



**FOURTH
DOWN
AND**

19,600

FEET

TO GO

David Hanson spent last June as a National Park Service volunteer in Alaska, patrolling the upper reaches of Denali with a team of climbing rangers. In the process of inspecting fixed lines, offering medical assistance, carrying bodies, and hauling bags of human waste, he gained insight about what it takes to save a mountain from people and people from a mountain.

story and photography by **David Hanson**

The Football Field on Denali is as it sounds, a long, semi-flat plateau, the mildest grade on the upper mountain. Below, the Alaska Range tumbles away for thousands of feet. Above, the 20,320-foot summit occasionally reveals itself. If the Football Field didn't sit at 19,600 feet in one of the most inhospitable environs on earth, it's where you'd walk your dog and throw the frisbee if you lived in the neighborhood. Instead, the plateau is one of the deadliest spots on one of North America's deadliest mountains.

Take last June 6, for instance. Despite winds increasing to 35 miles per hour, it's an ideal summit day. With the season's mad rush up the West Buttress in full swing, the route from High Camp looks as busy as a Boulder hiking trail: guided teams, private parties, and the occasional soloist shuffle up the same line at the speed of a retirement home fitness walk. Many of the climbers make the summit. Then, on the descent, a few simply collapse.

One man sits in the snow, dazed, unwilling or unable to continue walking downhill to High Camp, still a solid three hours away. His teammates are nowhere to be found. Thirty minutes behind him, a young man in a private party of three weaves drunkenly. He, too, falls to his knees. Within the same hour, a third man crumples near the bottom edge of the Football Field. All three are disoriented and ataxic; stumbling and losing coordination. They're suffering from high altitude cerebral edema or HACE, a swelling of the brain that's often fatal. Climbers know it as "too high, too fast" syndrome. The only cure is getting down to lower altitudes.

Beyond their plight and a desire to climb North America's highest peak, the thread that ties these three dying men is the National Park Service mountaineering ranger program. They owe their lives to the outfit. As Denali ranger Tucker Chenoweth and his patrol of four volunteers descend from the summit to their patrol base at High Camp, they find their patients strung out on the Football Field.

Within two hours, the three hypoxic men are plucked, one by one, from their frozen, oxygen-starved deathbeds by a Park Service helicopter. Chenoweth calls in. Each man goes on a screamer suit ride in a body harness dangling 150 feet below the helicopter to the Park Service medical tent at 14,200 feet. There, another ranger and group of volunteers reevaluate them before boarding them onto the helicopter. Ten minutes later, they find themselves breathing the rich stew of warm air at the 7,200-foot Base Camp. And soon thereafter they're whisked by a hospital helicopter to some of the world's best high-altitude medical care in Wasilla.

The alternate ending to the story is equally short. Had Chenoweth's patrol not been on the Football Field within that narrow time frame, or had the weather gone to hell, the three men would likely have died. Climbers routinely pull off astounding feats of bravery and grit to rescue fellow alpinists from obscure circumstances, but in this case, there were few options other than a helicopter ride. Colin Haley, one of the strongest, most elite mountaineers in the world, discovered one of the Football Field patients that day. He and his partner Nils

Nielsen were skiing off the summit. But Haley told me that even he and Nielsen didn't have the capability to bring those men down to an altitude where they could recover.

I was in the middle of this whole scene. I spent last June on Denali as a Volunteer-In-Park (VIP) under the leadership of Brandon Latham, an acclaimed Denali mountaineering ranger (see MTN Report, Mountain, Summer 2011). Our team of seven—Latham and six VIPs—were the patrol behind Chenoweth's. We took the patients out of their screamer suits at 14,200 feet and treated them in the med tent before packing them into the chopper for the ride to Base Camp. Last year was a deadly one on the mountain, but it would have been much worse without the Park Service presence.

Or at least that's the general consensus. We spent a lot of time sitting in tents that could have served as an international brain trust on the topic of mountain management. In addition to Latham, at various times we had in our company: Renny Jackson, a 35-year veteran climbing ranger of Grand Teton National Park; Ang Tshering, a Khumbu Climbing Center instructor, Nepali lama, and owner of a Himalayan guide service; renowned alpinists like Colin Haley, and, why not, Conrad Anker. It was the perfect setting and group to discuss the complicated issue of mountain management—a subject that involves fees, feces, expectations, evacuations, and mandated legislation. Turns out when it's applied to Denali's popular high altitude climbing scene, the Park Service's mission to "preserve and protect the natural resources" is not as straightforward as it sounds.

