. It's also not known if the climbers nearby were equipped with first-aid packs to treat the sick man.

The controversial decision to leave a climber in distress is a dilemma that haunts survivors of mountaineering disasters. It also raises questions about the responsibility of fellow climbers on the mountain.

In the 1996 tragedy that killed nine climbers on Everest, two members of a commercial expedition were left for dead after a freak snowstorm wreaked havoc near the summit ridge. The climbers who discovered the pair in hypothermic shock felt it more prudent to save limited resources for those who could actually be helped.

In the end, one climber -- a Japanese woman named Yasuko Namba -- died where she had presumably been abandoned. The other, U.S. climber Beck Weathers, awoke from a 12-hour coma, and staggered back to Camp Four unassisted. By then, he was partially blind, grotesquely frostbitten, and barely coherent.

In the aftermath of that calamity, climbers who were in a position to organize a rescue effort were denounced for not doing enough to save their teammates. Among those singled out for criticism was Jon Krakauer, whose eyewitness account of the disaster became the bestselling book Into Thin Air. While acknowledging regret, Mr. Krakauer has defended the actions of those on the mountain. He argues so many people went missing that day that risk assessments had to be made. Attempting to rescue all the climbers would have needlessly jeopardized the lives of many others.

What's more, the climbers attempting rescues were themselves fighting severe fatigue and the effects of high altitude. In such situations, blunders are made and judgment is clouded, said Mr. Krakauer.

Yesterday, when asked about the wisdom of leaving a sick climber on the summit ridge, Mr. Webster -- speaking from Camp Two, at 6,500 metres -- bristled.

"Let me put you at 8,500 metres, and you haven't slept in three or four days, and you know that if you don't descend within an hour, you're dead. Now tell me what you do, buddy?"
High anxiety: Climbers' likely deaths cruel reminder they're on their own

By Pauline Tam
Friday, May 21, 2004
Page: F1 (City Section)

The family of a Bolivian doctor who reportedly collapsed near the south summit of Mount Everest is pleading with climbers on the mountain for help.

Dr. Nils Antezana was last seen Tuesday afternoon on his way down from the 8,850-metre peak. At about 8,500 metres, he and his guide ran into trouble, and were assisted by a nearby Sherpa.

The Sherpa later told other climbers he was able to help the guide, but could do little for Dr. Antezana. The Sherpa escorted the guide to the first rest stop below the summit, but left Dr. Antezana, who by then was reported to be incapacitated and unresponsive. Since then, no climbers have attempted a rescue or recovery effort.

In a desperate plea posted to everestnews.com yesterday, Dr. Antezana's family urged climbers on the mountain to locate the missing man. "There must be a search party sent out for him."

Dr. Antezana is among three missing climbers feared dead on Everest so far this year.

Unconfirmed reports say Dr. Antezana showed advanced symptoms of high-altitude cerebral edema -- a swelling of the brain caused by lack of oxygen. In its advanced stage, the illness can cause vertigo, vomiting, hallucinations and delirium. Climbers who don't descend quickly can die from the illness. When exacerbated by extreme cold, the condition can cause climbers to die within hours.

Dr. Antezana was climbing with a small team led by an Argentine. The guide has since been identified as Gustavo Lisi.

Among the climbers to have heard the Sherpa's account of the attempted rescue was Ben Webster, the leader of a Canadian expedition. Mr. Webster, who is three days' climb from where Dr. Antezana was last seen, said none of the teams near the summit had the energy or resources to organize a search party.

Mr. Webster said the prospects for the missing climber are "very dim."

Meanwhile, two other deaths have been reported on the north side of Everest. One climber has been identified as 63-year-old Shoto Ota of Japan, who lost consciousness and died on her way down from the summit.

Another unidentified climber is also presumed dead after running into trouble on the descent. A team of Sherpas and Korean climbers who attempted a rescue effort are reportedly missing.

If the fatalities are confirmed, they will bring the total number of fatalities on the mountain to 182.
High anxiety: Ottawa duo on lonely vigil waiting out wind, rain before beginning final assault on summit

By Pauline Tam
Friday, May 21, 2004
Page: F1 (City Section)

Up and down Mount Everest, the weather is worsening by the day. Base Camp is drenched in rain and fog. Near-hurricanes are gusting below the summit.

In the middle of the world's tallest mountain, heavy snowstorms have stranded Ottawa climbers Shaunna Burke and Ben Webster, who are virtually alone at Camp Two.

From their location at 6,500 metres, it is still a three-day climb to the summit.

But their ordeal is far from over. A dismal forecast for the next two days has forced yet another delay. Instead of attempting to reach the 8,850-metre peak this weekend, Burke, 28, and Webster, 41, have postponed their summit bids until early next week.

At this point, the prospects don't look good.

With the year's first tropical cyclone active on Everest, it won't be long before the monsoons follow, signalling the end of the climbing season. If the winds don't subside and the skies don't clear by next week, Burke and Webster can forget about trekking up to the summit.

Despite her outwardly cheerful demeanour, Burke's anxiety is palpable. Having never climbed to the top of Everest, she fears the opportunity is slipping away. "I sort of sit here at times and worry, 'Well, will I get my shot? I've worked so hard for this. Will it actually happen or not?'"

She feels particularly vulnerable to doubt as the tedium of Camp Two sets in. After leaving the noisy celebrations at Base Camp on Tuesday, she has suddenly found herself with little to do and too much time to think. It doesn't help that there are few climbers around for company.

Only one other team remains at Camp Two, with a third expected to join them today. Together with Burke and Webster, they are among the last expeditions still on the mountain, waiting for their turn to climb to the summit.

To break the monotony of life at Camp Two, Burke goes for short walks near the camp. But in keeping active, she is also careful not to exert herself. "We're actually getting quite bored," she says. "We play a lot of cards, we rest and eat a lot. It's very basic living."

For Webster, who is attempting his second ascent, there are signs that fatigue is catching up to him. He is short-tempered and easily irritated. The strain of having spent more than a week at Camp Two appears to have soured his mood. It doesn't help that despite the intensity of the last six weeks -- during which he helped shoot a TV documentary and organize the successful ascents of two other climbers -- his work is still not done. Together with Burke, Webster plans to film their climb to the summit and back as part of the documentary.

Even if the final spell of clear weather arrives, Burke still worries about how her body will react in the Death Zone above 8,000 metres, where there is one third the oxygen available at sea level.

"The only thing that does reassure me a little bit is that I've seen other climbers reach the summit who aren't as physically strong as I am," she says. "That doesn't really tell me anything about how my body is going to do at altitude, but I'm gauging that if they can make it ... maybe I can make it. But you never know. You never ever know."
The deadliest stretch to Everest's summit lies ahead

By Tony Atherton
Monday, May 24, 2004
Page: B1 (City Section)

Far away and far, far below, wars are being fought and political campaigns are being waged. But by mid-morning today, halfway between earth and heaven, Ottawa University doctoral student Shaunna Burke is expected to make her own small dint on history, an impression as distinct as the print of her boots on the snow covering the last -- and deadliest -- 900 metres to the summit of Mount Everest.

By late tonight (tomorrow morning Nepal time), if all goes as planned, Ms. Burke, 28, will become only the second Canadian woman to surmount the world's tallest peak, a milestone that would be like icing on the cake for Ottawa adventurer and filmmaker Ben Webster, who has been documenting the efforts of Ms. Burke and the rest of her team for the Discovery Channel since April.

Ms. Burke may have an unexpected climbing partner today. Andrew Lock, the Australian member of the documentary team who reached the peak last week with teammate Hector Ponce de Leon, has decided to try for a second summit, according to reports from Base Camp.

This time, he hopes to climb through the perilously thin air above 8,000 metres without using the bottled oxygen that is normally an Everest staple.

"He had mentioned that would be a goal of his if he could summit successfully for the ... documentary and get down to Base Camp for a long enough period of time to recover," Kent MacDonald, leader of Algonquin College's support efforts for the expedition, said yesterday.

News that Ms. Burke and Mr. Webster had finally left Everest's 6,500-metre-high Camp Two after several tedious days waiting for a break in the weather came yesterday in an e-mail dispatch from Mike Swarbrick, the expedition's technician at Base Camp, 1,200 metres below.

Mr. Swarbrick said the pair, climbing with four Sherpas, were planning to rest yesterday at Camp Three on the sheer face of the adjoining peak of Mount Lhotse, before continuing to Camp Four on Everest's southeast ridge.

Their rest would have been uneasy at best, suggests Mr. MacDonald. Camp Three clings precariously to a 45-degree slope in an otherwise unbroken two-kilometre-high wall.

Sherpas usually prefer to skip Camp Three and head straight for the relative safety of Camp Four. Recent warming temperatures would have made the wall of ice and snow above the camp particularly unstable, said Mr. MacDonald. Avalanches are a constant danger.

If anyone at Camp Three did hear the deafening roar of cascading snow, he said, "they would have about 30 seconds to get out of the tents, get their boots on, get their crampons on and get away. Do the math, and you can see there's not much chance of getting out."

But as risky as it is, the rest stop is essential for those who aren't acclimated to the altitude like the Sherpas.

Ms. Burke will need all the strength she can muster for the final leg of her journey today, said Mr. MacDonald.

The plan calls for Ms. Burke to try for the summit with three of the Sherpas, who will closely monitor her along the route for signs of cerebral or pulmonary edema, the high-altitude internal swelling that is the leading cause of deaths near Everest's peak.

Mr. Webster and the fourth Sherpa will remain at Camp Four, gathering their strength should they be called upon to mount a rescue effort, said Mr. MacDonald.

At some point in her climb, Ms. Burke will come across a grisly reminder of just how chancy her quest is. The body of Bolivian doctor Nils Antezana, missing since Tuesday, is believed to lie somewhere along Ms. Burke's path to the summit. His death is one of five confirmed or suspected fatalities near Everest's peak.

"It's not uncommon for climbers to see the remains of other climbers at that altitude," said Mr. MacDonald.

As expedition leader, Mr. Webster had his own brush with death on an earlier Everest climb, he said. Climbers will try to cover the bodies, if they have the strength, or tip them into a crevasse. Recovery is out of the question, he said.

"When people talk about going to Everest, (they say) that it's a cattle-walk now," said Mr. MacDonald.
Incredible feats, such as Friday's record-breaking, eight-hour-and-10-minute speed ascent from base camp to the summit by 26-year-old Pemba Dorji Sherpa, only add to the sense that Everest is not the challenge it once was. But, said Mr. MacDonald, "when you talk to the people who actually do it, they'll quickly remind you that the people holding that opinion have not had to experience what they're experiencing."

