

An Attempt on Everest's West Ridge from Tibet

GALEN A. ROWELL

I N MARCH 1983 I traveled through Tibet to Mount Everest with sixteen other members of the American Everest West Expedition. Bob Craig was our overall leader, and I was the climbing leader. Our goal was a self-contained ascent of the complete west ridge. Without Sherpas, low porters, or oxygen, we hoped to follow a new route on the Tibetan side up to 24,000 feet, where we would join the path followed by the Yugoslav expedition that made the only ascent of the complete ridge in 1979 from Nepal.

When I reconnoitered the route during a dash to the North Col in 1981, I was impressed not only by its extreme length and technical difficulties up high, but also by the lack of avalanche and icefall dangers that plague other approaches to the peak. The west ridge is safe from everything but the wind; every inch is exposed ground. I grew to appreciate Mallory's comment that on the Tibetan side of Everest "one may delight in being warm anywhere."

The Tibet we entered by way of a flight to Lhasa on March 16 was not, as most imagine, a freezing land of ice and snow. Even in winter it is more like a freeze-dried Nevada with intense radiant heat whenever the sun shines. In winter I was able to run shirtless through town, where the only department store displayed basketballs next to violins next to toy Space Tanks. The following day our 1959 Russian jeep, hired at \$1.32 per mile, broke down 12 times enroute to Shigatse. Four days and 460 miles of dirt later we reached 17,200 feet in a truck. Thanks to a road built for the 214-member 1960 Chinese Everest expedition, we motored right into Base Camp.

Sherpas aren't allowed to work in Tibet, and Tibetans make unreliable high-altitude porters. The communist system channels all payments to the commune instead of the individual, thus removing the incentive for a porter to take risks or do more than his share.

Our novel solution was to bring seven American "Sherpas," men to carry loads and not be slated for the summit. The men we chose were friends who had been to high altitude before.

The north face of Everest seemed to loom above our Base Camp, but it was twelve long air-miles away. Yaks could haul our tons of food and equipment only some of the distance. Where they would stop depended on us, on Tibetan yak drivers who spoke no English, and also on the beasts themselves. I escorted the first yak train with six climbers. When the drivers first slowed down, Mike Graber gave them an inspiring lecture in English on UFOs and the meaning of life. Men of both races rolled on the frozen ground with laughter.

Late in the day the yaks halted in front of a four-foot drop onto the jumbled rock and ice of the Rongbuk glacier. The drivers motioned that this was it. We didn't believe them. They graciously allowed Steve McKinney to try taking the lead yak. He tied a yak-hair lead rope to its horns, led it to the edge, and began to pull from below with every ounce of his considerable strength. Dave Carman joined him, while I jabbed from behind with ski poles. The yak stood its ground like a half-ton terrier, resisting the forces that were moving it inexorably toward the brink.

We seemed to be winning until the rope broke. Men flew backwards onto the ice. Carman yelled, "My finger is dislocated!" In one continuous motion Graber jumped into the gully, grabbed Carman's finger, and yanked it into place with surprising force. "To be an orthopedic surgeon," he announced with a twinkle in his eye, "you have to be able to bench press twice your I.Q."

The loss of The Great Yak War forced us to become the yaks. For the next two weeks we undertook the thankless task of ferrying loads up the rock-strewn ice while an advance guard of Mike Graber, Kim Momb, John Roskelley, and Jack Tackle began fixing ropes up an unclimbed arête on the west ridge.

Temperatures were rarely below zero Fahrenheit, but winds up to 120 mph made it feel colder than an Alaskan winter. We were all healthy except for Harold Knutson, who began having strange blackouts. Why this happened to one of our fittest members baffled both our doctors, who labeled his condition "unpredictable, unexplainable, and untreatable here."

Harold's blackouts continued at the rate of several a day until he left for home on April 5. That same afternoon Roskelley and Momb crested the west ridge at 24,000 feet. Seven thousand feet of rope were fixed on the face below to facilitate hauling loads. The two men had reached the Tibetan-Nepalese border, from where they could look down for the first time into the Western Cwm, where another American team was.

We were confident that unless something unusual happened we could put at least two men on the summit. A summit bid seemed possible as early as April 20, and our chief concern was whether we would be well enough acclimatized to proceed so high so soon without oxygen.

Our camps were in places where the five Tibetan elements of existence neared their limits of hostility. *Earth* was steep, barren, and without sustenance; *Water* was locked up in ice and snow; *Fire* was impossible without imported

PLATE 3

Photo by Jack Tackle

**Mike Graber leading on the WEST
SHOULDER of MOUNT
EVEREST. Summit is in the
background.**



PLATE 4

Photo by Galen Rowell

**Hauling loads at 20,000 feet up the
Tibetan side of the West Shoulder of
MOUNT EVEREST.**



fuel; *Air* was thin and hard to breathe; *Space* was infinite, but without respite from wind, ice, and cold.

