

The Great Couloir on Everest

JAMES WICKWIRE

WITH THE DECISION of the People's Republic of China in 1979 to open its autonomous regions, including Tibet, to non-Chinese mountaineers, new opportunities to climb Mount Everest were presented. A few months later, Chris Kerrebrock, a strong, young climber from New York City, initiated an Everest application with the Chinese Mountaineering Association. Lou Whittaker became the leader of a small nucleus of Rainier guides that included Kerrebrock, Phil Ershler, Marty Hoey, Eric Simonson and George Dunn.

When Whittaker and the others received word from the CMA that permission for a post-monsoon 1982 attempt had been granted, I was asked to join this elated group of Pacific Northwest climbers. Later, other Rainier guides were added: Dan Boyd, Larry Nielson, Joe Horiskey, Tracy Roberts and Gary Isaacs. Ed Hixson, the U.S. Nordic cross-country ski team physician, was selected as the expedition's doctor. Dave Mahre, with whom I climbed extensively in the 1960s, at 54 became our oldest member. Nawang Gombu, the first person to have climbed Everest twice, came from Darjeeling. Finally, Dick Bass, a ski-resort developer, and Frank Wells, a motion-picture executive, joined the team.

As a tune-up for the challenge of an unclimbed route on the North Face of Everest, Kerrebrock and I decided to go to McKinley in the spring of 1981. Our objective was a new route up the mammoth Wickersham Wall, climbed only twice previously. Before we could reach the base of the Wickersham, however, disaster struck. Pulling a heavily loaded sled between us, Chris Kerrebrock suddenly plummeted into a hidden crevasse. We were too close together for me to brake the fall, and the sled and I fell in with Chris. He was wedged tightly in an 18-inch-wide slit between the glassy walls of ice. Despite a broken left shoulder, I managed to inch my way up 30 feet to the surface and out of the crevasse. I was safe but, after several hours of effort on Jümars in the crevasse, I was unable to free Chris from his icy trap. He died of hypothermia about nine hours after the accident.

In a state of considerable anguish and guilt, I spent two weeks alone on the Peters Glacier before Doug Geeting made an unprecedented landing on the

Photo by James Wickwire

MOUNT EVEREST from the north.

Camp IV = 23,700 feet; Camp V

= 25,000 feet; Camp VI = 26,500

feet. X = Accident at 26,200 feet.

HP = High Point at 27,500 feet.



upper glacier to retrieve me. Avalanches, storms, extremely little food, my shoulder injury, and exposure to other crevasses as I worked my way back up the glacier all combined to make this the most trying ordeal of over twenty years of active climbing.

For weeks afterward, I was tormented by questions about whether to climb again. During this time, Everest receded into the background. Gradually, though, the desire to climb returned, and with it, the ambition to tackle Everest. On a trip to Beijing that fall to negotiate the protocol agreement with the CMA, I told Lou Whittaker that I would go. We were successful in persuading the Chinese to allow us to come in the pre-monsoon season, a time we believed would provide more optimum conditions on the route.

We left Seattle on March 9 with great expectations. With Steve Marts' inclusion as cinematographer, there were 17 of us. We would have preferred a smaller team, but as we planned to do all of our own load carrying from Base Camp to the mountain, we felt the larger numbers were justified.

As the key element of our intended route, we chose the most striking feature on Everest's North Face—the Great Couloir or Norton Couloir as it is sometimes called. At the very head of the Central Rongbuk Glacier, we would climb in an arc ascending from near the slopes below the North Col, up across the broad 40° to 45° face to the base of the Great Couloir at 25,000 feet. Once in the couloir, we would climb to its head, onto the Yellow Band, through a still higher Gray Band, then to the summit. Our intended route and that of Reinhold Messner on his phenomenal solo climb of Everest from the north in 1980 would most likely coincide above 27,000 feet. A significant difference, however, was that Messner on his monsoon-season ascent had been able to climb on a mantle of snow covering the rock bands and filling the small gullies of the upper face. We expected more difficult climbing due to the lack of snow.

Lhasa was disappointing. Over thirty years of Chinese occupation and control had removed much of the mystery and romance of this remote Tibetan capital. Nonetheless, interspersed between conditioning hikes up the hillside behind our government-operated rest house, we were fascinated by the fabled Potala Palace, home of ten Dalai Lamas, and the Jokhang Temple where Tibetans came in great numbers to pray. The small, cast-iron bed of the 14th Dalai Lama in the Potala was still made, presumably to await his return.

