



AAC Publications

Mount Everest, 1963 (Part II)

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 I is found [here](#).

On May 7 Willi Unsoeld and Tom Hornbein moved up to Advance Base in one day. We had worked out the following plan: two 2-man assault teams on the West Ridge, and one 2-man team on the South Col route, all with the necessary support groups. A traverse of the mountain from the West was to be attempted only if it could be coordinated with the men on the Col route. Target date for the double-assault was May 18, and arrangements were made to evacuate Base Camp on the 22nd. Then the weather deteriorated into a series of storms. Each snowfall increased the avalanche danger of the route to the West Ridge. At one time four Sherpas and two tents at the Dump were swept down by a snow slide, but nobody was hurt. The tents and everything inside were a total loss. Now May 21 was the earliest summit date. This was hard on the nerves for Lute Jerstad and Barry Bishop who were impatiently waiting at Advance Base for word to move up the Col route.

By May 9 the pressure from the outside world to release the names of the first summit team became unbearable. The news had already reached Kathmandu via the porter grapevine. Very reluctantly I gave in and announced the names over the radio. This was very much against our beliefs and convictions, and I felt like a traitor to the men above, but in the world of present-day communications ours was a stand that could not be held. As in the case of Hillary and Tenzing, all our efforts at stressing the team effort were largely in vain. That day I wrote in my diary:

"... Everybody contributed, everyone worked together. There are no heroes: The men who first reached the South Col, or those who were the first to open up the Icefall and the Lhotse Face, and others who did many hard and thankless jobs. This is a team effort, and I'll be damned if we're going to have one or two heroes ..."

For four days of perfect weather, Barry Bishop and Lute Jerstad sat at Advance Base, champing at the bit. But everybody understood that a traverse was possible only if the South Col team could act as support for the West Ridgers. There were further delays due to difficulties with the power winch, and by now most of our best Sherpas were listless and bone-tired from many weeks of high carries.

From April 13, the day we returned to Camp II from the reconnaissance, to May 13, the day Camp III-W was reoccupied, stretches the period known to the West Ridgers as the "Lost Weekend." It is hard even now to reconstruct exactly what happened to the West Ridge effort during those four weeks, but the sense of frustration comes back only too vividly. With all available Sherpas busy on the South Col route, the Ridgers were made subject to the caprices of the motor-driven winches.

Team after team trudged to III-W to tinker with the "Tiny Tiger" motors, to string out some 2,000 feet of airplane control cable, and to maneuver the special sleds formed of six Head Shortskis locked rigidly by special cross-bars. Team after team trudged back again beaten by various combinations of kinking cables, submarining sleds, and inert engines. Emerson and Corbet even put in two days cranking away on an unlikely looking hand-winch (designed to hoist boats out of the water). With the help of two Sherpas they demonstrated that given enough time and energy it would be possible to

hoist all supplies to III-W with the hand-winch. But the look on their faces when they returned convinced us we did not have that kind of time or energy to spare. Fortunately Al Auten was able to leave the radio work largely up to Barry Prather and throw in with the Winch Brigade. At last through Al's mechanical wizardry and the explosive properties of ether used as a primer, a grand total of two sleds carrying a sum of thirty-six oxygen bottles were inched up the slopes to just below III-W. On May 13, winching was over; it had begun on April 17. Truly as Barry Corbet observed, "Never had so little been accomplished by so many."

The real turning point on the West Ridge came with the summit success by Big Jim Whittaker and Gombu on May 1. The outstanding effort of the Sherpas preceding the tremendous effort of the summit team had left the Col route stocked for a second summit pair. Thus full porter power could be switched to the Ridge. It remained only to coordinate the build-up on the Ridge with the second Col party so that the summit attempts from the two routes would occur simultaneously. But this coordination of parties was not at all easy to maintain.

