Gongga Shan— Minya Konka Revisited

DOUGLAS KELLEY and JOSEPH E. MURPHY

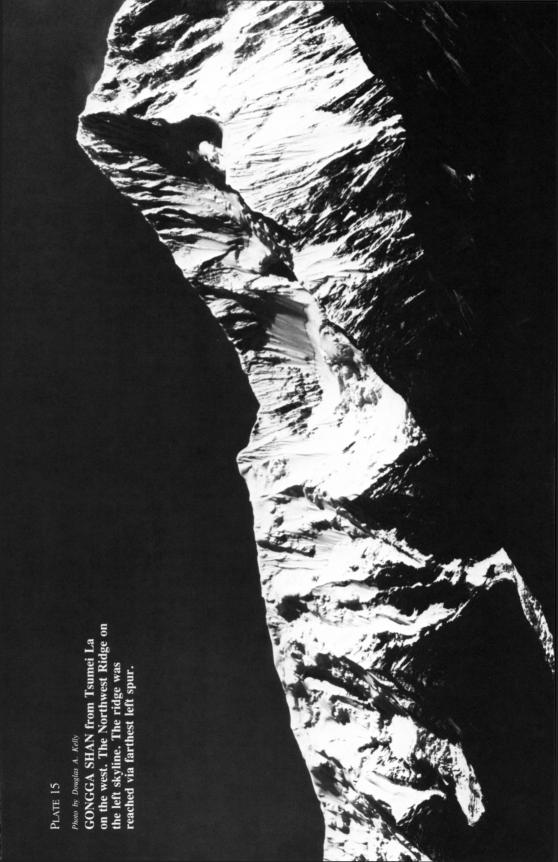
N OCTOBER 3, 1982 Dana Coffield and Douglas Kelley reached the summit of Gongga Shan, a 24,891-foot peak in western Sichuan province of the People's Republic of China. Fifty years earlier two other Americans, Richard Burdsall and Terris Moore made the first ascent of the mountain, then called Minya Konka. In the intervening years savage weather and avalanche combined to defeat six of nine expeditions to the peak, and more lives were lost attempting the mountain than had made it to the summit.

The 1932 expedition was a remarkable achievement. It sailed from Boston at the height of the depression, spent two months at sea, and docked at Shanghai as the Japanese began shelling the city. There the expedition split; four members continued, travelling fifteen hundred miles up the Yangtse river to find a mountain whose height and location were unknown. Theodore Roosevelt's sons had seen the mountain from considerable distance while searching for pandas and reported that it was higher than Everest. Moore's party found the peak, surveyed it, and after 27 days reached the summit by the northwest ridge. For a quarter century thereafter, Minya Konka remained the highest summit reached by Americans.

In 1957 the Chinese in launching their first major mountaineering expedition selected Minya Konka, which they renamed Gongga Shan. Gongga was the logical choice because it is one of China's four sacred mountains and the highest peak in China proper. They picked the northwest ridge as their route. It was a massive effort with twenty-one Chinese climbers, an equal number of scientists, and a large support group. The team made the attempt under the leadership of Shi Zhan Chun who later led the successful Chinese Everest expedition. Thirteen climbers were caught in an avalanche on the snow chute below Camp I. Many were injured, but only one perished. Six members of the team reached the top and of these three died while descending the summit ridge.

When the Chinese opened eight peaks to foreigners in 1980, the first expeditions allowed to return to Gongga were American. One American

¹ See A.A.J., 1981, pages 309 to 315.



expedition attempted a new route up the south face. The team was led by Andy Harvard and included Henry Barber, Lou Reichardt, and Jed Williamson. The other expedition sought to repeat the northwest ridge. Four members, Yvon Chouinard, Rick Ridgeway, Kim Schmitz and ABC cameraman Jonathan Wright were caught in an avalanche just above Camp I and swept down fifteen hundred feet. Wright died in the fall and was buried on the mountain.

In 1981 a Swiss expedition was to attempt the peak from the southeast, via the Hailoko Glacier, and a Japanese expedition tried the northeast ridge. The Swiss were turned by bad weather to other peaks. One Japanese fell when 100 meters from the summit. The other seven in the summit party retreated, but they too pitched down the north face and were killed.

