

DREAM MERCHANTS

INVESTIGATING
THE MYSTERIOUS
DEATHS OF THREE
JAPANESE CLIMBERS
ON DENALI IN 1989

BY JON WATERMAN



TOM FALLEY

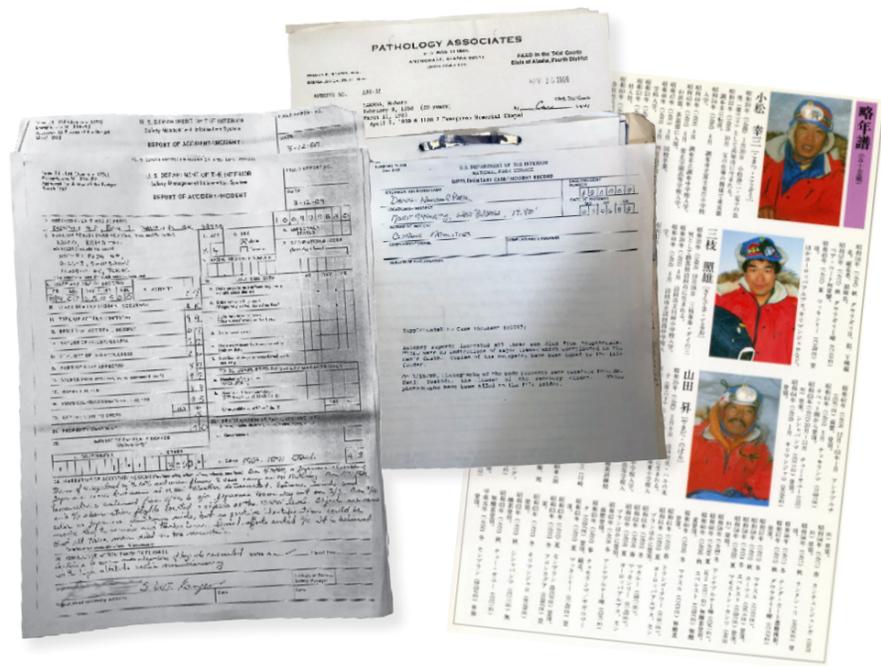
Kahiltna Pass, 10,000 feet, lower left with trail to
11,200-foot camp and up West Buttress; Denali Pass
visible upper left.

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WHEN NORBORU YAMADA and his two Japanese companions didn't return from the *West Buttress*, Denali's easiest route, in February 1989, no one could understand what had happened. Known as "the Dream Merchant," Yamada was famed for his visionary Himalayan climbs including the South Face of Annapurna and Everest in winter. Several years earlier he had led the race to climb all 14 8,000-meter peaks. His many admirers (including me), friends and family wanted to believe that the climbers were sheltering out the lengthy storm in a snowcave.

More than two weeks after the Japanese team's disappearance, supporters had to accept the inevitable when the bodies were spotted from fly-overs. In one attempted recovery a military Chinook helicopter flew half out of control and at full throttle, with the veteran pilot breathing bottled oxygen and trying to break out of a 2,000-foot-per-minute downdraft. Rescuers strapped inside the bouncing fuselage could see three red-suited and motionless figures lying below, spread up to 100 feet apart in the shape of an upside-down isosceles triangle. Cyclonic winds on frozen snow had carved abstract sastrugi that, from the aerial perspective, looked like texture on a skip-troweled sheetrock wall. Since the violent weather and thin-air flying and landing were deemed unsafe, the Japanese remains lay on the 30-degree slope for more than a month.

Finally, on March 26, a 17-man Japanese rescue team climbed to the accident site after being pinned down by another prolonged storm with wind they described as a "devil's roar." The rescuers were shocked to see that Yamada's team all lay on their backs on an innocuous-looking snowslope merely 15 minutes away from their last camp. Panting in the thin air, casting repeated looks up at the sky in case the wind would begin anew, the rescuers stood over bodies "stiff as iron" and said a prayer for their "piteous death[s]." Even with good weather and daylight returning five



The official park service report and the autopsies noted that Norboru Yamada and his two companions, Teruo Saegusa and Kozo Komatsu, died of hypothermia. But the three, as seen in the page from the book *Death Wind*, were highly experienced. For them to die on Denali's easiest route just didn't make sense.

days into spring, the mercury still plunged to -40 F. The rescuers also observed that the wind blew even harder here than it did on their storm-swept Mount Fuji in Japan, where wind speeds exceeded 100 mph.

Denali insiders will never forget the photograph taken by the body-recovery team and leaked from a thick, yet still unfiled folder that remains—until this writing—in the South District Ranger's office in Talkeetna. Normally, climber accident narratives, called Case Incident Reports (CIRs), are filed three hours north at Denali National Park headquarters with a century's worth of mountaineering arcana. After a few years, most accidents are forgotten, but the Talkeetna rangers and Alaskan old-hand climbers still see the 1989 tragedy as an unsolved enigma. It didn't make sense that Yamada, a veteran at high altitude and who had done technical 8,000-meter peaks in winter, would perish on what was essentially a steep ski slope.

The troubling photograph captures a supine Yamada at 17,400 feet on a slope guides had long ago and portentously dubbed "the Autobahn." The "Flash Frozen" description that circulated with the photo had been intended to warn aspiring climbers about the ferocity of North America's highest peak. I

wasn't the only one who cringed about friends and family hearing the tuna-locker elucidation or seeing the image, showing Yamada with a peculiar, bared-teeth grin. The photograph did not show that he was roped to his partners Teruo Saegusa and Kozo Komatsu.

Yamada was seen with straightened legs atop a several-inch snow pedestal, which the weight of his body held in place as the surrounding snow had been blasted away. These winter pedestals suspend everything that can't be pried off by the wind: amber colored urine stains, mummified human feces, and footprints left over from more than a thousand Denali climbers who make this same pilgrimage from May through July. In summer, when the wind eases and it starts snowing, all is once again blanketed over.

Yamada's blue flap hat had long since blown off, while one-wool mittened hand was crooked toward his heart because of a broken arm. Since either a fall or wind had partially unzipped his jacket and blown back the fur-ruffed hood, his signature red bandana could be seen neatly tied around his neck. The waxen white and bare left hand extended straight out, with no apparent relationship to the rope wrapped around his shoulder. Both arms hung suspended in the air as if he were in the midst of a dance step.

This photograph and another shot from the air show that none of the deceased climbers held their knees or burrowed or assumed the fetal position of those trying to shelter from the extreme cold. Nor had they begun removing their clothing in the frequent final act of "paradoxical undressing" by hypothermic victims flushed by dilated blood vessels that cause a burning sensation.

From my experience as a Denali mountaineering ranger performing scores of searches for climbers, rescues or recoveries—along with a study of accident victims for my book *Surviving Denali*—I wanted an explanation and conclusion for every misadventure on the mountain. Even long after I gave up working on the mountain, I wanted to prevent tragedy. But with the Japanese team's demise, the report (written by the South District Ranger) was unintentionally mysterious and inconclusive. I needed to understand what really caused their deaths.

Teruo Saegusa—eyes wide open like his partners—alone escaped broken bones. All of the team appeared to have perished quickly and were dead before arrival—they made no attempt to crawl to one another. Their exposed skin, whiter than the surrounding snow, was not bloated or badly distorted, preserving each man's facial features, as if they had been sprayed with liquid nitrogen. Hence the notation "Flash Frozen." As if mountain weather alone could explain what really killed them.

Given their body positions and the autopsy showing that their limbs were broken after death, the photo shows signs of human flight: The leading Japanese alpinist had landed here after a long ride through the sub-Arctic night, blown from the wind-machine of Denali Pass. Meteorologists agree that the pass, a low funnel between the two summits of Denali, could, due to the Venturi Effect, triple the 100 mph winds commonly buffeting the upper mountain. To be lifted and bodily blown off would take winds greater than that of terminal velocity—or 120 mph—the maximum speed a human can reach while falling through the air.

Due to the climbers' lack of fatal injuries, and given the cold location, through process of elimination most coroners would call the causes of death hypothermia—as stated in the three autopsies. The lack of obvious clues about what really killed them and why the three expert climbers chose to ascend into one of Denali's infamous winter storms is why the accident report remained a cold case that needed to be resolved.



BOTH ARMS HUNG SUSPENDED IN THE AIR AS IF HE WERE IN THE MIDST OF A DANCE STEP.

Compared to 44 other climbers who have disappeared on Denali, the bodies of the Japanese team at least could be examined, and this was only by luck. If not for their rope catching in the sastrugi, the trio would have continued being blasted down by the winds that blew away their packs, ice axes, video cameras, hats and mittens down past blued hanging seracs, down the two-mile-long, elevator-shaft steep plunge to the Peters Glacier. Down there, in the catch basin of the winds, all is buried in deep-snow remnants of the last Ice Age.

At the time, the tragedy had been briefly covered by newspapers, lamented in climbing journals, detailed (but not resolved) in that thick CIR file, and expanded upon in a respectful book, *Shi-fu*, or *Death Wind*, published only in Japan. The authors had only concluded "it was a fatal mistake for them to adapt their experience in the low-latitude Himalaya" to Denali's harsher, higher latitude. Yet Yamada knew the mountain well, having climbed it repeatedly in previous years, and wouldn't have overlooked Denali's lethal weather.

To a Denali expert, all the write-ups, particularly *Death Wind* (which I had

The 17-man rescue team hauls the bodies of Yamada, Saegusa and Komatsu to a waiting helicopter. Cyclonic winds delayed the body recovery for over a month. The three climbers were found just 15 minutes from their last camp.

translated), were weirdly incomplete. It was as if Yamada's deferential Japanese supporters could not dig up or divulge how the men really perished.

Several accounts of successful winter climbs on Denali serve as noteworthy and even inspirational models, such as the book *Minus 148* (detailing how three climbers survived a similar storm at Denali Pass by digging a snowcave). But tragedies like that of 1989 garner most of the attention. Disaster, after all, stimulates empathy. And on another level, comprehensive accident reports (which, as far as I was concerned, hadn't been completed for Yamada) expose human error, ultimately evoking coping mechanisms—allowing other mountaineers to ask themselves if they could have survived in similar straits—teaching us how to avoid similar mishaps. Yet regardless of nationality, climbers are essentially members of an extended family, and losing three brethren can hit hard.

As a lucky survivor of a winter climb on Denali—up the *Cassin Ridge* in winter 1982, similarly accident-prone and exposed to inhumane conditions—I knew that someone as talented as Yamada Norboru, my winter brother, wouldn't simply flash freeze in his tracks because he underestimated the mountain. There had to be a more thorough explanation that would allow closure. And I confess that the sardonic smile frozen on his face has haunted me for years.

TO MOST JAPANESE CITIZENS the name Denali elicits respectful recognition. In Japan the mountain's name happens to be synonymous with that of Japan's most famous mountaineer, Naomi Uemura. The story of Japan's knight errand of cold weather adventure, killed on Denali five Februaries before Yamada, is also cloaked in mystery—except to those alpinists who understand the oddities of this mountain in winter and the techniques used to climb it in such extremes.

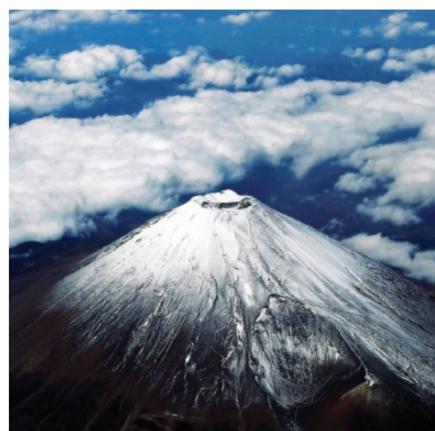
Born in Kaminogo, Hidaka Town, in 1941, Uemura remains Japan's version of Neil Armstrong. Although he could have been first of his countrymen to step atop Everest, in 1970, when after leading almost all of the way to the top, facing the final few yards, he

COURTESY DENALI NATIONAL PARK, BOOK IMAGE COURTESY KUNIAKI YAGIHARA/DEATH WIND

COURTESY KUNIAKI YAGIHARA/DEATH WIND



Japanese mountaineers have long thought of Denali, seen above, as spiritually connected to their own sacred Mount Fuji (upper right). Lower right: Yamada poses for a hardman shot.



THIS IS BACKED UP BY TAOIST BELIEFS THAT THE SECRET TO IMMORTALITY IS FOUND ON FUJI-SAN.

beckoned a respected Japanese elder behind him to go first. In less than a decade, the soft-spoken, shy Uemura—who stood 5 feet 3 inches tall in his stocking feet—would become larger than life in Japan for his epic dogsled trips and solos of the highest peaks on five continents. These included the first-ever solo of Denali, in stormy August when climbers had abandoned the mountain, several months after he became the second Japanese gentleman to climb Everest. He spent 363 days dogsledding from Alaska to Greenland, a journey that he described as “pure bliss;” he solo rafted down the Amazon River; and he became first to solo to the North Pole, while stalked by a polar bear and repeatedly rescuing his sled dogs. As famous at the time as the great Italian alpinist Reinhold Messner, Uemura enjoyed support from Purina and National Geographic—among his many sponsors. He even went back to Everest in winter 1981, and missed the summit by several hundred meters after a companion fell to his death.

Then on the eve of his 43rd birthday, Uemura returned to Alaska and made one of the most audacious climbs in the world: a solo, winter ascent of Denali by the *West Buttress*. He reached the summit on his birthday, February 12, 1984. He even made it back down to Denali Pass (the windiest place on the mountain) and radioed out the next day to announce his success. Then he vanished. Bush pilots and the park service and would-be rescuers believed that he fell off further below from the crest of the *West Buttress*.

Today Japan honors the lost adventurer with two Naomi Uemura museums. They display his many adventure books, postcards written during his journeys, the tattered Japanese and American flags that he left tied to a tripod with a spare pair of underwear on Denali’s summit, and the diary that he left in a snow cave at 14,300 feet. Scores of Uemura relics are displayed from his journeys—Everest summit rocks, clothing, and a life-size cutout of the adventurer—but the 20-man Japanese search team on Denali could not find the body of their beloved Naomi Uemura.

Another unsolved cold case then? Not quite. To close this file I first turned to Naomi’s diary. A week before his disappearance, down at Windy Corner, a breezy spot where most climbers avoid overnighting, he wrote about his crampons repeatedly falling off and how he nearly froze his fingers tying them back on.

Then I consulted Vern Tejas, first to survive a Denali winter solo, in February 1988. Vern respects Uemura, and in his honor planted a Japanese flag on top when he summited, but as a seasoned Denali guide he had spent a lot

more time on the mountain than his Japanese counterpart. So he is familiar with its biggest challenge: “The wind on Denali is a freight train,” he messaged me. “Get out of its way or die.” But he’s certain that this wasn’t Uemura’s issue.

“Naomi’s boots killed him,” Vern said, referring to the toasty but floppy white rubber boots (aka Mickey Mouse Boots, as coined by the military, which developed them during the Korean War) that he and Naomi wore but that lacked rigidity. The soft boots “were notorious for squirming out of your crampons,” Vern wrote. “It happened to me, fellow guides and our clients many times, especially on the Autobahn. We finally redesigned the heel of our crampons by adding a small strap that the ankle strap went through.” But Naomi, new to these specialized Alaskan climbing boots, would not have known about this strapping system. So Vern and I believe that on February 13, 1984, Naomi Uemura had a crampon pop off on the Autobahn. Unroped on the tricky-angled ice traverse, and probably buffeted by the wind, with nothing to stop

his fall, he plunged all the way to the remote Peters Glacier (or somewhere along the way, perhaps, he dropped into a crevasse).

Uemura was first in the world to climb the highest peak on five continents, ahead of the curve in the now popular quest for the Seven Summits. While Uemura had been following his dreams as one who relished solitude and loved nature, he was hardly a “collector” of mountains. If he had survived, he likely would’ve been perplexed by many who now chase the seven summits as if mounting trophies on their walls.

There’s no question that Uemura—as the original Dream Merchant—had inspired Yamada, Saegusa and Komatsu five years later. Still, even if Yamada had been obsessed with a Seven Summits quest, by following in the vanished footsteps of the respected elder and well-sponsored legend of Japan would have made him proceed with great caution and respect.

So if Naomi Uemura’s disappearance can be explained, surely there was a more definitive cause for the deaths of Norboru Yamada, Teruo Saegusa and Kozo Komatsu. And since a team of Austrians who repeatedly ran into Yamada on Denali but were not interviewed in depth by the park service for its accident report, I knew they would have their own opinions on the disaster.

JAPAN’S 12,380-FOOT MOUNT FUJI, or Fuji-san (Fire Mountain), falls more than a mile and a half shorter than Denali and is 3,500 miles distant. But to volcanologists, the magma-fueled and seismically active Ring of Fire, fringing the Pacific Ocean Basin, links the peaks like sisters.

Denali is the elder mountain, a pluton, melted down by magma 56 million years ago, cooled under the earth and crystalized, then pushed up by tectonic-plate activity. Fuji-san, a stratovolcano, was explosively created—its magma spewing up out of the Ring of Fire and onto the earth—less than three million years ago. Compared to Denali, there are no steep climbs up the evenly sloped Fuji-san, which routinely smokes, shudders and, according to seismologists, could soon blow its top again. In the large national park surrounding Denali, there are more than 600 seismic events per year, usually directly beneath the mountain; occasionally the bigger temblors cause avalanches. Both snow-clad peaks can be seen towering 130 and 60 miles distant from their respective cities, Anchorage and Tokyo.

