

Families Crowdfund a \$200,000 Search for Two Climbers Missing in Pakistan

Friends and loved ones scramble to arrange a risky, high-altitude search for Kyle Dempster and Scott Adamson on one of the most extreme mountains on Earth.

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Climbers on skis approach the 23,901-foot Ogre I in Pakistan's Karakoram Mountains. PHOTOGRAPH BY ACE KVALE, AURORA PHOTOS

There was radio silence in Utah on the evening of August 25, 2016.

Climbers Kyle Dempster, 33, and Scott Adamson, 34, were 12 hours late in returning from their scheduled five-day alpine climb in Pakistan.

Back home, their family and friends started to worry—perhaps with good reason.

Dempster and Adamson were trying to tackle one of the most extreme mountaineering challenges in the world: the unclimbed north face of the Ogre II, a peak in northern Pakistan.

The Ogre I (23,901 feet/7,285 meters) and Ogre II (22,835 feet/6,960 meters) are separate summits that comprise a craggy massif that is officially called Baintha Brakk. It is one of the Karakoram range's most prominent formations.

Dempster—a veteran of climbing in the Karakoram, with six prior climbing expeditions to Pakistan—is one of only seven people to have ever stood on the summit of Ogre I.

Meanwhile, the Ogre II, though lower in altitude, has only seen three summits—all by a single party of Korean climbers in 1983.

During Dempster and Adamson's 2015 attempt, Adamson fell and broke his leg high on the mountain, just beneath the summit ridge. That prompted a long and difficult retreat via rappel with scant gear and dangerously frayed ropes. On the last rappel to base camp, the climbers' anchor in the ice crumbled, causing the two to fall down a steep slope for 295 feet (90 meters) before finally coming to rest on the Choktoi glacier at the foot of the mountain. The anchor failure was an "inexcusable [mistake that] nearly killed both of us," in Dempster's words, and the two were lucky to return home from that initial foray.

The allure of finishing unfinished business, however, captivated the climbers enough to bring them back this year for round two.

On Sunday, August 21, they began climbing around midnight, local time. By Monday evening, their Pakistani base-camp cook, Ghafoor Abdul, reported seeing two headlamps halfway up the mountain.

It turned out that this would be the last time anyone would spot Dempster and Adamson. By Tuesday night, a storm had moved in and hung around for the next 11 days. When the storm finally relented, the Ogre II was painted in a fresh, white coat of snow, but all traces of Dempster and Adamson were gone, leaving behind no clues as to what, exactly, went wrong.

Meanwhile, 7,000 miles away in Salt Lake City, a small group of friends

and family came together and arranged something remarkable, and possibly unprecedented.

Within just a few days of the climbers' missed deadline, this small network of friends and family raised nearly \$200,000 to cover search costs; catalyzed diplomatic support within American, Swiss, and Pakistani embassies; and convinced high ranks within Pakistan's military to execute an order to go forward with a risky, high-altitude helicopter search.

It was all anyone could do to give the two Americans every last chance.

Finding Hope

Driving from Wyoming to Utah, Savannah Cummins texted her friend Angela Van Wiemeersch, who is Scott Adamson's partner, to see what her climbing plans were for the coming weekend.

Van Wiemeersch responded with an update on the situation. She said that she had heard no word from Adamson and Dempster. Nor had Dempster's long-time partner, Jewell Lund, or Dempster's mother, Terry Dempster. All were getting worried.

"I continued to offer help to Angela over the next two days, but she seemed to have things under control," says Cummins. After three days, "she finally said I could come help by staying awake with her, Jewell and Terry all night, since Pakistan is an 11-hour time difference. It was really difficult. We were telling stories, laughing, and crying all at the same time. We continued to hope that every time Angela or Jewell got an email that it was good news, but unfortunately we received little good news that night."

Another one of Adamson's friends, Juanita Ah Quin, was present that night. It soon became apparent that money might become a potential issue, so Cummins and Ah Quin launched a fundraising page on the crowdsourcing site GoFundMe.

"This seemed like the only thing we could do to help and make sure that a solid search and rescue could happen when weather cleared, without having to worry about money," says Cummins.

Twenty-four hours after launching the page on August 30, more than two thousand people had donated \$100,000. Over the next couple of days, those numbers would nearly double.

The climbers, through their memberships with the American Alpine Club (AAC), had what is billed by the AAC as "\$12,500 of rescue coverage." That number breaks down to \$7,500 of coverage with Global Rescue, and \$5,000 of domestic rescue benefits that are only available within the United States.