Mr. Swarbrick reported that Mr. Lock had arrived at Camp Two by early yesterday and was expected to proceed from there directly to Camp Four to meet with Mr. Webster and Ms. Burke before the final summit attempt. "He would not want to do this on his own," said Mr. MacDonald. "He would want to know that there's a group of people somewhere near him with oxygen in case of an emergency.

But Mr. Lock's second summit, as challenging as it is, is less important to the expedition than Ms. Burke's first, he said. "I think they're pretty much focused on, let's just get Shaunna up and let's get her down safely," Mr. MacDonald said. "If they can do that, they will have met every single team goal they set out before this thing."
Shaunna Burke nears summit of world's tallest peak

By Jennifer Chen
Tuesday, May 25, 2004
Page: B1 (City Section)

Shaunna Burke, a 28-year-old University of Ottawa graduate student, hopes early this morning to become the second Canadian woman to brush her feet in the snow atop the world's tallest mountain.

As she left to attempt the most treacherous segment of the climb in her bid for the summit yesterday, Ms. Burke had sherpas capturing her progress on film. She is part of an expedition led by Ben Webster, an Ottawa filmmaker.

Since the team left in April, cameras have been rolling for a documentary with the Discovery Channel. Two team members, Hector Ponce de Leon of Mexico and Andrew Lock of Australia, already made it to the summit on May 16.

While Ms. Burke heads for the peak, Mr. Webster, who had waited out bad weather for about two weeks, decided not to reach the summit. His major responsibility was to direct the filming and logistics for the six-hour documentary, said Kent MacDonald, leader of Algonquin College's support efforts for the expedition.

"He had made up his mind some three weeks ago," he added, that he did not need to reach the summit to complete the documentary. "At that point, he had decided that he would go to a maximum of Camp Four."

Even while Mr. Webster had been resting at Camp Two, waiting out the storms, he was concerned about how tired he was, Mr. MacDonald said.

Somewhere on the Lhotse Face, Mr. Webster decided that he had to turn back. "He was extremely tired," Mr. MacDonald said, and he was afraid of holding Ms. Burke back on her push for the summit.

Mr. MacDonald's last contact with the pair was just before they reached Camp Four, about 900 metres from the summit.

While Mr. Webster returned to Base Camp to rest, Mr. Lock began reascending the mountain from Base Camp on May 22 to catch up to Ms. Burke for a second attempt, this time without oxygen. He hoped to catch up with her before Camp Four, at 8,000 metres.

Mr. Ponce de Leon headed to Camp Two to relay information from Ms. Burke and Mr. Lock back to Base Camp.

Via e-mail, Mike Swarbrick, the expedition's technician, reported from Base Camp that Mr. Lock had passed Camp Three and almost caught up to Ms. Burke. Last night, Mr. MacDonald said they should have already left Camp Four for a summit push.

Although the wind had begun to pick up slightly late yesterday, it probably wouldn't affect the climbers too seriously, Mr. MacDonald said. Wind and the darkness, which sets in between 4:30 and 5 p.m., can be deadly for those still above Camp Four, in what is known as the "Death Zone."

Climbers on the south side of Everest should generally start the push for the top around midnight. "If she was on track, it would be between eight and ten hours" to the peak, Mr. MacDonald said.

Once she reaches the top, he added, it should take about five to seven hours to descend, where she'll rest at Camp Four before heading straight to Camp Two.

So far this year, two deaths have been reported on the north side of Everest, while three climbers have gone missing.

"Everybody's kind of sitting on pins and needles right now, thinking of Shaunna, because of the tragedies that have occurred on Everest in the last five or six days."

"It would be great to get her up and down safely," Mr. MacDonald said. "Speaking with Ben (Webster), that is certainly without a doubt his No. 1 priority."
Burke's Sherpas want to end summit bid: Weather threatens to derail grad student's goal of climbing world's tallest peak

By Pauline Tam
Tuesday, May 25, 2004
Page: F1 (City Section)

If the weather doesn't clear by today, Shaunna Burke's dream to reach the top of the world will have to wait for another time.

The 28-year-old climber had planned to ascend the final 850 metres late Monday, arriving at the peak by yesterday morning. But blustery winds and blowing snow have stranded her at the 8,000-metre site known as Camp Four -- the final rest stop before the summit.

With strong winds and low temperatures predicted high on the mountain for today, the prospects for Burke don't look good. Despite her eagerness to continue, the Sherpas accompanying her are reportedly reluctant to climb higher. That would seriously jeopardize the ascent of the University of Ottawa graduate student.

"I got a radio call from the Sherpas stating that the conditions were so bad that (the Sherpas) wanted to come down in the morning," said Mike Swarbrick, the expedition's technician at Base Camp. Reports from Base Camp indicate Burke spent Monday night in her windblown tent. The three Sherpas helping her huddled in another shelter.

Burke's mother, Lynne Burke, spent a long, sleepless night, Monday, then waited yesterday for a phone call that never came. It was the day her daughter had promised to call from the summit of Mount Everest.

Instead, the elder Burke endured an agonizing silence until early afternoon -- about midnight on Everest -- when she got word her daughter was safe.

Burke was still waiting at the highest camp on Everest for her chance to become the second Canadian woman to reach the top of the world's tallest mountain.

"At least she's safe at Camp Four for the moment, and at least we know her whereabouts," said her mother, who received the news from a producer at the Discovery Channel. The network has been following her daughter as part of a documentary on an expedition led by Ottawa adventurer Ben Webster.

Since the expedition began two months ago, Burke has used a satellite phone to make occasional calls to her parents. Their last conversation was more than two weeks ago, when she vowed to contact her family as soon as she reached the summit.

Since then, two of her teammates have reached the peak, leaving her and Webster to wait their turn. Earlier this week, after Webster announced he was abandoning his climb due to fatigue, he returned to Base Camp with what is apparently the expedition's only working satellite phone, leaving Burke without a means to contact her family.

"It's just the not knowing," she said.

Her daughter, Krista, expressed concern that Webster had given up his attempt to accompany her sister up the mountain. "I thought he was going to be her support while she was climbing, so that's a little bit alarming."

The situation is complicated by the fact that fatigue has also forced the Ottawa climber's teammate, Andrew Lock, to abandon his climb. After ascending to the summit last week, the professional Himalayan climber from Australia had offered to take Webster's place, and make a second trip to the peak as Burke's partner.

But at less than 200 vertical metres from Camp Four on Monday, Lock was forced to turn around. "The brain was willing, mate, but the body was not," he told his teammates by radio.

Lock then descended to Camp Two, where he spent the night, before descending to Base Camp yesterday. On his way down, he stopped to help a troubled climber who had lost his way during a snowstorm. The incident was reported in an e-mail dispatch from Swarbrick at Base Camp.

"Although pretty exhausted, Andrew went well out of his way to guide the lost soul back to the standard icefall route," Swarbrick wrote.
Heartbroken Shaunna abandons her summit quest: Another Canadian woman poised to finish historic ascent

By Pauline Tam
Thursday, May 27, 2004
Page: D1 (City Section)

The howling winds near the top of Mount Everest did their best to drown out her pleas. Still, Shaunna Burke's determined voice broke through the static.

"Please listen to me," she entreated. "I can do this. I'm strong. Please listen. ... "

But the three Sherpas hired to guide her would not be persuaded. Over the radio to expedition leader Ben Webster at Base Camp, the head of the Sherpa team sounded a note of resignation as he announced the end of the summit push.

"Ben, we are cold, we are tired, we are packing up," he said. "The winds are too strong. We are coming down."

Listening to Burke's desperate appeals, technician Mike Swarbrick could sense her heartbreak. Though she was less than 850 vertical metres from the peak, the University of Ottawa student would be robbed of her chance to become the second Canadian woman to reach the summit of the world's tallest mountain. That title could go to Urszula Tokarska, a 41-year-old interior designer from Toronto, who began her final ascent to the summit yesterday.

For Burke, nearly two months of strict discipline -- involving profound sleep and oxygen deprivation -- were about to dissolve into crushing disappointment.

"Through no fault of her own, this tough young woman, who has spent 45 days battling most of the way up Everest, has been forced to turn around," Swarbrick reported in an e-mail yesterday.

"Shaunna just spent three days in the death zone, waiting for an opportunity that has been taken from her by the severe, relentless, bone-chilling winds. She's been champing at the bit to give it a go, but the odds and the elements have been against her."

Indeed, the tempestuous winds were visible from Base Camp, nearly 3,500 metres below the summit, where Swarbrick could see plumes of spindrift raking the top of the mountain. The near-hurricane winds also grounded the last remaining team on the south face of Everest -- of which Tokarska is a member. Like Burke, Tokarska and six other climbers have been stalled at 8,000 metres since Monday. Unlike her, they were planning to spend a fourth night at the highest camp on the mountain, in a last-ditch effort to salvage their climb.

But the longer they stay in the thin air above 8,000 metres, the more likely their bodies will succumb to altitude sickness. Even with the help of bottled oxygen, climbers can't remain at such heights for long. Yet despite the deadly conditions, Burke has displayed remarkable stamina, said Swarbrick.

"From listening to the radio transmissions, I'd say that she has been stronger in body and mind than the Sherpa team that was charged with guiding her."

Nonetheless, he acknowledged the wisdom of the Sherpas' decision.

"The Sherpas know that Everest is capable of crushing not only human dreams and spirit, but also their mortal frames," he wrote. "Big men have died on the mountain."

From their home in Quebec's Eastern Townships, Burke's family reacted to the news with a mixture of relief and dismay.

"For me, it's a relief, but it's not about me," said Burke's mother, Lynn. "This is about her and how she's feeling. So for her, I feel sorry that she didn't have the opportunity."

Burke's sister, Krista, said she respected the Sherpas' decision to call off the climb.

"The Sherpas live on the mountain. They know the mountain, and if they've had enough, then they're probably able to see much more objectively than my sister, who desperately wants to complete this dream."

The premature end to Burke's summit attempt brings an abrupt conclusion to Webster's expedition, which began nearly two months ago.

An Ottawa-based adventure guide who climbed to the top of Everest in 2000, Webster, 41, was hired by the Discovery Channel to produce a six-part series on the expedition. The documentary's goal was to provide an intimate look at what it takes to climb Everest. In particular, Webster's pitch to the network involved an ambitious plan to shoot detailed footage of his team and
their struggles above 8,000 metres -- known as the Death Zone.

