Dhaulagiri II

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The Dhaulagiri range was thought to contain the highest mountains of the world from 1818 until Kangchenjunga was found in 1848 and Everest in 1852. Yet Dhaulagiri I was the next-to-last 8000-meter peak to be climbed when the Swiss ascended it in 1960. In 1963 a small Austrian expedition tried to climb Dhaulagiri II (25,429 feet), the highest in a range of four unclimbed peaks — Dhaulagiri II through V — among the last of the high, unclimbed 7000-meter peaks. Although they were unsuccessful, two of the members reached the base of the mountain and found a possible way to the summit. For eight years expeditions of various countries have tried to climb the Dhaulagiri peaks but have been unsuccessful, losing many lives and giving them the reputation of the most dangerous and inaccessible range in the Himalayas.

Planning by the Austrians started in 1970 when Adi Weissensteiner and Franz Huber decided to try Dhaulagiri II again. Adi asked around and the climb interested me. As any expedition to Nepal must be supported financially as well as be recognized by an established club for permission, the next step was to find a club. The Austrian Himalayan Society was interested and had several good climbers who wished to join the effort. Acquiring the equipment and permits took six months, with a tentative start of March 1. I left Seattle on February 22, after submitting my application to the American Alpine Club for a Boyd N. Everett Climbing Fellowship Fund grant, because I was financially broke. I could get to the mountain and back to Austria, but not back to the U.S.A., on the funds I could raise. In Austria, planning, equipment sorting and packing, and last-minute details went ahead at a furious pace.

The Austrian Himalayan Society named it the Dr. Rudolf Jonas Memorial Expedition, after one of the first great climbers and leaders of Austrian Himalayan expeditions. His brother, Franz Jonas, is currently president of Austria.

The expedition consisted of very strong Austrian climbers, some of whom had climbed the North Wall of the Eiger and the Matterhorn and in the Himalayas, Andes, Russian Pamir and Hindu Kush.
The members were Franz Huber, leader; Adolf Weissensteiner, assistant leader; Adolf Huber, Helmut Draxler, Dr. Horst Stych, Günter Guber and I.

Adi Weissensteiner and I were the advance team to get the gear to Pokhara and to clear the expedition with the Nepalese government. We arrived in Kathmandu on March 12, only to learn that our equipment was stalled in New Delhi because of an airline strike and the state of tension between India and Pakistan. As assistant leader, Adi stayed in Kathmandu to clear the expedition, pay for permits, etc. I went back to New Delhi to get our two tons of equipment. Indian Customs took six days of haggling. Finally, after tribute had been paid, I faced the real problem: thieves, dysentery, foreign language — and Pokhara 400 miles away. I managed to hire a truck and after a harrowing ride through India’s and Nepal’s uplands, I arrived at Pokhara one day ahead of the main team from Austria. Adi’s stay in Kathmandu was productive. He found a very good Nepalese liaison officer, D. S. Rana, who expedited the government business. The permission to climb Dhaulagiri II cost $600.

On arrival in Pokhara, Franz Huber hired 61 porters, three Sherpas and one mail runner. We left Pokhara on March 30. Our route schedule called for a circuitous trip 200 foot-miles around the western end of the Dhaulagiri range to the north side of Dhaulagiri II. There are shorter routes to the area, but also many limitations, such as an 18,200-foot pass that might not be open this early in the year and a security gate at Jomsom that keeps people from entering the 25-mile buffer zone between Tibet and Nepal.

From Pokhara we traveled upriver, over mountain ranges, upriver, and up and down mountain ridges for 22 days. Soon the trail became a path and then the path became a route, and finally disappeared for several days. The complete expedition was lost for 24 hours. After crossing the 14,800-foot pass, Jangla Bhanjupang, we dropped into the Barbung Khola region and into Tibetan-populated country on the back side of the Himalayas.

On August 20, after trekking almost 200 miles, we waded the last river in a blizzard at the village of Mukut, at 13,300 feet. We established Base Camp across the river and awaited better weather. We seven climbers and three Sherpas had 12,129 vertical feet to climb in less than 30 days. To do that we needed good weather. It took eight days and 1700 feet of fixed line to establish Camp I at 15,500 feet, a day-and-a-half from Base Camp. The route to Camp II was under a big icefall and up a steep gully. By using fixed rope and climbing over a narrow pass at 18,500 feet, we entered the hidden valley. The pass guards the entrance into the deadly Avalanche Valley and the only
climbable approach to the north and west side of the Dhaulagiri range. This small notch in the headwall between two 20,000-foot mountains had been found in 1963 by Adi Weissensteiner. Failure to find this entrance may be the reason for the failure of other attempts on the west side.

The exit off the southern side of the headwall was a 1000-foot descent down a narrow couloir. Once out of the couloir, we were able to see Dhaulagiri II for the first time in 35 days. (We had seen it on the flight into Kathmandu in March.)

On April 30 Camp II was established at 17,500 feet, and a team was selected to establish Camp III. The best route was across the enormous, crescent-shaped valley guarded by a two-mile-wide hanging glacier, which continually swept the route. The only protection from avalanches was to hide behind the exposed rock bands that laced the slope. For many days we crossed and recrossed this dangerous slope. Avalanches came down, new snow fell, but with luck and teamwork we established Camp III at 20,000 feet on the northwest ridge, just above the start of the first icefall and 5000 feet above a frozen lake in Avalanche Valley.

