

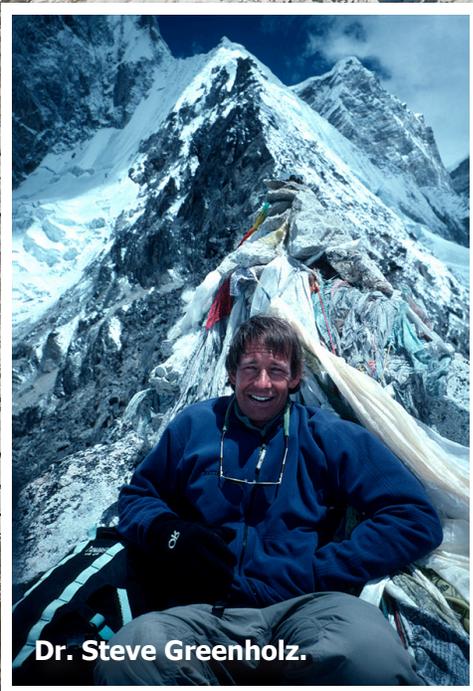
# Dr. Steve Greenholz

*Striving to reach new heights...*

Dr. Steve Greenholz is a Pediatric Surgeon in Sacramento, California. He went on an expedition to Mt. Everest in May, 2000.

Dr. Greenholz is a serious mountaineer, having climbed many notable mountains in Bolivia, Alaska, Ecuador, Africa, and Asia. A long distance runner, cyclist and tri-athlete, Steve enjoys kayaking and rock climbing. As a doctor and climber, he is a valuable member of his team.

There is a particularly interesting dispatch from a May 2000 article that followed the expedition each step of the way. His experience is reported in the story on the following pages.



**Dr. Steve Greenholz.**

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*— Dr. Steve Greenholz*

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*“To live is good.”*

*Dan Morrison reports on Dr. Steve Greenholz’s epic summit bid.*

Story from [www.everest2000.com](http://www.everest2000.com) (site no longer active)  
May 2000 by Dan Morrison

NAMCHE  
BAZAAR [4:30  
pm] “I fall  
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Dr. Steve Greenholz is a very experienced mountaineer. He is also a very introspective man. Although he is friendly and gregarious in many ways, he does not easily share intense, personal moments. And summit day for Dr. Greenholz was an intense, personal moment.

A couple years ago, Dr. Greenholz climbed Cho Oyu, a mountain whose summit is about two thousand feet less than the summit of Mount Everest. “But,” as Dr. Greenholz states emphatically, “those two thousand feet are enormous.”

“I think it’s really the debilitating effect of those extra days and night up high.” Dr. Greenholz explains. “On Cho Oyu your high camp is 23,500 feet, below 8000 meters. You don’t have to breathe oxygen. Hopefully even here you only have to spend one night at the South Col. The longer you spend, the less likely your chances are.”

“You get progressively weaker the more time you spend up high. You get too tired.”

“When I finished Cho Oyu, I couldn’t take another step upward. So when I came back, the whole purpose to me was, now I have that extra day, that extra two thousand feet, how can you preserve yourself physically enough to do that?”

“We spent one night at Camp Three,” Dr. Greenholz says about his summit climb on Mount Everest. They slept while breathing oxygen. From Camp Three to Camp Four was much harder than they expected. “I think it was much more difficult than we expected,” he says, “it was more technical, both the Yellow Band and the Geneva

Spur, it had steep, near vertical rock climbing. There was a fixed rope, but it meant working your way up through miniscule toe holds for your crampons up steep, broken rock. Which was exhausting.”

“It’s very physically demanding, because you’re scratching with your crampons. And you’re scratching with your ice axe. So there’s kind of a sliding back effect. You’re using enormous physical exertion. One hand on the fixed rope, with an ascender. But I switched to my hand a couple times, because your ice axe can’t grip, so I would tuck it, and use my hand, while you’re trying to find some way to get your feet on to something.”



The city of Namche Bazaar, capital of the Sherpas in Nepal.

“It’s very physically demanding, because you’re scratching with your crampons. And you’re scratching with you ice axe. So there’s kind of a sliding back effect. You’re using enormous physical exertion.”

“I think it was complicated by how hot it was. And with oxygen, that hot, and mask, we were all fogging up. That’s what happened to Kim [Gattone]. I think the fogging up wasn’t as big an issue until you hit the rock climbs. Then you were completely fogged up, trying to see a foothold, when you were trying to look through a mist. And all of us were pulling up our glasses, or trying to clean them, particularly on those rock climbing sections.”

