

Flashbacks

in the DEATH ZONE

BAY AREA CLIMBER RECALLS HIS
NOR CAL ROOTS ON EVEREST ASCENT

By Robert Chang



Rob's team high on Everest's southeast ridge above 27,000 feet. Lhotse, the world's fourth highest peak (27,940 feet) in the background. Photo: John Gray

Editor's Note: The following is from a longer work in progress by climber and guide Robert Chang on his life-long adventures and efforts to promote cancer awareness through climbing high peaks throughout the world.

8:10 a.m. May 31, 2005
Summit Ridge, Mount Everest, Nepal Himalaya

My labored breathing gives way to astonishment; my heart rate monitor is pegged at over 200. I peer to my right, looking over the precipice of an 8,000-plus foot drop from the knife-edge cornice I am climbing on. Ahead of me lies the last 80 feet to the summit of Mount Everest – the highest point on earth.

The fixed ropes end, so this final 80 feet will be free-solo; no ropes, not connected to anything or anyone, except the 12 sharp points of my crampons on each of my feet and the pick end of my ice axe clanking onto the hardened snow and ice I am treading on at nearly 29,000 feet.

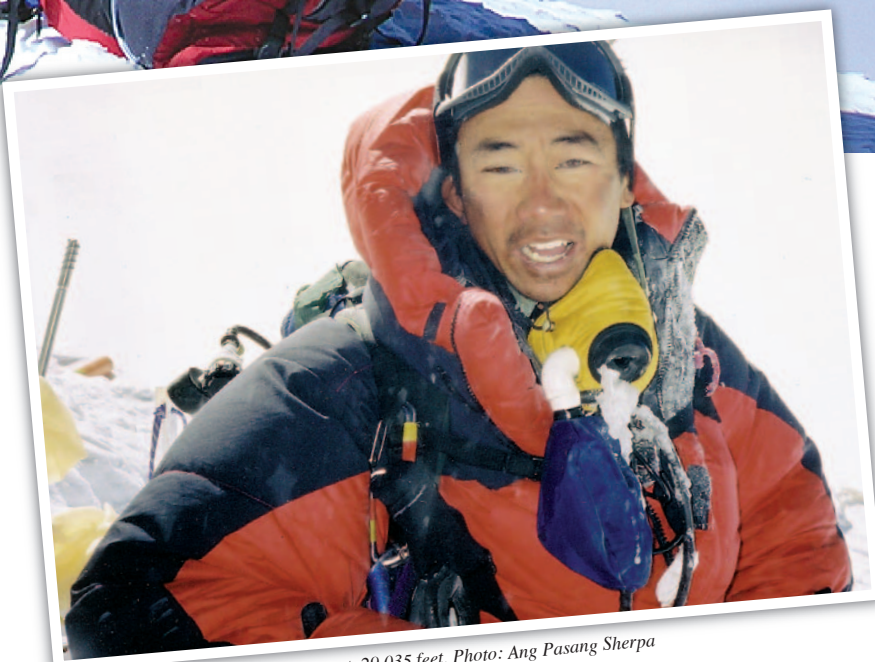
It occurs to me that any slip or fall would be unrecoverable. Death could come quick, or

slow and painful, so I opt not to fall – as if it's all just about choice. My mind flashes back to my more novice days, climbing what was then a fearfully high ridge on California's Mount Shasta, Casaval Ridge.

The echoed voice from the past of a cantankerous Shasta Mountain Guide telling me, "Step, kick, kick, plant your axe – rest!" resonates as I come closer to the goal of 29,035 feet. I repeat this as almost in an entranced mantra.

Thoughts of my sister, Marie, who passed away four years earlier from cancer come to mind. My presence on Everest is again a small promise to her that I would fulfill this dream to climb the highest point on earth to promote awareness for a disease that took her painfully away from our family and her friends at the young age of 38.

I rhythmically keep my cadence up, keeping to mind the Marine Corps Hymn in my focus, another thought of my good friends who are also in a faraway land, and doing something very dangerous, but of course, on a different scale. Nonetheless, courage, commitment and training are all things we share in common, and the hymn has been a



Chang on the summit of Mount Everest, 29,035 feet. Photo: Ang Pasang Sherpa

“The echoed voice from the past of a cantankerous Shasta Mountain Guide telling me, ‘Step, kick, kick, plant your axe – rest!’ resonates as I come closer to the goal of 29,035 feet.”



Be sure to flip off the computer before leaving for your adventure.

Few things are more satisfying than saying adios to work and hello to a Sierra adventure. If you need an escape, California Alpine Guides is currently booking:

- Sierra Trekking Trips
- High Sierra Climbing Trips
- Lover's Leap Rock Climbing Classes

Give work the salute and book your trip today.

California Alpine Guides
 Certified Rock Guide
 P.O. Box 8486
 Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546
 (877) MTN CLIMB (686-2546)
CaliforniaAlpineGuides.com



Chang hanging out on El Capitan's Nose route. Photo: Jan Holan

constant thing I have been keeping in my mind throughout my ascent.

Twenty long minutes later, I am atop the world.

My altimeter blinks the numbers, 29,039 feet. I grin to take in that extra four feet. The customary hug of my Sherpa, the clicking of a few pictures is all in order. I pull off my oxygen mask, which opens up my view. Spectacular.

The imposing shadow of Everest's pyramid juts northward a few hundred miles onto the Tibetan plateau. To the south, a blue mass of what appears to be water in the bowed horizon, which I reckon is the Indian Ocean thousands of miles away.

The frigid wind howls, the minus-40 degree temperature is getting to us. I have tears in my eyes thinking of my sister and my family and truly feeling where my soul meets the sky.

