

For most cameramen filming on Everest is challenge enough, but little did GTC member Kevin Augello realise what a gruelling experience the 'Sight on Everest' shoot would turn out to be...

SOS... SOS... My mobile phone bleeps to alert me to a text message. It's from a Dutch friend and colleague, Harry Kikstra, television producer and expedition organiser for www.7summits.com. The message reads "Have project planned. AAA docu material. About a blind climber on Mt Everest. Interested?"

Most people can remember where they were when a life-changing event occurs and this was to be no exception. I was at Video

Forum at Earl's Court in London having flown over especially from Holland where I now live. I read the message, smiled, then put the phone back in my pocket. It would make an interesting project for the future. Little did I know I would be boarding a Jet Airways flight to Nepal, headed towards Tibet and the North face of the world's highest mountain, in just over five weeks' time.

Back in Amsterdam a few days later, the project was explained

over dinner. Milan Collin, a Dutch wildlife cameraman and good friend (www.deepeei.com), was to be the third member of the team. Harry told us about the client he would be guiding, a German climber Dr Thomas Weber, who would be facing an amazing challenge. He was attempting to become the first visually impaired climber to tackle the North face of this 8850m mountain. The challenge for us as film-makers would be to arrange sponsors,

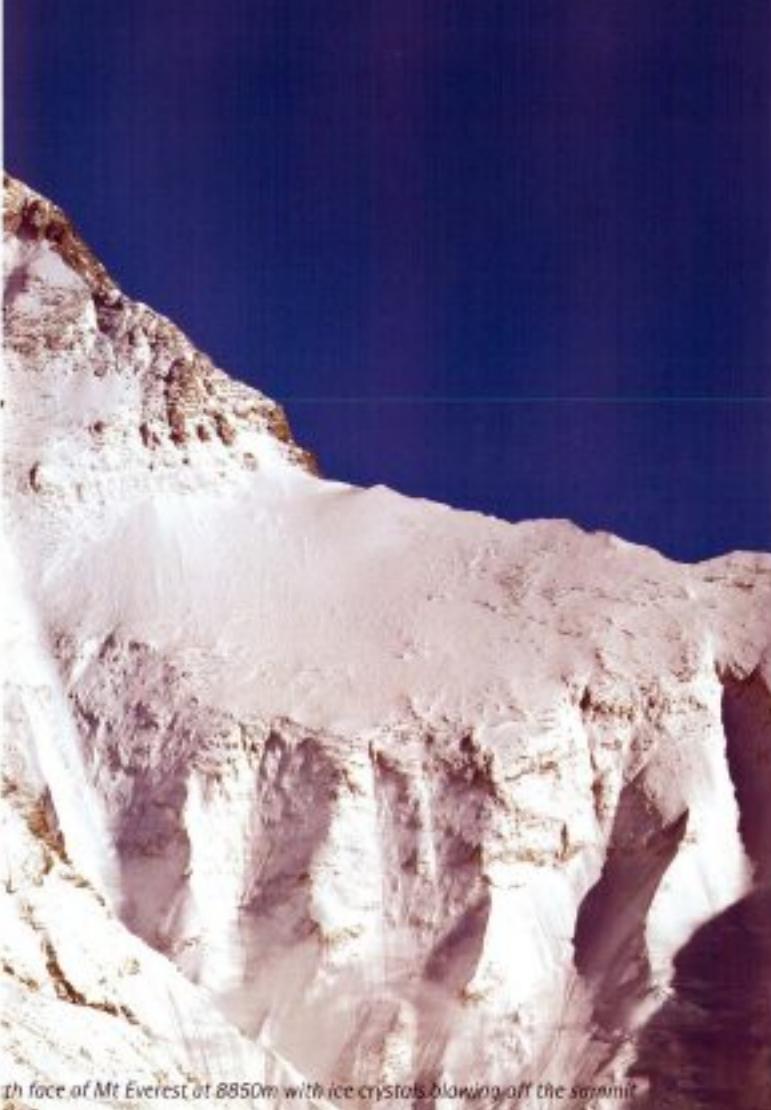
insurance, carnets and permits, as well as the mental and physical preparation, in just over a month.

