

American Women's Himalayan Expedition, Annapurna I

VERA KOMARKOVA

CLIMBING ANNAPURNA sounds reasonable, but why all women?" people ask. "Few American women ever get a chance to climb that high, to lead, or even to participate in a major expedition," Arlene Blum would say. "No American woman has ever climbed to 8000 meters, and only seven women from any country have ever climbed that high. We hope this climb will give a number of women sufficient experience so that they can be invited on mixed expeditions, or organize their own."

A year was spent raising the \$80,000 we would need for the climb; in this effort we were aided by many volunteers. In the beginning we ordered a few dozen T-shirts with a slogan "A Woman's Place is on Top . . . Annapurna" . . . about \$60,000 worth of shirts were sold. Our climb was sponsored by the American Alpine Club and supported by the National Geographic Society and Johnson & Johnson, the makers of OB tampons (the unexpected advantage of an all-women team).

The use of oxygen and a relatively small number (six) of Sherpas were planned to increase both safety and probability of a successful climb. In particular, the carrying capacity provided by Sherpas enables an expedition to use "the relatively short and unreliable period of transition between monsoonal snow storms and high-altitude gales" * in the post-monsoon season with maximum efficiency.

Selection of the ten team members was based on their high-altitude experiences and potential ability to work well together. Women interested in joining were invited to participate in one of the many practice climbs during the year prior to the expedition. Virtually all the women on the team had reached 20,000 feet. Alison Chadwick-Onyszkiewicz, the sole British climber, had made, without oxygen, the first ascent of Gasherbrum III (26,090 feet) in the Karakorum. We hoped to hire

* Reiter, E.R. and Heuberger, H. 1960. "A synoptic example of the retreat of the Indian summer monsoon." *Geografiska Annaler*, 42(1): 17-35.

PLATE 21

Photo by Arlene Blum

ANNAPURNA I from Camp I.



Sherpanis (Sherpa women) as two of our five high-altitude porters. But when we got to Kathmandu, we learned that the two local women hired were not strong load carriers but had been chosen to help us with laundry and camp tasks; we were not able to use them on the climb.

Our 12-day, 80-mile, rainy, and leach-infested trek started out from Pokhara on August 15. In Pokhara we hired 200-odd porters to carry 66-pound loads. The critical part of the trek lies beyond the last village of Chhoya and was pioneered by the French in 1950; fortunately, the majority of our porters did not desert us in Chhoya, as is often the case.

The narrow, slippery trail traverses the west slopes of the Nilgiri group, covered with lush alpine meadows and sheep pastures. A steep descent leads into the Miristi Khola valley; we crossed the river on a bridge constructed by an advance party.

The Base Camp, which we reached on August 26, was located at 14,300 feet on a gravelly, sparsely vegetated lateral moraine, which disappears into the broken chaos of the North Annapurna Glacier in the deep gorge below. Our sardar Lobsang Tsering took pride in the fact that all our loads arrived intact. However, Joan Firey came down with pleurisy and pneumonia and four weeks elapsed before she was able to climb.

On August 28, Liz Klobusicky-Mailänder, Alison, and Lakpa Norbu (who took part in the 1977 Dutch expedition) established Camp I at 16,500 feet on surface moraine debris on the north side of the main glacier. The trail followed the grassy shoulder above Base Camp, descended onto the glacier surface, and ascended the steep rocky rib on the north side of the main icefall.

Camp I offered good views of the mountain. The French route and some other alternatives on the north face were ruled out as too dangerous. The two remaining possibilities included the Dutch Rib, climbed by the Dutch in the fall 1977 (*A.A.J.*, 1978, pages 594-595) and considered relatively safe, and a new route, in part utilizing the line climbed by the Spanish en route to the east peak of Annapurna I in 1974 (*A.A.J.*, 1975, pages 201-202). The final decision was postponed until we could observe the conditions on the mountain for some time.

