

# Everest Southwest Face

CHRISTIAN BONINGTON

I knew there was something wrong the moment Martin Boysen started speaking on the radio. It was 7:30 in the evening of September 26 and in the last three hours the tension had been steadily mounting at Camp II as we waited for news of three climbers who had pressed on towards the summit of Everest leaving the Top Camp that morning. Martin's voice crackled through the static: "Pete and Pertemba have just got back, but Mick hasn't." Suddenly, an expedition that had been so successful, so lucky, and which had run so smoothly, was caught by tragedy, a harsh reminder of just how fine is the margin between life and death on Everest, however strong the team that tackles it.

We had climbed the southwest face just two days before when Dougal Haston and Doug Scott made their magnificent push for the summit. We had a well-established Camp VI, were well ahead of schedule and I wanted to give as many as possible of our strong team of climbers the chance to savour the challenge and satisfaction of Everest's summit. I therefore had planned to make two further summit attempts of four climbers each on September 26 and September 28 respectively.

That morning of September 26, at 3:30 Martin Boysen, Mick Burke, Pete Boardman and our sardar, Pertemba, had set out from the two small box tents that clung to a ledge carved from the snows of the upper snowfield of the southwest face at a height of 26,600 feet. Even at dawn the wind was gusting strongly, and there was a threat of high cirrus cloud in the sky, warning of a possible break in the weather, but there had been such clouds before and anyway this was their chance of standing on the highest point of earth—and so they set out.

An accident is usually composed of several, often unconnected incidents, which inexorably compound the final tragedy. The first one occurred half way across the snowfield above the rock band. They were following the line of rope that Dougal Haston and Doug Scott had fixed in place just three days before when one of Martin's crampons fell off. He had already had trouble with his oxygen, and now with only one crampon there could be no question of going on. By this time Pete Boardman and Pertemba had pulled ahead, reaching the south summit of Everest by 10:30 A.M., much faster than on the first ascent, because of the consolidated nature of the track. They had seen no sign of Mick Burke and assumed that he had gone back with Boysen. Their own



PLATE 51

*Aerial photo by Dr. Keiichi Yamada*

**The Southwest Face of MOUNT  
EVEREST. — = fixed rope;  
- - - = route without fixed rope;  
—| = short lengths of fixed rope;  
Δ = camp; x = bivouac.**

ascent was very nearly jeopardized when Pertemba's oxygen system iced up and they spent an hour and a half on the south summit, struggling to clear it, before making their summit bid. They reached it at 1:10 P.M. in what had been an impressively fast ascent. They flew the Nepalese flag in honour of Pertemba's ascent, surely the most difficult attempt ever achieved by a Sherpa, made a tape recording and then started back down.

Just below the summit they were astonished to meet Mick Burke, who was sitting down having a rest. After Boysen had turned back he had decided to carry on by himself. Under the circumstances it was a reasonable decision. There was a well consolidated track and Mick Burke was a very experienced and determined mountaineer. It was he who had forced the rock band, the key to the south face of Annapurna in 1970.

He had been to our high point on Everest in 1972 and had a wealth of summer and winter climbing experience in the Alps behind him, including being the first Briton to climb the Nose on El Capitan. In going on alone he took a calculated risk, something that is an integral part of mountaineering. He certainly was not the first man to go it alone on Everest. At a very similar height on the north face on the north side, before the war, Odell and Smythe had pressed on when companions had been forced to retreat. Although he had been slower than Pete Boardman and Pertemba he had made quite a respectable time and was in good spirits. He even tried to persuade them to go back to the summit with him so that he could film them on top, but you do not retrace your steps lightly at 29,000 feet and Pete declined. He was worried anyway, about the time.

This was more difficult ground than Pertemba had even been on before and he wanted to move one at a time. Pete therefore said that they would make their way to the south summit and wait there. At the time this seemed perfectly reasonable; it was cloudy, but you could see the sun through the clouds, and though it was gusting at about 40 mph, visibility was still quite good. Mick being alone on the way down, would be much faster than Pete Boardman and Pertemba.

And so Mick Burke plodded on alone towards the summit of Everest, the goal of his ambition, and the other pair started down—but within half an hour, weather conditions deteriorated dramatically, with the cloud closing in to form a complete white-out and the snow gusting furiously.

