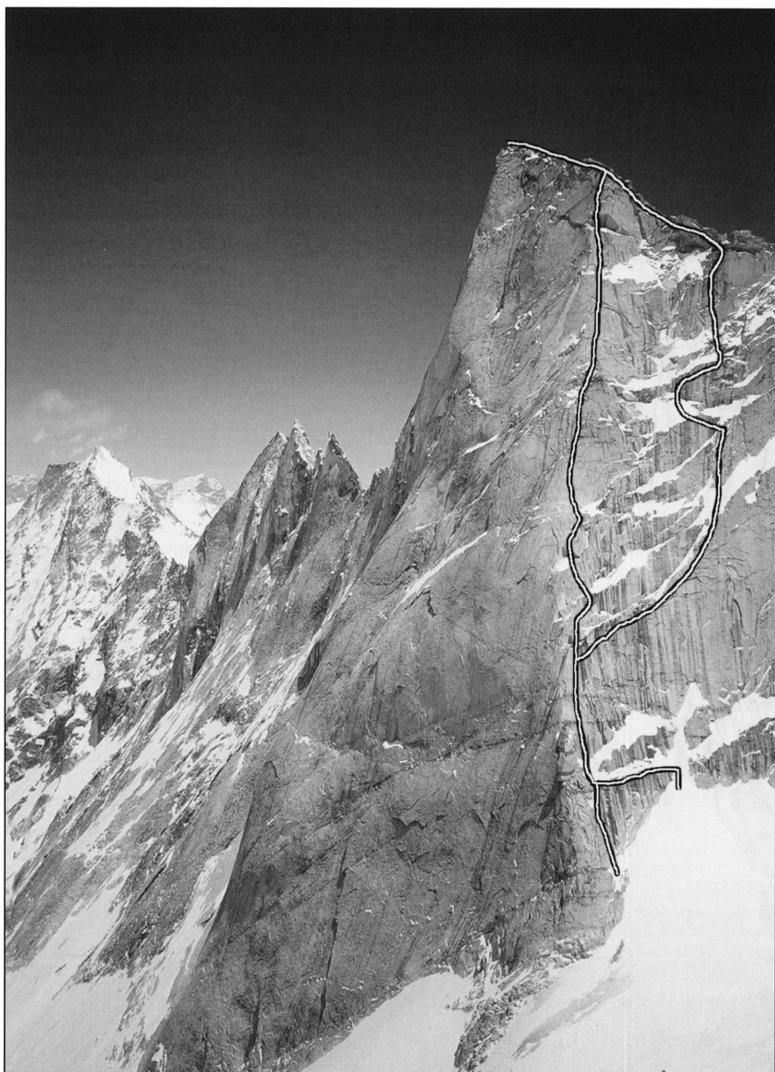


ARWA TOWER, SPIRE, AND CREST

*When the weather gods smiled: two perfect weeks in the Indian Garhwal
with the French High Mountain Military Group.*

BY ANTOINE DE CHOUDENS



The Arwa Tower's northwest buttress, showing the French Route (left) from 2002, and the Fowler-Sustad, 1999.

Last spring, eight of us from the French High Mountain Military Group (GMHM), inspired by Mick Fowler's pictures of Arwa Tower, went on an expedition to the Indian Garhwal. Our team—Thomas Faucheur, Philippe Renard, Laurent Miston, François Savary, Grégory Muffat Joly, Emmanuel Pellissier, Dimitry Munoz, and I—was blessed with the best weather any of us had ever seen in the Himalaya. We could climb as much as we wanted—and we did! We successfully climbed a new route on the Arwa Crest, and made two ascents each of Arwa Tower and Arwa Spire, including a new route on the Tower.

We left France near the end of April. After flying to Delhi, we took a bus to Joshimath, a small town in the mountains, where we had an exasperating struggle getting government authorization to continue. Because Arwa Tower and Arwa Spire are in a restricted area near the Chinese border, we had to overcome a lot of red tape just to reach base camp.