Biting the bullet

We knew that finding a commission within this short timescale would be unlikely, so we would have to invest our own time and money in the project hoping to return with a saleable story. Of course, we would also have to procure suitable video equipment and we decided to split the cost of

BLIND FAITH

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARRY KIKSTRA,
7summits.com



Face of Mt Everest at 8850m with ice crystals blowing off the summit

this investment equally between the three of us.

I have dedicated my life to documenting four main genres; travel, adventure, exploration and the natural world. After working for over ten years in the mainstream industry, I wanted to combine my passion for these genres with my work as a cameraman and film-maker. That is why I set up my production company New Earth Films – to film life's adventures.

We made a decision early on to film pre-departure material right from the first meeting. Thomas lived and worked in the United Arab Emirates, but he was able to fly into Amsterdam for a weekend which gave us the chance to capture his thoughts prior to the expedition, as well as filming him training in the Bever Indoor Ice Climbing Centre, in The Hague.

We decided to break from the traditional filming approach and allow ourselves to feature in the



Kevin filming with the A1 in Tibet

story both in video diaries and by interviewing one another, thereby creating a 'making of' theme to run alongside the main plot. Little did we know at this stage that this approach was to prove vital when we would all become personally involved in high altitude rescues.

Kitting up

But for now, our main concern was with choosing cameras; small, lightweight equipment was essential and discreteness was also a consideration as we knew about the political problems in Nepal. Two systems sprang to mind: the JVC GY-HD100 and JY-HD10 or the Sony Z1 and A1. In the end, it was the Sony combination that rose to the challenge and, with the help of Stuart Reed, Product Marketing Manager for Sony Europe, two Z1s and three A1s were duly delivered via FOFIC BV in the Netherlands. Sony was especially keen to see how the A1 would function at altitudes of more than eight kilometres.

Other kit companies were incredibly helpful. I am already sponsored as a cameraman by Manfrotto and was delighted when Mark Hoskins was again able to help us out with a whole host of supports and Lowe-pro bags. With Sennheiser, Peli Cases [NL], PAG

and Lee Filters also on board, we were all kitted out. Only a \$5000 Chinese filming permit stood in our way!

Before going, we had set up a website www.SightonEverest.com named after the title of the documentary which would cover events prior to and during the expedition. This proved to be a great success receiving over 30,000 hits monthly. We updated it every couple of days with recently filmed material including a 10-minute continuous take guided tour of Base Camp (BC). Milan and I passed the camera mounted on a Manfrotto 'Fig-Rig' to each other, over and under prayer flags and in and out of tents, with Harry in shot giving a commentary on the Sennheiser ew100 radio microphones.

Harry had already left for Nepal two weeks earlier in order to gain extra acclimatisation, leaving Milan and me to finalise the paperwork and assemble the sponsored equipment which was arriving by the minute.

Soon we were humping 20 items of luggage, weighing in at 287 kilos, around Heathrow airport; fortunately Jet Airways had generously sponsored us with business class return tickets and unlimited weight allowance.

ON EVEREST



Thomas enjoying an acclimatisation hike

Dust and air

Arriving in Kathmandu we found the military curfew in full force, with armed checkpoints every 500 metres. But the A1 allowed us to blend in as tourists, with its detachable XLR ports and mic meaning we could capture HDV images without drawing too much attention to ourselves.

Even early on the durability of these little cameras was pushed to the limit when we entered this part of China, formerly known as Tibet, via a crossing point called Friendship Bridge. Dust from the Tibetan plateau created a major problem for all the cameras and, no matter how hard you tried, a thin film would develop over all the equipment within seconds. Only in an airtight Peli case were the cameras safe and whenever they were out of it an airbrush was constantly to hand. Other challenges were presented by temperature extremes well exceeding the manufacturers' guidelines: rising to +40°C and



Milan on the long climb up to the North Col at 7000m

falling to -45°C at high altitude, the cameras never let us down.

