Book Review

A Day To Die For: 1996: Everest's Worst Disaster

Graham Ratcliffe

London, UK: Mainstream Publishing, 2011

US \$14.95 (paperback); \$9.99 (Kindle), 334 pages

On May 10, 1996, 8 people were caught in a blizzard and died on Mt Everest while attempting to summit the mountain, making this the deadliest day in the history of climbing Mt Everest until 16 persons were killed in an avalanche in 2014.

The 1996 Everest climbing disaster gained wide publicity and almost 2 decades later continues to fascinate people. *A Day To Die For* adds to the already substantial literature on the disaster, although it focuses more on weather-related and people matters than the issues related to the commercialization of Everest, which have been the subject of some other publications.

Barometric pressure is the foremost factor influencing the cellular oxygen cascade, and ultimately is the root cause of physiologic problems suffered by humans traveling to high altitude. Everest summit atmospheric pressure is one third of sea level, and it can fall significantly further during storms, critically endangering climbers who are already steep on the descending limb of the oxyhemoglobin-dissociation curve. The central nervous system is exquisitely sensitive to hypoxia, and many of the climbers in the death zone on Everest that day in 1996 likely had dull brains from hypoxia and possibly high altitude cerebral edema, exacerbated by the effects of hypothermia, exhaustion, and advancing high altitude deterioration.

Graham Ratcliffe was a member of a team that made decisions that saved their lives on Everest in 1996, and this book delves into the backstory of those decisions. Much of this book focuses on Ratcliffe's passion—although some might dismissively say his obsession—with choices related to the weather forecasting associated with the 1996 disaster. The book especially explores matters such as: Where did information about the storms come from? How good was the information? Who received it, and with whom was it shared? Was the information believed—or heeded? Why did some ignore the forecasts and the overt conditions of the mountain?

Reviews of this book have ranged widely, seemingly related to differing views on the detailed rehashing of the events of that fateful day at the top of the world. However, this reviewer enjoyed the book, learned about the author's success as a two-time summiteer, and respected his historical perspective and stewardship as chairman of the Bentley Beetham collection of photographs from the 1924 British Expedition when Mallory and Irvine were lost.

A Day to Die For is an adventure book, not a scientific work, but medical readers will find that it offers a practical, real world look into hypoxia and its consequences at high altitude.

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