



AAC Publications

Mount Everest, 1963 (Part I)

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal, Khumbu Section

Editor's Note: The story of the two American ascents of Everest in 1963 appeared in the 1964 AAJ in one long article, with the first part, written by Norman Dyhrenfurth, covering the ascent by the South Col route, and the second part, written by Willi Unsoeld, covering the first ascent of the West Ridge. Because of the great length of the article, it has been divided into two parts for this website. Part II is found [here](#).

IN June of 1960, upon returning to Kathmandu from the Swiss Dhaulagiri Expedition, I applied to His Majesty's Government of Nepal for permission to lead an American team to Everest in 1961. Months went by and soon it was too late. The next year had been reserved for the second Indian attempt. I reapplied for 1963, and finally on May 10, 1961 permission was granted. Now all that remained was the financing, organization, selection of team, and such minor matters as how to support my family in the interim.

Team member James Ramsey Ullman once described the ensuing struggles on the precipices of organization and finance very aptly: "In our United States, raising money for a mountaineering venture is only slightly less difficult than, say, soliciting funds for the erection of a statue of Karl Marx on the White House Lawn ..." Contrary to the popular belief that ours was the biggest and wealthiest expedition that ever set sail for the Himalaya, we were obliged to ask the United California Bank for a \$20,000 loan to get everybody and everything back to this country. It took two and a half years of full-time, all-out effort on my part — with an important assist from our treasurer Charles B. Huestis, Vice President and treasurer of the Hughes Aircraft Company — to set up a non-profit corporation and secure the support of more than 350 sponsors. It was a foregone conclusion, based on frustrating experience of all previous American expeditions, that it would be utterly hopeless to achieve my original budgetary goal of \$180,000 for pure mountaineering. Deputy leader William E. Siri and I decided as far back as the fall of 1960 to develop a scientific program which could be carried out by the men who were to go high on the mountain, rather than by a separate group of scientists. What eventually evolved were studies designed to investigate certain fundamental problems in glacio-physics, human behavior, and biology. In formulating the research program, care was taken to ensure compatibility of research procedures with expedition operations and the limitations imposed by time and field conditions.

The news media spoke of our final budget as being in excess of \$400,000, but the greater part of that impressive amount went for scientific equipment, salaries of the principal investigators, organizational and administrative expenses before, during and after the expedition, heavy production costs of a full-length documentary film, and last but not least the around-the-world tour of five Sherpas and our Nepalese Liaison Officer. The latter program was part of our contractual agreement with the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

As a final word on the much-publicized finances of AMEE, let me say that the two government-sponsored Indian Everest expeditions as well as the 1954 Italian K2 ascent were able to spend more on pure mountaineering than we did. And yet some European newspapers carried cartoons which showed the rich and vulgar Americans dismantling Everest piece by piece, with a huge moving van waiting at Base Camp to ship the mountain back to the United States !

In May of 1961 I received a letter from Lt. Col. James O. M. Roberts in Kathmandu, offering his services as transport and administrative officer. Although we had met only briefly before, I was well

aware of his outstanding record in Himalayan mountaineering and accepted his offer with alacrity. His contribution to the ultimate success of our venture was perhaps greater than anybody else's.

The final team was composed of nineteen Americans, one Britisher and one Nepalese liaison officer. As climbing expeditions go, it was a large one, but I firmly believed that a major objective called for a major effort.

The Advance Guard reached Kathmandu early in February, after having fought and won the traditional battle with Indian and Nepalese Customs to get some 27 tons of food and equipment into the country. We were joined here by the Main Body on February 13. Headquarters in Kathmandu was the Hotel Royal where the northern compound was made available for the staggering array of our gear. Here we were joined by 32 of our Sherpas who had been carefully selected by Jimmy Roberts and myself.

Then came February 20 — the date set more than two years before for the beginning of the trek to Everest. On the 19th, Jimmy Roberts had gone off by truck to Banepa with most of the Sherpas and all the loads, and the rest of us followed on the morning of the 20th. Our army of porters was there — Tamangs from the Kathmandu valley and Sherpas from Solu Khumbu — and for almost three hours they filed past in endless procession, while their loads and identification tags were assigned to them. Thanks to the organizational genius of Jimmy Roberts we left in good order and on time.

The final figure was 909 porter-loads, each weighing an average of 62 pounds. In single file, bent under loads and head-straps, AMEE's army moved out of the field at Banepa onto the trail beyond. At last we were on our way.

The approach to Everest from Kathmandu is well-known and has been described in previous accounts. Nevertheless a few highlights may be of interest.

On March 1, the chain bridge across the Likhu Khola broke after most of the expedition had crossed it. No team members were on it at the time, but several porters fell into the torrent and were swept downstream, while others hit the rocks near the water's edge. Fortunately there were no injuries worse than cuts and bruises.

