

# Ama Dablam's South Ridge Climbing and Filming

TOM FROST

NATURALLY WE AIMED for a perfect trip. Our aspirations included climbing a perfectly beautiful mountain by a classic route, producing a super film, and participating with the best of friends. In the beginning Roger Brown had fearlessly suggested the idea of filming a Himalayan climb and seemed confident that television financing could be obtained if we came up with a combination of the right mountain and the right personnel. However, living in the real world as we were, the undertaking of such an unlikely project inspired in me less than complete optimism and urgency. The perfect mountain was not even on the permitted list.

Nevertheless, Al Read recommended applying straight away. This was eventually accomplished, listing as members a choice, compact team of eight; and as the expedition objective, first to produce a good quality mountaineering film, and only second would be the climbing itself.

A year and a half later Al advised us that Ama Dablam might appear on the impending new list of permitted peaks, and if so we would be first in line. It was, and we were. Kowabunga! Now it was Roger's turn to secure financing and make the film project a reality. In fleeting fashion this was accomplished another year later, about forty-five days prior to our previously scheduled departure.

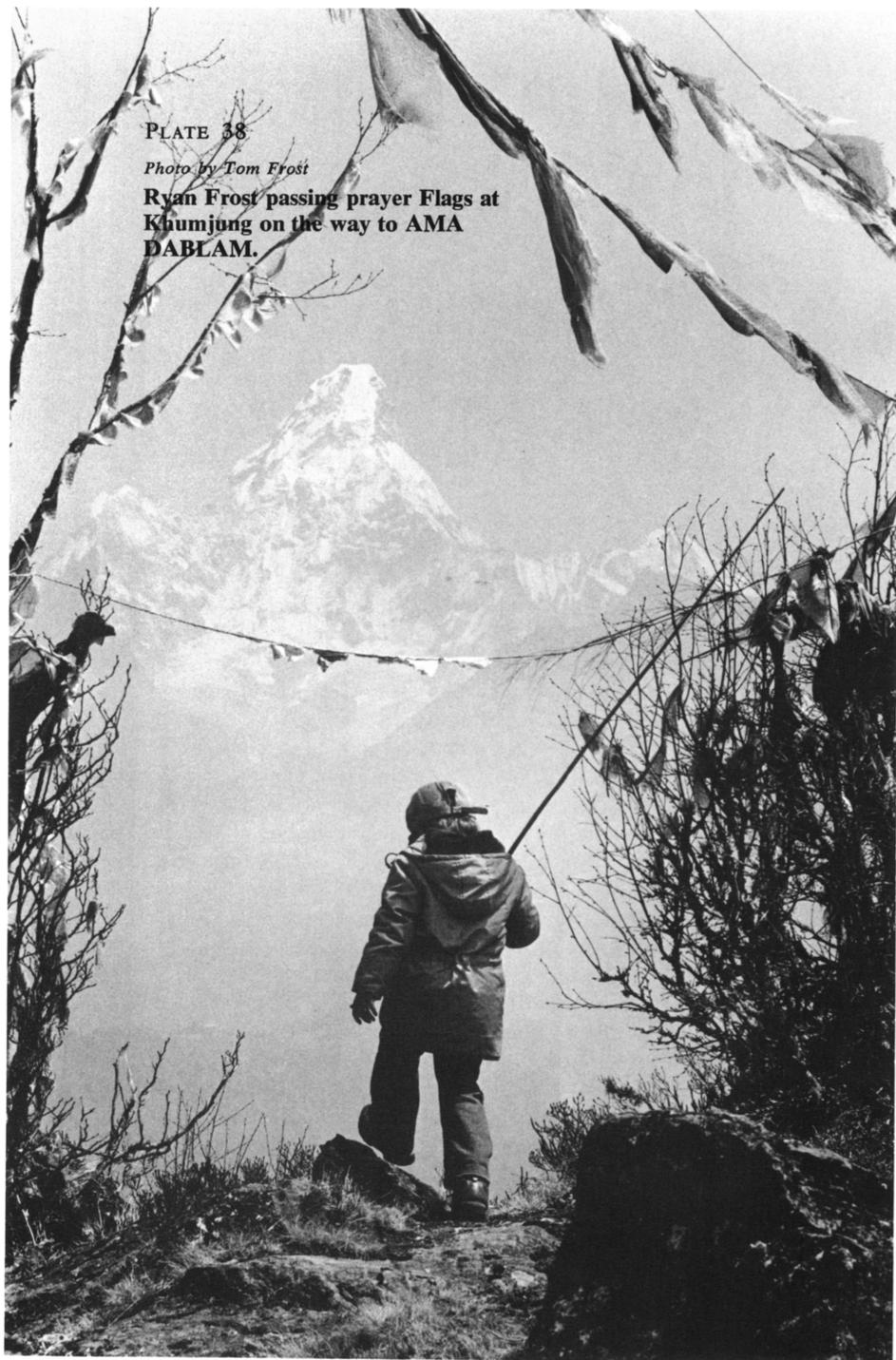
Financial commitment from John Wilcox and ABC Sports was followed by a frenzy of preparations and additional requirements to be met which included expanding both climbing and film crews. Celebrities and Englishmen were added to the climbing team. Rodney Korich, miracle worker, assembled the necessary food and equipment, transported it and us to Kathmandu, then amazingly to Lukla on schedule. Ama Dablam '79 was becoming a reality. Our fearless leader even exclaimed, "That we have arrived where we are at this time is proof that miracles still exist." They do.

