

On top of the world

Federal Agent Fraser McKenzie was a long way from on top of the world when an earthquake struck the slopes of Mount Everest.

It was the moment AFP Federal Agent Fraser McKenzie had dreamed of for a long time. At 8848m the next stop is the Moon. For Fraser, standing on top of Mount Everest had become something more like an obsession. The big day was 21 May 2016. At more than 29,000 feet it's the sort of altitude only aircraft usually frequent. For the briefest of possible moments the Perth-based Airport policeman was flying high at the top of the world.

But 12 months earlier it looked more like a nightmare than a dream. On 25 April, 2015, Fraser's first attempt was stalled by a 7.8 earthquake at Everest Base Camp that killed 22 climbers. The year before, an ice fall and avalanche killed 16 Nepalese Sherpa on April 18, 2014, near Everest Base Camp.

Even as Fraser was realising his dream to summit Everest, fellow Australian climber Dr Maria Strydom

tragically succumbed to altitude sickness as she was descending from the peak in May this year.

When Fraser flew out of Perth for his first attempt to conquer Everest on 28 March, 2015, he would soon be just metres from the mighty mountain claiming his own life. By Anzac Day 2015, Fraser was at 17,500 feet at Everest Base Camp with the expedition and waiting for their turn to rotate through the high camps before the summit. His team was waiting to move out the next morning.

He woke before sunrise and "fired up" with a gunfire breakfast. "Alcohol is not a good acclimatisation tool at altitude," Fraser says but "it is a tradition I do not miss under any circumstances". The morning passed uneventfully with a gear shakeout in preparation for the departure up the notorious Khumbu icefall. It was here that 16 climbers, mostly Sherpa, were killed in 2014 during the earthquake.



At approximately 11.50am, Fraser moved up into the communal mess tent for lunch with other expedition members. The rest is his story.

The expedition was led by American guide and experienced mountaineer Greg Vernovage. Among Greg's achievements was his position as the Olympic female Volley Ball coach who led the US team to a Gold Medal at the Sydney 2000 games.

Highly capable and experienced, Greg has managed the logistics for several summit attempts in the past. He is well known in Nepal and well respected by Nepalese and climbers alike.

We were sharing a few laughs waiting for lunch and looking forward to the following morning's climb. We were now at the business end of the journey. If the weather remained okay, we all felt like we had a good shot at a summit.

Having said that, you can only assess your relative chance of success after leaving Camp 4 on the day you attempt to summit. I was acclimatising well and felt strong. On this day I was thinking well ahead of camps one and two.

But a lot can change in five minutes at the top of the world. It was about 11.55am when the ground beneath us began to move. Softly at first, then slowly increasing in intensity, the ground motion would best be described as elliptical.

Towards the end of the quake it was very violent and difficult to remain upright. However, there wasn't much panic. When the quake ended everyone rushed outside, all aware that a ground shake would be dangerous for climbers still travelling through the Khumbu Icefall and up at the camps.

A short time later, I looked up the icefall and heard a loud crack followed by a tremendous rumble. A massive ice shelf had released from our left and was thundering down the wall of the valley toward base camp.

The ice shelf released a tremendous amount of energy pushing snow, ice and rock through base camp killing many instantly and injuring a lot more. With nowhere else to go the residual snow and wind blast started heading down the valley through the remainder of the camp.

It had the look of a fast moving dust storm similar to the ones seen in documentaries of the Sahara. It was moving quick, appeared very dense, and was at least a hundred feet high.

Even if you had the energy and fitness to run there was nowhere to run to. I thought I was going to be buried so I tried to control my breathing. I also knew that if I was buried anyone capable enough of digging me out was more than likely going to be buried as well.



I got down behind a two foot rock wall built as a stand for an outdoor hot water urn. I was on my hands and knees and appropriately in the praying position. I pulled my Down Jacket hood over my head. I tried to make a cup out of my hands in order to clear an area in front of my face.