We started carrying loads to Camp I, a welcome change after days of repacking and organizing. Vera Watson, Piro Kramar, Annie Whitehouse, Ang Pemba, and Lakpa Norbu almost reached the Dutch Camp II site on September 2; they were unable to cross the last large crevasse because they had used their climbing rope to fix an earlier section. Their route traversed the main glacier, ascended a rocky nunatak for a thousand feet, and then angled up the next glacier step. Arlene had placed the greatest importance on the location of Camp II; several earlier expeditions had placed Camp II on the higher glacier plateau, where it was exposed to avalanches from the notorious "Sickle" of the French route. The camp

and lives were lost as a consequence. Arlene, Irene Miller, Lobsang, Lakpa Norbu, and I went up the next day to look around the higher glacier plateau above the Dutch Camp II. General consensus was to establish Camp II at 18,500 feet at the Dutch site, where it would be somewhat out of the way of avalanches and protected by the large crevasses right above it.

We also had to decide on the route. The new-Spanish route combination appeared easier; on the other hand, it was longer and a dangerous couloir would have to be bypassed on the approach. Deep snow could accumulate on the less steep parts, and several sérac sections further endangered the climb. The Dutch Rib, although steeper and technically more difficult, appeared more direct and considerably safer apart from its approach, which was threatened by avalanches from both sides. Arlene strongly favored the Dutch Rib, while Lobsang pushed the Spanish route. The Dutch Rib won easily after we watched several avalanches sweep the Spanish route.

According to the Sherpas, it would not have been safe to occupy Camp II before the mountain was opened at a prayer-flag raising ceremony. Since this August was an inauspicious month in the Tibetan calendar for making flags, we had to wait until the flags were made in Kathmandu in September and carried to Base Camp. Meanwhile, members and Sherpas carried 30 to 40-pound loads up to Camps I and II day after day, and boredom set in. Lengthy discussions involved such issues as whether we should treat the Sherpas as partners and let them share leading or use them as porters at low altitudes (we decided to include Sherpas in lead climbing), competitiveness, democratic decision-making, use of oxygen, and number of climbers on climbing teams. We all agreed on the summit policy: that anybody capable of climbing the summit would get a chance, and Arlene made the logistics plans accordingly.

On the auspicious day of September 12, we all assembled at Base Camp for the flag-raising ceremony. It was cloudy, with swirling mist and occasional light drizzle. During the chanting, offerings, raising of flags and flowery speeches, Annapurna's summit appeared above us in a window among the clouds.

Now we can begin the steep climbing above Camp II. Ice climbers Liz and Alison on one team and Piro and I on the other are to take turns climbing each day with Chewang Rinzing and Lakpa in support. We draw straws: Piro and I win and are to start climbing September 17. The trail to the foot of the rib is easy, but it crosses several avalanche paths. The start of the Dutch route, pointed out by Lakpa, is a steep icy runnel. Piro proposes a higher starting point and leads 60° ice at the beginning of the pitch. Chewang and I also lead a pitch; we get more than halfway up the face.



PLATE 22

Photo by Christy Tews

**Halfway up the side of the Dutch Rib
at the foot of the rappel which avoids
two traverses, Annapurna.**

It snows heavily during the next day, and on September 19 we are awakened by chunks of ice and avalanche winds thrashing the tent. It seems that avalanches are coming down all around us, and we retreat to Camp I and Base Camp.

This must be a bad year for avalanches, since even Base Camp is not a safe place. Possibly for the first time in memory, a slow avalanche of heavy snow and rubble was creeping down the mountain towards the Base Camp kitchen. According to several observers, the avalanche was stopped in its tracks when our pious cook Passang Temba ran up towards it, praying and throwing lama-blessed rice in its direction. That accomplished, Passang grabbed all available buckets and filled them with water from the camp creek which dried up minutes later.

On September 21 we start digging out Camp II. Annie and I continue to work on the route along with Ang Pemba and Mingma; we are determined to reach the top of the rib face. Each of us leads a pitch; Annie and Ang Pemba have a lead each of an airy ice traverse, the scene of much suffering under loads later on. At 4:30 P.M., we are on the ridge above the face. At this spot, we have the best perspective to look at the north face from up close; the view commands the whole scene down to Camp I. The ridge slopes steeply above us and both its sides fall precipitously into avalanche gullies on either side of the rib.