Webster chose two professional Himalayan climbers to join him in the expedition. Between them, Hector Ponce de Leon, 36, of Mexico and Andrew Lock, 42, of Australia had three Everest ascents. They were seasoned guides who had not only survived high-altitude brushes with death, but had risked their own lives to save others.

At 28, Burke was the junior member of the expedition. A former competitive skier, Burke had parlayed her love for climbing into a scholarly pursuit at the University of Ottawa. During the expedition, she conducted interviews with climbers as research into the psychology of Everest mountaineers.

Since arriving at the base of Everest in late March, the climbers have encountered one deadly obstacle after another. During forays through the Khumbu Icefall near Base Camp, they dodged teetering ice blocks, and crossed gaping crevasses on wobbly ladders.

Farther up the mountain, the climbers narrowly avoided the path of nightly avalanches -- the most common killer on Everest. Later, along a near-vertical wall of ice known as the Lhotse Face, Webster and Burke were caught in a blizzard while trying to descend from a practice climb. They were lucky to escape with their lives.

At each stage, the climbers battled the stresses of altitude, which ate at their muscles, and left them weak and lethargic. Burke noticed the deterioration most dramatically, while Webster and Lock were weakened by a persistent flu bug. The only climber to emerge unscathed was Ponce de Leon.

Earlier this month, after six weeks of climbing to help their bodies adjust to the thin air, the ascent finally began in earnest. To juggle the challenges of climbing and filming, Webster divided his team into groups, with the intention of orchestrating three separate attempts to the summit. He believed the strategy bolstered the team's chances of reaching the peak, while allowing them to gather enough footage for the documentary.

The plan was in keeping with the way the expedition had unfolded.

At every stage, Lock and Ponce de Leon had kept a more aggressive pace, largely because they were stronger climbers. As a result, Webster postponed his own summit bid -- along with that of Burke -- to focus on the efforts of his other teammates.

In the end, Lock and Ponce de Leon reached the peak during a brief spell of clear weather. Ponce de Leon raised the stakes by starting his summit push later than most climbers. He was still able to get to the top in seven hours -- slightly less than half the time it takes the average climber. On their way down, the climbers were involved in a daring high-altitude rescue that earned them the gratitude of other expeditions.

But the drama was not over. Webster's plan left him and Burke in the precarious position of waiting for an opportunity they knew might never come. With high winds and tropical cyclones signalling the start of the monsoons -- and an end to the climbing season -- the pair spent last week virtually alone on the mountain. They were still waiting for a break in the weather to climb to the summit.

By then, Burke's anxiety was palpable. In front of her teammates, she put up a brave front. But despite her outwardly cheerful demeanour, Burke feared her opportunity was slipping away. Meanwhile, Webster was showing signs of fatigue. Having spent 10 days at 6,500 metres, his mood had soured considerably, and he was short-tempered and easily irritated.

This uneasy battle with timing and nature was familiar to Webster. During his first trip to Everest four years ago, Webster languished at high altitude for a week while waiting for the right climbing conditions. As the leader of a four-man team, he had been ostracized by his teammates due to infighting. Journalists who were on the expedition chronicled the squabbles at length.

Webster eventually made it to the summit -- he was the only climber on his team who did -- but the expedition ended in animosity.

The resulting negative publicity had a lasting impact on Webster. To this day, he remains tight-lipped about what went wrong, and blames the media for distorting their coverage.

Nonetheless, the publicity from that climb led to a second Everest expedition. A year later, he was hired to guide a U.S. climber to the peak, a task he performed successfully, even though he himself stopped after reaching 8,000 metres. He told support staff he felt too weak.

The situation repeated itself earlier this week, when Webster gave up while attempting to reach 7,200 metres.

In a radio exchange with his support staff, Webster confessed to feeling exhausted, and worried he was keeping Burke from getting to the summit.
He eventually returned to Base Camp, leaving Burke to continue climbing to the Death Zone. She spent three nights alone in her windblown tent, while the Sherpas guiding her huddled in another shelter. It's not clear whether she survived with the help of bottled oxygen.

Back in Quebec, her family waited for news of Burke, and were alarmed when they heard nothing by Tuesday.

That was the day after she was supposed to have reached the summit. When news finally came that Burke was still waiting at the highest camp on Everest, her sister expressed concern that Webster had reneged on his promise to accompany Burke up to the peak.

Burke's sister was even more worried when she learned that Lock had offered to take Webster's place, only to be forced back due to fatigue. By then, fierce winds and blowing snow had trapped Burke and her Sherpa guides at 8,000 metres for nearly four days.

Even with the news that Burke has been forced to abandon her climb, her family still fears for her safety. The descent from Everest can be every bit as dangerous as the ascent.

"We won't feel like we're out of the woods until she's back at Base Camp safely," said her mother.
'Oh my gosh, this is a serious place': Shaunna Burke describes the final days of her bid to reach the summit

By Pauline Tam  
Friday, May 28, 2004  
Page: E11 (City Section)

Earlier this week, after spending three days at 8,000 metres, Shaunna Burke was forced to abandon her quest to become the second Canadian woman to reach the summit of Mount Everest. That title is still up for grabs after another contender, Urszula Tokarska of Toronto, failed in her attempt yesterday. Burke, a graduate student at the University of Ottawa, is part of an expedition led by Ottawa adventurer Ben Webster. On her return to Base Camp yesterday, Burke, 28, spoke with the Citizen's Pauline Tam about being stranded at Camp Four -- the final rest stop before the 8,850-metre summit.

The following is an edited version of that conversation.

I was at Camp Four for two nights and three days. Most climbers only spend about eight hours there. Then, they head for the summit push. People at Base Camp were worried because I was up there for a long time. The winds were about 70 knots. It was dark and cold. The Sherpas stuck together in one tent, and I was alone in mine. It was so windy that the walls of the tent pushed down on me. I was wrapped in my down suit, inside my sleeping bag, just trying to survive. I was on bottled oxygen, and trying to force myself to eat a bit. I could see that my energy levels were diminishing. My muscles were weakening. It's definitely not a fun place to be. But I knew I was strong, and I knew my body was doing well at that altitude.

I never felt lonely when I was climbing. It was when I got into my tent that I got scared. I found it difficult to have no one beside me, especially when it was windy and dark.

The first night I was there, I was quite scared, and I just wanted to hear someone else's voice. I called my teammate, Hector Ponce de Leon, at Camp Two. He was relaying information to Base Camp. I told him I just wanted to hear his voice. He said I sounded good, and told me not to worry. He was very good support to me.

The next day, I was so determined to get to the summit that I said, "I'm going to wait a second day." We borrowed oxygen and cooking gas from Adventure Consultants, the other team at Camp Four. We had enough resources to stay another night, but the winds didn't diminish. They stayed at 70 knots. I woke up every hour, hoping they might diminish, and we could set out. But they never did.

On the third day, one of the Sherpas called Ben on the radio. They said they were cold and tired and they were turning back. The Sherpas were really tired. At one point, I went over to their tent, and I looked at them, and they had bags under their eyes. They had no energy. They looked like they had lost a ton of weight. It was funny because after I came down from Camp Four, Ben said to me, "Well, you should have put a mirror in front your face because I'm sure the same thing was happening to you." I didn't realize it but looking into the eyes of other people, I thought, "Oh my gosh, this is a serious place." It's very hard on the body.

As soon as I heard the Sherpas say they wanted to turn back, I went over to see the guide at Adventure Consultants. I was still determined, so I asked if I could join their team for the push to the summit. He was keen.

But he made a call to his boss at Base Camp, and his boss talked to Ben. They decided it was too big a responsibility. Ben didn't feel it was a safe environment because there wouldn't be one of our Sherpas to watch over me. I would be with another group, and who knows if this group would really take care of me?

Ben had said that if I could get at least one of the Sherpas to stay with me, then he would feel much better about the decision. But the Sherpas did not. They did not want to leave one another. Honestly, I did not want to put their lives at risk. I'm willing to put my life at risk, but I'm not willing to put anyone else's. So Ben told me I had to come down.

I was so disappointed. I remember on the way down being in tears, partly because I was exhausted, but also because I knew my chances were over. I had worked so hard for this. I had focused on this for the past two years.

The biggest factor keeping me from the summit was the weather. The other groups really lucked out. Aside from our group and Adventure Consultants, there was a third one still on the mountain. It was a commercial expedition called Alpine Ascents. They managed to
make it to the summit on Monday, which was a beautiful, clear day. Unfortunately, I was one day behind them. Then, after I left, Adventure Consultants made it to the summit on Wednesday. They didn't think they were going to make it, but at the last minute, the winds died down just enough for them to head out. Later, I heard that half the team made it, and the other half turned around.

During my time at Camp Four, I did absolutely nothing. I lay in my sleeping bag to conserve energy. It was about -40. And with the winds pounding, you didn't even want to get out of your tent. It was just too scary. I thought, "Oh my God, the winds are going blow my tent right off the side of the mountain." I feared for my life. So I just lay in my sleeping bag with an oxygen mask. I also tried to rest and drink as much as I could.

One thing I thought about was the dead climber. He died after being left behind last week when he ran into trouble just below the summit. I never came across his body because I didn't get that high. But the climbers from Alpine Ascents saw him. He was off to the side of the trail. I'm not sure, but I think they left him where he was.

Someone called us to say his wife wanted some of his personal belongings. They asked if we could do that for her. Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance. The idea of possibly coming across a body worried me. I wondered how I was going to react. Am I going to be emotional? But I talked to my teammates who have come across bodies. They said usually, you're so physically exhausted when you're climbing that it doesn't register. It's not until you get back down that the emotion sets in. That sort of reassured me a little bit.

Now that I'm back at Base Camp, I've come to terms with not getting to the summit. When I was coming down from Camp Four to Camp Three, I was quite upset. I was in tears. But once I hit Camp Three, I said, "There's no looking back. You just have to look forward."

And that's when I made the decision to come back next year. I'm very determined. I have to do research for my PhD anyway, so I might as well give it another shot. One of the things I'm going to work on is finding a corporate sponsor. But I'm not going to give up on this.

I learned quite a bit about myself on this expedition. I had thought that I was quite psychologically attached to Ben in terms of feeling safe in the climbing environment. And when he turned around half way up to Camp Three, I said, "No way. I can do this. I'm going on my own."

