

### Before You Read

This is a true story about climbing K2, the second highest mountain in the world. Dan Culver and Jim Haberl from Canada and Phil Powers from the USA were part of a seven-member team who climbed K2 in 1993. Dan and Jim were the first Canadians to reach the summit on July 7 at 4:35 PM.

Think about what motivates someone to climb a mountain. Could you imagine yourself doing something like this?


### Try This

When you see ★, take a moment to consider the question or statement in the margin or at the bottom of the page.



# K2 Dreams & Reality

by Jim Haberl



Phil, Dan, and I climbed slowly together and stopped as we reached the crest of the ridge at 8000 metres. I collapsed heavily in the snow, as if someone had kicked me behind the knees. I was thankful for the rest — my mind and body barely able to stay ahead of our task. Between deep breaths, I fought with the knot in the rope and the locking carabiner on my harness, a procedure that would have been routine back home in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia. But mitts and knots never seem to mix, especially here, half a world away. ★

#### ★ Pause and Think

What do you think the last line means?

I sat in the snow and thought about how tough it was just to function at these heights; the climbing was as physically and mentally demanding as anything I had ever done. Meanwhile, my mitts persevered with the knot.

Camp was only two hundred metres away. Combatting my lethargy, I stood up and coiled the rope. As a precaution against the possibility of a fall into a crevasse, we had roped up that morning when we had left Camp 3. But that hazard was now behind us, and Dan was slowly ascending the broad ridge above. The snow had been windswept and compressed by the storms that scour the mountain almost every day of the year, so there was no foot penetration, only crampon marks in the hard snow.

#### ★ Pause and Think

What does it mean to feel “weak and very small”? What experiences could make you feel that way?

When I finally arrived at Camp 4, 8050 metres, I dropped my pack and vomited. There was no food in my stomach. The high altitude had prevented me from eating anything for two days, and all that came up was the foul, green bile of an empty belly. Immediately I began to shiver from the cold. I needed to get out of the wind. Phil had our tent in his pack and he was still several minutes below. The only shelter was a tent left by previous climbers. Wind-drifted snow was creeping up its walls, and the nylon fabric was taut with pressure. Dan grappled with the door zipper, fighting to clear it of ice and snow. He won, and gratefully I crawled inside.

I felt weak and very small in such a high and wild place. ★

Modern plastic boots with high-tech insulation provide lightweight protection from the cold and excellent performance while climbing. Step-in crampons help to prevent frostbite by eliminating straps which compress the boot and restrict the blood's circulation.



While I wrestled with putting on additional layers of clothing under my altitude suit, I could hear Dan and Phil outside setting up our tent and preparing for the night.

Once our little tent was up, Phil escaped the cold in it while Dan came into the other tent with me and lit the lightweight butane stove. Soon the small gas burner was humming, warming our tent and melting snow for drinks.

Dan did most of the cooking that night, a tedious chore at high altitude. For three hours we carefully melted chunks of dry snow in our small pot, making cup after cup of warm fluid to replace the liquid our bodies had lost from the day of climbing. Phil and Dan drank their mugs of soup, hot chocolate, and tea while I sipped with difficulty at my cup of warm water. The thought of any taste, even tea, made me nauseous, so I



*When I finally arrived at Camp 4, 8050 metres, I dropped my pack and vomited.*

quietly leaned back against the wall of the tent and forced myself to drink the water.

If the weather was right and the effect of altitude on our bodies overnight was not too severe, the next day would bring our summit bid. I lay quietly in my bag and listened to myself. My mind measured the deep fatigue of my body as it laboured to contend with the difficult breathing and fits of coughing. It seemed the altitude had completely drained my physical reserves.

I knew I would never be closer to the top.

I wanted to climb the mountain.

I dozed uneasily. At 10:30 PM I woke up gasping for air and gripped with terror. Where was I? Anxious and alone, I stared into the blackness of the tent. I tried to relax and boost my confidence with thoughts of all the other climbing expeditions I had endured to cold and desolate places. Experience. I sipped some water and slipped back into a deeper rest.

Phil and Dan also slept fitfully. The alarm rang at midnight. I could not muster any energy and again it was Dan who fired the

stove and filled the pot with snow for drinks. Dan and I retreated into our goose-down cocoons, while Phil searched longingly for the warm spot in his lightweight setup. We were all half awake and hiding from the reality of our tired bodies and the icy temperatures outside.

More than two hours later the stove was turned off and we inched our way out of the tents. The moon was bright and full, and only a slight breeze swept down from above. The summit of K2, the second highest peak in the world and the mountain of our dreams, was beckoning us with the rare privilege to try for the top.

The next afternoon I reached a point only five metres below K2's grand summit and stopped to wait for Dan. We had decided long ago to try to make the first Canadian ascent of the mountain together. So I carved a platform and sat down in the afternoon sun. A more magical experience would be hard to imagine.