“And I think the other thing about from Three to Four was it took a lot longer than we expected. I think it took a lot more out of everybody. We thought it might be a four or five hour thing, and I think it turned out to be eleven. We got to Four around five o’clock. Five or five-thirty in the afternoon.”

“The weather was bad,” Dr. Greenholz continues, “but the bigger concern was can we recover in five hours to start again? After an eleven hour day. Questionable. Now, if the weather had been good, we would have gone.”

The decision was made to spend the night on the South Col and go for the summit the next day. They slept with oxygen again. “We were surprised we rested as well as we did,” says Dr. Greenholz.

They spent most of the next morning just lying in their sleeping bags. “Then we all decided to take a walk,” Dr. Greenholz explains. “And it’s blowing to beat the band. And we put on gear, and Mike [Brown] came out, Dave [Hahn] was out. We walked around and saw the corpse.” A Sherpa died on the South Col several years ago, and his body is still there. “We walked around the South Col, and it was just screaming. And then we sat around, Dave, Mike and I, chatting about the ethics and morality of taking photographs of corpses.”

“First we were talking about the emotional impact of seeing corpses. And our biggest surprise was that it had no impact.”

“Michael started the conversation by saying, ‘You know, this has oddly little impact,’ when we were standing there. We were both surprised. Very dispassionate. I think the corpse has been there eleven years.” Because of the atmospheric conditions at 26,000 feet, the altitude of the South Col, bodies do not decompose. “The head of hair was full,” says Dr. Greenholz, “it was face down. But, he could have died yesterday.”

“I think you feel so separate from his life, it’s like, he died a long time ago, these are what’s left, and maybe it’s no different than walking through a cemetery, except you actually look at the remains. But we all felt very dispassionate about it.”

“The only thing it does do, and I expected it to be more chilling, in a fear sense, but it was almost sort of vague, but yes, this is a very serious place. That’s what it makes you feel, from the South Col, from that point onward, it’s very serious. It does raise to mind the question of what happened. What went wrong that this happened. But it’s more of a logical progression than an emotional progression.”

The team geared up and left Camp Four for the summit about 10:15 that night. “I felt fine,” says Dr. Greenholz, “good, ready to go, excited. You still have a little exhaustion, lethargy just from being that high. But I felt pretty good the last couple of

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days; I was concerned about having spent that extra day there. I had spent an extra high day on Cho Oyu with Kim’s previous blind episode, and I deteriorated a lot that day. And the next day I was exhausted.”

“So I was concerned about that extra day, but I was on oxygen, resting pretty comfortably, and so I thought, who knows what’s going to happen?”

“My goal all along, my ultimate feeling about the trip, all I ever wanted was a summit morning. I wanted to walk out of the tent one night with a shot.”

“So it was kind of like for me, what ever happens, all this has happened, this is what I came to do. I have a shot at it; I don’t really care how it turns out. I’m going to give it my best shot, but at least I’m getting the shot.”

“Michael [Brown] and those Sherpa disappeared right from the get-go,” explains Dr. Greenholz. “That was the last time I saw Michael the whole day. Because they were going to leave oxygen on the Balcony. So I was assuming that those Sherpa were on their way, and they were going to drop off the oxygen and who knows.”

“With me in sort of my immediate limited world, because it’s dark, was Robert [Link] Ang Passang and myself. Greg [Wilson] and Mike [Dunnahoo] were further back.”

“Through the gullies I was fine. It was slow; it was four breaths a step.” Dr. Greenholz was breathing three litres of supplemental oxygen per minute. “We weren’t making great progress, but at least in my estimation we were making okay progress. We’d kind of check with Ang Passang periodically, and get some idea as to how long to the Balcony. I think they would have liked to have been at the Balcony at three am, I think we got to the Balcony around five-thirty. It was sunrise already.”



“Through the gullies I was fine. It was slow; it was four breaths a step.”

“But we were moving consistently, virtually no rest breaks. Everything was going fine, the weather was good. We took a rest break at the Balcony. Talked for a little bit, swapped [oxygen] bottles. Which is also interesting, because when Ang Passang swapped my bottle, he never turned it on. And Ang Passang said, ‘Let’s go, we can’t take a long break here if we’re going to make the summit we have to keep moving.’ And my first couple of steps, something was wrong. And I finally turned to Ang Passang and he checked, and it wasn’t on. I just felt like I couldn’t breathe.”

It took them a long time to reach the South Summit. “Again,” continues Dr. Greenholz, “moving consistently, and again, it was Robert, Ang Passang and myself. I was first, those two were behind me. It was like, ‘You set the pace, and we’ll see where we are.’”

