Annapurna South Face

TOM FROST

IN 1960, Christian Bonington, a budding officer in the British Army, had the persistence and good fortune necessary to land a berth on the British Services expedition to Annapurna II. From the summit ridges it was possible for Chris to look to the west 20 miles to Annapurna, the great 8000-meter peak scaled by Herzog and Lachenal, and dream of someday approaching her even higher summit. From this viewpoint Annapurna's great south face stood in silhouette, appearing so large and steep that its ascent seemed unlikely. But times change – and along with them the eleven men who went to Nepal in the spring of 1970 to experience the south face of Annapurna . . . and themselves.

When Nepal's borders were reopened to climbers in 1969, the challenge of the 10,000-foot-high Annapurna South Face was too great to be dismissed and Chris snapped it up. For him as expedition leader, it was basically a challenge of leadership in some of the most diversified conditions under which a private individual has the opportunity to try himself. He set immediately to work at meeting part of the challenge, raising the approximately $60,000 which financed the expedition. This was accomplished primarily in the area Chris knows best – photo-journalism. He promoted its public-interest value, something heretofore more easily accomplished in Great Britain than here. He received advances on the post-expedition book, magazine and newspaper articles, and weekly TV coverage by the special four-man ITV crew which accompanied us to Base Camp. Even during the national elections, when prime news time was at a premium in England, Annapurna coverage continued as essential to the public interest – in much the same way as the modern Harding-Caldwell cliff-hanger epic in America. In the later stages Mount Everest Foundation sponsorship with full financial backing was obtained. Thus Chris made it all possible; he conceived the idea and accomplished the bulk of the organization and funding, opening the door to us relative free-loaders. Soon a quite compatible team of British super stars mutually assembled themselves, picked me as the apparent least of available American evils, and we were an expedition born, attending to final logistical efforts and looking forward to the time of testing. Were we really prepared for what was to follow?

PLATE 1 *Photo by Edward Cooper*

HALF DOME, Yosemite Valley. South Face on right (New Route by Rowell and Harding). Northwest Face on left (New Route by Robbins and Dorworth).

Mike Thompson, our 32 year-old anthropologist from London, took on one of the toughest of expedition challenges – food. In hopes of solving the everpresent high-altitude food dilemma, he tried a radical approach by going heavy on canned food (lamb's tongue included). But in spite of the success of our many delicacies at Base Camp, up high it was the usual disaster and Mike's popularity was precarious indeed. However, I believe Mike inadvertently proved an important theory about high-altitude foods – it is not their being dehydrated that makes them unpalatable with repetition. It is their lack of variety – period.

One of the most important men of all in making this a smooth running expedition was Chris' right hand man, Kelvin Kent. A Captain in the British Army attached to the Gurkha Signals in Hong Kong, he is a wireless expert, is experienced in logistics, and speaks fluent Nepali. To get our porters he sent messengers throughout the hill villages of the Gurung tribes and on the appointed day nearly 300 Gurkha porters, all ex-members of the British Army, began carrying us into Base. Their performance was completely in keeping with their legendary dedication to service, the last day's march being made barefoot through the deep winter snowfall to Base Camp. By heading up our entire logistics effort, including porters and Base Camp operation, Kelvin was instrumental in our success.

Dave Lambert had just finished up his internship in surgery before coming on this expedition holiday. But with all the members being the strong physical specimens that they were and having the good fortune to avoid the local diseases, Dave had by far his greatest work during our approach march masterfully extracting the usual rotten teeth and distributing white tablets to the eager locals.

We were fortunate in having six of the best Nepalese Sherpas. I had been with Pemba Tharkay seven years previously during Hillary's schoolhouse expedition. He is particularly distinguished by his boldness and enthusiasm, and I noted with interest his marked "westernization" over this period. I found Ang Pema, who was on Jake Breitenbach's rope in the Khumbu Icefall, to be one of the most patient, conscientious and basically solid individuals I have ever met. I came away with great respect for him. Mingma Tsering and Nima Tsering were participating in their first expedition. They found the steep fixed ropes of the lower ice ridge exhilarating indeed. After it was established, the six Sherpas worked the route between Base and Camp IV, moving supplies silently and steadily up to the "bottleneck". This involved prusiks with 30-plus-pound loads at about 21,000 feet over more difficult terrain than Sherpas have yet been subject to. Good performance!