Two days later, near the village of Junbesi, a terribly burned woman was carried into camp for examination by our doctors. They agreed she had no chance of survival without hospitalization. A message was sent by expedition radio asking that the only available helicopter be sent out from Kathmandu. The woman was flown back to the United Missions Hospital where she made an astonishing recovery. A1 Auten, our communications officer, did an amazing job of contacting Kathmandu by way of an amateur operator in Australia. My wife Sally, as AMEE's liaison officer at the Hotel Royal had done the impossible in securing the services of the helicopter in record time, and the expedition's meager cash balance was further reduced by almost \$2,000 charged for the evacuation. And yet, the general reaction around Kathmandu when word of what we had done got around was less than enthusiastic. In that part of the world life is cheap. What was a burned woman? "It is only the rich Americans showing off," was a not uncommon comment. But we were glad we did it.

Near the village of Ghat, in the Dudh Kosi valley, we had our first encounter with smallpox. Again word was sent back to Kathmandu, and vaccine was soon being sent in by special runners and part-way by aeroplane. One of our porters died after he had left the expedition, and the disease threatened to spread to epidemic proportions. Although a number of Solu Khumbu people succumbed in the weeks to come, the combined efforts of our physicians and Sir Edmund Hillary's team in vaccinating more than a thousand Sherpas brought the disease under control. As usual there were hair-raising accounts in the world press which had us all but wiped out, in full retreat from the mountain.

Namche Bazar was reached on March 7. Here the scantily-clad Tamangs were paid off and replaced

by Solu Khumbu porters. Another crisis developed when Chotari, our Assistant Sirdar, developed symptoms of acute appendicitis, and one of the young Sherpanis came down with double pneumonia. Again luck was with us, and both patients pulled through.

On the 9th we reached the lamasery of Thangboche in the midst of a heavy snowstorm. While the porters were sent back to their villages with instructions to return on the evening of March 14, climbers and Sherpas spent their time sorting out equipment and on acclimatization hikes and climbs. I was happy to renew my acquaintance with the reincarnate High Lama, who graciously invited us all to dinner. We reciprocated with donations to the lamasery, and, when His Holiness developed an unbearable toothache, Drs. Gil Roberts and Dave Dingman came to the rescue and pulled the worst of five badly infected teeth. They did not dare pull all of them for fear of some lamaistic dorje or thunderbolt.

The weather began to improve, and on March 15 we were ready to move on. The night of the 16th was spent at Pheriche, and Lobuje (16,175 feet) was reached the next afternoon. All the porters – around 500 – were sent back to Thangboche, where Jimmy Roberts and our excellent liaison officer Captain Prabakher Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana (whose somewhat simpler nickname "Noddy" dates back to Jimmy's 1960 Annapurna II expedition) had stayed behind with the remaining loads.

On March 18 some of us tried to break trail as far as Base Camp, but adverse deep snow at this early date halted us at Gorak Shep, the old Swiss Lake Camp. We simply could not move from Lobuje to Base Camp in one day as we had planned. Jimmy arrived on the 19th with 300 porters and most but not all of the remaining gear – a number of the porters did not cherish the thought of carrying through two feet of snow and refused to go beyond Thangboche. Of the 300 men and women who had come up with Jimmy, only 170 were willing to stay at Lobuje. There was nothing to do but to ferry loads from Lobuje to Base Camp with an intermediate camp at Gorak Shep.

On the morning of the 20th a major portion of AMEE's forces moved up to Gorak Shep, and on March 21 some of us established and occupied Base Camp at 17,800 feet, closer to the Khumbu icefall and earlier than any expedition before. Although transportation problems were greatly increased by the heavy winter snows, thanks to the talents of Jimmy Roberts and his way with the Sherpas, no serious bottlenecks ever developed in ferrying all our loads to the base of the mountain. This put us a few days ahead of schedule.

When application was made to the Nepalese Government, I had asked for permission to attempt not only Everest, but Lhotse and Nuptse as well. During my lonely crusade in search of finances, the thought of a three-way assault was not without merit. But then there was the West Ridge, one of the great remaining challenges of the mountain. Some of us had studied it with more than casual interest in 1952 and 1955, and more than one of the Swiss Everesters of 1956 assured me that a reconnaissance of 'the West Shoulder had been considered as part of their program. Jimmy Roberts wrote me on August 1, 1962: "... By the way, the West Ridge gives rise to interesting thoughts – it would take one close to the old pre-war north face route ..."

During our pre-expedition training session on Mount Rainier, I brought up the subject of the West Ridge and discovered that others too had given the matter thought. We agreed on a reconnaissance of the West Shoulder but decided not to discuss our plans with anybody, at least not for the time being. The final decision was made during the approach march, while we were camped at Chaubas. It came as a result of a group discussion which I recorded in my diary in some detail: "... Now that we have no more 'camp followers', we talked very frankly about the thing that had been on the minds of all the climbers: the West Ridge, which, if we can pull it off, would be one of the biggest things in Himalayan mountaineering. It was interesting to see how highly motivated the whole group was. There was comparatively little interest in Lhotse and Nuptse although I had explained to them that initially, when we were trying to raise funds, the idea of an American "Grand Slam" of three peaks had its appeal. But to most of the men that meant very little. In fact, Tom Hornbein, who is such an idealist and so enthusiastic about the West Ridge, declared himself in favor of throwing everything into that

attempt, even if it meant jeopardizing success altogether. At this point I had to speak up strongly. I told them that I was in favor of making a serious stab at the West Ridge, or at least a thorough reconnaissance. If it proved feasible, we would push up a line of camps, but at the same time we would build up the South Col route. If the West Ridge proves impossible, we will at least have taken some good pictures of the Tibetan side of Everest from an entirely new point of view. But if the ridge is possible, we could attempt a traverse by having some men go up from the West and come down toward the South Col, and two — or perhaps four — do the same in reverse. That of course would be almost too much to hope for. In any case it was agreed that we should certainly make a stab at Lhotse as well, oxygen and other logistics permitting ...”

