

QUEST FOR K2

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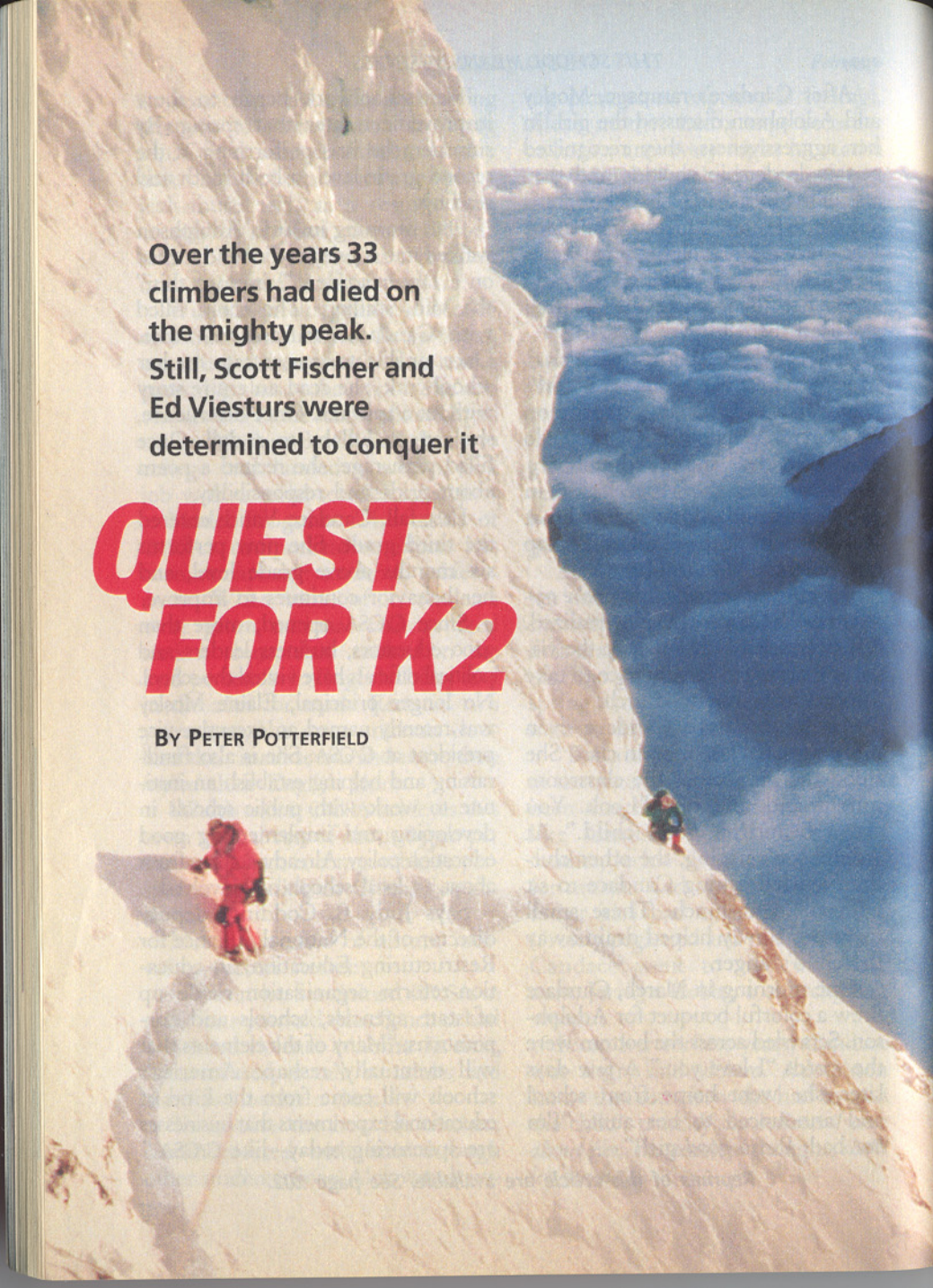
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Over the years 33
climbers had died on
the mighty peak.
Still, Scott Fischer and
Ed Viesturs were
determined to conquer it

QUEST FOR K2

BY PETER POTTERFIELD

WHEN SCOTT FISCHER leaned down to bid his five-year-old son Andy good-bye in their Seattle home, he noticed tears in the boy's eyes. For six of the last seven years, the 36-year-old guide had left his wife and two young children to climb the big mountains of Asia and Alaska, but the pain on his children's faces each time was becoming increasingly difficult to bear.

The torment of leaving, however, was a price Fischer knew he must pay to fulfill a promise he had made himself: to conquer the second highest mountain in the world—mighty K2 in Pakistan—which over the years had cost 33 climbers their lives, 13 in 1986 alone.