It was all they could do to find the top of the gully leading back down to the upper snowfield. They sat there shivering in the driving wind for an hour and a quarter, hoping desperately to see the vague shape that would be Mick Burke, looming through the scudding snow. But he did not come back. He should have had time to get back down and one can only assume that he missed his footing, or much more likely walked

over one of the cornices which overlook the huge Kangshung face of Everest which would have been on his left as he came down. I am absolutely certain that he reached the top of Everest and the accident would have occurred on the descent.

After an hour and a quarter it became increasingly obvious to Pete Boardman that unless he and Pertemba started down they would never get back to the Top Camp that night. Haston and Scott had only just survived a bivouac in reasonable conditions two nights before. In these stormy conditions they would have had practically no chance at all. It was an agonizing decision to make, but the only course open was to retreat, particularly since he felt responsible for his companion Pertemba as well as himself. They left the south summit just in time. They had the greatest difficulty in finding the end of the fixed rope that led back to Camp VI and only got back an hour after dark.

The next day, September 27, the storm raged unabated. There was no question of leaving their tent, and anyway Pertemba was suffering from snow blindness and Boardman had frostbite and was exhausted. Had the weather been fine, Boysen would have ventured out, at least to the end of the fixed rope, and we could have pushed Nick Estcourt and Tut Braithwaite up from Camp V, to have a look as well. But after another day and another night of storm we had to admit to ourselves that he was dead; in the unlikely event of Mick not having slipped and fallen, he could not possibly have survived without oxygen or shelter.

I had spent a year, thinking and planning not just how to achieve success but also how to reduce the factor of risk—but you can never reduce it completely. However large and strong the expedition, however careful the planning, the power of the elements, the personal factor, the little piece of bad luck, can all combine to wreck the most careful plan—and yet we must accept this if we go on climbing, for this is the very challenge and romance that mountaineering presents.

Just one week earlier our expedition had been like a well-oiled machine pushing people, rope, oxygen and food up the southwest face, establishing camps, forging steadily forwards consistently ahead of schedule. We had established Base Camp on August 25, just three weeks earlier than in 1972. The experience of the Japanese in 1973 and the French in 1974 had indicated that we should be able to expect settled weather during this period, with mornings of sunshine and snow in the afternoon. This had proved the case, and although there was a constant threat of avalanche both in the Western Cwm and on the face itself, there was only one day when we were unable to push supplies up the icefall and the Western Cwm. We had modified our original plan in the face of the snow conditions during the monsoon, and had completely changed the positions of Camps IV and V. This had made sound logistic sense for we had placed Camp IV at a much lower height than on previous

occasions, at about 23,700 feet at a position where it was sheltered from the threat of major avalanches and was in reasonable distance from our Advanced Base. Almost as a direct consequence of this, we put Camp V lower as well, still on the right side of the main gully at about 25,500 feet.

I had moved up there on September 16 to establish camp and assess our future movements. I had never believed in leading an expedition from Base Camp. At the same time it is usually a mistake to get right out in front, for then you become obsessed with the bit of snow or rock immediately in front of your nose, and as a result lose sight of the overall situation. This was a different situation, however. For we were now venturing on to new ground, across the great gully towards the deep gash on the left-hand gully, from a different camp than we had used in 1972.

I felt I needed to get the feel of the situation and so spent nine days at Camp V, working with successive groups of climbers to force the route as quickly as possible up to the mouth of the gully and then through the rock band. I was able to move as far forward as this because of the strength of my organizing team. Dave Clarke was at Camp IV, Adrian Gordon at Advanced Base, Mike Rhodes, our Barclays Bank nominee, at Camp I and Mike Cheney at Base.

Their role was not as dramatic as that of the lead climbers, but in many ways it was more vital, for without the flow of supplies going smoothly up the mountain the people in the higher camps would have had to retreat. I had spent a long time before the expedition working out our logistics, and the fastest time in which we could possibly climb the mountain.

We had consistently stayed in front of this theoretical path, largely because of the tremendous enthusiasm of the Sherpas who carried more, often heavier, loads than from previous experience I had ever thought possible. We were paying them well, but there was more to it than that. It was primarily the spirit and feel of potential success that pervaded the expedition.