Climbing has always been a dirtbag sport. From Fay Fuller's 1890 summit of Mount Rainier in woolen hose and a flannel bloomer suit, to Camp Four's gear innovations that began in 1945 when John Salathé started working Ford Model A axels into pitons, the attraction to the mountains has been one of jerry-rigged invention, joyful suffering, and absolute self-reliance. One of the first purported summits of Denali came in 1910, when four ragtag Alaskan miners calling themselves the Sourdough Expedition spent three months on the mountain. As the story goes, the Sourdough bunch carried doughnuts for sustenance and they hauled a 14-foot spruce pole to the North Summit. They intended to plant the pole there so their friends could view it through a telescope from a bar back in Fairbanks. Most believe they did summit, and climbers still insist they see the spruce pole near the seldom-climbed North Summit.

But today, mountaineering is both a business and a form of



Denali ranger Brandon Latham and National Park Service volunteer ranger Ang Tshering assist as a body bag is raised from High Camp on Denali's West Buttress Route. The climber passed away from cardiac arrest following a successful summit push.

Previous page: A patient heads for the medical tent at 14,000 Camp on Denali's West Buttress, aided by NPS volunteer rangers Tshering (left) and Alan Feder (right). The climber was brought by helicopter from the Football Field (19,600 feet) to 14,000 Camp, assessed, and flown down to Base Camp (7,200 feet).



Ranger Brandon Latham waits for a NPS helicopter at 14,000 Camp on Denali's West Buttress.



Ang Tshering, a Nepali guide, served as a volunteer ranger.



Renny Jackson joined the volunteer ranger patrol on Denali with his daughter, Jane.

tourism. And a new class of climber has emerged. Between 1903 and 1969, no more than 83 climbers attempted Denali annually. More typically, only 20 to 30 made the bid. By the 1980s, though, annual registration jumped to above 600. By 1992 it was 1,000 climbers. The growth reflected similar percentage increases on more popular summits like Mount Rainier, Mount Hood, Mount Shasta, Mount Baker, and Grand Teton.

As amateur mountaineering grows, the climbing populace moves

“WHO’S IN CHARGE? IF YOU PAY A PERMITTING FEE TO CLIMB, WHAT DOES THAT BUY YOU?”

higher up bigger mountains. And as it happens, those big mountains are often managed by our National Park Service. Because of that, a question naturally arises: Who’s in charge? Decades ago such a thought would have been ridiculous. You’re in charge. So go up if you want to, but more importantly, get your own ass back down. But if you pay a permitting fee to climb Mount Rainier—in addition to paying federal taxes that support the National Parks—what exactly does that buy you? A porta-potty and a parking lot? Weather updates and route info from rangers at Camp Muir? A 9u cell phone call and a helicopter ride off the Emmons Glacier if you sprain an ankle? Simply by rescuing people and offering advice, the Park Service may be supporting the notion that rangers are there to bail you out.

Denali’s 14,000 Camp is an advanced base camp where climbing parties attempting the West Buttress acclimatize and stage. The camp, a small village of snow walls and tents, is set in a massive, dished plateau beneath the Messner Couloir. It’s an odd scene with

Skittles-colored climbers shuffling about in down slippers, peeing in yellow holes, often in the middle of what amount to streets. A head poking above a short wall usually means that person is squatting over the required CMC, or Clean Mountain Can. Denali is one of the few mountains in the country with a human waste policy that involves throwing feces-loaded biodegradable bags (they’re draped into the CMCs to collect a few days of excrement) into crevasses. The practice continues even as Denali is widely recognized as the cleanest of the heavily climbed big mountains in the world.

Tshering, the Nepali lama and Himalayan guide, and I tote a sled full of our patrol’s poo bags to the crevasse outside 14,000 Camp. It’s an odd feeling to toss the nastiness into the mountain, but Tshering sees Denali as pristine compared to the filth on many of Nepal’s mountains. Plenty has been written about the unsanitary, contaminated scenes at Everest Base Camp and Ama Dablam. He’s here on an exchange program pairing native Khumbu Climbing Center instructors with Park Service patrols. The goal is to bring Denali-style management skills to the Himalaya. With some notable caveats: Tshering says there’s no hope for Nepalese governmental competency in managing Himalayan mountains. Rather, the know-how and ethic must take hold with Nepalese guides.

