

Minutes to live:
Keith Spencer just
before the disaster
that took his life

The Last Climb

A MOUNTAINEER REFLECTS ON THE WAY OF LIFE THAT KILLED ONE OF HIS BEST FRIENDS — AND THAT HE REFUSES TO GIVE UP.

by MARK JENKINS

THE ICE WAS AS GOOD AS ice gets — thicker, we call it. With a single swing, the pick sunk in solidly, as though the ice were soft wood. I felt so confident in the ice that I stopped only twice in 200 feet to twist in screws that would protect a fall. Keith followed, and then he led the next section; after that we gathered our ropes and hiked a snow ramp together to the base of the final headwall, a 220-foot, near-vertical waterfall — the day's primary objective. Stomping our feet and clapping our hands to stay warm, we ate sandwiches and peanut-butter fudge. We didn't talk. We were both in high spirits and knew it without having to say so.

It was January 2, 2009, and we were back in the South Fork of the Shoshone River, a deep canyon southwest of Cody, Wyoming, and home to some of the best waterfall climb-

ing in the lower 48. Nearly every winter for the past 20 years, we'd made our way here after all the fair-weather climbers snapped into skis. Ice climbing is cold and unforgiving, and it takes a special kind of masochist to appreciate it. But it was on these frozen, merciless walls that the two of us finally meshed and moved together with grace.

We were not a perfect match. Indeed, in superficial ways, we were opposites. I was vocal and gregarious, Keith practically mute. He volunteered nothing of his personal life to anyone, including me. We were different climbers, as well. He was too deliberate and slow for me to enjoy rock climbing with him. On ice, however, where he could use his axes and crampons to take full advantage of his athleticism, he moved more swiftly. That didn't make him an easier man to know, but we'd found our common element.

We finished chewing our fudge and looked up. Almost all the snow was now gone from the canyon walls around us, and the ice itself was clear of snow. We decided to divide the headwall into two pitches: I would climb halfway up, put in a belay, bring Keith up, then lead the second half to the top.

The ice remained safe, and I climbed more than a hundred feet using only one ice screw. I placed the belay in a tiny alcove below a vertical bulge, so that Keith might be protected from any falling chunks of ice while I led the last pitch. Kicking out a platform for my boots and driving in two ice screws to the hilt, I called out, "On belay!" — I had him if he fell — and began bringing up the ropes.

One rope felt slack, so I pulled it all the way up, stacking it carefully at my feet. Although I had climbed using two ropes for protection, Keith climbed on just one.

Keith was just pulling up over a bulge, only 15 feet below me, when he shouted, "Avalanche!" in a voice that was more resigned than alarmed.

A second later a horrific roar began. It was a hideous, unimaginable cannonade. I smashed myself flat against the ice, fully expecting to be torn from it. I screamed in terror. The thought of my two daughters sparked in my mind.

I cannot say how long the avalanche lasted — 30 seconds, a minute, two minutes? Forever? When it finally ended, I was in shock, disbelieving that I was alive and knowing, without even opening my eyes to check, that Keith wasn't.

SIX-FOOT-THREE, LEAN, AND HARD as an I beam, Staff Sergeant Keith Osborn Spencer of the Air National Guard was selfish with his time and disinclined to take any job that would cut into his adventuring. A biathlete, he competed for the Guard and ran a three-hour marathon but could also snap out 25 chin-ups from a dead hang.

We first met in 1979 as charter members of the Wyoming Alpine Club, and by the time we were headed back to the South Fork in the winter of '09, we'd packed in more life than our years should allow, but lost too many of our friends, as well.

Formed by a half-dozen wolfish, wool-clad climbers in the late '70s explicitly to beg for free gear, the Wyoming Alpine Club was our attempt to sound respectable — like, say, the venerable SMC, the Scottish Mountaineering Club — rather than like the long-haired, wild-ass teenage rubes we were. We designed our own stationery, with an ice ax underlining the club name, and sent out letters. We didn't need money: We could live off of black bananas, day-old bread, and cases of Old Milwaukee. We just needed a new rope or a not-leaky tent. No dues, no meetings, no officers — just expeditions. Yvon Chouinard was the first to

respond, sending us some pile jackets and polypro long underwear.

