COVER STORY

REACHING FOR THE STARS

Coalfields boy Gavin Vickers grew up believing the world was an exciting place. Having looked down from its highest point, he's more convinced of that than ever. JOANNE McCARTHY writes.

There's a short piece of film Gavin Vickers carries with him on his phone.

In it he's talking – gasping – to the camera, sitting on the roof of the world.

He's not a man given to tears.

But when he played that film for the first time after returning from the summit of Mount Everest, and was told one of his climbing party had died in the attempt, there were tears despite the lack of oxygen, and exhaustion so profound he can't find words to describe it today.

"I got emotional because up until then I had been so focused on what I was doing that I never really had time to think about it. It was a mix of relief, happiness and also sadness due to the loss of Peter [Kinloch, the Scottish mountaineer]," Vickers says.

It's one month since the Thornton coalminer sat on his own on a spot that's at the very outer limit of what the human body can tolerate, where "you can see over the horizon, the curve of the earth". And each time he replays that film where he's fighting for breath, lips cracked, eyes squinting, snow swirling around him, he relives the elation.

For a man like Vickers who climbs mountains to find the line of how far he can push his mind and body to go, Everest was a revelation.

"I actually feel, after this trip, that I'm never going to find that line," he says.

And if he does?

He laughs before answering.

"I'll know I've found the line for a few seconds and then I'll be dead," he says.

To get your head around Gavin Vickers's answer to the question "Why do you climb mountains?", it helps to go back to Cessnock 28 years ago and a trip up the Hunter River.

Vickers was 12, had three sisters, and was the only son of a coalminer father and a taxi company dispatch worker mother.

"I was always an outdoors kid," he says.

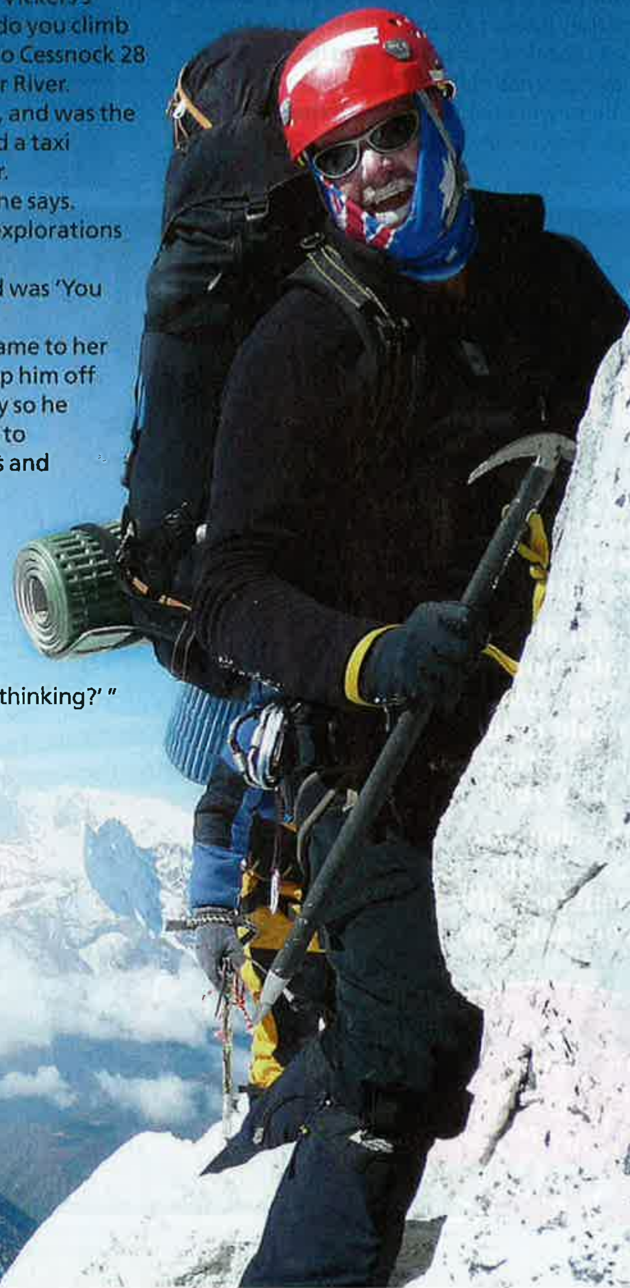
Back in 1982 the horizon of his explorations was set by his mother, Maree.