It is satisfying to look back in life and see that an important decision was occasionally made right. For me that decision was to include my

PLATE 38

*Photo by Tom Frost*

**Ryan Frost passing prayer flags at  
Khumjung on the way to AMA  
DABLAM.**



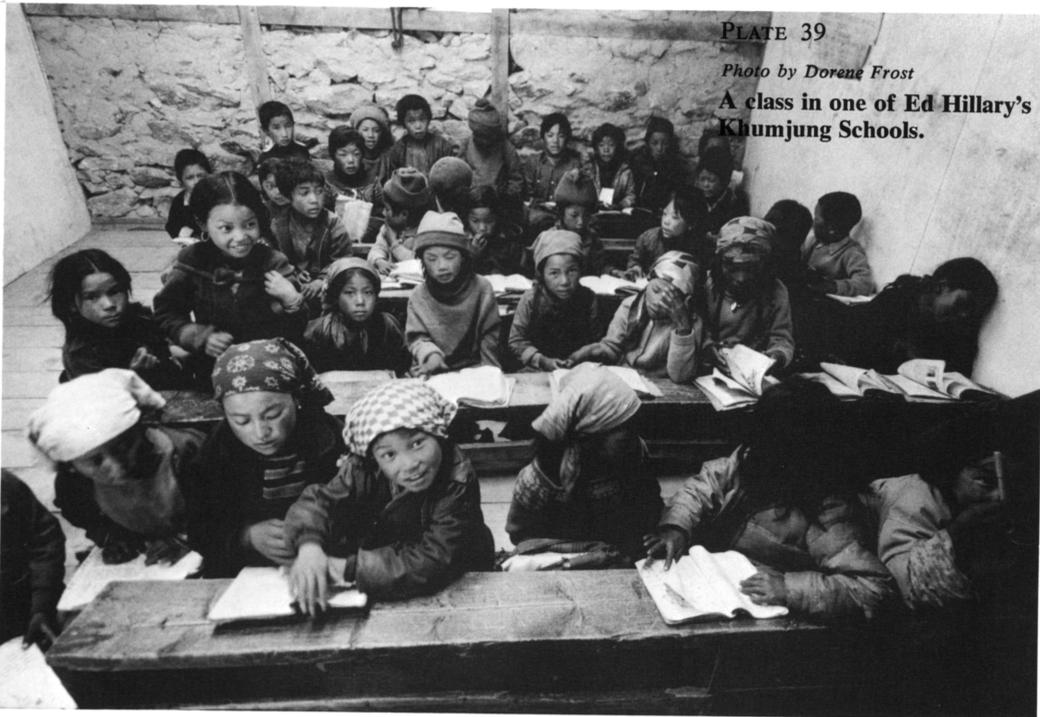


PLATE 39

*Photo by Dorene Frost*

**A class in one of Ed Hillary's  
Khumjung Schools.**

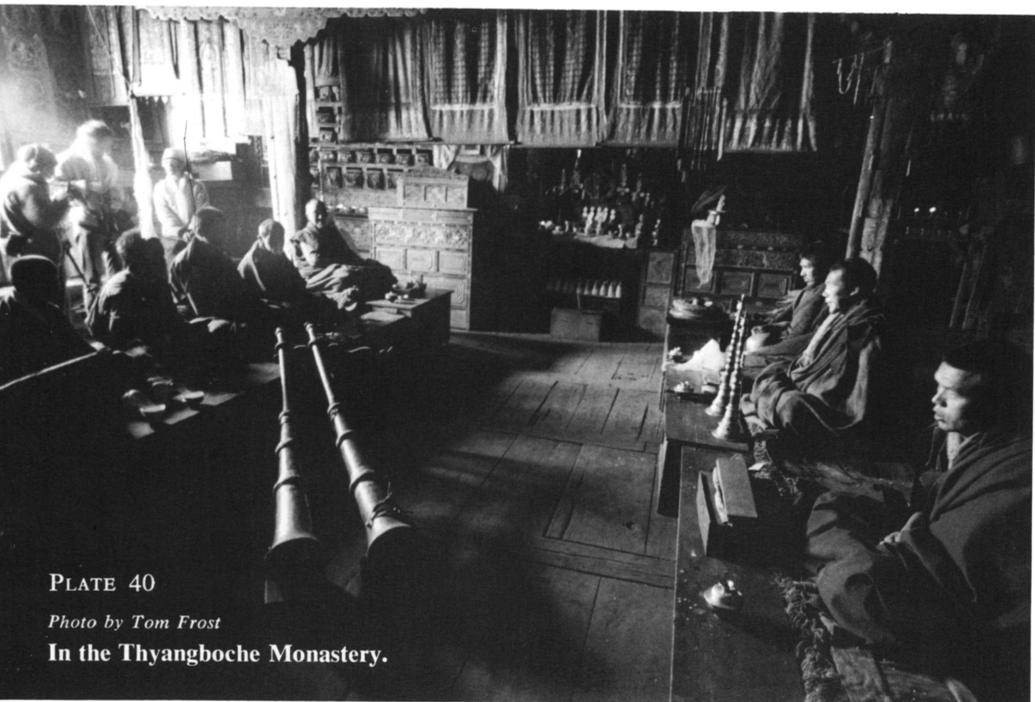


PLATE 40

*Photo by Tom Frost*

**In the Thyangboche Monastery.**

family—Dorene, Marna (age seven), and Ryan (age four). Why? I learned from the 1970 experience on the South Face of Annapurna that the element of danger on a big mountain, coupled with the lack of communication, put a greater burden on my wife than on myself, supposedly suffering away high in the thin cold air. The opportunity for visiting the Khumbu, of meeting her people and living amongst her snow-capped mountains, braving the Namche hill and a total of five days of approach march, working, playing, relaxing at our sometimes wintry, sometimes flower-studded meadow Base Camp, and even enjoying a hike together to Advance Base at 16,500 feet, strengthened our family individually and collectively. Especially, to be continually with the Sherpas for over a month was a joyful period of growth for Marna and Ryan.

