THE STORY OF K2 AND THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE ROPE

In the early summer of 2007, Chris Warner led a U.S. team of experienced mountain climbers on an expedition to reach the 8,611-meter (28,261 feet) summit of K2, the second-highest and one of the most dangerous of the 14 peaks on Earth in the 8,000-meter range. K2 is part of the Karakoram Range, the eastern tip of the Himalayan Range, on the border between Pakistan and China.

The first team of climbers to summit K2 was from Italy, on July 31, 1954. Although thousands had tried, by 2006 only 249 climbers had reached the summit of K2. In contrast, Mount Everest, the tallest mountain at 8,848 meters (29,028 feet), had been attempted 11,000 times, and 3,000 climbers had reached its summit. Mountaineering had compiled a unique set of statistics, including the “death-to-summit” ratio: on Mount Everest, the ratio was 1.8%, and on K2, it was 23.8%. “The wind conditions, the sheeress of the slope, the exposure to the elements, and the constant threat of avalanche and rock fall make it a much more difficult technical climb than Everest,” said Joel Shalowitz, a member of the 2007 Warner team. “It’s very unforgiving. For every five who summit, one has died.” Team leader Warner said:

There’s actually been only 15 Americans who have climbed K2, and there have been only 8 Americans who have summited K2 and Everest. Meanwhile, 12 Americans have walked on the moon. And so the statistics alone bear out that it’s incredibly difficult. But more important, I think, is who fails on K2. Everest attracts a lot of people who are not considered climbers. They’re just people who have a tremendous amount of ambition and are in good physical condition. K2 attracts only climbers. So the people who fail there are really all-stars every single time.

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This case was prepared by Gerry Yemen, Senior Researcher, and James G. Clawson, Johnson and Higgins Professor of Business Administration. It was written as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. Copyright © 2009 by the University of Virginia Darden School Foundation, Charlottesville, VA. All rights reserved. To order copies, send an e-mail to sales@dardenbusinesspublishing.com. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the permission of the Darden School Foundation.
Chris Warner, Mountaineering, and K2

Since his first international mountain climb in 1987, Warner had summited more than 100 peaks of more than 19,000 feet in elevation. In the process, he had survived numerous accidents. In 1989, for example, while coming off Shivling Peak in India, Warner’s rappel anchor popped. He fell 450 feet through the air before bouncing the first time—narrowly escaping with his life. Ten years later, an avalanche on a Tibetan mountain carried Warner nearly 500 feet and left him buried neck-deep in snow. On Mount Everest he was once hit on the head with an oxygen bottle. And throughout his climbing career, he had developed frostbite on nine fingers and two toes. None of that kept him from climbing. Nor did his marriage to Melinda Davison in 2004 or the birth of their daughter, Wendy, in 2005. He explained why:

I climb because it fully engages me as a person. I have been involved in everything from fatherhood to being an entrepreneur. Just like a torrid love affair—we find there’s so much excitement in the moment. Well, that’s the same kind of experience I get from climbing. It is fully engaging in the sense that it demands the absolute best of my physical, emotional, and intellectual self.

I really don’t consider myself a risk-taker. I actually consider myself as being very conservative, which might seem odd. But I truly pursue or I deal with the complex challenges of climbing on an intellectual basis, not on a purely emotional basis, which I think is the difference. Our idea of a risk-taker is somebody who’s all about the adrenaline and “let’s just go for it.” I really like to study my odds and try to figure out a way to skirt around the dangers. So I find that there’s nothing in life that so fully involves me. I like expedition climbing because I’m not involved just for a day or a week; I’m involved for three months or more.

Warner’s bond with the “savage mountain” began in 2002. He joined an expedition with an international team consisting of “probably the strongest nine climbers in the world.” They had planned to climb the mountain along the route that the original Italian team had used in 1954 and named the Abruzzi Route. A brutal storm made the climb extremely difficult for Warner’s group. After 30 days of siege-style climbing, disaster struck one morning as the climbers were putting on their crampons, and a climber from another expedition higher up fell 5,000 vertical feet, bouncing on the way down, and landing near Warner. The first one on the scene, Warner waited for another climber, and the pair confirmed that the fallen climber had died and then quickly wrapped the body in jackets and a tarp before lowering it by rope to fellow climbers. When Warner reached his team, the enormity of what he had just experienced finally hit “like a thousand knives” in his stomach. He wept inconsolably. The tragedy was more than Warner could bear. He packed up his gear and went back to the United States. Warner recalled the sad event several years later:

The good thing is that people with high-risk tolerance tend to suffer less from depression, and even traumatic events tend to be less depressing to us. So, even though I saw this guy fall 5,000 feet—crushed on the side of the thing, literally covered in blood, and by the time I was done transporting his body, my whole
torso was covered in his blood, pieces of his brain were on my jacket—it took me a couple days of walking out to kind of process that. But, you know, a week or 10 days later, it was processed. It wasn’t something that lodges in the back of my mind and then prevents me from being a fully functional human being.

Not only did Warner and the rest of his team fail to reach the top of K2 that climbing season—every team failed. There were no summits of K2 in 2002, and in fact, there have been many seasons in which climbers have not reached K2’s summit.

Three years later, Warner decided to try K2 again. This time he chose a completely different approach, going with one person whom he trusted implicitly with his life: Tao Franken, whom Warner had taught to climb 20 years earlier. They had maintained a close friendship, and Warner believed their climbing skills were compatible. Franken was a phenomenal athlete “who could be pointed in the right direction and never fail physically,” Warner said, whereas Warner described himself as an “endurance guy who could carry a lot of weight and problem-solve.” Although Warner believed in the partnership, he didn’t summit K2 that year either. In fact, no team succeeded in 2005. “Roughly 90 of us were at the bottom of the mountain,” Warner said, “and zero of us got to the top.”

The desire to summit K2 stayed with Warner, and he decided to give it another go in the summer of 2007. He wanted to lead a small group of people whom he knew had the experience and attitude to form a cohesive team. This time he wanted to try something different on the mountain; he wanted to go up a route that had never been climbed before. At the time, there were three mountain faces on K2 that had never been ascended—the east face, the west face, and the north face (Figure 1).

Figure 1. K2 routes.

Planning Ascents

Planning to climb a major mountain began by choosing a way up. This was a deceptively complex decision, and once a mountain had been climbed by one route, successive teams would try to find virgin routes to the top in order to be the first to have taken that approach. As on any major peak, there were several possible routes to approach K2 and fewer that had not been climbed. As he searched for a new route, Warner talked with others who had been on the mountain, tried to find pictures in books, and looked at all available information from previous expeditions. He planned for his team to begin on the Abruzzi Route and then head farther around the mountain eastward to a great yet unclimbed face. Warner was adamant about adhering to the purest style of climbing, which meant climbing without oxygen and climbing porters or Sherpa.

Warner knew that the month of June provided the most optimal chance for climbing in the Himalayas. The jet stream at the summits during that month often carried 150-mile-an-hour winds, but historically there were usually two weeks in June when the weather was good, providing a three-to-five-day weather window for making a summit push. Should that opportunity disappear, he was also aware that there was usually another potential weather window in July. He planned for an early arrival with his team so they could reconnoiter and be in a position to take advantage of any breaks in the weather. Therefore, the team planned to be at the Base Camp of K2 by June 1, 2007.

Building the Team

Warner was concerned about finding the right group of people for his team. “High-altitude mountaineering in the last 20 years has really gone from being about the team to being about the individual,” he said. “The greatest climbers of my generation in the Himalayas are complete individualists who really make it about checking every mountain off the list.” Warner wanted a smaller team of four or five people who wanted to summit as a group, so he sought experienced climbers with organizational and social relations skills as strong as their climbing. He identified those climbers with whom he had had some interaction and personal experience. “When one of us gets injured and our life is literally hanging on the line,” Warner said, “I want those other two people to be there to drag my butt down instead of watching them go to the summit.” So, the people Warner chose were people in whom he had implicit trust.

The team

Don Bowie: An accomplished Canadian climber, Bowie had encountered Warner in Pakistan in 2005, when Bowie was climbing Broad Peak and Warner was climbing K2. They both were at high camps when they heard each other on their radios and proceeded to converse

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3 Principally by virtue of its being the first established, the Abruzzi Route has been the most climbed.
across a glacier at an extremely high altitude. They became friends and knew that they wanted to do something together somewhere down the road.

