

Canadian Light Everest Expedition

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IT WAS ONLY a few days after Dwayne Congdon and I had stumbled off the summit of Mount Everest when Barry Blanchard roused me from my semi-conscious void within the sanctuary of my sleeping bag. "Hey, Woody! I have this climb I'd like to do with you on the Rupal Face of Nanga Parbat. The biggest vertical face in the world, no sponsors, small team, alpine style, unclimbed line, 8000 meters. . . ." I responded with a groan and a few words of protest. "But it's a small 8000er." I didn't know there were any small 8000-meter peaks. I was operating on a much different frequency at the time. I had been dreaming of learning how to rock climb again; I mean really rock climb with a sleeveless tee-shirt and a pair of gaudy lycra tights. To enter a rock-climbing season sun-tanned and minus the atrophied appearance I am so accustomed to after high-altitude adventures that are exclusively mind-and-lung expanding. "Hey, Bubba, ask me later."

Barry's source of energy and enthusiasm had always been an admirable enigma to most of us mortals. He and Albi Sole had been the victims of my biggest regret of the Everest Light experience, which still looms very large in my mind. They had been slotted for the second summit team, due to begin their bid once Dwayne and I were safely down. In spite of being healthy, strong, and chafing at the bit, they were called down off the mountain. Circumstances had denied them the opportunity they deserved. Dwayne and I hadn't helped their chances by cutting it close to the line. Of course all eleven of us came on this trip aiming for the top. We came with the awareness that our odds were slim on an expedition-style ascent on a very big brand-name mountain.

Back on the 19th of March we were the first expedition to arrive. We selected the choice location for our Base Camp at the foot of the Rongbuk Glacier at 16,800 feet. The Americans who closely paralleled our schedule, route, and style, arrived a day later with a permit to climb the Great Couloir. The Spanish arrived approximately a week later with permission to attempt the North Ridge. Base Camp offered colorful and diverse entertainment.

The price of luxury is quickly paid when you drive to 17,000 feet. Donning nearly every layer of clothing we owned, and under the influence of a condition close to the worst hangover I've ever experienced, we attempted to create order out of our six tons of supplies. Within hours, amidst total chaos, Jane Fearing,

our cook, had succeeded in turning out a fine meal, a demonstration of only one small quality that remained consistent throughout our sojourn. It is an illusion to believe that climbing is the feature attraction on a project of this nature. One day James Blench defined the role of an expedition member rather succinctly: "You go with a group of people you believe in, you give it all you have, you throw it all into one pot, and with the direction of a good leader you see what you come up with." I'm sure at times we may have all looked like good little Socialists. However, in reality, every one of us was a strong-willed, single-minded individual, who was not accustomed to aligning his or her purpose with more than one or two people at best. The one thing we did share in common was a recognition of the need to channel the diversity in this situation in order to accomplish our objective. Jim Elzinga was unanimously accepted as the leader. The cooperation and compliance that ensued was a source of constant wonderment.

Camp II at 19,500 feet was established at the base of the spur by the end of March. Camp III was established halfway up the spur, and reclaimed several times before it was successfully occupied by mid April. Due to the blessing of some good weather and relatively straightforward climbing and fixing, Camp IV at 24,000 feet was ready for occupation by the third week in April. Old abandoned caches and carcasses of box tents were grim reminders of the wrath of this mountain. I recalled reading an account of a team loaded with big guns who were defeated by the next section because of the winds and the sustained work load above 24,000 feet. We too were beginning to wear. All but Albi Sole and I had been stricken by a virus which attacked the respiratory tract that crippled our force and pace. Interestingly enough all but Annie Whitehouse on the American team had been afflicted by the same virus.

We spent days building our camps, spurred on by the sight of the tattered remains of efforts before us and of past horror stories of expeditions losing up to fifteen tents to the winds. I will never forget that dramatic photograph from Tom Hornbeins' book of climbers leaning 45° into the wind attempting to salvage the remains of their Camp IV. We also spent many extra days laying down and maintaining fixed ropes on easy ground to ensure we remained intact when the winds picked up. As the season advanced, our fears materialized. I remember one day watching Jim Elzinga, who weighs 200 pounds or better, get lifted off his feet and hurtled back down to the next anchor.

By April 20, Camp V was installed through the tenacious efforts of Barry Blanchard and Dwayne Congdon in three days of block cutting and shelter construction. By this time it felt as if we were beginning to spin our wheels. There is a paradox that exists in an expedition-style ascent. The multitude of incremental steps that promote a slow but strong and consistent progress tend to block the attainment of the ultimate objective. In securing the platforms from which to extend, long exposure to altitude burns you out by the time you're in position to make a summit bid. Our work force above 24,000 feet was down to half. We had to change our original objective of climbing the West Ridge Direct to traversing out onto the north face and climbing the Hornbein Couloir. To some this appeared the only viable alternative. To others it was a hard blow, a

PLATE 8

Canadian Light Everest Expedition Photo

MOUNT EVEREST from the North.

Altitude of Camps in feet: II =

19,400; III = 21,600; IV = 24,000;

V = 25,000; VI = 26,800.



compromise. They would have rather failed on the hard way than succeed by a less technical route. After reading Tom Hornbein's account and given the mountain we were on, I was not confident we had anything in the bag.

A week later on the 6th of May, another crucial decision was made. The summit teams were selected. This painful process was made easier by the mountain having already pared us down to four. Dwayne Congdon and I were to be the first assault team and Barry Blanchard and Albi Sole the second. The strategy from here would go as follows: two teams of two would fix from Camp V across the north face to the bottom of the couloir in four days. Meanwhile, whoever was capable would ferry the remainder of supplies necessary for Camp VI to Camp V. Within the week, following a rest, Dwayne and I would commence our summit bid. Being the first summit team we would install Camp VI at 27,000 feet and go for the summit the next day. If we failed to reach the summit, we would at least fix as much of the technical sections as possible with 6mm Kevlar rope for the second team to move through on.

With a concrete plan now in place, the hulking expedition machine began making steps forward. Everyone put out to his maximum capacity even when his cards were played out. Jim had contracted a bad viral infection which permanently bound him to Camp II and below. From there he continued to maintain a relentless grip on the orchestration of the strategy. Over the next week we succeeded in carrying out the initial stages of our plan.

On May 15, on parting from Camp I to begin our summit bid, Todd Bibler, a member of our American neighbors, shouted out some parting words of wisdom, "Glory or Death!." Coleen, Dwayne's long-time mate, failed to grasp the nature of Todd's humor. Later that day, Jim Elzinga took us aside for a little pep talk. He said that no matter what, make sure you treat this climb just like any other mountain; don't die for it.

Barry and Kevin Boyle joined Dwayne and me. They would carry in support through to Camp VI. At Camp II, we waited out two days of storms before we started up in spite of unsettled weather. On this day, halfway up our 5000-foot carry, when the conditions were especially compromising, I tried this little tidbit of Jim Elzinga philosophy out on Kevin. It didn't wash. If the truth be known, one's bearing on reality and the margin one leaves for longevity is altered significantly in a place like this.

On May 19, at Camp V, we strapped on the oxygen for the first time. Our circulation improved almost immediately. However, with two oxygen bottles on top of all the supplies for Camp VI and above, our packs were pushing 70 pounds. The pace was discouragingly slow and painful. I didn't dare take my pack off for fear of dropping it or losing energy needed to put it back on. As the four of us crept across the face, every now and then someone was toppled over by the wind. An ominous lenticular cloud capped the summit. Late in the afternoon we left the ropes and entered the couloir. It was constantly being flushed by surface avalanches from thousands of feet above. Periodically, rocks dislodged by the raging winds ricocheted down off the walls of the couloir. Near misses were stripping away our resolve. At eight P.M., I saw Barry step out of

PLATE 9

Photo by David Breashears

MOUNT EVEREST'S North Face.



the couloir into an alcove. This would be our Camp VI, at approximately 26,800 feet. Barry and Kevin remained with us and did everything they could to help us get settled. It was painful to watch them turn their backs to return to Camp V. This day had been a far more demanding test of their commitment than of ours, as we had the sweet incentive of the summit luring us on the next day. We remained outside preparing our equipment and securing our tent until after midnight, reducing ourselves to a devastating level of exhaustion.