On April 12 a week-long storm dashed our hopes of an early summit bid. When the clouds finally parted we were glad to see that high winds had kept the snow from sticking. On April 26 we established Camp V at the base of the final rock pyramid, a site measured at 25,100 feet by the Americans in 1963, but considered 400 feet lower by the 1979 Yugoslav expedition that had made the only ascent of the direct ridge via Nepal. (Our Tibetan approach joined the Yugoslav route at 24,000 feet.) Knowing that the Yugoslavs had utilized 25 climbers, 40 Sherpas, and oxygen, we planned to opt for the easier Hornbein Couloir on the American route if the ridge proved beyond our means.

May 3 dawned clear and still. Roskelley and Momb climbed to 26,000 feet on the ridge. The next morning in Camp V, John Roskelley woke up at four A.M. and said, "Kim, I've got pulmonary edema!" Momb and Roskelley were alone in the camp. Roskelley's symptoms advanced so quickly that he was unable to tie his shoes or put on his crampons. Momb helped him and they started down immediately, roped together. A mile and a half of corniced ridge led to Camp IV, where Tackle, Carman, McKinney, and Robin Houston were still in their sleeping bags. Momb was "really scared. It's the closest I've been to somebody I thought was going to die." After an hour's rest Roskelley started down the 7000 feet of fixed rope sandwiched between Houston and Momb. "If it wasn't for the fact that John is so damned strong," Momb told us at 19,700-foot Camp II that afternoon, "he wouldn't be here alive."

Meanwhile our team had switched efforts to the Hornbein Couloir route. Graber and Tackle reached 26,000 feet, and were ready to put in Camp VI at 27,000 feet with McKinney on the first clear day. Roskelley was recovering quickly.

I planned two summit bids using different tactics. The first would be made by those now working high on the mountain. They were better acclimatized than people below, but also deteriorating in strength each day they stayed high. The second bid would begin from the bottom. Kim Schmitz and I would rest up, then begin moving one camp a day up the peak. At Camp V we would meet the others. From there the fittest pair would go for the top, with the remainder carrying loads in support.

On May 8 a seemingly weak storm hit us, but it cleared to reveal a different mountain. Instead of a pyramid of dark rock and shining ice, we saw a white apparition. Eight inches of wet snow frosted Everest like a wedding cake. Fixed ropes were buried, and small avalanches crossed the route for the first time. We waited day after day for wind to clear the snow, but it only grew deeper as more pre-monsoon storms dumped wet snow. Soon the monsoon would arrive in full force and the climb would be out of condition for the season.

Just a week earlier success had seemed within grasp. Now our spirits had dropped with the barometric pressure. Schmitz and I began a last bid from Base Camp while Houston, McKinney, and Tackle waited for us in the high camps,

PLATE 5

Photo by Galen Rowell

COLD! Camp III midway up the West Shoulder on the Tibetan side of MOUNT EVEREST at 22,000 feet.



aware that conditions would have to change drastically even to place the next camp. When we reached 24,000 feet on May 14, I knew the game was up. Snow conditions were worse than ever and climbers were burning out from too much time up high without oxygen. Tackle had spent twelve consecutive nights at 25,000 feet. We began to evacuate the mountain.

On the flight home no one talked of going back. We all seemed satiated with Mount Everest and big mountains. Roskelley would cancel his trip to another Himalayan giant in the fall. Momb would decline his invitation for Everest's unclimbed east face. I wanted to get back to the California Sierra, where I'd find perfect weather, firm rock, gentle beauty, and no porter or permit hassles.

A climber's memory is a golden sieve through which harsh realities slip away. Today, five months later, I vividly recall beautiful sunrises, but storm days seem as distant as my childhood. Less than ninety days after our return, Momb headed off for Everest's east face and reached the summit on October 8.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Mount Everest from Tibet.

ATTEMPTED ROUTE: Mount Everest via the West Ridge from Tibet. A rib on the Tibetan side of the West Shoulder joined the Yugoslav West Ridge route at 24,000 feet. Highest point reached on the direct ridge was 26,000 feet on May 3, 1983 by Momb and Roskelley. On May 7 Graber and Tackle reached the same height in the Hornbein Couloir.

PERSONNEL: Robert Craig, leader; Galen A. Rowell, climbing leader; Dr. Gordon Benner, David Carman, Donald Castle, Dallas Clark, Michael Graber, Dr. Robin Houston, Harold Knutson, John Martinek, Steven McKinney, Kim Momb, Jon Reveal, John Roskelley, Kim Schmitz, Jack Tackle, Christopher Wren.

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