The only one issue that did become a cause for bad language was an annoyingly long pre-roll if the cameras were left on standby. On occasions this meant missing interesting material when at least ten seconds elapsed before a single frame was recorded. "Can you do that again?" became a catchphrase for the expedition.

Also, as with much new technology, control of many features on the A1 are buried deep within the menu system. Try accessing and using functions on a touch screen while wearing mittens and holding an ice axe!

Acclimatising

The long ascent to BC took five days, fortunately by road; our jeep drove ahead allowing me to film

the convoy passing by on an amazing series of switchbacks, at one point gaining 1.6 km in altitude in just over 30 minutes.

Situated at 5200m, BC included a collection of about ten other expeditions spread over a flat rocky plateau at the end of a now retreating glacier. In all, there were 72 other people involved in our Russian-led expedition with our team being just a sub-team of the larger group. This was to be our home for the next six weeks.

We waited at BC for about a week to allow more red blood cells to develop, so that we could absorb more oxygen with each breath. It soon became apparent though that even an activity like setting up the lightweight Manfrotto carbon fibre tripod would become an aerobic workout. There is simply not enough oxygen to satisfy the body's needs and this became more and more apparent as we went higher.

Fortunately for us, yaks would provide transportation for all the gear, including the filming equipment, and with everything stashed in Peli cases we followed the 80 strong procession up the mountain. Alex, the Russian organiser, told me: "It's easy to find your way from base camp to advanced camp, just follow the trail of yak dung!"

We then spent the next month doing 20 kilometre hikes up and down the massif from BC to North Col at 7000m. Again this was all part of the acclimatisation process and became a real chore. We used

the time to film some amazing views, not only of the summit with its cloud of ice crystals blowing off the top, but of glacial moraines and 50m high ice pinnacles leading up to Advanced Base Camp (ABC) at 6400m. It was here that we started to make full use of the filters that had been provided by Lee. High ultraviolet light levels and a lack of ozone made filming the brilliant snow a real concern.