On May 20, at five A.M., we arose covered in spindrift that had been driven through the walls of the tent during our few hours of respite. We made the first and one of the only radio calls of the day. The boys indicated that the lenticular cloud was holding its ground and obscuring the summit from 28,000 feet and above. Their words were barely audible over the screaming wind. We stepped out of the tent at nine A.M., eight hours behind schedule, and loaded up our packs with one oxygen bottle, 600 feet of 6mm Kevlar rope, and a few pitons. I tucked a portable radio on full volume deep inside my jackets. Our oxygen would last ten hours on a low flow rate of two litres per minute. All was not in our favour as we plodded up the icy couloir where trailings of old ropes hauntingly dangled on the walls. In the initial stages of the day, Dwayne's sense of conviction was considerably stronger than mine. As the day wore on, when his energy waned, mine would surge. We played off one another's fluctuating strengths throughout the day. To save time, we elected to climb unroped. When we reached the rock pitches at the Yellow Band, we began to string the rope out. A few hundred feet later we came together, having both assumed a much different mode of operation. The climbing had consumed our disappointment and pessimism. A very intense level of concentration and commitment prevailed. Every now and then I'd get a boost from the voices that crackled over the radio inside my jacket from our anxious onlookers 10,000 feet below. By five o'clock in the afternoon we had covered half the elevation to the summit. With no verbal communication necessary, we continued on. We seemed to be operating in perfect synchronism, matched in thought, determination, and decision. The voices that wafted up from the depths of my jacket had a marked change in tone. Now I was hearing the odd broken phrase with the words, bivouac, or benighted and speculations of where we would spend the night. We were unquestionably on our way to the top, and we certainly didn't have any intentions of spending the night out. The wind had died to a low roar confining us to the protection of the face on the summit pyramid. One final step of fifth-class climbing and we gained the endless ridge.

We stepped onto the summit at sunset, nine P.M. We wrestled with flags and cameras for twenty minutes, then turned our attention to the descent. Unfortunately the conditions would not allow us to sit on our backsides and surrender to a quick slide back home and live to see our friends' smiles the next day. Darkness intercepted us at about 28,500 feet on the traverse back into the couloir. We were separated about halfway down where we reached our fixed ropes. We both continued alone under the assumption that everything was under control but not particularly fun. We were slipping deeper and deeper into a very efficient state

of function, that of survival. Meanwhile downstairs, the team helplessly watched as our head lamps grew further and further apart. I was too preoccupied to realize the radio had ceased working before the summit.

I arrived at Camp VI ninety minutes before Dwayne. During the wait, my mind had its first chance to register anything beyond putting one foot below the other. I thought of the implications of having separated from Dwayne; my thoughts raced randomly, entertaining everything from the best to the worst of scenarios. One of the most pleasant memories I recall was the sound of Dwayne's footsteps outside the tent at 3:30 A.M. During the interim before dawn we managed to create a few more exciting moments for ourselves when a mishandled stove blew up, leaving us quite cold and thirsty, and me with little facial hair.

At dawn, we reassembled the radio, and pushed the button to re-establish contact with the rest of the team. There was no question as to whether it was a team success. Dwayne and I were lucky enough to climb off their shoulders to reach the pinnacle of everyone's efforts.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Tibet

ASCENT: Mount Everest, 8848 meters, 29,028 feet, via West Ridge and Hornbein Couloir; First Ascent by a North American Woman, May 20, 1986 (Congdon, Wood).

PERSONNEL: Jim Elzinga, leader, James Blench, Barry Blanchard, Kevin Doyle, Dwayne Congdon, Dave McNab, Chris Shank, Dan Griffin, Laurie Skreslet, Albi Sole, Sharon Wood, Jane Fearing, Dr. Robert Lee.

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