

Waco's Stuart Smith joined an elite fraternity by reaching the summit of Everest in May

By JOHN WERNER Waco Tribune-Herald staff writer

Far below Mount Everest, Nepal was in the grips of a civil war.

Maoist rebels had set off two bombs in Kathmandu's Embassy District, killing five people. Guerrilla fighters frequently attacked Nepali police. When the rebels called for a strike, the whole country shut down in fear of retaliation.

But Waco attorney Stuart Smith wasn't thinking about what he might find once he returned to Kathmandu. Nearing 29,000 feet, the veteran mountaineer was simply trying to put one foot in front of the other.

Everest's summit was slowly becoming a reality. For every step, Smith was taking four deep breaths from the oxygen tank strapped on his back. A blazing blue sky was a welcome sight on a mountain notorious for deadly storms.

Finally, he took the final step. Smith was standing on top of the world.

"I was very relieved...and exhilarated," Smith said. "When you're climbing Everest, it's a race against time and weather. The weather's often miserable at the top, but we had a fantastic day — you could see four other mountains standing 26,000 feet or higher."

It was 11:30 a.m. on May 16. From Everest's 29,035-foot vantage point, Smith could see the peak of Cho Oyu, the Himalayan mountain he'd climbed two years ago. He could see Nepal to the west and Tibet to the east. If he looked hard, he could see India on the western horizon.

A climber took a picture of Smith and Mingma Ongel, the Sherpa who accompanied him to the summit. Smith reached into his pack and pulled out several items for photo opportunities: the Texas flag and banners from the Rotary Club and his law firm, Naman Howell Smith and Lee.

Sixty-one people summited Everest on that beautiful May day, the highest single-day total from the south route in the mountain's history. Only 153 Americans had ever been to the summit — and now the 42-year-old Smith had joined them.

"Some people started crying, but I didn't have that kind of emotional feel," Smith said. "I was just happy that four of the five people in our climbing group made it to the top."

Smith stood on top of Everest for no more than 30 minutes before making his descent.

It was the culmination of nearly two months of climbing, planning and acclimatization after reaching Nepal. But his journey to the world's highest peak really began 27 years ago.

As a teen-ager growing up in Waco, Smith's parents often took him to Colorado on hiking trips. When he was 15, he signed up for a hike to the summit of Longs Peak, one of Colorado's fabled 14,000-foot mountains.

"It was pretty obvious that I was hooked from the first time," Smith said. "I've always enjoyed the outdoors and I like the physical challenge of pushing yourself to the limit."

Smith kept going back to Longs Peak before branching out to other Colorado Fourteeners. He hiked mountains around Texas and other states. After finishing law school, Smith taught school in Kenya, where he summited the 19,340-foot Mt. Kilimanjaro.

During the 1990s, Smith began tackling more technically-challenging peaks like Washington's Mount Rainier, Alaska's Mount McKinley and Argentina's 22,834-foot Aconcagua, the highest peak in South America.

Those climbs led to Cho Oyu, a difficult 26,906-foot peak in the heart of the Himalayas.

"When I climbed Cho Oyu two years ago, Everest seemed feasible to me for the first time," Smith said. "I thought that if I could reach a 26,000-foot peak without oxygen, I could get to 29,000 feet with oxygen."

Last summer, Smith summited Gasherbrum II, a 26,340-foot peak in Pakistan. Soon afterwards, Smith told his wife that he was planning to attempt Everest.

"By nature, Stuart isn't a flashy person," Elizabeth Smith said. "He'd never brag about how he was going to summit Everest. But Stuart has good judgment, he stays in shape and is extremely self-disciplined. So I felt pretty comfortable with his decision."

Smith trained like a madman. He ran a 50-mile ultra-marathon in Huntsville last December before running 26-mile marathons in Houston and Austin.

In addition to running 40 miles a week, Smith climbed the stairs with a 40-pound pack at his 10-story office building in downtown Waco. Twenty trips up the stairs equaled 2,400 vertical feet. Smith repeated the drill three times every week.

"I knew Stuart was training to climb a mountain because I saw him on the stairs with a pack on his back," said Jim Routh, an attorney at Naman Howell. "But he didn't talk about it much around the office. That's the way he is about all his climbs. He's so quiet. Then you'd hear through the grapevine that he's going off to some far corner of the world and wouldn't be back for two months."

The trip wasn't cheap. Guided journeys to Everest can cost \$65,000, but Smith found a deal for a non-guided climb at about half the price.

International Mountain Guides owner Eric Simonson set up camps along the route to the summit. He also hired Sherpas, natives of the Himalayas who carry equipment, cook and climb with the visitors. Roughly half of the 1,400 climbers who have summited Everest have been Sherpas.

After flying into Kathmandu on March 22, Smith noticed a heavy military and police presence in the streets. The Maoists have been trying to overthrow the Nepal government for the last six years. The guerrilla fighters killed seventy police officers in a raid two years ago and continue to strike at any time.

"The civil war is killing Nepal's tourist industry," Smith said. "Mountaineers still go there, but regular tourists won't. I was comfortable because I had been there twice before. But if they were targeting tourists, it would have been different."

Following a short flight to Lukla, Smith began a 12-day hike through mountain villages to the Everest base camp. The Sherpas had built a huge altar at the 17,600-foot camp to appease the mountain gods. Only after a ceremony that included the raising of prayer flags would the Sherpas climb into the upper mountains.

