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Central grad Andrew Towne talks about his Mount Everest ascent

By Brad Elliott Schlossman on May 28, 2017

Andrew Towne reached the top of a rocky ascent Thursday and got his first look at the highest camp on Mount Everest.

Tents were shredded.

Tent poles were snapped.

Human waste was smattered on the snow.

Oxygen bottles were strewn across the rocky terrain of Camp IV, where climbers get their last bit of rest before making a push to the summit.

A violent wind storm had come the night before and decimated the camp.

Towne's group heard the reports of four dead climbers and saw the weather forecasts predicting possible high winds, so they delayed their ascent by a day. It was a fortunate decision.

As the 2000 Grand Forks Central graduate was taking in the wreckage at the camp, located at about 26,000 feet at the South Col, a 20 mph wind gust blew across the mountain.

"That's when I realized that this is not a place humans are meant to be," Towne said. Towne had just entered Mount Everest's Death Zone—a place where the air is so thin that simply walking is a taxing proposition and death is imminent if a climber stays too long at that elevation.

"Your mind switches into survival mode," Towne said. "You realize there is no way to call for help up here. If you and your teammates can't help each other, you're out of luck. That's it. You're done. That's why this place is so dangerous."

This wasn't the first reality check for Towne on the mountain.

He had been there for a month acclimatizing and experienced his sherpa climbing partner yelling, "Danger!" on the Khumbu Icefall, a moving glacier between Base Camp and Camp I. Ice chunks regularly fall there. And walking across massive crevasses on ladders is a harrowing experience.

Towne had experienced a night at Camp III without supplemental oxygen, too. He woke up every 20 or 30 minutes gasping for air, wondering what he was doing on the mountain.

But nearing the highest point on earth—and the most dangerous part of the climb—provided even stronger emotions.

"It looked like a war zone at Camp IV," he said. "The only thing close to it that I've seen is Base Camp in 2015 after the avalanche came through."

Towne was unable to summit after the 2015 disaster that killed 19.

Towne and a climbing partner fixed up a tent at Camp IV to rest for a few hours before making a 10:15 p.m. departure for the summit.

It is common for climbers to begin their summit push in the middle of the night, because it's paramount that they get back down to shelter before the next night falls.

About 90 minutes into his climb, Towne's headlamp lit up a boot coming out of the snow.

He turned and looked to the side and saw a deceased climber wearing the exact same outfit as himself—same boots and pants—in the snow. His bare hand was outstretched, grasping in the air for something.

It's likely that it was one of the four climbers that had died in the days prior, but it's impossible to know for sure. When climbers die at that altitude, it is often too difficult and dangerous to remove their bodies. Some stay there for years.

"I mourned this man's death," Towne said, "even as I re-committed that, for me, that this mountain was not worth losing a finger or a toe, much less my life."

Towne kept climbing.

He stopped once when he couldn't feel the toes on his left foot. He swung his leg back and forth 20 times to try to force blood to move down into his foot. Soon, he felt his toes tingle. It worked.

He stopped again to eat and drink some water at the South Summit, which is about 300 feet below the summit.

And he wanted to stop again because he was tired.

"I forgot how much a lack of oxygen affects you," Towne said. "The only thing I wanted to do was to curl up next to a nice rock and sit for a while—even take a nap. Yeah, a nap at 28,800 feet in -35 wind chill sounded like a great idea. But of course, this is how people die. They push themselves to the point that they can't fight back against such thoughts."

Towne slowed his pace to taking one step every fourth breaths.

As he traversed from the South Summit to the true summit, dawn broke on the mountain and he got his first look at the 5,000-foot drops on both sides of him.

At about 4:30 a.m., he reached the summit.

Towne was on top of the world and had successfully reached the highest point on all seven continents, the fabled Seven Summits.

Only about 150 people in world history have climbed the Seven Summits, including both Carstensz Pyramid in Indonesia and Kosciuszko in Australia (the disputed seventh summit) according to a website that tracks it.

But Towne wasn't in the mood to celebrate.

"My immediate emotions on the summit were 100 percent focused on survival," he said. "I knew I had to take a photo. Not only for the momento, but also because Nepal has been stricter on who they certify who summited. You need photographic evidence. Beyond my background thought of, 'Don't forget to take the photo,' my other thought was, 'You're only halfway there. You got up, but now you've got to get down.'"

The descent on Everest is more dangerous than the ascent, but Towne and his climbing partner made it all the way back down to Camp II without major issues—except fatigue.

"It felt like I was on some kind of cruel death march," he said of the 18-hour trek. "This is when my experience as a rower and a marathoner kicked in. The louder my muscles screamed at me to stop, the more I thought of my body as a machine and not an organism. I removed the element of choice from the descent."

Towne was back at Everest Base Camp the following day and was able to catch a ride in a helicopter to Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city.

He's now preparing for a speech on his experience on Thursday in Washington, D.C., at the Youth For Understanding headquarters.

Towne, who works as an international consultant for a company in the Twin Cities, used his Everest climb to raise more than \$20,000 for Youth For Understanding's cultural exchange program.

What's next for Towne?

Besides work, he's not sure.

He still plans to climb a little bit, maybe Matterhorn in Europe, but he won't spend all of his vacation days that way anymore.

He has thought about setting his sights on orienteering, martial arts or, perhaps, competitive ballroom dancing.

But he won't forget his quest to conquer the Seven Summits.

"At the moment, it's a relief that I still have 10 fingers and 10 toes," Towne said. "I guess part of me feels a sense of accomplishment, but more than that, it re-affirms my longstanding belief that the journey is the reward."

"I liked the idea of having the goal of the Seven Summits. The satisfaction isn't having completed the goal—it partly is—but as much or more, it's just how I like to live life. I like pushing myself and I like the combination of nature and risk that you get in mountaineering."