**Bruce Normand:** Normand was a famous Scottish climber Warner had met in the mid-1990s in Peru. A theoretical physicist, Normand could hold conversations in seven or eight languages. Also, a world traveler, he had lectured extensively both in the United States and elsewhere, including Japan, Korea, Germany, Taiwan, and Switzerland.

**Pasquale (P. V.) Scaturro:** Scaturro was the camera operator, described by Warner as a swashbuckler because in every picture he had ever seen of him, “either Scaturro or somebody else in the photo had an AK-47.” Scaturro had led several expeditions and accumulated a lot of experience climbing and filming for IMAX, ESPN, Discovery Channel, and several other media outlets. He led the first blind climber to the summit of Mount Everest, a story that made the cover of *Time* magazine. Warner and Scaturro met at a big bash the National Federation for the Blind held celebrating Scaturro’s expedition to Everest. (Warner had summited the mountain two days before Scaturro’s team.)

**Joel Shalowitz:** A Darden School of Business alumnus and a Baltimore-area entrepreneur, Shalowitz was Base Camp manager. He was an amateur climber and a cofounder of Climb for Hope, a nonprofit agency committed to raising money for cancer research through which Warner had met him.

**Chris Stensland:** Although Warner did not know him, Bowie had asked Stensland to join the team. Stensland was an avid skier living in Vail, Colorado and had known Bowie since childhood. He was the assistant Base Camp manager.

From the very beginning, Warner laid out his expectations of the team. “I told everybody, ‘You are a member of a high-performance team so you have to behave like you’re a member of this high-performance team,’” he said. “And there’s behavior that we’re gonna accept and behavior that we’re *not* gonna accept.” As Shalowitz recalled:

So, I began trying to understand what my role might be just in terms of my internal sense of ambition. And I said to Chris, I will play whatever role it is to be, to serve the team, but I wonder if it might be realistic to have a personal goal to perhaps get to the point where I reach 26,000 feet, or around 8,000 meters, just as a personal subgoal.” He looked me in the eye and said, “I would not have that expectation.” And so, quickly we turned to a back-and-forth that reconciled what my responsibilities would be in the context of goals and team success, which was a very healthy conversation to have. In the end, I was grateful for the added measure of focus that proved critical when later events unfolded, and I found myself in the crosshairs of managing a number of unexpected tasks.
Preparation

Significant logistical organization and planning was required to mount an expedition of this scale. The team assembled a large portion of its resources in the United States and also had a list of items to buy in-country once it got to Islamabad, Pakistan’s capital. A local adventure outfitter called Adventure Tours Pakistan (ATP) handled much of the in-country logistics—hiring porters, providing cook staff at base camp, and offering general know-how. The timeline had the team slated to meet in Islamabad in the middle of May.

May 19

The would-be team trickled into Islamabad over a few days. Warner and Normand arrived first on May 19, 2007. Each had been in Pakistan four or five times before so were old hands. “Obviously, this is a much bigger thing that we’re about to embark on,” Warner said, “So, you know, there’s some butterflies in our stomachs.” Upon arrival, Warner and Normand dove into preparing for the climb and gathering their shipped goods. Scaturro, Bowie, and Stensland showed up the next day and began unpacking 1,200 pounds of shipped equipment and gear from boxes and packing into blue plastic drums for the trip (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Gear and plastic storage drums.

Source: All photos from Chris Warner. Used with permission.
Shalowitz was the last to arrive on May 24. Warner described their first meeting:

Climbers are like professional athletes anywhere. So, there’s a little bit of bravado. Kind of like two roosters showing up on the scene at the same time. I mean, the feathers go up and the whole thing. You gotta kind of do this dance around each other. So, there’s a little bit of that. But we had already set a norm for our team through e-mail and phone discussions so that we knew that we were not coming there to see who was stronger than the other person. We were all coming there to share this experience.

Warner had had to secure a permit from the Pakistani Ministry of Tourism to climb K2, which meant paying a peak fee of $12,000 for the team. The group also had to pay a refundable rescue bond of $6,000. A Pakistani Army liaison officer accompanied each expedition to base camp, and the team had to pay his allowance and equipment costs; a Major Sadeek was assigned to the American team. In 2007, 15 teams had been given permits to climb the mountain.

Warner spent the day before they left Islamabad at the Pakistan Alpine Club attending an official expedition briefing. Other team members ran errands such as converting U.S. dollars into rupees and shopping for last-minute items. By now the team had accumulated 6,000 pounds of gear, clothes, and food that included, among other things, a gallon of salsa, two car batteries, 7,000 feet of rope, 16 sleeping bags, 55 gas cartridges, 80 ice screws, and 19 pounds of coffee—an amount that would initially require 109 porters to carry. Everything had to be packed into loads weighing no more than 55 pounds. By the end of the journey, however, they needed only 37 porters, Warner recalled. “Along the way we had consumed 4,000 pounds of toilet paper, eggs, cooking oil, and anything else that we could imagine,” he said.

May 25

The journey began when the team left Islamabad on May 25. After traveling two days by jeep, it arrived at Skardu. From Skardu, there was a six- to seven-hour ride to a town called Askole, a portion of the trip on roads full of danger and obstacles. Dodging falling rocks and avalanches along the way, the team provided its own towing assistance at times—pushing vehicles through the rough patches (Figure 3).

In Askole, which was approximately 1,800 or 2,100 meters up (6,000 or 7,000 feet), Warner’s team emptied all its supplies and repackaged them into barrels that would better accommodate their needs at base camp. ATP had organized the 109 porters, who were natives of the mountain region—mostly from a town called Hunza—to help the American climbers get to base camp.

The trek to base camp was 65 to 70 miles and took seven days. “You go through these mythical and legendary names of camps along the way,” Shalowitz said, “Paiju, Jola, and Urdukas, all these different names, that in and of themselves have these wonderful stories of the many climbers who took these steps before us.” For example, famed climber Greg Mortenson
took a wrong turn on his trek back from the glacier and discovered a dire need for schools and decided to help build them.\(^4\)

As the group ascended, the terrain and vegetation changed dramatically. At approximately 4,200 meters (14,000 feet), they no longer saw anything green—just shades of blue and gray as rock formations took over the landscape. Bowie quietly packed a small sack of dirt just to remind himself of life off the mountain.

The danger to the team also increased as they approached the area where they would make base camp. They had to cross the torrential Braldu River, which ran through a deep gorge. Anyone who fell into the freezing water would surely die of hypothermia or collisions with rocks in the swift current. “You can look in the river and see almost opposing waves crashing against each other,” Shalowitz said, “and you know that it would crush you just from that if you went in.” Still, the excitement of just being there fueled the group. “I was traveling with these climbers,” Shalowitz said, “who had eighteen 8,000-foot peak attempts between them.”

Figure 3. Road to Askole.

June 1

The team arrived at base camp on June 1, 2007. Because it was early in the season only two climbers from the Czech Republic had arrived ahead of them. Although the climbers said it seemed like solid ground, the Base Camp at K2 was situated literally on top of the Goodwin Austin Glacier at an elevation of approximately 5,200 meters (17,200 feet) (Figure 4). The base camp area measured half a mile and was as wide as a football field. K2 loomed 3,350 meters (11,000 feet) above the mountaineers.

\(^4\) For Mortenson’s complete story, see Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin’s *Three Cups of Tea* (New York: Viking, 2006).
Figure 4. K2 base camp.

Located on either side of the Base Camp were glacial streams and sizable seracs\(^5\) that provided some separation and protected it from avalanches coming off the mountain. These seracs were large foreboding obstacles that had to be navigated around on the way up the mountain. Smaller ice features called *penitentes* also rose from the glacier ice. Climbers used those formations to plan which glacial streams would be used for clean water and which for outhouses and showers. “You want to make sure that all the camps are in congruity as to which side is the outhouse,” Warner said, “and which side is collecting the water.”

**June 2**

Bowie and Normand did some reconnoitering while the rest of the group stayed put and organized the equipment. Bowie and Normand wanted to see if they could find a reasonable route to the beginning of their targeted ascent route where they would set up an advanced base camp (ABC). It was one thing to plan a route on a map but something else to find a real route in the actual terrain. There were very few pictures of that side of the mountain—they had one taken in 1914—so they had only the stories of others to go on. Who knew what had happened to the mountain’s landscape since then? For nearly eight hours, the two climbers explored a large snow field that led to an ice fall, and along the way made a gruesome discovery—a dead climber whose frozen corpse was a brutal and unsettling reminder of the dangers ahead.