The snow hit with a blast and it was difficult to breathe, the space around me darkened instantly. It hit with a loud roar and slowly increased in both volume and speed. I was jostled and felt the snow around the side of my face and over my body; I couldn't hear or see anyone around me.

A short time later, I would estimate no more than 20 seconds, I felt the blast pass behind me. I looked to my left and saw our Sherpa Cook Jor Bahadur Rai lying on the ground covered in snow and praying. I ran to him and yelled at him several times to see if he was alright. It took him quite a while to stop shaking and respond.

Heads popped up around camp like snow caped prairie dogs. The only apparent damage from the snow blast was tents and equipment. Everyone appeared to have been dipped in snow and we all dusted each other off.

I moved to a "small rise" about 20m behind me where the expedition leader Greg was standing and surveying the valley. I uttered a few expletives. Greg grabbed the radio and began calling the high camps to get situation reports.

Five minutes later the radio began to chortle and we received news that no one was in the Khumbu Icefall during the avalanche and that the high camp climbers were all okay. There was a short pause and then Greg looked down at me.

"We better get ready for casualties," Greg said.

I said: "How many?"

"Lots," he replied.

He told us to use the expedition communications and charging tent to triage the most seriously injured. Former US Marine John Reiter cleared out the tent for the influx of injured climbers. We didn't have to wait long. Casualties came flooding in from other areas on the mountain.

They were separated by medical staff and allocated to one of three tents according to the nature and severity of their injuries. The most seriously injured were treated in our tent. A second tent dealt with patients that had serious fractures and a third with the walking wounded.

In our tent we had eight seriously injured patients. The snow and ice had picked up rock and shot the debris through the camp site. Some of the head injuries were horrific and the blood loss was tremendous.

We were joined by Dr Ellen Gallant, a cardiologist from Utah, and an Indian Army doctor Captain Ritesh Goal from Bangalore. Fortunately for us, Captain Goal was trained in mass casualty incidents treatment. The doctors worked well together. They were extremely calm and methodical and assessed the injured. We bandaged, cannulated, administered meds and monitored the vitals as instructed.

Then we lost our first casualty at 4.08pm on the same day, an unknown male Sherpa. John Reiter and I wrapped his body in a Tarpaulin marked it with the time and place of death and carried him outside.

Unknown to us, a pile of bodies was building up on the other side of a small hill near our triage tent while we were treating the injured. The final count was 19 dead. Casualties were being brought in on ladders, tables, chairs and anything else they could use as a stretcher. Sleeping bags were used to keep patients warm, pad the ground and soak up the pools of blood that appeared everywhere. Soaked bags were discarded outside the tent as we managed to stem the blood flow with bandages.

Sunset is at around 6pm however with high features on either side of the Khumbu Valley darkness at basecamp comes well before. The temperature drops dramatically and keeping the triage tent warm was extremely difficult. We received information from Kathmandu that they had been hit hard and all helicopters in Kathmandu were diverted to assist in the rescue effort in other parts of Nepal. However, if the helicopter was currently at the Village of Lukla or above it could remain in the Khumbu Valley and evacuate the injured from Base Camp.

