

# The Northeast Rib of Kwangde Central

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I THOUGHT THAT LIVING IN Kathmandu would offer greater climbing opportunities than my home in Bellingham, Washington. When Bellinghamsters aren't watching the slug races, they manage to pull off an occasional alpine climb. You can see the mountains from Kathmandu, but getting to them is another matter. I realized that when my wife took a job with CIWEC Clinic and we moved to Nepal for two years.

Back in Bellingham, our friends wrote about the exceptionally cold winter we were missing. I went insane imagining all the ice climbs that had never formed during my eight years living there. In January it was hot and dusty in Nepal. I continued to mountain-bike the dirt roads in the Kathmandu valley and fend off screaming kids that frequently threw rocks at me and latched onto the rear of my bike on steep hills. I was plenty sick (on the average once a month) and was tired of being hounded for money by the locals. Other climbers breezed through town, picked up permits and went climbing. I did not have a job and was beginning to get depressed.

I lived for March 2 when Carlos Buhler and Martín Zabaleta would arrive and I could join them on Cho Oyu. At this point, you may be wondering how many years I spent in Kathmandu before Carlos and Martín showed up to bear me away to the mountains. Only three months!

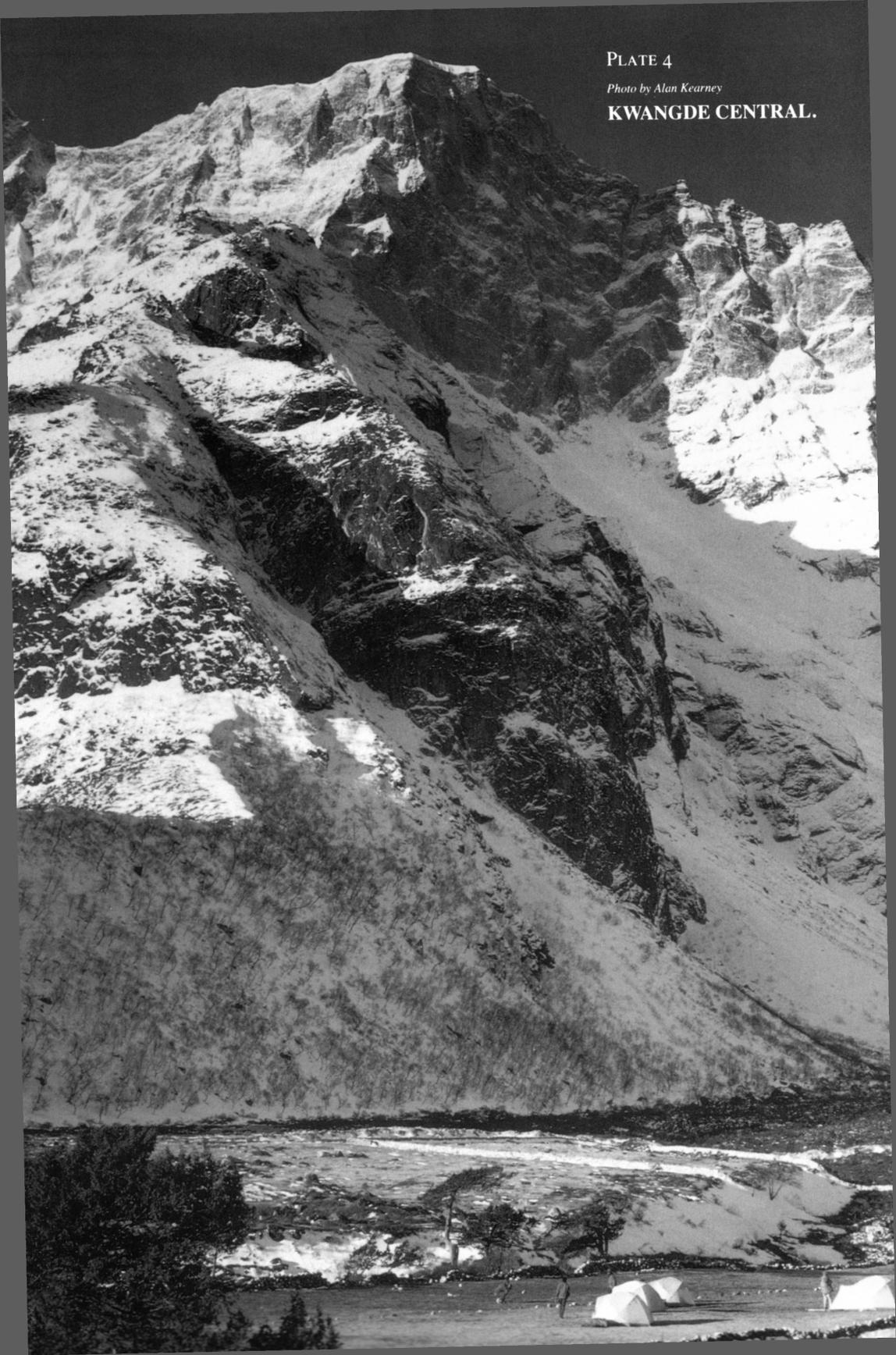
When at last they flew in, I became very nervous and excited at the same time. I was enthusiastic about leaving Kathmandu and apprehensive about climbing to 8000 meters. On previous trips, I had been slow to acclimatize, had never been above 20,500 feet and at least once had altitude sickness. My past record showed that I possessed an aptitude for climbing small beautiful mountains and not big ugly ones. I often wondered about climbers' motives and my own. What was the fascination with trying to ascend the really high peaks? Many of them are not attractive and even less so with so much garbage accumulating at the Base Camps. At least, Carlos and Martín were keen on keeping the trip small and thus impacting the mountain less. This was an approach I always favored.

