Snow Leopards on Pik Pobedy

RANDALL M. STARRETT II

IN LATE JULY OF 1985, I set out with my partner, William Garner, and cameraman David Breashears on a journey to the Celestial Mountains of mythology, the Tien Shan. There, along with twelve Soviet alpinists in a joint Soviet-American expedition, we three became the first foreigners to climb Pik Pobedy. William and I thus concluded our four-year quest to be the first non-Soviets to earn the "Order of the Snow Leopard," which the Soviets award to those who climb all four of their 7000-meter peaks.

Sitting athwart the Sino-Soviet border at 42°2′N latitude, Pik Pobedy faces the Soviet Republic of Kirghizia to the north and the Chinese province of Sinkiang to the south. The summit of Pobedy stands 7,439 meters (24,406 feet), the highest in a concentration of some thirty peaks over 20,000 feet. It is the world's most northerly mountain over 7000 meters. It is bordered by much crevassed glaciers, the largest of which is the 38-mile-long Inylchek Glacier. This region of the Tien Shan is surrounded by barren deserts and high plateau. Although Lake Issyk-Kul makes verdant the land to its east, Siberian winds pick up its moisture, then deposit heavy snow on the northern slopes of the Tien Shan.

Remote and inaccessible, the first major attempt to conquer Pik Pobedy was not undertaken until 1955. It met with disaster. Eleven Soviet alpinists died in a storm. Vitaly Abalakov was the first to reach Pobedy's summit the following year. He led a massive expedition of thirty-two men, who for two months painstakingly established a series of huge snow caves. Their final assault lasted two weeks.

Suspended above the Inylchek Glacier in a Soviet helicopter, a sense of calm transcended my apprehensions. Blown by the high winds, the helicopter danced across the sky like a puppet. The peaks we passed rose abruptly one to two miles above their foundation, laced with razor-like ridges. It is a strange, right-angled, two-dimensional landscape.

I knew very little about Pik Pobedy beyond a few salient points. It had killed more than sixty Soviet alpinists. In 1984 the weather had been the gentlest in memory, yet six climbers had frozen to death on the arête. Last summer satellites showed Pobedy's weather to be the worst in decades. A strong Soviet

