

# Annapurna Battleground

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UNDER THE LEADERSHIP of Bob Wilson, our group of friends and friends of friends was convinced we could climb Annapurna in a semi-alpine "McKinley" style, carrying our own loads, without oxygen or Sherpa support. All told, we took only 3300 pounds of food and equipment, making ours the smallest and lightest expedition to attempt Annapurna.

The trip to Base Camp at the end of the monsoon was itself an epic. Monsoon rain, mud, leeches, jungle bushwhacking, bridge wash-outs, mudslides and the inevitable bargaining sessions with porters kept us busy. While six of us escorted the 90 porters, Craig Reininger and Maynard Cohick cruised ahead to build a bridge over the Miristi Khola. Following them, we arrived at Base Camp on August 24, twelve days after leaving Pokhara.

We started carrying to Camp I on August 25 and moved there on the 29th. Camp II was established the next day and occupied on September 3. We were assisted in stocking these camps by six porters, as the terrain is relatively easy. Starting from 14,300-foot Base Camp, we continued on the moraine before dropping sharply to the North Annapurna Glacier. On the dry, broken rubble-littered surface of the lower glacier to the base of the icefall, the route seemed to change with each trip. Camp I was sited at 16,500 feet at the top of the icefall, reached by climbing steep slabs and scree along the margin of the glacier.

We were now enjoying good weather. Nonetheless, the trip up the glacier from Camp I to 18,250-foot Camp II always provided us a display of frequent avalanches from the surrounding peaks. Fortunately, the mile of no man's land between Camp II and the base of the Dutch Rib remained relatively quiet. This prompted us to push forward. On September 4 Craig Reininger and I fixed the route to the site of Camp III at 20,000 feet at the lower end of the rib. Choosing a line several hundred yards to the right of that used by the American women in 1978, we were able to climb directly to Camp III without having to traverse below the ominously overhanging ice of the lower rib. We fixed 700 feet of rope up the 50° to 60° ice. This facilitated the installation of a large pulley and

a continuous 1500-foot loop of rope for load hauling. In three long days we were able to stock Camp III with all our gear and a month's supply of food and fuel.

Those were nerve-racking days, especially for those hauling from the bottom of the rope, one foot in the avalanche chute, the other on the face. With great relief we finally left the North Annapurna Glacier for the safety of the Dutch Rib. For the first time in the climb we actually felt safe. Avalanche debris covered the lower half-mile of the glacier.

Immediately after establishing Camp III, we began work on the Dutch Rib. Craig Reininger and I fixed this in a day and a half, using 1600 feet of rope. The climbing was magnificent along the fluted, ice-incrusted rib crest, continually challenging but never desperate. Camp IV was placed near the top of the rib. The site was somewhat precarious, but it was the only possible one and had been used by three previous expeditions.

On September 16 I fixed 300 feet of rope up the ice cliff at the top of the rib at 21,500 feet. That afternoon we pushed as far as we could above the cliff, fixed another short pitch over a sérac bulge and dumped our loads at 22,300 feet. Knee-deep snow made for laborious trail-breaking. The next day we carried again to 22,300 feet, where we decided to place Camp V. One more camp above this and we would be in position to go for it.

Back at Camp IV that night Gil Harder, Pete Cummings, Pat O'Donnell, Maynard Cohick, Craig Reininger and I were tired but pleased with our progress. In 24 days we had established and stocked five camps. Tomorrow we would move to Camp V. From there it would be only two or three days to the summit. Then it began to snow.

All night it snowed hard. The next morning we took a rest day, the first in over three weeks. The storm continued all day. That afternoon Eric Roberts came up from Camp III on the fixed ropes. The snow fell on into the night.

The morning of the 19th I awoke with an overpowering urge to descend. Pete, Pat and Craig also felt like returning to the relative luxury of big tents and lots of food at Camp III. Gil Harder, Eric Roberts and Maynard Cohick decided to wait one more day to see if the storm would break.

The avalanche hit about an hour after I had left. I had just reached Camp III and was talking to Bob Wilson. The tent we were in collapsed and was partially buried. Craig, the last to leave Camp IV, was hit full force while rappelling down and was temporarily buried. Fortunately, the slope was steep and the snow kept on going. Pat and Pete were both thoroughly blasted by the shock wave.

For the next three days the storm forced us to wait. Huge avalanches cascaded down close-by on either side of the rib. We never received another radio call from the three at Camp IV. After it cleared on the 22nd,

we had to wait another day to let the mountain relieve itself of its burden of snow. Annapurna poured forth snow from every conceivable slab or slope. One memorable avalanche started below the Sickie cliffs and triggered the entire face of the French route. Such must have been the fate of the Italians in 1973.

The 23rd was again clear and we plowed our way back up to Camp IV. We found not a trace of it. It was as if Camp IV had never existed, swept away by forces beyond comprehension. It seemed unreal. That night at Camp III a long discussion brought the decision that going on or not would be a personal choice. After much soul searching, Peter Cummings and I decided that we had to give it another shot.

The next day Pete and I headed up while the others descended to Base Camp. Bypassing the site of Camp IV, we slogged our way on to Camp V at 22,300 feet in thigh- or crotch-deep snow. Hoping for the summit the second day, we were up at 4:30 A.M. We plowed upward into the dawn cold, but with each step, each breaststroke, through the deep snow, our dreams faded. By afternoon we had slogged up 700 vertical feet and were just below the beginning of the long summit slope. Our high point was 23,000 feet.

Within two days we were all together again at Base Camp, gathered before the monument. It now has thirteen names on it. As we bowed in silent prayer, Annapurna sent down a huge avalanche that descended all the way to the valley. It called to mind the nature of the battleground.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Nepal Himalaya.

ATTEMPTED ASCENT: Annapurna, 25,545 feet, via Dutch Rib to 23,000 feet.

PERSONNEL: Robert Wilson, leader; Gil Harder, deputy leader; Maynard Cohick, Peter Cummings, Pat O'Donnell, Craig Reininger, Eric Simonson, *Americans*; Eric Roberts, *Welsh*.