

Dhaulagiri 1973

LOUIS F. REICHARDT

Formation of the expedition

THE 1973 American Dhaulagiri Expedition's conception and initial momentum were a legacy of Boyd Everett's tragic 1969 expedition to the same peak. After the avalanche which killed Everett and six comrades, the remaining members resolved to return in four years' time to assault the peak it had been everyone's dream to climb. Jim Morrissey was elected leader before leaving Nepal and American Alpine Club sponsorship was obtained the following year for a second attempt. The new expedition's objectives were to climb Dhaulagiri I, 26,795 feet high, by two routes—the northeast spur and the southeast ridge, the latter an unclimbed route of severe and sustained difficulty. To give a maximum number of Americans opportunity to climb in Nepal, we decided to rely primarily on them, not Sherpas, for logistic support. Hence the final expedition was planned for sixteen climbers and only seven high-altitude Sherpas.

In 1971 a full complement of climbers was chosen for the new assault, and they began the crucial task of finding the funds, equipment, and food necessary for a creditable effort. The dedication of the new members—most notably Langbauer, Thompson, Harvard, and Rennie—was responsible for making the dream a reality. The new climbers also molded the expedition so that by departure it had ceased psychologically to be the descendant of the first venture.

Meanwhile, in Nepal Terry Bech recruited a high fraction of the country's outstanding Sherpa climbers. Bech and his wife Cherie also surveyed approaches to the ridges which would avoid the southeast glacier, site of the 1969 accident. Their energetic "mini-expedition", unsupported by Sherpas, reached 25,000 feet on Dhaulagiri's northeast spur in the spring of 1971, aided by oxygen bottles left by the Japanese. From this point, excellent photos of the southeast ridge were taken to aid expedition planning.

Approach to Base Camp

In early March 1973, food, equipment and climbers were finally united on the lake shore near Pokhara at the foot of the Himalayas.

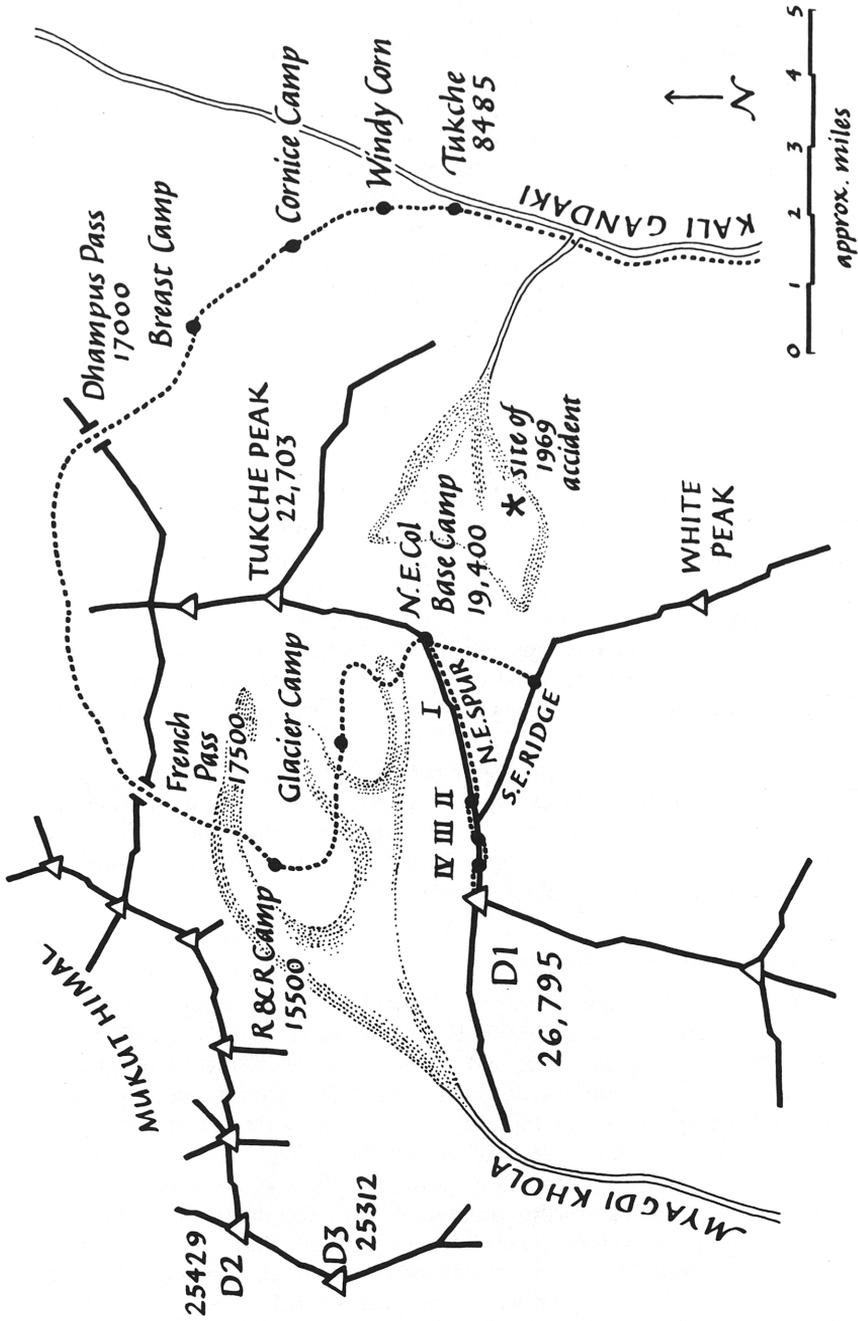
Three rainy days were spent repacking and sorting gear according to its priority and whether it was to be shipped further by porter or plane. The Bechs' reconnaissance had persuaded us to make the final approach over passes from the north, even though earlier expeditions had avoided this route in spring because of its altitude. To ferry loads over the 20 miles above 15,000 feet, which would be under deep snow, we hired 30 porters from Sherpa villages in eastern Nepal and outfitted them with boots, warm clothing, and goggles. We also arranged to have most of the equipment destined for the southeast ridge air-dropped near the mountain.