Ama Dablam is unique in many ways. Aesthetically she is tops. The south-ridge route which we climbed and filmed enjoys a delightful quality and variety of climbing. From the 15,000-foot Base Camp at Chome, near Mingbo, one moves along pleasant moraines and ridges that lead to Camp I (19,070 feet), then up a ragged gendarmed rock ridge between Camps I and II (19,600 feet). Superb rock climbing is found on the Yellow Tower and First Step, then occur snowy-icy gullies and a corniced mushroom ridge topped by a 60-foot ice wall below Camp III (20,750 feet). The upper route is a perfect 40° to 50° snow-and-ice slope that tops out on the 22,494-foot summit. We underestimated it. A word to the wise—carry a headlamp as Jeff Lowe had the foresight to do.

Safety-wise, the route could not have been much better. Consider the advantage of no glacier or icefall to negotiate. The route lies primarily on the crest of the main south ridge. Present indications are that pre-monsoon or winter seasons on Ama Dablam are preferred over post-monsoon. Last fall the French team turned back below the Yellow Tower because three feet of non-melting snow blanketed the south ridge.

One of Ama Dablam's qualities is its position almost in the center of the Khumbu. I felt as though we were climbing the neighborhood mountain with neighborhood friends rather than having travelled 180° around the earth. The wives of our Sherpas would frequently visit, and the Sherpas could zip home momentarily if needed. We felt almost a part of their community.