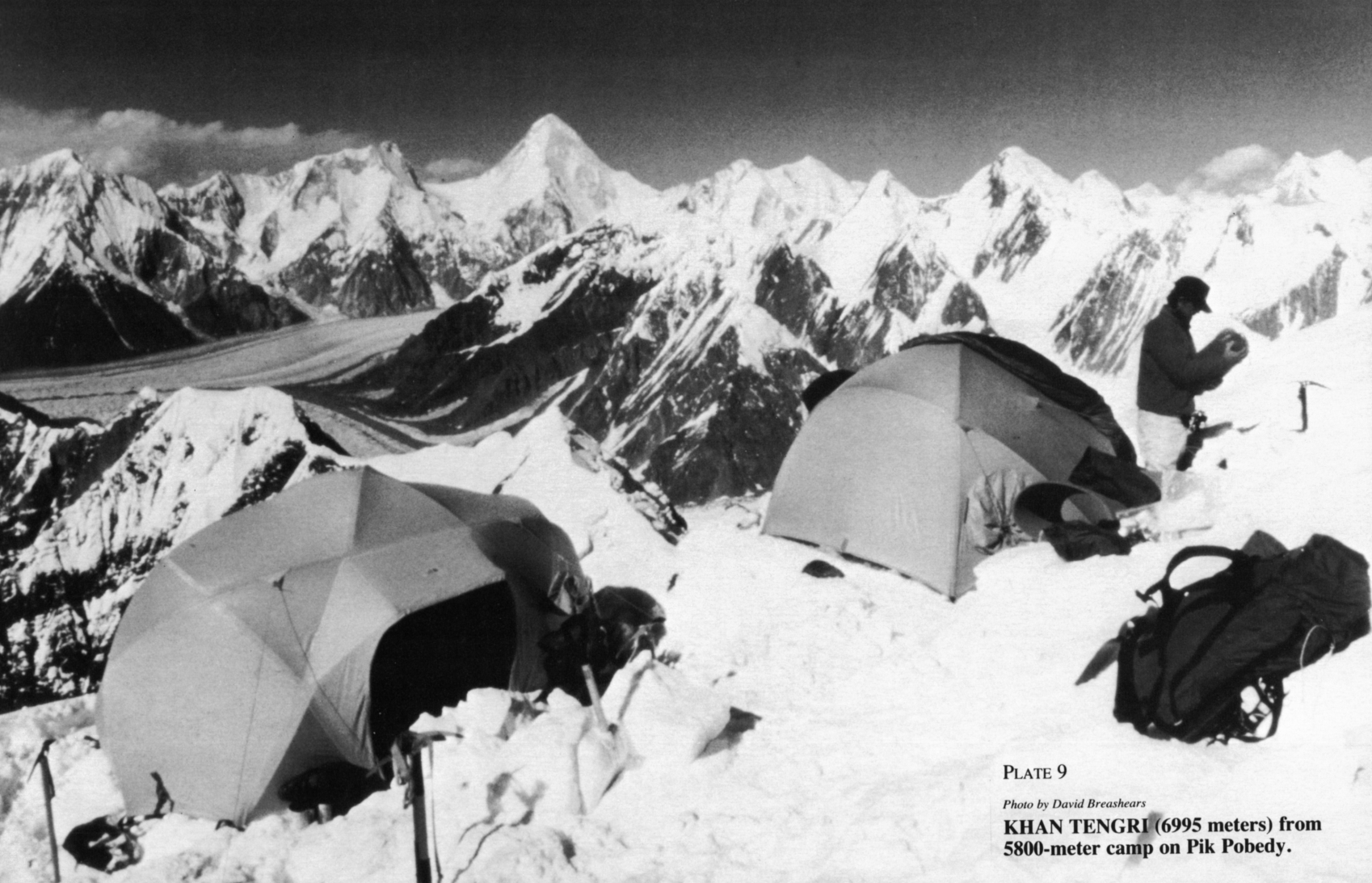

PLATE 9

Photo by David Breashears

KHAN TENGRI (6995 meters) from 5800-meter camp on Pik Pobedy.

team led by Boris Studyenyin, a Soviet "International Master of Sport" and three-time conqueror of the mountain, had for more than a month failed to reach the 23,000-foot-high, six-mile-long arête leading to the base of the summit ridge. Storm and avalanche had thwarted their every attempt.

As we landed at Base Camp, approximately fifteen miles from Pobedy, Khan Tengri (23,084 feet), "The Lord of the Spirits," silhouetted the cobalt sky like a colossal Matterhorn. Pobedy presented a wholly different view. From glacier floor to sky it was covered with monstrous, churning clouds. From the top a plume ran down the sky, suggesting that some ethereal beast could materialize at any moment to greet its first Western visitors.

The Soviets had established a comfortable Base Camp and they greeted us warmly. It would be difficult to imagine a Soviet team better suited to this expedition. Four of their climbers had topped Everest in 1982; Oleg Borisynok had summitted Pobedy twice; Valentin Ivanov, a co-captain of both the Everest and our expedition, had even traversed Pobedy and most of the adjacent range.

When August 15 dawned, Pobedy was eclipsed by storm. The Soviets convened a council, where their many years of experience and their most recent encounter on the mountain were focused to produce a joint decision. The Soviet leaders recommended that we should not go up Pobedy this year, but attempt Khan Tengri instead. Yet, within hours an avalanche killed a Soviet climber on the new route they planned for us to take.

The day of departure was clear with very high winds. While preparing for Khan Tengri, William, who speaks Russian, discovered that many of the Soviet climbers still wanted to attempt Pobedy. The team reconsidered. As night fell on August 16, our tents glowed at Pobedy's base, imperceptible to the rest of the world.