I realized I'm stronger than I give myself credit for. I think that's what I learned about myself: I'm able to go after my goals independently, and I don't need anybody else's help. I can do it on my own.
'It's OK,' her boyfriend said. 'You're off the mountain': Weeks after returning from her scuttled attempt to reach Everest's summit, Shaunna Burke was plagued by nightmares. 'It's normal,' she was told; 'just let yourself feel it.' Pauline Tam speaks to the Ottawa grad student.

By Pauline Tam
Tuesday, June 29, 2004
Page: B1 (City Section)

It wasn't easy coming down from Mount Everest. For nearly two weeks after reaching Base Camp, Shaunna Burke relived her ordeal in nightmares.

Every night, the dream was the same: Stranded near the summit in the thin air and tempestuous winds, she would feel her lungs tighten. Then, an overwhelming dread would seize her. She knew sooner or later she would die, either because her oxygen supply was running out, or because she would succumb to altitude sickness.

One night, Ms. Burke sprang from her sleep, panicked and disoriented.

"Are we going up the mountain?" she cried.

Her boyfriend, Ben Webster, did his best to comfort her. An experienced Everest climber himself, Mr. Webster was familiar with the symptoms of withdrawal. "It's OK, you're off the mountain now," he told her. It wasn't until she left Nepal that the nightmares finally faded.

"I guess I've come to terms with the situation in some ways because I haven't had them in a while," says Ms. Burke.

Since returning to Ottawa earlier this month, the 28-year-old climber has been working through the disappointment of her failed quest to become the second Canadian woman (after Calgarian Sharon Wood) to reach the summit of the world's tallest mountain.

At first glance, she hardly seems scarred by the experience. Sitting in a coffee shop near the Kanata house she shares with Mr. Webster, Ms. Burke talks openly and animatedly. She is fresh-faced, relaxed, and full of energy. Her athletic frame, developed over years of competitive skiing, doesn't seem the worse for wear, even though she lost 12 pounds.

But Ms. Burke admits putting the eight-week expedition behind her was tough.

"From skiing, I'm used to knowing what physical and emotional fatigue feels like, but it's nothing like the extremes I felt after coming back from Everest," she observes.

After the nightmares came a deep emotional funk. There were days when she wandered the house feeling spent and empty. On Everest, she had faced trials that could have killed her; in Ottawa, without that urgency, nothing felt real.

She worried about her state of mind, and was grateful when Mr. Webster offered his advice. "Don't worry. This is normal. Just let yourself feel it," he told her.

These days, as she embarks on a PhD at the University of Ottawa, Ms. Burke appears to have recovered. "I've got my energy back. I know what I have to do for school," she says.

It takes a strength and discipline to survive Mount Everest, but it takes an even stronger will to overcome its disappointments.

Ms. Burke was the junior member of an expedition led by Mr. Webster, who climbed to the top of Everest in 2000. This year, the 41-year-old adventurer was hired by the Discovery Channel to return to the mountain and produce a six-part series documenting the climbing season. The expedition also included Hector Ponce de Leon of Mexico and Andrew Lock of Australia -- two professional Himalayan climbers who had three previous Everest ascents between them.

On May 16, after six weeks of practice climbing, Mr. Ponce de Leon and Mr. Lock made it to the summit during a brief spell of clear weather. Mr. Webster and Ms. Burke, however, postponed their climb to support the efforts of their teammates. By the time a second window of clear weather emerged, Mr. Webster was so exhausted that he abandoned his ascent halfway up the mountain.

Ms. Burke pushed on with the help of three Sherpas, but ended up being stranded at 8,000 metres. Though she was less than 850 vertical metres from the peak, heavy winds and a withering cold snap trapped Ms. Burke in her tent for three days. With a limited supply of bottled oxygen,
she fought to stave off altitude sickness at a height where humans lose all ability to acclimatize.

In the end, with the Sherpas reluctant to climb due to the fierce weather, Ms. Burke was forced to abandon her ascent, despite being a day's climb from the summit. On her way down, she cried, out of disappointment and fatigue.

"I remember being very emotional," she says. "I was sad and a little bit angry because I didn't feel that I had any control over the situation."

Still, like many who have climbed the mountain before her, Ms. Burke views Everest as a life-changing experience. She has glimpsed what her body can do, and come to understand the value of patience. Like many high-altitude climbers, Ms. Burke extols the simple, uncluttered existence she finds on the mountain. In such an environment, climbers develop mental toughness.

At the same time, Ms. Burke is aware of the anxieties her parents and sister went through. During the expedition, the family, who lives in Quebec's Eastern Townships, worked hard to withstand the strain of having a loved one choose to put her life at risk. Their greatest fears were realized when they learned Ms. Burke was trapped high on the mountain.

Since returning from Everest, Ms. Burke has spent time helping her family understand her love of mountaineering. In return, Ms. Burke received a journal from her mother, who wrote about her thoughts while her daughter was away.

Ms. Burke's interest in the way mountaineering affects climbers and their families is by no means trivial. At the University of Ottawa, she completed a master's thesis on the psychology of Everest climbers, and her PhD project involves research into the role emotions play in mountaineering.

Based on stories she collected on Everest, she has learned that many high-altitude climbers have ways of preparing themselves to face the possibility of death on the mountains. Some, like Ms. Burke's teammate, Mr. Ponce de Leon, reach out to his family and friends for support. Others, such as Mr. Lock, leave behind a letter to loved ones.

Ms. Burke says she contemplated doing something similar before leaving for Everest, but eventually decided against it. "I didn't believe that I was going to die. I knew the chance was there, but I didn't believe it."
Students will get to scale Everest from home

Tuesday, March 8, 2005
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While Ben Webster struggles to reach the peak of Mount Everest later this month, thousands of Ottawa students will be watching using new Internet-based video technology, provided by Telecom Ottawa and the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. Students at six schools will conduct live interviews, via video conferencing technology, with Mr. Webster. To accompany the video link, the students are learning about the mountain's history, other climbers that have scaled it and the effect altitude can have on the body. Telecom Ottawa calls the initiative "reality based learning." "Technology is part of the lives of today's youth," said chief operating officer Dave Dobbin. "We need to open the eyes of the teachers and trustees. The old way of doing things doesn't work anymore." This will be the fifth time Mr. Webster has attempted to climb Everest. He last attempted it last year.
Shaunna Burke's unfinished business: Conquering Everest has never been out of her mind since she failed last year. 'I believe in living life to its fullest and following your dreams,' she says.

By Aron Heller
Saturday, March 12, 2005
Page: E13 (City Section)

A year ago, Shaunna Burke was less than a kilometre from the top of the world. She was determined to carry on, but the forces of nature would not cooperate. The temperatures were dropping, the winds were picking up and her experienced Nepalese guides said it was getting much too cold.

She was almost there -- 848 metres from the peak -- but, in the end, Ms. Burke was forced to retreat from her assault on the summit of Mount Everest.

The 29-year-old remembers the agonizing descent. Physically and emotionally exhausted, a disappointed Ms. Burke cried all the way down the mountain, her dream of becoming only the second Canadian woman ever to make it to the peak shattered.

But by the time she made it back to the makeshift headquarters at the Everest Base Camp, she had already decided she would try the climb again as soon as possible.

"I thought, 'you know what, I'm alive and the mountain's always going to be there and I'll get the chance to go back,'" she says. "I decided at that moment to look forward and not to look back." That drive has been burning inside her for the past year.

Next week, Ms. Burke heads back to Everest to take care of some unfinished business. Along with her boyfriend, experienced Everest climber Ben Webster, Ms. Burke is getting another chance to leave her mark.

She regards her quest to reach the top of Mount Everest a "passion, not an obsession." Nonetheless, it has filled almost every waking moment of her life this past year. "It's definitely always in the back of my mind."

Indeed, even as she's continued working for her PhD in sports psychology at the University of Ottawa in the School of Human Kinetics, Everest is on her mind. Her chosen dissertation topic: Cognitive dissonance of Everest climbers.

Previously, she did her master's thesis on the mental strategies of elite Everest climbers.

While her research may give her a slight psychological edge, she knows it hardly compensates for the physical disadvantage. Beyond the obstacles every climber faces, reaching Everest's summit is even more of a challenge for a woman.

"Obviously, men are stronger. The other thing I know is that our circulation is not as good as men because we are meant to have babies -- all of our blood is meant to go to our tummies."

Women also have physiological considerations men do not. For example, the rigours of climbing Mount Everest have been known to affect a women's menstrual cycle. Ms. Burke, though, feels as ready as ever. She's been working out at the gym, treading on a Stairmaster with a backpack filled with weights to simulate arduous hours of climbing.

While she knows not many woman will literally follow in her path, she hopes her quest at least encourages other women to pursue their goals, just like she is hers.
"I could be a role model to other women and to little girls. If I could affect a little girl's life for her to go live her dreams, that means a lot."

Ms. Burke is attempting to go where only Sharon Wood of Calgary has gone before. The challenge begins long before setting foot aboard the flight to Nepal -- it begins with raising money. An assault on Mount Everest costs about $50,000.

Last year, Ms. Burke was part of a team filming a documentary about Mount Everest that was sponsored by the Discovery Channel. This year, her voyage is being financed by the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board and Telecom Ottawa. It includes more of an educational component, as Ottawa high schools are designing a special curriculum on Mount Everest in which Ms. Burke will assist.

Ms. Burke realizes she has been handed another golden opportunity that may not repeat itself.

"I feel so fortunate to have the opportunity to be able go back. So many climbers work so hard to get there once -- to raise the money -- and I'm being given a second shot."

"That's where the pressure is. I'm not a multi-millionaire, I can't just go there whenever I want. If I don't reach the summit this year, I may not have another chance to go back."

Despite her desire to climb again, she won't be taking any unnecessary risks. She intends to make it back in one piece. At the same time, though, she says there is one thing she fears even more than death.

"This is my way of living life. I believe in living life to its fullest and following your dreams and not being afraid of trying to go out and reach your dreams. And if you don't reach them, well, at least you tried," she said.

"I'm not afraid of dying. I'm more afraid of not living my life to the fullest."
Three climbers with connections to Ottawa are all taking on Mount Everest, each in a quest to make their mark in the record books, each with their own reasons to beat the world's highest peak.

This is Peggy Foster's second chance.

If she makes it to the top, the 45-year-old Ottawa-raised motivational speaker will be the first Canadian woman to climb the highest peaks of all seven continents.

"It will take me right right to the edge and I will have to dig even deeper than I already have to do it," she says. If she is successful, Ms. Foster will be the second Canadian woman to scale Everest. But she's up against Shauna Burke, 29, a University of Ottawa Ph.D student in sports psychology who is also taking her second shot.

