

## How We Met: Joe Simpson and Simon Yates

Climber, author and professional mountain guide **Simon Yates**, was born in Leicestershire. He studied Biochemistry at Sheffield University before becoming a nomadic climber, putting up new routes in the Himalayas and the Andes. He has travelled extensively in India, Nepal, Kazakhstan, South America and Australia. His autobiography, *Against The Wall*, tells his tale.

**Joe Simpson** is a climber, author and Greenpeace activist. The youngest of five children, he spent his early years in Malaya, Gibraltar and Germany, where his father saw military service. His passion for climbing has taken him all over the world. Twice he has come very close to losing his life on mountaineering expeditions. The story of his extraordinary survival in the Peruvian Andes is told in his award-winning book and acclaimed movie, *Touching the Void*.

### **Joe Simpson:**

I first met Simon in Chamonix in the French Alps. A whole bunch of us were out there climbing. Even though I liked him straight away, I didn't specifically climb with him all summer. Some people have a partner they have been doing routes with for years, but we were a bit promiscuous as we'd climb with whoever in the group happened to be around.

Having climbed in the Alps it was a natural progression to want to move on to the great ranges. Simon and I shared the same objective and we worked throughout the winter to get the money together for the trip to the Peruvian Andes in the spring of 1985, where we aimed to do the previously unclimbed West Face of Siula Grande.

We were both experienced climbers, but we'd never been to that altitude before: Siula Grande is 6,356 metres high, which is just under 21,000 feet. We both knew that we would be doing a serious route and that a lot of people had failed on it, we also knew that we were on our own and if anything went seriously wrong there was no chance of anyone coming to rescue us.

I got on well with Simon, he was and is easy-going but also strong-willed and determined, however deciding to go on the trip with him wasn't something I analysed intensely, just like with any other friend you know you like them but you don't go looking for the reasons why. It's not like a dating agency where you list someone's attributes, you just think, yeh, he can climb and I can get on with him.

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We succeeded in reaching the summit of Siula Grande two-and-a-half days after leaving base camp, but we were both frostbitten and completely wasted from long climbing days. There wasn't time to hang around on the top as it was about two or three in the afternoon by that stage, so we just took some pictures and started going down the north ridge. We had assumed the way down would be easy but it proved to be just as hard as the route we had climbed to get up. We went as far as we could before dark, then spent the first night of the descent in a snow hole we had dug before carrying on the next day.

Down-climbing was still difficult and we were making very slow progress. I was leading so I was some way ahead of Simon, when I slipped and fell. When the realisation that the impact had broken my leg sank in, I just looked around me and thought, I'm dead.

I was at 6,000 metres and I couldn't think how the two of us could get out on our own. You've got to remember that a mountain rescue team will use eight or ten men to get someone with a broken leg off a mountain.

I was dreading having to tell Simon. I thought I'd break the news in a confident kind of way, like it was normal or something. I could tell by the way he looked at me that he knew I was in really deep shit, well we both knew that.

What Simon should really have said then was, 'well, I'll go off and get some help' which would have been a euphemism for 'you've had it'. Instead, he chose to try and save my life by lowering me thousands of feet down the mountain on the rope, at great risk to himself.

Lowering me involved making a bucket seat in the snow so that Simon had some security as he lowered me, although he took most of my weight I could help to balance and support myself. He'd lower me until the rope length ran out, which is around 150 feet. I would then dig him another seat in the snow while I was waiting for him to climb down to me. Then the process would begin again.

It was an incredible feat of mountaineering and we managed to descend about 3,000 feet in this way.

By dark the conditions were appalling, there was avalanche snow falling down the face and it was extremely cold and windy. Before the light faded we had seen that we were not that far from the glacier so we decided to keep going down as there was a better chance of finding somewhere to shelter there rather than on this exposed and windy mountain face. Anyway, we were practically there, just one final effort and we'd have been down on the glacier.

Had it been daylight we would have seen that there was a sheer cliff of ice directly in our path and we could have avoided it, but in pitch blackness Simon inadvertently lowered me over the edge. Instead of being able to support my own weight to some degree I was now dangling in space with my full weight on the rope. Simon couldn't support the strain and I was dragging him off with me. There was nothing he could do to hold my weight; in order to stop himself plummeting over the edge the only thing he could do was cut the rope to prevent us both being dragged to our deaths. He obviously guessed that this could kill me, but he had no choice but to let me go.

At the foot of the cliff there was a massive crevasse which I fell into. By rights I should have plunged to the bottom and died. Luckily, if you can class the situation we were in as lucky, I landed on a ledge system from where it was possible to reach a steep slope which actually led out onto the glacier.

For someone with two working legs getting back to base camp would have taken about five or six hours, dragging myself with my hands and one foot it took me four days, with no food or water. I genuinely thought I was going to die, but strange though it might seem, I felt very matter-of-fact. People have said it was heroic, but I was doing the only thing I could in the circumstances. Human beings don't give up and die easily.