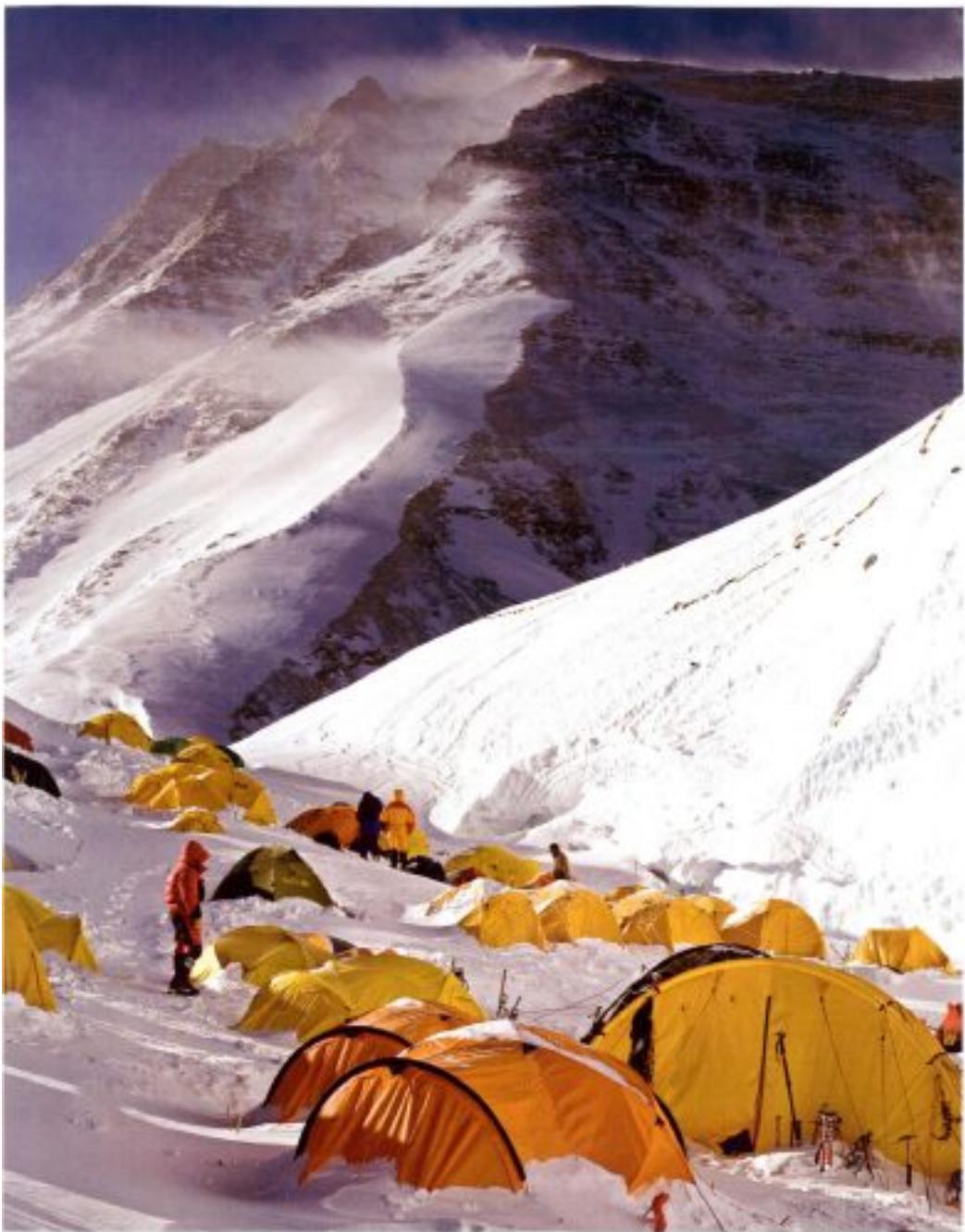
Life in the 'death zone'

It was about now that the mountain claimed its first life from our team; the friendly Russian climber Igor Plyushkin was to pass away. His body remains at peace buried under a makeshift rocky grave. We believe he suffered a heart attack. This year would see the most deaths ever on the North side. Although the Chinese authorities do not release official statistics about this matter, reports suggest that as many as 13 climbers may have lost their lives.

Eventually, summit day arrived; Harry and Thomas would leave the North Col and head up to Camp Two at 7700m, spend a night there and then push on up to Camp Three at 8300m. Both Milan and I were to remain below as we could not cover the additional summit costs of over \$10,000 each. Pemba Sherpa would film with an A1 along with Harry. Although neither Harry nor Pemba are professional cameramen and had only had a crash course on basic operation at ABC, they were able to capture



Tibetan yak herders tie the Peli cases on at Base Camp



The North Col: 7000m

amazing steady images of the windswept frozen mountain.

To our knowledge, no protective jackets are currently available for these tough little cameras, but with only a Lowe-pro camera bag to keep them safe, they were able to function just below the cruising altitude of a commercial airline. This camera was proving to be the adventure film-maker's choice piece of kit; especially as in its most basic form (minus battery and tape) it weighs a mere 760g.

We chose to leave the Z1 behind at the North Col, simply because of weight. Even though we did have a

Polar Bear jacket and heat pads for this camera, it was hard enough asking Harry to carry extra batteries, let alone a fully loaded Z1.

