





INTO THIN AIR



KENT HARVEY GOES
WHERE EVEN EAGLES
DARE NOT FLY...

BY MARGOT CARMICHAEL LESTER
PHOTOS COURTESY OF KENT HARVEY

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here'd been a lot of icefall avalanche activity coming down off the west ridge of Everest. Down at base camp (17,600 feet), Kent Harvey had just said that he should set up the camera to shoot it when a massive icefall avalanche cut loose. It was going to sweep right across the climbing route through the Khumbu Icefall where several climbers were. "The avalanche's powder cloud and wind blast swept all the way down and through base camp," the operator and DP recalls. "In a matter of minutes, word came over the radios that two people, one of whom I had known for years, had been blown into a crevasse. They were later rescued. Unfortunately the Sherpa they were climbing with was never found." Knowing he would be doing several trips through that area was unsettling. "There's no doubt that traveling through the icefall was a bit of a gamble — Everest can offer up a lot of scary moments," Harvey admits of the 29, 029 foot peak, the highest point above sea level on earth. "Many of us are familiar with various tragic stories. When you're there, those stories take on a greater relevancy".



[“Exerting yourself at altitude is like breathing out of a straw.”]

And Kent Harvey has been there more than most. To hear this child of the Rocky Mountains spin tales about shooting on the slopes of the world's tallest mountain is to ingest snapshots from a life Harvey was born to lead. Prior to entering to the film business, the extreme filmmaker and Hollywood action-film operator worked as a ski patrolman, professional river guide, and rock-climbing/mountaineering guide. You could just as likely be reading this story in *Outside Magazine*. But happily for us, Harvey also was watching the light and taking pictures.

“I was always fascinated how the mood of a room would change over the course of a season,” he recounts. “Growing up in Colorado and having four distinct seasons really lent itself to seeing light in different ways and that always had an affect on me.”

Harvey's love for all things camera began with sixth grade photography class, and picked up steam at the University of Oregon, where he majored in telecommunications and film. After graduation, Harvey kicked around Crested Butte and Boulder, guiding until he had an epiphany. “The film business was where I needed to focus my energy,” he remembers. So he called longtime friend and Hollywood gaffer Dan Riffle, and

landed a PA gig with the Denver-based show *Diagnosis Murder*. “As clichéd as it might sound, on that first day I watched the camera department and knew that was what I was meant to be doing,” he says.

Thus began a long, steady climb through the ranks of the camera department. Harvey began as a loader, and worked on features such as *Dumb & Dumber*, and *Things To Do in Denver When You're Dead*. In 1996, he worked with cinematographer Shelly Johnson, ASC on a television remake of *The Shining*, and joined Local 600. Ever forward he progressed, taking gigs as a 2nd AC, 1st AC, and then eventually as an operator and DP. In addition to the studio work, Harvey also shot action footage for several years for legendary ski-film director Warren Miller.

Then things changed in 2004, when Harvey teamed up with 2nd Unit DP Jonathan Taylor on *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*. A segment was shot in Glenwood Canyon on Interstate 70, and required a climbing cameraman who felt comfortable shooting several hundred feet off the ground. Harvey fit the bill.

“Jonathan was happy with my work and asked me to come out to L.A. to continue operating on the 2nd Unit,” he recalls. It was an opportunity Harvey couldn't turn down, so he moved



his family to L.A.

Today, though he's best known as an action shooter Harvey also works on non-action films and commercials. Over the years, he's shot documentaries and commercials, operated on a variety of television shows including *Trust Me*, *Boston Legal* and *The Office*, and features including *Iron Man 1 & 2*, *Gl Joe*, *The Other Guys*, and *The Dark Fields*. Harvey often works with 2nd Unit DP's Jonathan Taylor and Paul Huguen, attributing much of what he has learned on features to the two men.

"I heard someone once describe shooting big action sequences as hours of boredom surrounded by moments of sheer terror, and that can certainly be true," he says of Hollywood's bread-and-butter genre. "It can be daunting to know how much money is being spent on a single sequence, and when there is no way to see a real rehearsal of what's going to happen it can be pretty intense. Something that helps is thinking the action through from beginning to end, and rehearsing what you think will happen while looking through the viewfinder. My long time assistant, Lou Demarco, will laugh at this but often times when rehearsing a camera move I make sound effects so as to get my head in the game."

As on adventure shoots, action feature sets have their dan-

gers. "Shooting a high-speed car chase, handheld, from inside one of the picture cars can also feel dangerous," Harvey allows. "However on a set I'm working amongst a team of professionals who understand their respective crafts. They know it is their job to keep me safe and that gives me a piece of mind."

Harvey's first DP gig came in 1999 on an adventure documentary for NBC and The North Face, *Shishapangma: A Celebration of Life*. The film was about a team of well-known climbers planning to climb and ski Shishapangma, a Tibetan peak rising above 26,000 feet. The project, slated to shoot about 70 days, was cut short. "I returned to a lower camp to pick up my SR package to shoot some scenics," Harvey recalls. "My camera assistant, Dave Bridges, and two of the climbers (Alex Lowe and Conrad Anker) decided to hike up the glacier to the base of the mountain to inspect how best to begin formally climbing the southwest face. A massive avalanche released from 6,000 feet above. Tragically, Alex and Dave were never found. Conrad did survive."

The fainter of heart might have called it quits then and there. But after years of climbing, Harvey was philosophical and processed his grief as all great mountaineers do. He kept climbing.