Finally, on March 8, the whole expedition—16 American climbers, 7 Sherpa climbers, 3 cooks, 30 Sherpa porters, 30 local porters, and 60 mules—began the six-day walk to Tukche, the final village along our route. For the sahibs, these days were not physically demanding, but were filled with views of an alien, yet enticing culture. Each day began with hot tea thrust into a tent in premorning darkness by a Sherpa hand. "Chai, sahib?" Hiking began early, but was never hurried and was always finished by mid-afternoon.

The trail was an ancient caravan route from India to Tibet which connects the villages of lowland Hindus, Tibetan Buddhists, and mountain tribesmen who have borrowed from each culture. First cutting across ribs of the Himalayan foot-hills on thousands of slate steps, it was almost tropical, but the trail climbed on the third day to Gorapani Pass where it was buried in snow. Descending the far side, we followed the Kali Gandaki canyon through the Himalayas, always surrounded by summits towering 20,000 feet over our heads. In the gorge, subtropical vegetation yielded to pines at Dana. A few miles further, snow descended to the valley floor and the trail led over the debris of massive avalanches. The semi-arid landscape to the north of the Himalaya was still gripped by winter.

On March 14, the expedition abandoned the main trail at Tukche and began the long approach to Base Camp. Four thousand feet above the valley floor, we camped at 12,000 feet on an exposed ridge. Winds that first night ripped the stays and broke the poles on all the tents that were pitched. It was a most unpropitious start. Nonetheless, all the gear was carried up these initial slopes during the next three days by our porters and local villagers. Only our Sherpas could go further because of snow. On March 16, we moved to 14,500 feet, establishing "Cornice Camp" on the same ridge. Four days later, Peterson, Fear, Smith and Bech left that camp and spent the next four stormy days pushing through deep drifts over Dambush Pass to French Pass to receive the airdrops expected there on March 22. Meanwhile, we continued to ferry loads through fresh snow. On March 23, we moved another step to "Cabbage Camp" at 16,000 feet.