Those team members remaining at camp worked on its infrastructure. As they set up the kitchen tent, communication tent, sleeping tents, and rest areas, teams from other countries began to trickle into base camp. Each national team staked out its own area, which included a space with an indoor table for meals or perhaps a separate dining tent. Warner’s team had a technical

\(^5\) A *serac* is a large piece of glacial ice that has broken off from a glacier. Seracs are often the size of large automobiles or buildings.
communications tent set up with computers. Together they created a fragile high-altitude energy system using solar panels that captured energy and turned car batteries, which acted as power sources to plug in the computers and satellite phones. (On sunny days, the system was great, whereas cloudy periods created problems.) That night it snowed six inches, causing difficulties that could potentially slow down the expedition.

**June 3**

At 3:30 in the morning, Warner and Normand ventured out on the glacier again, trying to find a way around to the east face of K2. The other team members were to spend their time hauling equipment to the ice fall past base camp, the last place to which the porters would help them cart gear. Normand and Warner were roped together as they walked out across a perfectly flat glacial snow field that “looked exactly like a parking lot.” The area was dangerous and laced with crevasses. Newly fallen snow could cover crevasses, making them invisible.

At high elevations, successive snowfalls can lead to the formation of a tenuous *snow bridge*, offering climbers a dangerous but potentially time-saving path across a wide crevasse. 

Late that morning, Normand was on a snow bridge over a crevasse 10 feet wide and 250 feet deep when, suddenly, the bridge collapsed beneath him, and he plunged 25 feet into the crevasse. As Normand dropped, the rope snapped tight on Warner. He dug in and leaned against the rope, but the force of Normand’s fall began to pull him toward the crevasse. When the snow beneath Warner’s feet collapsed, he fell into another crevasse that had been hidden from view. Normand was now 25 feet down one crevasse, and Warner was 5 feet down another—the two were literally dangling on opposite sides of a giant ice wall. Neither was able to hear the other nor discern whether the other had survived. “I assumed the worst,” Warner said. “You take a 25-foot fall with a big backpack on, and you’ve probably snapped your back.”

Soon Warner began to think about climbing up. He could feel the weight of Normand’s body pulling in the other direction. At that point he realized two things: first, from the vibrations on the line, he knew Normand was alive, and second, he knew that if Normand climbed up 10 feet, he would slide down 10 feet. Warner recalled:

I’ve never heard of anything crazier ever happening in the sport of mountaineering than two people falling into different crevasses at exactly the same moment. It was miraculous that it happened because if it didn’t happen, we’d both be dead. There’s no way you can survive a 250-foot fall into a crevasse.

The problem was getting out, because if he just pops out of his hole first, I’ll pull him into mine. So, we’re now trying to figure out how to get ourselves back out of this crazy thing. He has to climb 25 feet to get out so, you know, we’re doomed. And then through some silly rope tricks we figured out—he climbs up one foot, and I pull one foot of slack out of the rope—we eventually are both we’re sitting there in our holes looking over the top at each other. This is our first mountaineering experience on this expedition.
Warner was able to then radio Bowie and Scaturro, who had left base camp with a team of porters 30 minutes earlier. They dropped their packs and set out to the rescue site while a second group left base camp to retrieve the porters and gear. When Bowie and Scaturro arrived, they were grateful to find both mountaineers safe. As the group prepared to return to Base Camp, they decided it would be safer to get off the glacier and onto the side of the mountain. Halfway to base camp, they cut through another ice fall and pioneered an alternate route. The climbers channeled the adrenaline from their life-threatening experience into energy they could use to move the expedition forward.

As they continued exploring routes to the east face, they ultimately concluded that it was impassible and that they would not be able to stick to their original plan of climbing the east face. “There were maybe 1,000 crevasses as dangerous as the two that we fell in between our base camp and the bottom of the east face,” Warner said. “It was suicidal to continue to climb up that way.” All the months of training and planning to summit from the east face now had to be abandoned for a new plan.

June 7

Another unclimbed ridge on K2 that intersected with the Abruzzi Route at approximately 7,100 meters (23,500 feet) seemed promising: three rock buttresses, or ridges, with open avalanche valleys. Warner’s team decided to attempt the third buttress over from the Abruzzi Route and climb roughly 5,000 vertical feet of terrain that had never been climbed before to the summit. This became their new goal.

By this time, some of the other international teams had begun to climb the mountain. There was a Korean team of climbers already on the Abruzzi Route. There was a team of 10 Czechs working their way up on the Cesen Route. And a team of 16 Russian mountaineers was just beginning its climb on the west face.

After several attempts at reaching the site that Warner’s team had planned to use as its ABC site on the new route, it began to encounter difficulties. The weather stopped cooperating, Normand fell ill with a respiratory infection, and the route began to look increasingly impassible. So the team decided to wait for the next week until conditions improved.

June 12

During their rest week, the Americans managed to move almost 300 pounds of their gear up to an area they called the “depot,” located on the other side of the ice fall and off the glacier near the Abruzzi Route ABC. Navigating the high-standing seracs required skill and determination. In some cases, the climbers, with 50 to 60 pounds on their backs, had to walk over a crevasse and under an ice tunnel in order to move forward. Using fixed rope lines to secure themselves, they navigated this maze of ice while listening to the thunder-like cracks of seracs collapsing here and there in the ice fall. Daily, the mountaineers navigated the constantly changing ice rivers, crevasses, snow bridges, and seracs to transport their equipment to a safer place. Although they had kept busy and had moved marginally forward, they were way behind
schedule. They had planned to be at Camp One by now—not still trying to establish ABC below the start of their route. Warner was nonetheless convinced that the southeast buttress offered a promising route to the summit.

**June 21**

The climbers went up a rock spur on their intended route and began their assault on what they decided to call the Direct Southeast Buttress. Warner remembered the climb:

So, we set off to do that, and we worked on that ridge for about 20 days. And on the 21st day we reached a complete and utter dead end. We were at the edge of this gigantic cliff face, and we had to skirt around it to either left or to right, but on both sides there were massive avalanches streaming down it. And it was so warm that a lot of the rock was unfreezing from the mountain and boulders the size of microwaves were coming down about every 10 minutes. It was literally Russian roulette. And none of us came to K2 to walk into a fatal situation. So, despite 20 days of work, we went back down the mountain to start again. We turned around at about twenty-two-and-a-half-thousand feet on that ridge.

Four weeks after arriving on K2, the team had failed on two different routes. Although the intent had been to tackle a route that had never been climbed before, the climbers recognized that they had given it their best on the other routes and were going to have to rethink their goal. They looked at the options left. Essentially they had explored all of the possible new routes and now time was running out. They risked not summiting at all, unless they accepted the option of climbing the original summit route up K2—the Abruzzi Route. Now this team decided that, with roughly 300 pounds of equipment sitting at the depot near its beginning, the Abruzzi Route was the only realistic option left. According to Warner:

We had just failed on this other ridge, but we couldn’t afford to stop, so we spent four or five days of that climbing cycle on the Abruzzi Route. We knew we had a couple of good days so we were gonna push as far as we possibly could during this good-weather period.

Most climbers had the endurance to go out of base camp for three, four, or sometimes five days before becoming unable to continue. At that point, climbers went back down to rest and rejuvenate their energy. But by now, it was late June, and the possibility of having a good-weather window at any time precluded the luxurious possibility of rest at base camp. The time the team members had lost exploring the first two routes pressured them to hurry to establish their camps on the Abruzzi Route if they hoped to summit that season.

In the meantime, the Korean team had been working on the route that Warner’s team had now turned to. They had fixed rope lines and broken trail, creating the preliminary infrastructure required to ascend the mountain. Warner realized that if they could use the Korean setup, they could regain some lost time. Warner approached the Koreans, explained their intentions to climb
the route, and offered to share their resources with them in return for using their established infrastructure.

The Koreans said that they had been watching Warner’s team climb for two straight weeks, and respected tremendously the amount of work they had been doing and the way they had gone about their climbing. In fact, the Americans at that point had ascended higher on the mountain than the Koreans had. “So, there was no feeling like we were glogging onto their rope,” Warner said. “There was a feeling like, all right, here’s some other people who have worked really hard, and it would be a privilege and a pleasure for us to be climbing together.”

**June 24**

On Sunday, June 24, the two teams began working together to ascend the same route. Because both teams had arrived early on the mountain, they felt a natural competition to see which team would reach the summit first. At the same time, they were willing to work together to save energy and accelerate their progress. But each team had come with its own traditions of climbing, and the question of how to collaborate and work together smoothly was significant.