In the Spring of 1982, Japanese, Swiss and Canadian expeditions³ attempted the peak. The Canadians tried the original route, but were turned back at Camp I by an accident and unfortunate weather. The Japanese approached the mountain from the east, placed two men within 300 meters of the summit, but then retreated in the face of storms. After one member perished from exposure, the other staggered into Base Camp and discovered that his teammates had abandoned him. He survived a nineteen-day ordeal but later lost his fingers and feet from frostbite. Three Swiss climbers attained the summit, reaching the northwest ridge from the east, but one slipped descending the summit ridge and died. The experience of the prior expeditions caused us to approach our preparations with great caution.

Our expedition was initiated by Ned Andrews and Doug Kelley who had met in Peru on separate expeditions in 1979. In 1980 we applied for permission to attempt the mountain by the northwest ridge and were granted a permit for the fall of 1982. Joe Murphy flew to Beijing in February 1981 to complete the arrangements and sign the protocol. The party consisted of seven Americans: Joe Murphy, *leader*, Ned Andrews, *deputy leader*, Sharon Caulfield, Dana Coffield, Barbara Kelley, Doug Kelley, and Michael Lehner, and two Chinese, Mr. Wong, liaison officer, and Mr. Liu, interpreter.

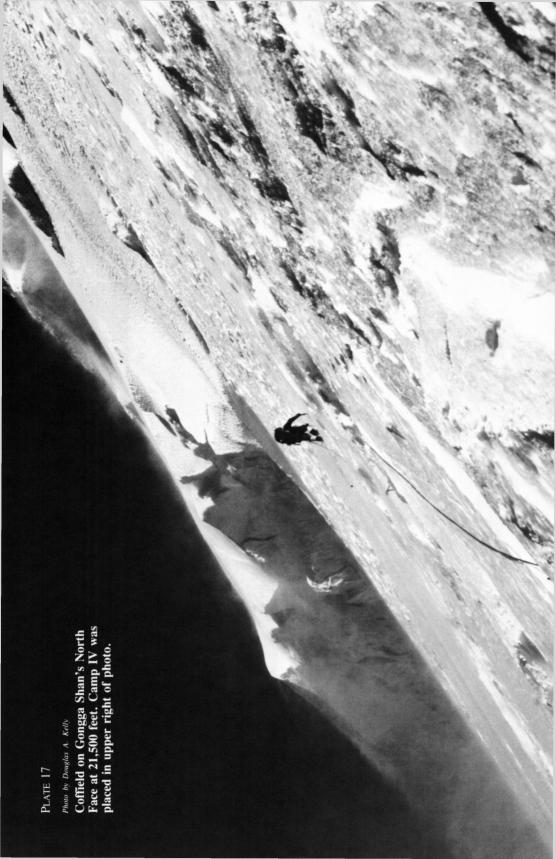
On the advice of the Chinese we planned a two-month expedition to allow sufficient time for the attempt. We knew that the Canadians had but two good days in eighteen in the spring of 1982. The Swiss, a year earlier, had seen but four fair days in fifty. The Swiss geologist Imhof had predicted bad weather in September and early October. We knew that our prospects would depend on favorable weather.

We arrived in Beijing on September 3, reached Chendu 1200 miles to the southwest by train on the 9th after a stop in Xian to see the archaeological site, and made the end of the road at Liu Baxiang by minibus on the 13th. From here horses carried our equipment, but to minimize expenses we planned not to use porters. After crossing a 15,200-foot pass, the Tsemei La, we arrived at the

² See A.A.J., 1982, pages 383 to 385.

³ See "Climbs and Expeditions" section of this *Journal*.





Gongga Gompa Lamasery at 12,600 feet on September 16 where we established Base Camp. We were still in the grip of the monsoon which had brought daily rain since the first of September. On arrival at the lamasery Michael Lehner became violently ill with dysentery.

On September 17 we began carrying loads to Advanced Base Camp located at 14,500 feet, five miles away in a meadow just below the northwest ridge. The route descended 300 feet from the lamasery to the Little Gomba River valley and then followed the river to the meadow. The carry was long and arduous because it involved crossing the river several times. Over the next three days we carried thirteen loads to Advanced Base. Because of the difficulty that past parties had in establishing Camp I and uncertain weather, we felt it important to commence exploration of the route to Camp I as soon as possible. At a team meeting on the 18th Murphy designated Coffield and D. Kelley as the lead team, and himself and Lehner as the second team.