At 23.00 hours, with the temperatures almost twice as cold as a domestic freezer, Thomas, Harry, Pemba and Passang Sherpa left their tent perched on a ledge at 8300m to push towards the summit ten hours away. Thomas appeared to be going strong. However, the altitude was beginning to have an effect on his brain despite using bottled oxygen. An operation to remove a brain

tumour some years ago had left Thomas with a condition of high and low pressure blindness and at 100m below the summit he was now completely blind. A short rope attached to Harry in front and Pemba at the rear kept Thomas on the narrow windswept path, by the side of which lay the dead bodies of casualties from both this and last year's expeditions, including that of a courageous British climber called David Sharpe.

A cruel twist of fate
As Thomas pushed on upwards towards the summit, Harry and

Pemba captured shots of him trying to achieve his goal. But with just 50m altitude left to climb, Thomas's health took a turn for the worse. Harry showed his professionalism and leadership qualities and wisely made the difficult decision to turn back – so close and yet so far.

However, tragically, three hours later during the descent, Thomas turned to Harry and said "I am going to die". Within a few seconds, he had. He fell a few metres, suspended by the fixed lines that start at the base of the North Col and lead all the way to the top. Shocked, Harry climbed down to him, but Thomas was grey and showed no signs of life. CPR was impossible with Thomas hanging upside down. We suspect that he suffered a brain haemorrhage, provoked by scar tissue from the removal of his brain tumour although we will never really know for sure.

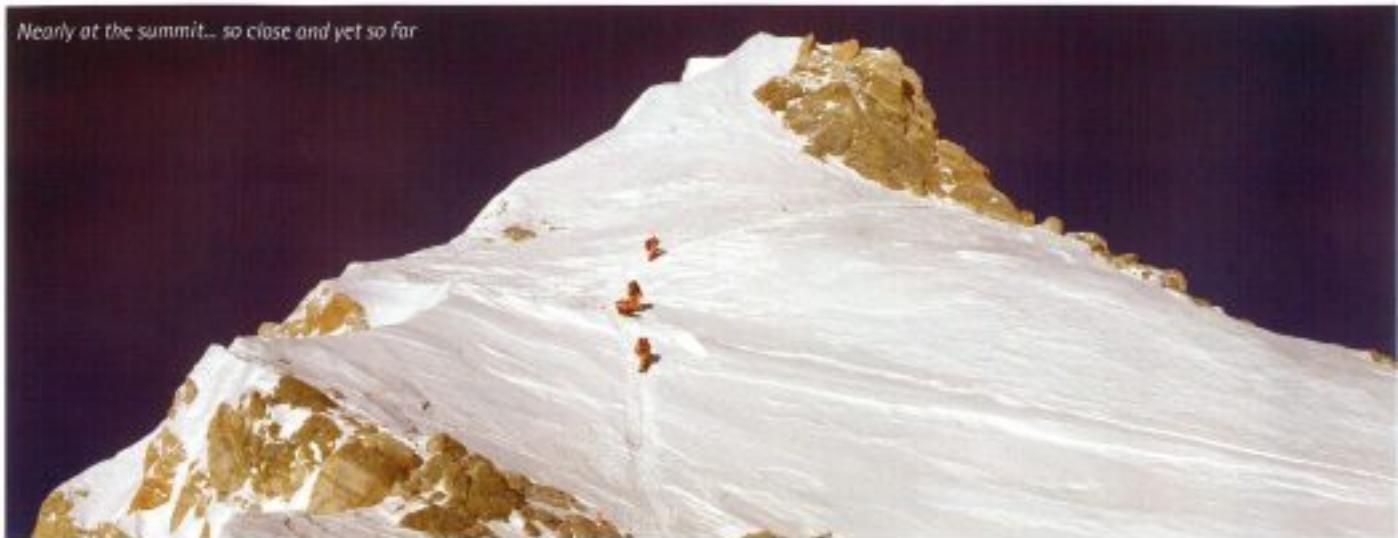
When the message came through, I was in the communication tent with camera in hand, as always. "Thomas is dead," Harry radioed in. I filmed as the message came through capturing the shock on the faces of all present. For my part, I was just trying to keep the tape rolling while at the same time dealing with my own reaction to the terrible news.