In what has become in two short years a standard approach to Everest from the Tibetan side, we journeyed to near the base of the mountain in a combined fleet of jeeps, trucks and, for part of the way, a minibus. Despite having flown directly to Lhasa at 12,300 feet, we soon adjusted to the increasing altitude without the usual assortment of headaches and minor altitude sickness. A severe sinus condition plagued me, aggravated as the result of the dusty three-day ride across the Tibetan plateau. It was not until we reached 17,000 feet that I could breathe normally.

At the road's end, on a gravel bed overlying the Rongbuk Glacier, we caught up with Chris Bonington's Everest expedition. Although only six in

number, Bonington's team planned to tackle the difficult northeast ridge rising above the Rapiu La. At 27,510 feet, this ridge terminated in the Northeast Shoulder still some 1700 yards and 1500 vertical feet from the summit. Using alpine-style tactics, Bonington, Peter Boardman, Joe Tasker and Dick Renshaw, with two companions in support, were taking on a very big project. Stimulated by our supply of hot buttered rum, the two expeditions enjoyed a festive evening together before we separated.

The weather remained clear and cold for most of the first month following our arrival at Base Camp (16,900 feet) on March 21. While our three CMA personnel took up residence there, the five tons of gear we brought were carried by yaks to an Advanced Base Camp (18,400 feet), about six miles from the mountain. We spent three weeks carrying loads up the debris-strewn glacier to Camp I (18,800 feet) and Camp II (20,300 feet), at the foot of the massive north face. Rest days were few and far between, and we all felt like pack animals before we had completed this laborious process.

On April 8 the real climbing began. Rather than taking a direct route up the face with an unacceptable level of avalanche hazard from a large ice cliff at 24,000 feet, we opted for a less direct approach that took us up alongside an icefall beneath the steep flanks of Changtse, Everest's close neighbor to the north. Slightly above 22,000 feet, we established Camp III on the north face proper. The campsite was at the base of a sérac that offered protection from snow avalanches off the face above.

A weather pattern of high winds and daily snowstorms slowed progress. But after four consecutive days of effort, on April 18 Ershler, Hoey, Boyd and I succeeded in establishing a route to Camp IV (23,700 feet). An unlikely-appearing snow mushroom was the only feasible campsite. Hours of shoveling produced two small platforms that barely accommodated our two tents. Above, the slope eased somewhat. Bypassing the prominent ice cliff in mid-face, we pushed the route on May 1 to a rocky moat at the base of the Great Couloir (25,000 feet). Camp VI was the most sheltered; an overhanging rock wall formed a natural roof.

Several attempts were made to establish Camp VI high in the Great Couloir. A lead pair of Dunn and Simonson covered most of the distance; Ershler and Boyd, hampered by the latter's temporary intestinal sickness, went a bit higher but still had not located a campsite. Finally, on May 15, Hoey, Nielson and I, who formed the first summit team, along with Mahre who was in support, made the climb up the hard snow and occasional patch of ice in the couloir.

While Nielson and Mahre searched for a campsite at 26,300 feet, Hoey and I waited 200 feet below in the couloir on the only rock of any size. At 5:30 P.M., as I started to carry a section of rope to the lead pair, Hoey fell suddenly and without warning from the fixed rope. I yelled "Grab the rope!" Sliding head-first, she rolled to her side and made a valiant try, but was not able to grasp the fixed rope. She was visible only for the first few hundred feet of the fall, disappearing into the mist and cloud that clung to the face. I was certain

PLATE 6

Dan Boyd at 24,000 feet on
EVEREST. The Central Rongbuk
Glacier lies below.