**June 26**

Each higher siege camp was approximately a one-day climb from the last. The climb from ABC at 5,400 meters (18,000 feet) to the summit at about 8,600 meters (28,000 feet) was a 3,200-meter (10,000-foot) difference. Given that an experienced mountaineer carrying a 50- to 60-pound pack could climb typically 700 to 800 meters in a day, four camps would be needed between ABC and the summit. Teams would have to carry all of the equipment needed for the higher camps up to Camp One. Then, they had to carry to Camp Two all the equipment they would need at Camps Two, Three, and Four, and so on. The mountaineers would establish a trail from camp to camp as they carried supplies and equipment upward. On especially steep and dangerous sections, they would fix ropes to ice screws or pitons so that those following them up or down could hold on for safety.

The Korean team was ahead of the Americans on the new route by about four or five days. Watching the weather forecast carefully, Warner saw a window of good weather approaching. He consequently planned to get to Camp Two on Monday, June 25; Camp Three on Tuesday, June 26; Camp Four on Wednesday, June 27; and summit on Thursday, June 28. That would give the group time to descend the mountain before a forecasted weekend storm blew through. With Camp Two established on June 26, Warner decided they would try to pass the Koreans on their way up to Camp Three. The thrill of the competition and the excitement of finally gaining traction and coming within reach of the savage mountain’s summit energized the entire team.

That plan changed, however, when the Americans got to Camp Two. The weather was so bad that they couldn’t continue. They decided to wait at Camp Two and see if conditions improved. “The good part about sitting it out is our bodies are able to adjust to the altitude,”
Warner said. “So it was constructive rest.” They spent two days acclimatizing to the altitude and boiling snow for water: dehydration was a constant problem on the mountain.

Unfortunately, the weather worsened. The temperature dropped below zero, and 40- to 50-mph winds came up and blowing snow. The wind ripped their tent, and nearly two feet of snow fell upon the bivouacked climbers. Their situation deteriorated. The crashing and rumbling sound of distant avalanches echoed in the background at Camp Two. Both the Korean and American teams were paralyzed. They consulted with each other as they tried to weigh the dangers of continuing or waiting the storm out.

**June 27**

Warner, Bowie, and Normand decided that the blinding, wind-driven snow (Figure 5) made it impossible to continue up to the next section of the mountain. They believed that no one would get to the summit and back home alive if they tried. So the team turned and went back down to base camp on June 27. The Korean team decided to try to get to Camp Four and then summit, but the bad weather forced them to return to base camp on June 28. Warner’s team monitored the weather and waited and hoped for the next window of opportunity. The following week, a window of good weather promised to appear.

![Figure 5. Blowing snow.](image)

**July 2**

Warner met again with the Korean expedition and recalled:

We met with the Korean team and said, “It’s stupid for us to work—to compete against each other. We need to start working together if we’re gonna get to the top of this mountain.” So, in the next push out we had to work together—which we did. Both us and the Koreans in the next push were able to establish Camp Three [July 3]. We did it in a way that shared our resources. We put in some of the rope
so they had less to carry. Instead of putting three tents at Camp Three—two for their expedition and one for ours—we just used two tents. It just took the resource down a little bit so it actually made it easier for everyone else to get to the top.

In partnership now with the Korean expedition, Warner’s climbers managed to fix a couple thousand feet of rope on the mountain. As the calendar slipped into July, several more teams were climbing the Abruzzi Route. A team from Italy and several solo climbers were making their way up behind them. “Of course they have the luxury of our footprints, the luxury of our rope that we’ve already put in,” Warner said, “but, you know, that’s part of the game.” An incredibly strong team of Russian climbers also arrived, who according to Warner, “blasted up the mountain pretty quick.” Operating together, the climbers had hopes of reaching the summit on Friday, July 6.

**July 4**

Warner, Bowie, and Normand had reached Camp Three at an altitude of 7,450 meters (24,442 feet) when weather reports from base camp indicated more troubling news—forecasts of high winds. They had already been struggling through snow accumulation more than waist-deep (Figure 6) that made the probability of avalanches almost certain.

![Figure 6. Deep snow.](image)

Groggy, coughing, and feeling crushed, the Americans debated what to do next. They reflected on other teams that had been in similar situations. Warner recalled:

In 1986, there was an international group made up of a bunch of teams that came together to make a summit push. And on their way down from the summit, seven of them got caught at high camp, the same camp that we’re in right now. During the storm, which lasted for a couple of days, they could not descend. One person dies, one other person is so debilitated that when the storm starts to ease a little bit, he can’t even get out of his sleeping bag—so he’s left there to die. Within 100 meters of leaving the tent, two more of them die. They sit down in the snow and die. This now leaves three people descending together. Of those three descending, one sits down somewhere along the way and dies. Two of them live.
that there is precedent. You can get trapped at Camp Four, you can’t find your way down, and you will die. You never want to be trapped at this camp, because you are likely to die. You quickly waste away and do not have the energy to get down alone.

They knew they had to decide whether to wait out the storm or descend and try again another time. “There was no physical way that three climbers could push the route to the summit in snow that deep,” Warner said. “So at this point, we had the three strongest teams—the Korean team, our team, and the Russian teams—defeated on the mountain.” Warner continued:

At that point, there were 28 people at Camp Four. And every one of them had failed on this mountain, this season, at least once. And by that point, our team had failed four times. And so if you collect all of the attempts of those 28 people and add them up, at that point on the mountain, there had already been 80 failures in attempting to climb K2, just among those people on the mountain.

**July 5**

The American team descended to base camp, again, while others tried to wait out the storm on the mountain. Conditions continued to deteriorate, and the remaining teams also descended. Watching weather reports closely, they determined there might be an open weather window early the following week (July 16).

**July 8**

While they waited at a lower altitude, the team used the break as an opportunity to recover equipment from their old Camp One and to ready themselves for their next summit push. Warner also wanted to use the time to do some international team-building. “I’ve always found that until people experience failure in this setting,” he said, “they are not interested at all in giving help or receiving it.” Essentially all teams had failed to reach the summit on their last push because they lacked the brute force to get through all the snow. Warner decided to gather everyone at base camp and devise an international group strategy to summit K2. He asked Normand to be the lead person and told him:

I don’t want to be the obnoxious American guy. Let’s come up with our plan and then you should present the plan to this international group. So, we discussed amongst ourselves what we wanted everybody to do. First and foremost was safety. There was rope on the mountain that people were rappelling and climbing up on a regular basis that was two and three years old. In two or three years [rope] weakens dramatically. There had already been an incident that season where one of the Italian climbers descended a rope, the rope snapped, and he fell. But luckily for him he only fell a couple of meters, and he was safe. So it was a brilliant time to intro to teaming up by talking about the ropes.
So, we split up the responsibilities so that the Russians would replace some sections between Camp One and Two, the Italians would replace sections between Two and Three, the lone Portuguese guy would do one difficult section up to Two, and then we would carry the rope that would go from Camp Four, the high camp, to the summit. So, everybody started to see that, okay, if I just do this little piece, I’ve done my part to earn equity into this larger team. And then the other thing they realized is that the way we’ve split it up now, we’re all dependent upon each other. They’re certainly dependent upon the American team because we had the rope for summit day.

Warner hoped that his plan would mean the Americans would be more in control of the schedule because certain pieces had to be done in a chronological order or the whole thing wouldn’t work. Then he figured that when everyone had done their part or developed what he called the “simple partnership,” more complex partnerships would develop. He hoped that 10 strong mountaineers would partner to break the trail to go from Camp Three to Camp Four to the summit. Warner wanted the strength of the Korean and Russian teams going to the top at the same time that his expedition was going to summit.

With a solid strategy in place, all that was needed was an improvement in the weather. Warner’s team had the most accurate weather forecasting system at base camp, and they identified an upcoming 72-hour weather window.