For the next thirteen days we started out to establish Camp IV only to be stopped by the afternoon snowstorm, sickness, mental or physical fatigue or the feeling the route would not go. After six days of storms that kept us tentbound, the four strongest members made a last-ditch effort to set up Camp IV. The leader, Franz Huber, went down to help bring up supplies to replenish those depleted during the storm. On May 15 Adi Huber and Adi Weissensteiner found a way through the maze of towering ice blocks that had given us route problems. Sherpa Jumbu Norbu and I brought up supplies, and Camp IV was established at 21,200 feet under an enormous sérac. My companion was a kitchen boy on two previous expeditions on Mount Everest, but he had never climbed higher than Camp II there. This was his first climb as a porter. Only four could make it that high. Others attempted it but fell sick and had to drop back to Advanced Base (Camp II) at 17,500 feet.

The climb from Camp IV to V was as frustrating as the route to Camp IV. The four of us alternately packed upwards into the last big icefall, another maze of ice walls that nearly exhausted the expedition's energy. Storms continually made the route dangerous and necessitated daily trail-breaking, exhausting work at nearly 24,000 feet without oxygen. Teamwork and leadership prevailed. Without it we could not have made it. All members found hidden crevasses or took short falls. These routine delays were countered by the expertise and dispatch of close teamwork.

On May 17 Camp V was established at 23,600 feet; but we were all physical wrecks. The strain of the route, lack of oxygen, and deep snow
nearly stopped us at this point. On May 18 the weather improved and with the summit in sight, a push had to be made that day or forever be abandoned. With food and gasoline for another 24 hours, we decided to give it a try.

On the morning of the 18th, as Adi Huber and Jumbu departed to break trail to the summit, Adi Weissensteiner's and my tent caught fire from a malfunctioning gasoline stove. Fire had burned only the tent's inner liner; no climbing equipment was damaged. After putting out the fire, Adi's toes began to freeze; more delays for rewarming. We two left Camp V two hours behind the lead team and met them as they descended from the top. We struggled on up the technically easy but gruelling slope and final ridge and reached the summit at 4:30 P.M., just ahead of the afternoon storm.

While taking summit pictures, I stuck my ice axe into hard snow. As I watched it slowly fall over and start to slide thousands of feet over the rim of the hanging glacier, I stood dumbly there. My body could not react fast at this altitude; and even my mind seemed incapable of reasoning and analyzing the consequences of the loss of the ice axe.

I do not know how the others felt, but I was totally unprepared for the experience of reaching the nearly unattainable summit. There was no elation — only the stark realization that now we must begin the more dangerous part of the trip, the descent. Adi's toes were freezing; my heels were beginning to freeze, and I was scared. Here I was, with a body so exhausted and deteriorated that I could barely think or move, with 13,000 feet of technical climbing problems. How we got down through the icefields to Camp V I do not know. We were automatons, cutting steps, belaying, doing what training and experience had taught us. The descent from the summit was plain Hell. One full breath for each step down a gentle slope. Through a storm of wind and clouds we finally found Camp V.

On May 19 the climb down from V to IV was even more dangerous. Icefalls that were easy to ascend posed delicate problems on the descent. Having used up ice screws on the ascent, we now had dangerously doubtful belays. It took all our knowledge and experience just to keep from a fatal mistake on the snow-covered ice.

We finally staggered into Camp IV, exhausted. Thanks to good leadership, Franz Huber had sent up Günter Guber and the mail runner, Migma. (He was pressed into becoming a porter when the other two Sherpas could not go above Camp III.) Guber had food ready — but we were so exhausted we could not swallow. Regardless of fatigue, the day was made wonderful for all of us because Migma had brought us the first mail in 40 days. I found that I had been awarded a Boyd N. Everett Climbing Fellowship grant, and I knew I could get home — if I could
get the rest of the way off the mountain.

The descent from Camp IV to III was horror. All of us took falls with heavy loads, because we were cleaning the mountain of all equipment. Deteriorating snow conditions caused exhaustion. May 20 ended the worst and greatest three days of my life. “I made the summit and I’m still alive!”

We were held up at Camp III waiting for the other members and more especially for cooler weather because the hanging glacier was peppering the valley with house-sized blocks of ice. Adi Weissensteiner’s experience in avalanche control paid off. He chose the time to go. We finally made the dangerous traverse safely into Camp II. Over the pass and through the gate to Dhaulagiri II, down the hazardous chute below Camp II, we carried or rolled all our gear, arriving in Base Camp on May 22.

The trip out was uneventful and enjoyable. The Tibetan porters were great, and the beauty of the return route was an experience we shall all remember. South of Mukut, we turned east, up over the 18,200-foot pass into a different world (Tibetan desert), and then turned south. The trip down the Kali Gandaki River through one of the world’s deepest canyons, between Annapurna and Dhaulagiri, was impressive, although it became a race against the monsoon. Nepal had the worst weather that spring in many years.

The success of the climb must be attributed to teamwork. Although a frugal expedition by most American standards — no dehydrated foods, only four down bags, eight-year-old used tents, inadequate down clothing and a diet of rice for lowland travel — we made it. The teamwork started in Austria, getting the equipment ready, and continued on the trek in, on the mountain, and on the trek out; in danger, in sickness, and in fun, the team stuck together, the East, the West and the Austrians.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Central Nepal
FIRST ASCENT: Dhaulagiri II, 25,429 feet, via the northwest side, May 18, 1971 (Weissensteiner, A. Huber, Fear, Sherpa Jumbu Norbu).
PERSONNEL: Franz Huber, leader; Adolf Weissensteiner, deputy leader; Adolf Huber, Günter Guber, Helmut Draxler, Dr. Horst Stych, Austrians; Ronald E. Fear, American.