On March 22, Willi Unsoeld, Jim Whittaker, Lute Jerstad, Nawang Gombu and two Solu Khumbu men entered the Icefall and in a tough but rewarding day's work forced a passage better than halfway to the top before returning to Base for the night. They hacked steps, placed fixed ropes and marked the route with willow wands. The next day a second team went up to improve and continue the route. This consisted of Jake Breitenbach, Dick Pownall, Dr. Gil Roberts and the Sherpas Ang Pema and Ila Tsering. At about two p.m. they found themselves at a steep wall of ice, some thirty feet high, to which the first party had attached a rope. This was near the future site of a supply dump, in the general area of the former Swiss and British Camp II. Pownall, Ang Pema and Breitenbach were on one rope, with Roberts and Ila Tsering on another. "I climbed an ice rib," Dick Pownall reported, "which parallels the ice cliff and is separated from it by some eight feet. I called down to Jake to ask Gil — who was in a better position to see — if there was a way around this spot; it looked spooky. There was no other way, so we proceeded, and I asked Jake to untie the end of the fixed line so I could use some slack and ice-screws to secure it better to the cliff. Just then there was a noise, and everything under, around and above started moving. Since we had been climbing over similar terrain all day without the slightest movement, my first impression was shocked disbelief. My next was movement and the thought 'so this is death'."

A huge section of the wall collapsed, burying Jake Breitenbach under tons of ice. Death was instantaneous. Recovery of the body was attempted but proved impossible. Neither Gil Roberts nor Ila Tsering were hurt. Dick Pownall suffered minor injuries, while Ang Pema, with deep facial lacerations and a mild concussion, had to be carried down to Base Camp by a hurriedly dispatched rescue team. Thanks to the competence of our physicians he was soon patched together and well on his way to recovery.

Sudden and violent tragedy had struck. During the next two days, while we were trying to find our way back to life and purpose, there was no movement of men in the Icefall. The 25th was spent passing out clothing and equipment, and by the end of the day we were again a team instead of a group of lonely and severely shaken individuals. We had lost a close friend and an outstanding mountaineer, but as deaths go, Jake Breitenbach's was a clean-cut kindly one.

Based on experiences gained in 1952 and 1955, I had been determined not to have a regular camp in the Icefall, and now I was more so than ever. But as in 1955, it became necessary to place a supply dump at about 19,200 feet, better than halfway to the top. This was done on the 26th by Corbet, Dingman, Bishop, Auten and twelve Sherpas. They improved the route, placed fixed ropes, built wooden bridges across the largest crevasses and put up a small tent at the Dump for emergency use only.

The breakthrough to the top of the Icefall and Camp I (20,200 feet) was accomplished on March 28 by Willi Unsoeld, Big Jim Whittaker, Lute Jerstad and Nawang Gombu. The final obstacle was a 70-foot vertical ice wall which ran clear across the glacier. Three hours of hard work with ice-screws, rope-pulleys and Jümar ascenders put them on top where they had their first look into the Western Cwm. Gombu confessed to me later that he had never seen such climbing before. By comparison his work as instructor at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling seemed like child's play. He didn't know this kind of climbing existed.

Once the 70-foot wall had been tamed and made easy for heavy load-carrying by the use of several sections of aluminum ladder, fixed ropes, bucket steps and the tunneling of the uppermost portion, we were ready to establish Advance Base (Camp II) at 21,350 feet. On March 31 Big Jim, upon arrival at the campsite, reported via radio "If there should be a good moon tonight, I may decide to take a stroll up to the South Col!" In more serious vein he thought that the approaches to the West Ridge were subject to some avalanche danger, but that the difficulties were by no means insurmountable. That evening I wrote in my diary: "If our health continues to improve, and if the weather stays good, we may climb Everest by May 1st!"

The time had come to hold a "summit meeting" at Advance Base. Leaving Base Camp with my old friend Ang Dawa IV on April 1 and filming some exciting scenes along the way, we spent one night at the Dump and the next at Camp I. When I reached Advance Base on April 3, the warm welcome given to me by our reconnaissance group was most gratifying. They had begun to feel cut off from the expedition's main body. Eight men were up here, and the rest at Base Camp. Eighteen Sherpas were stationed at Camp I and comprised the "upper ferry", while the balance of the Sherpa team — reinforced by 12 "special" Icefall porters who for the time being slept at Base Camp — worked at lower altitudes.