One of the worst aspects was the fear that Simon might have already left. As it happens, had I turned up two hours later that would have been the case.

I think it's really odd that people imagine I think badly of Simon for cutting the rope. I suppose it's taboo which is why people are troubled by it but there's a very pragmatic side to mountaineering which armchair climbers and the public in general do not understand. After I landed in the crevasse I did feel angry but at the circumstances not with Simon. I felt no resentment towards him whatsoever. It would have been totally illogical for Simon to die with me. In fact, because of his decision to cut the rope we both lived.

I did crack up when I got home. It was only then that the realisation I'd nearly lost it hit me and I got a bit wobbly. I was quite depressed being told by doctors that, as the bone in my lower leg had been driven up through the knee I'd never walk again let alone climb, which was the love of my life. At the same time Simon was climbing the North face of the Eiger which I'd always wanted to do - not that I blame him because I'd have done exactly the same thing myself had our situations been reversed.

I was determined that I wouldn't just accept the opinion of the doctors. Getting a reasonable range of movement back into the knee took a series of operations and a lot of painful physiotherapy. I did prove the doctors wrong, but it wasn't until five years later, when I climbed Ama Dablam in Nepal, that I succeeded on a mountain again.

Climbing is a fundamental part of both of our lives, we've made compromises with job security and making lots of money in order to do what we want. Our attitude to climbing has been tempered over the years, I don't think either of us would climb with the same bravado as we did on that first trip to Peru. As you get older you don't feel in such an impatient rush to do things, you know the peak is still going to be there next year.

The long-term psychological trauma of the accident hasn't changed our relationship, we like one another and we get on and that's that. Just because we have had this incredibly powerful experience together doesn't mean we're bonded for the rest of our lives in some way. That incident is not part of our lives anymore, it wouldn't be something we'd discuss if other people didn't keep bringing it up. To other people it seems like a dramatic event but to us it was just our normality at that particular time and afterwards we didn't dwell on it, we got on with living our lives.

I suppose in some ways it has even been beneficial to us as I can earn my living writing and Simon earns his as a mountain guide. In the twelve years since the trip to Peru we haven't been on another expedition together, but that has nothing to do with the accident, it wasn't like we'd fallen out or anything like that, it was just circumstances. I spent a lot of time recuperating and Simon went off climbing all over the world and our lives went in different directions.

During the last twelve years we've seen each other often enough - until three years ago Simon was still based in Sheffield even though he was away climbing and working a lot of the time - but now it's more like a case of bumping into each other rather than arranging to meet up. When I give a lecture in the Lake District, for instance, I'll go and see Simon and we pick up where we left off. That's not unusual, that's how friendship is in this kind of world.

Climbers are pretty confident people and that extends to their judgments too. If they decide someone is OK as a friend that is a pretty sound judgment and once it's made that shouldn't change. You don't have to actively keep in touch because you are confident that your friendship is made on a pretty sound basis.

### **Simon Yates:**

We got to know each other in 1984 in Chamonix in the French Alps when we were camping illegally on this place called Snell's Field where all the British climbers used to hang out. Joe and I got on well, we chatted and drank a lot of cheap red wine and did some climbing.

I think the idea of making a trip to Peru the following year was first mooted during that summer in the Alps. We were both keen to go on to bigger mountains.

Anyway, at the end of the summer Joe decided to come and live in Sheffield, where I was living, because there was a big climbing scene there. Over the winter the idea of going to Peru took shape. I seem to remember Joe and I worked in the same stained glass factory to get some money together.

Originally four of us planned to climb the west face of the 6,356 metre Siula Grande in the Andes which nobody had succeeded in climbing before, but the other two were invited to go on an expedition with Doug Scott, so they went to Pakistan instead.

To an extent a climbing partnership is a marriage of convenience - we both had the time and the ambition to do harder routes on bigger mountains. Still, personality is important. You have to be pretty evenly matched in terms of temperament and ability, plus you have to be able to live in close confines with that person. Mountaineering expeditions are quite stressful, the logistics

of reaching a remote region are complicated, then there's the physical and mental strain of climbing and dealing with danger.

But I got on well with Joe - and still do - and I felt I could live with his company. I felt I knew him reasonably well, I knew he was strong-willed, determined, ambitious but fair.

Reaching the summit of Siula Grande we didn't feel so much elated as simply happy to get there in one piece. The last day had been hard as we had been climbing on some particularly insecure snow features.

The relief at getting to the top was short-lived. We stayed there about five minutes taking pictures before starting down as it was mid-afternoon by this stage. We chose to go down the north ridge as we thought it would be simpler than the West Face we had just come up, but it proved to be just as bad.

We dug a snow-hole and spent the first night of the descent in that before carrying on the following morning. We were roped up but Joe was ahead of me, hidden by a crest. I felt a tug on the rope, but it didn't pull me much because there was a lot of soft snow about and it cut into that.

