



LIFE AND DEATH ON SHISHAPANGMA

BY DEVON O'NEIL

Martin Maier had no clue where he was or how he came to rest on top of a mound of snow on September 24. Blinded by sun and the white landscape, he stared toward a summit. His knees and ankles hurt. The entire scene, he says, felt fake.

"It was like a dream," Maier, 39, says. "It took me a long time to realize that it's true, it's no dream. Then I tried to have a look around."

Maier glanced at his watch—nearly 2 p.m. He lifted his head and noticed, for the first time, that he was lying in an avalanche debris field. Then he saw an arm and bare hand sticking out of the snow, 15 inches away. He recognized the wristwatch as Andrea Zambaldi's and suddenly realized what had happened. It was as if the avalanche hit him again.

He reached out and touched Zambaldi's arm but got no reaction. By then Zambaldi had been buried under the snow for seven hours. The debris was as hard as a stone. Maier knew his friend was gone.

In the minutes that followed, Maier slowly pieced together the rest of his memory. Together with four elite ski mountaineers—fellow Germans Benedikt

"Beni" Böhm, 37, and Sebastian "Basti" Haag, 36; Switzerland's Ueli Steck, 38; and Zambaldi, 32, of Italy—Maier had been climbing Shishapangma in Tibet, the world's 14th tallest mountain at 26,289 feet. It was the first objective of an ambitious trip: everyone but Steck, who was in Tibet climbing with his wife and joined the foursome spontaneously when they met at base camp, intended to climb and ski Shishapangma then ride mountain bikes 106 miles to 26,906-foot Cho Oyu, and climb and ski that, too. Dynafit sponsored the "Double 8" expedition, but Maier, an unsponsored, aerobically gifted engineer from Munich, paid his own way.

The sun had just hit the summit like a spotlight; after an all-night ascent, they turned off their headlamps for the final push. It was 6:50 a.m. and had warmed to -5° Fahrenheit. They were roughly 330 feet below Shishapangma's summit and the hardest parts were behind them. If all went well, they figured they would reach the peak by 8 a.m. "It was a magic moment," Böhm says.

Maier, Böhm and Haag had taken turns breaking trail throughout the ascent, which started for Böhm and Steck at base camp the prior afternoon and either Camp 1 or Camp 2 for the other three men. They joined forces at approximately 7,100 meters

at 1 a.m. and began the wallow through thigh-deep snow toward the summit.

According to Böhm, Haag was leading the procession up the summit ridge when he deviated slightly onto a 40-degree face, which offered a more direct route to the peak. Only 60 feet separated the first man from the fifth. Böhm noticed some ropes on the ridge and, acting on a gut feeling, turned around. "Hey guys, this is the way," he said. "Let's go here."

"And I just went," he recalls. "Because I knew they were going to follow me, and because I knew I didn't want to discuss it. I think if everything would've gone well, we never even would've talked about that situation later. It was kind of a little correction of the route, which happens sometimes. It was only a couple of meters."

Suddenly, the snow began cracking around them and sliding away. "The other guys were coming back," Böhm says, "but in that moment, it was already too late."

Seven hours later, that scene returned to Maier's mind with striking clarity. He and Haag locked eyes as the 60-foot-wide, 18-inch-deep slab knocked them off their feet. Zambaldi, standing lower on the slope, was also caught and whisked away. Böhm and Steck, both positioned on the edge of the slab, watched their partners get carried over a serac. They waited. Nothing. Then, 2,000 vertical feet below, they saw a massive cloud of snow *whoosh* off the face and, Böhm says, their hearts dropped. "The beginning looked really harmless," he says. "Then suddenly it became a monster."

Next to Zambaldi's arm, Maier spotted ski gear strewn about. He had tossed his poles and thrown off his backpack moments after the avalanche hit—moves he credits with helping to save his life by giving the snow less mass to tug under the surface. He found his pack and would later recognize Haag's gloves in a photo he snapped of the scene. But there was no sign of Haag or anyone else.

"I was quite sure all four guys had died in the avalanche and I was alone," Maier says. He pushed himself up to a standing position and tried to walk, but, after two steps, he collapsed. He tried again. Same outcome. He stared out toward the Tibetan plateau—still unsure of where he was—then toward the peak. He recognized a large rock on the summit ridge that the team had ogled from base camp and felt a wave of relief. Camp 3 was not far from that rock. If he could make it there, maybe he could find help.

Maier could not bear to keep stumbling, so he dropped to the snow and crawled "on my knees and elbows." He had little water and no food in his pack. He does not recall how long it took him to reach >>



Camp 3, only that it was “several hours.” Dazed and exhausted, one thought kept him moving: his seven-year-old daughter at home in Germany. “I just said to myself, she has to see me again.”