After weather forced her to turn back last year, Ms. Burke was determined that the mountain had not defeated her.

"I thought, 'You know what, I'm alive and the mountain's always going to be there and I'll get the chance to go back,'" she says. "I decided at that moment to look forward and not to look back."

Later this month Dr. Sean Egan, 63, a professor of human kinetics at the University of Ottawa, will lead a 20-person expedition to Everest.

He is attempting to become the oldest Canadian to reach the summit.

"It is the Stanley Cup of climbing," he says.
Everest climbers make base camp in bid for peak: Shaunna Burke on second attempt in 2 years after falling short last year.

By Aron Heller
Friday, April 8, 2005
Page: F3 (City Section)

By today, two teams of Ottawa adventurers should have arrived at the Everest Base Camp, a major step en route to the highest point on earth.

Sean Egan, a professor of human kinetics at the University of Ottawa, was expected to arrive this morning with a group of 17 hikers. The team is sponsored by Kanatek, an independent storage systems integrator based in Kanata. At 63, Mr. Egan is attempting to become the oldest Canadian to reach the peak of Everest.

Another group from Ottawa that includes Shaunna Burke, a PhD student at the University of Ottawa, arrived at Base Camp yesterday. Ms. Burke, 29, is attempting to become only the second Canadian woman ever to reach the summit of Everest, after Sharon Wood of Calgary.

A third Ottawan, Peggy Foster, is also currently climbing Everest. While her colleagues are taking the traditional route from Nepal, Ms. Foster, 45, is ascending from the Tibetan side of the giant mountain.

She is attempting to become the first Canadian woman to scale the highest peaks on all seven continents, known as the "seven summits." They include Mount Aconcagua in South America, Mount Elbrus in Russia, Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, Mount Vinson in Antarctica, Mount McKinley in Alaska and Mount Kosciusko in Australia.

But Everest trumps them all. At 8,848 metres, the peak of Mount Everest is the highest point on earth. Base Camp is 5,363 metres above sea level, more than half the way there.

"Everything is going well," Mr. Egan said yesterday via satellite phone from a tent in Gorak Shep, a three-hour hike from Base Camp. "I'm taking it one step at a time, not looking too far ahead, and I think that is the best way to go."

So far, he's been concentrating on the basics. "I'm all focused on the climb. I'm just trying to keep healthy. Rest as much as possible, sleep as much as possible, eat as much as possible and drink as much as possible. Other than that, I am trying to keep as relaxed as possible."

Thus far, the group has remained healthy, an achievement for a team of its size in such a treacherous environment. Ms. Burke's crew has not been as lucky. The team, which includes her boyfriend, Ben Webster, and two others, has been experiencing headaches, which often happens due to the altitude changes. Ms. Burke has been suffering from a flu-like illness caused by a waterborne parasite called giardia that is found in Nepal.

Last year, Ms. Burke was forced to abandon her climb less than 850 vertical metres from Everest's peak. Howling hurricane force winds pinned her climbing crew on the south face of the mountain for three days, where their bodies were succumbing to altitude sickness. After consulting with her climbing guides, Ms. Burke agreed to abandon her climb.

However, this time she plans to push through her pursuit of the peak. Along the way, she will likely cross paths with Mr. Egan, who'll be climbing with the help of two Nepalese Sherpas. He'll now spend several days resting, adjusting to the altitude and planning his ascent. Then he will make several gradual trips up and down from base camp to camps one, two, three and four, before making the final push to the peak. If all goes according to plan, he'll make his initial assault on the summit during the third week of May.

For the others in his group, though, the adventure is almost over. They, too, will stay a while at Base Camp; setting up a wireless network, testing Kanatek's technology, even playing a game of hockey. But the climbing will be over. Only the professionals continue on from Base Camp. "It's been challenging, to say the least," said Terry Kell, president of Kanatek Technologies, with a chuckle. "I've overcome my fear of heights, that's for sure."

The group has been hiking on many trails about as wide as a footstep, with up to 500-metre drops lurking below. Earlier in the journey, they were crossing a long swing bridge that hung over a deep crevasse when a group of yaks came charging from behind. The group had to sprint across the wobbly bridge to safety.
Two teams of Everest climbers reach base camp: Climb to the summit for both teams not likely until late May.

By Aron Heller
Friday, April 8, 2005
Page: F3 (City Section)

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So far he's been concentrating on the basics. "I'm all focused on the climb. I'm just trying to keep healthy. Rest as much as possible, sleep as much as possible, eat as much as possible and drink as much as possible. Other than that I am trying to keep as relaxed as possible."

Thus far, the group has remained healthy, an achievement for a team of its size in such a treacherous environment.

Ms. Burke's crew has not been as lucky. The team, which includes her boyfriend Ben Webster and two others, has been experiencing headaches, which often happens due to the altitude changes. Ms. Burke has been suffering from a flu-like illness caused by a waterborne parasite called giardia that is found in Nepal. However, she plans to continue her pursuit of the peak.

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"You have to be very, very careful. This is not a walk in the park," said Mr. Kell. "It's overwhelming. It will probably only sink in once we are back in Canada."
Canada triumphs in real 'summit' hockey match: Everest climbers use crevasse as penalty box in 21-13 cliffhanger

By Aron Heller
Tuesday, April 12, 2005
Page: C1 (City Section)

Canadian mountaineers scored a first in the annals of hockey history, playing a “real summit series” on Mount Everest, the world's tallest peak.

Dr. Sean Egan and his Kanatek teammates took Canadian hockey to new heights by building a rink at their Everest Base Camp on the Khumbu glacier and playing a game on their "glink" at 5,363 metres above sea level. The peak of Everest, at 8,848 metres, is the highest point on Earth.

In the game, Canada defeated the "Rest of the World," a team comprised of players from Australia, Nepal and the United States, by a score of 21-13. Gerry Gaetz of Ottawa opened the scoring for Canada with a goal after just 16 seconds. Mr. Gaetz is chief of banking operations for the Bank of Canada.

Making his refereeing debut was Tsherling, the head Nepalese sherpa. He called a tight game, with several players spending time in a crevasse, which doubled as the penalty box. The game went smoothly, aside from one interruption by three yaks that decided they needed to cross the rink. One even filled in for the Zamboni by "watering" the ice surface.

Today, it's back to business for the three Everest adventurers with Ottawa connections.

Each had a relaxing weekend of getting acclimatized to the high altitude at their respective base camps.

Mr. Egan and Shauna Burke, both climbing from the Nepalese side, continue their efforts, while Peggy Foster is moving upwards on the Tibetan side.

Mr. Egan, who at 63 is trying to become the oldest Canadian ever to reach the peak of Everest, will begin his gradual ascent up the mountain this week, while the 16 others in his group will start descending today and tomorrow. They will most likely be back in Canada before Mr. Egan makes his first attempt to climb the summit sometime in late May.

Further up the mountain, he may run into Ms. Burke, his former teaching assistant at the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. In a phone conversation from the Everest Base Camp, Ms. Burke confirmed she would begin her climb this morning towards Camp One and the infamous Khumbu Icefall. Ms. Burke is recovering from a flu-like illness caused by a waterborne parasite called giardia.

She is also suffered from the Khumbu cough, a dry, hacking, uncontrollable cough -- a typical hazard at this part of the climb. "But I know how to deal with that," she said.

She estimated her health was at 90-per-cent strength and said she felt confident about the rest of her climb.
"Second time around, you know how to prepare," she said, referring to her failed bid to climb the mountain last year. "I feel much more comfortable and much less anxiety."

Ms. Burke is attempting to become the second Canadian woman to reach the summit of Everest, but she has some company. Another woman from Toronto is also currently climbing from the Nepalese side, and Ottawa-raised Peggy Foster is attempting to reach the summit from the Tibetan side.

Ms. Foster wants to become the first Canadian woman to scale the highest peaks on all seven continents, known as the "seven summits."

She departed from the ancient city of Lhasa, the heart and soul of Tibet, on April 2. Her father, Maurice Foster of Ottawa, said she was scheduled to reach the Tibetan Base Camp at 5,200 metres this past weekend and her voyage is continuing according to plan. She now faces a 22-kilometre trek to the Advanced Base Camp at 6,400 metres, before also making trips up and down to camps one, two, three and four, acclimatizing to the altitude before making her attempt at the summit.

The North Ridge is considered to be the safest route to the summit. Technically, it is regarded as more challenging than the South Side, but it does not have the ice fall danger.

Sharon Wood of Calgary, the only Canadian woman to have climbed Mount Everest, took the North Ridge.
There is danger everywhere' as Ottawa adventurers trek up Everest: As countless climbers before them have discovered, the higher the mountaineers go, the harder it gets, Aron Heller reports.

By Aron Heller
Tuesday, April 19, 2005
Page: D3 (City Section)

Ottawa's four Mount Everest adventurers continue their bid this week to reach the top of the world. But, as the past week's experiences have shown, the higher they go, the harder it gets.

The team of Shaunna Burke and Ben Webster reached Camp Two yesterday, far ahead of the curve, but not before surviving quite a scare. On Saturday, the team was hiking through the Khumbu Icefall when they heard a large bang, the sound of cracking ice and felt the earth shake beneath their feet. They knew it was an unstable path -- a year ago, the exact same place collapsed. A repeat avalanche would send the climbers plummeting toward a certain death.
"It was really scary," Ms. Burke said yesterday, safe and secure at Camp Two. "We thought we were toast." No one was hurt, but Ms. Burke said two climbers were so emotionally shaken, they turned back.

Mount Everest has yet to claim any lives this season, but four climbers have died on nearby Mount Pumori. The danger on the mountain is ever present.

"Everest is very much about how you manage your fears," said Ms. Burke. "The important part is to compartmentalize the fears."

Meanwhile, Sean Egan has been dealing with his own difficulties. After several trips up and down to Camp One, he spent yesterday at Base Camp resting and performing basic body maintenance -- fixing broken skin, soothing burned skin and eating vitamin-rich food.

"Going through the glaciers is really hard," he said. "It's dangerous, crevasses everywhere, huge boulders of ice everywhere. A lot of climbing, a lot of hard work, and then you're working against the sun. Dehydration, wind, cold, you name it."

A week ago he and his Kanatek team were playing hockey at Base Camp. The 5,363-metre-high camp has since been whittled down from a small town to the remaining 24 expeditions going for the top. The amateurs are now gone and only the professionals remain. Indeed, the fun and games are a distant memory for Mr. Egan. Fifteen members of his team have already departed the mountain, with only Harold Mah left behind to assist him. At 63, Mr. Egan is trying to become the oldest Canadian ever to reach the peak of Mount Everest.