After hiking for nine days from Jiri to Namche Bazar, Carlos pointed out to me that he thought Ama Dablam one of the five most beautiful mountains of the

PLATE 4

*Photo by Alan Kearney*

**KWANGDE CENTRAL.**



world. What were the other four? He listed Gasherbrum IV, Nameless Tower, Machapuchare and Cerro Torre. He was diplomatic to include Cerro Torre and it did make me feel better. Since Sue had joined us at Lukla, I had been hit with an intestinal bug but was finally starting to recover at Namche.

We veered away from the Everest path westward toward Dramo and Thame Og. To the southwest rose several trekking peaks that sported steep technical faces and summits of reasonable height, a modest 20,000 feet or so. The scenery improved and I stated that Thame looked like a combination of Alaska and Patagonia, plus the culture of course.

The truly beautiful Thame valley wound northward toward the Nangpa La. I began to think I would have a good trip after all, and Sue was happy to be away from work and out of the city. Having tea served in bed by the cook boy on frosty mornings was luxurious. The pace had been steady and each day we gained less than 1000 feet until Chocsumba. Lhakpa Dorje, our sirdar, stated that there were no campsites until we gained Lunag at 16,300 feet, a rise of 1800 feet in one shot. There was no problem for anyone else, including Carlos' 63-year-old mother, but I got pulmonary edema. Sue stayed with me while the expedition went to Base Camp at 17,200 feet.

The following day, Sue and I descended to Chocsumba and the day after to Thame Og at 12,500 feet. The slightest rise in the trail made me gasp and Sue finally took my ten-pound pack. I sat on a boulder and wept. Fear and a sense of uselessness and failure gripped me. My lungs were trapped in a vise and I spent twenty minutes climbing a 150-foot slope. On the other side, when we began the gradual drop to Chocsumba, I could breathe a tiny bit better. But my brain was hammered with pain and my heart was crushed. Why did I travel to the other side of the world just to live in a city ten times the size of my home town, hike for two weeks and then get altitude sickness? Even Sue, with her expert medical training, didn't realize what was happening inside me or how fast pulmonary edema kills. I *did* know; I had lost a friend on Aconcagua in 1985 when he and his wife were guiding a group of clients.

The next sixteen days consisted of descent to Namche, rest, a very gradual reascent to Base Camp, seeing Carlos and Martín briefly, waving goodbye to Sue, carrying a load to 18,000 feet and getting pulmonary edema a second time. I left Base Camp immediately with the cook and reached Marulung in one day, a drop of 4000 feet. Cho Oyu was out of the picture!

