

# LIVES TO BE PROUD OF...

**THREE** summers ago I balanced precariously high on a slope of wind-swept snow, ice crystals tickling my face. Beneath my crampons the mountain dropped dizzily for almost 500 metres to where a very few others, small as ants, moved slowly across a carpet of white.

With the support of my ice-axe I had been very cautiously descending a zig-zag trail of boot marks already kicked into the face. But snow blown by the rising wind was rapidly covering these shallow steps, vanishing my trail. The danger level contrasted sharply with any reality I'd ever known, and took my breath away. Or perhaps it was the jaw-dropping view. And that was without glancing at the giant seracs, or ice blocks, teetering far above my head.

In July one of those seracs finally broke loose, plunging into several climbers on the slope below. After knocking them from their precarious stances, the ice slammed into layers of wind-blown snow, loosely attached to older, harder snow beneath. In a flash, a 150 metre wide crack opened in the snowy face, breaking an enormous

slab from the mountain, which plunged towards a group below.

By the time the snow dust finally settled, nine people, including three Britons, had lost their lives, and another nine lay injured. It was the most lethal avalanche on the range since 1994, when nine others similarly died on the French-facing side of the mountain.

Most of these climbers had all the right gear and were climbing with experienced alpine guides. Their route had been successfully traversed by scores of others this season and, indeed, is one of the most popular

## ANDREW KNIGHT

recalls his time on the mountain where nine people recently lost their lives in an avalanche, and ponders on the dangers involved - and the rewards - in such high-risk activities



routes to the summit of Mt Blanc.

Europe's highest peak rises to a height of 4,808 metres just beyond. The weather was good, and they'd even taken the precaution of leaving the safety of their alpine hut in the freezing depths of night to ensure they could traverse the most dangerous slopes before the sun's thawing rays weakened the ice crystals cementing everything in place. And yet, at 5.30am, despite good conditions, the avalanche struck them anyway.

## Only so much one can do...

There is only so much one can do to minimise such risks. I trained for months before my own ascent of this route, and was the fittest I'd ever been. I'd spent a small fortune on survival clothes and equipment, had hired an experienced alpine guide to help keep me alive and on track. I'd even studied the Bear Grylls' survival manual my nurses had thoughtfully provided, learning the various ways to construct snow caves.

The mountain was kind when my big day came. Her -10°C breath abated to a gentle 70mph, and clear conditions allowed me to briefly stagger onto the summit. And yet, I knew that if the weather changed, the mountain could snuff us both out of existence, any time it chose.

With several hours of difficult and dangerous climbing between us and the nearest outpost of civilisation, there would be little we could really do.

Mountaineers know the risks. Why, then, do we still leave the safety of the valleys, for the rarefied heights above? Partly for the views, of course. The

images my shaking fingers and half-frozen camera somehow managed to capture<sup>1</sup> were among the most stunning I'd ever seen.

Partly for the timeless sense of serenity this rarefied, pristine world can bring, with its mind-altering perspective on the problems and pressures of the world below, and of the true value of loved ones and home. But most of all, perhaps, climbers can reach such heights only by plumbing rarely-tapped reserves of stamina, determination, and sometimes even courage.

For a time, at least, the mountains demand nothing less than our best. And at the end of our lives, it's not how long but how well we've lived that is the measure of their worth.

The tragedy of their deaths will never be erased for the loved ones these climbers left behind. But on

those icy heights, before they died, they also lived lives to be proud of.  
1. [www.andrewsadventures.info/2009/Mt-Blanc/](http://www.andrewsadventures.info/2009/Mt-Blanc/)



The 2012 avalanche site - cornices teeter above climbers on Mt Blanc tu Tacul - three monts route. Below: Aiguille du Midi ridge - start of the route. Bottom: sunrise on the Col du Midi.



The author above the Argentiere Glacier.

Andrew Knight, PhD, CertAW, MRCVS, an Australian veterinary cryptozoologist based in London, has since 2009 been searching for the European yeti, *Gigantopithecus modernis yetii*. His quest has resulted in a series of misadventures reported in *Veterinary Practice* since 2010 (January: the ascent of Mt Blanc).