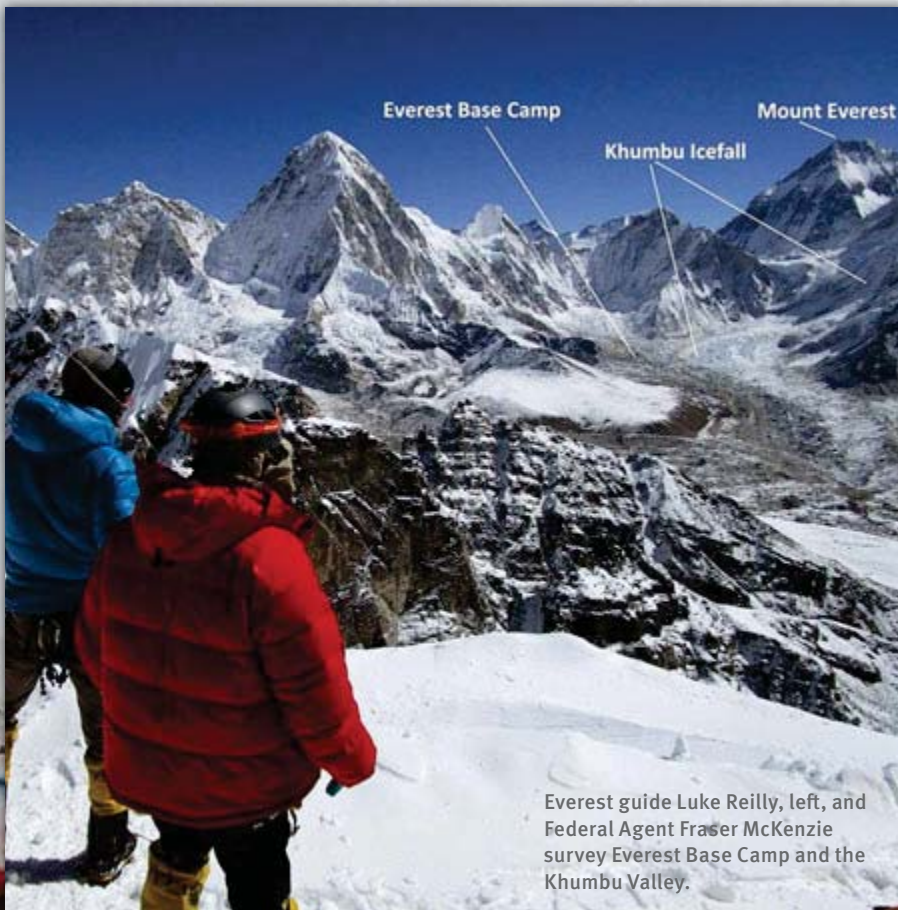
Helicopter flights were stopped for the afternoon. Late in the afternoon, the cloud base drops in the Khumbu Valley. Without visual sight of the mountain the helicopter flights were grounded until the morning – assuming the weather was fine.

After the earthquake and avalanche at Base Camp the final casualty count was 19 dead and 60 injured. Our expedition was spared due to luck of geography. A small moraine to our left looking up the Khumbu Valley dissipated most of the force of the avalanche. For some individuals it was just sheer luck or bad luck. One climber further up base camp moved his tent behind a large boulder because of a noisy team member in a tent next door and was shielded from the worst of the avalanche. California-based Google Engineer Dan Fredlin was killed while talking with his tent mate when a boulder rolled over the tent. His tent mate was spared.

The most poignant sight I witnessed was the sight of six Sherpa carrying a dead colleague to the evacuation helicopter. The deceased was neatly wrapped in a plastic sheet. Rope secured his entire body. At regular intervals



An injured climber waits patiently for attention.



Everest guide Luke Reilly, left, and Federal Agent Fraser McKenzie survey Everest Base Camp and the Khumbu Valley.



Federal Agent Fraser McKenzie cares for an injured climber.





The mess and cooking tents snow dusted after the avalanche.



Federal Agent Fraser McKenzie and Doctor Ellen Gallant share a happier moment after the final evacuation from Mount Everest.



Climbers are highlighted against the immense Khumbu icefall showing the scale of Mt Everest.

down the body along both sides were tied small hand sized rope handles. I was struck by the neatness of the deceased's presentation to the helicopter then it dawned on me sadly, plenty of practice.

By 11.30 am the next day after the avalanche the last casualty and deceased was flown out of base camp. A remarkable treatment and evacuation time of 23 and one half hours for an emergency at that altitude. It must be said that key to the planning and execution of the evacuation were the abilities of Expedition Leader Greg Vernovage.

Greg was unflappable and dispensed tasks with clear and concise direction. I never once saw him display any kind of stress. Also of note was the performance of the two doctors in our tent, Ellen Gallant and Captain Goal of the Indian Army. We could only do so much but you need a specialist to stop the cause of the flow and they were the precise specialist we needed for that kind of incident.

That night I finished the rest of the bottle of Anzac Day rum, I don't remember the rest.