

Everest and Lhotse

GLENN PORZAK*



OUR 1990 AMERICAN Everest-Lhotse Expedition had a dual objective. Not only would we seek to climb Mount Everest but we would also attempt neighboring Lhotse, the world's fourth highest peak. This was also the highest mountain unclimbed by Americans. Moreover, if we climbed them both, we would be the first American team to climb two 8000ers on the same expedition.

The members included Peter Athans, Wally Berg, Mike Browning, Ron Crozter, Dr. Charlie Jones, Andy Lapkass, Dana Coffield, Brent Manning, Scott Fischer and me. The entire climbing team had extensive Himalayan experience and six had previously attempted Mount Everest.

After flying to Lukla and the standard approach march via Namche Bazaar, Periche and Lobuche, an advance party reached the 17,600-foot Base Camp at the foot of the Khumbu Icefall on March 24, while the remainder of the team got there on March 29.

By April 6, the route through the icefall was completed and we began to make the first carries up to Camp I. Having been on Everest in 1981 and 1989, I was impressed by how the icefall had changed. This year, we were able to stay closer to the center of the icefall, which was more direct and less exposed to the avalanches from the west shoulder than in the past. However, there were more vertical ice walls which had to be fixed with ladders and there was far more movement than in past years. During the course of the expedition, the route underwent a series of radical transformations and had to be continually reestablished and so by the latter part of April, it was as bad as ever.

Camp I was sited at the top of the icefall at 19,700 feet. Within a few days, we had established a route through the crevasse-ridden lower section of the Western Cwm and located Camp II, three miles up the Cwm at 21,300 feet. Once fully acclimatized, we eliminated Camp I and made the climb to Camp II directly from Base Camp.

We were ready to begin pushing the route up the Lhotse Face. The bergschrund at its base had opened and forced us to bypass it on the right and then to traverse back onto the main part. Above, substantial sections of water ice were encountered, with isolated pitches ranging upwards of 70°. Even with fixed rope, the ascent of the Lhotse Face was exhausting and an average of five hours was required to make the climb from Camp II to Camp III at 23,500 feet.

* Glenn Porzak is probably the first president of an Alpine Club to have reached the summit of Mount Everest during his term in office. —*Editor*.

PLATE 14

Photo by Glenn Porzak

**The summit of EVEREST from the
South Summit. Peter Athans may be
seen near the Summit.**



From Camp III, another 600 to 700 vertical feet of ice climbing led to the Yellow Band. There were three rock pitches across the band, given the dry conditions on the mountain. At 25,000 feet, the rock ended and an easy stretch of snow led to the Geneva Spur, which was an enjoyable mixture of snow and rock scrambling. By the third week of April, the route had been fixed to the top of the Geneva Spur and we began our first carries to Camp IV on the South Col.

While most of the team was stocking this camp, a small group was given the task of establishing a Lhotse-Camp IV at 25,800 feet on Lhotse's west face. The routes on Everest and Lhotse are identical up to 25,250 feet, where, above the Yellow Band, the routes diverge. For Lhotse, you head southeast from the Geneva Spur towards a small platform which is just to the right of the start of the pencil-thin couloir which dissects Lhotse's west face. This couloir is without doubt one of the most aesthetic mountaineering lines in all the Himalaya. Up to 1990, this was the only way Lhotse had been climbed. This 2000-vertical-feet-high couloir is all the more impressive as it leads directly to Lhotse's final 100-foot summit cone.

Less than a month after we had arrived at Base Camp, we were ready for the first summit attempts. On April 27, Athans, Browning, Coffield and I, accompanied by Sherpas Ang Jambu, Dawa Nuru and Nima Tashi, spent a hideous night on the South Col with temperatures of -20° F and winds of 80 miles per hour. No one slept and all agreed that we would have to descend. This was a wise decision, for the storm continued for six of the next seven days.

Meanwhile, the Lhotse team of Berg, Fischer and Lapkass waited at Camp II for the weather to break. On May 3, they set off for Camp III. Unfortunately, on the 4th, a fierce snowstorm continued to engulf the whole mountain, forcing them to descend.

The morning of May 6 dawned beautiful and the next day the Everest team climbed back to Camp II despite deep snow. Thus, on May 8, Athans, Browning, Coffield, Manning and I with four Sherpas ascended to Camp III. On the morning of May 9, we set out for the South Col at 7:30 A.M. but almost turned back at the Yellow Band because of the adverse weather. We did continue and could hardly believe it when the wind died down. Usually it was the other way around. Just after two P.M., we reached the South Col, relieved to see that most of our tents were still standing. It had been eleven days since we had left the col after our first summit attempt.

Throughout the afternoon, we kept brewing liquids and testing oxygen apparatus. During the summit assault, we would each carry a 13-pound bottle which would provide eight to nine hours of oxygen at a flow rate of two liters per minute. In addition, we each had a bottle for sleeping at Camp IV, which was set at a liter per minute. At six P.M., the nearly balmy weather changed drastically. However, after two hours the storm blew itself out, the mountain cleared, the stars came out and the wind dropped. In a few hours we would have a full moon.