"The only rule my mum ever had was 'You have to be home by dark'."

That was until the 12-year-old came to her with a proposition. Could she drop him off at Elderslie with his rubber dinghy so he could paddle up the Hunter River to Luskintyre with three older mates and their dinghy? Four days would do it.

Vickers is grateful, even today, that she said yes, despite agreeing it was an astounding decision on her part.

"I look at 12-year-olds now and think, 'wow Mum, what were you thinking?' "



But it was a measure of their relationship and her trust in her big, adventurous son and his sensible older mates. And it was a decision based on the idea that the world is an exciting rather than a fearful place, and she wanted her son to get a taste of it.

Abseiling at a school camp at about the same time settled the deal. The world was beckoning.

"I was up there abseiling as a kid for the first time and I had no fear. I really enjoyed it and I wanted to do it again straight away."

There's a photo of the young Vickers at the school camp, confident as he's about to abseil down a rocky outcrop. Nearly three decades later the photos of Vickers on the famous Himalayan peaks of Cho Oyu and Everest feature the same smile.

He abseiled with mates at the Blue Mountains during his teen years, "always setting the goals higher and higher". Then for a few years the abseiling and adventuring took a back seat. He played basketball for the Newcastle Hunters and Newcastle youth team, became a Tubemakers apprentice fitter and turner, moved to Newcastle, settled down, started work at Mt Thorley Warkworth coalmine, ran a bike shop at Raymond Terrace and left any ideas of climbing mountains on hold, until 2005.

It was in that year he stood high above the French ski resort town of Chamonix after riding the dizzyingly steep Aiguille du Midi cable car to the level of the French, Swiss and Italian Alps, and looked out to the highest peak in the European Alps, Mont Blanc.

"There were all these groups of mountain climbers going up on the cable car and as I was watching them I thought, 'I've got to get back to that'," he says.

He returned to Newcastle but within a few months was sitting in a lecture hall, listening to mountaineers Doug Scott and Tim Macartney-Snape, and dreaming of climbing.

Brit Scott is one of the world's best climbers, having reached the summit of 40 peaks including the highest peaks on all seven continents. Macartney-Snape is Australia's best-known climber and was the first Australian to reach the summit of Everest.

"To see this guy [Scott] that I'd admired since I was a kid talking about climbing in such a relaxed way, it was unbelievable," Vickers says.

In the loungeroom of Vickers's home is a framed poster of Everest's sister mountain Lhotse. Vickers bought the poster that night for $20, asked Scott and Macartney-Snape to autograph it, paid $200 to have it framed and hung it on the wall.

"Then I went and did a mountaineering course in New Zealand. I thought it was the safest way to get into it without killing myself."

The course ran for 12 days. At the end of it, Vickers convinced a guide he was ready to climb New Zealand's highest peak, Mount Cook.

ON THE UP: Vickers preparing to scale a ladder on the second step of the final summit climb and, facing, on Ama Dablam with Everest in the background.

"It is the most amazing sight. Even in a place like the Himalayas, Everest towers over everything."

"Because of where it's situated you get very bad storms very quickly. It's why people die there," he says. "The guides are very good at finding reasons why you shouldn't attempt it if they think it's going to kill you."

The 10-hour ascent in fairly good weather was "the hardest thing I'd ever done".

"We left at midnight, and got back at 6pm. With that mountain it can be fine, and then it can turn pear-shaped very quickly."

It was so hard that Vickers started laughing at one point.