But Denali isn’t perfect. Waste removal remains a controversial, evolving, and eagerly studied issue. As climbers multiply, so rises the impact of humans on fragile alpine environments. National Park Rangers in the U.S. like to say that their job is to save the mountain from the people and the people from the mountain.

The Park Service sets up a semi-permanent camp at 14,000 feet and it’s telling that many guides and private climbers refer to it as “14,000 Medical.” A large round cook tent houses the commercial-grade propane stove, another round tent holds the medical equipment and two cots for patients, and a long, hoop tent makes for the communications headquarters (comms) with radio

and telephone service. The Park Service patrol members (our team) hang out in the comms tent.

Each morning, we update the weather and conditions on a white board that sits on our outer snow wall. Climbers from the village wander over daily. They come looking for poo bags or specific info from the ranger. Our patrol’s leader, Latham, a lanky, modest, easy-going 40-year-old, is one of the Park Service’s elite rescue riggers and an expert mountaineer. Responding to most questions, though, he speaks in general terms emphasizing that each team must make decisions based on their abilities. There’s a fine line between offering information and becoming a magic eight ball for climbers looking for the go-ahead to ascend to the High Camp or go for the summit. Still, a climbing party asks the rangers if they think it’s OK to attempt the difficult West Rib route. “In America, we have this sense that we need someone to cover for us,” says Conrad Anker. “You don’t have any of that in Himalaya. You’re on your own.”

Latham’s favorite reply to babysitting questions is “Hard tellin’, not knowin’.” At other times, though, he strongly advises. Like when a solo climber passes us in 30 mph winds on the icy pitch above 11,000 Camp. The man is not wearing crampons and slips with each step. If he loses it here, he’ll slide 2,000 feet, and we’ll be left to pick up his pieces. Above the howling wind, Brandon asks the non-English-speaker if he has crampons. We gather that he does. Brandon strongly suggests that he wear, not carry, them. The man ignores him. There are some rules that the rangers can enforce on Denali, mostly the rules that involve human waste. But you can’t control stupidity.

The theory that the Park Service babysits climbers is constantly tested here. The high altitude environment requires at least a 21-day expedition (for most climbers), but as one of the Seven Summits (the highest peaks on each continent), it’s also extremely popular. Once highly respected among alpinists because of the altitude and extreme temperatures, today the West Buttress route is regarded increasingly as “the Scenic Loop” or “the Denali Iditarod.” It’s an unfair assessment considering two technical

cruxes on the route: the Headwall and the Autobahn. And again, the Park Service finds itself deeply involved.

Renny Jackson, his daughter, Jane, and I climb the Headwall during our stint at 14,000 Camp. Renny recently retired after 35 years with the Park Service, most of it as Lead Climbing Ranger at Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming. The Denali team asked him to join our patrol as an observer and advisor because of his search and rescue expertise. He’s climbed here before, along with other serious routes in the Alaska Range and around the world. While you’d never know it from his quiet, self-effacing demeanor, Renny is one of the original “Teton Hardmen,” a fraternity of pioneering climbers whose informal roll call includes such legends as Paul Petzoldt, Jack Durrance, and Glenn Exum.

Just below the fixed lines, there’s a small notch cut out of the steep and icy Headwall slope. The notch serves as a waiting room a few dozen feet below a five-foot-wide, horizontal, blue-bottomed, man-eating crevasse. Crux number one. Eight climbers lean against the uphill wall, snacking on bars and adjusting gear. A guide in front of us reminds his three clients about the proper use of their ascenders. To climb the fixed lines you move your ascender first, prussic (a slipknot of light cord that acts as a backup) and carabiner behind, then step into the notches cut in beside the fixed lines like a set of primitive stairs. Though the exposure here is legit, the mechanics of the fixed lines are rather elementary. The guided group ahead of us makes painfully slow progress, but passing on the parallel downhill rope is considered somewhat of a dick move, unless we’re in an emergency situation.