The mountain forms a prominent part of the landscape from places such as Khumjung, the center place of our expedition Sherpas, the spiffy Japanese "Ama Dablam View Hotel," and the Sherpa spiritual Shangri-La—Thyangboche. I asked my climbing companion, Lhakpa Dorje, if Ama Dablam was a sacred mountain.

"Yes, to the old Sherpas it is. To the new Sherpas, climbing is important and it is okay to climb Ama Dablam."

"Why is the mountain sacred to the old Sherpas? Is it the abode of a god?"

“Ama Dablam is a god!” Lhakpa replied firmly.

*Ama* means mother. *Dablam* is the picture of a god worn by lamas around the neck and shoulder down about the right front side of their bodies inside a box. To the old Sherpas and Tibetans in the area, Ama Dablam is a god, and they carry the painting of this god on their person—and in like manner Ama Dablam displays its hanging glacier for all to see.

Contrary to the experience of some expeditions, the existence and realities of the film project were actually a blessing for us. The challenge of making a film provided an avenue for creativity and a means and purpose for working well together. In my eyes there were many heroes in this part of the effort. Jeff Lowe's natural quality of leadership on the mountain, combined with his determination that this commitment be properly fulfilled, set the tone. He carried this through to completion before allowing himself to be tempted by some “recreational” climbing. Martin Boysen continued to be the great jokester, enlivening the troops' morale as well as the film sound track with reports that some members (names withheld) were suffering from the dreaded Himalayan foot disease. “It's one of the most serious afflictions of high altitude. It is the inability to put one foot in front of the other!” The high-altitude cameramen, Greg Lowe and Jonathan Wright, led a conceptual and visual path toward completing the film, living continually with their 16mm ACL cameras and ready before the action occurred to document the better part for ABC. David Breashears regularly performed minor miracles in support of the entire film team. He moved huge loads, performed miscellaneous rescues of film personnel, loaded camera magazines, hauled film persons to the top, and generally made the whole event happen in a Sherpa-like, cheerful, enthusiastic manner. High and dry, but adaptable, kayaker John Wasson performed similar feats. The greatest pre-expedition enthusiasts, Tex Bossier and Doug Robinson, inspired us with their good spirits straight on through. In short, all members worked together to make the experience a good one.

By way of a ceremony and blessing in the Thyangboche monastery, and after paying the proper number of rupees, the way was cleared for a safe and successful trip. After the ceremony, Roger asked Doug, “What is it about Buddhism in general that relates to what we are trying to do here? Is there a corollary?”

Doug replied, “I think there is a very good corollary between Buddhism and mountaineering. Buddhism is meditative. Westerners approach living actively. Mountaineers feel that their lives are more completed, somehow, by going up into the mountains and doing this perfectly useless act of climbing. At first I didn't see the relationship between that and the Eastern meditative approach until I realized that climbing itself could be a form of physical meditation, where instead of sitting still the

