

THE ICE MAN CLIMBETH

By Susan Dawson-Cook

Reaching the top of 29,035 foot Mt. Everest, the highest peak in the world, is no simple feat. High altitude adventurer Ed Viesturs has not only stood on the summit of Everest six times, but he has also successfully climbed all 14 peaks over 8,000 meters in the Himalayas without the use of supplemental oxygen.

Viesturs recently told a crowd of students and outdoor enthusiasts at the University of Arizona that he was addicted to high altitude mountaineering. "For me, the higher the peak, the better," he said. He likes the high, thin cold air. "I like to suffer a little bit, do things that take a lot of time to achieve but that are satisfying."

His desire for physical and mental challenge began 30 years ago, when Viesturs read Maurice Herzog's book "Annapurna". The book, which described Herzog's 1950 expedition to the 26,200 foot Annapurna summit, the 10th highest peak in the world and one of the first Himalayan peaks to be successfully climbed, was the beginning of Viestur's dreams to climb Himalayan peaks. Knowing it would take time and persistence to become a high altitude mountaineer he chipped away at his goal, breaking away ice chunk by chunk until his dream stood in front of his eyes.

His first step was to go where he could learn to climb. Leaving Illinois and attending college in Seattle, the Cascade Mountains became his training ground for future Himalayan mountain climbs. The glaciated, high altitude conditions and bad weather are similar in many ways to the Himalayas, Viesturs said. In the Cascades, he learned how to evaluate situations and to make intelligent decisions under bad conditions. And he surrounded himself with conservative climbers who approached climbing in a manner Viesturs aspired to emulate. In 1982, he began working as a guide and has been leading trips up Mount Rainier ever since. He made his 200th ascent to the Rainier summit last summer.

Once Viesturs felt sufficiently prepared for the Himalayas, he set his sites on Everest. The cold and the lack of oxygen make the higher altitudes a threatening place. Altitudes above 26,250 feet are referred to as the Death Zone because there is insufficient oxygen to sustain life. At the 29,028 foot Everest summit there is only one third as much oxygen as there is at sea level. Too much time up there and even the most acclimatized climber will experience a deterioration of brain and body

functions, unconsciousness and eventually, death.

Most climbers use supplemental oxygen because it enables them to have better judgment, stay stronger, move faster and stay warmer.

"I wasn't interested or intrigued by using supplemental oxygen," Viesturs said. "I wanted to test myself to see if I could climb the mountain for what it was."

He knew this would require more intensive training, but to Viesturs, the journey was more important than just getting to the top.

His first approach to the Everest summit was from the north face. His group climbed as a team, expedition style. This means establishing a series of fixed camps at various altitudes. They set up one camp, then went back to base camp to rest, then ascended and established the next highest camp. It took eight to 10 weeks of work to establish these camps to prepare for the final ascent. During this time, their bodies had time to build more red blood cells and acclimatize for the climb.

The trek from the high camp to the summit takes approximately 12 hours, but Viesturs' group was assaulted by nasty weather so they aborted the climb. Viesturs sees the failed climb as a disappointment all prudent climbers face at some point.

"Many people choose their demise over a nonsuccess," he said. For him, "climbing has to be a round trip. We made a very logical decision and that was to stop, turn around and go home."

Some people will crawl to the summit and die there, and to them, getting to the top is more important than getting back down alive, he said. "I just don't understand that." People that run into trouble or die on the mountain tend to do so because they don't budget sufficient time and oxygen for the descent.

He made his second attempt on Everest in 1990 with Jim Whittaker, who in 1963 was the first American to climb Everest. Without sufficient oxygen, each step becomes more difficult and at that point, "you have to convince yourself that you are there because you want to be there," Viesturs said. He had the mind set to make it, reaching the summit early in the day. Standing on the mountain, higher than any other on the face of the earth, he could see 80 miles across the horizon.

In 1992, Viesturs decided he wanted to tackle K2 in Pakistan, the second highest mountain in the world, which he describes as steeper and more technical than Everest. "More than 2000 people have climbed Everest," Viesturs said.

28,000 in just two days. On the third day, they intended to leave their final camp and summit. On a brow of ice, they set up a tiny 5-pound tent and shared a sleeping bag. Due to inclement weather, they were trapped in the tent for three nights



Ed Viesturs approaching the Manaslu summit in 1999. Photo courtesy Ed Viesturs.

"Barely 100 people have climbed K2."

He partnered with Scott Fischer, the famous Seattle guide who later perished in a 1996 Everest climb, as part of a larger expedition to climb K2. The trip was fraught with avalanches and storms. In the process, tents got wrecked and "a lot of people faltered and then went home." Viesturs and Fischer persevered, climbing from 16,000 to

Viesturs said it was tough being up there so long. With nothing to entertain themselves and no appetite, their bodies were basically wasting away. "We just lay in that tent getting weaker and weaker," he said. Once the weather cleared, they finally made it to the top, badly weakened by those extra days at high altitude.

