

This article first appeared in High magazine in 1998

Review of 'The Climb'

"Boukreev had come down to the South Col hours in front of anyone in Fischer's team. Indeed, by 5pm, while his teammates were still struggling down through the clouds at 28,000ft, Boukreev was already in his tent resting and drinking tea. Experienced guides would later question his decision to descend so far ahead of his clients – extremely unorthodox behaviour for a guide. One of the clients from that group has nothing but contempt for Boukreev, insisting that when it mattered most, the guide "cut and ran"". Jon Krakauer, 'Into Thin Air', 1997.

"...he [Boukreev] foresaw problems with clients nearing camp, noted five other guides on the peak [Everest], and positioned himself to be rested and hydrated enough to respond to an emergency. His heroism was not a fluke". Galen Rowell, The Wall Street Journal, May 29th, 1997.

It was against this background of controversy that the late Russian, Anatoli Boukreev, asked the writer and investigative filmmaker G. Weston DeWalt to collaborate on a book about the events that occurred on the south (Nepalese) side of Everest in the Spring of 1996 when eight climbers died, most notably Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, the leaders of two guided expeditions. (It was Fischer who had hired Anatoli as a guide for his team). DeWalt agreed, but insisted on going beyond Boukreev's experience to ask his own questions and interview other climbers who were present on the mountain as the tragic events unfurled. Boukreev agreed. The product of DeWalt's exhaustive investigations and Boukreev's personal experience is their book, 'The Climb'.

In his book, Boukreev counters the two main criticisms that some notable climbers and writers (most publicly, Jon Krakauer, a client on Rob Hall's team who wrote the

best-selling book 'Into Thin Air' about the events on Everest in 1996) have made against him: that he climbed without using supplementary oxygen when guiding clients; and that he descended the mountain rapidly in order to avoid a storm, leaving his clients to battle on alone. Much of the book is dedicated to these issues, but the first 100 pages is taken up by a fascinating insight into the behind the-scenes machinations that are part and parcel of modern commercial Everest expeditions.

The book also discusses many facets of Boukreev's personal climbing ethics, most notably his interpretation of what is expected of a guide. Henry Todd – who hired Boukreev as a guide in 1995 on a commercial expedition to the north side of Everest – describes the Russian in the book as “absolutely super”. Todd hired Boukreev for one of his greatest attributes: “If anything went wrong, I wanted a rope bullet up that hill”. Todd understood that the Russian was not a hand-holder: “It's not what he's designed for. It's like using a racing car for taking children to school”. Boukreev had been brought up in the ultra-competitive world of Soviet climbing, where climbers were expected to look after themselves. Soviet guides were not guides in the western sense of the word, but took on the role of coach or trainer. Of the clients that he observed early on in Fischer's 1996 expedition, Boukreev wrote:

“Some of them, I was afraid, had the idea that a guide should control all the situations they might encounter. I would just wonder, ‘What is going to happen when there is nobody to hold their hands?’”. Boukreev believed that “I think it is not so necessary that a guide can chat good, but that he can climb good”. However there were occasions during the expedition when Fischer expected Boukreev to be more of a western-style guide than perhaps Boukreev was able to be.

On the question of why Anatoli did not use oxygen, the author explains in detail on several occasions why he preferred to make a correct acclimatisation than rely on the use of supplementary oxygen. However, Boukreev had made plans in case his ‘power’ was not strong enough to climb and guide without bottled oxygen: “Not wanting to commit until summit day when I could read my condition

[acclimatisation] clearly, I explained [to Fischer] that I was not 100 percent certain [of ascending to the summit and back without oxygen] and wanted the same amount of oxygen that was being supplied for the clients”.

A major difference between *The Climb* and *Into Thin Air* is the crucial conversation that took place between Boukreev and Fischer at the top of the Hillary Step. As Fischer crested the top of the Step he met Boukreev as the latter was preparing to descend after waiting for one hour on the summit. (Neil Beidleman, Fischer’s third guide, had remained on the summit breathing oxygen from the spare canister that Boukreev had given to him after carrying it to 27,500ft in case another climber or he himself needed it).