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When I caught up with Joe and discovered he had broken his leg I felt pretty bloody horrified. We were still at 20,000 feet and I thought that we had both probably had it.

It briefly passed my mind that maybe I could go on without him, but it was never really a serious thought, I knew the only thing I could do was try and rescue him.

I started lowering Joe down on the rope - cutting myself a bucket seat in the snow I could support most of his weight bearing in mind that he was able to balance himself with his hands, and lower him down for the rope length, which is approximately 150 feet, he would then cut another bucket seat in the snow in preparation for the next lower, I'd descend to him and we'd start the process again.

When we started the lowering business early in the day the weather was OK but by early afternoon conditions had become pretty bad with small avalanches pouring down the face. We had descended about 3,000 feet by dusk. Just before dark we could see the glacier not that far below. As it was bitterly cold and exposed on the mountain face we decided to keep going as we felt that we could spend a more comfortable night on the glacier where there was a better chance of being able to get out of the wind.

We were so close to being down when in the darkness I accidentally lowered him over an ice cliff. In daylight I would have been able to see that there was a steep drop ahead and it would have been possible to avoid it. As it was, I now had all of Joe's weight on the rope and I couldn't hold it, I was being pulled towards the edge of the cliff too.

Cutting the rope was the only choice I had even though it was obvious that this was likely to kill Joe. There wasn't much time to think about it, it was

just something which had to be done quickly or I would have been dragged to my death.

Afterwards I was in a state of shock and exhaustion. I dug a snow hole and spent the night in that. There was nothing I could do until morning when I could go and find out exactly where Joe had gone. If Joe had survived the fall I knew he would be doing the same as me and finding some shelter for the night. I was beyond assessing all the possibilities...

The following day I descended, using the length of rope I had to abseil down the cliff. That's when I saw the huge crevasse beyond the ice cliff and realised that's where Joe had gone. I was convinced he was dead. I shouted across the crevasse but I didn't think of looking into it, which I suppose I should have done, it seemed impossible that he could have survived such a massive fall.

All I could do now was make my way back to base camp and keep focussed on staying alive while crossing a dangerous and heavily crevassed glacier.

I spent a few days at base camp recovering physically because I was completely knackered, really out of it. The grieving process hadn't yet started as I was still in deep shock. On the third day I decided to pack up and leave the next morning, there was no point staying any longer. I was asleep in the tent when I was woken by Joe's voice howling and calling my name. My first reaction was delight, impossible though it seemed I knew it could only be him, but I was shocked when I saw him, he had lost a huge amount of weight after his ordeal and was pretty much on his last legs.

I don't really care that much what people outside climbing think about the cutting of the rope, because they don't understand the intricacies of what was involved. I know that I did my best to get Joe down the mountain.

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Sometimes it has been difficult because I've been to places and someone who thinks that what I did was awful and unacceptable will come up and verbally assault me.

The rope between two climbers is very symbolic of trust and friendship and to cut it is viewed as an act of complete selfishness. What's important is that Joe didn't think that and the first thing he did when he crawled back into the camp was to thank me for trying to get him down.

In mountaineering you have to make these very pragmatic, logical, cold decisions. At the time it was the only thing I could have done. You can go on and on about the what ifs, but if I hadn't cut the rope I would certainly have died.

I don't think the accident has marred our friendship, why should it? We were quite matter-of-fact about what happened. The accident isn't something we've kept on talking about. It was a bizarre thing to happen, like a fairy-story, I suppose, it even had a happy ending. But because it was so unreal it was easier to separate it from the rest of our lives. It was something we drew a line under pretty well there and then really, although it was part of Joe's life longer as he suffered more mental and physical trauma than me.

Both Joe and I think quite deeply about climbing and analyse the deeper motives behind it - that's a similarity between us. With some people climbing is an escape, they have a full-time job and they go climbing at weekends, but with Joe and I it's been our lives.

In the past we have probably both been obsessive, but if you get too obsessive you let the intensity of that experience override your rational thinking. We have both lost an awful lot of mutual friends through climbing and it's true that the risks you are willing to take decreases as you get older. The impatience to succeed is tempered by the knowledge that the mountain will still be there next year and you'll still be alive to climb it.

We haven't been on another expedition together, but that is just the way things have worked out. Joe's life took a different course to mine, he started writing books and bought a house. Joe is a creature of habit, he goes to this pub down the road on certain evenings and plays his game of pool. For a while I was just this climbing nomad, what made me more balanced about it was that I was feeling very alienated and lonely because I had nothing in common with other people.

I see us always being friends, I just don't see any reason why not. A lot of my friends live abroad and I don't see them from one year's end to the next but we always carry on where we left off and it's the same with Joe. When we meet up we have a few beers and catch up on what we have both been doing. Just because I don't see him regularly does not mean that he is any less of a friend

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