Our group of nine set off at eleven P.M. on the night of May 9 in bitterly cold weather. For the first $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours we climbed up a series of steep snow gullies which led to the southeast ridge, with Athans breaking trail most of the way. At

PLATE 15

Photo by Glenn Porzak

**The Last Steps to the Summit of
Mount Everest.**



roughly 2:30 A.M., at 27,500 feet, we reached the southeast ridge, along which we began to inch. Here, the slightest misstep would have sent one plunging 9000 vertical feet down the Kangshung Face. With the deceptive shadows cast by the moon, the climbing was tricky, requiring complete concentration.

Above 28,000 feet, the slope leading to the South Summit steepened. Many believe that this, not the Hillary Step, is the crux. It was 4:30 A.M., still dark, and the slope was not only steep but avalanche-prone.

When we were less than 300 feet below the South Summit, the sun suddenly exploded out into the sky in an almost instantaneous transition from darkness to sunlight. Thirty minutes later, we were standing on the 28,700-foot South Summit of Everest.

Whoever coined the phrase "knife-edged ridge" must have had the final 300 vertical feet of Everest in mind. Composed primarily of steep snow flanks with massive cornices, the constant winds had exposed far more rock than is typically seen in photographs. However, the most impressive aspect is the mind-numbing exposure on both sides. We didn't stop long and set out from the South Summit at 6:20. After an awkward rock step, twenty minutes of delicately traversing the corniced ridge brought us to the famed Hillary Step. More strenuous than technically difficult, the Hillary Step was virtually the only portion of the final summit ridge where you could temporarily escape from the exposure.

At the top of the step, the summit looked tantalizingly close, but it was not the summit but a final cornice which unbelievably extended some 30 feet off into space. Just then Athans came into sight, as he descended. Upon reaching the top, his oxygen bottle was on empty and so he spent less than five minutes before heading down.

Minutes later, I had passed the final cornice and for the first time that day the terrain eased up. Ahead of me was a rounded crest of snow with a small outcropping of rock just below. There was no mistake about it. This was indeed the summit. It was 7:15 A.M. on May 10, 1990.

Shortly after summiting, I was joined by Ang Jambu. His presence made me realize how, without the help of our Sherpas, we simply would not have climbed Everest and subsequently Lhotse. During the next half hour, we were joined by Nima Tashi, Coffield, Manning, Browning and finally Dawa Nuru. Only Ang Dorje was forced to turn back just below the South Summit when his oxygen regulator malfunctioned.

By ten A.M., the weather had deteriorated and we were descending in nearly white-out conditions. By that time we were below the southeast ridge and it made no real difference. The late-night start had paid off. Tired, but happy, in small groups everyone had reached the South Col by 2:30 P.M. We were met by Andy Lapkass, who had changed his mind about attempting Lhotse. That evening, the weather cleared and on May 11, Lapkass summited Everest with Tim Macartney-Snape. Six years earlier, Tim had been the first Australian to climb Mount Everest. This time he repeated the ascent, starting from sea-level.

On May 12, Berg and Fischer moved up to Lhotse-Camp IV. The good weather of the past two days was starting to change for the worse and a try at

Lhotse would have to be made now or never. The mountain was totally shrouded in mist and any summit attempt would be in less than ideal conditions.

At 10:45 A.M. the next morning, May 13, Berg's voice burst over the radio. He and Fischer were on the summit of Lhotse! The entire camp erupted in cheers. As the shouting subsided, we learned that the two had departed from their high camp at four A.M. and climbed the west-face couloir in nearly white-out conditions. The 45° couloir was continuous except for a 40-foot constriction at 27,000 feet. Once surmounted, they continued up the couloir to the base of the summit pinnacle, a 90-foot rock pitch. The summit itself was a cone of snow just big enough for the two climbers to straddle.

As the last ladders were brought out of the icefall on May 18, I could finally savor the fact that all the members of the climbing team had summited either Everest or Lhotse. It had been a fine team effort by a super group of individuals.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Mahalangur Himal, Nepal.

ASCENTS: Mount Everest, 8848 meters, 29,028 feet, via the Southeast Ridge; summit reached on May 10, 1990 (Athans, Browning, Coffield, Manning, Porzak, and Sherpas Ang Jambu, Dawa Nuru and Nima Tashi) and on May 11, 1990 (Lapkass).

LHOTSE, 8501 meters, 27,891 feet, via West Face; summit reached May 13, 1990 (Berg, Fischer).

PERSONNEL: Glenn Porzak, leader, Peter Athans, Wally Berg, Michael Browning, Dana Coffield, Ron Crotzer, Scott Fischer, Dr. Charles Jones, Andrew Lapkass, Brent Manning.

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