I hiked slowly on down to Thame alone, and although despondent, I was glad to be alive. Thame was so picturesque I lingered there for several days, reading and hiking, and eventually ambled down the trail toward Namche. The surrounding peaks teased me, but my spirit was gone as were any climbing partners. Between Dramo and Namche, I encountered Rob Newsom. I was happy to see anyone I knew. He had not come to climb Nuptse as originally planned but had a permit for Kwangde, a peak directly to the south. But the face he and Gordy Kito intended to climb was devoid of ice and anticipating a long rock climb, he went in search of used pitons in Namche. The scalp hunters in Namche wanted \$8.00 per pin and so he came back with none. I wasn't anxious

to return to Kathmandu and volunteered my hardware if we could get porters to bring it down from the Cho Oyu Base Camp.

Rob said that I ought at least to come to their Base Camp for a day or two and, if I wanted, to join their small expedition for the climb. Imagine an unused power eggbeater that has sat on the shelf for years and has just been plugged in. Every part functions smoothly as though it had never been discarded. I literally hummed with excitement.

I sensed something wrong when Rob said in his Louisiana drawl, "We came to do an ice climb and there's no ice. I'm not too psyched." I was grateful for a chance to do any climbing and logged his remark away without further thought. The day was hot and we took our time in reaching Base Camp in the village of Hungo. Gordy and Rob parked a huge North Star tent on the grass in a stone corral. The elevation was 11,800 feet and the air warm, an ideal place to finish my recovery. Rob was in the grips of an intestinal disorder and I sent a note to the Cho Oyu Base Camp to try to get my gear brought down to Hungo. Seven days passed during which my gear arrived. I made a carry to the north face of Kwangde's north peak. Rob was still pretty sick.

On April 15, Gordy and I moved to a high camp in two stages, having changed our objective to the northeast rib of Kwangde's lower summit. Rob came up on the night of April 17 and the three of us fixed ropes across steep snow and up two pitches of rock on the 18th. I was feeling good, having finally lost any trace of a cough, Rob had kicked his diarrhea and Gordy seemed in good spirits. Beneath the surface, I still sensed a lack of interest in the climb on the others' part. It was not in the condition they had hoped and there was a question of rockfall on the face we intended to try. I didn't think it was that bad, but Rob felt the danger excessive. During the past week, I had become remotivated, the route looked reasonable and the weather was perfect. It is possible that my perception of the hazards were smothered by my desire to climb something.

