

Rescue at 6400 metres

By DAVID STEWART

When Central Coast adventurer Shane Pophfer had a life-and-death decision to make for a young female mountain climber atop one of the world's highest peaks, he didn't hesitate.

SUCCESS: Pophfer's climbing partner Darren Wise reaches the summit of Aconcagua. The pair is taking an Australian RSL flag to the top of each summit to commemorate fallen ex-service personnel.



Shane Pophfer has told *Coasting* of the moment when he feared an American mountain climber would die in his arms on Mount Aconcagua in Argentina. Last month, Pophfer and his climbing companion Darren Wise were in a group of four at an altitude of 6400 metres, and just 500 metres from the top of Aconcagua, when fate intervened and disrupted the pair's quest to scale the seven highest mountains on the planet. The drama unfolded when the leader of a climbing party ahead of Pophfer's group emerged in the icy morning air. "All we saw was this guy dragging a body off the tip of this icy ridge," Pophfer said. It wasn't clear whether the body was male or female, nor if they were alive or dead. The group leader spoke briefly to Pophfer's tour guide, Tobias, in Spanish, then simply dropped the body in front of them and left to rejoin his group which was about an hour ahead. Pophfer, a former paratrooper, quickly discovered that the climber was a young American woman, and that she was close to death. "She was suffering from a cerebral edema (swelling of the brain), she had frostbite

and was barely breathing, and there was congealed blood coming from her nose," Pophfer said. "We had to make a decision about who was going to continue [to the summit] and who was going to stay," he said. "There was no way we could just leave her. She was in the process of dying." Pophfer said he did not hesitate in agreeing to stay with the woman. "Tobias and I just went into full-on rescue mode," he said. **Race against the elements** The pair had to move quickly to get the woman to a lower altitude, but also to keep her from freezing to death in the meantime. Pophfer said that the woman had suffered a fall close to the summit, and had spent the night on the mountain. That's often a death sentence in those conditions. "She was pretty busted up. She was lying in my lap for about an hour with very low and shallow breaths," he said. "It's frightening to have someone dying right in front of you." Radio contact was made with local park rangers who would come to help in the rescue mission. But they were four hours away. In the meantime, Pophfer and his guide

worked frantically to keep the woman alive, all the while inching their way down the perilous slopes. When they handed the woman to park rangers, Pophfer said he felt mixed emotions. "I was partly relieved, but also there was some disappointment about not summiting." Pophfer said he still does not know if the woman recovered. "She's expected to lose the tips of three fingers [to frostbite]," he said. "The last we heard she was being loaded onto some mules, and she was very thankful for what we'd done for her."

RESILIENT: Shane Pophfer makes it to the top of Mount Elbrus in Russia. His trek to the summit of Mount Aconcagua, in Argentina, however, was dramatically cut short.



THUMBS UP: Pophfer on Mount Elbrus. He and Wise thanked the many Australians who have donated money to their fundraising efforts for The Children's Hospital at Westmead. Pophfer's employer, Doyalson-Wyee RSL Club, donated \$3000, he said. Go to www.everydayhero.com.au/corporatemonk to donate.

What next?

After surviving the ordeal atop Aconcagua, Pophfer and Wise flew to Russia where they scaled Mount Elbrus, the fourth peak on their Seven Summits quest. Since returning to his Charmhaven home, Pophfer said he had been seriously considering a return to South America to finish the job. "I might just have to return to Aconcagua in February and finish the summit," he said. "It will niggle away at me if I don't do it." In the meantime, Pophfer is in training for the SIS Half Iron Man event at Port Macquarie on October 31. He and Wise will then begin preparations for their assault on Mount Denali, in Alaska, in 2012.



RECAP: How *Coasting* first reported on Shane Pophfer's Seven Summits campaign, and his plans to scale Aconcagua.