After several gradual trips, Mr. Egan plans to push all the way to Camp Two on Thursday. He's had a glimpse of the summit and says he's already "smelling" it. His other senses are not as sharp, though. He has found the altitude has upset his taste buds and everything he eats tastes very acidic.

Despite having no appetite, he's been trying to eat as much as possible, with a macrobiotic food diet that is heavy in proteins.

He knows he still has a long way to go, with plenty of hazards in his path.

"You've got to keep your mind fresh and enjoy the process," he said. "There is danger everywhere." Danger is what fuels Larry Legault. The adrenaline junkie from Ottawa lives for the outdoors, so he decided to buy himself an unusual 50th birthday present.

"I definitely didn't give it to him," said his wife, Lyn. "I have a crazy husband. I love him dearly, but he's crazy."

Mr. Legault grew up in Ottawa and attended St. Pius High School and the University of Ottawa. An orthopedic surgeon, he moved with his family to Tennessee 10 years ago, but returns to Ottawa each summer for six weeks. An avid mountaineer, rock
climber, biker, runner and kayaker, taking on Mount Everest was a natural next step for him to take. He's been travelling with the International Mountain Guides organization and is also currently making his acclimatization climbs from Base Camp to camps one and two.

According to his wife, he's having the time of his life. However, she is not as thrilled. "It's been his lifelong dream," she said from their home in Tennessee. "It's fun to follow, but it still bothers me that it is him up there. I'd be much more excited if it was someone else. It's my nature to worry."

Meanwhile, on the north side of Everest, Peggy Foster has reached the 6,400-metre-high Advanced Base Camp in Tibet. Her "Himalayan Experience" Yellow Team is one of only 17 teams bidding to climb to the summit of Mount Everest from the north ridge this year. Her team includes climbers from Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, France and the U. S.

She now faces several trips up and down the north ridge to camps one, two, three and four, acclimatizing to the altitude before making her first attempt at the summit sometime in May.
Broken leg forces Ottawa man to give up on second Everest journey: Ben Webster insists his girlfriend, Shaunna Burke, continue quest

By Aron Heller

Wednesday, April 20, 2005

Ben Webster's quest to return to the top of Mount Everest came to a crushing end yesterday as the Ottawa adventurer slipped and broke his leg on the infamous Khumbu Icefall.

Mr. Webster, 42, reached the summit of the world's highest mountain in 2000 and was attempting to return this year with a four-person team that included his girlfriend, Shaunna Burke, and two other climbers, Mike Swarbrick and Garry Hartlin.

Ms. Burke, 29, is attempting to become only the second Canadian woman to reach the summit. She plans to carry on in her bid.

Ms. Burke spent last night with Mr. Webster at the Himalayan Rescue Associations Clinic at Base Camp and will join him as he is flown to Kathmandu by helicopter this morning. She will then spend two days with him in the Nepalese capital before he is flown back to Canada for surgery. She will return to the mountain next week to continue the climb with a team of sherpas. Mr. Webster reportedly insisted from his bed that she not give up her dream and continue to the top for both of them, according to Mr. Swarbrick.

The Citizen was unable to reach Mr. Webster or Ms. Burke for comment.

A day after openly discussing the dangers of the notorious icefall, and three days after experiencing a trembling shake beneath his feet that made him fear for his life, Mr. Webster finally fell victim yesterday to one of the many hazards posed by the awesome mountain.

In fact, Mr. Webster was filming a video segment on the instability of the icefall ten minutes before crashing through the surface. He was near the top of the icefall when the glacial ice collapsed beneath his feet. Mr. Webster fell to the side with one foot caught in the jagged ice breaking his left leg just above the boot line. Both bones snapped and the foot and lower leg turned 90 degrees to the side.

A chair, ropes and stretcher were carried more than six hundred metres from Base Camp as well as food, drinks and pain medication. Mr. Webster's leg was straightened and splinted with two bars from a backpack and duct tape. About an hour and a half later he was placed on a stretcher and the long evacuation process began.

Mr. Webster's accident left many of his fellow climbers shaken. There are 24 expeditions making their way up to the peak from the south side of Everest this year, including those of Sean Egan and Mr. Legault of Ottawa. Many of the climbers huddled together last night in their dining tents comparing climbing experiences and recalling the drama that unfolded yesterday.

Mr. Webster was returning to Base Camp after a night at Camp Two as part of the routine altitude acclimatization climbs. His team was progressing far ahead of schedule.

The state of the Khumbu Icefall has been of particular concern this year. Weeks of constant sunshine caused more glacial melting than usual, resulting in the treacherous icefall.

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Mr. Webster slipped while capturing footage for the NewRO on the icefall. He broke his leg in two places -- the fibula and tibia.

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A complex rescue operation followed, taking several hours. It included the assistance of Larry Legault, an orthopedic surgeon from Ottawa, and nearly 50 sherpas who carried Mr. Webster down to Base Camp and relative safety.

Mr. Webster's accident left many of his fellow climbers shaken. There are 24 expeditions making their way up to the peak from the south side of Everest this year, including those of Sean Egan and Mr. Legault of Ottawa. Many of the climbers huddled together last night in their dining tents comparing climbing experiences and recalling the drama that unfolded yesterday.

There are 17 teams attempting to climb from the north side this year as well, including that of Ottawa's Peggy Foster.

Last year, Mr. Webster led an expedition to Everest, captured video footage that was produced into Discovery.ca's six-part series titled Everest: Ultimate Survival.

He is an experienced mountaineer, kayak instructor and river guide, having traveled extensively throughout Canada, the United States, Nepal, Africa, Europe, Fiji and New Zealand.
Snow bogs down Everest expeditions; hurt Ottawa climber to return home next week

By Aron Heller  
Friday, April 22, 2005  
Page: F8 (City Section)

Ben Webster is not the only one to have his Mount Everest climb halted.

As the Ottawa adventurer was being airlifted by helicopter from base camp on Wednesday to receive treatment for his broken left leg, heavy snow began to fall on the mountain, holding back the progress of the 23 other expeditions for several days.

Mr. Webster slipped Tuesday morning on the infamous Khumbu Icefall, breaking his leg in two places. It took several hours to evacuate him. With the help of Larry Legault, an orthopedic surgeon from Ottawa, and nearly 50 sherpas, Mr. Webster was carried down to safety at base camp.

Some of Mr. Webster's fellow climbers marvelled at the drama that unfolded on Tuesday. "Everybody put their politics aside and we all chipped in. The sherpas were absolutely amazing," said University of Ottawa professor Sean Egan.

Mr. Egan spoke from base camp about the dangers on the icefall: "Lucky for Ben it was just his leg. It could have been worse. One little step the wrong way and you could fall into a crevasse."

Mr. Webster's girlfriend, Shaunna Burke, has decided to continue her climb. Once Mr. Webster gets on the plane to Canada, she will trek back from Lukla to base camp and resume her climb from there.

Speaking from a hotel room in Kathmandu yesterday, Mr. Webster seemed resigned to the end of this Everest quest. "I do this for a living," he said of climbing. "These things happen. You have to accept it."

He is scheduled to fly back to Toronto tomorrow, where he will receive emergency surgery. He is expected to return to Ottawa sometime next week. He will continue to monitor Ms. Burke's climb from his home in Kanata. "The main goals of the expedition were for the kids of Ottawa and to get Shaunna to the top," he said. "She is tremendously courageous. It's a strong message to the kids how she is facing adversity and going on."

That adversity is even more severe following the recent snowfall. About an inch of snow fell on Wednesday and another inch yesterday covering the small crevasses and making them difficult to spot. Heavy clouds have also made visibility on the mountain difficult. The weather has forced climbers to stay put at base camp. They've been spending most of the time in their tents, some watching DVDs.

Mr. Egan said he would likely stay put until tomorrow or Sunday before making another trip up to Camp Two. In the meantime, he is trying to regain some energy for the next climb. He's been suffering from a form of acid reflux that has made it difficult for him to eat the spicy food prepared by the sherpas.

He's mostly been consisting on plain pasta and rice pudding.
Setbacks can't stop Burke from pushing for the peak: Despite her boyfriend and climbing partner's broken leg, and the death of a former professor on the mountain, an Ottawa woman carries on, Aron Heller reports.

By Aron Heller
Wednesday, May 4, 2005
Page: C3 (City Section)

It's been a turbulent two weeks on Mount Everest for Shauna Burke.

Her boyfriend and climbing partner broke his leg and returned to Ottawa. She was airlifted to Kathmandu to make the entire way back up the mountain. Finally, her former professor died on his quest to the summit of the highest mountain on Earth.

Nevertheless, Ms. Burke, 29, has carried on. And, weather permitting, she finds herself in position to make an attempt at the summit that she wasn't able to reach a year ago. On Monday, she arrived at Camp Three, her highest point to date. She was in good health and acclimatized to the altitude.

The forecast for the next few days calls for snow, but Ms. Burke estimates a window could open up within 10 days. She will then push to the top with the help of three Nepalese sherpas.

Meanwhile, on the north side, Peggy Foster, Ottawa's other remaining climber, continues her trek to the peak of Mount Everest. She, too, has acclimatized herself with several journeys above 7,000 metres and awaits her opportunity to try for the summit.

Ms. Burke battled physical ailments earlier in her climb. Her latest challenges, though, have been mostly psychological.

"There were moments when I've questioned what I was doing, why I was doing it," she said during a satellite phone call from Camp Three. "I've had to dig deep and ask the tough questions." She envisioned coming home without giving it her best shot, but "it didn't feel right."

Even for someone who wrote her master's thesis on the mental strategies of Everest climbers, Ms. Burke has coped with more than she bargained for. "I tried to prepare myself as best as I could but I never saw any of this happening. I'm definitely being challenged."

The first setback was on April 19 when her boyfriend, Ben Webster, slipped on the Khumbu Icefall and broke his leg in two places. Mr. Webster fell to the side with his left leg caught in the jagged ice. His tibia and fibula snapped.

After the accident, and the evacuation to Kathmandu that followed, Ms. Burke considered quitting. Mr. Webster urged her to carry on and she made her way up the mountain again. "I was right there when it happened. To see someone you care about so much and love in pain -- it's very, very difficult. I keep telling myself it could have been worse."

Ten days later, 63-year-old Sean Egan died from an apparent heart attack. As his former teaching assistant at the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa, Ms. Burke knew him well. The death was a "huge shock," she said. "It's difficult when it's someone you know well. It brings it really closer to home."