Fischer had decided to attempt the climb when he met another guide from Seattle, Ed Viesturs, in Katmandu, Nepal, in May 1991. The two men agreed to join forces and assault 28,250-foot K2. Viesturs was flush from a successful climb of Mount Everest. Fischer had twice been within a few thousand feet of the top of Everest, and twice he had been turned back by weather or by the need to rescue others. The bitterness of those defeats fueled his desire to climb K2.

The mountain's unusual name is a vestige of colonial British surveyors, who labeled it K2 because it was the second surveyed in the Karakoram range. Climbers consider it the hardest peak in the world.

As Fischer prepared to depart, Andy handed him a string of brightly colored ribbons like the prayer flags

that fly from temples and homes in the Himalayas. Andy and his preschool classmates had made them for good luck to safeguard the climbers on their journey. "I love you, Dad," Andy said. "You're the greatest."

"I love you, too, Andy," Fischer said, giving his son a hug.

FISCHER, VIESTURS AND THOR KIESER, a guide from Colorado, arrived in Pakistan on June 8, 1992, well ahead of the other 13 climbers in the expedition. At the confluence of the mighty Baltoro and Godwin Austen glaciers, they got their first look at the awesome pyramid of K2, where so many have died.

K2 is not just difficult to climb; it is equally difficult to descend. Near base camp is a tall rock cairn covered with improvised plaques, commemorating the climbers who have perished on the mountain over the years.

By July 12, Camp I (at 20,000 feet) and II (at 22,000 feet) had been established. That morning, Fischer and Viesturs set off from base camp to set up Camp III at 24,000 feet. The approach to Camp I was particularly dangerous.

Blocks of blue-green glacier ice the size of automobiles balanced precariously on one another, so unstable that the route changed from day to day. The debris dwarfed Fischer and Viesturs as they picked their way past towering seracs and crevasses up to 100 feet deep.

As Fischer was preparing to make a long, awkward step, an ice block shifted under his foot. It threw him

off-balance directly above a crevasse.

"Falling!" he screamed. Roped to his partner, Fischer tumbled in over his head and became wedged between the walls of the narrow chasm. Instantly, he felt a stab of excruciating pain in his right shoulder. He guessed his arm had been torn from its socket.

"Scott! Scott! Are you all right?" Viesturs called.

"I'd, it's my shoulder. I need help!"

Sliding to the edge of the crevasse, Viesturs grabbed Fischer's jacket and harness, and pulled him to safety. Fischer's shoulder was already horribly swollen, but the two managed to rig a makeshift splint before turning back to base camp. After several hours, Fischer could go no farther. "You'll have to get help, Ed," he said finally, his face contorted in agony.

FISCHER WAITED ALONE for nearly two hours. Just before noon, Viesturs returned with six members of the expedition, including Dr. Yuri Stefanski. After injecting Fischer with a painkiller, Stefanski grabbed his right wrist and pulled. With an audible crack, Fischer felt the arm pop back into its socket.

"Is it in?" he asked.

"Yes," Stefanski said. "But for you, the climb is over."

Fischer looked up at his companions. "Five days," he pleaded. "Just give me five days at base and I'll be climbing again."

FOR MORE THAN TWO WEEKS, Fischer lived like a recluse in camp. He could not bear to watch as other climbers ascended without him. Lying

in his tent, his boy's prayer flags flapping noisily from its guy lines, Fischer made his decision.

I have to do this thing, he thought. Whatever it takes, I have to do it.

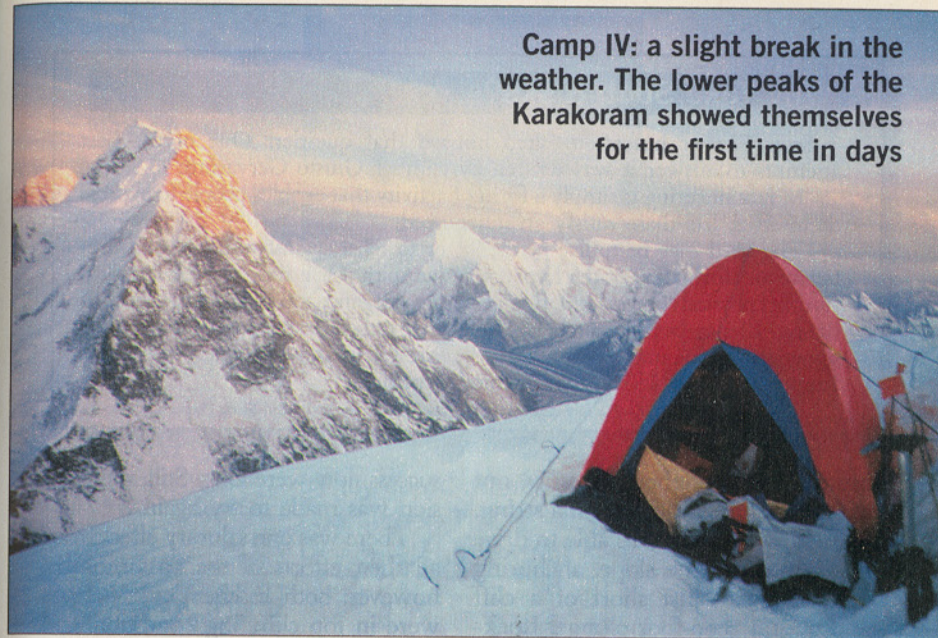
By August 1, radio calls set the base camp abuzz. Vladimir Balyberdin, the expedition leader, and another Russian had reached K2's peak. The news of their success turned Fischer's lingering despair into summit fever. *If Vladimir can do it, I can do it, bad arm or no.*