“Eventually we got to the South Summit, and had another pow-wow. I knew consciously, at the Balcony we were doing well, but we were pushing the limits. Although the consensus was, ‘If possible, let’s keep moving. If you feel like moving, let’s keep moving.’”

“So Robert and Ang Passang were pretty much giving the green light, to keep going.”

"In the past I was notorious for not turning around. But this time it was easy to turn around. And made easier by the fact that I was super tired, I knew it was going to be long, and by how bad the weather was."

"But the big issue, the big problem... It was ten o'clock at the South Summit. Which is not bad. Ang Passang was guessing two to two-and-a-half hours to the summit from there. As it turned out, it took Dave Hahn three hours from there. Regardless, the issue was the weather."

"Even when we were on the Balcony, we could see that the valleys had filled up. And over the next three or four hours the cloud layer was coming up from below. So it was consistently beautiful where we were, but every time you turned around the clouds were higher. And things were disappearing. Pretty soon Pumori was gone. So it didn't appear particularly threatening at the moment, but right at the decision time, and we're all standing around just below the South Summit, they were still giving the green light if I felt like going."

"There's a rock band," explains Dr. Greenholz, "right before the South Summit. It's difficult. Very, very hard, very vertical. Another super exhausting section. And I had just finished that, and was very tired. But now starting to really weight the, 'Is it possible, is it not possible?' A couple more hours. Well yeah, I can keep going for a couple more hours, and get there. I'm really tired now, but I can get there. Dave Hahn was now with us too, he was filming all that. And it was like, 'Well, you can get there, but can you get down?'"

"And I'm thinking, well maybe I can get down, but it's going to be slow again. And what does that mean?"

"And then right about that time the first wisps of clouds started to blow through. From this perfectly clear thing, to clouds. And in a matter of fifteen or twenty minutes, it whited out. And started snowing."

Weather kills people on Everest. "I was thinking that right then," admits Dr. Greenholz, "and I was thinking that even more when in a short period of time it got worse. And when we talked about the descent, it reached virtual panic."

"I even tried to go a little further, the weather got worse, Ang Passang comes back and says, 'Two, three hours, maybe, the weathers pretty bad.' And really pretty much instantaneously said, 'We better go down.'"

"I think I debated it for a few minutes. I'm surprised now, because I really wanted it, I put a lot of work into it, how quickly I made the choice. But it just seemed like everything was stacked up in this no-win. And I really do think it comes from loving your life, loving the prospect of your future. And standing there and looking at that, and sort of looking at the whole trip and saying, I've had this phenomenal trip, this is a phenomenal climb, I'm standing at the South Summit, how much am I willing to risk?"

"In the past I was notorious for not turning around. But this time it was easy to turn around. And made easier by the fact that I was super tired, I knew it was going to be long, and by how bad the weather was."

"It whited out, and then we started down. Because Robert decided, if we're going down, let's go down now. So we ended up virtually descending into the worst of it. I

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probably did two rope sections with complete blindness. My goggles had fogged up. And when I reached the bottom of that section, I was really tired. I had done it blind. I couldn’t see. Robert would say, ‘Go to the left!’ and I would try to go to the left. But I couldn’t see where I was putting my feet.”

“So when I got to the bottom of that, I was really tired, and hyperventilating. Just couldn’t get any air. Which is the first phase of what would be a panic attack. Just because I couldn’t get any air. So I took off my goggles and was trying to wipe things, and I opened up my pocket and instantly snow filled my pockets. So I pulled out my tissues to wipe, and they’re completely full of snow.”

“So now I can’t see, I can’t clean my goggles, and I can’t breathe.”

“It was that moment between desperation and panic. And then Robert came down, and it was his tone of voice. I look at this as the critical moment in the descent. His tone of voice was, do whatever you can, but we have to keep moving. Days later he said he was spooked at that moment. We were at 28,000 feet, the weather was terrible, and we were fearful that it was going to get worse.”

“The situation was beginning to spin out of control.”

“All you can do is just keep trying. That’s the crux. That was one of those “give up” moments, where you can’t do it, you can’t clear your goggles, you can’t move, you just can’t do it. And it’s very hard for anybody to work with you. You have to forget everything, and just focus on each instant as it progresses. I’m going to take a step. Ah, it worked. I’m going to take another step. That’s what you do.”

