

## **There's always a first time**

**By Nick Bullivant**

Well here we are, then. I can't believe this happened, but there we are on the front page of the paper. 19th February 1999. I thought we were dead.

I think the turning point was when I said 'Are we going to die here, Dad?'

He'd been sitting morosely beside me for - how long? Two days? Three? In that miserable hole in the snow. We were terribly cramped.

My hands were useless. My gloves had blown away on that windy day. When was it? It's difficult to remember. Does your memory fail when you have nothing to eat?

Let me see, let me see. Sunday we set out and spent the night in a snowhole in the Larry Groo. The stove packed in so we couldn't eat any food. Can't eat raw food - Dad said it'd be running the risk of poisoning. He didn't have to throw it out of the door, though. I'd have been willing to give it a go. He's been climbing in Patagonia and the Alps, so I suppose he's right.

Monday was that terrible wind. Dad said he knew a big boulder where we could shelter the night, it just meant climbing all the way out of the Larry Groo. That's when my gloves blew away. I had just put them down beside me. They went over and over across the hillside. I didn't have any others.

We couldn't get down at the other side of the hill. It was too icy so Dad used his ice axe to dig us a snow shelter in a bank of snow. We squeezed into it, two of us, side by side, and pulled the sacks into the doorway to keep out the wind.

After a while I asked how long we were going to sit there, because I needed the loo. He just said something about waiting till the wind drops. I dozed off and it was pitch dark when I woke up. I was desperate. I had to go. I managed to get a torch out of the lid of my sack. My hands were terribly cold. I went outside. I don't remember that time. The wind just took my breath away. I don't know how I managed but I got back beside Dad and when my shivering died down we fell asleep. The night seemed very long.

When it got light I thought we would get out but the noise of the wind was even stronger. Dad wasn't for moving. He became morose and didn't answer when I spoke. Our sacks were completely frozen down the front and we couldn't get into them. My hands didn't feel cold any more, which was a relief.

We sat all day and the second night, too. I didn't need the loo again. We ate snow, as Dad said we had to keep our water levels up. I was hallucinating chapattis. I tried telling stories to keep our spirits up until I told the one about 'Mummy, Mummy, why do I keep walking around in circles? - Shut up or I'll nail your other foot to the floor'. Dad said that was a bit too close to the bone and he didn't know what Mum would do to us when we got back.

I took it from that we were in serious trouble. That must have been at the back of my mind when I plucked up the courage on Wednesday to ask the awful question. 'Are we going to die here, Dad?'

Straight away I thought it was a stupid question but Dad seemed to decide to get out of the shelter.

We staggered. We fell over. I was aching from sitting so long folded up. We shook our hands to try to get some life into them. We trudged uphill. We fell over rocks. My hands were bleeding. I must have banged them on the boulders. We crawled at times.

Then we saw people. I couldn't believe it at first, I thought I was seeing things. The cloud was lifting a bit and we could see them down at the foot of a snow bank, digging snow holes. Dad said not to tell them anything. No names - nothing. He wanted to be first to tell Mum, not some officious copper.

We shouted and fell down the snow towards them. They got us into a snow hole. This was a big snow hole with room to sit up and move around. There was a candle light. They gave us warm drinks.

I think I was drifting off when I was aware of a noise outside. It was a helicopter. When they got us out of the hole we could see it had come down quite a distance away, something about the cloud being low. It seemed like miles. My hands were going black now. Someone said frostbite. I was almost carried to the helicopter.

I've not been in a helicopter before. I was too tired to care. I've not been on a mountain before, either.

I don't remember much of what happened when we got to hospital. I was asleep for most of the time. Next day some photographers came to see us and asked Dad questions. We sat up on the beds and held up our hands in plastic bags for them. Dad pulled a face when they asked about frostbite. I didn't know I was going to lose so much at that stage. He told them he knew what he was doing. It was good of the helicopter to come by, but we only took the ride because it was there.

After all, as he told them, he is an accomplished mountaineer. He knows what he'd doing.

Today we were on the front page of the Times. They operated on my hands. Tomorrow it's my feet.