Long before we had reached Base Camp, each man was assigned according to his personal preference. On the West Ridge Willi Unsoeld would be in charge of operations, with Tom Hornbein, Barry Corbet, Jake Breitenbach, Dick Emerson, Dave Dingman and Barry Bishop on his team. I had planned to be in charge of the South Col operations, with Will Siri, Jim Whittaker, Lute Jerstad, Dick Pownall and Gil Roberts on the team. The others would act in support of either group.

A first reconnaissance of the approaches to the West Ridge had carried the men about halfway between Advance Base and the West Shoulder (24,000 feet). In the following week a safe route was worked out which circumvented the dangerous-looking icefall immediately above Camp II. By circling up-valley from camp, they rose above the icefall. Then a lengthy westward traverse along the top of the icefall brought them onto the foot of the huge snow slopes leading up to the West Shoulder itself. Because of the length of the route, a dump was placed, but its use as an actual camp was discouraged because of avalanche danger after a heavy snowfall. Loads could be carried there in a day and dumped by men who returned to Camp II for the night and then picked up on the next day on the carry to Camp III-W (W = West). This camp was eventually established at 23,800 feet just below the crest of the Shoulder. As yet no one had seen the ridge head on, and there was general agreement that another reconnaissance in force was needed to determine whether a) there was a feasible route, and b) there were possible sites for at least three and preferably four camps between 23,800 and 28,000 feet. Only then would we be in a position to determine our ultimate course of action.

Concurrently with the West Ridge probes the South Col route was reconnoitered and advanced: Camp III on the first terrace of the Lhotse Face, at 22,900 feet, and Camp IV was to be as close to 25,000 feet as possible. During the next few days some time was lost in trying to follow the route taken by the Indian expedition of 1960, with Nawang Gombu, a member of that group, pointing out the way. The changes which had taken place since then were such that our men found the old Indian route impractical and eventually chose a line of ascent which closely followed our route in 1955.

Satisfied with progress made thus far, I returned to Base Camp on April 5. A number of changes had occurred in the Icefall, but Annullu and his "road gang" — he had volunteered for the dangerous and important job of keeping the Icefall open — were busily hacking away threatening séracs and rebuilding collapsed bridges.

A major problem was to keep up with the advance parties, and to speed up the carries through the Icefall. Although Jimmy Roberts was able to get excellent work out of the Sherpas, there was a strong feeling among the men at Advance Base that heavier loads should be carried. Four oxygen bottles weighed 56 pounds, which we considered a reasonable load. After some initial grumbling most of the Sherpas carried that much and more. Some of the Americans carried up to 75 pounds at times, but

they did not do it on a constant, day-by-day basis as did the Sherpas.

Al Auten, our communications officer, was relieved of his duties by Barry Prather and moved up on April 6. I asked Jimmy Roberts to occupy Camp I on the 7th to expedite matters there. Will Siri — who by now had completed his physiology program at Base Camp — went up on the 8th, and Dick Emerson, Jim Lester, Ang Dawa and I followed on the 9th.

In the afternoon of April 13 Willi Unsoeld, Tom Hornbein, Dave Dingman and Barry Bishop returned to Advance Base from their second reconnaissance of the West Ridge. They were all tired, and Dave appeared to be utterly exhausted. They had reached the rocky summit pyramid of Everest at 25,100 feet. Although convinced that there was a route, even the most optimistic among them spoke of serious logistical problems and an apparent lack of suitable campsites. Dave did not like the route and asked to be reassigned to the South Col team. Barry Bishop had certain misgivings about the chances for success on the West Ridge. As professional photographer and staff member of the National Geographic Society, AMEE's largest single sponsor, he knew he was expected to take still pictures as high as possible. With Willi Unsoeld and Tom Hornbein as the number one assault team, his own opportunities for a crack at the top were rather slim. When he too asked to be reassigned to the South Col route, it became obvious that the West Ridge attempt would have to be postponed, at least for the time being.

On April 14 Lute Jerstad, Dick Pownall and seven Sherpas moved up to Camp III, while Jim Whittaker, Gombu and two Sherpas succeeded in establishing Camp IV at 24,900 feet. They came all the way down to Advance Base, tired, but very happy. Now all that remained to be done was to string fixed ropes across the Lhotse Couloir and Yellow Band, and the route to the South Col would be open.

As a result of a series of planning sessions, we decided to continue the West Ridge build-up on a limited scale, while the bulk of man-power and supplies was directed at the Col. There was much gloom in the West Ridge camp, and my chances of winning any popularity contest were rather slim. They were dedicated mountaineers, not glory seekers, and they stuck to their guns, even when given the chance to switch over to the "conventional" route. "Surely mountaineering is more than a matter of summits," wrote Willi Unsoeld in his diary, "even when the summit is that of Everest." For me, who had spent all these years in mounting the expedition, the situation was somewhat different. Mine was the overall responsibility for the success of the venture, and as much as I would have liked to gamble on the more challenging West Ridge route, I considered it safer to give preference to the South Col effort at this time and made the final decision accordingly.