"The guide turned to me and said 'Why are you laughing'? I said it was because it was so hard, but we had to keep going because we couldn't exactly call a cab."

The Mount Cook climb was also the first serious test of whether he could even consider Everest, and he passed.

"I was absolutely shattered by the time we got back, but so elated to have climbed it," he says. "I told the guide I wanted to climb Mount Cook, Ama Dablam and Mount Everest.

"He said 'That's a pretty ambitious schedule' but I felt I could do it. I was so serious about it I went out and bought all the gear I'd need, about $5000 worth, because I knew it was something I was going to do for a while."

The world's highest peaks are in the Himalayan mountains running through and beyond the countries of Nepal and Tibet.

Fourteen are above 8000 metres. The highest are Everest at 8848m and K2 at 8611m, and they include Lhotse at 8516m, Cho Oyu at 8188m and Annapurna at 8091m.

In the Himalayas climbers are not only required to climb but must do so with only one-third the oxygen available at sea level. Altitude sickness, which can cause uncontrollable nausea and vomiting, blinding headaches, overwhelming tiredness, cerebral oedema and even death, is another obstacle which strikes seemingly fit individuals and contributes to the high attrition rate once people reach Everest base camp.

The lack of oxygen and risk of altitude sickness is why Everest treks are long – roughly 68 days – as climbers are required to acclimatise before increasing altitudes.

Vickers climbed his first Himalayan peak – Lobuche East, 6000m – in September 2007, and it was during this trip he caught his first sight of Everest.

"It was about lunchtime and the guide said to me, 'There's a nice surprise up ahead'.

"I saw the summit pyramid and the guide said 'That's the summit of Mount Everest'. There is absolutely no mistaking it."

And what was that like?

Vickers laughs again.

"Wow," he says. ▶

"It is the most amazing sight. Even in a place like the Himalayas where there are amazing mountains everywhere you look, Everest towers over everything. It is unbelievable to think of the forces needed to create a mountain like that."

In the two years between climbing Lobuche East, Ama Dablam and Cho Oyu in September last year, Vickers travelled back and forward between Australia, New Zealand and the Himalayas. Always climbing.

The trips included his first serious crevasse fall in New Zealand where he "stepped into a soft spot, my left leg went down and I got pulled in ways you should never be pulled".

"I was on a rope with my partner when I heard a little crack and went in."

It required a six-kilometre walk back to camp with an injured leg and a helicopter flight for medical attention.

Vickers did last year's ascent of Cho Oyu, the world's sixth highest peak, in preparation for Everest, and as a trainee climbing leader for a specialist adventure travel company.

"It's 650 metres lower than Everest but they call it one of the easier 8000m peaks because there are not many avalanches and not a huge amount of technical climbing," he explains.

Cho Oyu does have vertical ice cliffs of up to 80 metres which are scaled using crampons (climbing shoes) and ice axes.

It was at Cho Oyu that Vickers realised he was one of the lucky ones who could cope with altitude without sickness.

"I get out of breath but I don't get headaches and I don't feel the nausea," he says. "I've wanted my whole life to be good at something, and because I'm one of the lucky ones who can cope with altitude, I've found something I'm really good at."

He completed the climb, left his gear in Kathmandu, caught a plane to Australia and started preparing for Everest.

He trained his body by running, cycling and swimming, and he trained his mind by forcing himself to increase the training despite summer heat and tiredness from work.

He applied to his union, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), for financial help and they agreed to sponsor him for $25,000.

"I was absolutely stunned. It was incredible really, and quite humbling that these guys had that much faith in me," he says.

"If I can do one thing, it would be to thank them publicly for their generosity and their support. I just sat there thinking, 'how is this happening to me? I'm going to climb Everest and it's just all happened as I've bumbled my way through life'."

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Vickers increased the training until his departure in March.

"I always tend to train really hard because when I climb in places like Everest, I know I'm not going to be rescued if things go wrong. I'm just too big," he says.

"That's why people perish on Everest. You just can't physically carry people up there."