A little further on, just before the village of Badrinath (famous for its hot springs), the road was still buried under the snow from winter avalanches. At that point, we put the porters to work and started walking. We ended up spending the night in a deserted bus station, but not before taking a delightful bath in the hot springs, with snow gently falling on our heads, which helped us relax and forget about our hassles with the authorities.

The next day, we obtained our final authorization to continue from the military camp at Mana. Then we began a long trek through fog and through snow that was unusually deep for that time of year. At 3,700 meters, the hard snow was still almost a meter deep (three years ago, at Shivling base camp, there was absolutely no snow, even at 4,300 meters).

Before long, most of the porters became frightened of avalanches and deserted us. The few who remained had to make many trips back and forth, and it took eight days for some of our loads to get to our base camp at 4,350 meters (it should have taken just two days). But looking at the bright side, this gave us plenty of time to acclimatize. Finally, on May 6, the last of the loads made it to base camp.

During the first few days of sunny weather we put in an advanced camp on the glacier, near Arwa Tower, at 5,100 meters. Then we spent a few days doing some warm-up climbing:



Snow climbing on the north face of Arwa Crest.
Antoine de Choudens

François and Manu ascended a gully near camp, while some of us skied to the bottom of Arwa Spire and climbed a summit that sat out in front of it.

On May 10, a party of four—Philippe, Gregory, Laurent and myself—did a wonderful mixed route to 6,196 meters on the Arwa Crest, left of the Tower (TD, 1,100m). We were helped by technology that day. At the bottom of the face it was very dark and we couldn't find the beginning of the route. Fortunately, we had a digital video camera with us and only had to look at the film to find the good way!

The very same day, François and Manu climbed a couloir on the same side of the Tower, then reached 6,100 meters (the needle-like tower) on the east ridge. But when they encountered some enormous gendarmes up there, they decided to rappel back to the foot of the south face for the night. The next day, they climbed a pleasant gully up the south face, reaching the summit of Arwa Tower.

During that time, Thomas and Dimitry attempted the west ridge of the Tower, reaching 6,100 meters.

On May 14, two parties of two—Manu and François, plus Thomas and Philippe—began a climb of the east ridge of Arwa Spire (the English Route, taken by the first Arwa Spire ascent party in 2000). The first pair reached the top the next day, while the second team made it on the 16th.