There were to be two teams of four men each: The first assault group would consist of Big Jim Whittaker, Nawang Gombu (from Darjeeling), Barry Bishop and his Sherpa Girmi Dorje (from Solu Khumbu). The second team of Lute Jerstad, Dick Pownall, Ang Dawa and myself would move up one day behind the others in support and make its summit bid after the first team's attempt. It had been my hope to go as far as the South Col, but now, in view of the sad fact that Dan Doody, the only other professional film-maker, was utterly unable to acclimatize even to the altitude of Advance Base, Willi Unsoeld and others convinced me that I should at least try to carry a movie camera to the top. Our four-man team was in turn to be supported by Will Siri, Dave Dingman and two Sherpas. Those were our plans on April 14.

The next day Lute Jerstad, Dick Pownall, Chotari and Nima Tenzing (Thami) occupied Camp IV, while Barry Bishop, Dave Dingman and Dick Emerson (who had much difficulty with the altitude) went down to Base Camp for some much-needed rest.

On the morning of the 16th the men at Camp IV moved across the Lhotse Couloir toward the Yellow Band. There they encountered some difficulties due to icy conditions, but then they had passed the rocks and continued up through the steep bowl toward the crest of the Geneva Spur. Although their assigned task was to prepare the route across the Yellow Band with fixed ropes and return, ambition got the best of them, and they continued. All of us at Advance Base watched them with mounting

excitement until the Geneva Spur hid them from view. Late in the afternoon they reappeared on their way down, and the following message was transmitted to the outside via Base Camp radio: "At 3:30 P.M. on April 16 Luther Jerstad, Richard Pownall, and the Sherpas Nima Tenzing and Chotari reached the South Col at 26,200 feet. This is the earliest time of year that the Col has been attained. The next ten to twelve days will be spent in carrying food, oxygen, tents and gear to Camp V on the Col before Camp VI is established at 27,800 feet, preliminary to the first summit attempt. At the same time preparations are underway for the assault on the West Ridge."

The weather, which had been unusually good till now, began to act up and slowed down the South Col operation to such an extent that there was serious danger of physical and mental deterioration of all climbers. Heavy winds, cold and prolonged exposure to high altitude took their toll among Sherpas and Sahibs alike. April 21 brought near-tragedy: Dan Doody at Advanced Base complained of severe pain in one leg which was quickly diagnosed by Gil Roberts as thrombo-phlebitis. Anti-coagulants, bloodletting and ten days flat on his back saved Dan's life and enabled him to descend to Base Camp under his own power.

It snowed hard on April 25 and 26, and all activity in the Lhotse Face and beyond came to a halt. New snow presented avalanche danger. We discussed the problems of deterioration and the general feeling of low morale. Unless the weather improved within a day or two, we would have to go down to Base Camp or even lower to recuperate. I remembered Sir John Hunt's words of warning only too vividly. Will Siri recommended that both assault teams should go down immediately to avoid further deterioration. After a lively and sometimes heated discussion, during the course of which everybody had a chance to be heard, my final decision was to hang on for another day. If the weather showed no signs of improvement, we would all go down.

But the 27th dawned clear. High up the Lhotse Face the carrying teams were on the move again. Camp V on the South Col would soon be stocked. The first summit team left Advance Base for Camp III. The second group followed the next day. At the last minute Barry Bishop and I changed places, since Willi Unsoeld's persuasiveness had convinced me of the importance to the future American Mount Everest Foundation — in terms of income from the motion picture — that the first summit assault be recorded on film.

At Camp III, Big Jim, Gombu, Ang Dawa and I shared a four-man tent. For the first time we used oxygen for sleeping, one bottle for two men at a flow-rate of one liter per minute. This involved the use of T-joints and special plastic sleeping masks, but they were uncomfortable and rapidly filled up with saliva. I had to empty mine at least five times during the night, and the others fared little better. Although they used only half a liter of oxygen per minute per man, we decided to use Tom Hornbein's specially developed breathing mask from here on in. We slept better but used up twice the amount of oxygen.

On April 28 we moved up to Camp IV, accompanied by twelve heavily laden Sherpas. The four of us went on oxygen, and the 2000-foot climb — frequently interrupted by movie-making—was strenuous but not too exhausting. That evening my regulator developed a leak and most of the precious gas escaped before it reached the storage bladder. Ang Dawa immediately offered to exchange regulators with me, after I tried unsuccessfully to persuade one of the eight Sherpas who would make the final carry to Camp VI to give up his.

As a result of my filming the departure from Camp IV, Ang Dawa, Passang Temba and I were unable to catch up with the others. The weather deteriorated rapidly, and the long grind up the steep snow slopes and the traverse toward the Geneva Spur seemed endless and thoroughly exhausting. The route did not lead over the top, but cut across the ridge and from there almost horizontally into the South Col. It was snowing and blowing hard, and every few minutes we had to stop to clean our goggles. Then three Sherpas appeared through the storm, on their way down after having dumped their loads on the Col. Since Passang Temba was slated to descend with them, Ang Dawa and I distributed his load between us and continued with dogged determination. But with more than 70

pounds on my back I soon realized that I would never make it. Fortunately Big Jim and Gombu were aware of our situation, and they dispatched two men to take some of the weight off our backs. By the time we reached "the world's most desolate spot", I was staggering from fatigue in spite of the oxygen. The three four-man tents were buffeted by strong winds, and the South Col looked just as inhospitable as I had always imagined. Gombu was the only one with enough energy and drive left to come out of the tent and help me take off my crampons and unrope.