Global Rescue is a worldwide service that provides rescue support for its members, among other things that may include health benefits and security detail. According to AAC director Phil Powers, the average cost of most climbing rescues come in under \$7,000.

This situation, however, turned out to be different. It wasn't a rescue that was being requested, but a search. Although Global Rescue could technically arrange a search, it wouldn't be covered through the climbers' rescue-coverage plan. In addition, searches are far costlier because they often require more time, helicopter support, and manpower.

"The GoFundMe page got started because there were so many upfront costs," says Jonathan Thesenga, a marketing manager for Black Diamond Equipment, a Salt Lake City-based climbing-gear company that also helped sponsor this expedition. When Dempster and Adamson went missing, Thesenga stepped in to handle public relations and help arrange logistics on behalf of the families. "Once the family had maxed out credit cards, that's when it was like, we gotta figure this out."

To further complicate the process, there is no formal search and rescue operation in Pakistan, at least compared to more well-traveled mountain areas such as Chamonix, France, or the Dolomites of Italy.

"It was a scramble at first," says Thesenga. "Who do we talk to? We're getting shut down and shut down. Then, finally, you get on a lead of quality people, and all of a sudden, it's like, OK, this is starting to happen now."

Jewell Lund and Angela van Wiemeersch began by contacting the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, and through various connections, were able to begin moving up the chain to higher-ranking officials.

Meanwhile, Michael and Julie Kennedy, friends of the Dempster family, traveled from their home in Carbondale, Colorado, to be with Kyle's mother, Terry, in Salt Lake City. Michael was a world-class alpinist in the 1970s and 1980s, and he had coincidentally spent some time climbing in this exact region of Pakistan during the height of his climbing career.

Michael and Julie's son, Hayden Kennedy, is also one of Kyle's foremost climbing partners. In 2012, Hayden and Kyle made the third ascent of the Ogre I, a feat that earned them the Piolet d'Or award, considered the highest honor in mountaineering.

Michael Kennedy was instrumental in helping to organize the efforts, first from Colorado and then from Salt Lake City.

"We were reaching out to all these different contacts at the State Department and Embassy, and people in Pakistan we knew," says Kennedy. "At a certain point, there was just enough pressure that, basically, we got the attention of the military."

"All of a sudden, we're emailing with generals in the Pakistani military," says Thesenga.

"It happened so fast, it was hard to keep track of which buttons we were pushing and which levers we were pulling that were actually working," says Kennedy.

Brigadier Nadeem Aslam, C.E.O. of Askari Aviation Services, an agency that is run by former military personnel and supported by the Pakistan Army Aviation, says he was originally briefed about the missing climbers on August 28 through Global Rescue.

Soon, Aslam was inundated with calls from within Pakistan's army as well as from the United States.

"I would say the mountaineers were very popular as it was a trail of calls," says Aslam.

He said the Pakistan Army Aviation makes routine flights throughout these mountains to support troops deployed in these areas.

"In my opinion, no other pilots in the world take missions above 6,000 meters with as much precision as the Army pilots here do," says Aslam. "Pakistan puts all resources available for such a requirement, as it is not only a national cause and image issue, but a mercy mission also."

"The Pakistanis completely stepped up," says Thesenga. "They were like, 'We will treat this as though they are part of our family. You have all our assurances that we will use all our resources capable.' It was incredible."

Meanwhile, a separate team of climbers, led by Thomas Huber, a famous Austrian mountaineer, had just arrived in the vicinity with plans to attempt to climb an adjacent mountain called Latok 1. Also part of this team were the renowned American mountaineers Jim Donini, George Lowe, and Thomas Engelbach, who had traveled there with Huber and his climbing partners, Toni Gutsch and Sebastian Brutscher, to work on a climbing and film project.

In 1978, Donini and Lowe, along with his cousin Jeff Lowe, and Michael Kennedy, had nearly climbed the first ascent of the north ridge of Latok 1. At the time, it was a futuristic accomplishment, even though they didn't reach the summit. Since then, many of the world's best alpine climbers have attempted, year after year, to complete this climb though no one has ever managed to match the highpoint of the four climbers in 1978.

Arrangements were made for Huber and Lowe to assist the Army pilots in pointing out Dempster and Adamson's potential route path on the Ogre II, as well as potential scenarios that might have diverted them from that intended path. Meanwhile, Lowe assisted in running ongoing communication via satellite phone with the family network back in Salt Lake City.