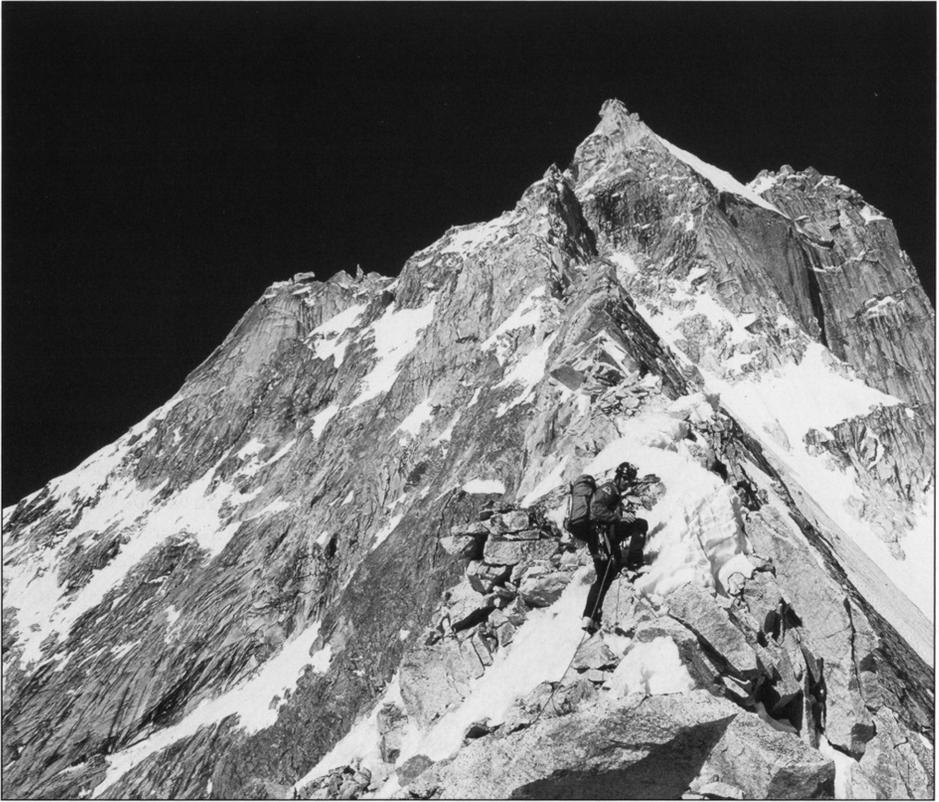
Meanwhile, our four-man team—Dimitry, Gregory, Laurent, and myself—were on the northwest buttress of the Tower. Though we had brought our portaledges along, we abandoned them on a ledge after the first two pitches. We began with two “climbers” and two “porters” (carrying the loads), with plans to switch roles on the second day, but then decided to go for the summit in one push. After climbing 600 meters up a perfect granite pyramid in 14 pitches (6b), we reached the summit of Arwa Tower, and named the route *Pilier Guilhem Chaffiol*, after our friend who had died during the 2002 Mountain Guide Stage. During the climb we found exceptionally good and dry rock. It was a succession of slabs and cracks, and we only had to use pitons for the belays. We bivied on a very small ledge, where three of us sat slipping on a slab with no pads. The morning was so cold that we had to wait for the sun before putting on our rock shoes (free climbing was very important for us!). The most difficult pitch was a superb parallel hand crack on a smooth shield, encountered on the second day. In the middle of the afternoon we reached the top of Arwa tower. What a great satisfaction it was for us to have freed the entire route! We stayed a long time to savor our pleasure.

While we were making all of these ascents, there was not a cloud in the sky. In the resulting snowmelt, rocks fell from the moraine above base camp, night and day. Some of our tents were drowned by the swelling river. Our gear became soaked, but fortunately nothing was lost.

With 15 days of sunny weather, our expedition went so perfectly that it seemed like it was a dream. This area is perfect for alpine-style first ascents and for ski touring, with magnificent scenery, including awesome views of huge neighboring mountains like Kamet, Nilkanth, and Chaukamba.

THE FRENCH HIGH MOUNTAIN MILITARY GROUP (GMHM)—A BRIEF HISTORY (“Who are those guys?”—Butch Cassidy)

As far as we know, only the French Army maintains a cadre like ours. Though other armies sometimes make similar expeditions, they usually do so by forming special groups, which are disbanded afterward.



The elegant, endless east ridge of the Arwa Spire. Antoine de Choudens

Based in Chamonix, the GMHM (Group Militaire de Hautes Montagnes) was founded in 1976 by Jean Claude Marmier, a famous French climber. Our primary mission is to develop and maintain a mastery of extreme alpine conditions—high altitudes and low temperatures—and to promote the French Army. We conduct exercises in mountains and ice deserts throughout the world, while performing medical, nutritional, and equipment experiments in order to assure that the French Army maintains a special, permanent group of elite alpinists. The GMHM has strong ties with the high mountain military school, and each year we provide instructors for its top levels. The French army maintains a few high level athletes from various disciplines in its ranks, including skiers, paragliders, and triathletes. The GMHM is a good organization to help some French alpinists.

In the beginning, the GMHM made many first winter ascents in the Alps. Our first expedition outside of France took place in the Ketil region of Greenland, in 1978. Three years later, we made an unsuccessful attempt on Mt. Everest, from the Tibetan side, and helped show the world that Everest's north ridge was not the easiest way to reach the top.