Our humble 15 minutes atop the world is tempered by the thought that all our water froze on our way up and we would make our 20-hour round trip in the "death zone" with no H₂O. Not exactly what we preach in



Training on California rock. Photo: Mike Deitchman

our courses back at home, but at this level, you do what you have to survive. Instinct and years of huffing up and stumbling off mountains pays off on this day.

As I rappel down the Hillary Step at 28,800 feet, a 5.8, 40-foot technical rock section, I find my hesitancy to trust the ropes 100 percent on Everest a self-realizing nightmare. The 7mm rappel line I am on is frayed and cut three-quarters of the way through from a recent and obvious crampon kick of another climber.



WESTERN MOUNTAINEERING
 SAN JOSE CALIFORNIA

Maximum quality, Minimum weight.

Down Works-Santa Cruz
 Mel Cotton's-San Jose
 Sunrise Mountaineering-Livermore
 Sonoma Outfitters-Santa Rosa
 Redwood Trading Post-Redwood City
 Outback Adventures-Larkspur

ULTRALITE
 20°F 11lb. 10 oz

HIGHLITE
 35°F 16 oz.

10 models under 2 lbs.
 850+fill power down
 Made in USA

I go into rock-climbing mode, stemming, lying back a bit, and now down-climbing versus rappelling, all with my down suit, crampons and ice axe dangling off my wrist with my feeble load of 25 pounds on my back.

“Moving over stone,” I think. One of my first climbing ventures was with the likes of Barry Bates and Doug Robinson in the Bay Area’s Castle Rock area. Their mantra of economy of motion and “no fall” ethic quickly comes back to me. I wish I was back there with them on a nice sandstone boulder. The blaring wind snaps my attention back to my current reality. My Gore-Tex gloves make the final three moves feel more like 5.13a.

As I reach the notch at the base of the step, I find the comfort and security of a new 6mm fixed rope to clip into. Hours later I stumble into Camp 4 at 26,300 feet.

A few days later I find myself back down in Katmandu relishing those short moments – and licking the wounds of some moderate cerebral and pulmonary edema, facial frost burn and other minor maladies associated with an Everest ascent.

More importantly, I remember how close to my climbing soul are the mentors and instructors who show us the way over the years. We may never see them again, but their influence and wisdom of the mountains definitely are imprinted in all of us: Economy of motion and one step at a time – it’s more of a way to live life than achieving the glory of a summit. **ASJ**



Chang on the summit of Cathedral Peak, Yosemite. Photo: Douglas Marsh

Robert Chang, 37, is a marketing coordinator for the Sports Basement store in Sunnyvale (www.sportsbasement.com). In his off time, he is a guide for Mountain Adventure Seminars (www.mtadventure.com) and an inspirational speaker (www.robchanginspires.com). Since his sister passed away from a rare form of cancer in 2001, he has led several major climbs to promote cancer awareness (www.climbingforacure.org).

He will give two slide shows about his Everest climb: Sept. 7 at Sports Basement in Sunnyvale and Sept. 14 in San Francisco at the Sports Basement Presidio store.

You can contact him at robchanginspires@comcast.net.



Alpine Skills International has been teaching those interested in becoming experts in the mountains. They offer outdoor climbing courses with trained instructors and certified guides. 530-582-9170. www.alpineskills.com

California Alpine Guides provides mountaineering & rock climbing instruction and guided trips. Most trips are led by the owners Scott Brown & Dave Miller, who are certified rock climbing guides through the American Mountain Guides Association. 1 877 MTN-CLIMB (686-2546) www.CaliforniaAlpineGuides.com

Mountain Adventure Seminars (MAS) offers a wide variety of rock climbing programs designed to meet the needs of both novice and experienced rock climbers. From one day instructional workshops, to multi-pitch adventures, MAS can help you reach your rock climbing goals. 209-753-6556. www.mtadventure.com

Outback Adventure’s rock climbing school offers a whole progression of rock climbing classes for total beginners to advanced intermediate climbers. The rock climbing lessons are offered throughout the entire San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. 888-441-PEAK, www.outbackadventures.com

Sierra Mountain Center is the most experienced full-service guiding company in Bishop, led by two AMGA-certified guides. 760.873.8526 www.sierramountaincenter.com

Sierra Wilderness Seminars, Inc. has been offering rock climbing, ice climbing, and alpine mountaineering throughout California for over 20 years. They are one of only three guide services to operate on Mt. Shasta. 1-888-797-6867. www.swsmtns.com

Southern Yosemite Mountain Guides offers weekend and 5-day climbing camps, in Yosemite’s high country. Since 1991 SYMG has been a leader in the active travel and mountain guiding world. All levels. Gear, food, camping included. 800-231-4575. www.symg.com

Call your local climbing gym for information about their outdoor climbing classes, clinics and tours.

Professional Rock Climbing Instruction & Guiding



Bear Valley
Bay Area
Lovers Leap
Phantom Spires
Sugarloaf
Calaveras Dome
Hammer Dome
High Sierra
Cosumnes
Pinnacles



Accredited Member
of the American
Mountain Guides Association



(209) 753-6556 x 1
www.mtadventure.com



Wilderness Exchange

Quality Gear at AFFORDABLE PRICES



We Specialize in
**Closeouts, Over-runs and
Cosmetic Blemishes from
Over 60 Outdoor
Gear Companies,
Which We Offer to
You at Savings
of 15%-60%.**



– AND WE ACCEPT TRADE-INS!

1407 San Pablo Ave. • Berkeley 510 525-1255
Backpacking • Adventure Travel • Rock Climbing
Hiking • Mountaineering • Camping
Open Every Day
www.WildernessExchange.com