Vera Watson and I establish a provisional Camp IIIA on the crest of the rib on September 23. Weather has been good for several days now, and sérac avalanches break off the hanging glaciers at frequent intervals. An exceptional sunset bathes the whole mountain in red. Just as we arrive back at Camp II, the thick cloud of a large avalanche covers the camp and everybody scrambles for safety. The main mass of the avalanche stops above us.

The following day our film crew reaches Camp II for the first time. Neither Dyanna Taylor nor Marie Ashton has climbed before; now, instructed by our hard working Base-Camp manager Christy Tews, who doubles as a film Sherpa, they both stay overnight at Camp II and work at 19,000 feet. Christy has recently moved to Camp I to manage the flow of supplies up to Camp II, leaving Base Camp in care of our efficient liaison officer Damber Singh Gurung. Meanwhile, sardar Lobsang has an acute attack of high blood pressure and retires to Base Camp.

Margi Rusmore and Liz move to Camp IIIA on September 24 to push the route along the ridge. As I am carrying a load to Camp IIIA, an ice avalanche comes in the direction of Alison and Vera Watson, who are approaching the foot of the face. They run downslope and up the opposite avalanche slope and get out of the way. When I arrive at IIIA, Liz leads a spectacular ice pitch right above the camp; she, Margi, Ang Pemba and Mingma lead deep snow pitches higher up. Annie and I

