

Gaurishankar's West Face

WYMAN CULBRETH

FROM A DUSTY bus window I watched the landscape pass by, then turned to see the Sherpas fast asleep. They were understandably tired from the last few weeks of hectic preparation; we were all relieved finally to be on our way. The bus was headed towards Charikot, a small village in northeastern Nepal where we would begin our approach to the base of the vast west face of Gaurishankar.

The expedition consisted of sirdar Ang Kami Sherpa and me as climbing members, one high-altitude porter, two Base Camp workers and our liaison officer, a Police Sub-Inspector. It was small, but I hoped that with two good climbers who could move quickly with light, specialized equipment our route would be possible. We planned to attempt the second ascent of the higher north summit, Shankar,* by a route partially different from the route of the successful 1979 American ascent of the west face. We followed Dennis Grey's route to Base Camp at 16,400 feet, arriving on April 12. After many days of load carrying over a 17,700-foot ridge, we established Camp I on the Tseringma Glacier at 17,000 feet. Descending another 500 feet, we came to the base of the face, which soared up steeply for 7000 feet to the snow-crested summit.

Difficult mixed climbing on ice-covered slabs brought us to the beginning of a prominent ice rib. After hacking at the ridge for most of a day, we were able to place Camp II at 19,300 feet. The ice ridge shot up steeply for another 1500 feet to a point where we chopped out Camp III on the last place on the route big enough to place a tent. That is to say, almost large enough, since half of it hung out over space. All this time we were also busy stripping the previous camps and moving up all our supplies and equipment.

At Camp III we left the 1979 American route and continued up a headwall with short sections of aid for 800 feet. There we made our way across an ice bulge and continued across the top of a triangular icefield through a series of

* Shankar (or Śankar) is a manifestation of Śiva. His consort is Gauri, the Golden One. The Buddhists call the mountain Tseringma. A much more complete explanation appears as a footnote to the article on the first ascent of the west face in *A.A.J.*, 1980, pages 417 to 426.—*Editor*.

PLATE 31

Photo by Wyman Culbreth

**The West Face of
GAURISHANKAR.**



ramps and tension traverses. We then gained the base of a vertical mixed gully, the key to the upper sections. At the top of the gully we came to a rock corner at the base of a large cornice. At this point we fixed rope and descended to Camp III to wait for clearer weather.

On May 16 the high winds subsided and we left Camp III at seven A.M. and moved up the ropes to our high point. We had planned to go very light with just enough clothing and hardware to reach the summit, as there was no protected area large enough to bivouac on the face above. After 700 feet of 80° to 85° hard water ice, it eased to névé for another 700 feet. We then crossed a four-foot-wide crevasse and headed for the summit ridge. We followed this a short distance and reached the summit late, at 6:30 P.M., just as the sun was setting. What a vivid sunset we had over Shisha Pangma and the far ranges of Tibet!

All at the same time, we were happy to have reached the summit, relieved to be there and anxious about the descent in the dark and cold. The weather had been perfect, but as it grew dark, snow began to fall and visibility was zero. It was terribly difficult to place the ice screws as we had to feel for a placement. Nine 100-meter rappels and a short traverse brought us to our fixed ropes. Although there was a full moon, it had risen on the other side of the mountain and was only now coming onto our face. Our descent was still very slow because the fixed ropes had frozen in spots and were as stiff as steel cables. Finally we reached Camp III at 2:30 A.M. and collapsed into the welcome warmth of our sleeping bags.

On the morning of the 17th Ang Kami ascended to bring down equipment and ropes left on the descent. The following day we were forced by noon to descend as we had no food or kerosene left. Our high-altitude porter was apparently not to come up that day. We rappelled continuously with 65-pound packs to the upper part of the glacier. It was a long climb to the top of the ridge. Our Base Camp Sherpas came up to relieve us of our packs as soon as they saw our headlamps on the ridge. We reached Base Camp at one A.M. It was good to see birds and people and smell the trees after having been without them for over one month.

In retrospect, it wasn't just the summit that was important. We had had no serious accidents; after the expedition we were all still really good friends. After all, there are many things that make up a successful expedition.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Rolwaling Himalaya, Nepal.

PARTIALLY NEW ROUTE: Gaurishankar, 7134 meters, 23,405 feet, by the West Face, on new ground above 20,800 feet where the route ascended directly to the summit to the right of the 1979 route; summit reached May 16, 1984 (Wyman Culbreth, Ang Kami Sherpa).