By May 16, Camp IV-W had been established on the perfect flat spot atop the Ridge at 25,100 feet near the steep rocks. The route had also been reconnoitered toward Camp V-W to 26,200 feet at the base of a snow-filled gully several hundred yards west of the famous Great Couloir of the pre-war British expeditions. Above IV-W we first followed what we called the Diagonal Ditch, a long gully slanting upward across the North Face. Although most of the ditch was of packed snow, now and then we had to climb slabs, thinly covered with snow, with the well known North Face strata dipping downward at an unpleasant angle.

Instead of moving up to V-W on the 17th, we were forcefully instructed as to what had caused the flat spot on which IV-W was pitched. Around midnight on the 16th, the wild wind carried away the two four-man tents along with the four Sherpas, Barry Corbet and Al Auten, who were sleeping inside. They were swept at ever increasing speed toward the Rongbuk Glacier 6,000 feet below. Miraculously they stopped on the very brink. Al had ended up closest to a rip in the wreckage and had been elected to climb back up to camp and call us. In the two-man Gerry tent, Hornbein and I slept soundly until he rudely awakened us to report the recent departures. Climbing slowly into our boots and parkas, we crept forth into a darkness as howling as we had ever experienced. The errant tents had left a clear track which we followed to their resting place a hundred yards or so below their take-off point. Corbet and the Sherpas seemed comfortable enough, buried securely in the wreckage, and besides if we had dug them out, there would have been nowhere to put them. We therefore contented ourselves with lashing the flapping rags to axes with climbing ropes and telling the boys not to run off as we would be back in the morning.

However, the wind was still with us in the morning and getting worse. The Sherpas soon started their descent while Corbet joined us in the Gerry tent to try to hold the fort. Around mid-morning, just as we were radioing Base that we were leaving for III-W, the Gerry burst its moorings and headed for the edge. Hornbein managed to dive through the entrance and set up a self-arrest with a handy tent stake while in the sliding tent I finished my radio report to Base on the most recent developments. There is nothing like upholding one's reputation for long-windedness on the radio.

Safely back at III-W, we took stock of our situation, which held little hope for success. The four Sherpas who had been with us in the storm had been the very best available. They had gone straight on down to Camp II and were clearly out of it. This left only a mixed handful of old-timers and raw beginners upon whom it was unwise to depend for the sustained effort called for by repeated carries. Then too, the destruction of the tents left us without enough to equip the six camps for which we had planned. And finally, the South Col party of Jerstad and Bishop was already scheduled for the top on May 22 and it would endanger their chances to ask them for a further postponement.

After a long, sleepless night, Hornbein woke up the morning of the 18th with one of his usual fanatical suggestions. In order to conserve equipment and Sherpa-power, he suggested we make do with only one camp above IV-W. And in order to save time, he suggested we reconnoiter, prepare the route for

the Sherpas, and establish Camp V-W — all on the same day! In our weakened condition it was difficult to distinguish fanaticism from genius. Tom's suggestion was adopted with scarcely a quiver.

Two more days were spent recuperating at III-W while waiting for additional Sherpas and equipment to come up from Camp II. Emerson had arrived at III-W after spending the night of the storm alone in a crevasse during an unprecedented solo ascent from Advance Base. Along with us five Sahibs were Ang Dorje (supposedly long, past his prime) and Pasang Tendi and Tensing Nindra, both on their first expedition. We eight spent the day in as total relaxation as possible while gathering our resources for what was obviously to be the final, all-out effort. There was this about the prospect that definitely appealed — it would not have to be repeated. One last blast and — win or lose — we could descend. On May 19 Ila Tsering (on his second expedition) and Tensing Gyaltsso (also a neophyte) arrived from Camp II with another Gerry tent and we were ready to go. With a fervent "Hals und Beinbruch" from Norman at Base Camp, we headed up from III-W for the last time.

This was the signal for the South Col team to start its long-postponed move up the mountain. Lute Jerstad, Barry Bishop and three Sherpas left Advance Base on May 18, while Dave Dingman, Girmi Dorje and two other Sherpas followed a day later. Camp III had been partially buried by an avalanche, but efforts to dig out the tents and reoccupy them were successful. The weather held good, and on the afternoon of May 21 Barry and Lute established themselves at Camp VI, thanks to an amazing carry by Pemba Tensing and Nima Tensing.