Thomas will remain suspended in his harness frozen for many years to come, unless the rope is cut allowing him to fall into a crevasse. It was impossible to retrieve him without putting other peoples' lives at great risk. Besides, Thomas had confided in a good friend prior to leaving that, if he were to die, then he could not think of a better place to rest... he was a true mountaineer.

However, this day was not over yet ... not by a long shot.

At 09.00, Lincoln Hall an Australian adventurer and writer was on the summit. He had travelled from his home in the Blue Mountains just outside Sydney to cover the story of Christopher Harris a brave 15-year-old lad who was trying to be the youngest climber to reach the summit. Lincoln was there to write a book on Chris's story and Australian cameraman Mike Dillon was

Nearly at the summit... so close and yet so far



Thomas and Pemba ready at Camp Three: 8300m

following the story on film. However, Chris was suffering the effects of high altitude and decided to return back to BC with Mike and his father Richard. Lincoln though decided to complete his own summit attempt; after all he had paid for it.

On his descent, he began to succumb to a swelling of the brain called HACE (High Altitude Cerebral Oedema) caused by small leaks of fluid. This potentially fatal drunken effect led Lincoln to believe he was onboard a yacht sailing on the ocean. Even with the help of three strong Sherpas he was unwilling to leave the Second Step, a rocky outcrop at 8700m.

As a native English speaker, I was asked to man the radio and attempt to convince Lincoln to come down with the help of the team. I told Lincoln, in no uncertain terms, that if he did not move he would never see his wife and children again. But, to no avail, he still believed he was at sea. Twelve hours passed until

tired, thirsty, hungry and out of oxygen, the Sherpas were called back to save their own lives. Lincoln was declared dead by nightfall.

Not all bad news

Now to make matters worse Harry had not been seen or heard from in over twelve hours... I did not want to go through this nightmare for a third time.

Milan filmed all the radio communications from our tent at ABC, over an hour's worth in total. Fortunately, that evening Harry walked into Camp Two in a mild state of shock, but doing well.

The next morning, after a terrible night's sleep unable to absorb the day's events; news came flooding in that an American guide Dan Mazur had discovered Lincoln alive at 07.30. He had survived against unbelievable odds in freezing temperatures. A fresh team of 11 Sherpas were sent up to meet him along with our team doctor,

André. I was in a filming frenzy. By the next morning Lincoln was safely back at ABC. He had suffered severe frostbite to both hands and one foot, as well as exposure and pneumonia.

I then made the most memorable telephone call of my life. Using a satellite phone, I called Lincoln's wife, back home in Australia, to tell her that her husband was alive after all. I will never forget her reaction.

I was able to gain exclusive footage of Lincoln's arrival back at camp, his medical treatment and his departure tied to the back of a yak, as well as an emotional interview. This material proved to be of great value as we were approached by various news channels including ABC news who had picked up on the story. Milan frantically edited the footage using Final Cut Pro and

uploaded it via our satellite connection from BC.

None of us had expected to be swept away with a story like this. It still seems strange that we lost Thomas and it will be very moving when we come to view and edit the material.

Thomas's involvement was on the condition that a percentage of any money made from the finished documentary would go to the Tilganga eye hospital in Kathmandu, a centre that provides free eye care to poor people from all over the world, through its clinical camps. We visited its head office on our return and filmed extensively there.

We could only have wished that our new friend could have been there with us.

Dutch based production company New Earth Films, enjoy the challenge of delivering the world to the world – by filming life's adventures while maintaining respectful and ethical documentary film-making.

Feel free to contact Kevin on:

Kevin@new-earthfilm.com; www.newearthfilms.com
0031 [0]6 294 327 32.

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www.SightOnEverest.com

Expedition website with backgrounds, team biog, expedition reports, hundreds of images & video footage.

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FACT FILE