

# Everest from the North

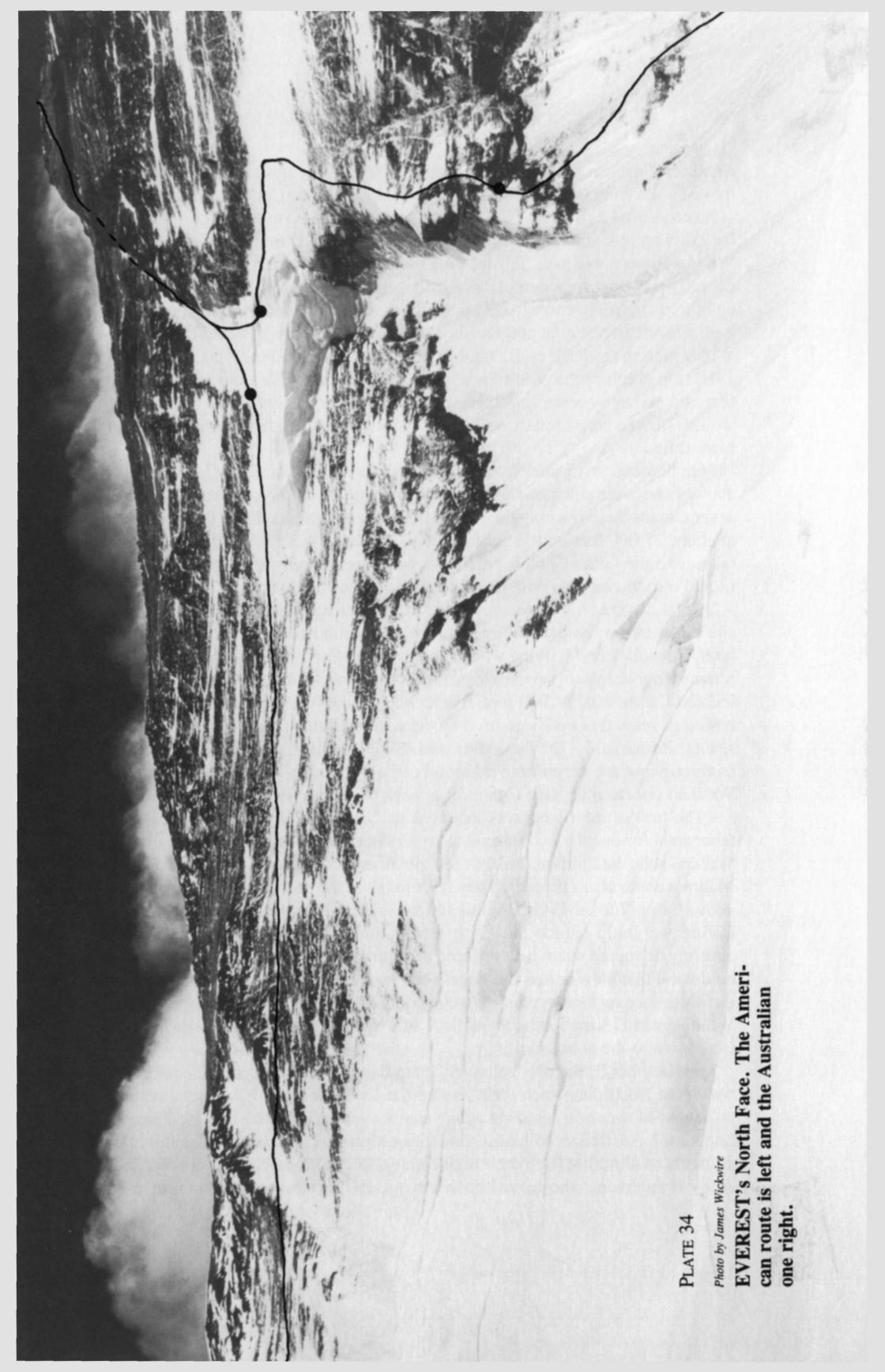
JAMES WICKWIRE

TWO YEARS AFTER a nearly successful attempt to reach the summit of Everest by climbing a new route on the mountain's north face, a nucleus from that team of mainly Washington State climbers returned for another try in the post-monsoon season. An accident that took the life of Marty Hoey, our only woman member, and monsoon storms had stopped us then. Lou Whittaker again was the leader with Phil Ershler, Dave Mahre, George Dunn, Ed Hixson (as expedition doctor), Steve Marts (as cinematographer) and me from the 1982 team. New members were John Roskelley, this country's most outstanding Himalayan climber, Peter Whittaker, Lou's son, Greg Wilson, John Smolich and Carolyn Gunn (as Base Camp manager).