It takes weeks to make the gradual climbs up

PICTURE: JONATHAN CARROLL

KING OF THE MOUNTAIN: From left, Vickers abseiling as a boy; with 13-year-old American summiteer Jordan Romero, who was climbing Everest at the same time; a body en route to the top; about to leave for the summit; on top of the world. Below left: Vickers at home.

Everest. The party started with 19 members, but five dropped out after the first few weeks. Vickers led a group of three. Also in the larger party was Scottish mountaineer Kinloch, 28, who told Vickers he had just become engaged, had started a new job and had been "waiting 25 years to climb this".

"He was a lovely guy, a really nice guy."

Bad weather kept the group confined to their tents for 10 days in May and Vickers worried his Everest dream would end with a whimper and a dismal trek back to the start.

"I watched a lot of DVDs, read a lot of books and listened to music. When it kept on being bad I started thinking, 'this trip's just going to peter out'," he recalls. "That's the problem. It takes all that time, all that money, all that time off work, and there is a pressure to actually make the climb."

They were finally able to leave base camp on May 19, and made their way to high camp at 8300m on May 23.

"There we waited, and it started teeming with snow."

Vickers's group of two sherpas and four climbers started preparing at 9.30pm. At 10.45pm, and despite the snow, they headed off for the summit, along with a number of other groups, although the larger group from Vickers's party, including Peter Kinloch, remained at a lower camp.

"You head out at night for the climb to the summit so you can make the descent when it's light," he says.

Within two hours of leaving high camp climbers are confronted by the first of a number of bodies of mountaineers who have died making the attempt.

The first is an Indian climber known as "Green Boots" for his shoewear.

"I knew to expect them and I knew about their stories, but it was still confronting to see them," Vickers says. "You see a body frozen in the snow and you think, here's a person who had the same goal I did and it's cost them their life.

"It really sharpens you and makes you think, 'I'm not going to get like that'."

Near the summit, climbing Everest is a case of putting one foot in front of the other, then another foot, then resting for long seconds at a time to catch your breath, even with oxygen, and starting over again.

"It can take you 20 minutes to get 100 metres and you do that for nine hours," Vickers says.

"You don't have much capacity to think about much at all except staying on your feet, moving forward and getting to the summit."

There's a "little bulge of snow and a fairly gentle slope" before the summit, Vickers says.

"Suddenly there's the summit, and all you can think is, 'this is unbelievable'."

Vickers sat on the summit by himself for a while before others arrived. He made the summit at 10.07am on May 24. He stayed for 30 minutes before the five-hour trek back down to high camp.

"About 80 per cent of accidents happen on the descent," he says.

It was two days before Vickers and his group received news that Peter Kinloch had died on May 26 after making the summit, going blind and suffering frostbite and exhaustion. Attempts to bring him down were hampered by appalling weather, his rapidly deteriorating condition and the exhaustion and worsening condition of his team leader and sherpa.

"They had no oxygen. They gave him some drugs to help with the cerebral oedema but he was too far gone. The team leader and sherpa were also in a bad way," Vickers says.

Peter Kinloch's body is on a ridge below the summit now. On the same night a Japanese climber died 150 metres from high camp.

It is why Everest is such a challenge for men like Vickers. To search for the line of how far their bodies and minds can go, prepare well, examine the risks, reduce the risks, accept whatever conditions are thrown at them, and still make the attempt.

"I know a lot of people don't understand, and never will understand. They won't get why I want to climb Everest," Vickers says.

"But I need to do that so I can feel alive, because I have a hard time going to work and paying bills without going and doing that.

"I take total responsibility. I don't want to count on others to get me out of trouble."

Vickers remains elated. Everest wasn't a life-changing experience, but it was an experience about life. He hopes his climb encourages others to find and achieve their goals, but recognises his luck in growing up believing the world is a beautiful, exciting place.

"My mum, giving me that foundation, taught me to stand on my own two feet and that the world isn't scary," he says. "Because of that I want to experience everything it has to offer."