I stared out at the countless mountains below me and simply absorbed the wonder of it all. In every direction lay peaks and glaciers: some world famous, many unnamed, all part of a remarkable creation. It was a wondrous time for me, alone in that place, only faintly aware that I was sitting at 8600 metres on one of the world's most challenging and treacherous

mountains. It was 3:50 PM, and time seemed to stand still.

Forty-five minutes later, Dan climbed into view. Together we took the final steps to the top. It was one of my life's extraordinary moments.

By 4:55 PM it was time to leave the top. The wind had shifted and the weather was changing. Our luck had run out. Very suddenly the afternoon air began to lose its heat and the pleasant pinnacle of K2 became a place of potential danger. I had stuck around on the summit for over an hour and knew it was time to go. We turned our backs to K2's peak and carefully began the process of descending to Camp 4.

Each step down the mountain required concentration. I was very aware of the risk of stumbling or catching a crampon, careful of every foot placement and consciously assessing the quality of the snow to make sure there were no surprises. After half an hour of carefully choosing our way, we gratefully stepped into the deep snow of the sheltered slope where I had earlier dug my observation pit. Here we relaxed somewhat and plunged down in the soft snow for twenty minutes. Everything was going well; we were tired but descending steadily.

Camp 4 was just below and, as in the morning, my crampons dug confidently into the hard surface. I



An ice axe is the mountaineer's tool. Simple and elegant, it can be used in a number of different ways.

**\*Pause and Think**

What picture does the word 'bottleneck' make you think of?



Communication is important in most things in life and climbing mountains is no exception. To stay in touch with Base Camp regarding team movement, planning, logistics or weather conditions we used small, portable radios while climbing on the upper reaches of K2.

began the traverse towards Camp 4 and glanced up to see that Dan was entering the Bottleneck. \* Summit day was almost over. Finally, I wanted to relax and enjoy our success.

Seconds later my brain was brutally invaded by a loud, crashing noise, a noise which in an instant shattered the silence and the harmony of the day. I spun around to see Dan cartwheeling violently through the snow, rolling by me at high speed. I stared in horror. All I could see was Dan tumbling faster and faster, his blonde hair in the tangle of the fall. As he hit the hard snow below me his limp body began gaining momentum. Only a miracle would stop him now.

There was no miracle.

I watched Dan hit some small rocks 100 metres below then continue to fall down a broad chute gaining speed with every passing second. He disappeared from my sight. I wanted not to believe.

My throat seized up in a swell of emotion. Weakly I croaked for help. Camp 4 was only 100 metres away. I yelled for help again, hoping that someone would hear. Then I cried out for Dan and listened. Nothing. I followed the line of his fall and carefully picked my way down through the rocks. The marks in the hard snow became farther and farther apart, spans of more than thirty



*The salty taste of the tears rolling off my cheeks into my cracked lips brought me slowly back to the world of reality.*

metres, as his body had bounded down the face.

Gravity.

I found his hat.

My legs were tired and the steepening terrain of the South Face was the last place I wanted to be. I stopped on a ledge and stared down the huge expanse of the mountain at my feet. There was no sign of Dan. Nothing. I yelled his name for what seemed the hundredth time. There was no response. I sat down on the ledge in disbelief.

Dan was dead.

The salty taste of the tears rolling off my cheeks into my cracked lips brought me slowly back to the world of reality. I knew in my head that Dan was gone, yet my heart was yearning to refuse that logic. I was alone, sitting on a ledge just below 8000 metres and looking down the immense South Face of K2, wondering where Dan's body would come to rest. I took no solace then, in the thin cold air, knowing that Dan's spirit would remain with many of us forever. Thoughts like that were for another time. For me it was time to brave the descent of K2 without him.

**First Reaction**

1. What is the strongest image that comes to mind when you think of this true story of climbing K2? Describe this image to a partner.

**Look More Closely**

2. Reread the selection and review the illustrations. Make two lists: one that describes the *physical challenges* and one that describes the *mental challenges* experienced by the climbers.
3. Record three examples of how Phil, Dan, and Jim supported each other during the climb.
4. The author, Jim Haberl, titled his book *K2 Dreams and Reality*. Create two webs, one that shows the dreams the climbers started with and one that shows the realities they encountered.
5. Skim the selection to find five terms related to mountain climbing. Define or illustrate the terms.

**Develop Your Ideas**

6. Reread the section on page 18 that begins, "If the weather was right and the effect of altitude on our bodies overnight was not too severe, the next day would bring our summit bid." What is the climber thinking about? What might he be saying to himself? Use thought bubbles to record what you think he might be saying to himself.
7. Find out more about a team or an individual who has attempted and met a particular challenge. Make a poster to show what was achieved.