Early March 24, Emil Wick's Pilatus Porter began airdrops at French



Pass. Although some boxes broke strewing food across the snow, recovery was high, so all the climbers were able to move to French Pass the next day. The bulk of their gear was left behind to be carried forward by Sherpa porters. The three days of airdrops at French Pass were exciting and successful. Emil Wick consistently made his drops at minimal height—8 to 15 feet—even though the altitude was 17,500 feet. John Skow, the kicker, became very adept at hitting the drop zone and also re-packed everything in burlap so that candy no longer had to be recovered in pieces from the snow. Each flight brought 15 to 18 porter loads of gear. The sequence of drops brought the expedition three weeks of food and fuel. This was dragged on sleds to “Rest and Recreation Camp” at 15,500 feet on the Mayangdhi Glacier. At this point, our route rejoined the traditional path up the Mayangdhi gorge and glacier to the northeast col.

Between March 28 and 30, Jeff Duenwald, the deputy leader, led an advance party—Lev, Roskelley, and Thompson—up the Mayangdhi Glacier to the northeast col. Their route bypassed the one dangerous glacier icefall with a traverse on the slopes of the “Eiger”, a steep rock buttress on the north flank of Dhaulagiri. Above the icefall, they entered a deep valley, flat and broad, but nevertheless exposed to ice avalanches from hanging glaciers 4000 feet above on each flank. An intermediate shelter, “Glacier Camp”, was first placed on a hummock at the valley’s head and was later moved 800 feet higher to a site protected by stable séracs, but its location always made this the least popular camp on the expedition. From “Glacier Camp”, it was a long steady climb to the northeast col at 19,300 feet.

Airdrops began at the northeast col on April 1 and were again managed professionally by Wick and Skow. During five days, we received roughly 200 porter loads of gear and supplies. The largesse included 60 days food, 25,000 feet of rope, Bluet fuel, and tents. In gratitude for his work, we invited John Skow to join us.

Attempt on the southeast ridge

The southeast ridge runs from White Peak for five miles to merge with the northeast spur at 26,000 feet. “Incredibly long and technically very difficult . . . great walls and towers of ice . . . there’s no end to it”, was Gaston Rébuffat’s description in 1950. Our expedition hoped to climb the upper half of this ridge, mostly ice, after reaching its crest from the basin in which we had pitched Base Camp. A single couloir runs through the rock buttresses guarding this flank of the ridge, forming a massive and almost vertical hourglass 2500 feet high. The angle of 50° to 65° makes this a classic alpine ice climb, but at much higher altitude. The route led across a difficult bergschrund, climbed snow and hard ice to the bulges at the waist—thin ice on rock—and continued up icy flutes to the sculpted crest.

Duenwald, acting as climbing leader, wasted no time in beginning the assault on the ridge. To ensure an early start, he had purposely included many of the strongest technical climbers in the group which opened the path to the northeast col. On April 3, Thompson and Roskelley crossed the bergschrund and climbed six rope-lengths higher, mostly on steep snow. Roskelley, Harvard, and Lyman returned the next morning, but were driven down by a storm before advancing much further. As more climbers arrived and became acclimatized, the competition for the lead became keen. Duenwald came to occupy the position of a coach trying to play the entire team. Lev and Young left camp very early April 5, reached the waist of the hourglass by climbing the steep, thin ice in its lower half—the crux of the climb—and were so elated that they failed to notice the setting sun and had to be guided back to camp in the dark by searchers from their audience. Probably, euphoria could have floated the entire expedition to the ridge-crest the following morning, but nature intervened. For five days, storms prevented anyone from venturing above the bergschrund. The time was not wasted. Under the probing eye of Drummond Rennie, who had gallantly agreed to be Base Camp Manager, the site was converted from a drop zone into a permanent camp, and the camp kits, food, and equipment were made ready to be carried to higher altitudes.

