

JEFF RASLEY

Himalayan Heroes

I WAS ON A CLIMBING EXPEDITION TEAM on Mera Peak, a twenty-one-thousand-foot mountain in the Khumbu region of the Nepal Himalaya, southwest of Mt. Everest. Our Nepalese crew included a guide or “sirdar,” cook, “kitchen boys,” and a crew of porters. In 1999, most Himalayan porters had no rain or severe cold-weather gear. They wore flip-flops or cheaply-made Chinese tennis shoes on their feet, even on snow-covered trails.

Porters are usually small and slight, standing five feet four to six inches and weighing between 125 and 135 pounds. Our sirdar, Seth Chetri, is large for a Nepalese; the Chetri are the warrior caste in Nepal. He was about five feet nine inches and 160 pounds. In his early twenties. He spoke English well and shared with me his dream to win a scholarship to the National Outdoor Leadership School in the U.S. He loved to practice his English telling and hearing dirty jokes.

Jid Baldoo was our senior porter. He is also tall for a Nepalese at about five feet eight inches, and probably weighed 140 pounds. Most of the porters on mountaineering expeditions are Tamang, one of the many distinct ethnic groups in Nepal. The Tamang have lived as peasant farmers for centuries on the great slopes of the Himalayas. Their ancestors were horsemen in Genghis Khan’s army. Jid had worked his way up to senior porter and had recruited our staff of porters from his village. Although he spoke no English, I had gotten to know Jid from a previous expedition, and a special affection had grown between us. I gave him a rain jacket, making him the envy of other porters on the trail.

Above:
Jeff Rasley.
Photograph, 2004.
View from Langtang
Valley trail outside of
Kyanjin Village in the
Langtang district of
Nepal. The author was
on an expedition
to trek Langtang
and climb Yala Peak
with two friends
and a Nepalese crew.

Opposite:
*Standing Male
Worshiper.*
Alabaster (gypsum),
shell, black limestone,
bitumen, height 11½ in.,
Mesopotamia, Eshnunna
(modern Tell Asmar),
2750–2600 BC, Early
Dynastic I–II. The
Metropolitan Museum
of Art. Fletcher Fund,
1940. Photography
© The Metropolitan
Museum of Art. (40.156)

NOT ONE OF THE OTHER FIFTEEN CLIMBING TEAMS could successfully summit Mera that first week of October 1999. The conditions were too tough for climbing due to unrelenting snow and terrible visibility. It rained every day for two weeks below fourteen thousand feet and snowed every day above that altitude.

The eleven-day trek to Mera base camp was surrealistic, over high mountain passes, across rushing, glacier-fed streams, slipping and sliding through a muddy bamboo forest, and past a Sherpa village wiped out by an avalanche. We were soaking wet from rain every day the first week, and then slowed by deep snow as we neared our base camp. After four days of fighting the weather between base and high camps, our team gave up. I spent the last day on the mountain in a tent by myself, retching and wretched with altitude sickness.

The snow continued to fall as our defeated and bedraggled team finally hiked out of base camp. At sunrise on the second day of the hike out, my tent sagged with five inches of heavy snow, which had fallen overnight. It continued falling as we ate breakfast, packed gear, and then trudged 2,000 feet up the backside of Zatrwa La. This was the last high pass we had to cross to get out of the great white-capped peaks and back to civilization in Lukla Village, where a Twin Otter airplane was scheduled to pick us up and fly us back to Kathmandu. By the time we post-holed up to the crest of the pass, the fresh snow was over two feet deep.

Barely visible through the falling snow on a ridge above and behind us were splotches of red and yellow—down parkas of three Nepalese porters from another climbing expedition that was following us out of the mountains. The three porters were inching their way across the ridge, slowed by the blowing snow and the heavy loads they were carrying.

The conditions were perfect for an avalanche—fresh, deep, and unstable snow and warmer-than-usual temperatures. We were on top of a fifteen-thousand-foot pass with a four-thousand-foot descent.

We huddled together at the top of the pass. Heather wanted us to spread out for the descent, but Tom argued that the five of us ought to stay close to each other. We didn't rope up. All of a sudden, Heather yelped and took off running. Tom cursed. Seth bellowed, "Go!" And I heard the low, distant roar mountain climbers dread.

We started running after Heather. Judy cried out and fell down. Tom and Seth grabbed her arms, pulled her up, yelling in her face, "Run! Run!"

I saw them out of the corner of my eye as I pounded mechanically down the rocky, snow-covered slope, stumbling into and over boulders hidden by snow. With my mental capacity still impaired by

altitude sickness, my only conscious thought was to keep going down to survive.

The spindrift came over us, stark white and opaque; I could barely see my gloves and boots. The avalanche petered out. We fell to our knees gasping. We looked back up into the vast whiteness of the mountain.

The three Nepalese porters from the other expedition had disappeared—vanished in the gigantic wave of the avalanche. We later learned that they were killed, along with four others who died in a series of avalanches across the Nepal-Tibetan Himalaya that week.

Seth instructed Heather, Tom, Judy, and me to catch up with the members of our crew who were ahead of us on the trail and to hike on to Lukla. We arrived in Lukla Village that night just after sundown. The worst part of that last ten-hour hike out of the mountains was just enduring it. The next worst part was wading across three glacier-fed streams. The water was freezing and running fast as the massive snowfall melted and ran off the sides of the mountains. We were all bone tired, wet, and emotionally drained.

At the Mera Lodge in Lukla, we sat by the wood-burning stove trying to warm ourselves. The night wore on, but Seth, Jid, and four of our porters didn't arrive at the lodge. We feared something had gone wrong for them.

Around midnight, Tom and Ram, our cook, hiked back to the nearest stream. They returned with the frightful report that it had become a raging river, neck high. When we had crossed around 6 PM, it was only knee deep.

We stayed up until exhaustion sent us into our sleeping bags on the lodge's cots. Before we went to bed we gathered in the kitchen to pray—Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and agnostics—all united in our fervent hope and prayers for the safe return of Seth and our porters. Sick, wet, and exhausted as we were, we fought off the dread that was creeping around the edges of our minds with hopeful prayers.

After Seth had instructed us to hike on to Lukla, he began trudging back up the Zatrwa La to find the porters in our crew who had been following us. We watched Seth disappear back up into the blowing snow.

Seth found Jid and four other porters struggling halfway down the pass. The two youngest porters, Suk and Chandra, were hypothermic and too weak to descend under their own power. Seth and Jid carried Suk and Chandra the rest of the way to the bottom of the pass. Then, Seth and Jid climbed back up four thousand feet to the top of the pass and carried down the two seventy-pound *dokos* (carrying baskets) left behind by Suk and Chandra.

The ethics of Nepalese guides and senior porters do not allow them to abandon gear. They will risk their lives to preserve their company's tents and their climbing clients' personal gear. I have seen a sirdar dive off of a ridge with a one-thousand-foot drop to save a day-pack carelessly dropped by a client.

After Seth and Jid carried the two *dokos* to the bottom of the Zatwra La, they divided the extra loads among themselves and with the two other porters who had the strength to carry. They all set off in the dark for Lukla.

When they reached the first stream, it was waist high. Seth tied a rope to a boulder, waded across, and tied the other end to a boulder on the other side. He helped Suk and Chandra cross the river as the others passed the gear across. They repeated the process at the second stream. The third stream was up to Seth's shoulders and running too fast to cross. They spent the rest of the night soaking wet beside the river at freezing temperatures.

Around nine in the morning we heard whistling coming up the lane outside the Mera Lodge. Suk and Chandra were barely walking, still suffering from hypothermia. But Seth was whistling as he walked into the lodge. He and Jid had brought the others out safely. Seth proudly announced that none of the gear was lost. He and Jid each carried 120 pounds over twenty miles on mountain trails and across three swollen-rushing streams in the dark while caring for Suk and Chandra.

SOME SIX MONTHS AFTER MY RETURN from the Mera Peak expedition, I was driving home from my office in downtown Indianapolis. Tears started streaming down my face, and I had to pull over to the side of the street. I was crying uncontrollably. I could no longer hold in the feeling of guilt and shame. The picture was seared in my mind of the three porters just before they disappeared in the white tsunami. I had done nothing, could do nothing, but it would not release me.

I called Tom in southern Indiana and Judy in Montana a few days later. Each had had similar symptoms. We were experiencing mild post traumatic stress disorder.

I had participated in four Himalayan expeditions in five years. I swore off mountaineering after Mera in 1999. It was no longer safe to visit Nepal, anyway. A violent Maoist revolution against the king had broken out, and there were shootings and bombs going off in Kathmandu.

Four years later in 2003, however, I felt beckoned back to Nepal. That year, 2003, was the golden jubilee of the first 1953 summit of Mt. Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay. The country needed tourists to return, and the Maoists and government

declared a truce. The Hillary family decided to use its resources to bring back tourists to Nepal. Sir Edmund would co-host with the King of Nepal a black-tie affair in Kathmandu, and Hillary's son, Peter, would co-host with the Incarnate Lama of Tengboche Monastery a celebration on the grounds of the monastery at eleven thousand, five hundred feet.

I heeded the call. I did not attempt to climb any mountains, but trekked through the Khumbu to Everest Base Camp at eighteen thousand feet and, as a freelance journalist, covered the world's highest party at Tengboche Monastery.

Since 2003, I have returned to Nepal to lead several Himalayan expeditions. I will often stop at a trail bend or take a rest cramponing up a glacier and reexperience that fateful 1999 expedition to Mera Peak without tears. I remember and honor the heroic strength and goodness of Seth Chetri, my guide and sirdar, and Jid Baldoo, a Buddhist peasant-farmer. I will not forget those three unnamed porters I saw disappear in the avalanche, and I honor them too. I will try to face the challenges life puts in my path inspired by the courage, strength, and kindness of Seth Chetri and Jid Baldoo, the two strongest men I know.

JEFF RASLEY holds a master's degree in divinity from Christian Theological Seminary, a law degree from Indiana University, and a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Chicago, where he majored in philosophy, religion, and politics. He lives in Indianapolis and is a practicing lawyer, when not practicing his other calling of world travel and adventure.