

# South Ridge of Ama Dablam

SUE GILLER

“WHEN WOMEN are on a mountain, it always snows.” This was not the weather forecast we had hoped to hear. With Camp III still not reached, and with the afternoon weather becoming worse and worse with each passing day, we did not want to clear the mountain because of a storm. Still, perhaps Sherpa wisdom did not apply to foreigners. All we could do was hope for the best.

A year earlier I had a phone call from Annie Whitehouse. In 1978 Annie had obtained a permit to climb the south ridge of Ama Dablam in the spring of 1982, but having just enlisted in the Air Force, she felt she could not continue working on the expedition. Would I take over the permit and organize the trip? It took only a brief moment for me to answer “yes.”

Over the ensuing year, events progressed like clockwork. I soon had a climbing team of eight, all competent mountaineers with experience climbing all over the world, plus a great Base Camp manager, Tanyalee Erwin, who had gained experience in the “Nepali way” on a previous expedition to Nepal. Four members I knew from a trip to Dhaulagiri in 1980. Shari Kearney, Lucy Smith, Heidi Lüdi and Susan Havens had experience in working with the Nepali government and a knowledge of the thousands of details of putting together a Himalayan expedition. Also joining us were Anne Macquarie who had just returned from Pakistan, Jini Griffith who had climbed in the Pamirs, and Stacy Allison, the “baby” of the expedition at 24 years, who had just finished an alpine ascent of the Cassin Ridge. All were competent technical climbers, at home on ice and rock.

Working hard over the summer and winter of 1981, we put together the necessary equipment, obtained sponsorship from several companies and sold T-shirts to help raise the needed cash. By early March we were packed and ready. On March 6, we left reality and time-travelled back to the magical kingdom of Nepal. Our great adventure had begun.

We spent a busy week in Kathmandu meeting our Sherpa staff, purchasing last-minute food and equipment, and packing for the trek to Base Camp. Because of problems with Royal Nepal Airlines, we had to trek in for twelve days from Lamusangu rather than fly to Lukla. From the midlands of Nepal, we crossed numerous drainages to reach the Dudh Kosi which we then followed upstream to Namche Bazar. There was not a flat stretch on the entire



PLATE 12

*Photo by Shari Kearney*

**A climber returns to Camp II on  
AMA DABLAM.**

trek. We were in shape! Upon reaching Namche Bazar, we had walked 150 miles and gained over 40,000 feet and lost 30,000 feet of elevation.

For the four days from Namche to Base Camp below the south ridge of Ama Dablam, we exchanged lowland porters for yaks. The sound of yak bells often helped us to find our way through the afternoon fog to the campsite.

Base Camp at 16,100 feet was reached on April 3. Used by the local Sherpas as a summer yak-pasturing camp, our next month's home came complete with several ready-made buildings, requiring only a tarp for the roof, and a sandy beach beside a small pond for sunbathing. Excited to begin the climb, we spent hours the first day gazing up at the mountain which towered above us, begging to be climbed.

We began work immediately. The route to Camp I at 18,700 feet was marked on April 4 by Lucy and Stacy. Past expeditions had scattered so many cairns around the boulders that we often got confused as to which way to go. How strange to need trail signs pointing the proper way on a Himalayan mountain open to climbing for only three years!

Camp I was in the middle of a steep talus field at the beginning of the technical climbing. We found already built tent platforms, which made for level if lumpy sleeping. This camp was protected from most of the winds but was often in the fog and snow during the afternoon snow showers. The goraks were in attendance daily and I sometimes felt they were watching over these strangers who periodically came to feed them exotic tidbits.

We spent several days carrying supplies to stock Camp I before Jini, Lucy and Anne moved up to occupy the camp and work on the route to Camp II. It took them three days to fix the ridge, using about 2000 feet of line. Each evening the progress report via radio brought excited comment on the pleasures of the climbing. Following a narrow ridge of excellent granite, the route snaked around the gendarmes, sometimes on the left side of the ridge, sometimes on the right and occasionally along the top. There was never a dull moment with tremendous exposure and spectacular views of the mountains around us.

We placed Camp II above the Yellow Tower, a 100-foot 5.8 vertical headwall. My favorite camp, this was a split-level series of small ledges with tent platforms already made, as was a trash heap from previous expeditions. Set right on the ridge top, this site offered a magnificent panorama, with the summit temptingly close above us. We found several unopened cans, some without labels, left by an earlier Spanish expedition. We would often treat ourselves to a "surprise" with dinner by opening an unknown can. We dined on Spanish fish, beans, baby eels, and in celebration of the summit, we scored a can of escargot in tomato sauce. These treats helped a little to alleviate our disappointment at the quantities of trash around the tent sites.