When Lyman and Thompson returned to the southeast ridge April 11, they discovered that the two-mile trudge through soft snow to the bergschrund and the many pitches of jumaring on icy ropes made the day tiring before the leading had even begun. Yet they pushed 450 feet further, first on steep ice and later on snow. While they worked, Langbauer and Fear cut steps below to ease the way for subsequent climbers. Nonetheless, Young, Harvard, Lev, and I had the same hard start the next morning. Although Del Young quickly led 300 feet higher on mixed ice and snow, I was able to get only a short distance further before a blizzard converted the face into a morass of sliding powder snow. At this point, the ice was of uneven quality, sometimes treacherous, often hard to protect with tubular ice screws, but fortunately not very difficult. The route threaded a gully amidst white flutes whose scale was impossible to determine by eye. It was an eerily beautiful climb, a seductive approach to the crest and summit, but completely exhausting to climb without steps in that thin air.

The crucial day in determining the expedition's future was April 13. Langbauer and Roskelley left early to climb the remaining distance to the crest. Duenwald led others over to cut steps but returned early to report that extensive rockfall down our couloir made step-cutting dangerous. The mountain was warming rapidly as the weather improved. Meanwhile, climbers could be seen reaching the crest of the southeast ridge for the first time, elating the entire expedition. They did not, however, seem able to move along it. Late that night, Langbauer reported

that the ridge was so narrow that when he had tried to mantle the final few feet, his hands had simply pushed into space on the far side. The crest was a finely-chiselled rib of hard ice—55° on our side, 60° on the other—which stretched for two miles before there was a hint of easier terrain. It was far narrower than we imagined in our most pessimistic moments—a rude awakening because climbing had so far gone well. Neither Roskelley nor Langbauer felt there was any possibility of the expedition covering that two miles. The climbing would be severe, the logistics even worse, and it would become a trap in bad weather. It did not seem worth braving the stonefall in the couloir to continue such a task. The final decision was deferred until more climbers had visited the crest, but everyone knew that night that one dream was shattered.

The ascent of the northeast spur

The northeast spur is more a face than a ridge. Although often steep, the broadness of climbable terrain greatly reduces the difficulty except above 26,000 feet where the crest is narrow and must be followed faithfully. In 1960, this spur was the thread which led the Swiss to the summit of Dhaulagiri after seven unsuccessful expeditions—the last 8000-meter peak to be climbed in Nepal. Then it represented a step forward in the level of alpine endeavor. For us it remained a personal challenge and an opportunity to place Americans on top of an 8000-meter peak for the first time in ten years. The hard work of the past month had created a healthy, well-acclimatized group, completely free of altitude sickness, so prospects were excellent. The attack plan, devised by Morrissey, Duenwald, and Peterson, was intended to give everyone a summit shot.

Work on the northeast spur was begun April 12 by Morrissey who led a small party that reached the future Camp I site at 21,400 feet in spite of very high winds. Two days later, the rest of the expedition began carrying the 120 loads which would reach that camp. The altitude difference and distance made full the days spent in this chore. Generally, descent had to be made in one of the snowstorms which were now daily occurrences.

On April 17, Rennie, Langbauer, Bech and Anderson dug platforms into the steep side of a snow ridge and occupied Camp I. That night in Base Camp we heard a continuous roar from the heights—the jet stream descending upon the mountain. By morning Camp I had been almost destroyed. The few tents which had escaped the wind had been broken under the weight of drifting snow. Tom Lyman moved up to supervise construction of snow caves, and rather grimly, the expedition prepared to climb the mountain like moles.

On April 19, Bech and Anderson explored the route to the next campsite at 23,400 feet. They followed the ridge to 22,300 feet and then moved onto the left face to avoid crevasses and rock cliffs. Their

route rejoined the crest at a rocky platform perched above these cliffs—a natural citadel and the only feasible location for Camp II. Most of this icy stretch was fixed with rope during the next two days. Even so, the altitude, distance, and wind were to make this the most demanding carry on the mountain, requiring eight hours on the average for a round trip. The physiological difference between the two camps was tremendous. Although the first 300-foot rope-lengths required only ten to fifteen minutes apiece to ascend, each of the upper two needed at least 30 minutes.