**July 15**

Despite the elegance of Warner’s plan, the teams failed to agree upon a day for the summit bid. The Americans decided to push forward on Sunday, July 15 and left the rest of the teams in base camp. Their plan was to get from base camp to Camp Two in a single day. Warner described the experience:

It didn’t happen. We only made it as far as Camp One. The weather was horrendous with 60-mile-an-hour snow storms. The next day we were able to make it from Camp One to Camp Two [Monday, July 16]. This is the point now that everyone else is starting to leave since we had been a day ahead of everybody. But now, actually, all the schedules are starting to converge at the same point. And then the day we went from Camp Two to Camp Three [Tuesday, July 17], a Portuguese climber and his Pakistani porter caught up to us. So now there were five of us, but five people were not ten. We did not have the power to make it all the way to Camp Four. So we actually got stopped midway to Camp Four. Some Russian climbers were coming up, and they couldn’t make it to Camp Four, so they had to drop all the way back down to Two. It was literally chest-deep snow. In fact, it was so bad that on the following day, because we’ve now broken trail halfway to Camp Four, there’s five of us camped at this Camp Three and a Half.
July 18

On Wednesday, July 18, the Russians, a lone Iranian climber, and the Koreans were able to use the footprints that Warner’s team had left the day before coming up from Camp Three. So they arrived at Camp Three and a Half with some much-needed strength. By now, there were roughly 25 mountaineers trying to make the push to Camp Four on the same day. They worked together with one person out front to plow through 20 steps in the snow. Then that person stepped aside, completely exhausted, and the next person would go 20 steps and then step aside. Six or seven of the climbers rotated through this process until they finally arrived at Camp Four. The 18 others trailed behind Warner’s team, the Portuguese, the Koreans, and the Russians.

July 19

Warner’s team reached Camp Four at 7,900 meters (26,000 feet) on Thursday, July 19, having missed the originally hoped-for Wednesday opportunity to summit. The weather was surprisingly calm, so everyone bivouacked, preparing to rest. Normand visited each of the teams, spreading the summit strategy to every group before they went to sleep:

We needed to come up with a new system to get to the summit. The biggest problem of going to the summit with 25 people is that there are natural bottlenecks. If you’re 25th in line, you’re standing there waiting for somebody to move through something, you could literally catch frostbite or hypothermia just standing there. So we needed to spread everybody out. It’s the only way it was going to logically work.

We went around and said, “Hey, guess what? We have 3,000 feet of rope, and we have all the anchor materials, but we need to spread it amongst everybody.”

Apart from the aforementioned Korean team, made up only of men, a second Korean team of women, accompanied by two Sherpas, knew they were going to be pretty slow, so they wanted to leave at 10:00 p.m. with approximately 20% of the rope. It took at least 20% more time to put in the steps and stretch out the ropes than it did to follow. Their leaving at 10:00 p.m. would allow the Korean men’s team to leave at 11:00 p.m. to catch up just as the Korean women ran out of rope. Warner’s team agreed to leave at midnight, and the Russians would leave at 1 a.m. and continue seamlessly laying rope all the way to the summit. “We don’t really care about when everybody else leaves,” Warner said, “cause they’re not part of the power that we need to get up to the top.”

July 20

Unfortunately it didn’t work out that way at all. The Korean women’s team left at midnight instead of 10:00, and the Korean men left basically at the same time. Warner’s climbers left an hour later. They all converged in the first area where they needed ropes. The Korean women were at the front of the pack threading rope out. The Korean men’s team was behind them in a clump.
For a brief second, Warner noticed the natural beauty of his surroundings and the predawn light just starting to take on some color. Then suddenly, Nema Nurbu, one of the Korean team’s Sherpas, who had summited Everest six times, fell from the group of Korean climbers and started sliding down the 40-degree snow slope. Another Sherpa tried unsuccessfully to grab him as he slid past. The fallen mountaineer reached a seemingly level area, (which actually wasn’t level), and everyone thought he would just stand up and stop sliding. Instead, as all the other climbers continued to watch, Nurbu continued sliding and shot off the south face of K2, falling 9,000 feet to his death. “We were emotionally wrecked,” Warner said. “Twenty-four people are standing there, and nobody knowing what the hell to do.”

At this point, Warner’s team was on the Bottleneck, a narrow, 100-meter wide, 50-to-60-degree-slope ice sheet that was extremely dangerous—the same site at which 15 other climbers on K2 had perished. Warner quickly glanced at the other members of his team. The question in his mind became: What now? Should the American team continue its summit push? Would returning to Camp Four to regroup make sense?

Warner made a decision. He would continue to climb the mountain, and hopefully others would follow. As Warner and Bruce Normand passed the Korean men’s climbing team, whose Sherpa, Nema Nurbu, had slid off the side of the ridge to his death, they offered their condolences and pressed forward. When Warner’s crew reached the Korean women’s team, they found a complete mess. The three climbers were frozen in place—trapped in the middle of the mountain’s face. Not moving meant prolonged exposure to negative-20-degree temperatures, which was an invitation for frostbite or hypothermia. Warner took charge and got the climbers moving again:

The sun is now rising. I take the next section of rope out of my backpack and then stretch this 250-foot section of rope up, and it brings us to this natural little hawk’s nest, this little tiny ridge crest. Our team is pretty swift. We knew what we needed to do even without words. We had to find out who had the rope because without the rope, we could never get to the summit. And we had to keep the rope moving.

Bowie dropped to the back of the mountaineers, asking people who passed him: “Do you have rope? What piece of equipment do you have? We need to send that forward.” If he found somebody with an ice screw in his backpack, that got sent to the climber in front of him, and it moved up the chain climber by climber. With roughly 20 climbers going up, all this equipment was transferred to Warner and Normand.

While searching for gear, Bowie realized that some of the climbers were starting to exhibit signs that the high altitude was affecting them; several were exhausted and hungry. Even Bowie struggled to keep his sports drink down. At one point, Stafano Zavka, a member of the Italian team, came up to a ledge close to Bowie and lay down in the snow next to him. This was Zavka’s second K2 expedition; he had failed to summit in 2004, when a lot of his teammates had gone on to do so. Now, Zavka was panting horriby and carried no bottled oxygen. “Hey, are you okay?” Bowie asked. “You don’t seem to be okay.”
“Yeah,” Zavka said, “I’m fine.” At that moment, one of his teammates, Michael Fait, reached them. “You guys should be going down,” Bowie told the Italians. They didn’t respond. Eventually Bowie could continue to move on. He climbed approximately 100 feet above the ledge He looked down and saw them both at a standstill—Zavka was still lying in the snow. (In the end, Fait decided not to summit and returned to Camp Four.)

As the sun rose, the string of climbers continued to ascend, moving and waiting, as those leading navigated carefully but deliberately toward the storiied segment known as “the traverse.” Because the four Russians were extremely strong climbers and used oxygen, they moved out front of the rest of the mountaineers. With help from Warner, the Russians began fixing ropes at the base of a several-hundred-foot vertical serac overhang—which the climbers would have to pass by etch-stepping with the teeth of their crampons and the tips of their ice axes. It would take the first climbers more than an hour to navigate the first 15 feet across the face.

They passed the traverse and made the turn, and their progress continued slowly but surely upward into the afternoon. At 3 p.m. Joel Shalowitz, Base Camp manager, heard cheers coming from the Russian base camp. “You heard other climbers summiting throughout the day, and it was really magical,” Shalowitz said. “You really had the sense that the world had united and made this climb happen.” Normand and Warner were behind the Russians. They had 3,000 feet of rope stretched from high camp to the place near the summit where they didn’t need rope anymore. This marked the beginning of their final summit push. Bowie was still behind many other climbers, so Warner and Normand waited for him to reach them. “We’ve spent two and a half months together,” Warner said. “We’re gonna finish this off as a team.” Finally the moment they had all worked so hard for was upon them.

**K2 Summit at Last**

The American team reached the summit at 4:30 in the afternoon, which was late by climbing standards. Not only did they summit ([Figure 7](#)), but in the end 18 people summited that day (a record summit day on K2).

**Figure 7. Summit of K2, July 20, 2007.**
“It really became about one giant team, which was really the beauty of the experience for us,” Warner recalled. “Everybody came together, and everybody effectively worked as one team.” The emotion of their success was difficult to capture in words. Jubilation burst through the Base Camp as Shalowitz and Chris Stensland learned their teammates had summited. When asked to describe how he felt at the moment he was standing on the top of K2, Warner said:

I want to answer this question about standing on the summit of K2 in contrast to standing on the summit of Everest. I think that we see Everest as a particular type of icon—as a place that defines humans’ ability to be great, to overcome tremendous odds. When I got to the summit of Everest in 2001, I was guiding a team, and I had roughly 11 people who were dependent upon me. So I can’t pass up the fact that the sense of responsibility was almost overwhelming.

