

Noshaq

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WHEN George Barnes and I boarded the plane in San Francisco, each with ice axe in hand, the worried stewardess insisted they go into the cockpit and not under our seats. Well, if they really needed ice axes to fly this airplane, they might have them. On debarking, we got them back from the smiling captain. "Are you really climbers? Not Cuban hijackers?" Holy cow! What should we do in Cuba? Are there mountains? Certainly none as high as 24,580-foot Noshaq in the Hindu Kush between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the Afghan capital, Kabul, we caught up to the other members of the American-Austrian Hindu Kush Expedition, Donald and Alice Liska, Donald Morton, and two Austrians, Manfred Kosi and Peter Goessmann. The latter two had come all the way in a Volkswagen bus of venerable age, the others by plane via the Atlantic.

It took only a surprisingly short three days to obtain the hard-to-get official permission for the famous Wakhan Corridor, the access route to Noshaq from the Afghan side. We also found an interpreter named Nazirullah and an old bus big enough to carry us and all our gear to the base of the mountain. We had everything but some vital climbing equipment, still on its way from the United States by airfreight.

To save time Manfred and I stayed behind to wait for the missing baggage, while the others left in the rented bus. The equipment eventually arrived and on July 20, nine days later, we two bade farewell to Kabul. After an uneventful 200 miles on a new, paved road, we were terrified by the remaining 200 miles of dirt road. Often the "road" was a riverbed, sometimes dry, sometimes under a foot or two of rushing, swirling water. Where the track, carved into the vertical face of a crumbling moraine hundreds of feet above the river, had broken away, it was patched with

assorted rocks, gravel and wooden sticks. This Russian roulette was nerve-racking! Our rented jeep managed to get us in five tortuous days to Quaz-i-Deh, the last village. There we left it together with its native chauffeur, who promised for the sum of 1000 Afghans (a little over \$13) to wait until we were back from the mountain. He actually kept his promise.

The next morning we promptly hired five native porters and started into the barren Quaz-i-Deh valley. With little food left, we were eager to join the main group. By fighting our fatigue and promising the porters a *bakshish* (gratuity), we shortened the hike to Base Camp by one day and joined our friends on the evening of the second day.

They had erected a little tent city in a well-chosen place: a flat of fine, dry gravel beside the glacier, not too far from the base of Noshag. Water ran nearby. The altimeter read 15,200 feet. Our friends had been active. They had established a large cache under the northwest face of the peak and a smaller one on the face itself. Their plan was, at that time, to forge a new route up to the west peak of Noshag, which would avoid most of the west ridge, the route first climbed by the Austrians in 1963. Before the pros and cons of the proposed route could be weighed, its upper half had to be explored. This was done in the following days by George Barnes and the two Dons. Meanwhile, Manfred, Alice, Peter and I made the third ascent of Khorpusht-e-Yakhi (18,700 feet), a beautiful mountain directly above Base Camp.

On the evening of July 30 everybody was back at Base. The others had reached Noshag's west ridge the day before at 21,000 feet. A dense fog rolled in as they began their descent. Only with great difficulty did they find their high camp on the face and thus barely avoid a bivouac. They proved that the west peak of Noshag could be climbed by the northwest face, but also concluded that the route was not without hazards, especially in bad weather.

With a cache at the base of the northwest face, an alternate route was to climb from the cache over a moderately steep snow and ice face straight up to a shoulder on the west ridge. This should be a relatively easy and safe line of ascent with few crevasses and no menacing sérac zones. The shoulder would be a good place for our first high camp. From there to the top of the mountain our route would be identical to the Austrian west ridge route. Because of the obvious dangers of the northwest face, it was not difficult to convince everybody of the advantages of the second route. Having made our choice, we could start establishing the high camps we thought necessary for a safe ascent of the mountain. We would probably need three camps, judging from the experience of our predecessors. Since we had sent back all the porters, we had to do the carrying ourselves.

A week and numerous loads later, we all were assembled again in Camp I at 18,700 feet. The site was ideal: a level, scree-covered shoulder with room for four tents, a storage area and the "kitchen". We had enough equipment and supplies to set up the higher camps without returning to a lower altitude. We were in high spirits, nobody suffering unduly from the altitude.

The next day, August 8, the "tigers", Manfred, Peter and Don Morton, pushed on for Camp II, which they established on a tiny platform at 21,000 feet. The rest of us carried up a second tent and more provisions during the following days. In the meantime the "tigers" explored the route to Camp III. Whereas the route between Camps I and II was almost entirely on snow and ice, the further ascent to Camp III was on rock and scree. From a technical standpoint, the climbing was easy except for a steep headwall below Camp III, where the advance group anchored 200 feet of fixed rope.