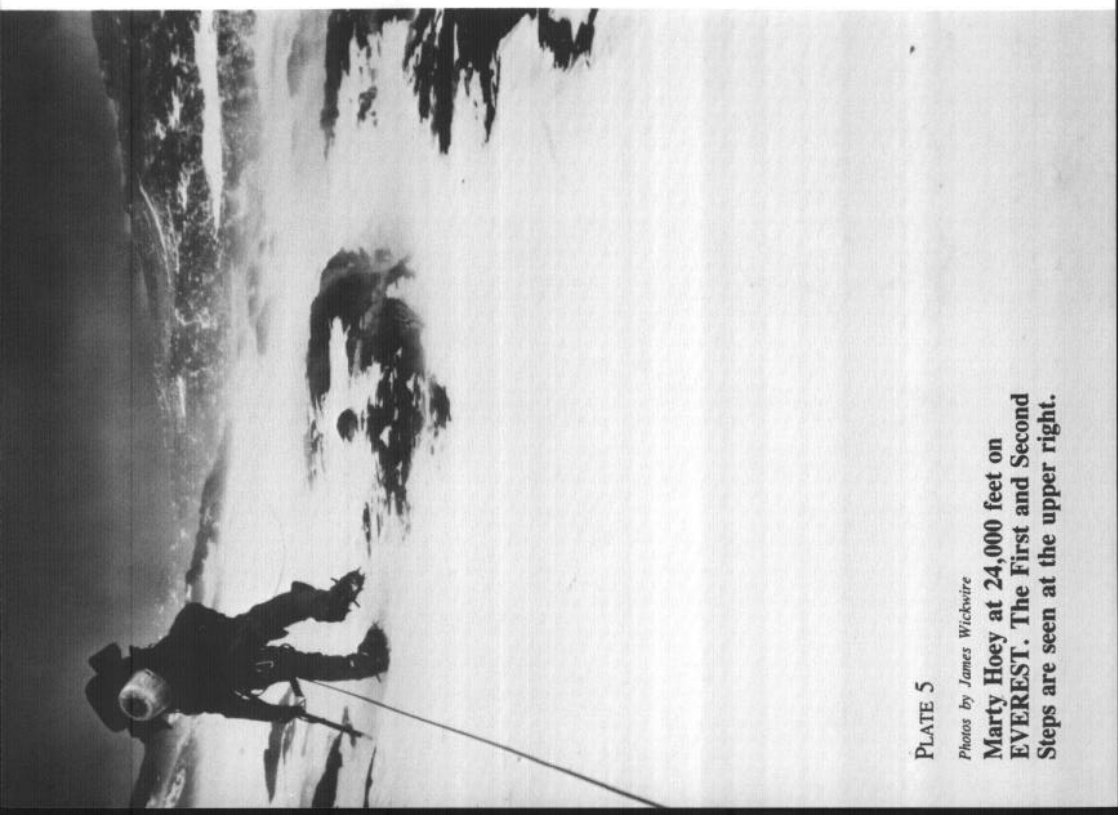
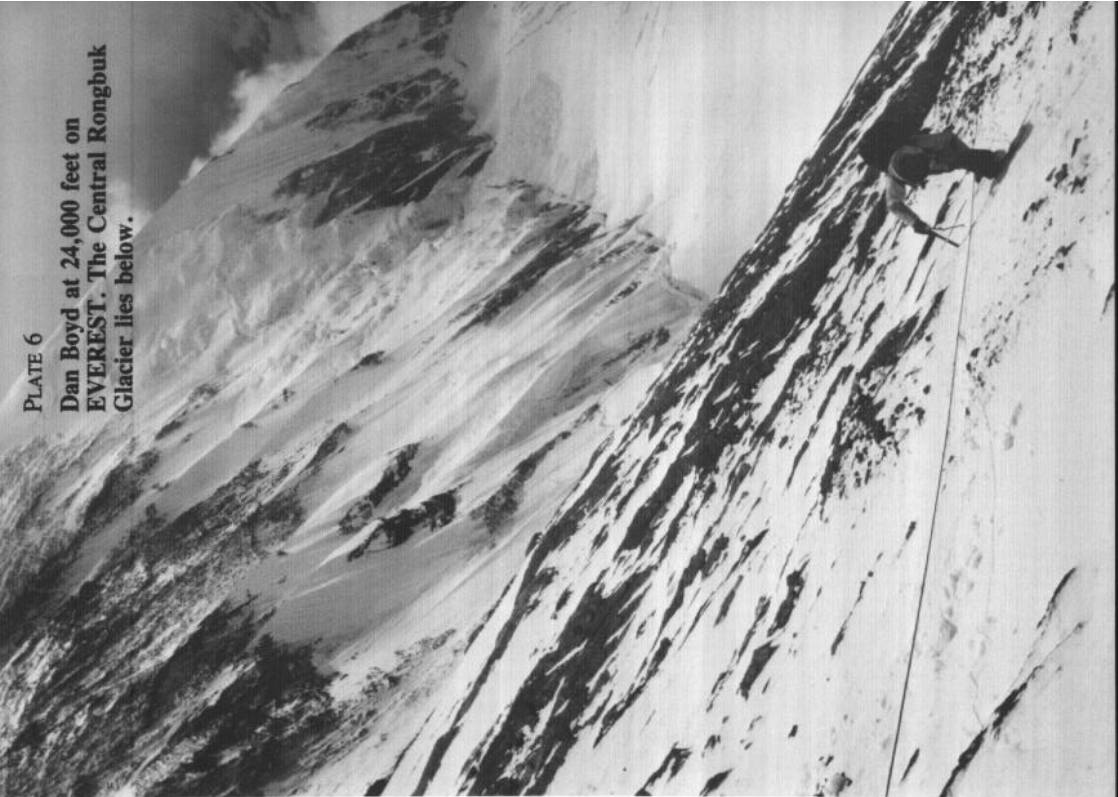