Membership was open to anyone who actually did things, big things. At 19, Keith had walked the length of the Continental Divide — six months, 3,000 miles — solo. So he was in. Bill Kuestner, a.k.a. Captain America, and Mark Cupps, a.k.a. Cuppy, had climbed Denali, although Cuppy had gotten pulmonary edema and come within an inch of losing his life. The brothers Moe — Mike and Dan, Eagle Scouts — had caused legendary mischief in all of the wildernesses they'd explored.

Keith's quirk was quietness. He was practically impossible to speak to on the phone, the pauses being unbearable. Eventually he would say, "Well, thanks for calling" — even though *he* had made the call and offered up nothing. He'd ride his bike over to visit you, stay for an hour, say very little, and then leave abruptly, saying, "You're always welcome here." It was his signature.

Keith loved Dylan and the Stones and on road trips could play the same cassette or CD over and over again until you were dying to toss it out the car window. He would never sing along or hum or even bob his head. He would listen, mum, unmoving as a statue.

Once, surrounded by longtime friends, he dodged a personal question by suddenly reciting Robert Service's poem "The Heart of the Sourdough." He had obviously practiced it. He cleared his throat, began in a very deep voice, and recited the entire thing:

There where the mighty mountains bare their fangs unto the moon

There where the sullen sun-dogs glare in the snow-bright, bitter noon...

We all speculated as to the cause of his silence. He grew up in Reno, Nevada, one of four boys, but never said a word about his brothers. He was apparently a gifted high school runner but a loner. In a rare, out-of-the-blue moment, he told me that his father was a pack rat and a dictator who bossed his mom around. When I tried to learn more, he clammed up.

In 1995, we suddenly had a lot more to not talk about: Four of our closest friends died on an Arctic expedition when a bowhead whale breached and flipped the aluminum motorboat in which they were all traveling, dumping them into freezing water, two miles from shore. Unable to right the boat, they hung on to the hull for as long as they could before succumbing to hypothermia.

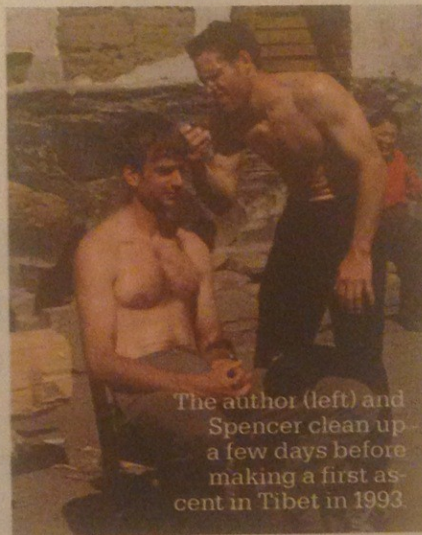
The following summer, Keith and I, along with Tim Banks, another of the Alpine Club's surviving members, climbed the Medicine Bow Diamond to install a memorial plaque in their honor. The Diamond is a 700-foot wall in Wyoming that hardly anyone but club members ever climbed — it's too high in the

mountains, with frequent rockfall and severe storms, and the rock is blade-sharp. We shredded one of the ropes during the ascent.

We summited at dawn. The welkin above and Lake Marie far below were lavender: Earth as seen from heaven, the kind of view only a mountaineer gets.

Tim had lugged up a battery-powered drill, and we mounted the plaque at the edge of the face, in the sun but out of the wind — just the kind of place a climber would take refuge. Keith had written the epitaph beneath the names of the dead: ADVENTURERS WITH COURAGE, COMPETENCE, AND COMEDY.

We knew that it could just as easily have been our names on the plaque, but we didn't



The author (left) and Spencer clean up a few days before making a first ascent in Tibet in 1993.

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discuss it. We knew as well that it could still be our fate, but we didn't discuss that, either. Climbing high mountains is a mortal endeavor, a gamble. You pretend that vigorous physical and technical preparedness will change the odds. But inside, to keep alpine climbing, you have to believe in luck. I don't know if Keith saw it that way, exactly. I only know that, like me, no matter how painful our recent loss, he wasn't hanging it up.

WHEN KEITH WENT TO RANGER SCHOOL, he was deeply disappointed. He was about 35 then, and the training days were so easy for him that at night he would slip out for an extra five-mile run, followed by push-ups.

He lived a spartan existence, as befitted his bachelor temperament. He kept a tidy apartment, as if he were living on a ship. Other than his biathlon rifle and his mountaineer-

ing equipment, he had few possessions.

