

Trapped in a crevasse!

by
Christopher Matthews

The view from the top was breathtaking. In the distance, they could see the dark, cruel face of the Matterhorn, and, a dizzy two-kilometre drop below, the ski resort of Cervinia, no larger than a toy town.

On Sunday, March 31, 1996, shortly after noon, a party of five ski-alpinists stood on the Dent d'Hérens's eastern shoulder, a snowy saddleback crest 4,075 meters atop the Grandes Murailles glacier on the Italian-Swiss border. To the south — the direction they had come from — the dazzling white expanse of the glacier, hidden, at this time of the year, under a thick mantle of snow, curved away gently to meet the pure blue horizon. To north, east and west, bare granite or snow-capped Alpine peaks thrust up dramatically towards the heavens.

The sky was pure blue, but an icy northerly gale was blowing and the temperature was around 15° C below zero. Too cold, decided 35-year-old Brigitte Djajasmita, a computer systems engineer in a Geneva bank and the only woman in the group.

"It's so beautiful up here in the mountains," she said to her guide, a veteran professional named Jean-Pierre Bernard. "But I'm going to take cover below. The wind's getting to me."

"OK, no problem," replied Bernard, a wiry 51-year-old Frenchman. He had initiated her to the sport 12 years earlier, and knew she could look after herself better than anyone else in the party. They had shared adventures in Alaska and in Tibet, where, six years before, they had scaled an 8,000-meter peak, Shisha Pangma, without bearers or oxygen. On another expedition she had spent four days trapped in a blizzard on Mount McKinley. Brigitte had shown grit, resilience and cool on that climb. Not only had she steady nerves and steely determination but possessed impeccable climbing instincts.

Brigitte's companions were all, like her, mountain or outdoors lovers. They were Bertrand Reich, a 33-year-old, moustachioed solicitor from Geneva, his brother-in-law François Besançon,

31, a Geneva Commercial Radio executive making his first climb, and two experienced mountaineers, Bernard Bernet, who ran a butcher shop in Modane, France, and Fulvio Fresia, from Paris.

The party had hired Bernard to take them on a ski-climb up to the Dent d'Hérens's eastern shoulder. The excursion was not only scenic — taking them over the grandiose expanse of the Grandes Murailles — but physically demanding as well. There were no great difficulties, but they would need to climb up to over 4,000 meters, where oxygen began to be significantly rarefied.

At Aosta, they left the highway and drove up the Valpelline valley, one of the prettiest and most unspoiled in the Italian Alps. They left the van where the road stopped and put on their skis, fitting artificial sealskins on the soles. The skins' bristles, which prevented the skis from sliding backwards, made it much easier to move uphill.

For the next hour they cross-countryed along the side of a frozen lake, the Lago di Place Moulin. The scenery was magnificent — the lakeside lined with ghostly pine woods heavy with snow and the high, grim cliffs beyond washed by scores of frothing waterfalls.

At lunch time, they reached the Prarayer hut, at just over 2,000 meters on the lake's northern tip and sat down for a picnic. From the hut, the track continued up a dark, rocky gorge where vegetation thinned and then gave out altogether as they moved above the tree line.

After three hours, the gorge opened out onto the dazzling white expanse of the glacier. They had been moving due north, but now turned eastward across the ice field. Another hour and they reached their destination for the night, the Aosta hut at 2,788 meters.

They made an early start on Sunday morning. It was a simple enough ascent but Bernard knew you could never be too careful in the mountains. The party therefore had two emergency radios with them. Brigitte carried the group's provisions — candy bars, chocolate and salami — and their first-aid kit. If all went according to plan they would be up and back well before nightfall.

Moving in Indian file, they set off due east across the Grandes Murailles glacier. At more than 3,500 meters the air was noticeably thinner

and Reich had problems keeping up with the others. After four hours and 300 meters from the summit he knew he wouldn't make it and stopped to rest. Bernet, Besançon and Fresia, who were in better shape, had by then almost reached the crest.