PLATE 23

Photos by Arlene Blum

**At the top of the steep snow slope on
the side of the Dutch Rib on
ANNAPURNA.**

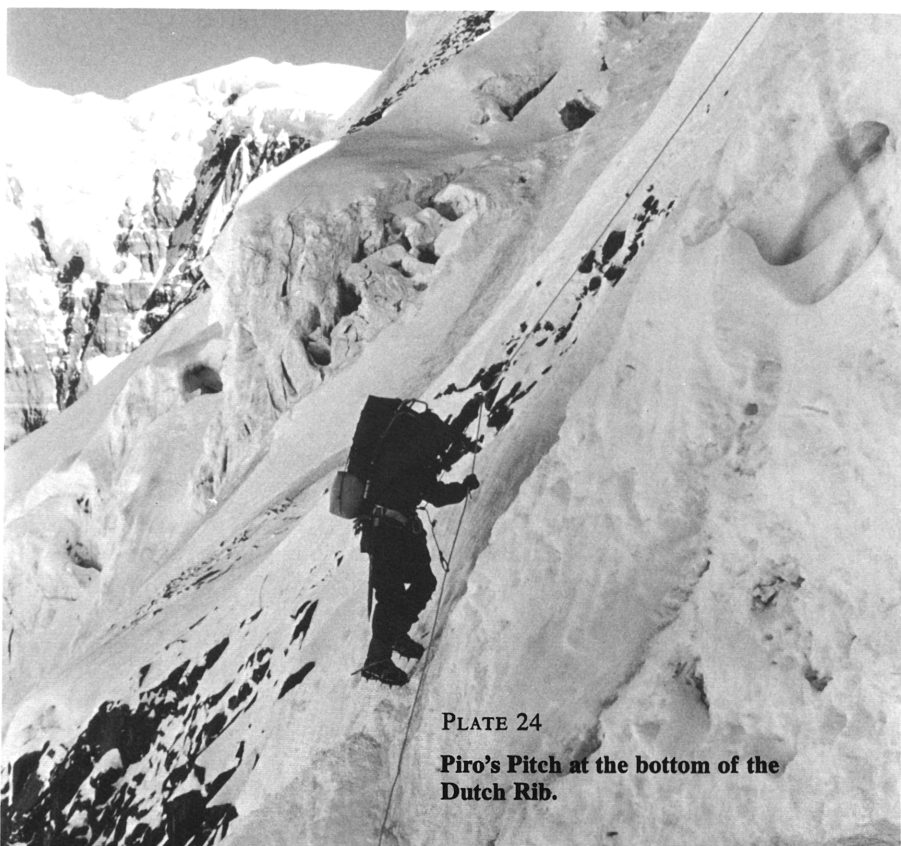
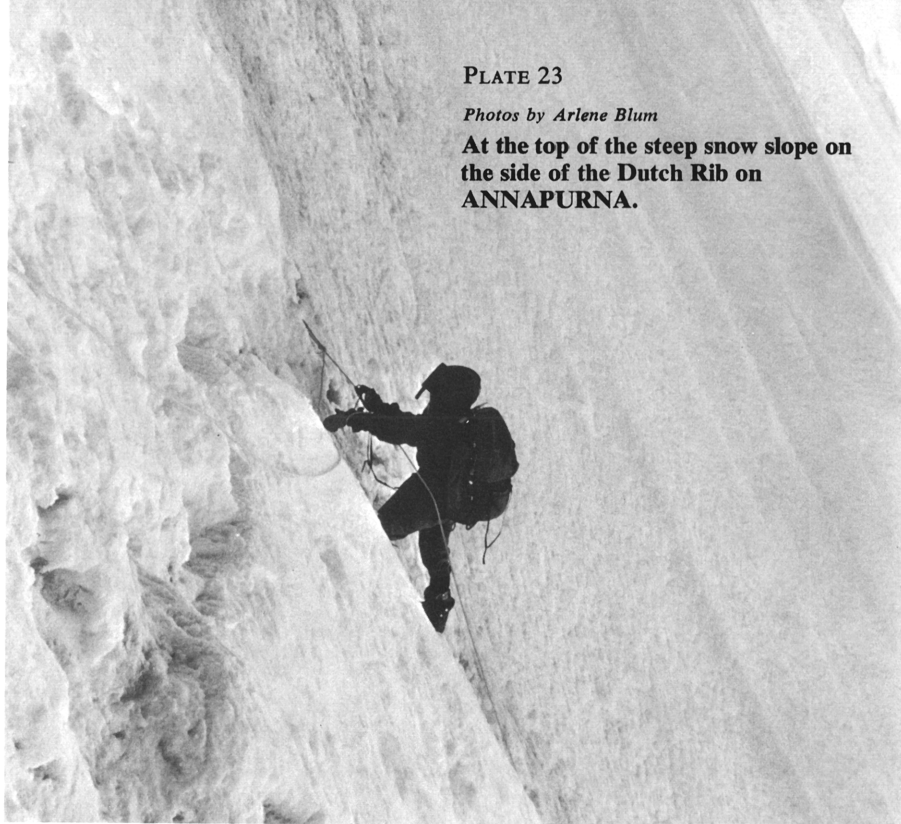


PLATE 24

**Piro's Pitch at the bottom of the
Dutch Rib.**

try to improve some of the face anchors on the way back. We still have a couple of anchors to do when the whole face cracks deep inside. In an instant, we are both off the face.

We find out what that cracking sound meant the next morning, September 26. Arlene and I start up with loads for IIIA. This time, the two of us and two Sherpas have to run when an avalanche comes down. When we get to the cache at the base of the face where we usually leave our crampons, we are stunned. The whole place is transformed: the snow bridge, the cache, and the lip of the bergschrund have disappeared and broken ice blocks form the new surface. Lower down, a new bergschrund opening gapes open. It was a good idea to start climbing higher up; the Dutch route is scoured clean by the falling ice while our ropes are still in place. Arlene and I search for the things from the cache, but only a few light items float on the surface: green karrimat, helmet, wands. We all lost our crampons, but fortunately there are many spare crampons at Base Camp.