Late that afternoon, about the time Maier stumbled into Camp 3, Böhm and Steck arrived back at base camp. Thomas Kaempf, a Swiss man from a different expedition, met them with astonishing news.

When he heard about the slide, which was obscured from view at base camp, Kaempf had crossed a lake and scaled a hill to view the debris with a pair of binoculars. He thought he saw a small dot on the surface of the debris field, but when it didn't move for several minutes, and, given the time that had passed since the avalanche, he dismissed it and began walking back to base camp.

On his way, he stopped and looked back at the dot that then suddenly seemed to be moving. He zoomed in and saw someone traversing the avalanche field.

He relayed this to Böhm and Steck when they arrived. Exhausted after 26 hours of exertion, Böhm asked the team's sirdar, a strong mountaineer named Norbu Sherpa, if he would go up to investigate the sighting. Norbu recruited two Sherpas from a different expedition and set out. They climbed 3,900 vertical feet to Camp 2 (6,800 meters) before stopping for the night.

Roughly 1,800 feet above them, Maier was curled up in a wind-raked, partially collapsed tent the team had erected during their first summit attempt on September 18 (they turned back due to chest-deep snow). He found a foot of snow inside the tent

when he arrived just before dark, shoveled it out with his hands then fell asleep, shivering in his midweight pants and down jacket.

When he woke up the next morning, he knew he had to descend. He and his partners had left their skis at Camp 3 for the descent, and looking back, he says it would have been easy to tell that two of them had survived if he'd counted the pairs of remaining skis. But it didn't occur to him—something was wrong with his cognition and he didn't know what.

He tried to downclimb toward Camp 2, where he knew other expeditions were acclimatizing, but could not keep his balance. Unlike the previous day, when falling had little consequence, if he fell on the steep face between Camps 2 and 3, he might not survive. So he went back to the tent, found a lighter in one of the pockets and boiled water with a stove from an earlier cache. He lit a cigarette and tried to figure out his next move.

Around 11 a.m., Maier heard a voice. “Martin, are you here?” It was Norbu. Maier had met Norbu, as well as Böhm and Haag, on 26,759-foot Manaslu in Nepal in 2012. Maier summited his first 8,000-meter peak that trip, completing the round trip from base camp in a day. Although he was with a different team, he and Böhm and Haag became friends over card games while they waited out storms. When Böhm invited Maier on the Double 8 trip—which would be carried out sans supplemental oxygen or Sherpa support for the climb or descent—he committed immediately.

Maier says he had never been so happy to see another human face as he was to see Norbu's. Shortly after the reunion, Norbu placed Maier on a short rope to catch his falls, and they began the descent.

Maier changed to skis at the bottom of the 1,000-foot face, where they met the other two Sherpas. The four of them crossed a flat bench nearly three miles long, Maier toppling over every 100 feet, before arriving at Camp 2. There, Carlos Martinez Garcia, a Spanish doctor from a different expedition, gave Maier nifedipine, ibuprofen and an oxygen mask and injected him with a syringe of dexamethasone. Then they continued toward Camp 1.

After a long night at base camp, Böhm had started back up the mountain the same morning, September 25, and, at twilight, he met Maier and the men shepherding him down the route just above Camp 1. Another storm was moving in, and given that it took Maier the entire day to descend 3,000 feet, they hunkered down for the night at Camp 1. As wind raked their tent, Böhm suffered through his third straight sleepless night.

With the storm still raging, Böhm and Maier set out for base camp at 9 a.m. the next day. Maier still couldn't stay upright for more than a few steps. They traversed an undulating ice field, then crossed a three-mile-long field of glacial rocks. Maier was so emaciated that he couldn't raise his hands to protect his face when he fell forward, time and again, “like a tree,” he said.

Finally, at 5 p.m. on September 26, three days after the avalanche had swept him off Shishapangma and killed Haag and Zambaldi, Maier reached base camp. A horse carried him down to a four-wheel-drive vehicle, and he arrived at a hospital in Kathmandu, Nepal, on September 28. Scans revealed severe bleeding in the region of his brain where coordination and balance are controlled. He had also torn his meniscus in one knee and his medial collateral ligament in the other, and suffered bone bruises on both ankles.

Speaking by phone from Munich, Maier, still suffering from double vision one month after the avalanche, said he is not sure what to make of his survival. But the Shishapangma expedition will not be his last. He accepts tragedy's place in the mountains, he said. “It's a sad part, but it is part of this,” he said.

Haag's and Zambaldi's bodies remain on Shishapangma, Böhm said, and likely always will. ■

[photo] Martin Maier (fifth from left) with the Double 8 team and film crew. Not shown, Sebastian Haag. **Courtesy of Dynafit, Primaloft & Gore-Tex**

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