We had permission for the East Rongbuk-North Col approach to the upper mountain instead of the entire north face via the Central Rongbuk Glacier. An Australian team had a permit for the north face proper. Our intention was to follow the standard North Col route to about 25,000 feet on the north ridge, and then to traverse across the north face to reach the Great Couloir. The Australians and the Chinese Mountaineering Association officials who accompanied us were agreeable to our plan. Thus, instead of being able to get our yak-carried loads only to 18,300 feet on the Central Rongbuk—some four miles from the base of the north face—we would be able to use yaks on the East Rongbuk approach nearly to the foot of the North Col at 21,300 feet. This logistical savings allowed us to entertain the thought of climbing Everest with a climbing team roughly half the size of its predecessor. Except for the slope leading to the North Col, we also planned to avoid the use of fixed ropes on the upper mountain unlike the 1982 attempt when such tactics were used to slightly above 26,000 feet.

On August 6 we departed Seattle for Beijing. After a dusty ride across central Tibet, with stops in Xigatse and Xegare to acclimatize, on August 20 Base Camp was established on the terminal moraine of the Rongbuk Glacier at 16,900 feet. A spectacularly clear day, we were struck by the sharp contrast between Everest's monsoon mantle of snow and the wind-blasted dry appearance of the mountain during the spring months. The only noticeable change at Base Camp from our previous visit was the presence of three more memorial cairns along the one we had built for Marty Hoey.

We soon learned that the Australians, who had established their Base Camp a short distance below ours, had been plagued by poor monsoon-generated



**PLATE 34**

*Photo by James Wickwire*

**EVEREST's North Face. The American route is left and the Australian one right.**

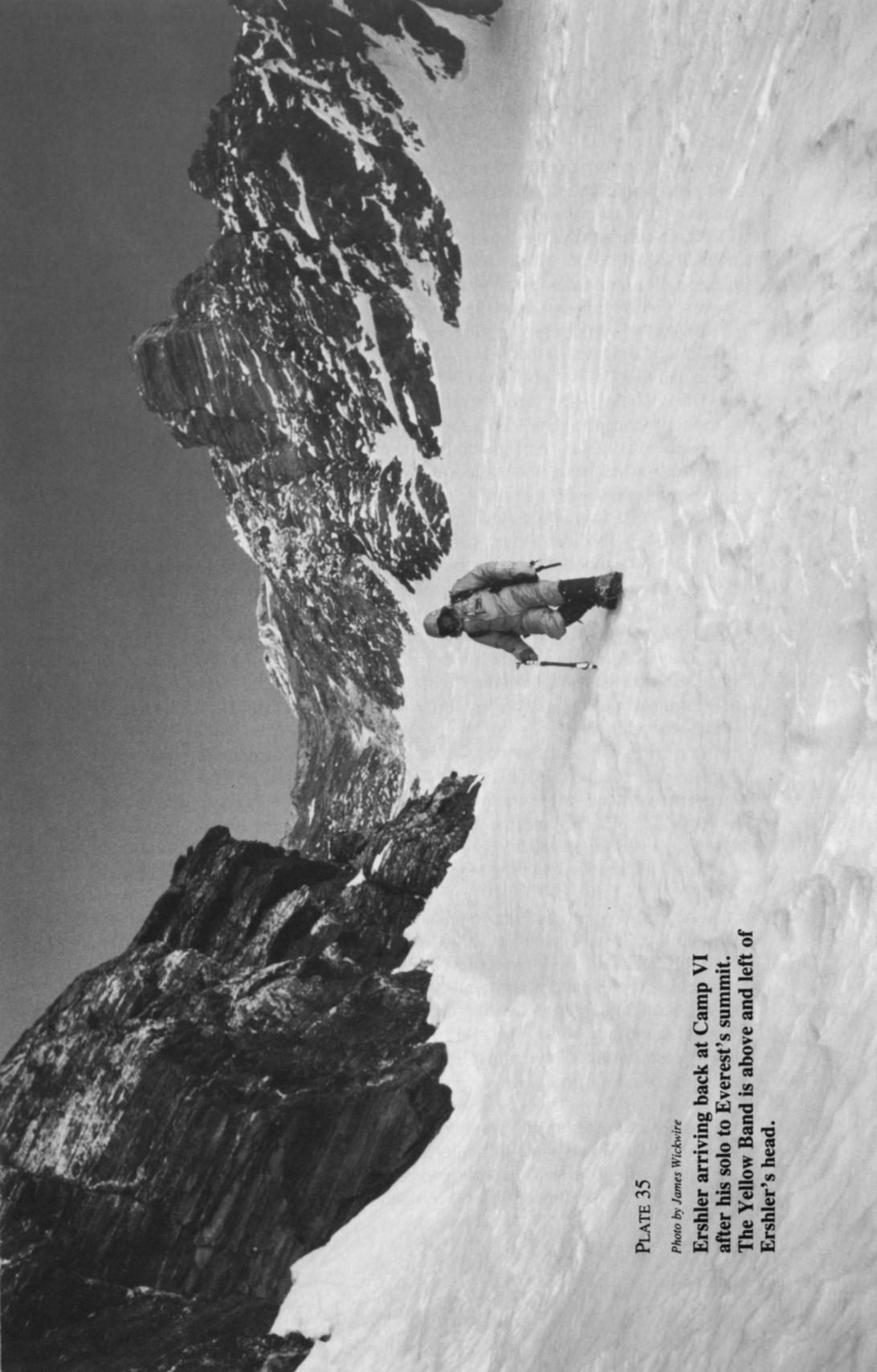
weather. The clear weather did not prevail for the next several days as the yaks moved a substantial portion of our equipment from Base Camp to Camp III, the Advanced Base below the North Col. Snow conditions on the slope leading to the col were not stable, but on September 4 Ershler, Dunn, Smolich and Pete Whittaker were able to establish a direct line to the col's crest at 23,000 feet that avoided the most treacherous appearing séracs. Two days later, however, as eight of us began to carry loads up the route, we concluded that the slope had a high avalanche potential and returned to Base Camp to await better conditions. With a pattern modeled on Reinhold Messner's timetable during his astonishing 1980 solo climb of the North Face, we decided to minimize our time at 21,300 feet and above by returning to Base Camp for periodic rests that we believed would allow us to acclimatize, but also to minimize the deteriorating effects of high altitude.