"We passed the information to the unit in Skardu, which was to fly the mission straight away," says Aslam. "However, the weather was very bad and no flying could take place. The crew was placed on alert and standby to fly the mission as soon as the weather allowed. Unfortunately, it became a long wait."

Survival Potential

Dempster and Adamson likely brought minimal supplies—only the bare amount of food and fuel for melting snow into water that was needed to last them five days. By the time the helicopters were poised and ready to search, it had already been over a week. And the storm continued.

It may sound unlikely that anyone could manage to hang in for that long under such extreme conditions, but there are a number of stories throughout the annals of mountaineering that have set a precedent for survival in some of the most unimaginable circumstances.

Climbing can be more unbelievable than fiction. Perhaps the most famous survival story is that of Joe Simpson, as recounted in his book *Touching the Void*. In 1985, after a series of twists, Simpson found himself with a broken leg in the bottom of a crevasse on a mountain in the Peruvian Andes. With no food or water, he spent the next three days burrowing out of the glacier, and crawling five miles back to base camp.

There's a 1998 epic in which Mark Twight, Ward Robinson, Kevin Doyle, and Barry Blanchard were caught in a storm high on the 8,000-meter peak Nanga Parbat, atop the Rupal Face, which is considered the largest alpine wall in the world. They lost their rope, gear, and tent after being pummeled by a massive avalanche. They had no choice but to try to down-climb the extreme, technical terrain, knowing that it was highly likely that at any moment one of them would slip to their deaths. They were about to give up when, in a moment of divine intervention, they stumbled upon an old, abandoned rucksack that contained food, fuel, a rope, and all the gear they needed to get down safely.

There's also the story of the first ascent of the Ogre I, in which two British climbers got into trouble on the descent from the summit. While rappelling, Doug Scott swung out of control and impacted a corner of rock, breaking his legs. It took him days, but he virtually crawled down the mountain and into base camp well after his friends had given up hope that he'd return.

"There was just no way of knowing whether Kyle and Scott were alive," says Thesenga. "But as the days went on, the chances got slimmer. At some point, it would've had to be a *Touching-the-Void* type of epic."

On Saturday morning, September 3, under the first clear skies in almost two weeks, two Pakistani military helicopters launched from Skardu. They landed in base camp beneath the Ogre, picking up Huber for the first scouting mission. An exhaustive search ensued, in which the pilots managed to bring the helicopter within 100 feet of the wall at elevations above 6,000 meters.

Throughout the day, pilots with the Pakistani Army Aviation worked with Huber and Lowe, and conveyed information to Askari Aviation to relay updates to Salt Lake City in real time.

They made thorough passes of the north face of the Ogre II, where the climbers were last seen, the northeast ridge (the climbers' planned descent route), and along a glacier between Ogre I and Ogre II.

In the end, no trace of the climbers was found.

The Aftermath

"I may confess here that I was in communication with many well-wishers of the ill-fated climber, and did give them updated information," says Aslam. "I was asked to talk to Ms. Jewel, Mr. Kyle's girlfriend...I could not find courage to give her such an unpleasant news. I sincerely pray that the family and friends of these gentlemen have the fortitude to bear this immense loss."

Savannah Cummins, who helped start the GoFundMe page, says, "I hope this crowdfunded search-and-rescue mission does not set a precedent in the climbing and adventure world. I have no idea what types of insurance are out there to cover a situation like this, so it's something I'll have to research for upcoming trips, and I hope others do, too."

But she also says she is happy she set up the page. "I have no regrets," she says. "I hope everyone who donated knows how thankful Kyle and Scott's families are. They would not have even been able to attempt such a search and rescue without everyone's help. No one wanted to be in this situation. It was so painful to watch what everyone was going through."

The GoFundMe page has been left open for now, as expenses are still coming in. Based what he's already seen and what he has learned from speaking to others, Kennedy suspects the final tally of these search costs may exceed \$200,000. Kennedy and Cummins are working to provide all the donors with a full accounting of the costs, once those are finalized.

"Kyle and Scott were recognized badasses in the alpine-climbing world," says Thesenga. "But really, they were part of the SLC climbing family. I think that's what made it sting so bad. They were still part of this climbing community, and to lose them really hit hard here."

The events of the last two weeks show, perhaps, that when a community comes together, search and rescue is possible, even in extreme situations. And everything but the mountains themselves can be moved.