When Brigitte joined the others, they were all snapping off pictures of the Matterhorn. Facing east, there was only a low parapet of driven snow between them and a vertical drop of some 600 meters. It gave Besançon the shivers.

"... The wind's getting to me," Brigitte said.

Out of the corner of his eye, Besançon saw her starting to zigzag down the glacier. A curve to the left... Besançon went back to his camera. A curve to the left... Bernet thought he saw her slim figure clad in grey and pink disappear over a ridge which lay some 100 meters away.

Brigitte was falling. Everything was happening faster than she could think. There was snow cascading around her ... a bone-crunching jar ... then she was falling again into a blue void that could be the sky ... then darkness.

Consciousness, when it returned a few seconds later, was cold, red and blue. The cold was on her face. The cold was snow. She worked it out. "I'm lying face down in the snow." The red was snow too — snow streaked with blood. But what was the blue?

Then the horror of it hit her. The blue wasn't the sky. It was ice, only inches away. She managed to turn her head. Blue ice right on the other side too.

Now her brain started putting the pieces together. "I am lying at the bottom of a narrow ice crevasse. I am bleeding. I have four inches' leeway left and right." She looked up. She saw a sliver of pale blue sky above the crevasse's thin mouth. It was 25 meters overhead. High-voltage emotion hit her. Rage. She wanted to kick herself: "What a fool! I didn't follow the tracks." Then she started screaming, but her screams were swept away by the howling wind.

On the crest it was 10 minutes before the four men started down. Reich, who had stopped to rest just off their ascent trail, was sitting on his rucksack when they reached him a few minutes

later. He couldn't have missed Brigitte coming down as she would have been retracing the trail.

"Have you seen Brigitte?" was the first thing Bernard asked him. "No, I don't think so," Reich replied. Bernard exploded. "Did you or didn't you? Make your mind up! It's important." The guide was worried. He was beginning to suspect something had gone wrong. He had learned that in the mountains any unexpected event is a potential hazard.

Suddenly Besançon was shouting, "Look, there she is." In the distance, some 300 meters ahead, was a splash of pink on the glacier — a lone figure moving across the slope towards the hut. Bernard heaved a sigh of relief. "Let's get going then."

In her ice prison, Brigitte tried to get to her feet — and gasped with pain. Something was wrong with her pelvis, and she couldn't stand up. Her face was hurting too, but they were only scratches. That accounted for the blood.

Despite the pain, she somehow managed to slip the rucksack off her back and remove her skis, which were still fastened to her ankles by safety thongs. She checked her watch. It was still running and it said 12:30 PM.

She began to take stock. She must have broken through the crust of snow covering the crevice at the top. Falling, she had probably smashed through an intermediary crust — or "snowbridge" — which accounted for the shock she had felt. The falling snow had cushioned her fall, saving her life.

But for how long? The horrifying thought that next struck Brigitte was this: if she had broken through two snow bridges already, who was to say that she hadn't landed on a third — which could give way any moment.

She had an ice pick strapped to her pack. This she slammed deep into the ice next to her. She fastened one end of a length of climbing rope to the pick, and secured the other end to her climbing harness. If the ground gave way, it would stop her fall. Now she felt a little safer.

Bernard anxiously wrenched open the door to the hut. He was determined to give Brigitte a piece of his mind. Skiing off alone to the refuge without

telling anyone was plain unforgivable. "What the hell..." he started bellowing at the standing figure, backlit against a window, now in the act of taking off a pink parka. But he never got the sentence finished.

It wasn't Brigitte at all! Bernard now saw that the figure he'd been pursuing across the glacier was not even a girl but a young man who, incredibly, had chosen to dress in exactly the same colours as Brigitte. Brigitte was missing! There wasn't a moment to lose! The guide raced for the telephone on the wall. He had to get help at once.