TOP OF THE WORLD, MA!

It's no every-day thing to shoot on Mt. Everest. Here's how Venice-based Kent Harvey managed the epic task.

"On Everest, climbers cut their toothbrushes in half or clip unnecessary straps off their packs in order to save weight," says Harvey of his most recent shoot on the slopes of the world's tallest mountain. "Carrying extra batteries up high really isn't an option, so I used a non-rechargeable lithium battery system designed by Stuart Cody of Automated Media in Massachusetts. I can get about 20 SR mags worth of shooting out of one 12-volt battery. And because they're lithium, they're essentially unaffected by the cold." More often than not, Harvey says he carried the camera body in his backpack. His climbing Sherpa/assistant, Ang Kashi Sherpa, carried the lenses and tripod. "There are times and places, like in the Khumbu Icefall or on the Lhotse Face, where I didn't want to take the time to assemble the camera due to the inherent risk of where I would be standing," Harvey explains. "In those cases, I carried the camera built either inside my pack or slung around my neck. Then I could place the camera onto the tripod, grab the shot I wanted, and get moving."



"This kind of thing you have no control over," Harvey asserts so genuinely you have no other choice but to take his words on faith. "I wouldn't say it was hard to climb mountains nor shoot on them after losing two team members. I will say that it made me much more aware, perhaps even more conservative, of the objective dangers that exist in the mountains, and to always trust my own instincts and intuition with regards to being safe. Tragically, I would have to say that most of the deaths involving friends of mine in the mountains could have been avoided. As heart-breaking and as sad as these losses were, they taught me some valuable lessons, one of the greatest being to trust my own gut."

Having climbed four of the infamous Seven Summits (the highest mountains on each continent) – and getting paid to do it – Harvey was offered a chance to climb Mt. Everest as part of a branding campaign for the Eddie Bauer/First Ascent technical outerwear clothing line. Harvey would be shooting the "plasma content" for the campaign, now playing on 64-inch HD plasma screens in Eddie Bauer stores throughout the country.

He'd been to Everest before in 2002, with climber Peter Whittaker, nephew of the first American to summit the mountain in 1963. The first time, Harvey shot "only" up to 23,000 feet.

This time, again with Whittaker, he would head to the top.

"It was a dream job as it combined shooting beautiful imagery on some of the highest mountains in the world," he notes. Already active (his idea of relaxing is mountain biking, climbing, skiing or whitewater kayaking), he trained stateside by riding his bike, trail running in Sullivan Canyon, and walking the steps in Brentwood with 40 pounds of water on his back.

His gear also needed to be up to the challenge. Harvey shot some tests at Mountain High ski resort with the Sony EX-3 and Canon's hybrid DSLR, the 5D Mark II. Because his footage would be shown on large HD displays, image quality was critical. In the end, Harvey took his 1/2-inch Fuji 13 x 3.3mm and 18 x 5.5mm zoom lenses to work with the EX-3 and a variety of Canon L series lenses for the 5D.

Working at altitude is extremely demanding, even for an experienced climber like Harvey. The filmmaker says it takes two weeks just to get to Everest's base camp, which sits at 17,600 feet. "And you begin walking at about 9000 feet," he notes. "When exerting yourself at altitude it's like breathing out of a straw due to the lack of oxygen."

That meant one of Harvey's prime challenges was simply pacing himself. "On a climb, the cameraman not only has to

climb the mountain but also shoot," he continues. "At high altitudes and in cold temperatures, a DP can't really ask the talent to wait while you move ahead or set up or they could quite literally freeze. This often means moving ahead of the subjects you are shooting, setting up the camera, getting the shot, packing up and moving ahead again."

Harvey's the one who ends up standing still the most. Over the years, he's figured out what clothes to wear, and has developed an efficiency that keeps people and things moving, "I know how people move in the mountains, and when they will likely need a rest, which is often times my chance to move ahead," he says.

On May 23, 2009, Kent Harvey stood at the highest point on the planet. "Climbing at elevations where planes fly is very cool," he deadpans. (He has since climbed Africa's Mt. Kilimanjaro – for a Radical Media/MTV special, Summit on the Summit - giving him five of the Seven Summits).

But he insists his most challenging mountain shoot was closer to home in 2001, on Alaska's Mt. McKinley (Denali), the highest peak in North America at 20,320 feet. It was a NOVA doc on high-altitude physiology and Harvey was hired to be the high-altitude cinematographer. The production used a Sony F-900 up to 14,000 feet; Harvey shot with a Sony PD-100 to the summit.

"McKinley is a very big and very cold mountain as it sits at a northern latitude and is very susceptible to big storms off the Bering Sea," Harvey describes. "Some say climbing McKinley is even harder than climbing Everest due to the sheer size of the mountain and its location in the Arctic. On our trip we had horrendous weather. In one particular storm we were relegated to our tents and a snow cave for 11 days at 17,000 feet. We did a lot of story-telling, sleeping, and day dreaming of lower altitudes and better food."

For Harvey, there's a convenient overlap between the skills he needed as a guide and the ones he needs as a shooter. "In the mountains you become intimate with terrain, the snow conditions, the weather, the gear and by really understanding the elements at play you make decisions instinctually," he concludes. "As an operator or cinematographer I believe you do the same thing. You become familiar with the story you are helping to tell, the crew you are working with, the equipment, the lenses, and before you know it much of what you do just comes by instinct." ❁