

A Himalayan Classic— Makalu's West Pillar

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MY HEART WAS POUNDING from lack of oxygen and excitement as I scrambled up the last talus slope and reached the abandoned stone walls that would become our Base Camp. Above, thin wispy clouds raced across a crystal sky and great plumes of snow swept over the summit of Makalu. I stood motionless, in awe of the majestic peak before me. Our route, the West Pillar, was an elegant rock buttress that bounded the immense granite west face of Makalu. The pillar was first climbed by the French. John Roskelley in 1980 had reached the summit solo by this route. I was full of nervous energy and eager to begin climbing.

On March 26, we established Base Camp at 17,500 feet at the foot of the West Pillar. Our team consisted of John Schutt, Mark Houston, Kathy Cosley, John Culberson, my husband Colin Grissom and me. The 100-mile trek from Hille to Makalu Base Camp had brought us through the most remote area of Nepal I had yet seen. For the last seven days of the trek, we post-holed through knee-deep snow as we crossed three 14,000-foot passes and then descended into the isolated Barun valley.

My teammates were as keen as I to start climbing and so after a day of sorting gear, we set out with the first loads. Three hours of scrambling brought us up a huge talus slope to the site of Camp I, tucked in the rocks on the south side of the ridge. A dozen tent platforms were lined with baling wire, tin cans and gas cartridges from previous expeditions. Panting like a dog from the altitude, I found temporary shelter from the wind behind a large boulder and marveled at the tremendous views of the Barun valley and Baruntse to the west and Lhotse and Everest to the northwest. I felt great respect for the French team and imagined how exciting it must have been on the first ascent. For the next five days we ferried enough supplies and equipment up to the camp for it to be occupied and on April 4, Mark Houston and Kathy Cosley moved up.

Immediately above Camp I, 60° slopes led to a mile-long knife-edged ridge. We worked in pairs and alternated leading after two days so that no one would have to be a support member and carry loads for more than four days at a time. I patiently waited my turn but hounded my companions.

"You mean you've already fixed 2000 feet of rope?" I asked John Culberson in obvious disappointment. I had hoped we wouldn't have to start fixing until

above Camp II. I enjoy the freedom that comes with climbing in a fast and light style. Besides, I didn't relish carrying the loads that would be necessary to fix the entire route.

"Yeah," John replied. "Just wait till it's your turn and you'll see." Colin and I started climbing to John and Schutt's high point to lead the remaining few hundred feet to Camp II. The ridge dipped and rose and I felt as if I were on a roller-coaster ride. To my left, a rock wall dropped 2000 feet to the glacier and to my right 70° slopes fell to unseen terrain below. The route led down a rock band, around overhanging cornices, up a giant bump and down to a windy plateau. Adding to the thrill was a powerful wind that threatened to blow me away, had I not been clipped into fixed lines. At the crest of the bump we fixed more lines and fought increasing winds before dropping down onto the plateau and anchoring the rope. I returned to Camp I humbled, as I had not anticipated that the route would require this much work so low on the mountain. We placed Camp II at 21,000 feet in a large cave formed by a crevasse. Thus sheltered, we escaped the howling wind. By mid April, after many gruelling six-hour round-trips from Camp I to Camp II, we had stocked our second camp and Colin and I moved in.

Beyond Camp II, 2700 feet of mixed rock-and-ice bands interspersed with patches of snow guarded the pillar above. Colin and I climbed easily up steep snow and blocky rock faces until we were pushed out onto the south face by overhanging rock on the ridge above us. A narrow ramp of verglas-covered rock slabs with downward-sloping holds led across the steep south face. The French had appropriately named it the Terrible Traverse because of the terrific exposure. After fixing it, we descended to Base Camp, excited by the stimulating climbing and the progress made. Mark and Kathy took over the lead and over the next two days fixed another thousand feet of rope up increasingly difficult rock bands. John and Schutt replaced them, but because of a nagging cough, John had to return to Base Camp to recuperate after only a day of fixing. The mountain was taking its toll. Unfortunately, the high altitude at Base Camp made it difficult to recover fully from exhaustion or illness. Hacking coughs continued to plague several members.