The weather stayed bad for the next couple of hours. Robert Link let Dr. Greenholz descend below him, and while handling fixed lines knocked loose an oxygen bottle hidden in the snow that someone had left. It flew past Dr. Greenholz at freefall speed like a missile, brushing his side. If it had hit him, the injury would have been serious at least, possibly worse. “He was convinced he had killed me,” says Dr. Greenholz.

“We get down to the Balcony, and the weather was worse. It is ten or fifteen feet of visibility. And there’s no fixed rope on the Balcony. Ang Passang is in front of me, and Robert, I thought at the time, was behind me. We were three in a line. Ang Passang completely disappears. I can’t see anything. The Balcony is white, the air is white, the snow is white. So I’m suspended in whiteness. And can’t tell where I am.”

“I can’t see Robert. I can’t see Ang Passang. So I start walking, what I think is behind Ang Passang. It was only in the most peripheral part of my awareness that I hear a voice. Which is Robert, who now is way over here,” Dr. Greenholz says while pointing off to his left. “And so I’m thinking, if he’s way over there, and that’s the Balcony, where am I?”

“I was a step or two from walking off the Balcony.”

Robert saved Dr. Greenholz from certain death. “He was screaming ‘Don’t move! Don’t move!’ One step from going off.” Dr. Greenholz says he felt no fear at the time, although it hit him later. “At the time it was just more of the same mess that was on going.”

“It’s the experience of facing such a difficult problem, knowing you could have folded, not folding, even though it’s beyond what you’re capable of doing, but you still don’t fold, and then when it’s all done, you realize how scared you must have been.”

“Ang Passang must have turned around at some point, and came back. Ang Passang pretty much just glued himself to my side at that point.” He stayed with Dr. Greenholz for the rest of the descent. Once they reached the fixed lines in the gullies below the Balcony, the weather improved slightly. “At that point you could see fifty yards.”

“I was exhausted by then, and would often sit down,” explains Dr. Greenholz. He was so tired that Ang Passang often clipped and unclipped Dr. Greenholz’s carabiner to the fixed line for him. “I was really deteriorating strength wise. I was super, super tired.”

“Arriving at the South Col, I had no idea where the tents were. I couldn’t see, it was blowing so much. But Ang Passang knew where to go. And out of nowhere suddenly there were tents, big tents. I was on them, and I never saw them until I was almost in the enclosure of tents.”

“When I got to the South Col, and could finally see my tent, I was so tired; I lay down in the middle of this whiteout, twenty yards from the tent, and started crying.”

“I couldn’t help myself. I was so relieved and emotionally released, that I was sobbing. In the snow, with my goggles off, just knowing that I had to get up and walk twenty yards. And Greg [Wilson] was outside, in his down suit, and came over and helped me to the tent.”

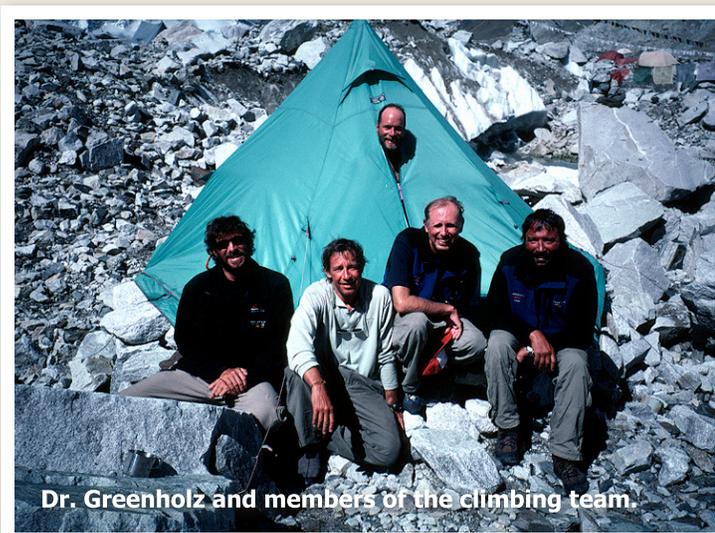
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“And how focused you were on the task, and how you eliminated everything so you could focus on the task. And when the task is over, you’re flooded with all those things you eliminated, or were able to ignore, until the problem is solved.”

“So here we are,” continues Dr. Greenholz, “we’re laying in there, we’re both crying, we’re slowly getting it together, we’re saying, ‘You won’t believe what happened!’ And at that point Ang Passang came to the tent. And zipped it down. And just was seeing how we were doing.”

“And he said, ‘Too bad no summit.’ Then a shrug. And then, ‘To live is good.’” 🧢



Dr. Greenholz and members of the climbing team.