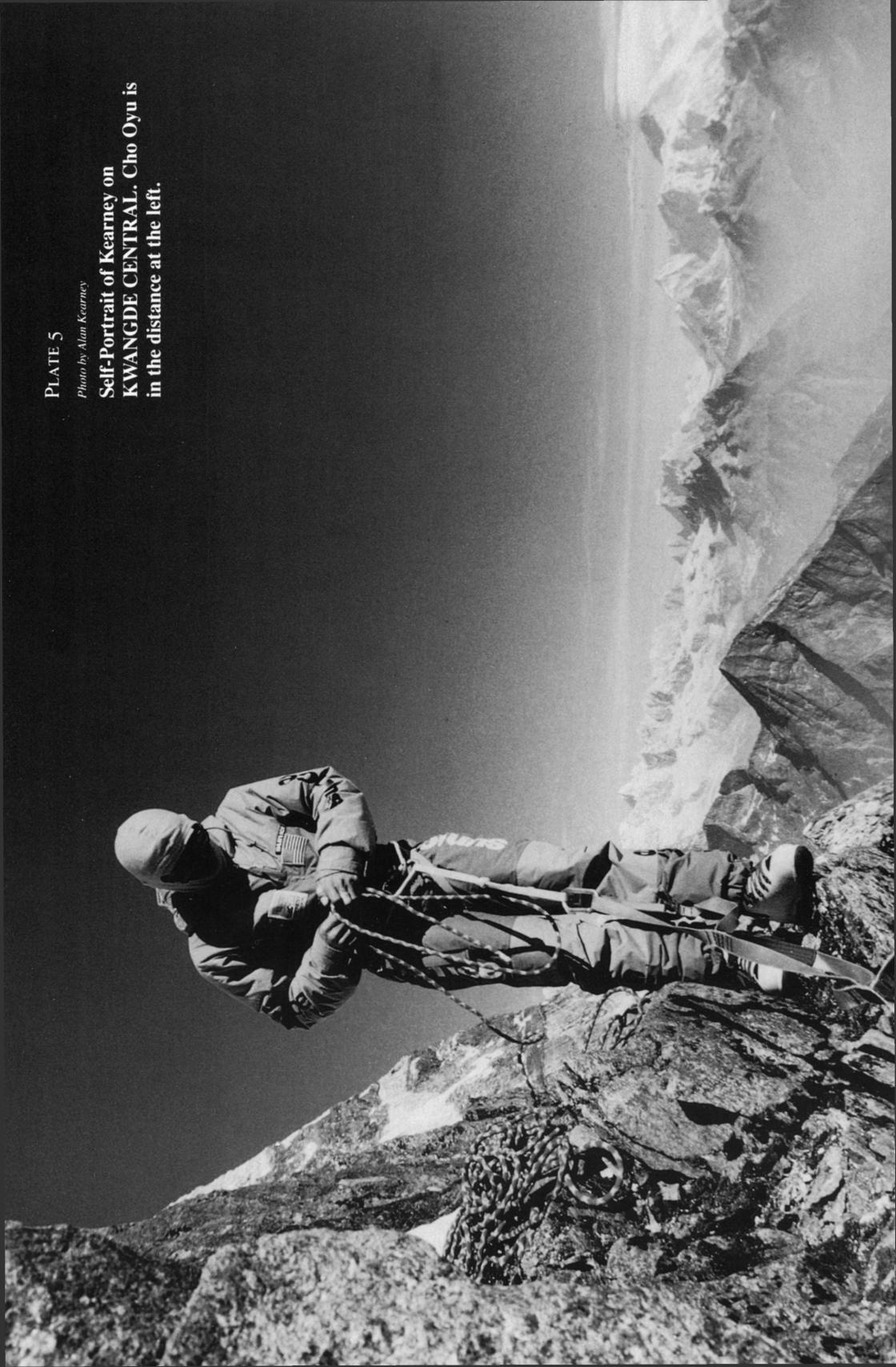
The next morning, the three of us climbed easy snow to 16,500 feet, just below a snow-and-ice gully leading to the fixed ropes. As we neared the couloir, it ejected a large rock that slid 100 yards down the snow slope and stopped. Rob announced that he would not be doing the climb and when I asked Gordy about the route, he felt the same. My position was tenuous, being a guest on their expedition. Although I had had my share of bad times since arriving in Nepal, here was a chance to wipe out those feelings of failure and depression. I had no intention of offending anyone. I felt I could solo the route, doing it for purely personal reasons. I told Rob that I would leave the first fixed rope in place so that he could retrieve his camera, Gore-Tex coat, Jümars and North Wall hammer that he had left hanging from a piton the day before.

Rob replied, "No, you don't understand. I'm never going up that mountain again. My life's worth more than that gear. If you can bring some of it down, that's OK, but I'm not going back up." I said that if that were true, I would pull the first rope on the traverse and use it higher. Doing so would cut me off from his gear as my intended rappel would not descend past that spot. Naturally I

PLATE 5

*Photo by Alan Kearney*

**Self-Portrait of Kearney on  
KWANGDE CENTRAL. Cho Oyu is  
in the distance at the left.**



didn't expect them to wait at Base Camp with nothing to do while I was climbing, but I guess I hoped they would.

I was plenty nervous that first morning as I climbed hard snow and ice back up to the start of the ropes. I was determined to right the wrongs and leave Nepal having climbed a summit or at least having made a good effort. This situation could turn things around. The trick was staying alive.

As I began the first self-belayed pitch above the high point of the fixed ropes, a baseball-sized rock tore through the air and vaporized on the slabs nearby. Perhaps Rob was right about the danger and I was being a fool. It appeared that after a couple of pitches I would be on a rib between two concave faces and thus safe from rockfall. Completing those three pitches and reaching safer climbing took the remaining afternoon and part of the next morning. Consequently, my first bivouac was filled with apprehension, as I was in the danger zone.