Fischer had rigged a crude sling, but decided to let his arm hang limp in case he needed to brace himself in a fall. He knew he might be fooling himself, but it was worth a try. "Whatever it takes," he told Viesturs as they resumed their climb.

When they reached Camp III, snow began to fall, drifting as the wind rose. They crawled into their sleeping bags to wait for a clear spell.

FISCHER AND VIESTURS awoke the next morning with snow pressing in on all sides of their tiny tent. The radio, stuffed in Fischer's sleeping bag to keep the batteries from freezing, crackled to life.

Through the static, teammate Thor Kieser reported from Camp IV, more than 2000 feet above them, that two climbers—a French woman and a Ukrainian—had reached the summit, but it had taken them the entire night to struggle back. Both were frost-bitten and desperate. Kieser planned to lead them down to Camp III, but would need help. Fischer and Viesturs immediately tried to launch a res-



Camp IV: a slight break in the weather. The lower peaks of the Karakoram showed themselves for the first time in days

cue, but were turned back by driving wind and snow.

At 11 p.m., Viesturs unfastened the tent flap to check the weather. Snow was still falling, but he thought he saw something move.

A lone figure, covered with snow, stumbled into view: the Ukrainian, Aleksei Nikiforov. His face was haggard; his breathing came in shallow gasps. Nikiforov, clearly exhausted, had been climbing for 36 hours. He'd left Kieser and the French woman bivouacked at the top of a snow slope near Camp IV.

By 7:30 the next morning Fischer and Viesturs realized that, despite the storm, they had no choice. They were the only ones in a position to help the two stranded climbers.

Struggling through thigh-deep

snow, the rescuers reached a steep slope 1000 feet below Camp IV by midmorning and realized they faced a deadly peril. The angle of the slope, combined with the layer of new, heavy snow, created ideal avalanche conditions. As they discussed how best to make a safe retreat, Viesturs, who was below Fischer, began digging a hole in the snow, hoping to get deep enough so that an avalanche would pass over him. Just then, what the climbers feared most came crashing over them.

Fischer was hurled down the mountain like a candy wrapper in the breeze. *This is it*, he thought.

Viesturs, crouching in his hole, felt the wall of snow roar over him. But then the rope between them went taut, and the force of Fischer's

Why Take Such Risks?

Scott Fischer has often asked himself that question. One of the best attempts to answer it was written by climber Giusto Gervasutti:

"Mountaineering is simply a form of activity that enables people to express themselves, lets them satisfy an inner need.

"The need may be to live heroically, or to rebel against restraint and limitation: an affirmation of the freedom of the spirit. Or it may well be the pleasure of physical fitness and moral energy, elegance of style and calculated daring. It may be the search for an intense esthetic experience, for exquisite sensations, or for man's never-satisfied desire for unknown country to explore. Best of all, it should be all these things together."

—*The Best of Ascent*, edited by Steve Roper and Allen Steck (Sierra Club Books)

momentum snatched Viesturs out of his hole like a puppet on a string. Somehow Viesturs was able to drive his ice ax into the slope, anchoring both climbers just short of a cliff and a fatal 4000-foot plunge. Luckily, neither man was injured.

RESUMING their rescue attempt, the two men climbed steadily, although they were disoriented in the white-out conditions. Finally, they found a guide rope fixed earlier by Balyberdin. There they came upon Kieser and the French climber, Chantal Mauduit. Valiantly, Kieser had belayed the exhausted, snow-blind Mauduit foot by foot from the ridge where they had spent the night. "Man, am I glad to see you guys," he said.

By the time the climbers made the two-day descent to base camp, it was August 8, more than two months since Fischer had left home. Once again, the summit of K2 had been ripped from his grasp. The rescue had taken precious days from the already short Karakoram summer. The odds for

success now were long. Still, the decision was made to try again.

There was one salutary effect from all their efforts of the past months, however: both Fischer and Viesturs were in top climbing condition and acclimated to the altitude. Covering now-familiar ground, they made it from base to Camp III in one long day, covering 7000 feet at high altitude, a remarkable feat.