When I got to the top of Everest, I didn’t feel that I was in the middle of a gigantic wilderness. I didn’t have deep fear for my own personal safety. And so I was able to really take in what I saw. And on the summit of Everest you can see for more than one thousand miles. When you can see that completely unobstructed view, which you can’t see in an airplane, you see the curvature of the earth—which I thought was absolutely amazing. And then even better than seeing the curvature of the earth is the layer of white—basically dust and humid air—right against the curve of the earth. Above that layer of white is a layer of light blue and then darker blue. And then above me at 10:30 in the morning, the sky was violet and there were stars. I felt on the summit of Everest that I was actually on the bottom of space, which was such a deeply moving experience for me. It was not like you were on top of the world at all. It didn’t feel that way ‘cause you didn’t feel remote. You just felt like you were on the bottom of space and that you could touch this void and it was an indescribable experience. That experience really lasted for roughly five minutes. That’s the only luxury I had to enjoy the moment because it was really about how I was going to get these other 11 people back down alive. And our descent was totally epic, and everybody on my team lived. Not everybody from the other teams lived that day. So it was a really brutal day.

On the summit of K2, I would describe my summit experience as just feeling deep honor. And I felt honor for a couple reasons. One is that I felt like I had put so much of my life into this—my third expedition. I had spent roughly seven months of my adult life trying to climb this mountain. I don’t even want to do the accounting—probably 40,000 to 50,000 bucks trying to get there. So there was a deep sense of honor that something that had demanded so much of me had been fully experienced. More importantly, that sense of honor came from the style in which we did it. I knew that we had created something really special that day by the way people came together. Despite the tremendous odds, a lot of people got to the summit of K2 that never would have gotten there if it wasn’t for the way that we came together. In fact, I wouldn’t have gotten there if all these teams didn’t come together. I needed the Russians to get me to the summit of K2. And being in the position that I was in, as being kind of at the head of the spear, there was such
a sense of pride in that. We all knew it in the moment, which is really cool. It wasn’t ever about any one person on the summit of that mountain. It was hugging the Portuguese guy and hugging the Italian guy and hugging the Czech guy, and that was phenomenally powerful.

The other honor that I felt was like I was on a frontier. The Himalayas are older mountains. They’re not as jagged. When you’re on the summit of K2, you’re looking into China, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and every single peak that you see is as sharp as you can imagine. And I think of it like I was inside the jaw of a great white shark, and I was sitting on top of his biggest tooth. It’d be scary as hell because any second that shark could snap its jaws shut and kill me. And you felt that. But you also felt this sense of excitement, this frontier experience that you had on the summit of K2.

My experience on Everest was equally valuable but completely different. It was like a Disney experience on the summit of Everest—like you were seeing these magnificent, beautiful aspects of the universe. But on K2 you felt like everything was tenuous, and it was a tremendous honor that you’d ever even be allowed to be there. And the only reason you could be there is if you had performed honorably. It was really powerful.

The atmosphere back at Base Camp was jubilant throughout summit day. Phone calls went out to families; journalists called in; and the chatter among the climbers and those left at Base Camp was joyous.

Warner’s team had climbed for 16 hours and spent 45 minutes on the peak, and it was time to begin the descent. Summiting so late in the day left little sunshine for navigating the rugged terrain. Bowie let his teammates know he was going to need some assistance to get back down. One of the Czech climbers, Libor Uher, asked Normand to watch him because he was really weak.

The Descent

At roughly 5:15 p.m. they started their descent, and came across another member of the Italian team, Mario Vielmo, still on his way up. Warner recalled their conversation.

“Mario, are you okay?” I asked. “Are you sure you want to go to the summit, it’s getting late in the day.” He’s like, “Yeah, I’m definitely going.” “Do you have a flashlight?” I asked. “Is there anything I can give you that you need?” And he asked if I had an extra pair of mittens—which I didn’t—and he continued going up. I saw Stefano a little while below him, and the two of them were climbing together. They were 40 feet apart or whatever. They continued on, they got to the summit at 6:30 at night while we were coming down.
Warner remained focused on helping Bowie descend. They actually crawled down the mountain with their faces against the slope using their ice axes and kicking their crampons into the snow to move downward safely. When they reached the ropes, they had to rappel down. Two people rappelling on the same rope was technically impossible—it would literally lock the upper guy’s rope. So they now had to spread out. The Czech climber went on ahead of the American team. Bowie went down next, then Warner, and Normand was last. By now all sunlight had disappeared, and black clouds had moved in, obscuring any light off the stars. As the climbers turned the corner on a traverse, they started to descend the Bottleneck. Somewhere above them were the two Italian climbers, and below them were the Korean teams, the Russian team, the Portuguese climber and his porter, the Iranian climber, the Czech climber, and two of the Italian team climbers—Daniele Nardi, the leader of the expedition who had been on the summit with them, and Fait.

As they started to walk across a relatively flat section of mountain, Bowie saw what he thought was a plastic bag ruffling in the wind. When he walked past the plastic bag he heard someone say, “Help me, I’m dying.” The voice belonged to Libor Uher, the Czech climber, who was completely lost. Uher was suffering from hypoxia (insufficient oxygen) and ataxia (loss of coordination). His body temperature had dropped to the point where he was hypothermic, and he was probably starting to suffer from cerebral edema (a swelling of the brain). Warner described the discovery:

So here’s a person who is in really deep problems. It’s pitch black dark. It’s roughly 8 o’clock at night. You can’t see anything besides what the beam of your headlamp is showing you. We take a rope, we tie Don in the front of the rope, we tie Libor behind Don, and I’m in the back holding on to the rope. If these guys fall, I’m going to be the anchor that saves them. Bruce is coming down behind us because we’re now purposely separated for all these rappels. When Bruce catches up to us, we tell him, “You have to go ahead to Camp Four as fast as you can. You have got to find a place for Libor to sleep and start getting some hot drinks going.” There are three of us in a three-person tent, so we don’t have room for a fourth climber. And we need to feed this guy some hot fluids to treat the hypothermia.

Normand pressed on ahead of the rest of them. At first Uher was able to walk about 100 feet before he had to stop to rest. Then he could make it 50 feet, until eventually he couldn’t walk at all. Bowie and Warner, completely exhausted, threw Uher across their shoulders and dragged him into Camp Four. When they straggled in, Normand told them that there was no tent space for Uher.

The worn-out American team members put Uher in their tent and removed his crampons. Just inside the tent was a vestibule used as a mud room where climbers took their crampons off and left them before going further inside the tent. Space was limited, so the crampons were in a neat pile.
Bowie went in next because he was a paramedic and started working on Uher. “It takes a long time to get everybody into the tent, which is 10 times harder with four people than with three people,” Warner said. “You’ve got to get in, take off your crampons, get all your stuff fixed up, and find a place where you fit in the tent.” Normand stepped in after that. Warner decided to stay outside until everyone else was settled. As he waited, he spoke with the Italian expedition leader to find out what the plan was for his two members who were still coming down off the mountain:

He told me they hadn’t heard from anybody by radio. It was roughly 9:30 at night, and we can see the two lights, maybe 50 feet apart from each other. So they were together. That made total sense. They were descending, they were on the traverse section, and they were staying a couple of anchors apart from each other. We needed them to be together. So I told him, “Listen, if you have any problems, let us know. Our tent is three feet from your tent. You could scream at the top of your lungs, and we could hear everything you’re going to say.”

Warner then crawled into the tent vestibule, placed his crampons neatly on top of the other three pairs, and climbed in with the rest of the mountaineers. Their next problem was immediately evident—three sleeping bags for four climbers. The Czech climber had Warner’s bag, so he had to get close to the rest of the guys to stay warm. Their most critical task was rehydrating, so Warner stayed up until about 12:30 that night doing nothing but melting snow into water so they could each have a liter to drink. He also worked to keep Uher hydrated and warm. Warner spoke no Czech, and Uher spoke limited English, so Warner kept looking Uher in the eye to reassure him they would take care of him And that he would not die on that mountain.

At 11:30 p.m. that evening, Nardi arrived at the American tent to let them know he hadn’t seen either of his Italian climbers yet. He wanted Warner’s opinion about whether or not he should be worried. “Well, they’re only an hour and a half behind us, and we know that from when we saw their lights,” Warner said. “Eleven o’clock is not yet the time to worry—maybe midnight is the time to worry.” As the Italian left, the winds picked up, and a small storm started to brew. The Americans left the lights on inside their tent as a beacon, hoping to help the two mountaineers find them.