On September 15, the North Col slopes were deemed safe and, in a burst of activity, we were able not only to establish Camp IV on the col but also to carry several loads there opening the way to the upper mountain. From the next camp at about 25,000 feet on the north ridge, a traverse across the north face would take us to the Great Couloir where we would rejoin our 1982 route, and as it turned out, to coincide with the route that the Australians chose.

On September 18, Roskelley and I nearly reached the anticipated Camp V site but were turned back by high winds and a sudden local storm. Two days later, Roskelley and I, along with Ershler, Dunn, Smolich and Peter Whittaker, retraced our steps to the previous high point and a few hundred feet above located Camp V at 24,900 feet. There we found two tents almost completely buried in snow that had been used by the Ultima Thule expedition the previous spring. Remarkably, the tents were still usable. In the high winds that plagued us throughout the expedition, a second carry to Camp V was made a day later. We then retreated to Base Camp for a week.

The first summit push was mounted on October 1. Roskelley, Pete Whittaker and I formed the first summit team; Ershler, Dunn and Smolich the second. Wilson, who had suffered a cracked rib from coughing, Lou Whittaker and Mahre were to act in support. They were to put in the route across the north face above Camp V to the Great Couloir and to establish Camp VI high in the couloir. Before we could launch the effort from Camp V, however, our plans were severely disrupted when Lou suffered an injury to his right eye from the bitterly cold wind that blew across the ridge from the west. Instead of traversing across the north face on October 2 with the support team as planned, Roskelley, Peter Whittaker and I were forced to wait at Camp V while Mahre and Wilson assisted Lou down to the North Col.

On October 3, the only relatively calm day we experienced, we could only watch the Australians inch their way up the Great Couloir. In what we believe to be one of the most amazing achievements yet on Everest, Tim McCartney-Snape, the Australian co-leader, and Greg Mortimer reached the summit after 12 hours of climbing from their high camp at 26,700 feet. Neither climber, nor Andy Henderson, who turned back a scant 150 feet below the summit, used



**PLATE 35**

*Photo by James Wickwire*

**Ershtler arriving back at Camp VI after his solo to Everest's summit. The Yellow Band is above and left of Ershtler's head.**

supplementary oxygen. Even more astounding, McCartney-Snape used cross-country ski boots to reach the summit after his expedition double boots had been taken away in an avalanche that wiped out one of the Australians' lower camps. The three climbers did not regain their high camp until three A.M. A sight that none of us will forget was the Australians' tortuously slow descent of the Great Couloir the entire next day, obviously at their physical limits. Only Henderson, however, suffered any serious frostbite.

Before we could regroup, the relentless winds returned, dictating a descent to Camp III. It was now the second summit team's turn. On October 8, Erschler, Dunn and Smolich set out from Camp V and traversed across the north face to the Great Couloir. Carrying essential food, equipment and two oxygen bottles (Smolich planned to go without), they took no tent as they planned to use the tent left by the Australians. Erschler radioed at seven P.M. that they couldn't find the tent and the threesome was forced to bivouac in some rocks at the edge of the couloir and spent a difficult night. In the morning, Smolich and Dunn in particular were suffering, and they all descended to Camp III.