For the next 12 years, we made many expeditions to Peru, Alaska, and the Himalaya. We had our greatest successes on Gyachungkang, Lhotse Shar, and Kamet. In 1993, we went back to Everest, and climbed it from Nepal. The next year, Alain Estève (our chief), decided to change our emphasis, and we began a five-year exploration of the polar deserts. We developed



California dreaming? Finding wired bliss on Arwa Tower's north-west buttress. Antoine de Choudens

our knowledge and experience for this type of trip by going to the Canadian North, first to Ellesmere Island, to walk on the ice pack, and then to Baffin Island in the winter. We found out how to live when the temperature drops to -40°C . Our next test was to cross Greenland, unsupported. In 1995, our 1,000-kilometer trek from Ammassalik to Upernavik was excellent preparation for what would be our biggest project: the North and South Poles.

The trip to the North Pole, in 1996, was the hardest of the two. For 55 days, we walked across the ice pack, covering 1,000 kilometers. We spent day after day climbing up and down compression ridges, and crossing open arms of frigid water. At first, we pulled a 130-kilogram sledge. The last 15 days, we walked more than 10 hours each day—when we finally arrived at the pole, we were out of food, but had completed the journey on our own, without any support. Going to the South Pole wasn't as difficult, but it was longer—we took 50 days to cover 1,300 kilometers. For three of us (François Bernard, Antoine Cayrol, and myself), it wound up as a "Three Poles Challenge" (Everest and the two Poles).

In 1999, the GMHM went to India and did the third ascent of Shivering's east ridge. Then, in the Indian Mountaineer, we saw that incredible Mick Fowler photo of Arwa Tower, and we were gone—we felt we had no choice but to go for that awesome mountain.

To train for big wall climbing, we first went to Yosemite, in the fall of 2000. Six months later, we flew to Baffin Island's Eastern Fjords, where we put up a new route on a wonderful peak that we called "Alain Estève Peak," in memory of our late chief (who had died in a fall, ice climbing in Norway). Our new route was 1,000 meters high, and all the pitches were freed, up to 7c.

Then, we were ready for the Indian Garhwal.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Indian Garhwal, Arwa Valley

ASCENTS:

Arwa Crest: north face, first ascent of the French Route (1,100m, TD M5). Philippe Renard, Grégory Muffat Joly, Laurent Miston, and Antoine de Choudens. May 10, 2002.

Arwa Tower: south face, first ascent of the French Route (500m, 4c M5 80°). May 11, 2002. This is the south face gully, approached from the north face of the needle tower on the east shoulder of Arwa Tower. Emmanuel Pellissier and François Savary.

Needle Tower: first ascent of the French Route (900m, 5a M4 80°). Emmanuel Pellissier and François Savary. May 10, 2002.

Arwa Spire: east ridge, third ascent of the English Route (600m, TD), Emmanuel Pellissier and François Savary. May 15, 2002.

East ridge, fourth ascent of the English Route, Philippe Renard and Thomas Faucheur. May 16, 2002.

Arwa Tower: northwest buttress, first ascent of Pilier Guilhem Chaffiol (550m, 14 pitches, 6b). Dimitry Munoz, Grégory Muffat Joly, Laurent Miston, and Antoine de Choudens. May 16, 2002.

Born in France in 1969, Antoine de Choudens lives in Gieres near Grenoble, France. He is married with no children. He has an engineering diploma, is a mountain guide and ski instructor, and has been with the GMHM since 1994. His first climbs were in the Alps in the 1980s, and some of his highlights in cold places include: Korjenevskaja Peak (7,105m) in the Pamir (1992), the North Pole unsupported from Siberia in 55 days (1996), Everest without supplemental oxygen (1997), new routes on virgin peaks in Antarctica (1997), the South Pole unsupported in 50 days (1998/99), Shivering's east ridge (1999), big walls in Baffin Island's eastern fjords (2001), and Minya Konka (2002).



The GMHM team at the South Pole in 1999. Antoine de Choudens is standing in the upper right (before the American flag).