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[Home](#)

[Subscriptions](#)

[Current Issue](#)

[Editorial](#)

[Letters](#)

[Access](#)

[Hot Flashes](#)

[Features](#)

[Gallery](#)

[Equipment](#)

[Reviews](#)

[Just Out](#)

[Events](#)

[Guides & Travel](#)

[Rock Gyms](#)

[Marketplace](#)

[Suppliers](#)

[Special How-to  
Sections](#)



Today's date: Thursday, January 13, 2005 7:54:51 PM. ●●● >  
> Feature > No 194

## Features

# Escape from Kyrgyzstan

**Kidnapped by AK-47-toting  
terrorists, four young American  
climbers fight back.**

By Pete Takeda

"Dear Friends,

Tommy Caldwell, Beth Rodden, John Dickey, and myself are headed for the mountains of Kyrgyzstan for some fun in the sun. I wish you all happy and safe travels this summer and I pledge to do the same. After all, I don't have to be able to outrun AK-47-toting terrorists -- just Beth."

-- Jason "Singer" Smith's e-mail message on July 25, 2000, the day of the team's departure for Kyrgyzstan

Right down to the type of weapon that would come so close to killing him, Smith's prediction couldn't have been more wrong. Just three weeks after sending that note,

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[Books](#)  
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## Readers Index

[index 58-87](#)  
[index 88-117](#)  
[index 118-149](#)  
[index 150-165](#)

Search back issue  
table of contents for  
issues 58-165.

## Link Pages

[Manufacturers](#)  
[Organizations](#)  
[Grants](#)  
[Other links](#)

## Retail Purchases

Smith, Caldwell, Rodden, and Dickey were running for their lives, AK-47 rounds spitting in their wake. By the time their six-day ordeal was over, they had experienced the horrors of war: captivity, assault from small-arms and mortar fire, deprivation, and ultimately a harrowing escape. They also emerged from the mountains as witnesses of violent deaths -- one of them instigated by their own hands.

Upon their return to America, the climbers faced a media circus. They landed an agent and signed a book deal. Though few details are forthcoming, the package is described as "fairly lucrative, but nothing to retire on." A feature film is also in the works, by the same producers who brought us *Indiana Jones*.

The intended six-week climbing trip began on July 27 in Bishkek, the capitol of the rugged, landlocked Central Asian nation of Kyrgyzstan. From there, the team helicoptered into Kyrgyzstan's Kara-su Valley, which, along with neighboring Ak-su Valley, contains spectacular granite towers up to 4000 feet high. The area has drawn international teams since the 1980s, and when the young Americans arrived they weren't disappointed.

"The place is fantastic," says Caldwell. "It has mountains of granite, huge 50-pitch routes, and rock quality rivaling El Cap."

Caldwell, Rodden, Dickey, and Smith hoped to climb several towers, and between them packed enough climbing firepower to tackle

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anything in the area. The boyfriend/girlfriend team of Caldwell, 22, and Rodden, 20, were fresh from knocking off the first free ascent of El Cap's 22-pitch *Lurking Fear* (5.13c) a month earlier. Jason "Singer" Smith, 22, holds an impressive resume of Yosemite and remote big-wall climbs, including an unsupported solo of Mount Thor's 3800-foot West Face (VII A5) on Baffin Island. Singer got his nickname from the sewing machine he used to stitch up his stylish homespun threads. At 25, John Dickey was the oldest in the group. A resourceful, and widely traveled climber, he is also a budding freelance photographer. Kyrgyzstan was his first major assignment.

The trip was initially uneventful, the setting idyllic -- pine-scented alpine meadows with brilliant wildflowers, huge glacial valleys with soaring walls and glacier-fed rivers.

"The people in the valleys were so nice, so generous," says Caldwell. "Even though they didn't have much, they still fed us when we came by."

"The first climb we got on was the Yellow Wall, kinda the area warm-up," says Smith.

On August 11, the team started the climb. The following morning they were in portaledge 1000 feet up the wall. It was 6:15 a.m. The sun was just coming up.

"First one gunshot goes off," says Smith. "I heard the thing in my sleep. It was like this dream. Then I jolted upright and shouted, 'What the fuck was that!'"

"That was a gunshot," said Dickey.

The two quickly reasoned that someone was just out hunting. Then a second shot rang out.

"We're being shot at, Singer!" said Beth.

"That's ridiculous," replied Smith.

But when shot number three struck the wall so close to the climbers that it showered sand onto their portaledge, there was no doubt. Somebody was trying to kill them, or was at least deadly serious about getting their attention.