Boukreev states that: “When I met Scott, my intuition was telling me that the most logical thing for me to do was to descend to Camp IV [the South Col] as quickly as possible, to stand by in case our descending climbers needed to be resupplied with oxygen, and also, to prepare hot tea and warm drinks... he [Scott] saw our situation in the same way and we agreed that I should go down. Again, I surveyed the weather, and I saw no immediate cause for concern”. (Boukreev and Fischer had both assumed that all seven of their Sherpas were heading for the summit that day with no-one in reserve at the South Col; however, unbeknownst to them, Fischer's Sirdar (head Sherpa) had ordered one Sherpa to remain behind in order to act in support and light the stoves).

Indeed, Fischer’s publicist, Jane Bromet, is quoted in the book as saying: “Scott told me... [before the summit bid] that if there were problems coming down, Anatoli would make a rapid descent [to Camp IV at the South Col] and come back up the mountain with oxygen...” Bromet claims to have told Krakauer about this conversation. Yet Krakauer makes no reference to it in his book.

At that time, Martin Adams, one of Fischer’s clients, was just behind Boukreev and the also-descending Krakauer. According to Krakauer, Boukreev “...moved very

rapidly down the Southeast Ridge without waiting for any clients – despite telling Fischer atop the [Hillary] Step that he would be going down with Martin Adams”. Yet in *The Climb*, Adams is quoted as saying that shortly after he left the South Summit:

“I’m going down the ridge, doing fine, and Anatoli comes by, sizes me up, sees I’m doing okay and keeps on going. For me, it was business as usual, Anatoli’s going by, and I had no problems with that”.

As in the conflicting accounts that emerged after the human disaster on K2 in 1986, precisely what occurred on Everest on May 10th and 11th 1996 may never be fully realised. What is certain is that after failing to rouse any support from the tented climbers on the South Col, Boukreev braved the storm on five separate occasions in an attempt to locate and then rescue missing clients and guides. In the final analysis, Boukreev pulled three clients out of the storm in the middle of the night before returning up the mountain the next day to where Fischer had collapsed the night before on his descent. But his friend was already dead.

The book replays these harrowing events in Boukreev’s own words. His faltering command of the English language may lack the finesse of Jon Krakauer’s polished literary abilities but here are the words of an honest man coming to terms with the tragic events that surrounded him:

“People say, not go to up. And I understand this. Actually, I remember what is – how it is South Col, plan of South Col. And I didn’t get crampon, because I was very hurried and people said you don’t need go up. I leave camp, just little walk, and just go direction from wind, I keep this direction and I cross the South Col, and I didn’t see – I cannot see nothing, just my headlamp little bit just through white.”

Boukreev remained convinced that in all probability had he remained on the mountain with the clients on the descent they may all have perished: “If I had been farther up the mountain when the full force of the storm hit, I think it is likely I would

have died with the clients. I honestly do. I am not a superman. In that weather, we all could possibly have died”.

Ultimately, *The Climb* serves to prove that in any circumstance – and especially in circumstances as extreme as those that occurred on Everest in 1996 – there is more than one truth, more than one version of events. However, it has taken the publication of Boukreev’s own book to allow his story to be made available to the public. Krakauer's original article on the Everest tragedy was published by the U.S. magazine ‘Outside’ (which had arranged Krakauer’s trip with Rob Hall’s expedition). The article was particularly critical of Boukreev (criticisms which were slightly watered down in *Into Thin Air*). In *The Climb*, Boukreev’s letter of reply to the editor of *Outside*, Mark Bryant, is re-printed. It was never published by *Outside* as it was deemed to be too long. (Krakauer's article ran to over 17,000 words; Boukreev’s letter extended to about 1500 words). One of *Outside*’s senior editors, Brad Wetzler, offered to edit the original letter down to 350 words in order to allow it to fit their format and to help sharpen Boukreev’s arguments and to make it “probably” into a “more forceful piece of writing”. Boukreev declined the invitation.

Anatoli Boukreev died in an avalanche on Annapurna on Christmas Day 1997.

The Climb, by Anatoli Boukreev and G. Weston DeWalt, is published by St Martin's Press (ISBN: 0-312-16814-4).

Paul Deegan was a member of the 1995 Everest Expedition which employed Anatoli Boukreev as Climbing Guide. Eight westerners summited on the expedition.

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