Smith's climbing party included the husband-wife team of Phil and Sue Ershler of Seattle, Ted Wheeler of Portland and Kevin Flynn of Rochester, N.Y. The Ershlers were trying to become the first husband-wife team to summit the highest peaks on all seven continents. All of the climbers had considerable experience.

"I loved climbing with Stuart," said Sue Ershler. "Not only was he very experienced, he was in great physical condition. He always seemed very level-headed and dealt well with adversity. And he had a dry sense of humor. That's important because you spend a lot of time at camp in between climbing."

One of the most dangerous parts of the Everest ascent is near base camp, a moving glacier called the Khumbu Icefall. Climbers snake through the mile-long icefall, weaving around the huge ice blocks and crossing crevasses on a series of ladders.

"Those ice blocks tilt at different angles and are constantly changing shape," Smith said. "They can look different from one day to the next. You need to start early because the ice melts later in the day. There have been a lot of big collapses. It took me about four hours to get through the icefall. I didn't take any rest breaks — I didn't want to stop."

The most important aspect of extreme altitude mountaineering is acclimatization. Everest climbers generally climb a couple thousand feet to an upper level camp before returning to a lower camp for a few days to give their body time to recuperate. Gradually, they work their way up the mountain.

Smith went back and forth through the Khumbu Icefall six times with no major problems. But the weather turned nasty at Camp II. With winds gusting up to 90 mph and snow pelts flying through the air, many of the tents were destroyed one night at the 21,300-foot camp.

After surviving the windstorm, Smith managed to reach Camp III at 24,000 feet two days later. Once again, the wind was howling and Smith was close to getting frostbite on three fingers in sub-zero conditions.

"It was getting very hard to breathe up there," Smith said. "I tried to sleep, but it was only in 30-minute intervals. We didn't know how long the storm would last. But we knew we couldn't stay much longer because we only had food for one night."

After two nights at Camp III, Smith decided to climb back down to base camp to recuperate. But as he was making his way down a long glacier called the Lhotse Face, he noticed several splotches of blood about 75 feet apart. He later learned that a British climber had fallen to his death down the glacier.

"The British climber probably fell about a thousand feet," Smith said. "The Lhotse Face is an ice slope at a 50-degree angle. You climb it by clipping on to a fixed rope. But if you slip, there's nothing to stop you."

After his experiences high on the mountain, Smith was glad to get back to base camp to rest. He spent 11 days there, playing cards, reading and calling his wife in Waco. Basking in 90-degree heat, he caught up on some lost sleep and ate big meals prepared by the Sherpas.

When the weather finally cleared, Smith and his party began their final summit push on May 11. Climbing in relatively calm conditions, the party had little problem getting through the Khumbu Icefall before heading up the Lhotse Face a few days later.

Using oxygen tanks for the first time, they advanced to the South Col at 26,000 feet. Smith tried to sleep for a few hours before the party took their one-day shot at the summit.

"It's pretty hard to sleep with an oxygen mask on your face," Smith said, "especially when you're thinking about summiting Everest the next day."

Since bad weather often hits the peak by mid-afternoon, the climbers began their last push at 10:30 p.m. on May 15. They trekked six hours in the dark along the flat South Col before climbing the vertical Triangular Face. Wearing headlamps, all they could see was the snow a few feet in front of them.

After daylight broke, they climbed single-file across a knife-edged ridge with sheer cliffs on each side.

"The ridge drops 8,000 feet into Nepal to the left and 10,000 feet into Tibet to the right," Smith said. "It really didn't bother me, but some people got excited by it."

By the time Smith reached the Hillary Step, the mountain was crowded with climbers from England, Switzerland, Japan, Korea and New Zealand. But he didn't have to wait long to climb the 20-foot vertical rock wall named after legendary British climber Sir Edmund Hillary, the first man to summit Everest in 1953.

The Ershlers and Wheeler reached the summit slightly before Smith. Flynn, the fifth climber in their party, had decided to turn back the previous day.

Sue Ershler began crying when she reached the top. Summiting Everest was especially meaningful since she and her husband had to turn back last year at 27,000 feet because he temporarily lost most of his vision.

"Never in my life had I worked so hard for something," Sue said. "So I experienced a flood of emotions."

Smith didn't cry or shout for joy, but he knew he was lucky to summit Everest on his first attempt. Everest's average summit success rate is only about 20 percent. In 1996, 15 people died attempting to scale Everest. About 180 have died in Everest climbs in the last eight decades.

"I'm glad I did it, but I'm also glad I don't have to try it again," Smith said. "It's a tough climb. It's very risky."

Elizabeth Smith got the news from her mother-in-law as she was driving into Houston for a meeting.

"I was cheering as I walked into that meeting," Elizabeth said. "But I managed to hold back from telling everybody, 'You wouldn't believe what my husband just did!'"

After that window of blue sky, bad weather quickly enveloped Everest in the following days. But Smith made it down the mountain safely. When he got back to Kathmandu, he found even more soldiers patrolling the streets. After two months in the Himalayas, he was happy to go home.

Smith returned to Waco considerably skinnier, dropping from 160 to 140 pounds in two months. But he was already thinking about his next summit. He wants to ascend the highest peaks in Antarctica, Europe and Indonesia to complete the highest peaks on all seven continental plates.

"Oh, Stuart can definitely do it," Sue Ershler said. "Everest is the hardest. The others aren't even in the same league."