Above Camp III at 20,000 feet the ice ridge rose as our greatest difficulty. After some outflanking maneuvers and much effort, Camp IV

was established 1000 feet higher, half way up the ice ridge. It was at this point that Martin Boysen and Nick Estcourt took the lead. Martin and Nick have long been climbing companions. Together they made the second ascent of the south face of the Fou, climbing the entire diagonal crack free – a remarkable achievement. Martin has many technical ascents to his credit and was unanimously acknowledged to be the best technical climber on the expedition. And Nick, very competitive, has a way of keeping up. They were the perfect pair to crack the smashingly steep pitches of the upper ice ridge. The first of these took two days to climb and resulted in the only overhanging – at one point completely free – prusik on the ice ridge. The 70° rotten snow/ice traverse of the next pitch was equally trying. Even after fixed ropes were in place, the upper ice ridge was so strenuous it became a logistic bottleneck, preventing the climbing oxygen and other luxuries from moving above Camp IV. Later in the expedition, after coming back up from Base Camp rest, Martin and Nick kept this devastating IV to V carry open completing it more times than any other pair and making possible our later marginal success.

Mick Burke and I had had our eyes on the Annapurna rock band since first seeing Jimmie Roberts' photograph. This band of good quality metamorphic rock with inclusive icefields rises for 2000 vertical feet between about 23,000 and 25,000 feet. Mick led all the pitches of its lower 1000 feet, and in many ways was the right man for the job, being a veteran of the Matterhorn in winter, the British Cerro Torre expedition and the Nose of El Capitan. He led with brilliance, losing his cool only twice when his crampons fell off. One pitch was so steep that the other lads could hardly follow on Jümars. All in all, it was an unusual and rewarding experience for us both – this technical climbing game in the bitter cold and sunlight so near the roof of the world.

But as we were fixing ropes on the rock band, other developments began to unfold that reflected the concerns and aspirations and temperament of the members. Our time was running out. The monsoon was due in a matter of weeks. The route was being pushed in slow motion and the great logistic bottleneck had developed on the upper ice ridge. Overworked climbers were dropping back to Base Camp like flies for a rest. Why is the summit so elusive? Can we make it? Who will make it? Who can make it? A new plan was born of the minds of men to override the previous "gentlemen's agreement" of orderly rotation – push the strongest two over the backs of the others in hopes of a quick success. Strategy. Personal relations. Expediency. Compromise. Why are we here? Really here? It is becoming questionable.

The "Row" punctured the relatively good feeling that had existed. The ideal of teamwork suffered a setback. We did not endure to this particular

end. When will there be a big expedition that has members who are all of one mind and individual desire is that of raising up one's companions rather than oneself? But optimism continues and is indeed essential. For if one cannot hope for growth in himself, how can he ask for perfection in others?

Out of this tangle emerged a summit pair. Don Whillans and Dougal Haston moved up the mountain from their final Base Camp rest with the goal firmly in mind. They paused for a single, but important, carry from IV to V in token support of the others' tasks of drudgery, then moved on, establishing Camp VI at about 24,000 feet half way up the rock band and fixed-roping the large, inconceivably cold, east facing couloir of ice which ran 1000 feet to the summit snowfield. This latter effort was accomplished in the most appalling blizzard conditions typical of the screaming, cold winds experienced near and on the summit ridges during the last weeks of the expedition. It bespeaks the hardness, courage, and tenacity of Dougal Haston. Refusing to budge from Camp VI until the summit was theirs, Don and Dougal started at seven a.m. on a bad day hoping to erect the Camp VII tent somewhere on the summit snowfield. With Don leading strongly all the way, they reached the top of the fixed ropes and continued up the summit snowfield unroped. No site was in sight. At ten A.M. the summit looked so close they continued for it, reaching the top at 2:30 P.M. Victory! The pair returned to Camp VI at five o'clock. Fantastic – a 2500-foot summit day without oxygen and in bad weather. This was superhuman performance. And it was our passport to head home. It brought happiness in all camps and restored a partial degree of unanimity.

On the 30th of May, as the entire team descended the mountain to Base Camp, a sérac avalanche crossed the route between Camps II and I. Ian Clough, a youthful climbing instructor from Glencoe, was killed by tons of falling ice. Ian's body was buried the following day at Base Camp. It was a tragedy which completely changed the complexion of the expedition. For the first time during the course of our adventure the bounds of mortality were transcended. For a moment our closed world expanded a bit. For the first time values began to take on their proper perspective. Those things we had supposed to be of value, and had worked for all along, were compared to values having a more eternal weight of significance. Once more, or perhaps for the first time, we were a team . . . of one mind. It was unspoken, perhaps not even understood, but it was felt. In the spirit of thanksgiving for the blessings of this life we marched out – home from Annapurna.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Central Nepal

ASCENT: Annapurna, 26,545 feet, first ascent of the South Face, May 27, 1970 (Whillans and Haston).

PERSONNEL: Chris Bonington, *leader;* Don Whillans, *deputy leader;* Martin Boysen, Mick Burke, Ian Clough, Nick Estcourt, Tom Frost, Dougal Haston, Kelvin Kent, Dave Lambert, Mike Thompson, Pasang Kami, *sirdar;* Kancha, Ang Pema, Pemba Tharkay, Mingma Tsering, Nima Tsering.