Meanwhile at Camp IV-W we pitched the four-man tents (stripped from III-W) on the spot from which the previous tents had been blown. A gusty breeze again flapped the fabric, causing some reflex flinching among the wind-shocked troops, but by the time all tents were enmeshed in a web of climbing ropes, we felt safe enough to try for sleep.

With the weather clear and cold next morning, May 21, Barry Corbet and A1 Auten were away by 7 a.m. on the reconnaissance. Two hours later Ang Dorje led out the crucial Sherpa carry. Even with light loads (from 25 to 30 pounds) these untested Sherpas faced as great a task as had ever been contemplated in the high Himalaya. Our hopes were for a 2000-foot carry over increasingly steep and unknown terrain. The high morale of the whole crew was demonstrated just before their start by the roar of laughter which greeted Ila Tsering's observation: "All good Sherpas down Base Camp. All bad Sherpas up here IV-W."

Out across the slabs of the great North Face the route lay, straight to the base of "Hornbein's Couloir." Here at just about 26,000 feet, we reached the end of the known terrain, though flying ice-chunks from above testified to the pioneering labors of Al and Barry. As Sahibs and Sherpas awaited the end of the ice-barrage from above, we said good-bye to Dick Emerson. Besides his heroics on the winch, Dick had provided the ingenious formula upon which the complicated logistics for both routes had depended. It had been a marvellous stroll across the Face for Tom, Dick, and me from the old Masherbrum crew, but now, having reached the select 8000-meter level, it was time for Dick to stand by for the return of the Sherpas, who might well need all possible assistance in returning from their amazing carry. Emotions seemed definitely to be rising with our altitude, and eyes were streaming as Tom and I turned upwards, leaving Dick sitting on a rocky ledge.

Barry and A1 had done their work well, chopping a staircase up the couloir to the very edge of the Yellow Band. Here, where their altimeter read 27,200 feet, they discovered the first possible campsite since entering the couloir. It was a tiny ledge of snow no more than eight feet long and narrowing from a maximum width of twelve inches down to about three. Wild juggling was resorted to before all the gear for the camp was safely balanced on the ledge while men clung to their embedded axes on the steep slope below. As Tom and I set to work enlarging the ledge, A1 and Barry began the task of belaying the Sherpas back down the couloir. It was another tearful parting. Both A1 and Barry clearly had strength left for a summit try. If either Tom or I had faltered physically en route to V-W, Barry stood next in line to replace us. It had been he who voiced the opinion at III-W that Tom and I deserved first crack at the summit because of our contributions in preparing the route and now it was

clear there would be only one attempt. Barry's last words as he deftly rigged a long handline were, "Just like guiding Mount Owen, Willi."

The job of digging the platform, pitching the tent, transferring all the gear into it, melting snow and cooking supper with only an occasional whiff of oxygen took all the agony and energy which is expected at over 27,000 feet. Supper was a luxurious mixture of Campbell's Red Kettle soup, freeze-dried shrimp with tomato sauce, crackers and jam.

On the other side of the mountain, at five A.M. the next morning, Lute Jerstad and Barry Bishop lit their stove to prepare breakfast at Camp VI below the South Summit. There was a sudden burst of flame, which singed Lute's beard and burned Barry's plastic sleeping mask. They managed to dive out of the smoke-filled tent before suffocating. It was a miracle that they were alive, but the near-disaster greatly weakened them and caused serious delay. It was not until eight o'clock that they could get started.

