Near-death experience made her Mt Everest climb ‘more memorable’

Trainee teacher’s safety rope stopped her fall after fellow climber’s misstep

Theo Chua/Mike Tang

SINGAPORE— Barely 15 minutes after she reached the peak of the world’s highest mountains, trainee teacher Nor Yurinia Yokoohnroo almost plunged to her death when a climber attached to a shared climbing rope from the rear slipped and fell, pulling her along.

The near-death experience, however, made her conquest of Mount Everest last month more memorable than she had expected.

That she succeeded only on her second try. Her first attempt, as part of the celebrations to mark Singapore’s Golden Jubilee in 2005, was aborted due to the massive earthquake that devastated Nepal.

Her three-man mixed team, formed under the “Unity in diversity” tagline, came together last July after her team-mates reached out to her with a common interest in scaling Mount Everest.

Their expedition was supported by Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the National Institute of Education (NIE).

Ms Yurinia was the only person to successfully reach the 8,848m peak on May 22, making her the first Singaporean to do so since the last successful expedition in 2009 by the Singapore Women’s Everest Team.

“I knew that coming down would be difficult, but I didn’t know that I would fare such an experience,” she said.

On the 26-year-old’s mind was theHillary Step, a near-vertical rock face about 9,800m above sea level.

She fell five to six metres, spinning laterally along the way before being jerked to a halt by her safety rope, which allowed her to land safely “on two feet” on a rock.

“When I realised that I was going away from the mountain and my whole body was airborne, I thought, ‘that’s it’. And then, that is when the second-second, I was pulled back by the rope. When I was on the rock, 1, just cried (because I realised how close I was falling off the mountain).”

Her interest in mountaineering started in 2006, when she joined the National Mountaineering Club as an undergraduate. She was hooked after she got her first taste of high altitude mountaineering.

But the thought of scaling the world’s highest peak did not come to her until she saw it for the first time in 2010. Standing atop the 6,471m Mera Peak in Nepal, a popular trekking mountain, she told herself: “One day, I want to climb Mount Everest.”

Her first attempt, two years ago, was scuppered by an avalanche caused by the Nepal earthquake. The co-leader of the Aluminum Team Singapore Everest 2013 squad said they had to turn back after passing the 5,500m mark.

She had dreams about her first expedition in the days leading up to her second trip, which made her anxious about her impending climb. But her team-mates helped to reassure her and overcame her fears.

Despite having fulfilled her long-time dream—a journey she describes as “humbling” — Ms Yurinia does not intend to stop. She is certain that she will be climbing more mountains in time to come.

Her teammates, Mr Jeremy Tong, 26, a recent graduate from NTU’s Sports Science and Management programme, and Dr Arjunan Saravanan Pillai, 47, a teaching fellow at NIE, failed to reach the summit because of hypothermia.

Mr Tong, who was a more 200m or so from the peak, had to make the difficult decision to turn back because of literal cold feet. Had the condition been ignored, it might have resulted in the loss of his toes. The 35-year-old experienced mountaineer, who has scaled over 30 peaks in South-east Asia, Latin America and Africa, aims to give it a second shot next year.

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On the disappointment of staying behind at base camp, he said: “It was emotional... having some that far.” But upon hearing about how some people had lost all 16 digits in their attempt to reach the peak, he made the “difficult” decision to abandon his climb.

“Trails and tribulations are part and parcel of life,” he said, adding that he hopes their experience would inspire young people to take an interest in the outdoors, where “very real, very volatile, and evolving” conditions will require “adaptability, tenacity, and resolve”.

“All of such ingredients will add flavor to an individual’s character,” he said. “The mountain will always be there, I can always try again.”