As we wait our turn, Renny and I talk about the Headwall and the crevasse—and the Park Service’s role in it. Without the fixed lines, most climbers would place pickets (angled aluminum shafts the length of fence pickets that you bang into the snow and run your rope through as protection) the entire way up. Without the protection, if you slipped, you’d go for a ride. And the crevasse would not be pleasant to hit at



Brandon Latham looks down on 14,000 Camp from the ridge above the Headwall.



Latham leads rescue rigging training at 14,000 Camp. In 2008, Latham and ranger Mik Shain coordinated the longest vertical rescue in Denali's history, coming to the aid of a climber who slid more than 2,000 feet.



NPS volunteers Tshering (left) and Dan Goddard (right) attend to a climber suffering from high altitude cerebral edema inside 14,000 Camp's medical tent.

luge speeds. The verticality of the crux freaks some climbers out. A middle-aged couple regroups below the crack as we pass. They turn around after a short-lived attempt to ascend the fixed lines.

We carefully use the steps cut into the upside wall of the crack to climb above it. On our way up, we check the anchors and make sure all is tight. A few days later, a man is treated in our med tent and eventually flown off after fracturing his ankle descending the tricky feature. Since he was clipped into the fixed lines, he sustained only the relatively minor fracture, rather than falling into the crevasse or taking a long slide.

The Jacksons and I top out on the Headwall. And Denali suddenly

“SOME INDEPENDENT CLIMBERS SEE THE FIXED LINES AS GARBAGE LEFT ON THE MOUNTAIN.”

feels more serious. The comforts and security of 14,000 Camp now distant. We huddle behind a rock, hiding from the stinging winds whipping up from the west as Renny recounts the genesis of the fixed lines. As numbers (and accidents) increased in the 1970s, the commercial guide companies installed semi-permanent ropes. Naturally, private parties “borrowed” them as they offered much easier access. Conflict arose between guide services and private parties. And ultimately the guides’ bosses didn’t want the liability of maintaining the fixed lines. So the Park Service stepped in and adopted them. The result is a bomb-proof ascender line, superior to, say, the more dubious pickets and occasional fixed lines on Rainier’s Disappointment Cleaver route, which are maintained by guides who report their changes and updates to the rangers. The difference being that the Disappointment Cleaver lines aren’t relied upon universally, while Denali’s Headwall lines are essentially an escalator to the upper mountain.

“So here, there’s this preventative search and rescue going on,” Renny says. “Maintaining these fixed lines in hopes that less people fall. But you’re creating this self-replicating thing. Considering the accidents that have happened this year, it’s apparent that many people up here need this type of infrastructure or else they wouldn’t get up so high.”

The Headwall’s fixed lines have been in use for nearly 40 years. At this point, they’re grandfathered in. Meanwhile, the babysitting debate has moved higher up the mountain to a point just over 1,000 feet above our perch. The West Buttress’s second crux, the Autobahn, cuts diagonally up a 35-degree slope from High Camp to Denali Pass and onward to the 18,000-plus-foot ridge that leads to the Football Field. In 2011, three people died and more were injured in falls on the Autobahn. Because much of the Park Service’s safety management policy comes as a reaction to tragic events, the rangers had to answer the inevitable calls from guide companies and others to install and maintain a fixed line on the Autobahn as well.

This time they declined. “We applied our standard question,” says Coley Gentzel, Lead Mountaineering Ranger at Denali. “Is it appropriate and necessary? On one hand it would make the Autobahn safer, like the Headwall. But the other side of the argument says we’re enabling unskilled climbers. We concluded that it was not appropriate. If you aren’t in the situation to climb the Autobahn safely, you shouldn’t climb it.”

The Jacksons and I complete our chore for the day by caching a Park Service bag full of Mamba draws (carabiners with built-in slings

of webbing) at the pass. We’ll pick them up in a few days when we move to High Camp for our weeklong patrol. Often, draws go missing from the Autobahn’s pickets. The Mamba draws are harder to swipe. We’ll replace them to keep that picket line safer. The takeaway is that the Park Service is OK with maintaining the Autobahn’s pickets and draws (you use your own rope), but not with offering the next level of protection, a fixed ascender line. It might seem a nebulous distinction to a non-climber, but the parallel on rock would be using existing protection on a big wall (pitons say) or permanently bolting a steel ladder to the route.

