

Gilbert Harder

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In the Wake of an Annapurna Avalanche

On September 19, 1979, Maynard Cohick and his group were preparing an assault on Annapurna's summit. The climbers were camped on a precarious ridge, waiting out high winds at 20,946 feet. They had chosen this ridge, called The Dutch Rib, because they reasoned the steep cliffs rising above their campsite would shield them from the constant threat of avalanche high on the mountain. Furthermore, the total area of The Dutch Rib is so small that sliding snow tends to be diverted in either direction, crashing harmlessly off the side of the Earth. The climbers felt like they had situated themselves in a narrow zone of safety.

Patrick O'Donnell, a ski-resort vice-president, who was on the mountain with Maynard, later wrote, "It was so narrow you could straddle the ridge with both feet and peer into 2000-foot deep gullies, which dropped away on either side."

The winds soon became horrific, causing whiteout conditions near the top of the mountain. Some of the climbers at The Dutch Rib decided to retreat to the relative safety of Camp III. Two men rappelled down the steep slope of the ridge, disappearing over the lip without further discussion of strategy. Three of their team members stayed behind: **Gil Harder** [Abilene, Texas, Abilene Grotto], Eric Roberts (North Wales) and Maynard Cohick (Republic, Missouri).

Harder was suffering from mild altitude sickness. Roberts had just descended from Camp V through the brunt of the windstorm. By all accounts, Cohick was strong enough to make Camp III ahead of Harder and Roberts, who chose to rest at The Dutch Rib before going down. Instead, Maynard decided to remain with his friends.

Then everyone on the mountain heard what has been described by most witnesses as a giant crack. The entire east face sagged and started to collapse from the seismic shock of the avalanche - leaving the two descending climbers buried in snow. The pair had clipped into their carabiners when they heard the giant crack. Still hooked to their ropes, they managed to dig themselves out and were able to scramble down the steep slope of The Rib to Camp III at 19,974 feet. They radioed Camp IV, trying to raise their partners. There was no answer.

Days later, after the storm subsided, a rescue party at The Dutch Rib found a piece of frayed rope between two ice screws and the remains of a tent, which had been ripped away into oblivion. No other signs of the lost climbers were discovered.

A runner was dispatched from Base Camp to Kathmandu, carrying news of the disaster that wouldn't reach the United States for another week. Harder, Roberts and Cohick had literally vanished into thin air.

—*Lance Feyh, Living the Life with MountainZone.com*

Edited by William R. Elliott from Ron Miller's In Memory of Texas Covers, 31 January 2020