The night was cold and windy, but thanks to sleeping pills and oxygen we rested fairly comfortably. The oxygen consumption was a cause of grave concern to me. Because of our inability to tolerate the so-called "sleeping-mask", twice the allotted amount was used. Then there was the leaky regulator which more than doubled Ang Dawa's needs, and upon arrival on the Col we all remained on oxygen at a 1-liter flow while resting, in order to conserve our strength for the struggle ahead.

The morning of April 30 was extremely windy, but we were able to see the South Summit of Everest with a huge plume of snow. The Sherpas were eager to get started. Big Jim and Gombu were next to leave, while Ang Dawa and I stayed behind to film their departure. Again I wrestled with the faulty regulator, replaced parts, tightened every screw, but to no avail. By the time we were roped up and ready to leave, the eight Sherpas were out of sight, and Big Jim and Gombu were nothing but tiny dots.

We started off, and I felt fine. For the first time since leaving Advance Base did I feel reasonably certain that I would be able to reach the highest camp. As we approached the steep couloir, I felt a tug on the rope and discovered that Ang Dawa's breathing bag was deflated. This meant that half of his oxygen supply was gone. I cramponed down to him, changed bottles and threw away the empty. This reduced his load by 14 pounds, but we were greatly concerned about the continued infernal hiss of escaping oxygen.

The Sherpas waited among the rocks to the left of the couloir until Big Jim took over the lead. By the time we reached that point I began to tire, but on we went, belaying carefully across the couloir, and up over rotten rock covered with loose snow to the crest of the Southeast Ridge. Above, we could see the men putting up two small tents, but at our slow pace it took us hours to get there. We passed the ruins of the highest Indian camps, and some fifty feet below our camp we came upon the skeletal remains of the tent where Lambert and Tenzing spent that memorable night in May of 1952.

The eight Sherpas passed us on their way down. To my horror seven of them were still going on oxygen. Plans called for the eight partially consumed bottles to be left at Camp VI, but all of Big Jim's and Gombu's pleading was in vain. At last Dawa Tenzing relented and turned over his set so that Ang Dawa would finally have a good one.

It had taken ten men nearly two hours of hard work to carve a semilevel platform out of the mountainside and pitch two connecting two-man tents. I estimated our altitude to be no more than 27,450 feet, about 400 feet lower than I had hoped for. With the Sherpas halfway down to the Col, and the camp well-established, there was nothing to be done about it. Gombu assured us that ours was higher than the Indian camps, and the other Sherpas told Big Jim that this was the highest Sherpa carry ever made on Everest. Jim had no way of knowing at the time, but we were several hundred feet lower than Hillary and Tenzing's final camp. I was utterly exhausted at this point and barely able to crawl into our tent. Only later did it sink in that we were camped much too low, something that was to haunt me in the weeks and months to come.

The night was quite comfortable, but on the morning of May 1 there was a gigantic plume of snow directly above us, with Lhotse and Nuptse barely visible. Makalu was completely blotted out. After a quick breakfast — a cup of hot Jello per man — Big Jim and Gombu were on their way by 6:30. I told them: "Don't wait for us, we'll come along and see how high we can get. If the weather improves, we hope to reach the South Summit and film you guys on the final ridge." I had no illusion about making the summit. My 45th birthday was only six days off, my pack with two oxygen bottles, two still

cameras, a professional movie camera, extra clothing and film weighed around 55 pounds, while Ang Dawa carried at least that much. We roped up and began to follow the fast-fading tracks of Big Jim and Gombu. The wind blew so hard that they were soon filled with snow, and I had to break trail all over again. We moved very slowly, with the regulators set at the maximum rate of 4 liters per minute. The packs seemed terribly heavy, and the goggles filled up every few minutes with drifting snow. There was rotten rock under a foot of loose snow, with little or no chance for adequate belaying. After a traverse toward the left around steep rock ledges and up a snow couloir, we gained the ridge where the summit team's tracks were again visible. As we followed the ridge we saw no more than a few feet ahead of us, and I was uncomfortably aware of the fact that my right hand with the ice axe was inside Tibet, with a nearly vertical drop of more than 10,000 feet to the Kangchung Glacier. From time to time we looked over our shoulders at Lhotse, barely visible through the driving snow. We were just about even with its summit, then we were above it. On we went, following the faint tracks into nothingness. It was tough going, with three to four breaths for every step. I started counting steps, with a prolonged rest after every twenty, then after every ten. Suddenly there was a tug on the rope. Ang Dawa's breathing bag was empty, and he seemed to be in trouble. I cramponed down to him to discover that his first cylinder was used up. After changing bottles, we continued to climb. At a point where the ridge levels off before rising sharply toward the South Summit, half of my oxygen supply was gone, and Ang Dawa helped me change cylinders. I explained to him that this was the end of the line for us, but when I got ready to go down, he looked at me uncomprehendingly: "Up go, Bara Sahib?" said Ang Dawa, pointing. But I shook my head: "This is the point of no return. If we go on, we will have oxygen until we're about halfway between the South Summit and the Main Summit. Then we will run out of air, and we will never get down alive. We will also not reach the Main Summit, so we can't even be dead heroes on top!" And I tried to explain that our main function was to take movies as high as possible and to support Big Jim and Gombu. We had carried heavy movie equipment to this point, up to 28,200 feet, but it was absolutely useless since we couldn't see anything. At last Ang Dawa saw my point of view, and after a very slow and careful descent we reached Camp VI around 1:30, completely done in. All the way down, while hanging on for dear life in that terrifying storm, I kept worrying about our summit team. It seemed utterly impossible that the summit could be reached.