Several men stood below, gesturing and yelling for the climbers to come down. The team's ropes, tied together, barely made it to the deck. Dickey was first to reach the ground, and was immediately accosted by three young men wearing uniforms that were different from those he had seen worn by the Kyrgyz army. They were fierce-looking fellows, sporting big bushy beards, AK-47s, and grenades. The shooters were members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), rebels fighting to create an Islamic state in neighboring Uzbek territory. Communication was limited to gestures, sign language, and a few words of English.

The climbers were escorted back to their basecamp, about 40 minutes downhill. There they found two other men, another IMU rebel and a young man who turned out to be a Kyrgyz army soldier. The rebels had

already killed his three companions in a battle several days earlier. His life had been spared so he could act as a mountain guide for the rebels, who were on the move and unfamiliar with the region.

"[The Kyrgyz soldier] was trying to tell us what was going on, but we couldn't understand him either," says Rodden. "So we had no idea of what was going on or where we were going."

The climbers' tents, which they had locked up to prevent thievery, had been slashed open, and their belongings were strewn on the ground. Some of the rebels were wearing their clothing. Despite the language barrier the nature of the climber's predicament soon became apparent -- they were hostages.

Kyrgyzstan, a nation roughly the size of Nebraska, is a jigsaw puzzle of ethnic and political boundaries. The southwestern portion of the country is a ribbon of territory bordered on the south by Tajikistan and on the north by Uzbekistan. That the rebels were active in the Kara-su Valley is hardly surprising: It lies in the southeast of Kyrgyzstan, close to the point where the three nations converge. Chances are, the rebels were fighting through the Kara-su on their way north to sanctuary. The rebels apparently saw the American climbers as ideal hostages to trade for jailed compatriots or hold for ransom. It's happened before. In August 1999, IMU rebels captured four Japanese geologists. Though never officially

confirmed, it's rumored that a ransom of \$2 million was paid for their release.

Regardless of the rebel motives, the frequent border incursions have spurred the Krygyz military to beef up operations in the region. Violence has escalated. At a news conference on August 17, Kyrgyzstan's Security Council Secretary, General Bolot Januzakov, reported 17 Krygyz military deaths and 18 wounded during recent battles. He further reported the deaths of 50 IMU. No wounded militants were recovered. He stated, "[The IMU insurgents] do not leave injured in the field. They finish them off." Januzakov also announced the rescue of eight German alpine climbers who had been held hostage.

The escalating conflict earned the attention of the U.S. State Department. In July, the government issued a travel warning advising Americans to avoid the southeast region of Kyrgyzstan. Craig Luebben and Topher Donahue, two of America's leading alpinists, originally planned to accompany the ill-fated team. Says Donahue, "After reading the State Department warnings, it seemed silly to go. Some reports about the trip say they had no warning, but that's bull. We'd talked about it. Craig, his wife, Sylvia, and I decided not to go. It seemed way too dangerous."

On August 12, the climbers stuffed four backpacks with clothes and food. Then their captors marched them several miles into the Ak-su Valley. Around mid-afternoon bursts

of automatic rifle fire erupted, spraying through the group. They had been discovered by the Kyrgyz military. The rebels' response was swift -- they marched the Kyrgyz prisoner behind a boulder and executed him. The shooting rose in intensity, and the rebels ordered the climbers to run one by one to shelter behind the very boulder that marked the execution site. As the four sprinted for their lives, bullets ricocheted in their wake. Impacting high-caliber rounds shot sparks on the rocks around the climbers' feet. Dickey, in the mad rush for shelter, lost his pack. The climbers reported seeing Kyrgyz soldiers drop, hit by IMU fire.

The Americans hunkered behind the boulder, pressing up against the fresh corpse. Smith at one point sat on the body for 40 minutes, too focused on survival to be squeamish.

"They'd shot that dude in the head twice," says Smith. "I plopped right down on his leg and sat there because it was a safer place to be. I was ready to pull his body on top of us [for cover]."

The battle raged for around six hours, and close to nightfall culminated in three incoming mortar rounds, several of which struck locations where the group had previously taken shelter.

"I was definitely gripped when the mortars came in," says Smith. "They go off with a low rumble -- the ground shakes -- and then it's just like a video game, that high-pitched,

descending whistle. *Sssssshhhhh*. You can tell from the whistle when it's going to land, but you don't know if it's on top of you or a hundred feet away. That's really scary. Wacky, man."

Night fell and the shooting stopped.