Ms. Burke got another reminder of the danger yesterday, when an American climber plunged to his death from the Khumbu Icefall. Nearly 200 climbers have died on Mount Everest since Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first successfully scaled the slopes in 1953.

"It is a risk, I'm not trying to hide it," she said. "I guess it comes down to really wanting that goal. There is something inside that keeps me going."

Recovering at home in Kanata after undergoing surgery in Toronto, Mr. Webster said Ms. Burke has even more challenges ahead. "The idea that Everest
has somehow become easier is really a misnomer and it is a bit of a disservice," he said. "The story is still a great adventure story, no matter how you cut it. It's still a serious undertaking. It's a struggle."

Regardless of the result, he said he was very proud of her and her perseverance. "Whether Shaunna ends up summitting or not isn't really the issue any longer. I think it's the fact that she is even willing to try it at this point."

And try she will. "I feel it is more important now. It almost means more," she said, of getting to the top of the world.

"Ultimately, I am doing it for myself, but at the same time I want to make Ben happy. I don't know how Sean would feel, but, hopefully, maybe, there would be something in there that he would be happy that I went and did it."
Sherpa hurt when avalanche buries near-empty Everest camp

By Aron Heller
Thursday, May 5, 2005
Page: B5 (City Section)

A day after an American climber plunged to his death from the Khumbu Icefall, an early morning avalanche injured seven climbers yesterday on Mount Everest.

A huge wall of ice, rock and snow essentially buried Camp One, flattening dozens of tents. Luckily, most of the tents were unoccupied as few climbers were sleeping at the camp when the avalanche hit at 5:15 a.m. local time. No one was killed, but some Polish, American and Canadian climbers suffered minor injuries.

A Nepalese sherpA, however, was seriously injured and is reported in critical condition with a broken back.

Shauna Burke, the Ottawa mountaineer who's attempting to climb on the south side of Mount Everest, was sleeping at Camp Two at the time of the avalanche. Ms. Burke last slept at Camp One a week ago. She made her way to the affected area yesterday to help with the rescue, before settling for the night at base camp.

She will remain there for several days, waiting for a break in the snowy weather, before making her first assault on the summit of Mount Everest.

Speaking yesterday on the NewRO, Ms. Burke said the injured sherpA suffered a broken back.

"The Everest climbing community did not dodge a bullet today, it dodged a bomb," wrote Mark Tucker of International Mountain Guides.

Larry Legault, an Ottawa orthopedic surgeon, was a member of the same group before deciding this week to forgo his dream of climbing Mount Everest after the death of Dr. Sean Egan, a University of Ottawa professor. Mr. Legault is currently in the small town of Lukla, safely off the mountain, but unable to fly out because of fog. He's waiting for a flight to Kathmandu, from where he will return home.

That leaves Ms. Burke as the only remaining Ottawa climber on the south side of the mountain.

Avalanches are common on Mount Everest at this time of year though they rarely strike at the permanent camps that mark the route to the summit. Camps One, Two, Three and Four are deliberately located to protect them from such a danger.

"This is the first time in my memory that one has released and come into the camps," said Ben Webster, Ms. Burke's boyfriend and climbing partner. "The great saving grace is that this didn't happen two weeks ago."

At that time, Camp One would have been filled with climbers acclimatizing to the altitude.

By now, most of the mountaineers are either staying higher up the mountain or at base camp.
Ottawa's Shaunna Burke has aborted her plan to make a summit attempt on Mount Everest this coming weekend, after another shift in the stormy weather that has recently plagued the mountain made it too dangerous to climb any higher. She'll continue her holding pattern at base camp.
Window of opportunity closing: Peggy Foster and Shaunna Burke share the goal of reaching the top of Mount Everest. And as Aron Heller writes, they face the same dilemma: bad weather that may end their dreams.

By Aron Heller
Friday, May 13, 2005
Page: F3 (City Section)

Ottawa's two remaining Mount Everest climbers continued their race this week to see which one might become the second Canadian woman to reach the summit of the world's highest mountain.

Peggy Foster and Shaunna Burke are climbing from opposite sides of the mountain. Ms. Foster is scaling the north route, on the Tibetan side, while Ms. Burke is climbing the more traditional south route, on the Nepalese side.

The north route is regarded as more challenging than the south, but it is also considered safer because it does not present the icefall danger that has already claimed several climbers this year. Recently, however, both women have encountered the same obstacle -- stormy conditions.

"We're waiting for the weather," said Ms. Foster, 45, in her first interview from the mountain. "Right now, it's all about the weather."

The past week has seen heavy snowfall followed by vicious winds on the mountain, forcing both women into a holding pattern at the respective base camps.

Ms. Foster reported harsh, dusty conditions with winds gusting at up to 100 km/h that make it much too dangerous for an attempt to climb the summit.

The weather has been so nasty that some Everest observers have speculated that there may be no assent to the top this year, something that hasn't happened in 30 years.

"I have heard that rumour," said Ms. Burke, 29. "Obviously anything can happen. That's why I'm trying to be so aggressive."

Ms. Burke seemed poised to make a summit attempt this weekend after a recent forecast indicated a narrow, two-day window could open as early as Sunday.

But the window of opportunity closed just as quickly as it opened, forcing Ms. Burke to abort her climb.

She will depart tomorrow for the 6,500-metre Camp Two, to put herself in a position to capitalize on any potential break in the weather next week.

Ms. Foster is also trying to manoeuvre into a good position in case of an opening and is planning to move to the advanced base camp at 6,400 metres.

With only three weeks left in the climbing season, time is running out. Both woman are fully acclimatized to the altitude, and their two-month quest has boiled down to a waiting game.

"Managing that is just as important as the physical part," said Ms. Foster.

Her 10-year quest to climb the world's greatest mountains has helped her develop the necessary discipline. Ms. Foster is aiming to become the first Canadian woman to scale the highest peaks on all seven continents, known as the "seven summits," having successfully reached the summits of Mount Aconcagua in South America, Mount Elbrus in Russia, Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, Mount Vinson in Antarctica, Mount McKinley in Alaska and Mount Kosciusko in Australia.

Two years ago, she made her first attempt of Mount Everest but had to turn back following breathlessness and a faulty oxygen mask. This time, though, she has stayed healthy and strong throughout and is optimistic about fulfilling her dream.

"I think this is my time," she said. "I'm just trying to take it all in."

While waiting at base camp, Ms. Foster's main priority has been to consume as much food as possible. In five weeks, she has lost about 11 pounds.

At that altitude she is burning, on average, 35 calories per pound of body weight. She figures she needs to eat more than 4,000 calories a day to maintain her present body weight.

"It's a great weight-loss program," she said.

Ms. Burke, meanwhile, has been spending most of her time alone, conserving her energy and "focusing on the task at hand." She said the waiting definitely "eats away at you psychologically." She estimated
that about 35 per cent of the climbers on the south side had tired of the whole ordeal and turned back.

She has no plans to quit, though. Last year, she climbed to within 850 metres of the summit. A successful climb to the top for Ms. Burke this year would make a fulfilling conclusion to the heartbreaks that have plagued her on the ominous mountain.

On April 19, her boyfriend, Ben Webster, slipped on the Khumbu Icefall and broke his leg in two places. Ten days later, Dr. Sean Egan, Ms. Burke's former University of Ottawa professor, died on the mountain from an apparent heart attack. His sudden death prompted Larry Legault, an orthopedic surgeon from Ottawa, to call it quits and head home.

"Canadians aren't having a very lucky year this year, that's for sure," Ms. Burke said. "Last year, I didn't have to face any of this."

Regardless of how the drama unfolds, each woman has endured an unbelievable adventure.

"It's not just about the summit," said Ms. Foster. "It's about the journey. Sort of like life."
Shaunna Burke is down to her last chance. The five-year quest by the University of Ottawa graduate student to reach the top of Mount Everest will culminate within a week, one way or another.

Ms. Burke, 29, was to begin her first attempt on the mountain's summit this morning, but once again was forced to abort at the last moment as heavy winds and precipitation slashed the peak of the world's highest mountain. Her new target date is Sunday.

It will be her first, and last, attempt to scale the awesome mountain.

"We're down to one shot now," she said from Base Camp. "It's better to give it your all, with one stable weather pattern, if you can find one."

Therein lies her main problem. The government of Nepal has a June 1 deadline for climbers to leave the mountain ahead of the summer monsoon season. That leaves next week as the last opportunity to head for the top before climbers have to start packing up their camps and make their final descent on May 30.

Peggy Foster, Ottawa's other remaining climber, does not face the same time constraints. She is ascending on the north ridge, from the Tibetan side of the mountain. With a forecast calling for winds of up to 100 kilometres an hour for the next two weeks, Ms. Foster and her team have decided to put off their summit bid until the first week of June.

On the south side, though, the pressure is mounting. Ms. Burke said anxiety was building among the remaining climbers as they jockey for position in case of a sudden opening. "We're looking for a three-day stable window, but we don't know if we are going to get it. People are starting to panic a little bit."

Some have even decided to press their luck against mother nature. Ms. Burke said that despite the stormy weather, a team of four Czech climbers would be making the first attempt of the year on the summit this morning. The team departed for their climb without oxygen or sherpa support. They have yet to be heard from.

"Everyone here is quite worried about them," she said. "It's really risky."

Ms. Burke has been through the dreaded Khumbu Icefall 10 times already, marching up and down the mountain, waiting for her chance. She said she was starting to get anxious, but added that she wouldn't expose herself to any unnecessary risks. "I was really hoping for a weather window, just to be able to go up and come down and come home. Unfortunately, it is part of mountaineering where it's something you can't control and you just have to grow with it and be patient."

Nevertheless, she admitted she, too, was starting to feel the heat. "For five years, I've had this dream and it's all coming down to this one moment, so there definitely is a certain amount of pressure. But I can't get too worried about it because I can't control the weather. I can only control my headspace and that's pretty much about it."
'You always balance risks, benefits': Larry Legault left Mount Everest without making it to the top after the misfortune that befell his Ottawa colleagues because, as he tells Aron Heller, 'it's a great mountain, but it's nothing to give your life for.'

By Aron Heller  
Monday, May 23, 2005  
Page: B1  (City Section)

Sean Egan is dead. Ben Webster is lying in his bed in Kanata with a severely broken leg. Shauna Burke and Peggy Foster are battling illness, exhaustion and a stubborn mountain that won't let them climb it.