As we sit on our packs, refilling our lungs with the oxygen lost burying the cache, Renny wonders if it’s possible to go backward in mountain management, to remove the fixed lines. Some independent climbers, like professional alpinist Colin Haley, see them as garbage left on the mountain, ironically by the very agency responsible for keeping the mountain free of garbage. Haley says that catering to the commercial guided groups by maintaining fixed lines is wrongheaded. “I don’t think the Park Service should be creating an amusement park, and facilitating beginners by putting fixed equipment on the mountain,” he says bluntly. “If guide companies are making money to get beginners up, then they should maintain the lines and pickets, not the Park Service courtesy of our climbing fees.”

The Park Service, however, hasn’t found it “necessary and appropriate” to remove the lines. Plus, if they’re on Denali, as Haley agrees, to maintain cleanliness and offer rescue, the climber’s fee is going to a lot more than just maintaining the controversial fixed lines. For now, the fixed lines are like a guardrail on a mountain road. Keeping people from falling to their deaths supersedes the notion of preventing the ill-equipped or poorly skilled from daring to travel so high. So the Headwall lines stay, the Autobahn gets only pickets and draws, and the rangers remain ready if someone gets in over his head.

In the summer of 2008, a solo Canadian climber slipped at 16,400 feet on the ridge of the West Buttress, falling 2,000 feet down the back side to the Peters Glacier. Somehow he survived the fall with relatively minor injuries. But to live another day he had to be hauled back up 2,000 feet by Park Service rangers Latham, Mik Shain, and a team of volunteers. The man survived because of their expertise and equipment, including the thousands of feet of rope that’s stored at High Camp and 14,000 Camp. Unlike the nuances of preventative search and rescue—maintaining fixed lines and pickets—such high altitude missions make waves beyond the tight-knit mountaineering community. The stories ripple out into the mainstream world where facts skew.

Annually, the entire National Park Service, from the Virgin Islands to Maine’s Acadia, to Alaska’s Gates of the Arctic, spends \$4.5 million on rescues. The majority of those searches involves not mountaineers, but injured or lost hikers, boaters, and anglers. But it’s the high-profile big mountain rescues that splash across headlines and make for easy targets from those who would withhold public funds from rescuing recreational thrill-seekers. In 2001, Alaska Senator Frank Murkowski, encouraged by an early Tea Party “how dare we pay for them” sentiment, ordered a study to be conducted on charging for rescues on Denali.

Mike Gauthier, current Chief of Staff at Yosemite National Park, was tasked with the study. Gauthier was a climbing ranger on Rainier for decades and spent many seasons on Denali. He’s another hardman mountaineer like Renny Jackson. To answer the Senator, Gauthier

worked with the American Alpine Club. Their research found too many problems to recommend a charge-per-rescue system. Foremost, it introduced a hesitation on the rescuer's side. "The last thing you want is for the National Park Service to get out the calculator to determine what kind of rescue they should do," says Gauthier.

The study also found that a pay-per-rescue system would open the door to a multitude of legal liabilities that could, even with only a few court cases, cost the Park Service far more than \$4.5 million. "In Europe, climbers and skiers buy search and rescue insurance," says Gauthier. "There's on-duty, commercial standby rescue services and they do hundreds of short-haul rescues. There's almost always

"I AWAKE TO ONE OF THE MOST STUNNING AND SUBLIME ALPINE PERCHES IN NORTH AMERICA."

something going on. Helicopters all over the sky. We have more of a wilderness and adventure ethos in the U.S.. The rangers are there to pick up the pieces, but only when it's life or death."

Part of the fallout of the study is that today there's a new push inside the Park Service for more low cost, preventative search and rescue. In the Grand Canyon, which is basically an inverted 4,000-foot, dehydrated mountain, the Park Service sends volunteer rangers out to hike the popular up-and-down trails during busy times. They talk to hikers and gauge fitness, hydration, and weather protection in an attempt to deter could-be patients from getting in too deep.

On Denali, and other big mountains, it's more complicated. Rangers can, and do, give the same kind of "don't go if you aren't capable" advice at 14,000 Camp or Rainier's Camp Muir or the base of Mount Olympus' Blue Glacier, but the obvious dilemma still involves fixed lines. And the people who employ them to go too high too fast—like the three HACE evacs from last June. When such victims go from near-death at 19,600 feet (Football Field) to cozy and treated at 500 feet (Wasilla) in an hour, everyone on the mountain sees it happen. And everyone knows it's free.