He lifted the receiver to his ear — and this time dismay turned the sweat cold on his neck. There was no tone. The line was dead, the phone out of order. In furious frustration, he yanked the radio from his rucksack and feverishly started trying one emergency frequency after another — the rescue centres in Aosta, Courmayeur, Cervinia, Zermatt: "Calling from Aosta hut. We need urgent assistance..."

But there was no reply. There were mountains all around them and the message wasn't getting through. So he decided to go down to the next hut to try the phone there. It normally took an hour to reach the Prarayer hut. He made it in 40 minutes. Bernard was exhausted and his Italian rudimentary. It was the manageress, Rosanna Petitjacques, who made the call to the Rescue Centre (Protezione Civile) in Aosta.

Even the slightest movement was agony but Brigitte managed to pull her "Polar Blanket" out of her rucksack and wrap it around herself. The blanket was a length of aluminium foil which provided excellent insulation even in extreme conditions. Next she got out the food and checked the level in her water bottle. She had almost a litre — more than enough she was sure. They must come for her soon.

The temperature inside the crevasse was around 0° C — freezing, but much warmer than on the glacier. She told herself that she would be all right as long as she didn't lean against the ice. That would bring her body temperature down rapidly. Below 35° C hypothermia begins to set in and death is only a couple of hours away.

Brigitte checked the battery level on the AVR

(Avalanche Victim Research Device). She had plenty of power. But just to make sure she slipped the device inside her clothing. The warmth would keep the batteries running longer. Then she pulled her hood over her head. She knew that 30 percent of body heat is lost through the head.

She settled down to wait. She was a professional. Almost. And it would require all her trained resources to keep alive where she was.

The manageress's call was taken by dog-handler Ettore Creton, one of the team of five specialists on standby at the Rescue Centre at Aosta airport. Creton sighed. Sundays were bad.

Pilot Sandro Tommasi had just delivered an injured skier to the local hospital and was taking his six-seater Alouette chopper back to base when HQ came through on the radio. Immediately Tommasi swung the aircraft round and headed up the Valpelline valley. Shortly before 3 PM he was landing in a flurry of snow next to the hut at Prarayer.

Bernard ran out to explain the situation. Repeating what Bernet had told him, he said that Brigitte was last seen going over a ridge 50 to 100 meters from the summit, heading downhill. "All right," Tommasi said. "Let's go up and take a look."

Flying 10 meters above the ground, Tommasi and Bernard scoured the glacier for the next 45 minutes. Visibility was poor. The wind buffeted the helicopter about and sent great maelstroms of snow flying off the crest. The first 100-odd meters from the top got left out of the search. In the light of what they knew, it would have been a waste of time.

It was becoming frighteningly clear to Bernard that Brigitte may have fallen into a crevasse. From the air, they could see scores of deep gashes scarring the face of the glacier. Brigitte might be in any one of them. But which? Bernard, Tommasi and the helicopter's other occupants all wore headphones plugged into AVRDS set in the "receive" mode. The devices would start beeping if they came within 50 meters of the missing girl. Bernard's model was also equipped with three luminous diodes. A green light meant there was no incoming signal. Orange signified "close" and red "very close".

But the AVRDs remained silent and the light stayed green. Shortly after 4 PM Tommasi got a radio message from HQ. The Alouette was needed to take another injured skier to hospital. Tommasi swung the aircraft into a broad curve and set course for Prarayer. "I'll be back as soon as I can", he told Bernard after leaving him at the hut.

Soon after 5 PM, he was back as promised. This time he flew the craft over a "serac" zone (ice field) at the eastern edge of the glacier, where the ice was broken up into huge blocks separated by crevasses as deep as 100 meters, then he swung back towards the centre of the glacier, but now light was fading, and the pilot decided to turn back to base. The search would have to continue on the ground.

At 7:15 PM two Alouettes dropped a party of 13 Alpine guides on the eastern shoulder of the Dent d'Hérens. Night was falling, and with the wind continuing unabated, the temperature had fallen to 25° C below zero. The men put on their skis and roped up in groups of five. If the lead man fell into a crevasse in the dark, the others would be able to pull him out.

