

The extraordinary cost of retrieving dead bodies from Mount Everest

by TRAVIS M. ANDREWS May 27



Five people have died attempting to climb Mount Everest this month, and one is missing.

One, 36-year-old Dutch climber Eric Arnold, reached the mountain's summit after four previous attempts but died during his descent last Friday. On Thursday, his body was taken from the mountain by helicopter and brought to a hospital in Kathmandu. The body of 34-year-old Australian climber Maria Strydom, who died last Saturday, was also brought to Kathmandu Friday.

This is a bit of an anomaly.

While these two bodies were removed, scores have not been. More than 200 bodies dot the mountain, according to Smithsonian.

Some of them are there per their final wishes. Many climbers wish to remain on the mountain should they perish, much like a captain going down with his ship, BBC reported. For those who wish for a traditional service, the costs and obstacles of retrieving bodies from the mountain are staggering.

"It's expensive and it's risky, and it's incredibly dangerous for the Sherpas," to whom the task generally falls, Fort Collins, Colo., mountaineer Alan Arnette told CBC.

The price tag can reach upward of \$30,000 to \$70,000 and the quest to reclaim bodies has taken lives in the past. In 1984, 36-year-old Yogendra Bahadur Thapa and his 35-year-old guide Ang Dorjee died during an attempt to recover the corpse of 39-year-old German mountaineer Hannelore Schmatz.

The first problem is the obvious one: Sherpas have to reach the body in question.

Most of Everest's more than 250 deaths have occurred on the portion of the mountain above 26,000 feet, which is referred to as the "death zone." Until 2010, the death zone had never been cleared of the many bodies and trash littering it and making the path more treacherous for future climbers, the Guardian reported.

"This is the first time we are cleaning the death zone," Namgyal Sherpa, leader of the Extreme Everest Expedition 2010, told the newspaper. "It is very difficult and dangerous."

And it's not a one-man job. As Arnette explained, it requires multiple — generally six to 10 — Sherpas most of a day to bring a body down the mountain. Adding to the difficulty is the time crunch Sherpas experience there. One of the death zone's more inhospitable features is its low oxygen levels, which are one-third those at sea level. Due to this, climbers aren't supposed to spend more than 48 hours in the zone, Gizmodo reported.

The act itself isn't easy, either.

"Even picking up a candy wrapper high up on the mountain is a lot of effort, because it's totally frozen and you have to dig around

it," Ang Tshering Sherpa, president of the Nepal Mountaineering Association, told BBC. "A dead body that normally weighs 80 kilograms might weigh 150 kilograms when frozen and dug out with the surrounding ice attached."

To actually remove a body, Arnette said, "They typically put it in some type of a rigging, sometimes a sled but often it's just a piece of fabric. They tie ropes onto that, and then they do a controlled slip of the body in the sled, for lack of a better term, down to the next camp."

There's not enough wood or stove fuel to cremate the bodies on the mountain, so they need to be brought low enough for helicopters to pick them up, which presents another hurdle.

Between the base camp and the summit are four camps, which The Washington Post illustrated in this useful infographic. Due to the thinness of the air further up the mountain, Arnette said helicopters don't normally land above Camp 2, which is 21,000 feet high. Quartz noted that a helicopter did land on the peak in 2005, but that was a rarity, a dangerous one to boot.

As Dan Richards, chief executive of Global Rescue, a firm involved in 2015 Everest rescue operations, told the website, "The last thing you want to do is to land a chopper in a place where there's a possibility there can be an avalanche or a landslide."

With all those concerns in mind, many bodies simply remain on the mountain.

That isn't always easy for grieving families. Take, for example, the body of Tsewang Paljor, a young Indian climber who died in a 1996 blizzard, Outside reported. To reach the summit on the north side of the mountain, climbers sometimes have to step over frozen legs believed to be his, which are capped by the green footwear that has earned the body the nickname "Green Boots."

Paljor's brother Thinley Paljor told BBC, "I was on the Internet, and I found that they're calling him Green Boots or something. I was really upset and shocked, and I really didn't want my family to know about this. Honestly speaking, it's really difficult for me to even look at the pictures on the Internet. I feel so helpless."

Given the high death count in recent years, some don't think the argument about removing the bodies is the correct one to have. Some don't think anyone should climb the mountain at all.

One former climber, Seaborn Beck Weathers who chronicled his experience nearly perishing on the mountain in a book titled "Left for Dead," now strongly advises potential climbers to reconsider. He told BBC, "If you don't have anyone who cares about you or is dependent on you, if you have no friends or colleagues, and if you're willing to put a single round in the chamber of a revolver and put it in your mouth and pull the trigger, then yeah, it's a pretty good idea to climb Everest."