As soon as we get to Camp II, a huge avalanche comes off in the valley behind the east peak. The cloud is so big that it covers the whole width of the North Annapurna Glacier. Soon it is obvious that it is going to hit Camp I and the film crew, which is filming on the glacier along with Joan, Christy, and several special porters. We are immensely relieved when the cloud moves on and we can pick out movement on the glacier; the mass of ice and snow stopped about a quarter of a mile above them after a two-mile run. Christy comes over on the radio: nobody was hurt, although Dyanna and her camera were blown about 20 feet into a shallow crevasse. Camp I was flattened, as were several tents in Base Camp.

After today, our presumption about a relatively safe route on the north face seems ridiculous. Some members have doubts about continuing the climb, but we decide to go on.

On September 27, Alison, Liz, Chewang, and Lakpa reach Camp III at 21,000 feet after four days of work on the treacherous narrow ridge. Our rejoicing soon ends when the following noon, all Sherpas come down from a carry to Camp III furious. It seems that they did not find some of their equipment that was sent up and that they do not like the food and equipment. They pack and leave for Kathmandu.

We discuss the situation; all members are ready to climb the mountain without Sherpas. Still, it would take longer and be less safe. Arlene decides to go down to Base Camp to talk to the Sherpas and I accompany her. Arlene gets a list of demands; the price is 1293 rupees per Sherpa, for equipment that we had supposedly failed to give them. We pay. The Sherpas promise to do their best and not rest before the mountain is climbed.

Meanwhile, another snowstorm drives the occupants of Camp II down to Camp I again, leaving Piro and Irene, waiting to lead on the ridge, isolated in the little Camp IIIA.

On my way up after the strike, I meet Liz on her way down for good. She has to get back to her teaching job in Germany; we hug and say goodbye. Camp II is still being repitched when I get there. Before anybody can prevent them, Ang Pemba and Mingma move to Camp III to lead the route above. Irene and Piro are nettled, having waited five days at IIIA to do this leading and having broken trail to Camp III. As it happens, Ang Pemba gets altitude sick and he and Mingma have to come down. Piro and Irene do several steep ice pitches, including an ice chimney led by Irene, and top out on a lower-angle snow slope threatened by avalanches.

Annie, Irene and I reach a high point 600 feet above Camp III, and then Chewang and Mingma come up to help Annie and me to work on the route to Camp IV. On October 7, the terrain consists of a series of transverse steep ice bands, connected by slopes with deep snow. We want to place Camp IV at least at 23,000 feet, well above the site of the Dutch Camp IV. Next day, October 8, Mingma leads a 70° ice pitch, avoiding the frayed red Dutch rope. Several easier pitches lead to a sheltered edge of a crevasse below the last large ice band on the face. We are at 23,000 feet, and it is late afternoon again. We have run out of both fixed rope and anchors. We deposit our rather heavy loads of equipment and food, which we took up in a mistaken belief that we would not have to go very far, and start the rappel down on one of our climbing ropes attached to Annie's ice axe.

Our high-altitude Base-Camp manager Christy and Joan bring loads from Camp II, which is an altitude record for both of them. Joan has recovered very successfully from her illness.

Arlene names the tentative summit teams. Piro, Irene and I are on the first team, and Alison, Vera Watson, Annie, and Margi on the second team. Margi volunteers to establish Camp V with the Sherpas. It is very windy and the tents at Camp III seem in danger of being blown all the way to Camp II.

The first summit team, supported by Lakpa, moves to Camp IV on the 13th. It is a windy, cold day again. We all have heavy packs. Arlene comes part way along to see us off. I arrive at Camp IV around four P.M., and Margi, Chewang, and I pitch two small Dunlop tents. Irene arrives very late, because she carries fifteen additional pounds of movie and camera gear. The same day Chewang and Mingma establish Camp V; Margi's foot freezes and she has to turn back. She cannot risk further frostbite and goes down the next day. The only radio stops functioning.

Lobsang, Ang Pemba, and Wangel are sick at lower camps now. In comparison, the members have very few altitude problems. Perhaps

Diamox, which some of us are taking daily, helps, as well as the gradual pace of the climb.