We divided into four teams—three Soviet and one American. The climb to Camp II consisted of two distinct problems. The first 1500 feet was a steep, complex icefall of alternating crevasses and séracs. The day was faultlessly beautiful and our climb up stable névé seemed to stretch to the sky. Beyond the icefall, the slopes were less precipitous, but more nerve-racking. We worked our way up through deep snow in a silence that was all the more ominous because it betokened no snow release. That evening we established our camp in a bergschrund at 17,000 feet.

On August 18, we reached the snow cave which marked the previous Soviet team's high point at 19,000 feet. We found the camp buried under six feet of snow. All day we had battled through waist-deep snow. There had been a tremendous potential for avalanche—heavy snow deposits, high winds, and a steep, convex slope. Fracture lines were in evidence all around. We spaced ourselves far apart, changed leads often and, fortunately, did not awaken the sleeping giant.

As we tried to dig out the snow cave, a major storm broke. We had to move up several hundred feet onto a 50° ice wall under a band of rock. We chopped platforms there and settled in to wait out the storm. Over the next twenty-four hours four feet of snow fell.

PLATE 10

Photo by David Breashears

Telephoto of KHAN TENGRI from 6000 meters on Pik Pobedy.

We concluded after much discussion that avalanche danger now precluded a safe descent. But the second night a fortuitous wind made passable the steep 4000 feet of mixed rock and ice leading up to the 23,000-foot arête.

On August 20, lenticular clouds on Pobedy created a phantom range of summits as we moved up the rock and ice. It was very cold and the wind was a constant 50 to 60 miles per hour. Valodya Puchkov, Valerii Khomutov and David took the lead. William and I climbed together. We attempted a couple of belays, but it was just too cold and windy.

Cut off from the group by the weather and the difficult terrain, I tried to move in perfect cadence—sometimes by counting, sometimes by rhythmically repeating certain words. In this manner I detached mind from body, relaxed and focused solely on my climbing.

Mid afternoon August 21, we climbed out onto a 30° slab of ice, ascended another 500 feet and stepped onto the Sino-Soviet border. The arête was fiercely corniced on the Soviet side so we traversed the Chinese side for about one mile. At nine P.M. we pitched our tents next to one another in a small depression and guyed them together to ice screws for mutual support.

On August 22, dawn was short-lived. As we set off across the arête my fellow climbers appeared and vanished like ghosts in the blowing snow. By noon we reached the base of the knife-edged summit ridge, which steeply rises some 1300 feet to the top of Pobedy. We rapidly ascended the first 1000 vertical feet of this ridge and at about three P.M. gathered under a large gendarme. The weather was deteriorating. Many Soviets had died there under just such circumstances. Nicholas Chornii, the Soviet team captain, stressed that we had to leave the summit by four P.M. in order to get back the four miles to our High Camp.

The last 300 vertical feet were difficult. At times we straddled the narrow ridge, while struggling for breath against the high winds. Around four P.M. I climbed off the ridge onto the summit.

Pobedy's summit is not the tiny and precarious place that forms the top of many Central Asian peaks. It is an undulating ridge nearly 1½ miles long and 50 yards wide, on which some four or five snow "towers" rise about 100 feet above the rest of the summit. The Soviets do not designate which one is the true summit, but count reaching any of them as a successful summit climb.

Ahead of me, David and six Soviets crossed over the first tower and up onto the second. When I reached the top of the first tower, I could see them several hundred feet away, crouching near some exposed rock. William and Victor Masyukov then climbed up beside me. It was 4:40 P.M. "We've arrived!" shouted Victor.

"But now we must get back," warned Nicholas Chornii, who had pulled up behind us. He was right. In −40° temperature and winds exceeding 80 miles per hour, our six-hour return to Camp V was harrowing. When we reached our tents, I just felt thankful to be alive.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Tien Shan, Soviet Central Asia

ASCENT: Pik Pobedy, 7439 meters, 24,406 feet; First Foreign Ascent (Breashears, Starrett, Garner). Soviet Climbers (Barisyonok, G. Bogomolov, S. Bogomolov, Chochia, Chornii, Golodov, Ivanov, Khomutov, Masyukov, Puchkov, Smirnov, Yermakov).