Anderson, Bech, and I pitched Camp II on April 24 in miserable circumstances. Arriving at the site in the middle of a blizzard, we were unable to erect the first two tents we tried. Finally, the third was raised on a ledge which was far too small for it, and we collapsed inside so tired that we went to sleep without even making water. Roskelley, Peterson, Lev, and two Sherpas joined us during the next two days. The site was laced with fixed ropes to permit us to emerge from our tents without risking a fall to the Mayangdhi Glacier, 6000 feet below, but it remained an uncomfortable and exposed spot where we were not able to dig snow caves.

While most members were making the arduous carries to camps I and II, Bech, Roskelley and I roped the steep snow face above our tents, reaching a broad snow crest at 24,200 feet on April 26. The next afternoon, we followed this crest for six pitches to a comfortable ledge immediately below a 50-foot rock band. This ledge was to become the site of our Camp III.

At this point, wind and altitude began seriously to dent our efficiency. One of our strongest men, Anderson, had his hands frost bitten during our stormy descent from the Camp III site. No-one attempted to move on April 28 because of the 80 mph gusts. Since it was clear and calm the next morning, everyone made an important carry to Camp III at 24,500 feet. Before descending, we levelled the site and pitched three tents to save the energy of those occupying it later. This exhausting work, finished in yet another blizzard, persuaded Peterson, Anderson and Lev to descend below Camp II for a rest. They left us in excellent position to reach the summit. Bech, Roskelley, Nawang Samden, and I occupied Camp III on May 1. Sirdar (Sherpa leader) for the French Makalu expedition and Deputy Sirdar with us, Nawang Samden was one of our most experienced Sherpas. We were joined the next morning by two more excellent Sherpas—Pasang Tenzing, a Sirdar who had climbed ever since assaulting Dhaulagiri with the Argentines in 1954, and Nawang Tenzing, nicknamed "Golden Bear" because of his good humor and great strength. Andy Harvard, Todd Thompson, and Jeff Duenwald replaced them at Camp II.

That same day, we explored in the wind possible routes above the rock band. The best was not found until late afternoon when we reached snow couloirs which bypassed the steep, rocky ridge crest. That evening,

the gusts were replaced by fog and heavy snowfall, which persisted for twenty-four hours. The morning after was perfectly clear, but extremely windy. Gusts reaching 200 mph pinned us in our tents for 60 hours. This same gale blew apart Camp II, which was much more exposed, forcing its evacuation.

A break in the weather during the afternoon of May 6 permitted Roskelley and Nawang Samden to follow the couloirs to a good site for Camp IV at 25,500 feet. The other Sherpas and I descended to the remains of Camp II to collect rope and a "high-altitude food kit", which had been assembled in Camp I to meet our radioed tastes and somehow carried to Camp II in the wind. The gale resumed late in the afternoon, making it very difficult to return to Camp III, and continued for 80 hours without respite. During this time, no-one moved between camps on the mountain. The altitude, however, made us lethargic enough for time to pass quickly. The standard menus developed an awful taste, but otherwise we were comfortable and optimistic. The camp itself began to disintegrate on May 9 when the poles on two tents snapped in a gust. Also prolonged exposure to altitude converted Terry Bech's cough into a serious ear infection, forcing him to descend. This was a terrible blow to us because he had been a pillar of strength from the beginning.

The wind finally stopped on May 10, allowing us all to carry heavy packs to Camp IV. Roskelley, Nawang Samden, and I remained there, while both Tenzings hastily descended to beat an impending blizzard. Snow and wind kept us inside the next day, but the delicacies in the special food bag more than compensated psychologically for the increased altitude.