In the cold shadow of morning at V-W, a seven a.m. start seemed amply early to Tom and me, but problems arose even as we left. As I stood at the foot of the first pitch, an ominous hiss warned of an oxygen malfunction. Tom quickly installed our spare oxygen regulator — but the hiss continued. Together we finally decided it was only a small leak and nothing to worry about — a decision which fully demonstrates the dangerous effects of a combination of altitude and enthusiasm on the minds of even experienced Himalayan climbers. Hindsight suggests the trouble lay with my oxygen bottle and that it could have been fixed by substituting the spare bottle we had left at camp. Rather than return the forty feet to the tent, however, we decided to compensate for the leak by setting our regulators at two liters per minute — half the usual rate for this altitude — and by shutting them off entirely during belays or other resting periods. In spite of these economy measures, my first bottle was empty in about three and a half hours instead of the eight hours which two liters per minute should have yielded.

This oxygen shortage was our one serious worry during the climb — and I frankly cannot remember being too nervous even about that. Tom explained to me that if my second bottle were exhausted before the summit was reached, he would simply put in his T-joint connector and we could both climb while using his bottle. Since our oxygen tubes were only thirty inches long, this arrangement would have produced another "first," namely the first lock-step ascent of any Himalayan peak. Luckily my second bottle lasted till well past the summit.

The couloir proved steeper than we had expected, forcing us to move one at a time with constant belays and much step-cutting. Well over an hour was spent on one hairy 40-foot rock pitch requiring two pitons and bare hands. Thus by 10:30 A.M. we were still no yet through the Yellow Band although its major difficulties now seemed to be below us. While switching bottles, we radioed Base for the first time that day, telling Big Jim that the stretch we had come up was so messy that we had no hope of trying to descend it. Jim was greatly unsettled by such talk about a "point of no return," but we felt strongly that the way to the South Col via the summit offered much less danger than did a descent to V-W.

Meanwhile Lute and Barry had moved up the southeast ridge to the South Summit. Barry, after a very bad night at Camp VI and the almost disastrous explosion, felt weak and close to exhaustion on the entire ascent. After a much needed rest on the South Summit, they continued along the final ridge on a reduced oxygen ration. And then, shortly before 3:30, they saw the American flag flying from the summit of the world. Placed there three weeks before by Big Jim, the aluminum pole still stood straight and tall, with only the ends of the flag slightly tattered. Tears of emotion and relief came to their eyes as together they stepped onto the summit. For 45 minutes they photographed the world around and beneath them — Lute took the highest motion pictures ever made — and they scanned the West Ridge for any signs of us. They waited, they shouted, but finally as the shadows lengthened, they began the descent.

In bright sunshine and gentle breezes Tom and I had at length crept out of the couloir and onto the upper snowfields of the North Face. The mass of the summit rocks now loomed above us — a mass of such imposing bulk that we were afraid of being unable to find the true top without an extensive search. We even called Base again to ask Jim where the top was and what it looked like, but understandably his puzzled efforts at description didn't help us out much. Then we remembered that Jim had spoken of looking down the West Ridge from the summit. Therefore, we had only to follow the crest on up. A long traverse to the right across crumbling slabs and steepening snow slopes brought us finally to the crest of this Ridge, where we could look straight down into the Cwm.

Across the South Face from us and slightly above appeared the South Summit. Ahead the Ridge rose as a twisting rocky spine. Doffing crampons, we attacked this lovely stretch with all the enthusiasm of snow-surfeited rock climbers. To our surprise, unlike the Yellow Band, the gray rock was sound, allowing quite delicate moves on moderately small holds. Or maybe it only seemed sound in comparison to the gravity-matrixed crumble of which so much of the North Face is composed. At any rate, we genuinely enjoyed those several rope-lengths on rock and were regretful when the arête changed back to snow again, demanding crampons for the last few hundred feet. The snow was ideally firm, however, and our progress was steady until just after six o'clock I suddenly came out at the top of the snow arête only about forty feet from the American flag. As Tom joined me, we threw arms around each other's shoulders and marched up to the flag in silence.

