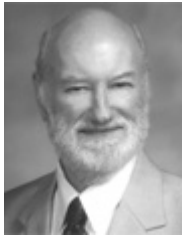




Sierra Sacramento Valley Medicine
Vol. 60 / No. 3 - May / Jun 2009
The 1914 Antarctica and 1996 Everest Expeditions



By John Loofbourow, MD

Two books: A spectrum of behavior and character at the extremes of the 20th Century.

IN AUGUST, 1914, 28 MEN, including two physicians, left England intent on making the first overland crossing of Antarctica. Almost two years later they returned home, having failed in their quest but overcoming continuous physical and psychological conditions beyond all ordinary imagination. All survived. The expedition is beautifully documented in Alfred Lansing's 1959 book, *Endurance*. In preparation for writing his book, Lansing spoke with 10 of the expedition's surviving members and was granted access to the journals and personal diaries of 8 others.

In early May of 1996, more than 166 men and women participated in 5 large-group, 12 small-group, and 2 single-climber Mount Everest expeditions. Of these, only a small and uncertain minority could be found at one time or another above 24,000 feet, and only a few had any intent or chance to "summit" at 29,028 feet. Among those who did "summit," 12 people died in the throat of an average summer storm that struck on May 10.

In 1977 journalist Jon Krakauer, who made the ascent himself, published *Into Thin Air*. It is an exhaustively documented, researched, and meticulously put together account of events of those few days and weeks, well worth reading.

There are similarities in the two expeditions and in the two books. Both authors are journalists, who have written expositively, with some moving and descriptive eloquence, in a time-forward order of events, without much speculation. In both expeditions, many participants at either end of the 20th century were clearly motivated by some sort of personal gain, notoriety, profit, publication, lecture circuit income or commercial interest.

The Antarctic explorers, very conscious of the fame and renown that could accrue to them, often had high expectations of notoriety and profit; many kept careful diaries, often preserving them through almost two long, fiercely harsh hopeless years on ice and across the world's most hostile seas. The early British- American-Norwegian competition at the earth's poles is well known, and national competitiveness at Everest and elsewhere is always with us.

Yet what struck me most were the contrasts between very early and late 20th century ventures. Where profit and nationalism are concerned, there was a marked difference of degree; both were the overriding features of the Everest expeditions, clearly contributing to a tragic outcome.

These motivators were present but far less significant in Antarctic 1914. Late century groups were in fierce commercial competition for what could be called market share.

Fischer and Hall, organizer-leader-guides of the largest groups, competed for patronage; to demonstrate that anyone who had enough money could "summit" safely despite marginal experience or physical condition; each guide needed to show that he was the better leader. These considerations led both highly regarded guides to accept climbers who were neither experienced nor capable; to make decisions near the summit that were clearly unwise; and, as a result, to die on the mountain.

By comparison, Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition was only marginally commercial, with no need or effort to "lead" adventurers for pay.

Nationalistic competitions in the Antarctic were also more remote, old fashioned, or aristocratically sterile. (If sometimes foolishly so; in the 1911-12 South Pole race Robert Scott's British expedition, which ended tragically, dragged linen and tea sets over the ice, and was at first prone to spend evenings in soiree-like discussions; Norwegian Roald Amundson's successful trek to the pole had been, like Shackleton's, lean and practical, meticulously planned and constituted.)

On Everest, in addition to the usual New Zealand, Australia and USA teams, there were groups from India, Nepal, Sweden and Japan. There were also particularly uncooperative and difficult groups from Taiwan and South Africa whose aggressiveness and intransigence promoted a lethal outcome; they refused to cooperate with competitors, or to agree on an order of ascent that could have avoided the deadly delays and traffic jams of May 10. Some climbers had to wait for hours for a turn to ascend; and worse, to wait for descent from the summit, where every minute delay raises the risk of death, and lack of oxygenation dulls decision-making.

There were, of course, great technologic differences between the early and late 20th century in terms of equipment, communication, medical care. At Everest, people might speak to family or friends from the summit; use satellite guidance, and modern cold weather gear; be treated by the team physician or by one of the many climber physicians; or by a base camp medical team with advanced equipment after being carried down the mountain by Sherpas who had earlier carried up virtually all needed for the ascent.

In Antarctica, two years could pass before any outside communication whatsoever. Geographic fixes often were impossible for many days when neither sun nor stars could be seen. Two physicians provided very basic medical care; a man sustained what appeared to be a myocardial infarct. Ironically he was treated according to a modern British protocol for minor MI: rest at "home." He survived.

The 166 people on the skirts of "Sacred Mother" Everest was also in sharp contrast to the 28 men on the Endurance, trapped in both the ice and the mind numbing isolation and desolation of the Antarctic; or in three small life boats that they had dragged with them over the ice, and in which they faced the torrential winds, rain, and moving mountains of Arctic waters.

Often the large numbers so impacted the Everest environment that a health hazard resulted. Krakauer's vivid description of conditions at the jumping off point toward Everest base camp include unhealthy sleeping conditions with choking smoke, water and food contamination by sewage, severe shortage of good food, and the resulting gastrointestinal and pulmonary consequences.

Why? Because of the concentration of expeditionary teams, Sherpas, media crews, communication teams, camp followers, and pack animals in a very confined area, as they awaited more auspicious weather conditions, and jockeyed for advantage.

Every preventable tragedy, it is said, results from a series of related errors, any one of which if avoided would have prevented the outcome. As one reads the Everest account, this toxic accumulation of so many people in such dire circumstances is where the ultimate outcome first announces itself.

On the other hand, reading of Shackleton, the sense is that at every step there is cohesion between the expedition's members and Shackleton, who take intelligent, thoughtful consistent steps to protect the relationships among expeditionary members. He takes care to assign likely troublemakers to his own tent; carefully physically and psychologically selects the crews for each lifeboat when they begin an impossible open sea crossing.

There is a military feel to the process; though some might have resented or openly disagreed with Shackleton's decisions, they follow his instructions without fail. The sled dogs, for example, were beloved of their team drivers. Yet when the dog's food ran out, they are ordered to kill them; they do so with great affection and with sadness but without resentment.

By contrast late 20th century group behavior was not cohesive. In many instances, a leader's orders were simply refused; one of Hall's highly paid and very strong Russian guides simply refused to use oxygen at the summit; therefore became cold, due to the delays, and refused to wait for the climbers in his charge. Hall died trying to rescue the abandoned climbers.

The various expeditions were encrusted with people who were an end to themselves: A New York socialite journalist with entourage, with special food, clothing, communication equipment, CD players, and TV; cinema actors and directors and crews; and the many wealthy individualistic egos who collect summit accents like stamps, for show. The mere presence of these self-satisfied, self-directed luminaries, and a world class media that follow them, charge the atmosphere as they did the O. J. Simpson trial; the outcome and the behavior of people so affected, is not one of cooperation, tolerance or even intelligent thoughtfulness.

Krakauer himself, having reached the summit, having written his hugely successful book, but also having lost four of his five summiting teammates, gives an edge of pain and remorse to his documentary. He fears he contributed to the result. That somber note seems justified in spades. Quite different is the very uplifting and impossible accomplishment of Shackleton and crew, who all survived their Antarctic frozen hell for almost two years.

These two books are great reads. They provide some vague insight into the contrasting character and behavior of people who lived at the beginning and the end of the last century. I do not claim that one age is better or worse; but I do claim that one age is irretrievably different from the other, probably in ways neither could even understand. We are basically captives, mental, physical, and psychological, of our own times.

john@loofbourow.com