Kelley and Coffield moved to Advanced Base Camp on September 19 and immediately began exploring the route to Camp I. Although not technically difficult, the route from Advanced Base to the ridge was objectively the most dangerous area on the mountain. All the previously reported avalanches had occurred in the afternoon. Kelley and Coffield decided that they would only travel on the snow from dawn to 9:30 A.M., the time the morning sun hit the slope. The traditional route followed a snowfield to the right of a rock pyramid. The Canadians got mired down when they tried to avoid the snow and stay on the rock. We found a couloir between the two which, despite continuing rockfall, remained free of avalanche danger except while climbing the rock band and traversing the lower part of the snowfield on the way to the couloir. We relied primarily on that route thereafter. On the afternoon of the 23rd, Coffield and Kelley moved to a temporary camp at 16,200 feet, just below the rock band to avoid the tiresome three-A.M. starts. They arrived just in time to watch an avalanche sweep over their previous day's route across the rock band. It was an ominous sign. The following day they moved to Camp I at 18,000 feet.

Camp II was established on the ridge at 19,800 feet on September 26. Kelley and Coffield were confined to the snow cave they had dug in an indentation in the ridge line for the next three days by 60 to 80 m.p.h. winds which blew northwest along the ridge. Murphy and Lehner broke through to Camp II on the 29th and spent a night in a tent next to the snow cave. The winds were so high they blew Murphy's pack off the ridge, and so Murphy and Lehner returned to Advanced Base Camp to obtain replacement equipment for the former and additional high-altitude provisions.

On September 30 Coffield and Kelley proceeded up the broad, gentle ridge against high winds in low visibility carrying provisions to Camp III. The camp was placed at 20,800 feet to the north of a three hundred-foot bulge in the ridge called the "Hump". The Hump was the major technical obstacle of the climb, extremely steep on the west, nearly as steep and avalanche prone on the east. It would have to be renegotiated on the descent from the summit ridge.

They spent a sleepless night on October 1, holding the tent down in gale-force winds. A foot of snow fell during the night, but the next morning was clear and windless. Coffield led around the east side of the Hump but retreated because the slope was avalanche prone. They then found a crevasse which sloped diagonally upward for two-and-a-half pitches to the crest of the Hump. From that point they descended three hundred feet to the narrow, corniced ridge between the Hump and the main summit ridge. They continued up the ridge onto the east face, against high winds, and pitched Camp IV in a diagonal crevasse at 22,000 feet. The campsite gave protection from avalanches but was difficult to find on the descent.

On October 3 Coffield and Kelley left for the summit at seven A.M. on a bright, clear, almost windless day. They ascended the ridge on firm snow until blocked by weirdly shaped snow gendarmes a thousand feet below the summit. They traversed east across snow-encrusted rock in deterioriating weather. Beyond the maze of snow formations, they front-pointed 150 feet to the northeast face which led to the summit. They attained the summit at 4:30 P.M. in low visibility and began the descent at five P.M. They arrived at Camp IV after several hours in darkness, in a driving snowstorm, replete with thunder and lightning.

The next day they retraced their steps to Camp II. The reascent of the Hump was treacherous due to a foot of new snow and whiteout conditions. Michael Lehner greeted them at Camp II where he had spent two nights waiting for them in a bivouac sack after carrying a load of provisions from Camp I. Gongga was not to release them easily and they received yet another night of snow. After another agonizing decision about avalanche conditions between Camp II and Camp I, the three returned to Advanced Base without mishap on October 5.

In the following week we climbed two additional peaks northwest of Advanced Base. On October 6 Andrews and Caulfield attempted Nochma but were turned back by adverse weather. Andrews and Murphy made the first ascent of Nochma (18,790 feet) by the southeast ridge on October 8, and two days later Coffield, D. Kelley, B. Kelley and Lehner made the second ascent. On October 12 Coffield and Lehner made the first ascent of Gomba (18,840 feet) by the south ridge; Andrews and Murphy made the second ascent on October 13.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Sichuan Province, People's Republic of China.

ASCENTS: Gongga Shan (Minya Konka), 7587 meters, 24,891 feet, fourth ascent, via Northwest Ridge, October 3, 1982 (Coffield, D. Kelley).

Nochma, 5727 meters, 18,790 feet, First ascent, via Southeast Ridge, October 8, 1982 (Andrews, Murphy); October 10, 1982 (Coffield, B. Kelley, D. Kelley, Lehner).

Gomba, 5755 meters, 18,840 feet, first ascent, via South Ridge, October 12, 1982 (Coffield, Lehner); October 13, 1982 (Andrews, Murphy).

Personnel: Joseph E. Murphy, *leader*, Edmund D. Andrews, Dana Coffield, Sharon Caulfield, Barbara Kelley, Douglas A. Kelley, Michael C. Lehner; Mr. Wong, *liaison officer*, Mr. Liu, *interpreter*.