Roskelley, Wilson, Peter Whittaker and I tried to reach the couloir from Camp V on October 9 but the winds forced us back. After two more days of being pinned down there, our chances to climb the mountain definitely were waning. Roskelley and I discussed another option. Instead of trying to reach the Great Couloir from where we were on the north ridge, we thought the main brunt of the wind could be avoided if we began the traverse from a lower point on the ridge and reached the foot of the Great Couloir at 24,800 feet where an alternative Camp V could be established. After a short rest at Camp III, that is exactly what we did.

In a display of coordinated team effort that is not always present in modern Himalayan expeditions, on October 17, Peter Whittaker, Mahre, Wilson and Smolich sacrificed their own summit chances by leading a revised summit team of Roskelley, Erschler and me across the north face to the new Camp V site. Consistent with his practice, John had decided to make his summit bid without oxygen. Phil and I would rely on the two bottles cached on October 8 at 26,600 feet.

The next day, protected somewhat from the wind, the three of us made our way up the Great Couloir to 26,600 feet where we leveled a small platform beneath a rock outcrop at the couloir's edge and pitched our tent. Unfortunately, one of the oxygen bottles had been avalanched away. As I had lost a portion of my left lung to surgery following a climb of K2 in 1978, it was decided that I would use the only bottle. Phil, who had turned back on the South Col during an oxygenless attempt the year before, generously agreed to again make the summit attempt *sans* oxygen.

At six A.M. on October 19, we left the camp in the dark. With the oxygen equipment and other gear, I was carrying about 30 pounds. Phil and John went without packs. I had some difficulty keeping pace with Phil due partly to the weight but also because I had not completely opened the valve to the oxygen bottle. John, who followed below, complained of being sleepy and dizzy.

Despite an early start and fine weather, after a brief conference at 27,000 feet just below the Yellow Band that bisects the Great Couloir for over 200 feet, we decided to head down. John's condition was the principal reason, but I was uncertain about my own condition as well. Back in the tent, John felt much better. His temporary affliction resulted from medication he had taken earlier that morning for a painful frost-nipped toe.

Although the yaks were due just two days later at Camp III to take us out, we decided to make a last ditch attempt the next day. After much soul searching, I decided that our chances would be best if John and Phil were to go to the summit as a two-man team. Although not consistent with the abortive attempt that morning, I was concerned about the wisdom of making a summit try with two oxygenless climbers. The chances of being forced to complete the climb alone seemed great. Alternatively, the risk of descending with two exhausted climbers seemed unacceptably high. Also, my drive to reach the summit, which had been untrammelled in 1982 and to this stage of the second expedition, was now inexplicably diminished.

For several hours, Phil and I debated summit strategy. I urged him to pick up the partly used oxygen bottle at 27,000 feet and to go to the summit with John. Phil, in turn, argued that I should take the bottle and all three of us would try again. The issue was not fully resolved until early the next morning when Phil finally agreed to make the attempt with John *and* with oxygen.

The pair left the tent at 6:15 A.M. I watched them struggle with the Yellow Band for several hours that morning. John led this difficult section taking a more direct line than the Australians had, aided to some extent by a rappel rope left from their climb. Shortly after eleven A.M., they climbed out of the couloir and traversed a steep section of unstable snow to reach a narrow snow rib that paralleled the couloir. At 2:10 P.M., John made an agonizing decision. His hands and feet numb from the cold, his torso shivering in the early stages of hypothermia, he could not maintain sufficient body warmth even while moving slowly upward. He calculated that the summit was reachable, but the cost would be severe frostbite or worse. He reluctantly decided to descend, having attempted to reach the summit of Everest without oxygen under what I believe to be more severe conditions than those faced by Messner, Habeler, Nielson and the other oxygenless summit climbers, including the Australians.

After initially deciding to descend with his companion, Phil, at John's urging, opted to continue. He climbed the next 1000 feet to the summit in a very fast one and one-half hours, arriving there at 3:45 P.M. All of us below the summit pair were tremendously elated at the success we had thought would elude us again. Exhausted from his own magnificent effort, with extreme concentration John worked his way down to our camp. It was necessary to warm his feet under my armpits. Phil returned shortly after six P.M. in good shape from his solo finish.

The next morning, we descended to Camp III and rejoined our happy teammates. Our return home was punctuated by festive banquets in Lhasa and Beijing with our Chinese hosts.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Tibet

ASCENT: Mount Everest via the North Col, North Face and Great Couloir,  
October 20, 1984 (Ershler).

PERSONNEL: Louis Whittaker, *leader*; James Wickwire, John Roskelley, Philip Ershler, David Mahre, George Dunn, John Smolich, Greg Wilson, Peter Whittaker, Edward G. Hixson, M.D. (doctor), Steve Marts (cinematographer) and Carolyn Gunn (Base Camp manager).