I chose to rope solo the lower two-thirds of the route and carry a stove, bivy sack, thin Polarguard bag and four days of food. By moving slowly, I would lessen the chances of getting altitude sick a third time. This style may seem archaic in the present world of extreme fifth-class free soloing, but it was appropriate for me. Attempting a new route alone brought to mind the thoughts expressed by the late Renato Casarotto, "The factors which motivate me to climb are the need for action, a desire for the unknown and a longing for mental and physical commitment—which may be total!"

Commitment was the key word. I kept telling myself that I could rappel at any time if the difficulties looked bad. The second day was more cheerful than the first. I was climbing on the crest of the rib and away from the intermittent rockfall on either side. The climbing was enjoyable when leading and a real grunt when reascending the rope with the pack and hardware. Far below, I could see the yellow dot of Rob and Gordy's tent in the corral.

In Hungo, they were probably drinking a hot mug of coffee and watching me through binoculars. I was munching on a granola bar and speculating on how to scale a 70-foot featureless wall. When it came to rope soloing, I had been a dunce and now this simple unclimbed route was asking me to produce direct-aid techniques. With my maximum ability at A2+, I lurched upward, making mistakes straightaway, running into dead ends, standing on pins that shifted and tiny slings looped over small flakes. It was a pleasure to resume free climbing and in one more short pitch to reach a suitable bivouac ledge.

A nearby snow patch provided water for dinner and from the warmth of the sack I watched the moon rise over Kusum Kanguru. I felt there was a possibility of succeeding as I had climbed ten pitches in two days and another five or six would put me on ground that I could climb unroped. There was one more obstacle on the agenda for Day Three: a smooth black granite slab some two pitches in length. If I could solve the slab puzzle and altitude sickness did not return, the route would go.

Three pitches of moderate and enjoyable climbing led to the slab on my third day on the mountain. Previous to this climb, the longest time I had spent alone on a route was measured in hours and not days. Down in Hungo, the tent was

barely visible and above, the black slab had fallen into the evening shadows. Cracks seemed to lead halfway up the slab, but beyond I could only see some seams and then nothing. It would have been reassuring to have had a bolt kit.

For a hundred feet I laybacked, stemmed, traversed left on thin holds and then jammed up a hand-crack. I continually placed stoppers and Friends and paid out the single 8.5mm rope through prusiks attached to my harness. I stuck a N° 4 Friend behind a block on a ledge and continued climbing up and left 40 feet higher. It was increasingly difficult the farther I climbed from the last piece. Close to large face holds to the left, I carefully smeared with my right foot, edged with the left and pulled up on a couple of rounded crystals to reach easier climbing.

The elevation was roughly 18,700 feet and although the slab was now below me, there still remained 1000 feet to the top. I rearranged rocks at the bottom of a snowbank and settled in for supper. During the night, I developed a cough and thought it might be the beginning of pulmonary edema again. But Day Four was clear and warm and the cough did not worsen. In two-and-a-half hours I climbed unroped up third-class with a couple of spots of 5.7. I reached the top at 10:30 A.M. on April 22, my 38th birthday.

Before tackling the descent, I reflected on the last five months of my life. From an incredibly low state of enthusiasm and health, I felt I had come a long way in a short span. Although Kwangde was not a striking peak and low by Himalayan standards, I had finished the climb in good style. The ascent was by a new route, though it will never stir the imagination or become a classic. For me, it was the perfect means to rebuild my cheerful attitude, eradicate my recent doubts and give me new strength to deal with living in a foreign country. If Sue ever took another job outside the United States, I wouldn't whine constantly, so long as there were slug races to watch.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Rolwaling Himalaya, Nepal.

NEW ROUTE: Kwangde Central, 5957 meters, 19,544, feet, Northeast Rib,  
Summit reached April 22, 1989 (Kearney).

PERSONNEL: Alan Kearney, Gordon Kito, Robert Newsom.