Colin and I climbed back up to Camp II with Schutt, hoping to reach Camp III in a day or two. We climbed the icy slopes, over the blocky rock bands, across the Terrible Traverse and up seemingly endless mixed rock-and-ice slabs. I was amazed at how sustained the route was and distressed to find that it had taken us four hours to reach the high point. We had to concentrate on ascending the fixed lines in the most efficient manner to have time and energy left to lead a significant number of pitches before rappelling over a thousand feet to Camp II by dark. Over the next four days, we finished fixing the route to the site of Camp III at 24,200 feet. On April 29, the three of us moved up and dug a small cave in the leeward side of the narrow ridge to protect us from the relentless wind. The site was cold and cramped and I was glad to bail out of our little cell once morning came.

Above Camp III, the granite pillar soared dramatically upward and the most challenging climbing began. While Colin, Schutt and I approached the wall, I silently prayed that the route would not be too difficult for me. Snow-filled

COLOR PLATE 2

Photo by Mark Houston

The West Face of Makalu



cracks snaked up through the steep rock slabs as far as I could see. Soon I was leading and all my anxiety disappeared as I focused my mind on piecing together the moves, brushing off the snow in search of holds, gingerly placing my crampon points on crystals and pressing hard on the rock as I mantled up. As we made headway, I became confident and exhilarated by the feeling of being high, like the feeling of being on the balcony on the tenth floor of a skyscraper. Yet, after three days of climbing above 24,000 feet, the thrill soon became replaced by fatigue. We were forced to descend for a much-needed rest. Mark, Kathy and John moved up to Camp III to take the lead. That night, an unwelcome storm plastered the ridge with two feet of powdery snow. Aggravated by the increasingly cold dry air, Mark's cough worsened, resulting in an injured rib. He descended to Camp II while Kathy and John waited for the storm to subside. When it did, the fresh snow temporarily barred upward progress and so the pair descended to Camp II.

After twelve gruelling hours of post-holing up from Base Camp, Colin, Schutt and I rejoined the others at Camp II on May 6. The following day, with support from John and Kathy, Colin and I climbed back to Camp III. After carrying an extremely heavy load, John wished us good luck and said he could not climb higher because of his persistent cough and lack of appetite, which kept him from recovering from each day's work. Two days later, he descended to Base Camp with Mark, whose rib had not healed. Meanwhile, Colin and I fixed 300 feet of rope above our high point before returning to Camp II for another rest. We were relieved by Kathy and Schutt, who managed to fix an additional 200 feet of rope up a steep dihedral where a frayed cable ladder dangled. By now, each additional pitch became a major accomplishment, for the slabs had given way to strenuous off-width cracks and dihedrals. Technical climbing at this extreme altitude required incredible effort.

After a day of recuperation, Colin and I headed back to Camp III, passing Kathy on her way down. Apologetically, she informed us that she was descending to Base Camp in a state of exhaustion. I could empathize and hoped that Colin, Schutt and I would have strength enough to finish the route. At Camp III, we rejoined Schutt and the following day, the three of us reached the crux of the route at 25,000 feet. To our left was an overhanging off-width crack and to the right, a smooth vertical wall with a useless, broken ladder at its base. Colin armed himself with a rack of large Friends and a pair of *étriers* and began the struggle up the off-width. Once he crested the overhanging rock, he disappeared out of sight and we could only guess at the climbing above as the rope inched upward. Two hours later, he arrived at a belay stance, having negotiated the last twenty feet of a steep, blank face.

Above the crux four long pitches up easier ground remained to be fixed to reach Camp IV at 25,000 feet. It was late in the day. We could fix only one more pitch before descending to Camp III. Time was pressing. The weather was changing for the worse with the approach of the monsoon and we were noticeably deteriorating due to the altitude. After weighing options, we decided to fix the last pitches carrying heavy packs on the way to occupy Camp IV. Finally, on

May 14, after a long, hard day, we arrived at dusk at the site of our last camp. We had to chop a platform for our three-person tent, an exhausting effort that took us two hours in the cruel wind. By the time we settled in and finished dinner, it was nearly midnight.