SUMMIT 22,494 FEET

DABLAM GLACIER

CAMP III

ICE CLIFF

MUSHROOM RIDGE

SECOND STEP

FIRST STEP

RED TOWER

YELLOW TOWER

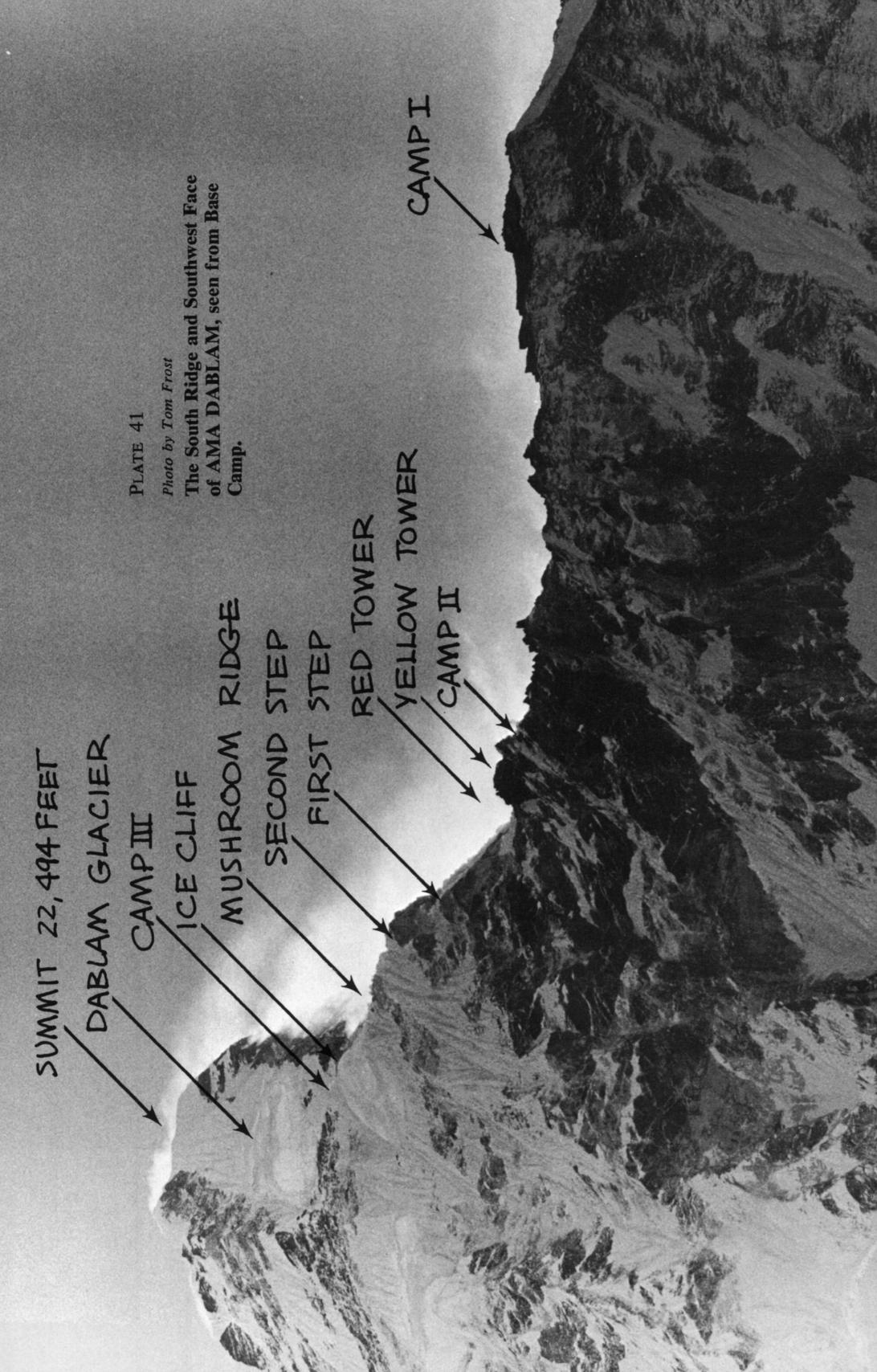
CAMP II

CAMP I

PLATE 41

*Photo by Tom Frost*

The South Ridge and Southwest Face  
of AMA DABLAM, seen from Base  
Camp.



