

Only lionhearts can conquer mountains...

Having conquered Everest, Vladimir Telpuk heads to highest peak of Antarctica

By Irina Filipkova

Since 1953, the peak of all peaks — Everest — has been conquered around four thousand times. Since Belarus gained its independence, only four of our citizens have visited the highest mountain in the world: businessman Vladimir is among them.

My father used to work as a glaciologist, spending one month each year in the Caucasus. I was brought up in the mountains so feel at home there. My father first took me with him when I was just four and, by the time I was nine, trips to Caucasian mountains were regular. In 1975, I reached my first summit: the 3,850m peak of Nikolaev, in Tsey Gorge. I used the experience to gain my USSR mountaineering badge.

You climbed many peaks after that. With your experience, can you explain why people climb mountains?

There is no answer to this question. Probably, to test their abilities and determination — not their physical skills but their persistence. You need patience in the mountains, as you need to survive severe conditions.

You might be walking along a crest with rock to the left and a cliff edge to the right. You see two legs sticking out from a rock, wearing the same boots as yours. They've been there for a long time but you simply have to step over them and continue. Seeing this, you understand that you could meet the same fate, but you have to overcome such thoughts. Those who have small children usually turn back. A Russian man died before my eyes high in the mountains; he was simply put aside and buried under the stones. It's almost impossible to bring down a dead body from 8,000m, so they stay there for years.

Have you ever been in real danger?

Yes, several times. We set off for the 'scoring' cliff from the mountain camp during the night and, half asleep, I forgot to put on my helmet. During the first stop, I noticed that I had an ordinary cap on my head. I immediately thought that I wouldn't be allowed to continue climbing, so I borrowed a torch from my friend and ran back to fetch a helmet. On my way, I slipped on a glacier reservoir and fell down. Luckily, I had an ice-axe with me, so man-

aged to halt my fall. On my way back, I had a thorough look and realised that the reservoir emptied into a bergschrund: a crevasse formed when a moving glacier separates from stagnant ice above. Its depth was about 60m, so nobody would have found me there.

My father dreamed of reaching the summit of Everest but had no

Mikhail Melnikov fell ill at 7,600m and we had to take him down. Three of us went up; each at our own speed. My companions were young guys, so walked faster. Suddenly, the weather came down and we lost each other in conditions of poor visibility.

I found an abandoned tent at 7,800m and tried to open it. At -60 degrees, with severe gales, it was

day, I climbed from 7,800 to 7,900m, but found nobody from my team. I had to return to 7,000m and continue my climb anew with the dawn.

I had good luck with the weather, as it was sunny, with little wind, as happens once every few years. Usually, you can stay on the peak for about five minutes before feeling uncomfortable but I remained at the



Antarctic mountains impressive in their beauty yet seem out of reach for mountaineers

chance in Soviet times. The first Soviet mountaineers only conquered it in 1982. During my two month expedition, I'd only been there about a month later when I was suddenly desperate to return home, thinking I'd pay any amount of money to do so. Then I pulled myself together. It takes four days to cover the distance from base camp, located at 6,400m, to the peak. Every step felt near impossible. Each of thousands of steps were completed individually. However, from the last camp to the top it takes just 6-8 hours, which isn't so far really.

Finally, on May 23rd, 2006, you raised the Belarusian flag at a height of 8,848m. Do you remember those four days from the base camp to the peak?

Rather well. We were climbing the traditional route — from the northern side. There were four of us but

hard work to open the zip. I'd have a go and then put my hand back into my glove to avoid frostbite. It would warm up ready for my next attempt. It took me five goes to unzip the tent but

I found no gas stove, water or sleeping-bag. Without them, you can die of hypothermia overnight. The

next

summit of Everest for an hour and 15 minutes, holding the flag with bare hands. The feeling was intense; nobody was higher, except for those in planes, which didn't count.

My weariness was so strong that I couldn't even be bothered to take a photo of the panorama. In fact, few bother to take a camera, as it's so heavy. You even take the cover off a chocolate to remove excess weight!

Which health problems are typical at that height?

Everything above 8,000m is the 'death zone'— due to pulmonary edema and cerebral edema. Dehydration is also a real danger, as 100 grams of liquid are lost each hour. You need a gas burner to be able to melt snow for drinking. To improve circulation you need to take aspirin.

People die in the Himalayas even from a simple leg strain as, if you can't walk, nobody will help you. It's impossible to transport someone from such a height; you simply freeze. One American was found dying by a Japanese expedition passing by. They couldn't help him; they could

only stay near. One unusual case saw a Sherp choose to stay with his



Vladimir Telpuk

master, despite being fit enough to walk down and save its life.

Most people who've climbed mountains before have frostbitten fingers and toes, despite today's boots and gloves being so good. You can even get frostbite on Mt. Elbrus. If you lose a glove, you may lose the tops of your fingers.

How do mountaineers keep their strength up?

First of all, they eat high-calorie foods — such as chocolate and nuts. Nutrition is a major problem in the mountains. The higher you are, the more your taste buds change. For instance, I like beef jerky, so I took it climbing; however, I couldn't bring myself to eat any of it. We usually ate spicy Nepalese food in the camp canteen but, during the high part of a climb, all food has to be heated on gas stoves, so you eat dehydrated soup or noodles. You boil snow to create water, but this happens at a low temperature, so you find that your food isn't heated thoroughly.

What do mountaineers dream of on reaching a summit?

I often think of revisiting again one day. The thing is that you need to dedicate a full two months to such trips, so I must have the blessing of my family. I'd like to climb K2 — the most difficult peak — but they don't approve, as it's so dangerous. My next plan is to go to Antarctica — this or next winter — to reach its highest point. It will probably be a single commercial climb, as it's very expensive to go there. If I succeed, I'll try the 'Seven Peaks' programme, visiting the highest point of each continent. I've conquered two of them already — Elbrus and Everest. It would be interesting, as no Belarusian has yet succeeded.

Does surviving under severe conditions help you in ordinary life?

To some extent, such as being readier to take risks in business — within reason. Life teaches us to bend as needed, while remaining stubbornly determined. Business is like conquering a mountain; you must persevere to reach the top, making difficult decisions. Your goal may be worthy but there is no guarantee that you'll reach it. Some projects seem impossible to accomplish, yet you try. To succeed, you must fully dedicate yourself, which improves your mental strength.



Vladimir Telpuk erected a Belarusian flag on Everest five years ago, at a height of 8,848 metres