In High Camp I awake to one of the most stunning and sublime alpine perches in North America. The outpost is dug in at 17,200 feet on a minor plateau with the cliffs of Rescue Gully to the southeast and, opposite, the protective buttress of the North Summit. Views this far up include the Kahiltna Glacier, Mount Foraker and Mount Hunter, and if you look down you can see the green river valleys leading to the town of Talkeetna. But most of the time, High Camp is head exploding, frozen-energy-bar-nibbling, sleepless-wheezing misery. Our team, one of nine Park Service patrols that slowly make their way up Denali during climbing season in a staggered coverage plan, spends a week at High Camp. Most climbing parties are here no longer than three or four days before food, energy, and good spirits run as haggard and thin as the air.

During our stay, we relocate the body of a climber who has died in his tent of cardiac arrest. He'd summited the day before. The body is hauled from the mountain by a Park Service helicopter. A mild storm hits and we sit in the giant Park Service tent for two days while 12 inches of snow silently falls on our camp. There's little wind, but no visibility and the Autobahn accumulates a dangerous layer of powder. No one climbs. Some parties arrive to camp just as the storm moves in. Within 36 hours, disheartened by the white blanket and weakened by the elevation, they've descended.

We play hearts and we make the short walk to the Diving Board, a prominent rock outcrop that looks directly down the Rescue Gully toward 14,000 Camp. We melt water. We're always melting water. Park Service patrols are better fueled and fed than private and guided climbers because our resupplies are cached throughout the season. We need the advantage to remain strong in case we're sent on a rescue on day five or six of sleeping at 17,200 feet.

A high pressure front sweeps away the storm and we dig out our tents and assess the camp. A handful of teams endured the whiteout and they're preparing for a summit push the following day. Anker joins us for coffee on his way to the summit from 14,000 Camp. He and photographer and adventurer Jimmy Chin are shepherding a team from The North Face of young-buck, big-line skiers, introducing them to the world of mountaineering. Anker climbed the Headwall solo, just spider-walked up, not even touching the fixed lines. But he's an old school freak. As we watch him saunter up the Autobahn on his way to a two-hour nap on the summit, we look around High Camp's backlog of

parties getting more desperate to reach the summit after waiting out the storm. It's hard not to wonder: Who will need to be rescued tomorrow?

A wide-eyed young man is in our tent the next morning. He claims to have coughed up blood earlier. His team has gone for the summit, leaving him behind. The paramedic in our patrol assesses the Alaskan and determines he's fine, just anxious. We give him an oxygen tank and send him to his tent for the day. We check on him in a few hours and he has depleted the entire O₂ tank, despite strict instructions to leave the flow on super low. Now we have one less oxygen tank for a more needy climber.

Later, Latham conducts a long distance pantomime exchange with a Spaniard taking a dump in the rocks outside camp. It's not easy to stop a man with a frozen logjam in the queue when you're 70 yards away and speaking a different language. Latham lets the man take care of business, but makes him carry his waste in a bag when he descends. The Spaniard's registration number is reported to the Talkeetna station, and he's fined upon his return.

In one week we experience the full array of what it means to manage a mountain—minus the acts of valor. It's a job, and it's a good one, protecting the mountain. We even summit without having to rescue anyone.

Our final day is calm and sunny, and we rest outside the tent. A lone climber slowly walks up the final hump 200 yards from High Camp. We'd heard he was on his way, word spreading that a soloist was attempting to hike from Base Camp to summit without stopping. We watch from afar as he sits on his tiny daypack in the snow, having climbed 10,000 feet in less than a day. As he sits for a half hour, we wonder whether he'll get up and continue on his crazy push. Is his daring version of fast-and-light made possible by the safety net we provide just by being here, watching him?

It must be somewhat comforting for him to know he could have a hot cup of tea and even a helicopter if needed along this well-managed route. He's made it up the fixed lines of the Headwall, now he just has the Autobahn, which he'll have to solo, the pickets not helping without a rope. He's a competent climber and he'll likely be fine soloing the Autobahn. But if not, or if he makes it to the Football Field and summit and doesn't return, we'll be the ones sent to recover him.

We hold our breath as he stands, shoulders his pack, looks in the direction of the summit, and turns around to descend, making the personal judgment call that has kept mountaineers alive for more than a century. ■