

Peak crazy: jumping off Everest

Ken Hutt was stuck at 5000m above sea level, crippled with altitude sickness. He hadn't eaten or slept. His mission? Paraglide off one of the world's highest mountains.

By MARK WHITTAKER



Ken Hutt practising paragliding off Cho Oyu. He is planning to attempt Everest next.

Ken Hutt was doing an acclimatisation walk to Everest Base Camp when he started to suffer from altitude sickness. His dream was to climb the world's sixth highest mountain, Cho Oyu (8188m) in Tibet, so he could unpack his paraglider and jump off it.

But here he was at barely 5000m above sea level and he was already crook. Above him, - helicopters with stretchers dangling below were ferrying dead bodies down the mountain. The day before, April 18, 2014, an avalanche had killed 16 Sherpas on the Khumbu Icefall two days walk ahead of him.

"I'm sitting on the glacier next to Lobuche, watching them, one after the other, feeling really sick," the 61-year-old from Berry on the NSW south coast recalled recently. "It's only 5000m. I haven't eaten or slept. 'What am I doing here?' I'm supposed to be climbing this 8000m mountain and flying a paraglider off it.' "

The former NSW policeman and businessman decided to call off his quest. He felt bad about it because he was raising money for polio eradication. He had sponsors. The Gates Foundation was going to triple every dollar he made. Nepal had beaten polio in 2000 but there were plenty of kids around the world still suffering.

But that night, just a few hundred metres lower, his altitude sickness came good. “I thought, ‘What a wimp. As soon as it gets hard you call it off. And I’m using these poor dead guys as an excuse.’ ”

Hutt decided he wouldn’t personally cancel the flight. He’d let fate do that for him.

“I reasoned that to fly a paraglider off one of the highest mountains in the world is so difficult that something else was bound to get in the way,” he says. “The weather’s going to stop us, the bureaucracy will stop us. There’ll be some reason why it won’t happen. I’ll let that reason come by itself and I’ll be off the hook.”



Ken Hutt climbing Cho Oyu.

He crossed the Chinese border to Tibet and thought he’d found his out when the Chinese government wouldn’t give him permission to fly. But then a friendly local bureaucrat, - sympathetic to Rotary’s End Polio Now campaign, gave him a tacit, I-know-nothing nod: “Just don’t fly from the top of the mountain or the border guards will shoot you.”

Hutt started climbing and never felt another pang of altitude sickness. The weather turned nasty but was forecast to come good. He got to 7200m and had the choice of flying from there or proceeding to the 8188m summit with the rest of the expedition. But he couldn’t do both.

“I still thought something was going to stop me doing this flight. So many things can go wrong. Something will.” But he woke the next morning, stuck his head out the tent and it was a glorious, clear day with a 6-knot breeze wafting up the mountain. Perfect for flying.

He knew he had to do it. But everything had gone so right, surely Murphy's Law would kick in when he got airborne.

Hutt had no rational right to be there. He had taken up mountain climbing after he retired from the police rescue squad in 1996, needing some adrenalin replacement therapy. He had learned to paraglide only the year before, inspired to take it up after watching a documentary, *Miracle in the Storm*, about a paragliding competition near Manilla in northern NSW.

A German paraglider was sucked up to 9947m (the altitude of 747s) where the temperature was minus-40C and the oxygen impossibly thin. She blacked out and only just came to in time to land it. A Chinese competitor also was sucked up by the storm and killed by lightning. That's what made him want to do this.

So here he was, a year after watching that, ready to jump from 7200m. He pulled the super lightweight (2.7kg) glider from his pack and suddenly became acutely aware that he had flown this craft only once before — off a tiny pimple of a hill near his home.

He would be flying in air one-third the thickness he was used to, hanging from a glider that was too small to carry his weight plus the ice axes, sleeping bag, rope and food he had to carry for self rescue.

“All the Sherpas were saying it was ridiculous: ‘You shouldn't do this,’ ” Hutt recalls.

“They hadn't even wanted to carry the glider up for me, but once I started to spread the glider out they all started getting really excited about it. The wind dropped from 6 knots to almost nothing, which is unheard of. We're at 7200m and there's not a breath of wind.”

In the absence of a breeze, Hutt had to launch by running down the slope. He wasn't even sure he could jog at that altitude. But after a hop and a skip he was away, and the valley was 1500m below.



Hutt on his property just outside Berry. Picture: Katie Rivers

“I've been flying for half a minute or something when I realised I haven't taken a breath. I now know what it's like being an asthmatic. All of a sudden there was no air to breathe. Just

trying to suck it all in. Nothing. I'm going to pass out. I wasn't working, just pulling a few strings, but the hard work had been done running off this hill. The lungs were just screaming out for oxygen. Once I recovered, I could start to take it all in. This is berserk! This has - happened!"

"I wanted to come down as fast as I could. It's pretty daunting. The way to come down is to get away from the hills, but I didn't want to get that far away that the Chinese military would see me and start shooting."

In hindsight he recognises that he was too inexperienced to be up there but that he was blessed with brilliant conditions.

Landing 13km away at base camp was something else again. He couldn't find the prayer flags he had set out as windsocks.

"The scale is huge. You have no idea how fast you're flying, how much sink rate you have." He realised he would have to land on rocks.

"I've estimated the landing speed was over 50km an hour. The noise through the risers was - deafening. I've never heard that before. It was because I was going so fast through the thin atmosphere."

As he hit the ground, he turned to fall on his back, intentionally using the ice axe wrapped in his down sleeping bag as a cushion.

"I've laid there: 'I just did one of the most amazing flights of all time.' And I've opened my eyes and right in front of me was Cho Oyu summit. 'How good is this!' I could feel pain in my left knee and right ankle but I was too scared to see what damage I'd done." Not much, as it turned out.

Hutt vowed that it would be his last crack at an 8000m peak. "You are being unfair to family. Mountaineering is selfish and dangerous. Throw in a paraglider in the high mountains and the danger doubles. You're taking off with your fingers crossed because you really don't know what you're going to be flying into with thermals and winds that are coming across one peak and can give you a big knock down. You skimp on weight so you don't carry a reserve chute."

Then he changed his mind. And decided to aim higher — to fly off Mount Everest.

"For some reason you keep going back. People say to you, 'Why do you do it?' (British climber George) Mallory said 'Because it's there', but I always say: 'If you've got to ask you're never going to understand anyway.'"

Last year Hutt was told he had verbal approval from Nepalese Tourism Minister Rabindra - Adhikari to fly off the world's highest peak, but then Adhikari was killed in a helicopter crash without having committed it to writing. Instead, Hutt led a trek of Rotarians to Everest Base Camp that raised \$180,000 for Rotary's End Polio Now campaign.

He's trying for Everest again next year, by which time he would be 62 — the oldest Australian man to have climbed the mountain and the only one to have flown off it.

The stats say that climbers over the age of 60 have a one in 10 chance of making it to the summit and, if they do make it, a one in four chance of dying on the way down. You've got to wonder how jumping off the top might skew that probability.

But Hutt's dream is in the hands of the bureaucracy.

"It's more about the politicians," he says. "Look, you could do it without approval and expect to spend some time in jail. But you can't do that when you're associated with Rotary and doing it for such an important cause."