And then there is Larry Legault. While Mount Everest has exacted a heavy toll from each of his adventurous colleagues from Ottawa, Mr. Legault has emerged from his two-month journey on the world's highest mountain with a different conclusion -- he has found peace.

"I'm happy with my experience. I'm happy I was there," he said, in his first interview since returning to his home in Kingsport, Tennessee. "On the other hand, my wife is happy that I am home in one piece. We've both come out kind of winners, I guess."

Mr. Legault, the least heralded of Ottawa's five Everest trekkers, arrived home on May 7, just in time for Mother's Day. He said it was a gift to his beloved wife of 27 years, Lyn, who had not stopped worrying since he left to conquer the perilous mountain.

It was only fitting, since Mr. Legault's expedition to Mount Everest was a gift he gave himself for his 50th birthday. An avid mountaineer, rock climber, cyclist, runner, skier and kayaker, he got his first taste of mountaineering on the Canadian Rockies. He followed that by scaling three of the world's "seven summits": Mount Aconcagua in South America, Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa and Mount McKinley in Alaska.

The peak of Mount Everest, at 8,848 metres, was to be his greatest adventure yet.

All was going according to plan. Mr. Legault had had no major health problems and was well along in his acclimatization treks up and down the mountain.

Then, out of the blue, Mr. Egan dropped dead from an apparent heart attack. The tragedy gave Mr. Legault pause.

"When you are over there, you always balance your risks and your benefits," said Mr. Legault. "I was at Camp One and I got a small avalanche, just a little dusting, but enough to get you aware that these things do happen, and then that's when I found out that Sean died -- that same day."

Mr. Legault, who is studying to be a deacon at his church, considered it an omen and immediately began making his way down the mountain, and back to his wife and four children: Gary, 25, Randy, 23, Nancy, 22, and Paul, 20.

Within a matter of days, another climber died, having plunged into a crevasse from the Khumbu Icefall, and a massive avalanche had wiped out Camp One, injuring seven climbers, including two Canadians.

Mr. Legault knew he had made the right decision. "If I had been there at Camp One only a few days earlier, it would have been all over with," he said. "Sometimes you just have to follow your feelings."

Mr. Legault grew up in Ottawa and attended St. Pius High School and the University of Ottawa. Ten years ago, he moved south with his family, but they return to Ottawa each summer for six weeks, and Mr. Legault's mother and four siblings still live here. Even before he set off for Mount Everest, he knew what was really important in his life. The climb merely reinforced it.

"I climbed with eight other guys and not many of them have family," he said. "Most of the guys in the group, they wanted to go for the mountain and they were willing to risk a lot more. For myself, at that point, the risks were probably too great over the benefits.

"It's a great mountain, but it's nothing to give your life for."

This sense of proportion, often missing with the hard-core, gung-ho type of adventurers, allowed Mr. Legault to appreciate his own adventure even more.

"Here I was, all by myself, solo, in the middle of Mount Everest," he recalled with excitement. "The sun was right in front of me, I could almost reach up and touch it. The mountain is all around and the sun
is shining over the mountaintops and moments like that it was like, 'Wow! that is why I am here.' " He said touching the top was merely a "bonus." For him, it was all about the journey.

"You're alive when you're on the mountain," he said, his voice ringing with excitement. "You appreciate life a whole lot more when you come back down." Now, he'll have to get used to living at lower altitude.

Mr. Legault has promised his wife this would be his last climb on "the big mountains." While a part of him will always wonder if he could have reached the top, he said he was at peace with his decision and even more so with his life.

"My wife had sent me a letter that said 'we just want you back, we don't care if you touch it or not,' " he said, referring to the summit.

"It was more for myself, I guess, more for my ego. But none of my family worried about that, they just wanted me home."
Weather foils quest to climb Mount Everest

By Aron Heller
Tuesday, May 24, 2005
Page: C1 (City Section)

Mount Everest's elusive peak was finally conquered this weekend, but the waiting game continues for Ottawa's two remaining climbers.

A team of climbers that included an American and a Spaniard scaled the north side on Saturday, followed by a Chinese team on Sunday, despite extremely harsh conditions. However, heavy winds, snow and extreme cold have thwarted all attempts to climb the peak from the south side.

Saturday's successful climb marked the latest spring season climb to the top of the world's highest mountain in 45 years. It did not come without a price. As of yesterday, at least one of the north-side climbers was confirmed dead, with a number missing and several returning with severe cases of frostbite. Ottawa's Peggy Foster, also climbing from the north side, has decided to wait until safer conditions appear. In an e-mail from the 6,400-metre advanced base camp, she described "the seemingly endless wait" for a window to push for the summit. She reported extremely cold weather and "increasingly desperate measures to fill our time."

Shaunna Burke, Ottawa's other remaining climber, is also holding tight on the south side. With only one week left in the Nepalese climbing season, things are even more desperate for her.

Ms. Burke participated this weekend in an emergency meeting with Nepalese liaison officers at base camp, asking the government to extend its June 1 deadline for a few more days to allow the teams at least one shot at the summit. The weather forecast for the rest of this week remains grim.

"It's a really bizarre year," said Ben Webster, who is co-ordinating Ms. Burke's expedition from his home in Kanata. "There has been no window, there has been no opportunity at all. It's been extremely cold temperatures up high and very strong winds, and that coupling just makes it impossible to climb."

Mr. Webster reported that the rate of attrition among climbers was very high with only a few determined climbers remaining. Nevertheless, he was optimistic that Ms. Burke would eventually get her chance.

"If I'm a betting man, I think they will go," he said. "I believe very strongly that we will get a break, at some point."

Ms. Burke will make her way up to Camp Two on Thursday to be in a position to go after the summit in case of a last minute opening. It will be her last trip up the mountain. If she doesn't get a chance to move on, she will be forced to abort her climb and leave the mountain.
Ottawa climber achieves dream of Everest: Shaunna Burke reaches summit last night; Peggy Foster waits for better weather

By Aron Heller and Dave Rogers
Monday, May 30, 2005
Page: D1 (City Section)

Ottawa's Shaunna Burke reached the summit of Mount Everest late last night, becoming the second Canadian woman in history to reach the top of the mountain.

"It took quite awhile," said Ms. Burke's former climbing partner, Ben Webster. "Shaunna was in the first couple of climbers to reach the summit." Ms. Burke's climbing group was the first to succeed the climb from the south side this year.

Peggy Foster, on the opposite side of the mountain, decided to wait for better weather.

Ms. Burke and three Sherpa guides left Camp Four for the gruelling 10- to 16-hour oxygen-assisted climb to the summit at 10 p.m. local time. If the climbers had started at dawn, they would arrive at about 8 p.m. and would have to return exhausted in the dark with their oxygen and other supplies running out.

"They would be coming back in the dark when it is much colder if they started early in the day," said Mr. Webster, who has been monitoring Ms. Burke's climb from Ottawa since breaking a leg on the mountain. "The plan was to start in the darkness so they could get home.

"If you don't make it back to your tent by the evening of your summit day, you are caught out on the mountain and there is probably a 99-per-cent chance that you are not coming home at all. If you don't make it back to your tent, you are dead."

Above the camp, the group entered the "death zone," where the body can no longer acclimatize on its own. When climbers are above 7,000 metres, they enter an area where the body starts to die at an accelerated pace, Mr. Webster said.

Ms. Burke could die from any number of things, he said, including cerebral and pulmonary edema, the accumulation of fluid on the brain or in the lungs. "They are very close to the jet stream so weather patterns can change very quickly and climbers can suffer from frostbite and hypothermia.

"She has not slept for three days and has had very little food because the body does not process food at that altitude. They have to break the trail and set the safety lines to allow them to climb through the technical areas."

Sometimes, the oxygen tank valves can freeze causing climbers to have difficulty because of a lack of oxygen.

Heavy winds, snow and extreme cold have all but shut down the 8,848-metre mountain in recent weeks, allowing only a handful of climbers to reach the top this year. All have come from the north side.

Last Thursday, Ms. Burke made her way up through the Khumbu Icefall one last time to settle into Camp Two. On Saturday, she reached the 7,200-metre high Camp Three.

Her group climbed to Camp Four at 8,000 metres on Saturday night.

Ms. Burke said the Nepalese government was open to extending the June 1 climbing deadline, allowing for a later than usual summit attempt this week.

Late last week, the winds on the south side finally started to subside, opening the possibility of the summit attempt that was looking bleaker by the moment. A year ago, Ms. Burke was forced to abandon her quest at Camp Four -- 850 metres from the summit.

Meanwhile, on the north side, Peggy Foster who is at the 6,400-metre level, does not plan to leave the advance base camp for the summit until today or tomorrow. The temperature at the summit yesterday was -23 with winds of more than 30 kilometres an hour.

Ms. Foster's father, Maurice Foster, said he expects his daughter to reach the summit about June 4 or 5. "It may go a couple of days earlier or later depending on the winds," Mr. Foster said.

"If you get into 80-kilometre-an-hour winds with a -25-degree temperature, that is not a good situation to reach the summit. High humidity and snow would make it a lot tougher."
If she is successful, Ms. Foster will be the first Canadian woman to scale the highest peaks on all seven continents, known as the "seven summits," having successfully reached the summits of Mount Aconcagua in South America, Mount Elbrus in Russia, Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, Mount Vinson in Antarctica, Mount McKinley in Alaska and Mount Kosciusko in Australia.

A summit attempt this late in the year marks a fitting end to what has, by all account, been a bizarre climbing season.

"It's hard to explain," Ms. Burke said, before leaving base camp for the last time. "There's not been much luck at all this year."

She said she had prepared herself emotionally for the prospect of not being able to reach the summit.

"It's frustrating, but I have no control over it," she said.

Nonetheless, she had said "there is still a chance." Many have already abandoned their bids this year. Ms. Burke, though, had vowed she would stay up there till the bitter end.

"My philosophy is: I've been here for so long already -- what's another week?" she said.

She said she has been trying to stay as focused as possible during the long wait at base camp, hiking every other day to stay in shape. Mostly, though, she said she was just trying to stay calm and focused.

An effort that, in the end, paid off for Shaunna Burke.
Shaunna Burke heads down Everest

Tuesday, May 31, 2005
Page: C6 (City Section)

Ottawa climber Shaunna Burke was rapidly making her way down Mount Everest last night, said her climbing coach, Ben Webster. "The winds are quite high," he said. "They want to get out as soon as possible."

Ms. Burke and her team were expected to reassess their options in the early hours of the morning, looking at the possibility of coming all the way down.