It was on September 20 that Nick Estcourt and Tut Braithwaite found the key to the south face of Everest, a ramp of steep snow that crept out of the deep-gashed gully that penetrated the rock band on its left side. Although we had obtained every photograph which we possibly could, none had shown what happened inside the gully; this was one of the big gambles. Mick Burke and I carried loads of rope in support of Estcourt and Braithwaite that day, and we slowly followed up the ropes they had already fixed, into the deep, shadow-enclosed jaws of the gully. A rock plastered with snow, jammed across the walls, formed the first barrier. Tut Braithwaite forced his way up one edge. By the time he had reached the top he had run out of oxygen, but

PLATE 32

*Photo by Christian Bonington*

**The "Balluchulish Bridge," a 35-foot ladder in the Western Cwm.**





PLATE 33

*Photo by Doug Scott*

**Camp IV at 23,700 feet. The tarpaulins above the MacInnes Boxes act as avalanche chutes to protect against powder-snow avalanches.**

he just kept going. Nick, who had already finished his cylinder, climbed up past Tut.

There was a shout from the shadows above, "There's a way through." And we followed on up. By the time Mick and I had reached them, Nick Estcourt was already climbing the ramp. The height was close to 27,000 feet. It was probably the hardest climbing ever attempted at that altitude, and he was without oxygen. The overhanging wall above pushed him out of balance. Afterwards, he said that because of the altitude it was one of the hardest pitches he had ever led. In doing so, he had solved the problem of the rock band.

On our return that afternoon and on the next day, which we used as our rest day, I made my calculations to ensure a smooth summit bid and subsequent ascents or bids. It was an incredibly complex permutation of movement of men, equipment, oxygen and food. I completed it at 25,500 feet, the odd whiff of oxygen to keep my mind working clearly—and at the end of about twelve hours of work, had a plan that worked, with Dougal Haston and Doug Scott making the first bid and two groups of four making the second and third. The next day, on September 22, I had what to me as a leader was the supreme satisfaction of helping Doug and Dougal into Camp VI.

*Doug Scott writes:*

For Dougal and me here were three incredible days of mountaineering on this our third expedition to Everest. On September 22 we moved up the gully by way of Tut's fixed ropes and then out of it right by the way of the ropes left by Nick. We were both amazed at the simplicity of the solution of the rock band and at the change of perspective—a veritable "devil's kitchen" of a gash so unusual on the open slopes of Everest. There was another 300 feet of ground to climb and rope to fix before we were out of the gully system and had found a site for Camp VI.

This was on a narrow arête of snow made possible only by hacking out a notch in its profile. Ang Phurba brought up the heavy tent with surprising ease. This splendid Sherpa went off down just as Chris, Mike Thompson and Mick Burke arrived with other vital supplies—rope, food and oxygen. Their magnificent carry up to 27,300 feet gave Dougal and me the wherewithal to continue our upward progress.

They went down, Chris weary from nine days' hard effort above Camp V. Mike Thompson gave us his best wishes, trusting us to make good his unselfish ferry. We would not let him down or Chris or any of the other lads below who had worked hard and fast to put us in this position.

The MacInnes box (a special tent named after its designer, Hamish MacInnes, the expedition's deputy leader) took a lot of erecting. Hacking

out snow at that height was hard work without oxygen. We had just enough cylinders for climbing and none to waste on static activities around camp. Just before dark we snuggled into our sleeping bags and began brewing mugs of tea and a billy full of sausage and mash.

Before light Dougal left the tent to lay the first of our three 400-foot lengths of fixed rope. It was his turn as I had completed the route of the gully the day before. It was slow going for him in the cold early morning light as the ground became increasingly steep and for 20 feet there was even vertical rock lightly powdered with snow—hard work at 27,500 feet. My lead ran over easier ground and by sun up we had 800 feet fixed. Dougal continued diagonally upwards across more difficult rock shale bands, dipping the wrong way and uncomfortably loose. We also ran out our two 150-foot lengths of climbing rope and retreated back to camp with all the rope we had fixed halfway to the gully leading up to the south summit.

We lay in our feathers that night listening to the wind buffeting the top pyramid of Everest and rocking our little square of canvas. No real doubts but nagging little thoughts of how vulnerable we were, how much we were at the mercy of the weather, how lucky we should be if our ascent even took place—and then we were off—into double boots, crampons, oversuits and harness, downing a cup of tea and away along the ropes with Jūmars sliding on the icy sheets. It took only a quarter of the time to reach our high point of the day before. So much for fixed ropes—then on to the virgin slopes. Rope-length after rope-length until Dougal's lead took us to the foot of the final couloir.