Soon thereafter, Viesturs became consistently employed as an international guide. Partnering with Rob Hall (who also died in the 1996 Everest disaster), the pair led six climbers to the summit of Everest via the Nepal side. Since so much gear

must bridge crevasses and climb massive walls of ice on multiple ladders attached end to end. Climbers then hike through the Valley of Silence before ascending the Lhotse face. Viesturs and Hall led all six of the highly motivated amateur climbers

As for safety, without backup camps, “you have to evaluate situations every step of the way.” But the dual ascent had been a tremendous success, so he decided to schedule more.

“Why not go out and climb all 14?” was the question racing through Viesturs’ mind at that point. In order to climb all of the 8000 foot peaks, he needed financial support. Mountain Hardware became his first long-term sponsor and before long, he had collected a portfolio of sponsors to live his dream, which he called “Endeavor 8000.”

The good thing about having sponsors is “you get to use the products and test them and even help design them.” But “you go off looking like Mario Andretti,” he said. And at the top of the mountain, he flies sponsor flags and shows their logos.

In 1995 Viesturs embarked on another dual peak climb. In *No Shortcuts to the Top: Climbing the World’s 14 Highest Peaks* (Ed Viesturs and David Roberts, Broadway Books, 2006), Viesturs said “The idea behind the twofer was that you used the first mountain to get acclimatized so that you could be really fast on the second mountain. And that spring, it worked to perfection. Rob, Veikka, and I climbed to the summit of Makalu from base camp in only four days. We reached the top only 10 days after leaving Everest.”

After the Makalu success, Viesturs had only three more mountains to tackle to reach his dream.

Making 10 separate expeditions to Everest, he embarked on his most difficult climbing project in 1996, when David Breashears asked him to climb to the summit of Everest to film an IMAX movie. No one had ever taken a 42 pound camera up there and it was a busy time on the mountain. Sixteen other expeditions were up there at the time. On May 10, tragedy struck when eight people died on the mountain,

including Hall and Fischer. It was a “huge psychological blow to have my good friends and hiking partners die on the mountain,” Viesturs said. In spite of that, the IMAX team decided to complete what they set out to do. On May 23, they made it to the summit on a beautiful day. It was on this journey that Viesturs met Gustafsson, who became his new climbing partner.

Viesturs continued working his way through the succession of peaks and after 17 years of climbing, he had climbed a total of 13 of the 14 peaks — only Annapurna was left. He knew the journey wouldn’t be easy; 50 climbers had perished on that mountain.

Viesturs failed to reach the summit twice, once in 2000 and again in 2002. But as usual, he was willing to turn around when conditions became too hazardous. He always thinks of his wife and three kids when he is climbing, he said. “Coming home is the best part.”

He decided to give Annapurna one last try in the spring of 2005. He planned to scale the north face in three days to minimize the danger and amount of time they spent beneath cliffs of unstable ice. At base camp, Viesturs and Gustafsson partnered up with a group of Italian climbers. After 10 hours of non-stop climbing, they reached their final camp at 22,000 feet. When winds increased to 100 miles per hour, they were trapped in their tent for two nights.

“We knew the Italians were still alive and well because we could smell their cigarette smoke,” he said, laughing. At 3 a.m. they climbed the last 4,000 feet, reaching the summit on the afternoon of May 12 with three of the four Italian climbers. Annapurna was the end point, his last peak on a journey that took 30 years of climbing experience to achieve.

“I was willing to walk away if conditions were too dangerous,” he said. “I knew to survive this long campaign I would have to be smart, I would have to be conservative.”

And in the end his patience, perseverance and good judgment paid off. Viesturs achieved his goal of climbing all 14 peaks over 8,000 meters high and is still here to tell the story, and to inspire high altitude mountaineers and climbing enthusiasts throughout the world. *W*



was needed at the multiple camps, they hired local Sherpas and trained them to become highly competent mountaineers. The Sherpas are well paid, well fed and given the best of gear, according to Viesturs. “Without them on Everest, we would not succeed.”

Just above base camp is the Khumbu Icefall. Regarded as one of the most dangerous parts of the climb along the South Col route, climbers

the full distance to the summit.

Viesturs convinced Hall it would be more efficient to attempt another peak while they were highly acclimatized. By the time their clients departed, the camps had already been broken down, so they carried their belongings and tents, climbing alpine style. Only seven days after they stood on the summit of Everest, they reached the Lhotse summit. It worked well, this tandem ascent, said Viesturs.



Ed Viesturs on the Dhaulagiri summit in 1999. Photo courtesy Ed Viesturs.