The next day we rested, but on the following morning, May 16, we set out for the top at 2:20 A.M. It was a perfect morning, clear and still, and we had high hopes for the summit. After climbing 45° mixed snow-and-rock gullies for six hours, we were driven back by ferocious winds that rose quickly out of the southeast. To those watching through binoculars from Base Camp, retreat must have seemed inevitable as clouds of snow rose up over the entire summit ridge in billowing plumes.

Back in Camp IV, Colin, Schutt and I collapsed in the tent, thoroughly exhausted and disheartened from our forced retreat. That afternoon, Colin told us that his bronchitis had gotten worse and he had to descend to Base Camp. This was hard for me to accept, as we had endured so many hardships together in the mountains; yet, I realized that he was making the right decision. Schutt and I planned a second attempt the following day, but when we awoke just before midnight still feeling weak, we opted for a rest day instead.

It was snowing lightly and visibility was poor when Schutt and I left Camp IV on May 18 at 1:15 in the morning. We were desperately hoping to make the summit on this attempt as we had only one day's food left and we were losing strength after having spent four nights at 25,500 feet. I felt as if I were sleep-walking, following the faint silhouette of my companion up the hard, wind-packed slopes. Falling snowflakes danced in the breeze and shreds of ancient rope rapped against the rock. At dawn, we reached the junction of the West Pillar and southeast ridge at 27,100 feet. I was rudely awakened by blasts of wind out of the southeast and doubt crept into my mind because my feet had become numb with cold. A layer of rock, barely visible through the clouds, became my goal. If we weren't out of the wind by then, I would have to go down. A wave of joy swept through me as we reached the rock band and I recognized it from the pictures I had seen. I knew we were near the summit. Miraculously, the wind had died and with renewed determination, I tied into the 5mm cord we carried with us.

We ascended the last rock barrier and gained the gentle, corniced snow ridge. Unconsolidated snow and the lack of oxygen slowed progress to an agonizing crawl. In the clouds, the corniced ridge seemed to go on forever. At long last, after weeks of extraordinary climbing, Schutt and I finally reached the pointed summit. It was 11:45 A.M. The sky was clear above us, but a sea of clouds below obscured all but the distant tops of Everest and Lhotse to the northwest. We embraced, elated with the realization of a dream and relieved that all we now had to do was to get down safely.

After fifteen minutes on the summit, we began the descent and arrived back at Camp IV at 4:45 in the afternoon, utterly spent. The next day we packed up and staggered out of camp like zombies, laden with gear, anxious to begin the 10,000-foot descent to Base Camp to rejoin our companions.