A 10th Century Japanese folk tale describes a smoldering love poem that burns forever on the



Denali Pass, where the Japanese were likely blown off by 200 mile-per-hour winds. The “Autobahn” (traverse trail seen diagonaling up from right to left to 18,200 feet) is the site of more fatalities than any other location on Denali.

Fuji-san summit. In the story the mountain is called *fu-shi*, which means *never dead*. This is backed up by Taoist beliefs that the secret to immortality is found on Fuji-san.

The summit of Fuji-san, a 5,000-foot, six-hour hike from its base parking lot, is not a challenge for alpinists. But the mountain persists throughout Japanese culture because of its symmetrical form and its depiction in literature and art since ancient times: framed by the cherry blossoms on wood-block carvings; or seen on flags, greeting cards and the 1,000-yen note.

Long after Norboru Yamada climbed Fuji-san as a teenager, he had built his confidence and found himself pursuing greater goals. The youngest of six children, he had been named Norboru—literally “one who is to rise”—by a prophetic priest. Although briefly on track as an electrical engineer, he despised routines or any sort of mediocrity and committed himself to climbing as a self-taught 16-year-old Dream Merchant. Eventually climbing nine of the 14 8,000-meter peaks, he put together a new Denali winter climb as a much more ambitious and unprecedented project: climbing the highest peak on each continent in winter. Sponsored by Japanese corporations, Yamada had already knocked off winter ascents of Everest, Mont Blanc, Kilimanjaro and Aconcagua. After Denali in winter, he had only Carstensz Pyramid, Elbrus and Vinson left on the tick list. For him to join the expanding ranks of the “Seven Summits Club” as its exclusive winter member, the only one to complete the Frozen Grand Slam of world mountaineering, would be a modern-day equivalent to the immortality olden-day

pilgrims sought on Fuji-san.

Although a rising star in thin air on the most difficult climbs under the worst conditions, Yamada still found himself a step behind more accomplished Europeans. Two years before his death on Denali, during a bold winter ascent up the most technically challenging route on the most dangerous 8,000-meter peak—the South Face of Annapurna—he summited with three companions. During the descent to high camp in roseate alpenglow, one teammate, Toshiyuki Kobayashi, vanished through a cornice. Shortly after, in an unforgettable moment that would long disturb Yamada, his old friend and partner Yasuhira Saito dropped from exhaustion into the dark void, his crampons sparking against rocks while shouting, “What’s wrong?”

Neither Kobayashi nor Saito were ever seen again.

Despite the incredible yet star-crossed accomplishment of the Japanese team, Jerzy Kukuczka and Artur Hajzer’s first winter ascent 10 months earlier on an easier Annapurna route is what sticks to the record books.

This lack of recognition on the world mountaineering stage was not new to Yamada. In 1984, another large Polish expedition had claimed the first winter ascent of Manaslu, a winter climb Yamada had tried but failed when he broke his leg in a crevasse fall two years earlier. The December after the Poles’ winter ascent, Yamada and his good friend Saito sprinted up Manaslu in a phenomenal three-day ascent. Since winds made the summit ridge too dangerous, they resorted to an unusual tactic: they roped up and belayed

COURTESY KUNIAKI YAGIHARA/DEATH WIND

COLBY COOMBS

one another to prevent being blown away. This bold ascent culminated a hat-trick year in which Yamada climbed not just Manaslu, but K2 and Everest all without bottled oxygen. Two years prior, in fact, Yamada had also climbed Everest in December—but the Poles had yet again beaten him to this winter prize three years earlier. Despite climbing nine of the 14 8,000-meter peaks, and although widely respected in Japan for these efforts, outside his own country Yamada remained a little-known outlier.

While Yamada's Frozen Grand Slam scheme lacked the intense technical challenges of his ascent of Annapurna's South Face in winter, it had the sort of cachet—and equal dangers—that drew in millions of yen from mainstream sponsors. And while by this time both Everest and Denali had been climbed in winter, no one had even attempted a winter ascent of Antarctica's Vinson, likely the coldest place on earth and cloaked in darkness for much of the winter (30 years later, it remains unclimbed in winter). If Yamada could pull off Denali and then Vinson, his Frozen Grand Slam would shine with inspiration while showing honor and completion to the quest of Naomi Uemura—whom Yamada had made a film about while climbing Everest several years earlier.

