

Oklahoman stands on Everest's summit

By David Zizzo Staff Writer

It was pitch dark and cold enough to freeze exposed flesh, and one wrong move could prove fatal. Douglas Beall was right where he wanted to be. Finally within reach for the 41-year-old Oklahoma City physician was the goal of a lifetime. For years, Beall had prepared for this day, exercising fanatically, planning trips and honing his skills with lesser challenges. Soon, if things went well, Beall would stand on top of the world: the summit of Mount Everest. Encased in a 25-pound cocoon of specialized gear, wearing an oxygen mask and carrying 25 pounds of other gear, Beall peered through goggles at the path before him lighted only by the lamp on his head. "You feel really isolated," Beall recalled. For weeks, Beall, and the other five climbers in his group, each accompanied by a local Sherpa climber, had performed a ritual of climbs and return trips between base camp and upper camps to acclimate to the thin air more than four miles up. They returned to a relatively lower altitude for a week to recover from cuts, bruises and other nagging afflictions that can't heal without enough oxygen.

And they waited for the window — a period of five days in Everest's brief May climbing season when the weather and the mountain might grant passage to those who dared.

A month after they arrived in the Himalayas, the time came. The serious trek would begin for Beall and the others, who included the youngest female to ever attempt the highest peaks on all seven continents. The group made their way over the Khumbu Icefall, a jumble of frozen monoliths the size of apartment buildings, crossing ladders strung over crevasses hundreds of feet deep.

"You can't see the bottom of them," Beall said.

They traversed bleak landscapes where the sun, blocked by only the thinnest atmosphere bore down on the climbers, who kept their mouths closed to avoid sunburned tongues. They climbed sheer walls, digging their crampons into the frozen face. After each exhausting leg, they stopped at higher camps to rest.

Finally, after a stop at the fourth and final camp, at 26,000 feet, the moment of truth — summit day. At 11 p.m., the dozen headed out, wondering if they really could endure above the five-mile level few had experienced.

"When it comes time for the last push, you really hope you're ready," Beall said.

For the first hour, Beall said, "I was really struggling. I couldn't figure out what was going on." He checked his oxygen gauge. "It wasn't moving." Gearing up, he figured, he must have inadvertently switched off his regulator. "Oxygen," Beall told his Sherpa, who handed him his ice axe. "No, oxygen," he said. "Turn it on."

When the precious gas flowed, he said, it was "like a shot of adrenaline."

After moving by headlamp for hours, at about 4:30 a.m. daylight began to appear, along with a new appreciation for the immensity of the mountain and the task before him.

"It sounds simplistic," Beall said, "but just the size of the mountain. You think, 'Oh my God!'"

At this altitude, he said, you don't hike. You trudge at four to six breaths per step, and feel, as one climber put it "like one giant lung." You struggle with pain and internal conflict. One part of you is so determined that you must be wary of bad decisions; the other must face self-doubt.

"You always wonder if you're up to it," Beall said. "It's kind of a haunting feeling."

But on this day, the mountain was strangely calm. And at 9 a.m., May 17, Beall topped a tiny cornice of snow at 29,035 feet, peered over into China and stood on the highest place on earth.

"You get to the top, and it's just immediate satisfaction," Beall said. "I was tired, yes, but there's just absolutely nothing better."

At this altitude, the brain doesn't operate the same, he said. The simplest calculations are difficult, Beall said, including how long you spend at the summit and who's up there with you (Beall's entire climbing party would summit) — details you often can't resolve later.

"You start to go a little wacky, but you don't really know you're going a little wacky," he said.

After about 30 minutes, Beall started the most dangerous and most vital part of any Everest attempt, the trip down. Everest's dangers were highlighted a few days earlier when Beall's group found a Sherpa whose head had been crushed by falling rock or ice. On this day on the way down, Beall and another climber spotted another Sherpa on the summit ridge. He had left himself unbridled from safety ropes and was "almost ready to slide down" to his death.

"He was a bit confused and delusional," Beall said. "He thought I was his client." The climbers gave him oxygen, and fortunately — since rescue by carrying someone is physically impossible at this altitude — convinced the Sherpa to begin moving again.

As they retreated down the mountain, Beall had to treat one climber for pulmonary edema, a common but dangerous result of extreme altitude. The entire climbing party made it back safely, eventually returning to civilization via a ride in an aging Soviet helicopter.

For now, Beall is waiting for the numbness in his feet to subside, and he's enjoying the thick atmosphere back home. He plans to finish the last two of the "seven summits," the highest peaks on each continent, climbs he figures will be a stroll in the clouds compared to Everest.

Climbing's in his blood, though, Beall figures, so as long as he's able, he'll be venturing far above the tree line. But he probably will never again experience what he did on Everest.

"It was everything I thought it would be and more," he said. "Even if that's the peak of my entire life, that'll be alright."