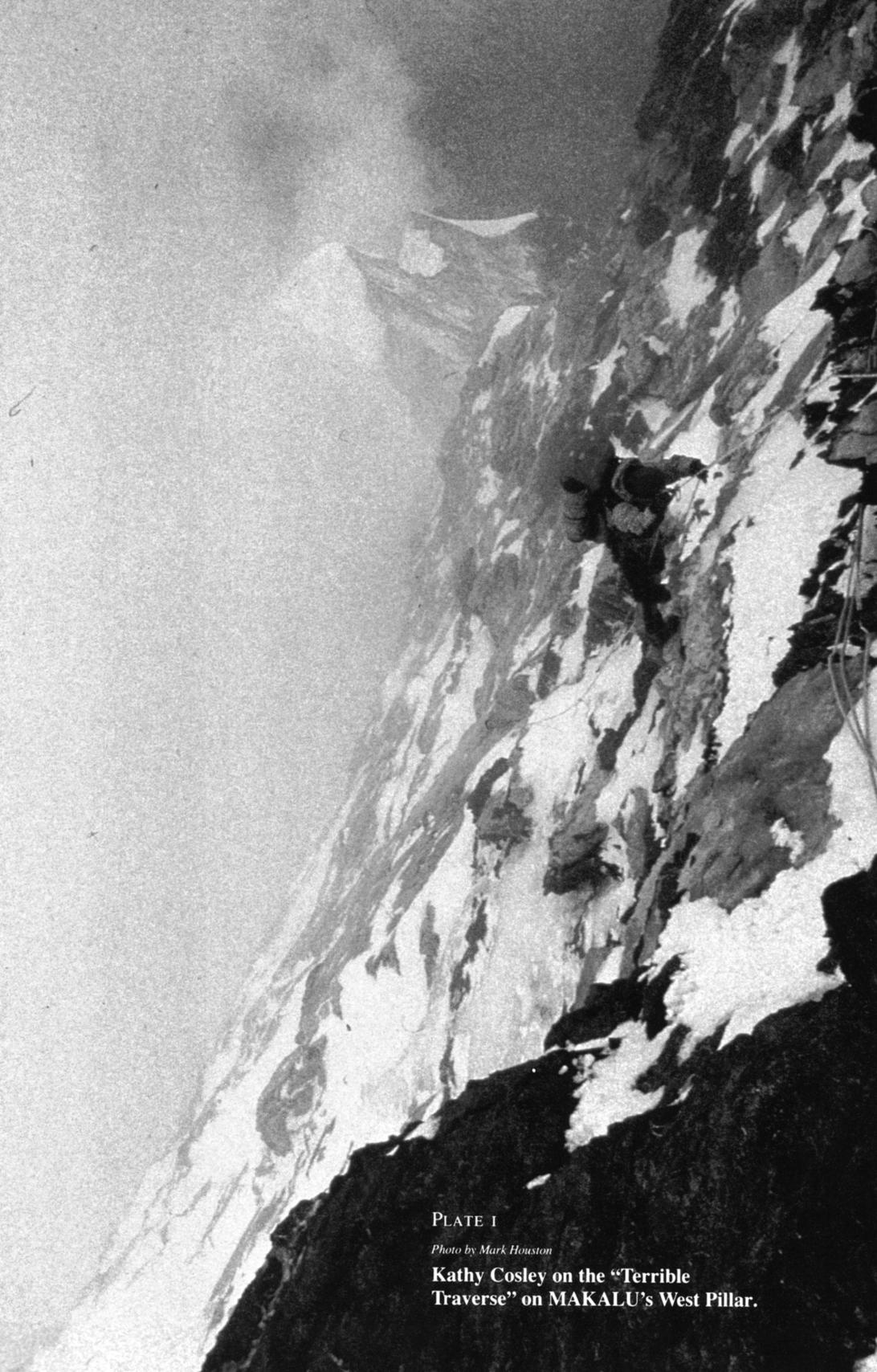


PLATE I

Photo by Mark Houston

**Kathy Cosley on the "Terrible
Traverse" on MAKALU's West Pillar.**

By the time Colin, Schutt and I arrived at Base Camp, Mark, Kathy and John were already ferrying loads down from our high camps and removing much of the fixed rope, a process that took five days. I was grateful to all my teammates, for without the combined effort of the team, our success would not have been possible. We finally left Base Camp on May 24, having spent 60 days on an incredible route.

As I looked back towards Makalu and its West Pillar for the last time, it stood shrouded in a massive layer of dull grey clouds, defiant to the end. I would soon enjoy the well-earned pleasures of a shower and ice cream, but I was hesitant to go forward. I wanted to savor the sweet feelings that come with a realization of success. But I knew that soon these feelings would be replaced with an emptiness as I searched for a new focus. I thrive on experiences which reward me with tremendous feelings of accomplishment, such as climbing the West Pillar of Makalu.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Mahalangur Himal, Nepal.

ASCENT: Makalu, 8463 meters, 27,766 feet, Fourth Ascent of West Pillar, First Female Ascent of Makalu by any route, May 18, 1990 (K. Grissom, Schutt).

PERSONNEL: Kitty Calhoun Grissom, leader, Kathy Cosley, John Culberson, Colin Grissom, Mark Houston, John Schutt.