On October 14, we get a late start after spending much of the morning packing and discussing logistics. Chewang and Mingma will climb with the first summit team on the summit day to increase safety and chance of success. After his carry, Lakpa cannot return to Camp IV alone; there are no fixed ropes between IV and V except for the short ice cliff right above Camp IV, and climbing involves two up to 50° steep ice sections.

Carrying heavy loads, Piro, Irene, and I get to camp almost at dark, after belaying the two ice sections. The Sherpas have already pitched one tent and are making coffee. Piro, Chewang and I pitch the other tent. The camp is at about 24,000 feet.

It is almost ten P.M. when Irene, Piro, and I settle down to sleep. We cannot attach three oxygen masks to one oxygen bottle, so we take turns, using only two. We start getting up at three, eat breakfast in the larger Sherpa tent and start putting on harnesses and crampons around six A.M.

"I am not coming along," Piro curses, discovering a white, frostbitten right index finger; she was putting on her crampons and did not notice a hole in her liner glove. She rushes back into the tent to start thawing it out; as an eye surgeon, she values her finger more than the summit.

Irene, Mingma, Chewang, and I rope up and start climbing shortly before seven A.M. We are together with Sherpas all on one rope for the first time. Mingma starts to lead.

The terrain continues to be steep and icy for only a few hundred feet. Then the angle lessens and ice disappears. In some places the snow allows easy cramponing; in others, we break through the crust into powdery snow underneath. It is a perfect day with cloudless skies and no wind. Despite the sunshine, it is very cold. It is windy up on the summit, which is adorned by a small plume of snow. The winter gales, accompanied by high-level cirrus clouds, have already started.

Our oxygen cylinders last only six hours at a flow of 2.5 liters per minute, so we delay their use as long as possible. We start to use oxygen when our pace slows down considerably after about three-and-a-half hours. The Sherpas do not use oxygen.

We keep climbing steadily and do not stop to rest. Near the saddle between the middle and main peaks we slow down again. Snow is almost thigh-deep, and Chewang, who is leading now in front of me, sits down for a second and proclaims: "Maybe no success!" But when I tell him that I am going to break trail now, he jumps up and almost runs for a few steps. He also refuses to use my oxygen.

As we continue up, the well known features, always present above us, change their familiar shape and sink below the horizon. At last,



PLATE 25

Photo by Vera Komarkova

**Chewang Rinji preparing flags for the
summit of ANNAPURNA.**

the "Sickle" disappears to our right, as do the middle and east peaks to our left. The snow is shallower again on the summit pyramid. We avoid the steep terrain by climbing diagonally from the area below the saddle and angling towards the windy summit ridge. We scramble over a couple of rockbands and join the ridge only after a long traverse on unconsolidated snow. For at least an hour we keep climbing over and around a succession of cornices and bumps in the summit ridge. "Maybe summit?" Chewang asks several times over.

At 3:30 P.M. we arrive at the highest snow cone, which bears a resemblance to the summit pictured in Bonington's book, *Annapurna, South Face*. Once we stop, the cold wind is piercing. We take pictures with flags. White-capped massifs of the very few higher mountains rise from a sea of brown, red and blue hues of the lower mountains, which merge with the deep blue of the sky to the north on the Tibetan Plateau. Only the pyramid-shaped Dhaulagiri I, close to us across the Kali Gandaki valley, is recognizable. Annapurna's steep south face, climbed by the British, briefly emerges from the turbulent clouds.

We head down after a few minutes; it is cold, and we have a long way to go. An hour later we stop for the first time long enough to swallow some sweets.

I do not realize that my oxygen is running out. I struggle on for some time and finally it dawns on me that I am getting anoxic. When I am taking the oxygen bottle out, I let the pack slip out of my hand. Luckily, it falls only a couple of feet. I wait for the slope to steepen again. It is dark, but a full moon rises behind the north ridge of the middle peak. Two red flares appear below. We are puzzled. Later we are told that even though the radio was not working, people at Camp I had seen us reach the top and the flares were announcing our success to Margi and Annie in Camp III. We reach Camp V shortly after seven P.M. Piro and Lakpa await us somewhat worried. Lakpa has a soup ready.