The next day Fischer, Viesturs and eight climbers who had also spent the night at Camp III pushed on to Camp IV, placing bamboo wands along the way to mark the route. When they arrived, however, their luck seemed to run out again. The mountain was struck by a fierce storm.

Fischer and Viesturs crawled into their tent to wait out the weather. The others were in adjacent tents dug into the bleak, wind-swept slope.

Pilots put on oxygen masks at 12,500 feet, yet the climbers were above 26,000 without extra oxygen. At that altitude, the effects of thin air become acute; muscles wither. Lassitude is so

pronounced that even lighting a stove requires an extreme act of will. Mostly the climbers lay in their sleeping bags, hardly stirring. The days passed slowly—two, then three. Temperatures dropped at night to 20 below zero.

ON AUGUST 15 came more bad news. One of two Mexican climbers, trying to descend from the high camp, had fallen 4000 feet to his death.

At last came a slight break in the weather. The lower peaks of the Karakoram showed themselves for the first time in days, reflecting the setting sun off ridges and summits. But for how long?

Fischer and Viesturs decided to go fast, climbing the last 2000 feet as light as they dared. "No sleeping bags, no stove, no tent," Fischer said as they reviewed their plan. By starting at 1:30 a.m., they hoped to reach the summit and return to Camp IV before nightfall.

Fischer secretly worried about his shoulder. He could use it to a limited degree, but the pain was worse after the avalanche. *I've got to go for it*, he thought, *whatever it takes*.

THEIR HEADLAMPS cast a faint glow as they set off in the dark on August 16,



They could climb no higher. They had reached the summit

with only the crunch of crampons on hard snow breaking the silence. No other climbers stirred from the cluster of tents on the small plateau. Their weather window had already begun to close; storm clouds were moving up the slopes.

Without supplementary oxygen, the will needed to climb at such heights is unimaginable to those who haven't experienced it. Even

though some of the world's best high-altitude climbers were on K2 that day, Fischer and Viesturs believed they were the only ones attempting to reach the summit. But looking down, the pair saw the glow of a solitary lamp far below. At least one other soul was following in their footsteps.

Fischer swung his ice ax and raised himself another foot up the 60-degree slope. Then he stopped, took three labored breaths and did it again. The two men climbed automatically, their oxygen-starved brains doing the right thing by rote. The climbers were now deep into what is known as the "death zone" on K2. Roped together, they knew that if one fell, the other could be pulled off.

At the top of the Bottleneck Couloir, a steep ice gully that presents some of the most difficult climbing on the route, the third climber

caught up—Charley Mace, a member of their own team. They tied him on their rope.

The trio struggled upward, taking turns in the lead. Suddenly, looking through the cloud layer, they saw a magical world of intense blue sky and dazzling snow stretching a mere 200 feet to the peak. They were stunned by the austere beauty of the mountain.

At noon, the climbers reached a mound of snow about 20 feet in diameter. They could climb no higher. They had reached K2's summit, the first Americans ever to climb the Abruzzi Ridge. They whooped, raised their ice tools in triumph and hugged each other. Ed Viesturs was so choked with emotion he couldn't talk. The 35 minutes they spent on top of K2 would be a time the three men would never forget.

The question now, however, was could they outrace the storm and get back to camp before dark. Spending a night on the storm-ravaged peak without shelter was, Fischer knew, the classic scenario for disaster.

As they turned from the sunlit summit, they were almost immediately engulfed in thick clouds. Snow

was falling again. Footprints they had made on the way up were covered. The climbers descended into an eerie world of white silence.

At times, two of them would huddle while the third went out on the end of the rope to look for landmarks. There was disagreement over the correct route. *We're not going to make it*, Viesturs worried.

After four hours, Fischer knew they must be near Camp IV. If they missed it by even a few yards, they could go right by it. So they began shouting into the blowing snow, hoping they would be heard.

Their prayers were answered. "Hey! Hey! Over here!" came a reply. After 53 days on K2, Scott Fischer had reached his goal. *I've earned it*, he thought. He was free to go home to his family.

The summer of 1993 was another grim one on K2. Four climbers perished in falls, and another died at Camp IV from the effects of altitude.

Scott Fischer is planning to climb the world's highest peak, Mount Everest, next month. "I'll get it this time," he says. "Third time's the charm. Whatever it takes."



Rolling in the Aisles

SHOPPING IN THE VEGETABLE SECTION of the supermarket, I observed a man gazing intently at a bag of potatoes. "Excuse me, lady," he said. "I don't have my glasses with me, and my wife wanted some Idaho potatoes. Are these Idaho potatoes?"

I looked at the printing on the bag and said, "No. Those are Colorado potatoes."

"Good," he replied. "That's close enough." —Contributed by Mary Helen Hall