*Dougal Haston writes:*

Crossing into it, we realized that we were in for a hard time. The snow was soft and deep and it looked much longer than we had expected. Just before the rock step my oxygen packed up and it took an hour's fiddling to fix it. Doug led on to the step and, climbing carefully and well, was up it in one and a half hours. Here we left a fixed rope. The next few hours were spent in a type of wading up steep snow (up to 60°). The leader first of all had to clear a layer of powder with his hands, pack it down until it was reasonably consolidated, then try to stand up, usually sinking up to his knees. Near the South Summit a piece of rock provided some relief. About three P.M. we pulled over the cornice and took shelter in Tibet.

*Doug writes:*

We considered bivouacking. There was a lot to recommend it; loose unconsolidated snow that might later firm up with the rising wind and the lateness of the hour, but then there was the feeling of getting the job

PLATE 34

*Photo by Christian Bomington*

Looking down the lower reaches of the left couloir. Camp V is visible left of center. Three climbers are climbing from the camp towards the couloir.

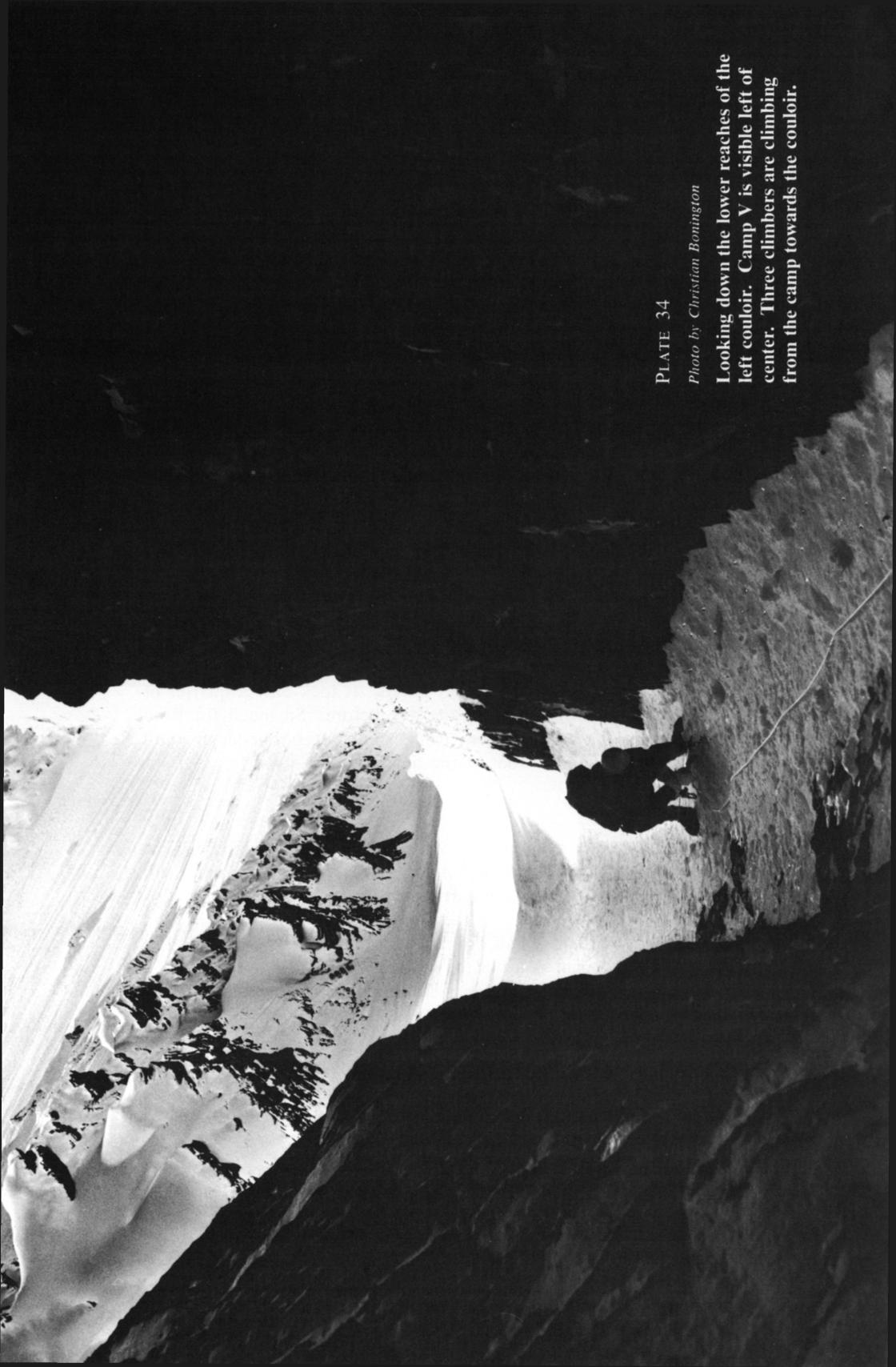




PLATE 35

*Photo by Doug Scott*

**Dougal Haston on the col between the south and main summits of Everest. Bivouac was in shadow at his right.**

a snow hole to escape the spindrift. I had not gone more than a few feet when Dougal emerged with the hot water. Thus fortified we set off along the ridge.

*Dougal writes:*

We knew that the way to the summit was not technically difficult but also wondered about the time factor and whether the snow conditions would be similar to those encountered on the ascent. A bivouac was looking more and more probable. We deliberated, waiting till the sun went off the ridge then making an attempt, but finally decided to push on for the top in the present conditions.

At four P.M. we left the South Summit and after a rope-length on the ridge were relieved to find that though not ideal the snow conditions did improve. The Hillary Step was deeply masked in powder snow and I shovelled my way up it without too much trouble. There was some windslab avalanche danger above but by treading carefully close to the cornice I avoided it. Soon after we were moving together in beautiful sunset colours to the top.

This was marked by a curious metal structure with strips of red flag attached which can only be evidence at last of a long-doubted Chinese ascent of the old British route from the North Col. The view was as much and more as any climber could expect who has struggled to the top of Everest—purples, reds, blacks with the twilight shadow of our mountain projected out on to the plains of Tibet. Down we had to go to the not-so-inviting thought of a bivouac. Soon retracing our steps, we were back at the South Summit, leaving a rope in place at the Hillary Step—thinking of the second ascent and more. While I boiled some more water, Doug started on a snow cave. Soon we were both working on it.

