

Kanchenjunga Solo

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ON MY RETURN FROM JANNU in November 1982, I obtained permission to climb Kanchenjunga's southwest face in the autumn of 1983. In March 1983 I decided on a solo ascent. Despite six years of Himalayan experience, the prospect was terrifying. Would I have the necessary determination to raise the funds, to organize the expedition and to carry it all out? My wife Annie was there to back me up. Along with three friends, she would accompany me to Base Camp. Without her support, I should have given it up and joined some other more reasonable project.

On August 28 we set out on the long approach with 35 porters, certainly the smallest expedition organized to climb Kanchenjunga. After eleven days of monsoon, crossing up and down steep terrain, we reached the last village, Yamphatin. Porter tariffs jumped alarmingly. On the Yalung Glacier, three days from Base Camp, most of the men quit. With the seven who stayed, we shuttled, all of us carrying 65 pounds. Finally on September 17 we set up Base Camp on a promontory above the glacier at 17,400 feet. I had wondered if we would ever get there!

Despite the unsettled monsoon weather, I set out alone. In three relays I carried 120 pounds of gear up the ridge to 20,000 feet. Each day I had to rebreak the trail. Beyond the ridge, I fixed the route for 650 feet down the cliff which gave access to Kanchenjunga's middle slopes. I had to climb back up this each time I descended to Base Camp. Camp I was set up on September 2 at 20,350 feet.

Next the middle slopes: 3250 feet of steep, complex slopes, crevasses alternating with séracs, a labyrinth. I had to make numerous detours to avoid crossing crevasses, the bugbear of the solo climber. On September 29 I was on the upper plateau at 23,625 feet, where I set up a second tent. The constant wind forced me to build a wall all around the tent.

At the beginning of October bad weather set in. I returned to Base Camp, where waiting made me insupportable. Annie had to escape to stay with Tibetan shepherds in the Ramche pastures to get away from the sinister atmosphere.

Only on October 6 could I climb again. On the 8th I crossed the bergschrund of the 3500-foot-high summit couloir and set up my tent at 25,275 feet.

At dawn of October 9 I set out for the summit but a strong southwest wind chased clouds into the massif. I quickly turned tail and began the long descent.

PLATE 6

Photo by Pierre Beghin

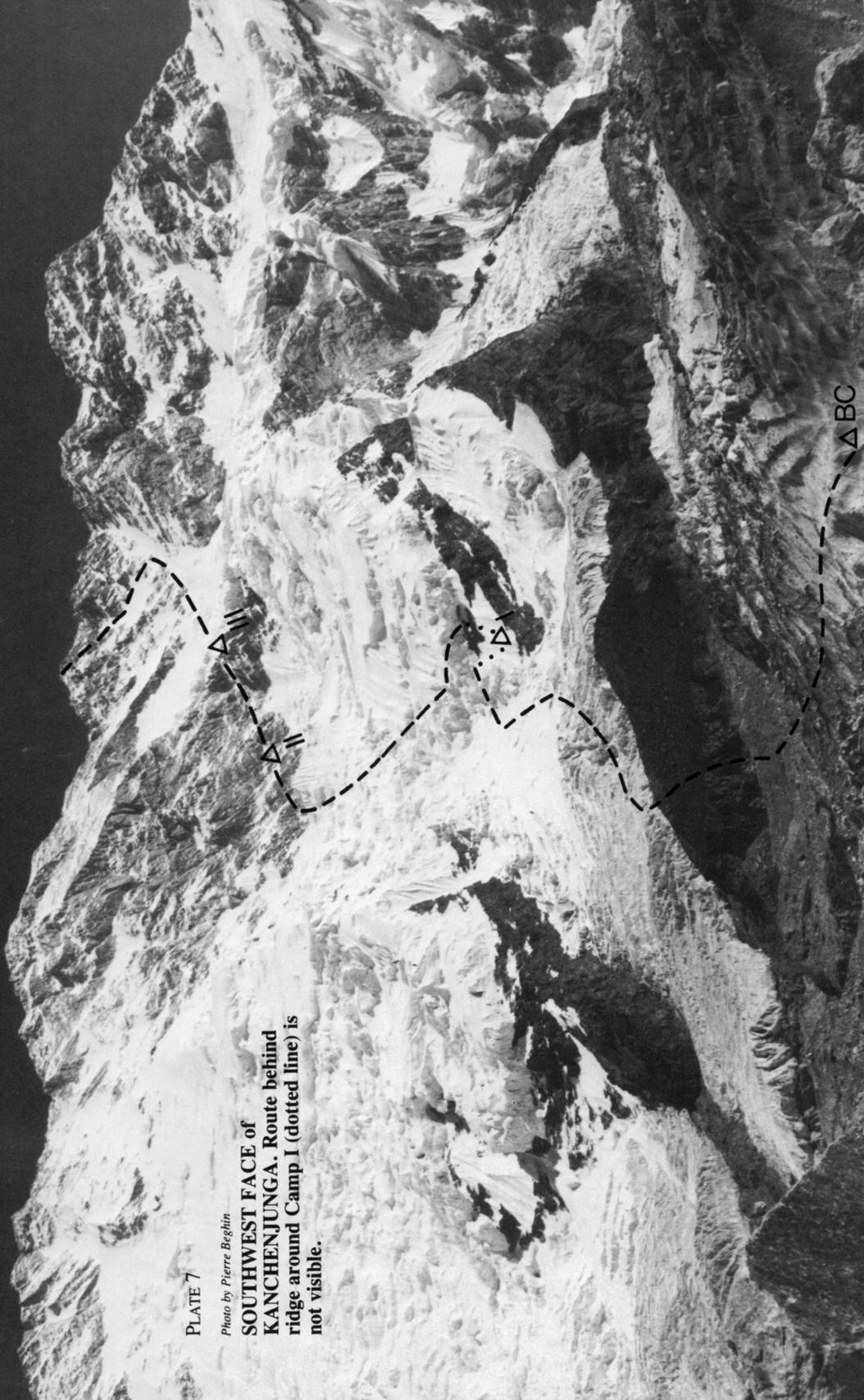
**The last 5000 feet of the
SOUTHWESTERN FACE of
KANCHENJUNGA.**