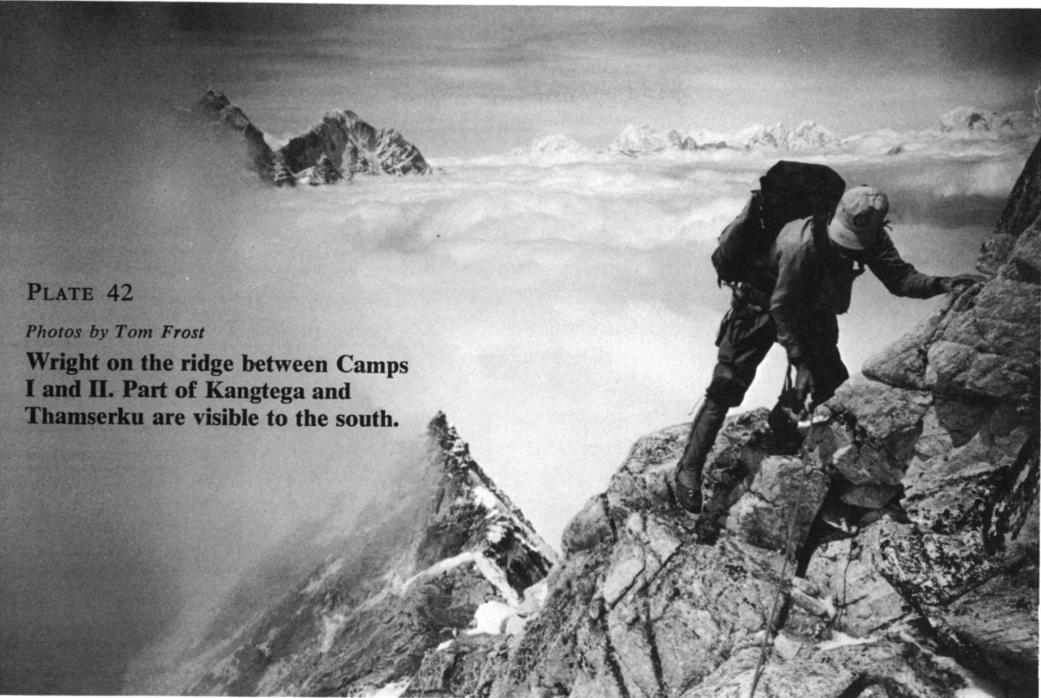


PLATE 42

*Photos by Tom Frost*

**Wright on the ridge between Camps I and II. Part of Kangtega and Thamserku are visible to the south.**

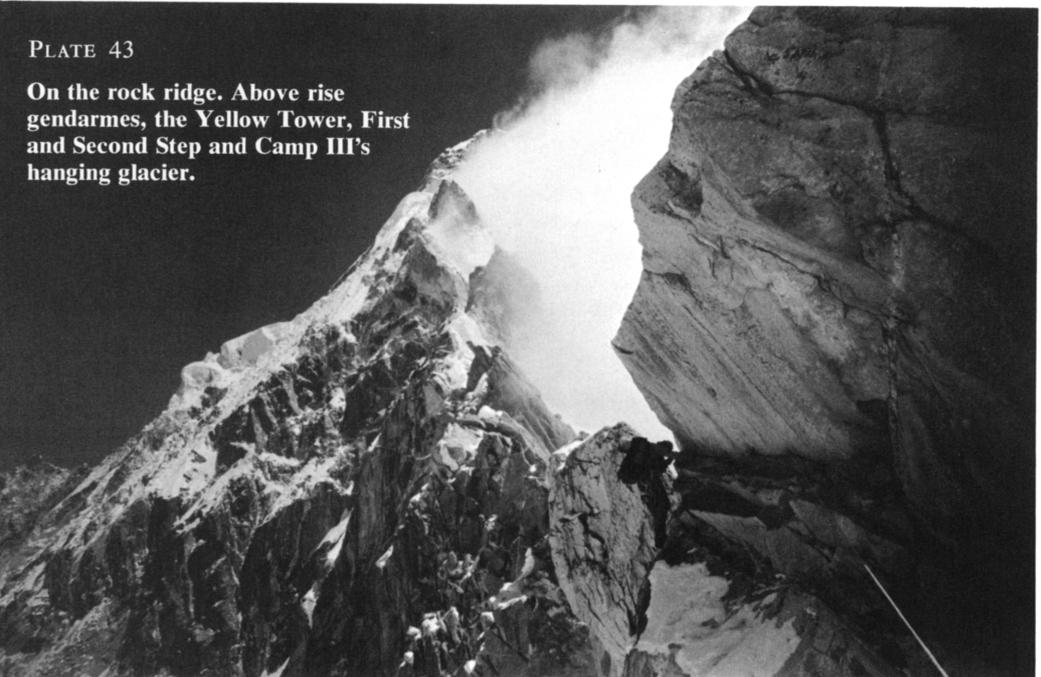


PLATE 43

**On the rock ridge. Above rise gendarmes, the Yellow Tower, First and Second Step and Camp III's hanging glacier.**

way the Buddha did, you gain the same ends of calmness of mind and directness of purpose through motion—through action—by climbing.”

After battling and filming our way to Camp III, we overconfidently breathed a sigh of relief. Erroneous readings of Bishop’s account of the first ascent led us to think the summit day would be short, and our foreshortened view of the slopes above III made them look easy. Eight of us, four climbers, four film crew prepared to move up.