The search party was led by Felice Aguetz, head guide for the Valpelline area. A compact 56-year-old with a leathery complexion and cropped grey hair, Aguetz knew the glacier as well as his own back yard. Being out on the Grandes Murailles at night was about as safe as hand-feeding alligators, Aguetz knew. But they had no choice. Unless they found Brigitte in the next few hours her chances of survival would be virtually nil.

A half-moon was rising, bathing the glacier in a ghostly white light. Quickly, the men skied down to the ridge where, according to her companions, Brigitte had last been seen, and left the top 100-odd meters of the glacier out of their search. Here they made the final preparations for the descent, one guide in each of the three groups switching his AVR to "receive" and putting the headphone over his ears.

From 25 meters under the ice, Brigitte's heart started pounding as she suddenly heard the sound of an approaching helicopter. "Help! Help!" she started shouting. Then she realised it was

useless. The thumping rotor would have drowned out her voice.

The chopper was close — they must surely pick her up on the AVR. But seconds, then minutes went by and nothing happened. "I'm here! Help me!" Brigitte was shouting again. She heard the helicopter departing. The sky above the mouth of the crevasse had blackened. She realised with despair that she would be spending the night in her ice prison.

Descending the glacier in the freezing darkness, Aguetz and his men checked all the opened crevasses they could find, shining powerful torch beams into the black depths and peering gingerly over the edge. Skiing down, they could see no more than two meters ahead and as the night deepened, the temperature dropped to minus 30° C.

At 1 AM they were back at Prarayer having found no trace of Brigitte. The AVRDs had stayed silent. One of the guides, a youngster from nearby Courmayeur, had the beginnings of frostbite on one hand. Aguetz was in a dark mood. From experience he knew that the chances were now almost nil of finding her alive.

Brigitte sat hunched forwards in the dark, her arms crossed over her knees. "It isn't that bad," she tried to comfort herself. "They're looking for me. They'll be back."

She dozed fitfully. She thought of her parents in Geneva. They must have been told that she was missing. The thought of how they must be worrying was torture to her. It felt like the night would never end. Brigitte's watch didn't glow in the dark so she had no way of telling what the time was. At last, looking up, she saw a finger of pale sky. She heaved a sigh of relief. Day had broken, and now they would surely come!

The search resumed at first light. If Brigitte wasn't on the glacier, they reasoned, she must have fallen over the cliffs. At 7:48 AM an Alouette piloted by Oreste Gerard, another ex-Air Force man, set off from Aosta to search the grim cliff-face overlooking Cervinia.

But weather conditions had worsened. At 9:30 AM an awesome front of dark, swirling clouds

came bearing down on them from the South. The weather forecast predicted a storm. Staying aloft in such conditions was too dangerous. "I'm calling it off," Gerard said. The clouds were almost on them as they headed back for base. On the chopper, Bernard insisted that they land and continue the search on the ground, but Aguetaz convinced him that it was too risky. There would be no chance of the ground search resuming that day.

Brigitte realised it was snowing when the first feathery flakes spiralled down to where she sat. Then she winced as she was hit on the back by a clump of snow freshly detached from the crevasse's lip. If a large mass of snow fell on top of her, she thought, it would trap her as surely if she'd been hit by an avalanche. "I've got to get out of here," she decided. Reaching inside her backpack, she extracted the first-aid kit and filled a syringe with pain killer. She had her crampons with her, as well as the ice pick. Maybe she could numb the pain enough to climb up the ice wall.

Unzipping her ski trousers down the side, she injected the liquid into her thigh. But the pain was so sharp when she tried to stand up that she thought she would pass out. There was no question of trying to climb out. She sat down again. She wasn't hungry but she forced herself to eat a chocolate bar. Then she prayed: "Please God, don't let me die. Please get me out of here."