PLATE 5

Photos by James Wickwire

Marty Hoey at 24,000 feet on
EVEREST. The First and Second
Steps are seen at the upper right.

she had fallen 6000 feet down the entire face. In utter disbelief, I looked at the anchor. Marty's waist harness and Jümar were still attached to the fixed rope. Somehow, the buckle had suddenly unfastened when she leaned back on her Jümar. Without her ice-axe, imbedded in the hard snow at the anchor, she never had a chance to arrest the slip.

Without establishing Camp VI, the three of us somberly descended to the next camp below. Our hopes for an immediate try on the summit were shattered. The next morning Mahre and I descended to Camp II where we were tearfully reunited with our teammates. Earlier, Lou Whittaker had led a search party to the base of the face, but could find no trace of Marty. She had disappeared into the bowels of the enormous bergschrund there.

Nielson, who stayed at Camp V, was joined by Dunn and Simonson a day later. Together, on May 17, they climbed the Great Couloir and established Camp VI in an open crevasse at 26,500 feet. The next day, without the benefit of supplementary oxygen (although one bottle per summit climber had been carried there), the threesome climbed to near the head of the couloir. Nielson decided to make a solo attempt on the summit; Simonson, whose knee had been struck by a falling rock the day before, and Dunn opted to return to Camp VI.

Not following Messner's route that took a higher exit from the Great Couloir, Nielson climbed a narrow, twisting gully to reach the Yellow Band. Continuing to 27,500 feet, he was confronted with a difficult, unprotected move and wisely decided to retreat. Later, as Nielson descended toward Camp III, he realized he had frostbitten his hands and feet. Dr. Hixson later diagnosed moderately severe frostbite and there ensued an evacuation of Nielson from the mountain.

We had time for one more attempt to reach the summit. On May 24, however, at 24,500 feet Mahre, Dunn and I turned back in the grip of the first serious monsoon storm that dumped a load of unsafe snow on the face. The expedition was over.

The accident that took Marty Hoey's life was not the only tragedy on the mountain. On May 17 Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker were last seen climbing above 26,000 feet on their bold route. They never emerged from behind a rock tower on the ridge crest, and after days of anxious waiting and searching, Bonington was forced to conclude that they had most likely fallen down the Kangshung Face. Two of the best Himalayan climbers thus were lost in an accident eerily reminiscent of the Mallory-Irvine disappearance 58 years before.

We did not succeed in reaching the summit of Everest. But we pioneered a new route high on the North Face. Of perhaps greater importance, we were a completely united team. We managed to avoid the personality clashes that have troubled so many recent large Himalayan expeditions. Most of us left Everest with the desire to return—as climbers do when success has been just beyond their reach.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Tibet

ATTEMPTED ASCENT: Mount Everest via the North Face to c. 8380 meters, c. 27,500 feet, March to May, 1982.

PERSONNEL: Louis Whittaker, leader, James Wickwire, Philip Ershler, Marty Hoey, Eric Simonson, George Dunn, Edward G. Hixson, M.D., Dan Boyd, Dave Mahre, Larry Nielson, Joe Horiskey, Gary Isaacs, Tracy Roberts, Nawang Gombu, Richard Bass, Frank Wells and Steve Marts.