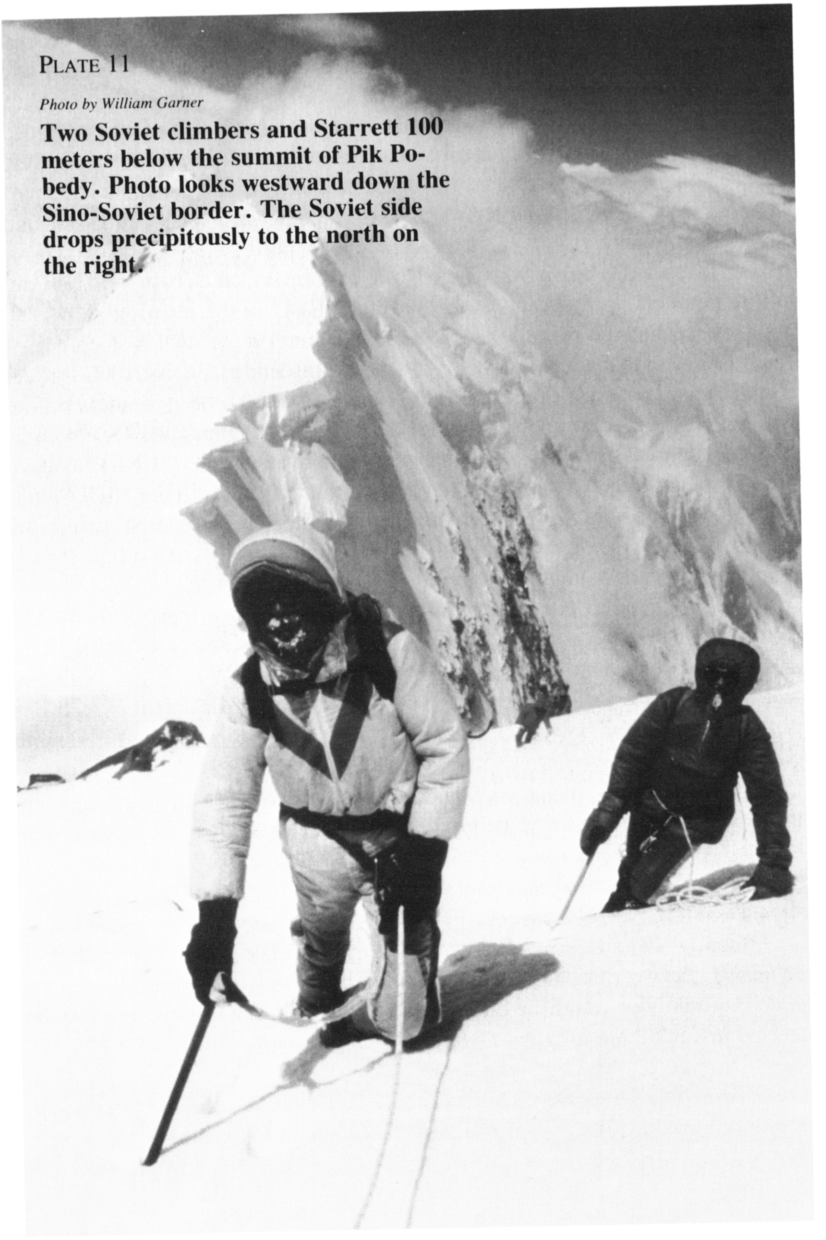

PLATE 11

Photo by William Garner

Two Soviet climbers and Starrett 100 meters below the summit of Pik Pobedy. Photo looks westward down the Sino-Soviet border. The Soviet side drops precipitously to the north on the right.