July 21

Just before one o’clock in the morning, Nardi received a radio call from Vielmo saying he was unable to find the tent. The small storm had intensified and was blowing snow across the summit ridge, limiting visibility. At 1:00 a.m., an exhausted Vielmo made it to the Italians’ tent alone, but by 3 a.m., Zavka still had not arrived. Nardi asked Vielmo to go back out into the storm to see if he could find Zavka. Vielmo left the tent, and Nardi fell back asleep. Fait, who had not gone to the summit, spent the night in the Iranian tent, keeping the exhausted Iranians awake with his shouted conversations with Nardi and Vielmo. But when it came to searching for Zavka, only Vielmo left the tent although he failed to find the missing mountaineer and returned to the tent.
Overnight, the small storm grew into a raging blizzard. The situation was eerily similar to those that had caused the deaths of so many other climbers at high altitude camps. In the back of everyone’s mind was the danger of being caught in the blizzard at 8,000 meters (more than 26,000 feet). Warner’s team had four people in its tent, and Uher, suffering from the ill effects of the altitude, was completely incapable of going down by himself. The storm was so great that his Czech teammates couldn’t climb up to get Uher, so he would need the Americans to bring him down with them.

One of the Portuguese climbers started yelling, “Come on! We got to go! We got to go!” The Russians, the strongest people up there, took off and went down. The Portuguese climber was the next to move and go down. His porter went with him. Then the Koreans started leaving. The only people left at Camp Four were the three Americans with the ill Czech climber, an Iranian climber, and the three Italians. Only the Italians knew that Zavka was missing.

As the Americans prepared to put on their equipment, they discovered that a critical survival tool was gone; one pair of crampons was missing. Apparently somebody who couldn’t find their own crampons had reached under the tent and taken them leaving the American team in a horrible situation. The remaining climbers from the Italian team panicked. As the Portuguese climber had done only minutes before, the Italians now screamed, “Come on! We got to go! We got to go!” But the Italians got lost in the storm’s whiteout within a few minutes of leaving the camp. “You couldn’t see your hand in front of your face,” Warner recalled. The Italians made it back up to the American tent and continued to press for them to leave. Bowie believed that it was his crampons that were missing, so he decided to descend without them. “By the way,” Nardi said, as Warner’s group tried to work out a plan, “Stefano’s missing. He never came back last night.”

Warner looked at his exhausted team, considered his ill friend Uher, and thought about the total whiteout on the other side of the tent. Ultimately it was his responsibility to get his expedition off K2 safely. Should they go out to look for Zavka? Could he have survived unprotected from the extreme cold that accompanied the storm?

Thinking that the missing Italian climber could still be alive, Warner faced a decision that went to the very heart of mountaineering decision making. He feared that going to look for the lost climber would mean death for his team already handicapped by one weakened climber, Bowie, and the Czech mountaineer, Uher, who both needed help to get down safely in dangerous weather conditions. Warner recalled:

So it’s now a raging blizzard. We have lost many of the strong people who could have helped us search for the missing person, if he was even alive. They’ve made no attempt, except for when Mario turned around and went back out into the storm at some point for five minutes or whatever it was, to try to find their own teammate. All they were concerned with was getting down as fast as they possibly could. I can’t say I blame them, because we know the stories of the many heroes that died. You engage yourself in an act of heroism, and it is a thing that can kill
you. But it did not in any way meet the way that we were managing the risks as we associated with them in our team.

Every person on K2 knew mountaineering was dangerous. Indeed, when they first arrived at Base Camp in June, Shalowitz had had a conversation with Warner about the possibility of disaster striking. Shalowitz remembered:

Knowing that I’d be at Base Camp when possibly some event might happen with our team, I asked Chris, “In the event something tragic or crazy happens on the mountain, how would you like me to handle communication with family and loved ones at home? Do you want me to let them know as soon as something happens, even if we don’t know the ending, or let events unfold, and then give them a real honest sense of what happened and when it happened?” He said that his belief was that it’s better to have people know and to give them the ability to pray for a positive outcome. Better to take some comfort that they might be in a position to influence the outcome through their prayers than learning about it after events played themselves out and then feel frustrated that they couldn’t somehow participate in the process.

Warner’s gut reaction to Zavka’s situation was that he could not have survived the night without protection. Acknowledging that Zavka was already dead required little conversation. “It was one of these things where everyone came to exactly the same conclusion,” Warner said, “but without conversation.” The anxiety created by the storm, the climbers’ complete exhaustion, the shock of watching Nerbu fall the day before, the added burden of Libor Uher, the loss of a pair of crampons, and now the missing Italian climber made it seem like the boat was sinking. Warner later said:

I think as I look back, the one thing I continue to wrestle with is should we at least have explored this more. We didn’t necessarily have the luxury or the wisdom in that moment to really say, “Hang on a second, let’s take a deep breath, and let’s assess all this information before we jump to a conclusion.”

Time was running out, so they made the decision to move ahead. The descent off any mountain was dangerous in the best weather conditions. “At 26,000 feet high on a twisty ridgeline, if you go 30 to 40 feet off to either side of the ridgeline,” Warner said, “you’re just going to fall 9 to 10,000 feet to your death, so you have to nail it straight with every single step.”

The team now consisted of the eight exhausted climbers remaining at Camp Four. As the wind howled and blurred visibility, they were unable to see the tracks of anyone who had gone down before them. The only thing Warner could think about was getting all eight down alive. “We continued to pursue all these challenges from the same mindset that we got ourselves to in the very beginning,” Warner said. “It’s not about us, so if we put our personal needs first, the team will fail.”
Bowie and the three Italians were the first to start the descent from Camp Four. They had gotten within 50 meters of Camp Three when Bowie hit a place where the wind had blown snow over an icy patch, completely disguising the ice. Bowie took one step and shot down the hill. By what Warner described as a miracle, Bowie landed right by one of the tents in Camp Three instead of going off either side of the mountain ridge. During his slide, Bowie heard a snapping noise and feared he had broken his leg.

Warner and Uher, the last to leave Camp Four, got completely lost and at one point for more than 40 minutes. Unable to move forward, they waited for breaks in the clouds that allowed them to see 30 or 40 feet ahead. As they slowly descended, stashed equipment guided the pair toward Camp Three. Nearly two hours behind Bowie and Normand, Warner and Uher reached Camp Three. Warner had his hands full with Uher whose cerebral edema made him combative, disoriented, and anxious.

Warner knew there was another big problem ahead because Camp Two was located on that part of the mountain with the worst weather where tents usually did not survive (Figure 8). A move to Camp Two increased the likelihood that there would be no protection from the elements for Warner and Uher—not to mention the other six members of the team.

Figure 8. Tent at Camp Two.

“In a perfect world, you descend, descend, descend,” Warner said. “One more percent of oxygen in the air increases your survival, so by staying back at a higher altitude, you’re decreasing your opportunity for survival.” Warner knew that if the storm continued to rage, they might not make it down to Camp Two. He also knew that if he forced the confused Uher to go down, they might not make it and Uher would die on the ropes. And that, if by some chance they did make it to Camp Two and there was no tent space, there would be utter chaos. So Warner
made the decision to stay at Camp Three with Uher. Warner asked Normand to continue down, catch up with Bowie, and assist him while he hunkered down at Camp Three with Uher. He described the evening that followed:

We really had a lot of anxiety battles we were fighting. I had to really create an environment where this person felt cared for and that he was going to live. He needed a lot of discipline because his behavior was completely erratic and irrational.

I mean, it was really powerful to be around him. He kept looking at me in this way that was like he was looking right into my soul. And he kept saying, “Maximum trust…maximum trust.” I had to create that bond of trust. We had to be totally trusting and dependent upon each other just so that something stupid wouldn’t happen. Although we weren’t speaking the same language, some things are pretty universal…like the power of a good hug…and looking into somebody’s eyes just trying to exude a lot of the right energy.

While Warner was holed up at Camp Three, the rest of his team tried to get down off the mountain. With his broken leg, Bowie had to lower himself by rope. He said it felt like his two bones were rubbing together—crackling against each other. The pain was excruciating and at times brought him to his knees, but he did whatever he had to do to get across sections of the mountain. One easily traversed 20-foot section was not equipped with rope. This presented a problem for Bowie, who, with his injured leg, needed rope. Bowie asked one of the climbers behind him to cut a section of rope and secure it in that area for him. “You’re making me so angry!” the climber screamed at him. “You’re going so slow that I refuse to cut it!” That climber moved past Bowie and continued down. Depleted of all his energy, Bowie called Shalowitz at Base Camp, telling him he needed help. Shalowitz contacted Normand, who quickly tried to catch up with Bowie.