PLATE 7

Photo by Pierre Beghin

**SOUTHWEST FACE of
KANCHENJUNGA. Route behind
ridge around Camp I (dotted line) is
not visible.**



I rushed to beat the fog to the crevassed zone to be able to see my way through. After ten exhausting hours, I was back at Base Camp to wait out more bad weather.

On October 14 the sun shone again. I left for my second and doubtless last attempt. I couldn't stand much more solitude but I had invested too much effort to give up yet.

I spent the afternoon in front of my tent at Camp I, observing the scene where I had come to immerse myself. I was struck by the absolute silence which reigns in these vast stretches of snow up which the shadows of the clouds slowly crept from the valley. A strange feeling seized me as if the absence of noise indicated reprobation, an objection to my presence in this place devoid of life. The least sound I made seemed to me to bring forth hostile glances. Behind that wall of silence, beyond the mountains that stretched out to the horizon, I felt a world from which I was excluded.

On October 16 at 25,275 feet I prepared, like a medieval knight, for a "watch over my weapons." The icy west wind gusted; the cold was biting. I tried to sleep, shifting in vain to find a comfortable relaxed position. Within the tiny tent I perceived a spirit at my side. All around me, it was white, indistinct. Was I dreaming or awake? Was a spirit present or did I lack oxygen?

On October 17 at five o'clock, I leave my bivouac. My hands and feet soon are numb. Nonetheless, I progress. At 26,900 feet I leave the couloir and traverse steep snow and rock toward the summit. I have never felt so far distant from the land of the living. Wherever I look there is no indication of life. Yet, 7500 feet below me is a tent; Annie has set up her tent on a 20,000-foot ridge to follow my progress with binoculars.

Lassitude floods over me. I stop after every ten steps. I am moving desperately slowly. I am ready to quit. The hours run on and I fear I won't have time enough to get back to my tent before dark. But I can't give up so close to the summit.

It is three o'clock when I reach the highest point of Kanchenjunga. Buffeted by gusts of wind, I shiver. Only Everest rises higher on the horizon. I am on the isolated spot which has haunted my dreams for eight months. Deep down, I feel a great joy but I am too exhausted, too anxious about the descent, to have it come to the surface. A bluish haze of twilight floods the atmosphere. I must leave this icy summit. In less than three hours it will be inky black.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Nepal Himalaya.

SOLO ASCENT: Kanchenjunga, 8586 meters, 28,168 feet, solo ascent via the southwest face, summit reached October 17, 1983 (Pierre Beghin).