

Rescue on the Eiger – *Chris Bonnington*

From 'I Chose to Climb'

We saw two Swiss Guides coming up towards us. The one in front shouted, 'Two of your comrades are injured, will you help us to rescue them?'

Of course we agreed and turned back up the slope.

The pair were Brian Nally and Barry Brewster, two climbers from southern England. That morning they had started out up the side of the First Ice-field, but instead of going into the Ice Hose, they attempted the wall, about a hundred feet to its left. In doing this they lost the route and wasted several hours. As a result it was getting on for midday when they reached the second Ice-field. Here they decided to cut steps diagonally across it, and so their progress was slow.

It was four o'clock when they reached the end of the ice-field, the stone-fall was by now violent as the afternoon sun loosened the rock in the upper part of the face. This place was a death trap after midday. Barry Brewster took over the lead at the foot of a rock pitch – Nally heard him shout – 'Stones!'

He ducked into the rock instinctively, for he was now hardened to the constant bombardment that they had experienced from the start of the second Ice-field. Suddenly, the dark shape of a body came hurtling down and Nally was only just able to hold the rope. The peg bent to a frightening angle. The rope held, and Barry was lying suspended on the end of it on the steep ice a hundred feet below. When Nally reached him, Barry was unconscious. Nally then did everything that anyone could have done in the circumstances. He cut out a ledge for his friend – no easy matter in the hard ice, with the stones continuously whistling down – gave the injured man his crash hat, wrapped him up in all the available spare clothes and then settled down for the night.

The following morning we learnt of the accident, and turned back up the ice-slope. Don let out the first pitch, half an hour's climb and then;

'I think I can see someone,' Don called down. 'Look at the top of this ice-field.'

I could just discern a small red figure moving slowly along the top.

'Stop where you are,' shouted Don. 'We'll come up to you.' The man didn't reply and continued on for thirty feet or so; then he stopped on a small spur, and seemed to be lying down.

We were now getting used to the sound of falling stones which were coming down the whole time.

'It's as good as a war film,' remarked Don, after a particularly bad bombardment. But then we heard a deeper sound – it seemed to fill the wall with its wild keen. I looked across and saw the tiny figure of a man shoot down the ice into space. It was like being hit hard in the stomach – I just hugged the ice and swore over and over again – then got a grip of myself – the little red blob of colour was still there; it must have been the injured man who had fallen.

We shall never know exactly what happened, but probably Barry had been swept from

his perch by stonefall. Mercifully, he was dead when he fell, for Nally had been with him when he died early that morning.

Don and I continued cutting across the ice-field. The sky was now completely overcast; wisps of grey mist were reaching round the side of the face. Stones whistled and landed all around me; one bounced off my helmet, another hit my shoulder.

Pitch followed pitch – it just never seemed to end; all this time Nally was lying inert on the small spur of rock. I wondered if he also was injured, whether he would be able to help himself on the way back. Don and I now felt very much on our own, for the two Swiss Guides had vanished – there was no-one else on the face and I couldn't help wondering what would happen to us if we were hit by stones.

One last rope length and I found myself only a few feet from Nally; at first glance he seemed unaffected by his ordeal. He was wearing a red duvet that clung wetly to him and round his neck, in a tangle of knitting, was his climbing rope. His features were heavy with fatigue. He had a look of simplicity, yet in his eyes there was a wildness.

'Are you going to the top? Can I tie on to you?' he asked.

My nerves, already stretched, exploded.

'We've come to get you down, you fool.'

'But why not go on up, now that you've come this far?'

'Your friend is dead! Do you realize that? We're taking you down.'

It was only then that I realized how shocked he was, how misplaced my anger. He was like an automaton, did what you told him, but was incapable of thinking.

'We'll have to put you in the middle, between us. We'll use your rope. Give it to me.'

I spent the next twenty minutes untangling the rope – it was knotted as only three hundred feet of nylon can be. Each knot had to be undone separately, the rope was sodden, it numbed and cut my hands, but at least I was doing something. Don, a hundred and fifty feet below, was in the line of some of the worst stone fall. All he could do was to wait patiently and watch the storm gather about our heads.

At last the rope was untangled. I tied Nally into the middle and he started back towards Don. Our progress was painfully slow and stones were still coming down the whole time. Nally had given his crash hat to Barry; a stone hit his head with a dull thud and he teetered backwards, and I grabbed his arm, putting him back into the ice. He shook his head and seemed alright, or, at least, no more shocked than before.

At the end of the ice-field the storm broke: there was a deafening blast of thunder followed by a torrent of hail. It completely covered us, tore at us with steadily increasing force. Then, as suddenly as it started, the storm stopped.

'Let's get a move on,' Don shouted, 'before it starts again.'

We abseiled carefully down the Ice Hose. Once down, we began to feel safer, though I didn't relax till we reached the Stollenloch Window, where a reception party was waiting. We were pulled through the window, blinded by the flash bulbs of press cameras, and the whole ghastly nightmare was over.