By late afternoon, Shalowitz was able to use high-powered binoculars to spot Bowie slowly limping down the mountain on the ridge above Camp Two. Later, as dusk turned to darkness, the Base Camp crew anxiously awaited the call from either Bowie or Normand saying that they had arrived safely. A subcontext to this story was the necessity of conserving communications. The radios were run by batteries whose life was dramatically shortened in the high-altitude cold, so descending climbers often turned off their radios between calls to Base Camp. At 7:45 p.m., the camp chef, Didar, peering into the night sky, let out an audible gasp and ran into the communications tent. “I just saw a light fall 200 meters!” he cried.

Yesterday, Tomorrow, and Today

Bowie’s fight to reach Camp Two lasted until 8:00 p.m. that night. Unknown to him, when he arrived at the small Camp Two plateau, his headlamp had fallen off and plummeted down the south side of the ridge in the darkness. Upon arriving, he immediately wriggled into a borrowed tent—something that had been prearranged between Warner and the Portuguese
climber. Some of the American team’s gear was already there, including Bowie’s extra sleeping bag. The three Italians and the Iranian climber were already inside the three-person tent. Bowie asked one of the Italian climbers who was in his sleeping bag, “Hey, would you mind if I used this sleeping bag because I’ve got a broken leg?” According to Bowie, he responded, “Yesterday, this was your sleeping bag, tomorrow this will be your sleeping bag, but today this is my sleeping bag.” When Bowie asked for water, no one would give him any.

Normand arrived at Camp Two shortly after Bowie and knew he could not squeeze into the three-person tent with the other five. He radioed Base Camp and then set out to salvage pieces of the Italian climbers’ former tent. The storm had shredded parts of it, leaving it full of snow and making it barely habitable. Without any shelter, however, Normand would perish—so he made the best of his modified protection, staying up into the night boiling gathered snow into water for Bowie and himself.

Warner had his own issues to deal with up at Camp Three. Using the last vestiges of the carbon dioxide canisters to melt ice into water, Warner had created a cloud of carbon monoxide in the tent. He breathed in the poisoned air and became completely disoriented. At that moment, Uher thought Warner had some kind of high-altitude edema and tried to shake him out of his stupor. Warner suddenly realized what Uher was doing and immediately stuck his head out of the tent into the air to clear his lungs. The two men knew that night that they had saved each other’s lives.

July 22

Warner and Uher attempted to brave the 40-to-60-mile-an-hour winds to descend to Camp Two. As they finally reached the area, Warner heard on the radio that there was a possibility the Iranian climber was snow-blind and still at Camp Two:

At this point I’m feeling like I’m at war, and everybody is an injured soldier, and we’re not going to leave a single injured soldier on the battlefield. And it doesn’t sound too dramatic, but a tremendous amount of effort goes into looking into every single tent to see if there’s anybody there. Once I determined that there’s nobody left, Libor and I had spent some time resting before we were able to continue down. We descend and eventually get to Camp One. We actually catch up to Bruce there and I once again have to go and check all the tents at Camp One because we don’t know if anybody’s missing.

All it takes is somebody to crawl into a tent in a moment of exhaustion and lay down to take what they think is going to be a nap, and it’s a nap they never wake up from. So I go through all the tents and make sure nobody’s there, and we continue down. And on the way down from Camp One, we come up to Don. Now Don has just gotten some other help. He’s gotten some help from the Czech climbers who’ve now started to come up our route to try to help rescue Libor but obviously the most critical person at this point is Don.
With the Czech team’s help, they moved Bowie down to the Advanced Base Camp (ABC) and spent the night there. The storm conditions continued to make the descent slow and perilous. Warner described the night at ABC:

The reality is that it’s really hard to be a victim. And when you are so completely dependent upon the help of others, I think that in that moment you expose a lot of yourself. There were three sides to this little triangle, and it was Joel in Base Camp who was trying to organize the helicopter for us and organizing the 35 people to come up and get us. He was in a super critical mission role—the general perhaps. There’s Don, who’s the injured soldier, and then there’s myself, who’s this first lieutenant or whatever. I’m totally focused on him and sending passionate cries for help to Joel to make things happen. It became this very intimate shared experience that we’re going through that didn’t end—it lasted for days.

**July 23**

At 5 a.m., a team of 35 Americans, Russians, Czechs, Germans, and Pakistanis left Base Camp armed with a coordinated transport plan to carry Bowie back to Base Camp. Two hours later the nine people assigned to get Bowie down from ABC over the steep rocky maze to the icefall arrived at ABC with a makeshift stretcher made of rope and tent poles. Warner remembered that moment:

It’s the most amazing feeling you could ever have to see the Cavalry. To tell the truth, we had been running on adrenaline and maybe fear. We had refused to give up but at that point we were pretty tapped out. If we didn’t have those 35 people coming up, it would have taken a week to get Don down. I could barely walk under my own power, never mind try to carry a body at that point. And with his leg, there was no way he could walk under his own power.

In good weather conditions, the Pakistani military would have flown a helicopter into Base Camp for Bowie. Because of the storm, the group of volunteers carried Bowie out to the lower Broad Peak Base Camp from where he was flown out. He had suffered three torn ligaments in his leg.

Warner and the rest of the team were reunited at Base Camp. Warner was now the ninth American to summit K2 and Everest. Several months after the team had disbanded and returned home, Shalowitz described how he felt about the team and its leader:

It would be impossible to look back at the way things unfolded without noting the varying perspectives climbers arriving to the mountain had regarding the relationships and responsibilities they would have with others, and how those perspectives informed both their definition of success and ultimately, the path to their results. Most of us have heard the debates regarding the “Into Thin Air” episode at Everest and other more recent climbing controversies relating to
“leaving” people on the mountain. The ultimate moral dilemma: Do you look to your own self-preservation and survive, or do you look to try to help somebody at all costs? Is it the Marines’ old rallying cry that we bring all our men home even if they’re dead, or is the mountain a mountain, we all know the risks going into it? Think of your family and those that love you and get your ass home safely. Naturally, every specific instance has the immediate factors that make each decision unique. I can tell you that I believe that very moral and ethical people can come down very legitimately on opposite sides of these questions at the moment of decision.

Before passing judgment, I think it’s helpful to take a moment to understand a bit of historical context. During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, perhaps the golden age of climbing, expedition members adhered to a deeply held philosophy—there were no guides, but instead, a group of climbers, committed to one another, and committed to the purpose of doing something unprecedented, and in the pursuit, collectively, putting the team success first. This kind of mindset begets a commitment to preparation and doing the most you can to be of contribution to the success of the team, as if the success of the team relied solely on them individually—because in these remote, uninhabited regions of the world—often it would. As a result, all of the highest mountains in the world were summited during this period. As we progressed into the 1980s, this philosophy changed. Routes on these mountains became established, guides could be hired to lead the way, porters could be hired to carry gear and set up or operate camps and climbing infrastructure, and those arriving to the mountain came with a mindset of “bagging a summit.” To be clear, achieving a summit under these circumstances is still a monumental and dangerous achievement, but one can also see how such alterations to the design of such a climb might alter one’s sense of personal responsibility. One is more likely to be less prepared, relying on the guide/porter for success, and becoming more efficient by doing less work to preserve the best chance to achieve personal success.

As we arrived at K2 the range of these philosophies also arrived in the form of different teams from around the world. Those of the more traditional alpine philosophy, often referred to as *brotherhood of the rope*, tend to do and carry more, try to push themselves in terms of a team experience. Certainly they plan to reach the summit, but ultimately the goal of the team in terms of that experience, and pushing themselves, is also defined by them all returning safely. And every one of these experienced climbers that I’ve talked to who’ve arrived with that mindset have all been part of rescues that are above 8,000 meters, and all been part of experiences where they’ve gotten very near the top and have brought people down rather than summiting because their experience and definition of success is quite different than that notion of trying to bag a peak.
I won’t try to say what’s right or what’s wrong, or I won’t try to ascribe any kind of judgments upon that. I know the kind of team I’d rather be on, both in terms of my professional life and in terms of my relationships.

I want the guys who want to win where everybody gets to win. It’s just the place where there is more possible. I went hoping that I could be tested as part of a high-performing team where I would have a chance to kind of see what I’m made of and work with other people who I knew would be giving it all. And in the end, I feel unbelievably privileged to have been part of our team. The way Chris set the leadership tone by design and example, the way everybody contributed selflessly in making it their own, left me feeling one of among many people who gave everything. And in points of adversity, I know that we acted in a way that made ourselves proud, and ultimately led to people’s lives being saved, and many others’ accomplishing things on the mountain that I think might not have otherwise happened had we not been there.