

Winter on Annapurna IV

Carl Hannigan

At last, in mid October 1981, we received permission for the Canadian Annapurna IV expedition to take place as part of the training schedule for the Canadian Mt Everest Expedition of autumn 1982. Most of the summer had been spent fund raising and in political manoeuvring, so we had two frantic weeks organizing food and equipment before our departure date on 31 October. The team consisted of Leader, Gordon Smith, Twins, Al and Adrian Burgess, Roger Marshall, Steve Langley and Carl Hannigan, all of whom betrayed their origins by their multifarious British accents and Don Serle and Jay Straith, the only ones who could be recognized as Canadians.

After several days of preparation in Kathmandu, on 6 November the main body of the expedition set forth to be joined later by Straith and Serle. One day's bus journey over treacherous roads (120km) took us and over 110 porters and mounds of food and equipment to the village of Dumre from where we set off walking in balmy tropical weather and jungle scenery.

After 7 days' walking up the Marsyandi Khola, we reached the village of Chame on 13 November at 2700m in an unexpected heavy snow fall. As most of the porters were unshod they abandoned the group and returned to warmer climes, and I cannot say I blame them as they were ill equipped for the conditions. Twenty stalwarts remained, and with the aid of horses and Yaks hired locally the expedition continued up the valley past the village of Ongre until the side valley leading to Annapurna IV was reached. Several days of ferrying loads up the snow-plastered moraines (impassable for the animals) resulted in us establishing base camp at 4600m by 26 November.

The climb was not allowed to start until 1 December and on that date the team started breaking trail through deep snow on the lower slopes. Adrian Burgess was in front at about 4900m and succeeded in starting a slab avalanche which to everyone's amazement he outran *uphill!*

A great deal of activity on everyone's part resulted in camp I, a snow cave at 5580m, being established and stocked by 5 December after fixing ropes up the rocks and snow of the first buttress. During this period the twins had been above camp I fixing ropes to the site of camp II. Marshall and Smith placed a tent at this site (6035m) on 6 December and stayed there with the intent of digging the next snow cave. That night and all of the next day there was a heavy snowfall followed by high winds. Most of the route was blown in and the fixed ropes were buried.



59 Climbing on Annapurna IV during the winter ascent. Machapuchare is in the background

Photo: Carl Hanigan

After 2 nights Smith and Marshall descended, passing Langley and Hannigan moving up to stock camp II. That afternoon and most of the next day these two attempted to dig another snow cave but kept hitting glacier ice all the time, and were buffeted continuously by high winds. The winds were so high that the tent was ripped apart and blown away, so they returned to base camp where a few days were spent recovering while the storm blew over.

Finally on 13 December the snow cave at camp II was established working from camp I (the decision not to use tents again was made after the destruction of the tent at camp II). During the next week, the twins, Marshall and Langley worked rapidly to fix ropes up the last 250m of the buttress and through a very large crevasse at the top to gain the summit ridge. Working out of camp II they travelled daily to the site of camp III (6400m) and dug a small snow cave. After this they returned to base camp to rest in preparation for the summit attempt while Smith, Hannigan and the Sherpas stocked camp III with food and equipment from camp II. Backup from camp I was provided by Serle, while a heroic plodding job had been maintained by Straith keeping camp I stocked. Camp III was complete by 20 December and everybody moved down to base camp as the twins and Marshall moved through to camp III where they were ensconced by the night of 21 December.

At 7am on 22 December (shortest day of the year) they left camp III in high winds at -30°C . and moved up the fixed ropes that had been placed on the first steep sections above camp III. Above these they moved over the rounded humps and steeper snow sections leading toward the summit. High winds and bitter cold dogged them up these slopes till they reached the final 200m snow slope, steep and unstable. At this point they roped and Roger Marshall led the section to the summit which they reached about 3pm. It was unsafe to climb to the top of the summit cornice as this overhung the SW face for some considerable distance. They returned to camp III by 6pm, having completed an incredible ascent at that altitude of 1100m in 11 hrs, without oxygen and in appalling conditions of wind and cold. A second attempt by Smith, Langley and the Sherpa Sona Gyau was unsuccessful because of high winds and illness, and because of the deteriorating conditions. Hannigan and the other Sherpa Dowa Dorje (killed in the Khumbu Icefall in September 1982) did not mount their attempt.

This was essentially a lightweight low budget expedition with only 2 Sherpas, most of the carrying being done by the team members. By 2 January the whole team was back in Kathmandu having climbed the highest mountain in the world to date during the official Nepalese winter climbing season of 1 December to 31 January. This does not, of course, include the Polish Winter Ascent of Everest which was accomplished in February 1980 and is unrecognized by Nepal.