What did we feel? What did we think about? What did we do during this culmination of our date with the world's very "nose-tip?" The actions are pretty well prescribed: pictures and placement of summit objects. The Rev. Andy Bakewell, A.A.C. and member of the first reconnaissance expedition to Everest from the south in 1950, had given me a crucifix to leave on top. I tucked it down inside Gombu's kata (Buddhist ceremonial scarf) at the base of Big Jim's flag pole — along with two prayer flags given me by Ang Dorje. Buddhist prayer flags and ceremonial scarf, the American flag, and the cross of Christ all perched together on the top of the world — supported by an aluminum rappel picket painted "Survival Orange" ... The symbolic possibilities rendered my summit prayer more than a trifle incoherent.

Feelings and thoughts melted and merged in our climactic moment. My thoughts were heavily weighted with history — the early attempts via the North Col — the drive and vision of such men as Mallory, Norton, Smythe, Shipton, and Tilman. And the later generation of Everesters led by Hunt, Hillary and Tensing and including such as Lambert, Evans, Bourdillon, Eggler, Marmet, and Von Gunten. Following these years of effort and achievement appears our own expedition and the tremendous output on the part of the entire team — Sahibs and Sherpas alike — output and sacrifice without which our own summit moment would never have materialized. But dominating such thoughts were the surging emotions which colored them. Control is thinned by the altitude and the tears came readily — called forth by a wave of gratitude and burst of comradely feeling for each member of the expedition. And behind the expedition — our wives and families — eliciting their own peculiar mixture of guilt and exaltation. Twenty minutes of emotional flux such as this and the marvel is that we still had the starch to even start the descent.

The sun was just disappearing as we left the top after one last broadcast which was picked up at Camp II*. In the short twilight, we raced across the treacherous ridge to the South Summit and from there started down the line of tracks towards Camp VI. Barry Bishop and Lute Jerstad had preceded us to the top by about three hours and we took advantage of their tracks until first the sun and then my flashlight faded into darkness. The blind, stumbling descent became more and more reflex. Belays were set up, a fall was stopped, a route searched out — because we had spent so much of our lives doing just these things. Then echoes from below — then shouts. Must be Dave Dingman and Girmi Dorje in support at Camp VI. Hours later a blacker smudge against the snow below and falling into the arms of ... Lute and Barry?! What a surprise! They had heard us and waited till we reached them around 9:30 P.M.

Now down again — the four of us together. Terribly tired and Tom the only one with a little oxygen left.

Four stumbling tight-rope walkers edging down a knife-edge of snow. Lute falls and is stopped when his chin hooks over the rope stretching between Tom and me. I am supposed to be belaying Barry as I precede him down the ridge. Fatigue engenders strange techniques.

Finally, at around 12:30 a.m., the arête becomes indistinct and Lute thinks it is time to get off the ridge before turning left toward Camp VI. The turning point is crucial — a mistake could land you in the Cwm — and it is too dark to be certain. We bivouac. A simple maneuver — just take off your pack and lie down. Nothing fancy, not even a common huddle. Mostly just fall like logs and wait for daylight. Tom fusses with his feet, complaining of the cold. I report no discomfort in my feet (nor even feeling) and feel secretly proud at my superior cold tolerance.

At dawn we just stand up and start walking. Clear tracks lead us towards Camp VI until we meet Dave and Girmi who have come up to look for the bodies. Dave does a great job in caring for us during the long descent. His own summit chance is dropped instantly in the face of our need. By ten p.m. he has coaxed us as far as Camp II and has diagnosed both Barry and me as suffering from seriously frozen feet. While descending the Lhotse Face, Tom and I contact Base Camp by radio and are told we're connected through to Kathmandu. The connection is pure garble so I risk a political statement for home consumption, "Well, Missus, this is my last big expedition." Tom views me with disgusted respect, "What a shewd move, Willi, I heard that qualifying adjective." (Note: So did Jolene.)

An agony hobble from Camp II to Base on blistering feet. Then two more days by porter-back to Namche Bazar. Lute is carried down, too, but he and Tom are well enough to make the march out. Barry and I finish the trip by helicopter from Namche and arrive in Shanta Bhawan Hospital, Kathmandu on May 27 — just five days after the summit — thus completing the longest schuss in history.

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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