



AAC Publications

Burke Khang, South Face and Southeast Ridge

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal, Khumbu Section

On May 23, 2014, as I was hunkered down in my tent at high camp on the north side of Mt. Everest, the government of Nepal opened 104 new peaks for climbing. One of them was named after me. Thus began a three-year odyssey, which some friends and family members have characterized as an obsession, to be the first person to climb my eponymous peak. [Editor's note: Burke Khang was named by the government of Nepal upon the recommendation of the Nepal Mountaineering Association, in recognition of Burke's contributions to the promotion of mountain climbing, trekking, and tourism in the country.]

Burke Khang (6,942m) lies on the frontier ridge east-northeast of Hungchi (7,029m). I made three unsuccessful attempts to climb it—in autumn 2015, autumn 2016, and winter 2017—failing each time because of conditions on the mountain or weather. I decided to make one last attempt in the autumn of 2017. I was joined by Noel Hanna, my good friend from Ireland and an accomplished climber, guide, and extreme adventurer, and by Micah Kershner, an alpine climber from New Jersey. We were accompanied by Richard Adler, a trekker, and Alex Buisse, a professional photographer and pilot of our camera drone. We were supported by four Sherpas: Naga Dorjee Sherpa, Pemba Tshering Sherpa, Samden Bhote, and Tshering Tashi Sherpa.

On September 30 we arrived at base camp (5,300m) on the west side of the Gaunara Glacier. My planned itinerary called for rest days there, at Camp 1, and Camp 2. I informed the team that, at age 75, I would not deviate from that program. Noel, Micah, Naga, Pemba, and Samden moved up to Camp 1 on the following day. Noel and the Sherpas had arrived earlier and already had begun fixing lines up the mountain, so they did not need a rest day. Micah decided to forego the rest day and move with them; this may have contributed to the altitude sickness that beset him at Camp 2. Tshering Sherpa and I began our move up the east couloir of the south face on October 3. This was the toughest climbing of my life, since the route is incredibly long and steep (much of it 75°+). The snow was soft and sugary, and the couloir also extremely dangerous because of a fusillade of rock and ice that constantly rained down at warp speed from above. It took 10 hours to reach Camp 1 (6,200m)—I was exhausted and pretty much collapsed in my tent.

On October 4, important decisions had to be made. Our weather forecast warned of heavy snow and high winds in the next few days. Noel, Micah, and the Sherpa team planned to move to Camp 2 and continue fixing lines to the summit. I felt strong and invigorated from my night of deep sleep, but I was not going to move up without taking a rest day. Noel asked if I wanted the team to wait for me before leaving Camp 2 for the summit push. My answer was unequivocal: If the team saw an opportunity to summit, they should take advantage of that opportunity and not wait for me.

Noel, Micah, and the Sherpas made good time, reaching Camp 2 (6,600m) in just over three hours, despite challenging climbing, with technical rock, fragile snow bridges, and sideways traverses of steep ice walls. On the 5th, Tshering and I began our move to Camp 2. Within minutes of our departure, I received a radio call advising me that Noel and the Sherpas were on their way to the summit. Micah was suffering from altitude sickness, so he remained at Camp 2. I decided to remain at Camp 1 and await the results of the summit push. If Noel and the Sherpas did not reach the summit, I would move to Camp 2 the following day and be part of a second summit bid.

Noel, Naga, Samden, and Pemba had left Camp 2 at 6 a.m. Their entire route was studded with deep

crevasses, making navigation difficult and perilous. When they reached the headwall below the summit ridge, their plan had been to follow a direct line to the summit. This proved to be impossible when they found it was nearly 90°, so they moved east and attacked the headwall where the distance to the ridge was shorter and the angle more forgiving (70°).

The crest featured more crevasses and unstable cornices, which were studiously avoided. Forward progress was slowed by either deep snow or soft sugary snow. Finally, they achieved the first camel hump and what they thought was the summit. Alas, not so: It was a false summit. Onward to the second camel hump. At 12:05 p.m., Noel, Naga, Samden, and Pemba reached the highest point, where Noel pulled out a bottle of champagne from his backpack, so the team could toast their success. It was a truly joyous moment for everyone on the Burke Khang team, though no one was more pleased than me.

We are currently working on a documentary. The video below has beautiful aerial footage of Burke Khang taken from a helicopter after the 2017 winter expedition.

– Bill Burke, USA

Images



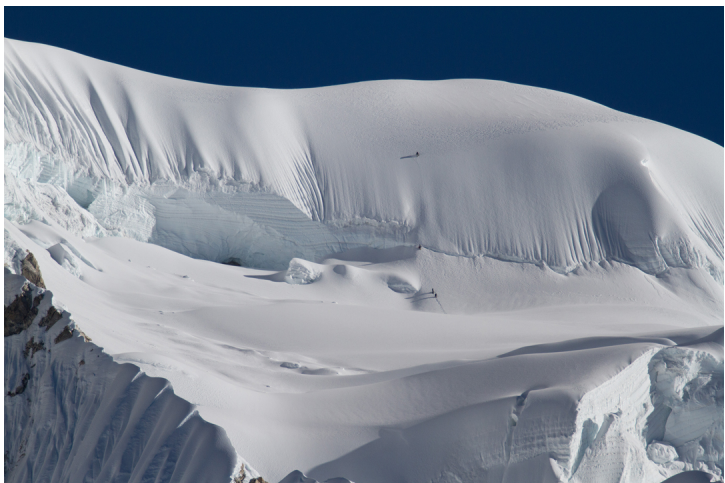
Looking north up the Gaunara Glacier to Burke Khang (6,942m) and the route of ascent up the south face and southeast ridge. The high peak to its left is Hungchi (7,029m), first climbed in 2003 by Japanese via the southwest ridge.



The final section of the southeast ridge leading to the summit of Burke Khang.



Above Camp 2. The team is climbing the headwall onto the crest of the summit ridge. The summit is top left.



Climbing the headwall onto the summit ridge of Burke Khang.



Camp 1 on Burke Khang. The summit is the highest point visible in the center of the picture, and Camp 2 was placed on the glacier shelf below and to the right. Climbers can be seen making their way up the lower part of the snow spur leading to the shelf. On the left is part of Hungchi.



Naga Dorje Sherpa descending from the summit of Burke Khang. Behind lie Tibetan peaks above the West Rongbuk Glacier.



Moving up the east couloir of the south face of Burke Khang.



Noel Hanna and Naga Dorje Sherpa on the summit of Burke Khang.



From left to right: Naga Dorjee Sherpa, Samden Bhote, and Pemba Tshering Shepa on the summit of Burke Khang.

Article Details

Author	Bill Burke
Publication	AAJ
Volume	60
Issue	92
Page	0
Copyright Date	2018
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions