

# What lies beyond the heart of man

By Eileen M. Chambers  
Correspondent

*This is the second of a three-part series about Sisters mountaineer Warren Thompson who has gone on two expeditions to Everest, one to Denali, and many more to world-class mountains. Part one appeared on March 7.*

Everest 1984:

"Nobody sleeps well on Everest because of the lack of oxygen," Warren Thompson says.

In 1984, he was leading an American expedition that was attempting to climb Everest from the Chinese side of the mountain, a first for the U.S.

"I was at Base Camp, looking at the stars which at 18,000 feet are unbelievable. It was so quiet. The usual jet-stream roar off the mountain was still. Standing there, I felt a slight tremor but thought nothing of it until the next morning, I awoke to a voice outside my tent. 'Knock. Knock. Might I have a chat?' My British visitor told me that an earthquake had triggered an avalanche which hit their camp in the Great Couloir.

"Men were dead. Others injured. No food, fuel or tents. 'Do you think you can help us,' he asked.

"Not only yes, but hell yes."

What Thompson had at his disposal were yaks — shaggy cattle that Tibetans use to carry loads for expeditions.

"Immediately I went to our Tibetan liaison officer and said that we were going to divert our yaks from our route over to help the British."

"No," he replied.

"You don't understand. This is life or death.

"No," he raised his voice, digging in his heels. 'That's their karma.'"

"Okay," I calculated, thinking on my feet. "That's their karma but we are going

to help them."

"No! If you go there, you will share their karma and their karma is bad because the mountain fell on them."

"People are going to die."

"And then they will be reborn."

"Given his beliefs, I knew he was not going to budge. Like most problems you face climbing internationally, you have to be smart diplomatically. Eventually, I got him to let our yaks carrying our supplies up our route to a juncture where our climbers, using makeshift ladders, could then trek over to the British."

This was not the first problem to hit Thompson's expedition. Before they were slated to leave Seattle, the team itself showed signs of dissension.

"Weeks before we were to leave, after eight years planning this expedition, half of the guys suddenly announced that they wanted to climb Everest alpine style," he said.

Alpine climbing consists of small, fast teams carrying minimal gear. Expedition-style is based upon the number of climbers estimated to reach the summit and then creating a supply train up the mountain to support those climbers reaching the summit and, equally important, getting back down.

"They wanted to climb light, fast and without oxygen, a very risky, make-it-or-die-trying gamble. All my planning had been based on expedition-style. I had studied everything about Everest. I knew the route, where every camp should be placed, the supplies we needed to put our guys on the summit. I had even gotten high-capacity oxygen canisters from NASA. As the expedition leader knowing the risks involved I would have pulled the plug, but they insisted that we continue. However, I knew we

were in trouble. Bottom line, you have to be able to trust the guys climbing with you. We didn't have that now."

Sure enough, when the team got to Base Camp, mutiny erupted.

"Those who insisted we climb alpine-style picked apart all of our logistics, right down to how much toilet paper we should carry. It was hell. They didn't know what was needed like I did. After six weeks, I had to ask incoming guests to bring toilet paper with them."

As weeks passed, Thompson, sick with a severe sinus infection, realized that his health was not improving nor was the team's resistance diminishing. Devastated at seeing the expedition fall apart, Warren, along with his friend Ray, and a physician, made the difficult decision to head back to the U.S.

"On the plane, Ray said to me 'If you ever do another expedition, I will go with you but, Warren, before then, I want you to consider what you need to do to become a better leader.' I listened as Ray continued, seeing that my leadership was a factor in what happened on Everest."

His friend told him, "Warren, whenever the press asked a question to the team, you answered it for the rest of us."

"I thought that is what a leader did."

"But what would have happened if you said to the reporter, 'Why don't we have Phil, our equipment manager,



PHOTO BY WARREN THOMPSON

Moon over Everest.

answer that question? He is the best when it comes to equipment.' If you let Phil step into the spotlight, Warren, how do you think Phil would have felt?"

"Really important."

"No. You are not getting it. It would have told Phil that you trust him enough to answer a question that he knows you can answer. So, when the chips are down and you need cohesion on the team, who will stand with you? Phil. The reason this expedition is going to fail is not because you had dissension. It is going to fail because the rest of the team didn't stand with you. Warren, the role of a leader is not to stand in front and take the credit. A leader's job is to lift everyone else on the team up."

The expedition did, in fact, fail. Attempting alpine-style, two climbers who made it to the highest camp had no food or fuel to melt snow for water and only a half a can of oxygen. When a storm hit, they barely made it back down the mountain.

Thompson had learned an invaluable lesson.

"In that moment, I learned that leadership is ultimately about the relationships you build. I would not forget this the next time I attempted Everest."

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