The realities of the situation were: Martin’s warm boots did not get sent up the mountain as requested. We were blessed with a tremendous rise in wind velocity and drastic temperature drop (to  $-10^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) the very night before. The lower section (from Camp III to the Dablam Glacier) was icy. Our party was too large, and the masses could not keep pace with Jeff and Martin who were trying to keep pace with Martin’s increasingly colder feet. The last of us reached the blizzard-bound summit at five P.M. As this last herd of six plowed toward the summit, Jeff shouted down, “Not time for you to come to the top, Martin’s feet are freezing!” What a tragedy, I first thought, to come so close and turn back. But after what seemed a long internal struggle, I finally realized that it wasn’t *my* feet that were freezing. At that moment, Jeff relented and allowed us a few more minutes to come on up and enjoy a moment of white-out view.

The descent was all Jeff’s with his all-seeing, lithium powered cyclops night eye and cool head to wear it on. During countless rappels through the blackness toward this beacon-in-the-night, seven silent birds-on-a-perch appeared again and again into my view. Each time I took my position at the end of the line, I marveled at how our team had grown to such qualities of confidence and teamwork, as to be able to work unerringly together in reaching again that place below, which we “recognized and liked.” The greatness of the night performance made up for the sloppiness of the previous day’s work.

Three days later, Doug Robinson and John Wasson followed this same route. Even though, due to the continued pre-monsoon afternoon cloudiness, they were also denied a coveted look northward to the Nuptse wall and Chomolungma beyond, Doug reported, “I’m impressed with the long, hard day it is to the summit from Camp III. But it sure is nice to be here and to know that it’s all downhill going home.”

Back at Base Camp Jeff asked David and Doug if they would like to do Ama Dablam again. No. Not being ready to go home, and since we had permission to move about anywhere on the south side of the mountain, Jeff moved alone back to Camp I with plans to start up a hard new route on the south face of the mountain to the right of the main south ridge. Base Camp was a bustle of moving loads, collapsing tents, and the clanging of yak bells, as the rest of the expedition packed and began to move out. Jeff left the tent at Camp I at three A.M. on April 30.

He climbed 1500 feet of snow and ice gullies, then the 700-foot verglas rock face above, which Jeff described as harder than expected. He intersected the *voie normale* at the rock island on the summit slopes, reached the summit by early afternoon, and returned to the tent left at Camp III at five P.M. the same day. This performance spoke more accurately of Jeff's true climbing capabilities and underscored the quality of his dedication to the prior completion of the film.

The following day, tired but happy, Jeff returned to our family and Pemba Sherpa waiting at Base Camp. With little fanfare we enjoyed a final evening in the pyramid tent, as brilliantly lit clouds dotted the western horizon. Base Camp was now silent where only days before the hubbub and confusion of a major expedition had existed. Soon, the monsoon would return, bringing new life to the flowers and meadow grasses and a mantle of thick snow to the peaks above.

The following morning we departed this peaceful valley and its special mountain. Ama Dablam had treated us as friends. Was that possible for "just" a mountain to do? Could we be tempted to make of a mountain more than it was? Many seem to have found excuse to worship such objects. Or, in reality, was it the Creator of both us and the mountain that had blessed us so richly?

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Nepal Himalaya.

ASCENT: Ama Dablam, 22,494 feet, second ascent via south ridge. Summit reached 22 April 1979 by Boysen, Breashears, Lhakpa Dorje, Frost, G. Lowe, J. Lowe, Pilafian, and Wright; 25 April 1979 by Robinson and Wasson; and 30 April 1979 by J. Lowe by a new route on the south face.

PERSONNEL: *Climbers:* Tex Bossier, Martin Boysen, David Breashears, Tom Frost, Jeff Lowe, and Doug Robinson. *Film Crew:* Roger Brown, Rob Dubin, Greg Lowe, Peter Pilafian, and Jonathan Wright. *Sherpas:* Ang Temba sirdar, Lhakpa Dorje, Nima Tenzing, Sangya Dorje, Pasang Tsering, Pemba, Zangbu, Ang Nima, Palden Chosang, Urken. *Kayakers:* Cully Erdman, Phil Freedman, M.D., Tom Rutch, and John Wasson. *Friends:* Lisa Bossier, Lyn Freedman, Dorene Frost, Marna Frost, Ryan Frost, Rodney Korich, Jean Lowe, Ralph Lowe, Christy Northrop, S.L. Shresta (liaison officer), and Jojo Suchowiejko.