On August 10 the first group, Manfred Kosi, Peter Goessmann and Don Morton, moved up to Camp III, which was located above the belt of rocks at 22,500 feet. According to an "ingenious" plan worked out during a rest day, they were supposed to set up a two-man tent and in addition dig an ice cave for two more people. While it was easy enough to set up the tent, digging an ice cave at this altitude was too strenuous. One man would have to sleep in the trench they had started.

It blew during the night, giving Manfred, outside, second thoughts about sleeping in an open trench at 22,500 feet. Just before he froze to death, he joined his fellow climbers in an already crowded two-man tent. At 5:30 A.M. the three were on their way to the summit. Climbing over the 24,100-foot west peak, they ascended the 24,580-foot main peak of Noshaq in truly tiger-like fashion, using only four hours from camp to summit. Don broke his personal altitude record by 4000 feet. Manfred topped his by 6000 feet and Peter climbed 10,000 feet higher than ever before.

Considering the two-man tent at Camp III still too small for three, they descended to Camp II. There they met the rest of us, who had just arrived for the night. There was no room for them. They had no choice but to descend all the way to Camp I, a long way even for "tigers", if you have just come down from the top of Noshaq.

A violent wind sprang up at evening and hour by hour became stronger. Would our tents at Camp II stand? "George, let's heap a few more rocks on top of the rock piles which anchor the guy lines. It's a long way down to the base of the mountain . . ."

The wind buffeted the tents all night and half the next morning. By

mid-morning it had died enough to allow us to get ready to climb up to Camp III. Don Liska carried another tent to solve the sleeping problem. The next night would be a pleasant one — or so we thought.

When I arrived at six o'clock, the last one into Camp III, all was not well there. Of the two gasoline stoves we found, one did not work at all; the other one was not in much better shape. More than an inconvenience, this could be disaster. After four hours, the Liskas eventually produced a single cup of lukewarm soup per person.

At four o'clock, in the light of my headlamp, I got to work on the stoves. At six I gave it up. Half an hour later we started for the summit — without breakfast! The snow was perfect and the slope not particularly steep. Finally a series of ledges and easy rock led to the so-called west peak — west shoulder would be more appropriate. There we rested a bit in the warm sun and filled our canteens with snow, hoping it would turn into badly needed water. The clock showed noon. Clouds began to obscure the tremendous view of countless mountains from Tirich Mir in the south to the Russian Pamir mountains in the north.

The gently rising snowy ridge to the main peak was endless! Half a dozen steps, then I had to catch my breath, bent over the ice axe. Another five or six steps, and another rest stop. Is there no easier way of earning my Canadian Club? George was far ahead. Look! He had reached the top! His tiny figure stood out clearly against the sky.

At the base of the last slope I met the Liskas again. Don was giving Alice a pep-talk. Who would give me one? I needed it more than anyone else!

Everybody made it to the top of the mountain that day, sooner or later, and everybody made it back to camp. In the evening it began to snow. No stoves, no warm food, almost nothing to drink!

The long descent to Camp I began the next morning. The rocks were covered with ice and several inches of new snow. How glad we were to have fixed ropes on the difficult headwall.

The next day, August 15, all of us, six bearded, grubby men and one pretty lady, descended to Base Camp. A recently arrived expedition from Austria gave us a hearty welcome. Soon a party was in full swing. Prost! Skol! Cheers! All you teetotalers, vegetarians, Moslems, cliffhangers and other fanatics, forget your principles and empty your glasses! You climb Noshaq only once in your life.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Wakhan Corridor, Hindu Kush, Afghanistan.

ASCENTS: Khorpusht-e-Yakhi, 18,700 feet, third ascent, July 30, 1969 (Goessmann, Hechtel, Kosi, A. Liska); August 1, 1969 (D. Liska, Morton).

Rakh-e-Daros, 18,670 feet, second ascent, August 2, 1969 (D. Liska, Morton).

Koh Sang, c. 18,200 feet, 1.2 miles east-southeast of Khorpusht-e-Yakhi, first ascent, August 18, 1969 (D. Liska, Morton).

Noshaq, 24,580 feet, via West Ridge, sixth ascent, August 11, 1969 (Goessmann, Kosi, Morton); August 13, 1969 (Barnes, Hechtel, A. and D. Liska). This is an altitude record for the highest summit reached by a woman outside of Red China; Chinese women have climbed Kungur, 25,148 feet.

PERSONNEL: Richard Hechtel, *leader*; George Barnes, Alice and Donald Liska, *Americans*; Peter Goessmann, Manfred Kosi, *Austrians*; Donald Morton, *Canadian*.