And yet, at the very time when Ang Dawa and I decided to turn back, Big Jim and Gombu were kicking steps up the steepest portion of the ridge. Each had deposited one partially-used oxygen bottle at about 28,400 feet to lighten his load, confident that one full bottle per man was sufficient to reach the summit and get back again. With Big Jim in the lead at 11:30, they reached the South Summit, where the full force of the storm hit them. Doubt arose in the big man's mind as to whether to go on. Although he had studied the previous photographs of that final ridge, now that he came face to face with it, it looked much steeper and more difficult than anticipated. After a few minutes' hesitation and soul-searching, Big Jim and Gombu dropped down some thirty feet to the saddle between the two summits and began climbing up the final ridge. Carefully they worked their way up between the immense snow cornices which overhang the Kangchung Face on the right, and the rocks on the left. Struggling through the gale, they reached "Hillary's chimney" and encountered no difficulties. Soon they were above it, and what followed was a series of humps in the snowy ridge. And then, as Big Jim approached what appeared to be the final dome, he stopped and waited for Gombu to come up to him: "You first, Gombu," "No, you go first," was the small man's reply. Then Jim said "Let's go together," and side by side they walked the last five feet. Beyond, everything fell away. They hugged each other, fighting to maintain their balance on the storm-swept summit of the world. It was one p.m. almost seven hours after their departure from Camp VI.

At the very top Big Jim drove a four-foot aluminum stake to which he had secured an American flag. And then they took pictures of each other holding various smaller flags. Toward the west and the plains of Tibet in the north the view was clear, but to the south and east everything was obscured by the mountain's vast snow plume. After Gombu tied a kata, the traditional Buddhist friendship scarf, to the stake, the men began their descent only to discover that the oxygen tanks were empty! At a maximum flow of four liters per minute, a full bottle is supposed to last almost four hours. But due to the cold and the reduced pressure at this great altitude, their estimate had been faulty. Only two hours after dumping the other cylinders below the South Summit, they had run out of oxygen! During the grim battle to the top, they failed to keep an eye on the pressure gauges. The realization of their

predicament hit with full force. Gasping for breath, they discarded the empty tanks and continued their slow and cautious descent, with Gombu in the lead. Suddenly a big chunk of cornice dissolved between the two men and dropped toward the Kangchung Glacier some 12,000 feet below. Even some of their crampon tracks had disappeared, and Big Jim found himself staring at Tibet between his feet! He gave a tug on the rope to point out the gaping hole to Gombu, and both men looked at the corniced ridge with renewed respect and moved closer to the rocks on the right.

When they reached the lowest point in the ridge, Jim found it necessary to heed what would appear to be the highest call of nature in mountaineering history. While the big man fought his private battle with pack and layers of clothing, the small man clawed his way to the top of the South Summit. It took Jim fifteen minutes to get back into harness, and by the time he reached the steepest portion of the 30-foot climb, the steps had all but disappeared. Greatly weakened by his recent effort, he suddenly lost his footing and found himself hanging from the rope upside down, with the pack pulling him backwards. He shouted, but in the howling of the wind Gombu could not hear him and kept pulling on the rope with all his might, making it even harder for Jim to right himself. After a tremendous, desperate effort he was once again right side up and able to fight his way up the steep incline at the rate of five minutes per step. This was perhaps the worst part of the climb. For the first time that day Jim began to doubt that they would get down alive. It had been almost three hours from the summit to this point. The lack of oxygen had taken its toll. Somehow the instinct for survival saw them through the ordeal of getting down the steep ridge, climbing one at a time and belaying each other carefully. Every fifteen feet it was necessary to stop and gasp for air. At last they reached their oxygen bottles and were sucking in the breath of life at its fullest flow. As their canteens had frozen solidly half an hour out of camp, they had been without liquids the whole day. Their bodies were drained by dehydration and oxygen-starvation. Clouds were building up over the Southeast Ridge, and the wind was still howling. At long last the steep section was behind them. It was only then that Big Jim began to believe that they might make it back to Camp VI.

In the meantime Ang Dawa and I had recovered enough to prepare food and drink for the summit team. We tried to keep warm, breathed oxygen at a one-liter flow, and waited endlessly. It was terribly windy, and the ridge above us was barely visible. At last, at about 5:30, small snow slides and rocks began to hit the tents. We could see the two men coming down, very slowly and carefully. When they were within shouting distance Ang Dawa called out to Gombu who gave the victory signal with his ice axe. Ang Dawa turned to me with a big grin, and we slapped and hugged each other. Big Jim looked haggard and at least ten years older than when he left that morning. It took them almost half an hour to get rid of crampons, rope and packs and to crawl inside their tent. I wanted desperately to rush out to embrace and congratulate them, but I simply did not have the strength. All I could do was to croak my congratulations and admiration for the superhuman effort they had put in. We plied them with tea, bouillon, dried beef, canned peaches and more tea.