A serious and dedicated soul, Yamada, 39, substituted a smile for talk during social gatherings. Among his boyish faced Japanese companions, the model-handsome, broad-cheeked Yamada stood out with a full moustache. He proved a popular teammate, repeatedly invited on most Japanese expeditions, in part because of his strength up high, but since he reined in his ego against ambition, he made a point of trying to get all of his partners to the summit. Just like Uemura. Even three decades later, his pure methods and linkage of multiple high peaks (but never as a soloist) remain achievements that only genetically endowed Sherpas and a few dozen highly trained climbers can duplicate. But only if they're lucky.

Although he knew how to hang it out and had repeatedly seen partners and even a leader die on his Himalayan climbs, Yamada was more than just lucky. He was a shrewd tactician: sneaking up summits by taking advantage of changes in the weather, and he remained alert to even the briefest windows within tempests.

This brings us to Denali's *West Buttress* in winter 1989, with the stormiest weather the bushpilots had ever seen. On February 16, Yamada, Saegusa, Komatsu and a fourth team member, Shunzo Sato, who would feel ill and remain at base camp, were flown into 7,200

feet on the Southeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. At the subzero landing strip, Yamada held an uncharacteristic hardman pose for the camera, kneeling outside the tent without hat and gloves, guzzling a beer. Through a nearby col, they watched the summit blush with alpenglow, 18 miles and 13,000 feet above.

Still, their competitive edge and something unique to their culture had been stimulated. Through the code of honor called *bushido* among Samurai warriors in pre-modern Japan—still extant among many athletes in contemporary culture—they were vexed by freshly laid ski tracks leading to the main fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. Europeans, yet again. Two days earlier a team of seasonally unemployed Austrian guides—Walter Laserer, Heli Steinmassl and Heli Mittermeyer—had

AFTER THE AUSTRIANS SPENT A COUPLE OF HOURS LOST IN THE BLIZZARD, HOPE OF REACHING THEIR SNOWCAVE VAPORIZED—ALL THREE THOUGHT THEY WERE DEAD.

shot up the glacier with the summit in their gun sights.

As veritable unknowns, the three Austrians made their livelihood towing clients up moderate peaks, rather than being paid by corporate clients to push themselves up immoderate peaks. But they played hard during their time off. Their winter agenda on Denali, along with the desire to stretch their limits as young tigers, served as a *bergführer* vacation from the trade routes they would return to when spring guide season cranked up in the Alps. But their leader, Laserer—an all-arounder who has repeatedly guided the seven summits—told me, “The winter climb on Denali was easily the most dangerous climb I have done in my life.”

While in Argentina the previous month,

Laserer and his partners acclimatized by twice summiting Aconcagua (2,500 feet higher than Denali). They also managed to fly off from several hundred feet below the windy summit with their parapentes.

Several days later, fresh from the thin air, they pulled the trigger on Denali, deliberately arriving amid the waxing moon cycle to brighten the long winter nights on the mountain. By acclimating on Aconcagua they had taken a shortcut, effectively increasing their red blood cells, which carry oxygen for thin-air environments, and benefiting from an increase in pulmonary pressure that infused their lungs. Their invaluable time on Aconcagua would allow them, theoretically, to sprint up Denali. Still, even though the Austrians had a two-day head start, the Japanese raced to catch them. Laserer knew that the three Japanese had come from sea-level Tokyo, with little acclimatization (although Yamada had climbed two 8,000-meter peaks that fall).

Shortly afterward, the two teams met as the Austrians came down below 8,000 feet to retrieve a food cache. The Austrians had been forewarned by the park service not to travel unroped on the glaciers because old and flimsy crevasse snow bridges were often hidden under new snow. So they couldn't help thinking it odd for the Japanese to keep their climbing rope packed away on the lower glaciers. The meeting between these two rival teams, as the Japanese offered the Austrians tea, was one of strained politeness, rather than of climbers seeking bonhomie in a strange and dangerous range conspicuously bereft of human beings. Since Yamada had equipment sponsorship along with support from a television company (two of his Everest expeditions had been sponsored by Nippon Television) the Japanese videoed the Austrians. Laserer felt miffed that the three men—obviously sponsored superstars with their brand-new equipment, logoed jackets and haughty manner—did not thank them or offer to help with trail-breaking in newly fallen thigh-deep snow.

Carrying the philosophy that they should expose themselves as little as possible to the infamous Denali meat freezer, the Austrians continued hotfooting up 7,000 feet of sinuous glacier, with the unroped Japanese close behind, up to a thousand-foot, blue-ice headwall, where the awe-inspiring section of narrow ridge called the *West Buttress* would bring them to the 17,200-foot high camp. In a week these fit Austrians had dispensed with terrain that takes summer climbers two weeks. Living on the cheap, with no cash sponsors to oblige, the Austrians were



Yamada, Saegusa and Komatsu were vexed to find a team of three Austrians—Walter Laserer, Heli Steinmassl and Heli Mittermeyer—poised for a winter ascent. The heavily sponsored Japanese climbers likely felt pressure in the face of competition to succeed at all costs. The Austrians, seen in this series of four photographs, had no such obligations and were more savvy to Denali conditions, building an igloo for protection while the Japanese camped in tents. Still, the Austrians barely survived.

hardly trying to beat the Japanese, but as professional mountain guides trained to shepherd others, they had the opportunity to carefully observe the ubermensch Japanese.

In one long, cold summit day, the Austrians topped out just as the lights of Anchorage blinked on in the distance. Laserer's hat blew off, so he pulled out a spare. All three tried to take pictures; all three of their camera shutters froze open. They quickly shared a thermos of hot cocoa.

But while clomping down and squeak-stepping across rock-hard sastrugi in the dark, 2,000 feet below the summit, they entered what Laserer later called a “proverbial shit storm” at Denali Pass. They could barely stand up in the blinding wind. Staying close together, but not roping up—because one person's fall would've pulled everyone down—they struggled down the trickiest 800 feet. It had not escaped their attention that the slope had been named the Autobahn for all of the unroped and inexperienced German and Austrian climbers who had crashed and often died descending it.

HELI STEINMASSL

But at the bottom of the Autobahn, first their goggles, then their eyes iced over in the blizzard. In desperation, blinded, they began circling the plateau in hopes of finding their high camp. Their headlamp batteries had already died in the cold; dark storm clouds blocked the moonlight. After the Austrians spent a couple of hours lost in the blizzard, hope of reaching their snowcave vaporized—all three thought they were dead.

Shouting into one another's ears to be heard above the roar of the wind, repeatedly being blown off their feet and struggling for a sense of direction with a compass that they couldn't hold still in the thundering blizzard, they made their way to what appeared to be a boulder that they had not seen when they left camp. They screamed at each other that they would shelter behind the boulder, out of the wind, and then would continue looking for their snowcave and sleeping bags.

As they got closer, the boulder appeared to ripple in a gust—just as they realized it was the newly pitched Japanese tent, oddly missing protective snow walls. Laserer was blown up

against it; Yamada zipped open the door.

In broken English, looking at the Austrians with their faces caked in ice at midnight in -79 below (according to the Austrian thermometer), with wind gusting over 70 mph, Yamada could have asked if they were O.K. or offered tea, but instead he only asked, “Summit success?”

The Austrians nodded in assent, and just then a break in the clouds leaked in moonlight. Yamada pointed the hypothermic Austrians back to their snowcave—they were saved.

As they took account of themselves the next day, discovering that they had all escaped frostbite, they agreed—while trying to patch their narrow-roofed snowcave, rapidly eroding away in the storm—that the Japanese were crazed to be building snowblocks around their tent in lieu of a cave. The nylon walls would have been beating against them as if they were inside a frost-covered drum.

During the middle of their second stormy night, still trapped at 17,200 feet, the Austrians heard one of the Japanese walking across their snowcave roof, as if out for a



The Japanese team on the lower West Buttress. They were in joking, high spirits most of the way up the mountain.

IN 2003, THE NORTH AMERICAN RECORD WINDCHILL— MINUS 118—WAS RECORDED HERE.

high-altitude stroll in winter on the coldest mountain in the northern hemisphere. (Later, the Japanese rescuers found that Yamada and company had tunnel-caved under their tent to escape the storm.)

During a lull in the wind the next morning, the three Austrians ran for their lives down the narrow spine of the *West Buttress*. The Japanese, honor-bound, sought their advantage during the sudden calm to go for the summit. Down on the Kahiltna Glacier, chastened and eager to escape the storm, the Austrians promptly skied back to their igloo at 10,000 feet.