What happened next was a swirling four-day nightmare. The climbers and IMU terrorists hid by day and moved under the cover of night. It's likely that the rebels were trying to head due north and reach sanctuary in Uzbekistan. But patrols of Kyrgyz soldiers in the valleys forced them to take a tortuous route over rugged ridges and across rocky alpine mountainsides. The insurgents stuffed the foursome into freezing riverbank caves and wet, windy holes under rocks -- like oversized rodent burrows -- for up to 17 hours at a time. The captors sometimes covered their hostages with branches and brush to avoid detection by Kyrgyz helicopters. Caldwell describes the bivies as "miserable, teeth-chattering cold."

"I probably cried four hours a day, I wanted so much to be with my family," says Rodden. "It was such a wonderful place, you know. We had no idea [this could happen]."

Early on two of the rebels departed, leaving the climbers in the custody of the group's leader and a dark-haired and swarthy 20-year-old, Ruslan "Yusef" Abdullin.

"They never beat us or tortured us," says Smith. "But they sure didn't treat us like



royalty."

At night the two remaining rebels marched the climbers anywhere from a few hundred yards to several miles. The Americans carried no water. For food they had only 12 PowerBars Rodden had stashed in her pack. Along with Dickey, Smith and Caldwell had lost their packs during the first day's battle. They drank from springs and silty streams. The rebels, like the area's inhabitants, were unbelievably tough. They ate nothing except for a few of the climbers' PowerBars. On day four, the militants raided a hut and scored some nearly inedible yogurt. The climbers were so famished that they forced down solidified balls of the greasy, cheese-like curd.

By the fifth day, the group found themselves back near the Yellow Wall's basecamp. Whether the IMU rebels had been hopelessly lost or the circuitous route was a tactical necessity remains unclear. What did arise from the long walk to nowhere was the growing certainty among the Americans that they would soon have to take action.

Despite exhaustion, hunger, and fear, Caldwell, Rodden, Smith, and Dickey held one critical asset -- the language barrier.

"We'd be sitting in a tree -- me, Tommy, and our guard," says Smith. "And I'd say something like, 'So what do you think, should we jump on him right now and bash his skull in?' We'd be like lookin' right at the guy. You just gotta make sure you have the right look on your face when you say it."

As darkness fell during the fifth day of their captivity, the party snaked up a stepped granite ridge, taking the line of least resistance, but soon encountered fifth-class terrain. An inky void on either side of the ridge indicated a huge drop.

"Going up the mountain on that night, we sat on a ledge and said, 'Hey, Yusef, alpinista -- you' ... Like, 'Hey, Yusef, you're a climber,'" says Smith. "And he'd be like, 'aahhh, naa,' and kind of brush it off. I'd say, 'John, should we grab him now and huck him back to the base?'"

Around midnight, the rebel commander left the group to retrieve radio batteries left back at the climbers' basecamp, indicating he would rendezvous with them later on top of the ridge.

Upon reaching the rendezvous point, the four climbers rested, ready to make their move. Beside them sat the lone remaining rebel, the young Yusef. Initially, Yusef was icy and reserved. He was a soldier in a merciless war. But, over time and through the efforts of the climbers, especially Smith, a born comedian, Yusef had "loosened up" and relaxed his guard.

When the moment was right, the climbers overpowered Yusef and pushed him off the cliff. "[Yusef] went 30 feet through the air, hit a ledge on his back, and then rolled off for more," says Smith.

"When we did that, I thought, 'Wow, we shouldn't have,'" said Rodden in *People*

magazine. "If [the rebels] find us now, they won't be merciful."

According to initial reports, the four Americans felt certain that Yusef's plunge was fatal. However, at presstime, an unconfirmed source says that Kyrgyzstan newspapers claim that Yusef did survive and is in a Kyrgyzstan jail. In an October 3 interview, Smith, sounding baffled at the possibility, said that Yusef may have lived, but thought it "unlikely."

Moving as quickly as possible, the four regained the valley and followed it downstream. The Ak-su and Kara-su Rivers eventually meet, forming the Karavshin River. Below this juncture, the Karavshin takes a sharp easterly bend. From prior exploration, the climbers knew there was a Kyrgyz army outpost below the bend. It lay a stiff day's hike, perhaps 10 miles, away.

The climbers pounded down the barren trail along the river under the eerie light of a full moon obscured by intermittent clouds. Dickey called the scene "Like running through a haunted house." The four were mentally and physically cooked, but this was no time to rest.

Around 4 a.m. they were approaching the army outpost when the roar of gunfire shattered the night. Bullets zinged and tracers arced within a few feet of the climbers. Dickey, Rodden, and Caldwell hit the deck. Smith, who says he doesn't know how the bullets missed him, kept running. He later claimed that compared to his

adrenaline-filled dash, "Michael Johnson can't sprint for shit." After about 100 feet, realizing he was alone, he turned around and ran back, concerned for the safety of his friends.