Fortunately, May 12 dawned warm and clear. Steep slopes led us to a false summit. Beyond, a long ridge climbed a thousand vertical feet to the peak. Our situation on this ridge was spectacular at first. We placed each foot right on the narrow snow crest which fell steeply for thousands of feet on each side. Beyond a second false summit, we escaped the wind by traversing onto the north face, now quite gentle. Eventually, we were forced back to the crest to climb a final series of craggy gendarmes. This ridge was just rocky enough to be enjoyable. At one point, we straddled it *à cheval* and hitched towards our goal. Later, we had to bypass a large boulder with a tricky traverse across the 15,000-foot-high South Face, climbing on steep, dessicated snow of dubious quality. Beyond lay a final snow ridge, a gravel path which bypassed the last false peak, and the summit itself—a non-descript platform of sedimentary rock, 26,795 feet high. The cold and windy hour spent on the summit, taking the required pictures, passed like a slow-motion film. The lack of oxygen was not painful, but dulled our senses too far to appreciate fully the view. When we descended to Camp IV, my sense of balance was largely lost and Roskelley's feet were frozen.

We had been high without oxygen far too long—20 days above 23,400 feet—and were very glad to descend to our friends the next morning.

Postscript

In Base Camp, Roskelley's frozen feet were thawed by the expedition doctors. For the next three days, he was carried on the backs of Sherpa porters down the glacier and across the two passes to Tukche. The strength of these porters could not have been matched by any sahib. Their efforts were simply fantastic. Surprisingly, there was a plane on the runway at Jomson, which is very near to Tukche. It had brought the Finance Minister of Nepal to attend the opening of the first bank in this district. In a striking humanitarian gesture, the minister and his deputy agreed to walk the 70 miles to Pokhara so that Roskelley and Duenwald could fly out in the plane. Consequently, they were spared the agonizing trail journey and were able to fly to the States immediately where advanced medical technology saved John's toes.

Meanwhile, another assault was being made along the northeast spur. Camp II was reoccupied on May 12 by Fear, Lev, Young, and Smith. After offering to escort me down, Ron Fear moved to Camp III on the 13th, where he was joined by the others two days later. On May 16, Fear, Lev, Pasang Tenzing and Nawang Tenzing moved up to Camp IV. The strength of Nawang Tenzing was unreal. Although it was his fifteenth day without oxygen at Camp III, he had first descended to Camp II to fetch needed supplies.

Unfortunately, the weather was too windy for a summit assault the next morning. It was so frigid at Camp IV that the Sherpas had to descend because of cold feet. Conditions deteriorated throughout that day, and four feet of snow fell during the night on every camp on the mountain. Continuing a second day, the heavy snowfall transformed the retreat route down the Mayangdhi Glacier into a suicidal journey. The slopes under the Eiger were constantly crossed by major snow and ice slides. The threat of the looming monsoon made it seem wise to evacuate the mountain at the next opportunity. The climbers in the high camps were called back to Base. Base Camp itself was evacuated on May 23. Ron Fear, Peter Lev, Lowell Smith and Del Young would almost certainly have reached the top if they had not been asked to descend, as there were several possible summit days between May 21 and 26.

We carried away with us a strong sense of collective, not individual achievement and the memory of a happy quest in which rapport between climbers and Sherpas was excellent. For this we were indebted to Jim Morrissey, whose leadership did much to maintain the cohesion and morale of the group, and to Sonam Girmi, the Sirdar, who succeeded in implanting our enthusiasm among the Sherpa climbers and Sherpa porters. Probably, no expedition has ever had more willing and cheerful supporters.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Central Nepalese Himalaya

ASCENT: Dhaulagiri, 26,795 feet, Third Ascent via Northeast ridge, May 12, 1973 (Roskelley, Reichardt, Nawang Samden).

PERSONNEL: James Morrissey, M.D., leader; Jeffrey Duenwald, D.V.M., deputy leader; Drummond Rennie, M.D., scientific coordinator; Craig Anderson, Terry Bech, Ronald Fear, Andrew Harvard, Del Langbauer, Peter Lev, Thomas Lyman, Jr., David Peterson, M.D., Louis Reichardt, John Roskelley, John Skow, Lowell Smith, Todd Thompson, Del Young. High-Altitude Sherpas: Sonam Girmi, sirdar; Nawang Samden, deputy sirdar; Pasang Tenzing, Ang Dawa, Gyaltzen, Sonam Tsering, Nawang Tenzing.