On the 16th, the Sherpas descend directly to Camp II. We cook and try to leave the camp in order. We start out around noon and belay the steep parts. Irene is tired and her crampons keep falling off. We arrive at Camp IV too late to go down to Camp III and have to share the Camp with the second team: Alison, Vera Watson, and Wangel in support. There are six of us but only three sleeping bags; we left ours at Camp V. Five of us members are crammed into the Oval Intention. Vera and Alison are in good, determined spirits and we discuss their plans. Wangel is ill, and we offer to wait at Camp III in support until they come down from their summit attempt. In case it is windy they will just do a down carry from Camp V. Otherwise they may try to follow our tracks to the main summit or attempt the so far unclimbed

middle peak, either by its north or west ridge. Though we are warm enough, the night is crowded and uncomfortable.

On the 17th we all get a relatively late start. Alison and Vera head up, Wangel, Irene, and Piro down. I stay behind for a couple of hours to finish taking down our tent and to replace Annie's ice axe with a picket. We leave one small Dunlop standing.

At Camp III we wait for word of Vera and Alison. They were last seen by the film crew a few hundred feet below Camp V just before dark. There has been no contact with them since they left yesterday and we are worried, hoping that their silence is due to a broken radio. Irene goes down the next morning. At Camp II Arlene is really worried and starts organizing a search party. No movement has been seen at Camp V for the whole day. Still, it was windy, and possibly they have not left the tents. The Sherpas are tired and do not want to go back up, but Arlene persuades Mingma and Lakpa to go. They will climb directly from Camp II to Camp V; no member can do this. The Sherpas pass Camp III in late morning on the 20th and we anxiously wait to hear from them. At about two P.M., the worst possible news comes over the radio: Mingma and Lakpa have seen Alison's body near Camp IV.

We cannot absorb the tragedy. Alison and Vera never reached Camp V on the 17th. Probably, they slipped on ice near where they were seen last, fell for about 1,200 feet, and were stopped by Vera's body falling into a crevasse. Alison's body rested on an icy slope east of and slightly lower than Camp IV. A tight rope led from her into the adjacent crevasse. The Sherpas reported that Vera and Alison must have died during the fall, as they did not appear to have made a move toward each other. The Sherpas could not get close to them because they did not have a climbing rope.

Arlene decides that Piro and I should go up tomorrow, make an accident report, and try to put Alison's body into the crevasse. We start out very early in the morning, greatly appreciating that Mingma and Lakpa offered to wait at Camp III until we come back. It is very cold and windy. After a couple of pitches, Piro's frostbitten finger is hurting too much and we decide to turn back to prevent further damage.

We pack up the camp, leaving some ropes and food. All of us have problems going down the narrow ridge with heavy packs, and Piro and I run again from an avalanche below the face.

Down at Base Camp we chip Vera and Alison's names into the memorial stone to those who have died on Annapurna.

We have established a memorial fund in their memory and plan to have a summer meet for women climbers and to give grants to women participating in expeditions and exchange programs. Vera and Alison really cared about women having the opportunity to climb; this memorial should help keep women reaching the top.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Annapurna Himal, Nepal.

ASCENT: Fifth ascent of Annapurna I, 26,545 feet, via the Dutch Rib route, October 15, 1978 (Komarkova, Miller, Chewang Rinzing Sherpa, Mingma Tsering Sherpa).

PERSONNEL: Arlene Blum, *leader*; Irene Miller, *deputy leader*; Alison Chadwick-Onyszkiewicz, Joan Firey, Liz Klobusicky-Mailänder, Vera Komarkova, Piro Kramar, M.D., Margi Rusmore, Vera Watson, Annie Whitehouse. Film crew: Dyanna Taylor, *camera*; Marie Ashton, *sound*. *Base-Camp* manager: Christy Tews. *High-altitude Sherpas*: Lobsang Tsering, *sadar*; Ang Pemba, Chewang Rinzing, Lakpa Norbu, Mingma Tsering, Wangel.