By this time the gunfire had ceased, and the climbers again ran for their lives toward the Kyrgyz army base. As they approached, three or four warning shots rang out from the garrison. For all the climbers knew, the soldiers might mistake them for terrorists -- or the small outpost itself might already have been overrun by rebel forces.

Nevertheless, they kept running as Smith screamed, "We're Americans! We're Americans!" At the gate, Kyrgyz soldiers pushed them to the ground and frisked them. It soon became apparent that the four ragged figures who had materialized from the night were indeed Americans. Six days after they were taken hostage, the ordeal was over. It was 4 a.m. on August 18. Says Smith, "I had a full-on breakdown when I realized we were finally safe."

The four were flown to Bishkek, where they were greeted as heroes by Kyrgyzstan's President Askar Akayev.

The expedition's aftermath continues to unwind. The climbers first spoke to reporters in Kyrgyzstan on August 19. Upon arrival in the United States several days later, they were bombarded by reporters and offers of movie and book contracts. *Good Morning America* flew them to New York for an interview, and *Dateline* is filming a feature-

length program as this article goes to press.

"Just today, I've had everyone from *Playboy* to the FBI call," said Smith during an interview in September.

When asked if he felt any remorse for attempting to kill Yusef, Smith said, "Unfortunately, no. It's what I try to tell Beth and Tommy. People have been fighting for 5000 years. That's the way things have been done, and unfortunately killing people has been a part of it. ... We were basically drafted into something that we wanted nothing to do with. I think it's very black and white, very cut and dried. I don't really have any question about it. I don't think Beth and Tommy do anymore either. They did for a while. I think they've dealt with it.

"John was the same way as me," says Smith. "We were ready to whack someone from day one. Totally comfortable with it. I mean the dude [Yusef] wore a six-inch knife on his chest and was ready to use it."

"I've had no nightmares," says Smith. "But say somebody moves a desk in the next room and it vibrates across the floor, my heart skips a beat because it sounds like mortar fire. Or when a gate in my van slammed shut I almost had a heart attack."

Caldwell and Rodden are reluctant to speak about the experience or the incident. Caldwell, though sympathetic with the climbing community's desire to know what happened, said several times, "Our agent says it's not a good idea to say very much at

all."

He did say this: "We went through a life-changing experience. I think it will work out in a positive way. I had one bad nightmare. Sometimes I feel a bit nervous. It's like having every possible feeling at every possible time."

*Pete Takeda is a senior contributing editor for Climbing.*

## **Is it safe to go?**

### Avoiding trouble in a climbers' Shangri-La

The politics -- not just the heights -- of Central Asia are enough to make your head spin. But don't cross this mountain paradise off your travel list just yet. Here's a quick primer, a climber's rough guide on how to avoid war zones when in the *stans*.

Stalin put up the lines in Central Asia. And looking at it from today's perspective, he did a crummy job. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has taken full advantage of the area's muddled borders, hiding its gunmen in the poorly defended valleys that divide Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The IMU doesn't particularly dislike the Kyrgyz and Tajiks. Rather, its beef is with President Islam Karimov (don't be fooled by the name), the mosque-closing dictator of Uzbekistan. Karimov, though, unlike his Kyrgyz and Tajik counterparts, has a real army to throw at the rebels. Thus, it's more out of convenience than animosity that the IMU fighters have set up shop in

## Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

As Caldwell, Rodden, Dickey, and Smith discovered in August, this messy little war poses some difficult access issues. And the American climbers aren't the only travelers to encounter trouble. Last year four Japanese geologists were similarly taken hostage in southern Kyrgyzstan. Nabbing nationals of wealthy foreign countries brings ransom money for the IMU's local insurgents.

Did Caldwell, Rodden, Dickey, and Smith know all this beforehand? They should have. Here is the easy way to stay out of trouble: Find a 1:45,000,000 map of the world, place the nickel over the point where Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan meet, and trace a line around it. **AND DON'T GO THERE!**

This cuts out the southern Karavshin, granite-walled valleys in which you could lose a Yosemite or two. But it leaves Kyrgyzstan's northern Tien Shan, crowned by Pobyedi (7439 meters) and Khan Tengri (7000 meters). While granite lovers lose out, these peaks more than live up to their reputation as Central Asia's "Celestial Mountains." In short, stay north and you won't get stuck in the middle.

-- *Eric McGlinchey*

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 [Top of page](#)