We were unable to establish radio contact with the second assault group on the Col, but fortunately they had considered the weather too bad for a summit attempt and decided to stay put for at least another night. As for us, we were far too exhausted to descend to Camp V that evening and settled down for a second night at 27,450 feet. (Later we learned that Sir Edmund Hillary, who was camped at the foot of Taweche, had looked up toward Everest on May 1 and declared the weather "impossible". Down at Advance Base Dan Doody wrote in his diary: "Expect all above are staying put for the day.") During the night we ran out of oxygen, and in the morning we made the descent to the Col and points below without it. Before leaving Camp VI, Ang Dawa helped me to set up the movie camera. With my last strength I made the highest panorama ever taken from a professional tripod. The climb down over treacherous, snow-covered rocks was a nightmare, and by the time we reached the Col we were as close to death from oxygen-starvation as I ever hope to get. Lute Jerstad, Barry Bishop and Dick Pownall made me lie down on the snow and placed an oxygen mask over my face. After gulping oxygen at the maximum rate of flow for a few minutes, I was strong enough to make it to one of the tents under my own power. I thought of my good friend Sir John Hunt, who underwent a very similar experience in 1953!

In view of the acute oxygen shortage we all agreed the second summit assault would have to be

postponed and all of us would have to go down to Base Camp to recuperate and reorganize. We still had the better part of May for further attempts, and then there was the West Ridge!

By May 4 most of the team were down at Base. It was good to be alive, to rest, to catch up on correspondence, and to receive by radio the many congratulatory messages from around the world. Everybody wanted to know the names of the summit climbers, but we had voted as a group not to give out any details until everybody was off the mountain. We wished to prevent the glorification of two men at the expense of the rest of the team. There were long discussions on oxygen and the apparent excessive use of it during the first assault. Our logistical planning had to be revised, with Willi Unsoeld and Tom Hornbein doing most of the work. Another serious problem was that of persuading the Sherpas, who had made more high carries for us than on any previous Everest expedition, to move up again. Once more it was Jimmy Roberts who saved the day, and in spite of fatigue, sickness and considerable grumbling, a number of our Sherpas rose to the occasion and declared themselves ready and willing. Some had already carried to the South Col three times, and others had gone to Camp IV-W on several occasions. I am convinced that their amazing performance was due primarily to the leadership and popularity of Jimmy Roberts.

This story in AAJ 1964 continued with an account of the first ascent of Everest's West Ridge, written by Willi Unsoeld. That part of the story is found [here](#).

Norman Dyhrenfurth concludes....

On the evening of May 24, 275 porters reported for duty, and on the following morning AMEE began its long trek back to Kathmandu, in a raging snowstorm. Again we were extremely lucky, for this was the beginning of the monsoon in the Everest region. One more day on the mountain, and the men might never have gotten down alive ! Willi, Barry and Lute had to be carried to Namche Bazar, where the former two were evacuated by helicopter in the early morning hours of May 27 and taken to the United Missions hospital in Kathmandu. Willi and Barry lost all of their toes, while Tom and Lute suffered no permanent injuries.

On June 9 the main body of the expedition reached Kathmandu, and after a series of wonderful and heart-warming receptions there, in India and Switzerland, the men of AMEE dispersed to rejoin their long-suffering families.

Everest has been friend and foe for the past eleven years, but the time has come to turn my back on it. In passing through Thangboche on the way out we stopped to pay our respects to the High Lama. As we took our leave, he looked very frail, lonely and forlorn. We had become good friends over the years. There still was a moment of regret as we passed through the lamasery's gateway, but the mountains were enveloped in heavy clouds, and Everest was hidden from view. This made the parting easier.

All that remains now is the return to that other life ...

Summary of Statistics

Area: Northeastern Nepal.

Ascents: Mount Everest, 29,028 feet, via South Col route, May 1, 1963 (Whittaker, Nawang Gombu) and May 22, 1963 (Bishop, Jerstad). First ascent of West Ridge and first traverse of peak, May 22, 1963 (Hornbein, Unsoeld).

Personnel: Norman G. Dyhrenfurth, leader; William E. Siri, deputy leader; Allen Auten, Barry C. Bishop, John E. Breitenbach, James Barry Corbet, David L. Dingman, M.D., Daniel E. Doody, Richard M. Emerson, Thomas F. Hornbein, M.D., Luther G. Jerstad, James T. Lester, Maynard M. Miller, Richard

Pownall, Barry W. Prather, Gilbert Roberts, M.D., Lt. Col. James O. M. Roberts, James Ramsey Ullman, William F. Unsoeld, James W. Whittaker, Capt. P. Rana.

*Certain parts of this section are appearing in the current Alpine Journal.

*The message gave their whereabouts and then to the amazement of those at Advance Base, Unsoeld concluded with the words of Robert Frost:

"... I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep ..."

Images

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