On Monday morning the guides involved in the rescue operation met at the Aosta Rescue Centre to decide what to do next. In the end it was agreed to search higher up on the glacier, nearer to the crest. But the men were very low in spirits. A little later, Bernard and Aguetaz called in at the little Carabinieri station at Valpelline to file a formal missing person report. Both men were deeply depressed. They had to assume now that Brigitte was dead.

The commanding officer at the station was a young Marshall from Sicily, Giuseppe Peritore. "Miracles can happen," he told them, after hearing their story. Then he told them a story of his own — how a fellow officer's parachute had failed to open during a training drop, and the man had fallen 3,000 meters — into a haystack, and survived.

"Don't give up. You may still find Brigitte alive" Peritore continued. "I'm no mountaineer but as a policeman I can tell you this: never put too much trust in eyewitness reports. Maybe you've been looking for Brigitte in the wrong place."

The Marshall's words seemed to eerily echo and validate their recent decision: they had to search the first 100-odd meters of the glacier!

Brigitte was filling her water flask with fresh snow. It kept her hands busy and her mind from panicking. Then she shook the bottle for several minutes until the snow melted. Then she drank. It was laborious work, but she welcomed it. It kept her body from dehydrating, and her mind on the rails. Night fell. She dozed off, waking up with a start, surprised and happy. "I'm still alive."

When Aguetaz looked out of the window on Tuesday morning, he saw that it was clear on the top of the mountain. He immediately called Cervinia to check the situation there and was told that clouds covered the valley. Then the guide got on the phone to the Aosta Rescue Centre, where the pilot who answered his call reported good visibility, but hesitated when Aguetaz asked him to take off, fearing the break in the weather would not last. "OK," he said finally. "We'll give it a try."

Meanwhile, Bernard had returned to France, where he alerted French and Swiss guides who might help look for Brigitte if the search on the Italian side turned out to be impossible. Aguetaz had promised to call him in case the search had been resumed, and he did, but Bernard arrived at Aosta just a few moments after the helicopter had taken off.

Shortly before noon, Gerard, bouncing acrobatically among the scudding clouds, landed the chopper on the crest with the tail hanging out over the cliffs. Aguetaz leaped out, accompanied by Alberto Cheraz, a youthful-looking 39-year-old, and a youngster named Paolo Turcotti. Then the pilot took off. A thick cloud bank was advancing on the glacier. They didn't have much time.

The three men roped up. Cheraz, in the lead, put on the AVR D headphones. They started down and immediately Cheraz was shouting. "I've got her! I've got her signal!"

Increasingly loud, the beeps led them straight to the mouth of an open crevasse just 80 meters below the crest — well before the ridge where the previous searches had begun. Aguetgaz peered in. He heard a shout — and turned assuming it was Cheraz.

“What are you shouting for?”

“I never said anything.”

It couldn't be! Aguetgaz looked down again and this time his heart exploded with joy. “I'm here! Here!” he heard clearly, from deep inside the ice, where he could now see a small, huddled figure.

It took 20 minutes to set up the tripod and the winches which Turcotti needed to lower Aguetgaz and Cheraz into the crevasse. Another half hour was required to fit Brigitte into a special sling so she could be hauled up. “Are we hurting you?” Aguetgaz asked. Brigitte shook her head. “It doesn't matter. I'm so happy to be alive.” At that moment the helicopter came back with a doctor

and Bernard on board. Minutes later they were taking off for Aosta. Behind them, they could see the clouds closing over the crest. On board, Bernard helped the doctor check if Brigitte had frostbite on her hands or feet, and was overjoyed when he realised that she was fine.

Brigitte spent four weeks in hospital with her pelvis fractured in two places and her sacrum in a third. But in three months she was back on her feet, back at work — and climbing again.

The one hour the rescue had lasted was the only break in bad weather for three days. Aguetgaz, who had had to leave some equipment behind on the crest, was only able to return to pick it up a few days later. By then Brigitte would surely have been dead. “Miracles do happen,” Aguetgaz had to agree. But, he reflected, God also helped those who help themselves. If He'd given Brigitte a hand, it was also because she'd acted like a real pro.