

Last Breath on Everest, the Pleasure and the Pain Flight Lieutenant Ted Atkins, RAF

Flight Lieutenant Ted Atkins served with the RAF for 31 years as an Aerosystems Engineering Officer. He also spent many years with the RAF Mountain Rescue Service as was the Officer Commanding the Service in Scotland for four years. During this time he trained as a Paramedic and led the RAF that climbed Mt Everest via the North Ridge in Tibet.

His talk will describe how it is to stand on the highest point on the planet and the risks he took to get his team there. He will talk of the team and personal motivations and how it was for him to hold the responsibility for the lives of his men. As a university of life (and death) in terms of management and leadership Everest has no equal. In a bad year for every six who stand on the summit one dies trying. Of those who die many will have made a bad decision at some point. This will often be oxygen (the lack of) related.

When Ted first went to Everest in 1988 he saw and used an array of useless oxygen systems; mismatched and wasteful. In 2001 when he led the RAF team little had changed, so with his team he had no choice but to use what was available. After getting two of his team on the summit Ted made his own attempt but one of his team became sick at 8300m and Ted's priority changed. The focus now was to get this man down. This was a success but the last chance for Ted to summit had gone. However the success of Everest is to bring home as many people as went there; with all fingers and toes!

Ted came back to UK and when on lecture tour told all who would listen how it was so much better a thing to have led his team than to have the personal glory of standing on the summit. He hoped that if he said this enough that it might come true! He knew that the day would come when he would say "I wish" and that day might be too late for climbing the world's highest mountain. So he resolved to go back on his own. No team to lead and worry about.

With his engineers head on he looked at the problem of Everest. This was to be his third and last chance, what could he do to stack the odds in his favour. The answer was oxygen. The whole issue of Everest is about oxygen. When you stand at that point 29028 feet above the sea, two thirds of the world's oxygen is beneath your feet. Without acclimatisation a person can only there live there for a matter of minutes. Having a good oxygen delivery system was the key. The system that was in use was a Russian aviator mask. It did not collect the oxygen on exhalation (approx 60%) and therefore wasted more gas than was delivered to the wearer!

Before setting off in 2004 Ted took a Tornado pilot's mask and began work on his new system. He did not complete this before setting off for Base Camp. Each day at Base Ted set off up the ice fall to get fit and acclimatised. Each rest day he pondered the problem until he had a brainstorm. He took the small coke bottle he had been using to pee in, dropped a condom inside folding the edges over the neck of the bottle, and attached a large bore hose over this and onto the mask. When he breathed out a valve in the mask closed and all the O₂ went into the condom. He used the pump from his air bed to simulate O₂ flow and it worked. When a breath was taken the condom emptied. The deed was done. But would he have the courage of conviction to use a prototype and put his life on the line?

They stepped over his body on the south Summit and (satellite) phoned down to say "Teds Dead".