He'd done many things in life. In addition to the Continental Divide, he'd walked the length of the 2,650-mile Pacific Coast Trail, gotten his pilot's license, mountain biked Australia's 2,200-mile Great Dividing Range end-to-end, and fought the Taliban in Afghanistan. (As with everything, he said little about his time at war, but once he did allow that "we will lose in Afghanistan. We are not fighting for our homeland. They are.")

But it was mountaineering that truly moved him. Because he was too closed off for most people, he often climbed alone. Keith soloed nearly all of Colorado's 14ers as well as the highest peaks in North and South America, Denali and Aconcagua. He knew that climbing solo was more dangerous than climbing in a team, but the lack of a partner wasn't about to stop him. Danger itself wasn't the draw — this is something flatlanders always get wrong — rather, it was the challenge. Keith needed to be pushed to his limits, and mountains do so quite splendidly. But with great challenge comes great risk. That's part of the deal.

On trips to the major ranges, Keith discovered that he did not sleep well at high altitudes. Because of this, he developed his own unique method of ascent. The standard routine is to gradually move from one camp up to the next during a period of several weeks, eventually going for the summit after a night in the highest, coldest camp. Keith, in contrast, summited from base camp. I know this sounds unbelievable, and only Keith was strong enough to pull it off. He perfected this unusual technique until he could climb even the tallest mountains in the world with it.

Because he was fastidious about everything in life, including breakfast, he got up at 2:30 AM if we were to get an alpine start, at say, 4 AM. Whereas I would crawl sloppily out of my sleeping bag at 10 minutes to 4, cramming a candy bar into my mouth while lacing my boots, Keith would have to cook himself a big meal and clean and restack his pot and stove before leaving the tent.

Philosophically, I learned that stoicism wasn't much fun. We Americans love the myth of the strong, silent type. Stoicism is somehow associated with courage and toughness, which Keith had in spades. But for years I found it really difficult to be around him. I would talk, and Keith wouldn't. Eventually, however, I realized that it was as much my issue as his. He wasn't uncomfortable; I was. Unlike me, he didn't need to fill every vacant space with words. After that revelation, I started seeing the trips with Keith as my Zen practice. I wanted and needed to develop some patience, and Keith, simply by being Keith, was the perfect teacher.

It took a long time, but after I passed through my apprenticeship in patience, a new world opened up to me. Whenever I was with Keith, I was free of the need to pontificate. I didn't have to share my thoughts; I didn't have to converse. I could say absolutely nothing for hours, and Keith would not be offended. This was his gift to me: the liberty of silence.

IT'S A SEVEN-HOUR DRIVE FROM LARAMIE, Wyoming, to the South Fork of the Shoshone River, and when we drove there on New Year's Day, 2009, Keith was, for the first time since I'd known him, practically voluble.

He had just returned from soloing Cho Oyu, the sixth-highest peak in the world. He'd been on the mountain with a team but had climbed alone. Nonetheless, he'd made close friends on the expedition, two women he called Squash and Suzy. The three of them were planning an expedition to Lhotse, the fourth-highest peak on the planet, in two years' time. He couldn't shut up about it.

Something had cracked open in Keith.

Perhaps I had changed too, because I managed to listen without interjecting my opinion. Some things take decades.

Over pizza in Riverton, we had a second honest-to-God conversation — about Justin Moe, the then-17-year-old son of one of the friends who had died in the Arctic 14 years before. Justin's father had been killed when he was only three, and over the years Keith had made an effort to take Justin out hiking and climbing. We'd done several winter trips with him and my two daughters, and Keith had thrilled the kids with his surprise fireworks show in the snow.

A natural risk-taker like his father, Justin was in a bit of trouble, so we called his mom to find out the latest and promised to get him out climbing or winter camping.

We arrived in Cody late and spent the night at the Spike Camp, an ice climbers hostel. The next morning Keith was back to his old laconic self, but it didn't worry me. He was at ease. We silently ate cereal, made sandwiches, filled our thermoses with hot chocolate, and drove out to the South Fork.

When we got to the icefalls, it was still dark, so we pulled off into the snow to wait for daybreak. We just sat there in the car in the dark on a ranch road, deep in the Absaroka Mountains of Wyoming. We didn't speak. We didn't turn on the radio. We just waited, car off, listening to the winter wind. That was enough.