*Doug writes:*

After another cup of hot water we both set to work on the hole. I hacked away at the roof with the ice pick. Dougal scooped out the loose snow with his gloved hands. At eight o'clock, just as the remaining oxygen failed, we had our snow cave. We snuggled into the hole at 28,700 feet. Dougal in his down suit and duvet boots. For me a nylon-

dawn, a red glow giving out as much heat as an electric fire a million miles away. The cold by this time had worried its way into our limbs and backs and was not far from the body core. Hypothermia approaching, we put on our frozen boots, gaiters and crampons and plunged down the windblown trail to Camp VI.

*Bonington writes:*

We had solved the problem on the Southwest Face. It wasn't the "Ultimate Challenge", that rather unfortunate title our American publishers chose for the story of our 1972 expedition. No mountain problem can be described as ultimate, since no sooner is one problem solved, than the next is discovered—this is the joy of the sport. It was, however, a complex and intriguing problem and as a result a very satisfying one. Even our best friends had given us no more than an even chance of success when we set out and quite a few put the odds against a lot higher than that. This in itself increased the attraction of the challenge for climbing is all about playing with uncertainties. We had needed a big, strong expedition to solve the problem, but even within the precision of the planning, there was plenty of room for individual discovery, not just for the members of the summit team, but for everyone who went out in front or even those who had a support role throughout the expedition. I got my own satisfaction from playing my mountain logistics games as well as from those few days in the lead below the rock band. Each one of us absorbed the sheer magnificence of that ever-expanding view of mountains from the side of Everest—and then there's the magic of Everest itself; it not only has altitude and scale, it also has an atmosphere of history that one inevitably becomes involved in. Perhaps, most important of all, we came back with a regard for each other heightened rather than lessened. The Southwest Face had been a good experience.

*Summary of Statistics.*

ASCENT: Mount Everest, First Ascent of the Southwest Face, September 24, 1975 (Haston, Scott); September 26 (Boardman, Pertemba and almost certainly Burke).

PERSONNEL: Christian Bonington, leader; Hamish MacInnes, deputy leader; Peter Boardman, Martin Boysen, Paul Braithwaite, Mick Burke, Michael Cheney, Charles Clarke, David Clarke, James Duff, Nick Estcourt, Allen Fyffe, Adrian Gordon, Dougal Haston, Mike Rhodes, Ronnie Richards, Doug Scott, Mike Thompson, Bob Stoodley; BBC Team: Arthur Chesterman, Ned Kelly, Chris Ralling, Ian Stuart.