On April 11, Susan, Shari and Stacy moved up to occupy Camp II. Daily afternoon snow showers began, causing problems on the rock traverses and hampering the leading. Although we had planned to spend two or three days to reach Camp III, the altitude slowed us down. After an initial rock section of 5.8 difficulty (the First Step), most of the climbing was on ice (40°-70°) or

snow. We found water-ice on the slabs above the First Step, along with so many old fixed lines that they created a hazard, entangling our crampons. We removed over two packs full of line to clear the way. We then traversed under the Second Step and gained the Mushroom Ridge which connects the top of the Second Step with the upper snowfields. A short ice pitch out of a crevasse gained Camp III at 20,800 feet.

On April 18, Susan, Shari, Lucy and Stacy left Camp II to establish Camp III. It took them two days to reach the camp as they were fixing most of the Mushroom Ridge as they went. Camp III was on top of a hanging glacier, below the summit snowfields. Situated on a large flat shoulder of snow, it was easily the most comfortable tenting of all the camps, but quite cold and windy.

It was while the team was working its way along the Mushroom Ridge that I received the Sherpa-style weather forecast. With success so close, I felt increasingly anxious that the weather would finally turn truly bad and I would have to call everyone down to sit out a storm, or worse yet, that we would be pinned down and use up our dwindling supplies. So, praying that the weather would hold for a few more days, we carried on.

After a rest day at Camp III on the 19th, with more afternoon snow, the first team left for the summit at six A.M. on the 20th. It was a crystal clear day with a steady wind from the north. The rest of us in support at Camp II watched the climbers as they worked their way up the snowfields. Small black ants on an immense sugar lump, they moved agonizingly slowly. They reached the summit at 3:30 P.M. and disappeared from our view onto the broad top. At four o'clock they reappeared and began rappelling the route, soon to disappear again into an afternoon storm. I retired to my tent, the radio left on for their call when they reached camp. As the snow pelted the tent, I alternated between elation at their success and anxiety. Eight P.M.—no call. Nine P.M.—no call. At 9:20 finally, Shari came on: they were safely down! Such a relief! Now, if only the weather would hold two more days and give the rest of us a chance at the summit!

The next day Anne, Jini, Heidi and I moved up to Camp III while the others went down to Camp II for a deserved rest. We had a completely clear day and our hopes rose. On April 22, we left camp at five A.M. Knowing how long it had taken the first team, we left as early as possible to use all available light. We slowly worked our way up the snowfields climbing on good consolidated snow of moderate steepness, gratefully using any steps left by the first team. Although we consciously tried to hurry, often climbing simultaneously, time seemed to ebb away. We were all dismayed to see our clear morning dissolve into fog at ten o'clock. So much for a view! As we finally reached the summit at 1:30, it immediately began to snow heavily. But we didn't care, elated at our success. After a few minutes on the summit we descended, reaching camp at seven o'clock.

We spent the next five days clearing the mountain. As though to show us how benevolent it had been, the weather socked in on the 23rd and 24th, snowing and blowing heavily. We were happy to have the fixed lines to help

us down to the lower camps. Because of the snow, we were unable to clear our lines above the First Step, but below that we removed all our ropes and many others left by earlier trips. By April 27, everyone and everything was down to Base Camp.

Ama Dablam has been called "the most beautiful mountain in the world", and to the Sherpas, it is itself a god. Viewed from Pangboche, its ridges sweep gracefully upwards, drawing the eye to its symmetrical pinnacle of a summit. A mountaineer's mountain, it inspires a desire to climb it in all who see it. We were grateful for the opportunity to dance attendance upon its majestic flanks and briefly to share the view from its summit with the mountain gods. A nearly perfect climb on the nearly perfect mountain.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Khumbu Himal, Nepal.

ASCENT: Ama Dablam, 6856 meters, 22,495 feet, via South Ridge, April 20, 1982 (Havens, Kearney, Smith, Allison); April 22, 1982 (Giller, Macquarie, Griffith, Lüdi).

PERSONNEL: Susan Giller, *leader*, Stacy Allison, Jini Griffith, Susan Havens, Heidi Lüdi, Shari Kearney, Anne Macquarie, Lucy Smith, Tanyalee Erwin, *Base Camp Manager*.