Eventually, in the gloaming, we began to glass various frozen waterfalls. On both sides of the South Fork, there are 3,000-foot-high

ridges sliced with deep ravines; snowmelt from the summits forms icefalls in the shadowed defiles. We decided on a five-pitch moderate route called the Main Vein. It looked like our safest option; the ice was so fat that even the first pitch had formed, an unusual occurrence. Although I'd done the route several times, Keith hadn't.

It was a typical, blustery, snowy Wyoming day. We could see the icefall, which wound up a gash 1,500 feet above the valley floor, but the rest of the mountain was shrouded in clouds. We hiked to the base through knee-deep powder. I would lead the ice pitches; Keith would lead the snow pitches. We didn't talk about it. We knew our strengths. Keith was faster postholing the deep snow between the falls. I was faster on the ice.

The first pitch was thin and sketchy and therefore good fun. Above this pitch Keith plunged up several hundred feet of crusty snow to the next frozen falls.

Partway up the second ice pitch, we were hit by a spindrift avalanche. At the bottom of the third icefall, we discovered a large pile of hardened avalanche debris with the

DANGER ITSELF WASN'T THE DRAW — THIS IS SOMETHING FLATLANDERS ALWAYS GET WRONG. RATHER, IT WAS THE CHALLENGE.

stump of a tree sticking out. This bothered me. I asked Keith how he was doing and he said, "Fine, long as there are no more avalanches." I said, "I think things are safer, now that anything loose has been swept away." This was a logical response given the information we had. Small sloughs were common in the South Fork, but avalanches of size were unknown. No one had ever died or even been hurt by an avalanche while climbing here.

The avalanche that hit us on the second-to-last pitch pulled the icy rope straight through my hands — burning my gloves — as well as through the belay device. Below me, Keith had fallen 200 feet.

I would have been stranded on the vertical wall of ice were it not for the rope I'd pulled up — the second one he hadn't used. With fumbling hands I managed to set up several rappels and get down to him. He was hanging from the end of his rope against the canyon wall, broken in half. Sobbing, "I'm so sorry, Keith, I'm so sorry," I cut him down and laid him on his back in the snow. I checked his pulse on one wrist, then the other, then on his blackened neck. Then did it all again. And again.

MY GREATEST FEAR IS THAT SOMEDAY my wife, Sue, and my two daughters, Addie and Teal, will get a call. Now that I've buried more than half of the original members of the Wyoming Alpine Club, this thought alone should stop me from climbing mountains. I know this; you don't have to tell me.

When I called Sue from a ranch in the South Fork, after I could finally croak out what had happened, she said she would fly up to Cody and drive me home. I said that wasn't necessary, but she came anyway. We drove slowly back across the high plains of Wyoming, the wind and snow blowing through the sagebrush, Sue listening while I told and retold the story of the accident.

The day after Keith's death, a search-and-rescue plane flew over the area and took pictures, which were later analyzed. Photos determined that the avalanche had started at the very top of the mountain when a five-foot-deep, quarter-mile-long cornice broke off, funneling thousands of tons of snow into the 30-foot-wide chute. (The search-and-rescue team and professional avalanche forecasters all agreed that there was no way Keith and I could have anticipated the avalanche.)

As we pulled up to our house, Sue whispered, "Please don't tell anyone you're going to give up climbing. Because you won't. And I don't expect you to."

I didn't, and she is right. I am gutted with guilt planning my next expedition. But when I'm finally there, up high,

breathing in the sky, sinking the teeth of my tools into the ice, exhausted and scared and hopeful and pushing upward with an electric joy coursing through me, it is as if mountains and I were made for each other.

This is not an excuse. I have no excuse.

We have a tradition in the vanishing Wyoming Alpine Club. Once we have passed through the hardest stages of mourning, we hold a celebration of our dead friend's life. It's a potluck, and everyone brings slides or photos and stands up and tells their personal stories about our former comrade. We laugh and cry and bring our friend back to life.

We did this for Keith, although I was unfortunately away on assignment in Papua New Guinea. Sue organized it. Two of Keith's brothers were there, as were dozens of friends. Tim had a bunch of slides digitized and played Keith's favorite Dylan songs to a slide show that broke everyone's heart.

And some midnight this summer, Tim will hike around to the top of the Medicine Bow Diamond with his battery-powered drill. Justin Moe and I will silently climb the quartzite face together, through the cold black night. I will lead and Justin will carry the plaque, the epitaph already written. ■