It wasn't just that Yamada had sponsors to please, and to whom he clearly would've *lost face* were he to turn back when the relatively unknown Austrians had succeeded.

Traveling light and unroped for speed, with only two packs, Yamada and his partners would have made short work of the sloping traverse to Denali Pass. We will never know exactly what happened, but somewhere above the pass they would have been repeatedly bowled over by winds. While climbers can function in these intense subzero temperatures, there is no reckoning with the Denali Venturi effect. Short of chopping through ice or digging a trench into concrete-hard snow, survival for the Japanese could only have been found in immediate descent.

So for likely the first time on the trip, Yamada pulled out the climbing rope and performed as if back on Manaslu with Yasuhira Saito. Yamada, always the strong leader, would have tried to belay Saegusa and Komatsu down against the hurricane, with air untenably cold in their bronchia, and the compression of the Venturi Effect—screaming

like frozen water through the giant pressure nozzle of Denali Pass—further reducing their oxygen intake. The millions of microscopic alveoli in the lungs of the Japanese climbers would have been struggling to expand with oxygen as intense cold would've begun frosting and drying out their throats in windchills easily cranking under 100 degrees below zero. Now surely exhausted like Saito had been, Yamada likely began wondering if he would finally join his pal—last seen sparking down the South Face of Annapurna.

While the post-mortem diagnosis of hypothermia as the killer still remains most likely, the climbers' dropping body temperatures would have clouded their thinking and numbed their limbs, making them stumble like drunks. But there is another possibility: sea-level survivors crouched in storm cellars have described how difficult it is to breathe as tornado vortexes have ripped away the houses above them, and suffocation sometimes imprints victims' faces with the peculiar *rictus grin*—a grin later found on Yamada's face. If he and his teammates did suffocate in the Denali Pass Venturi, it would've happened so suddenly in the subzero shit storm—under plummeting barometric pressure—that they likely didn't understand why they couldn't get enough oxygen in their lungs.

If it had been summer, and if the winds hadn't been so severe (a meteorologist estimated that this storm pushed 200-mph winds through Denali Pass) then the three men would've eventually been buried by snow where they dropped, like a score of others who have disappeared above 18,000 feet. But after rigor mortis and subzero cold had straightened the Japanese into slabs of iron, the winter wind—known to blow rocks out of the ice and across the upper mountain—began its final cleanse.

As the wind reached maximum velocity, all three corpses would have been lifted up over

the spine of Denali Pass and then slammed down against the slope, breaking their limbs as they flew past rocks of ancient black seabed and down the Autobahn that Naomi Uemura had shot across five years earlier. Except for the rope snagging sastrugi knobs, the three bodies would've been lost to the distant Peters Glacier.

Even over a mile below, amid the relative safety of the Kahiltna Glacier, the wind raged so hard for three days that the Austrians couldn't stand up outside their igloo. To this day, 31 years later, Walter Laserer and his teammates maintain that luck saved them.

In 1990, a friend of Yamada's with the Japanese Alpine Club set up a tipi-shaped weather station 500 feet above Denali Pass, "to defend the honor" of the dead Japanese so that future climbers could obtain real-time weather information and avoid the wind. In 2003, the North American record windchill—minus 118—was recorded here. Since wind or rocks picked up by gusts regularly destroyed the equipment, necessitating repairs every year, the station was abandoned in 2007.

Now, at last, Yamada's accident report can be completed in my mind and—because I left the park service decades ago—the file can finally be sent north. As for a conclusion, it's not essential to know whether Yamada and his teammates asphyxiated at Denali Pass or froze there and were blown off—one way or another, the wind finished them. On Denali there is no guarantee of survival—in winter more than one in three of those who go for the summit will die. And as Laserer said, "When the wind comes it will kill you so quickly you won't know what hit you."

To find solace or meaning to tragedy in the mountains, we need conclusion and closure: an explanation for *why* these practiced Himalayists climbed up into a storm. Although it happened more than 30 years ago, for modern alpinists the accident remains a cautionary parable about competition and sponsorship. In the 1990s Japan's Masatoshi Kuriaki repeatedly soloed Denali and Foraker in winter, but refused sponsorship due to Yamada's tragic example. Pressure to perform and stretch one's limits—while paid to do so—is greater today than ever before. So ultimately Dream Merchants must take heed that they don't sell out to the highest bidders, while collectors of summits must guard against becoming the collected.

Jon Waterman's books about the mountain include High Alaska, In the Shadow of Denali and Chasing Denali. See also jonathanwaterman.com