Pumori – the Scottish Route

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Surrounded by the peaceful security of the shady Alpine Club Library in South Audley Street, with its shelves upon shelves of Alpine Club reports and hundreds of aging Himalayan Journals overflowing with tales of intrepid deeds by past and present mountaineers, Mrs Johnson drops all her other work to come to my aid in finding the vital 'information'. Many of my expeditions have come to life in this manner – overnight coach to Victoria, navigate, with Highland caution, the crowded tangled streets, my goal the Alpine Club, walk down the hallway, passing under portraits of those who have gone before us, down the stairs and round the corner, the quiet welcome, the scanning of pages and pages of different texts. Then, with a bundle of photo-copies under my arm, I pay my 10 pences and return to the far north to sift through the 'information' in my humble den.

I was leader of our Pumori trip, originally coming across the permission as I cruised up the Khumbu in 1985 where I met Dave and Morris from Seattle. We shot the breeze. They told me they needed some help to climb Pumori. I said I'd be willing to have a go as long as I could take one other Brit. We drifted apart and the seed, having been sown, was left to germinate while I encountered an old buddy from a previous expedition. After a flight from Lukla, as I tripped casually through the sunny boulevards of Kathmandu, I re-encountered the Seattle pair.

Pumori was first climbed by a German/Swiss team way back – you'll find the report on the uppermost shelves of the Alpine Club (*AJ*67, 351, 1962). We pulled into Base Camp early in October 1986: Rick Allen and I and our two Sherpas. Migma Tenzing from Thame village was our Sirdar and cook, and Pasang, nursing his sore head from over-much chang, was his assistant. But the ever-reliable Pasang managed to stumble down the moraine bank to fill a kettle with water to make our first Base Camp brew. We were at 5100m on the right bank of the Pumori glacier. Our yaks had departed, the head yak driver carrying with him a letter addressed to the Ministry of Tourism in Kathmandu, requesting a change of route. We now wished to attempt an unclimbed line on the S face.

So Rick and I waited for the weather to improve and for our bodies to acclimatize. We pitched a tent on Kalipitar and spent the night there, waking up in the early morning air to fantastic views of Pumori, Changtse, Everest, a flank of Lhotse and Nuptse. Further down the valley Ama Dablam and Kantega stood tall, their distant summits scraping the azure blue sky. We gazed and descended to our Base Camp to drink mugs of steaming Sherpa tea. Then, after a full breakfast, we prepared our equipment for the climb. Down the valley somewhere Dave and Morris approached. Rick and I wished that they would soon come to Base Camp, as we were now ready to climb.

After our second night on Kalipitar, Dave and Morris arrived at Base, where we were glad to share their company and junk food. We pointed out our proposed new line which took a steep ice couloir for several hundred metres, then eased out on to lesser-angled ramps, which would probably go at Scottish Grade 3, then over several rock-steps, to take us curving up to the summit. They thought that the line was perhaps a little over the top and were not sure if they would like to attempt it with us, but were keen for us to try.

Day 1 took Rick and me to a height of 5600m at the foot of a steep buttress. We bivvied in our Goretex tent and longed for the morning. It came with perfect weather. We climbed roped-up moving together over iced-up rock. We pitched three rope-lengths of mixed buttress climbing, which led us on to a view of an overhanging rock wall, so we had no choice but to abseil into the steep couloir on our right. As I led out and began to rig up the ropes, we contemplated the dreadful consequences of snow falling higher up on the mountain, as we headed into one of the main avalanche chutes for that southern aspect of the mountain.

Once down in the couloir the emphasis was on speed to climb the steep ice and try to secure a safe bivi site on an ice arête about 300m above, which, of course, we had only seen from Base Camp. So we climbed towards this idyllic sanctuary, swinging leads of grade 4 to 5, but darkness caught us with several pitches left above. I spied a bivi to my left, which would involve a difficult traverse to the base of an overhang. It was Rick's lead, and as I hauled the sacks, the bivi tent tore loose from the side-straps and torpedoed into the oblivion below. Rick reached the ledge and belayed. We considered descending in the dark, as the prospect of four or five more nights without a tent and perhaps no snow caves was too awful to contemplate, but we decided to postpone the decision until the morning. I seconded over to Rick, carrying my rucksack, deposited it on the ledge and then reversed the pitch, leaving my ice-tools behind, front-pointing in balance to retrieve Rick's sack, which hung from a warthog.

Just as I was shouldering Rick's sack, a peg dislodged, releasing about eight metres of slack rope, which hot-footed me down the couloir. A jolt as I came to a brief halt indicated that somewhere the situation was being controlled. Then slowly I dropped several more metres as the rope cut into the snow. Rick's voice came to me in the darkness, 'Sandy, you've got to get your weight off the rope, as my hand is caught!' I tried to layback up vertical icicles and had actually managed a rise of about one and a half metres on rounded holds, when Rick unwound himself and tied the rope off. I began to sort out my prusik loops as spindrift cascades streamed down, stars shone and the moon swung round, brightening my shady place. My Chouinard 'X' tools eventually came down to me, attached to the end of our hauling line, and Rick belayed me, as I climbed out of my freezing depression. Once safely on our open ledge, we re-established pegs in blind cracks, brewed and slept.

The morning which followed was shrouded with a band of high wind clouds. Rick's pitch brought us almost to the top of the couloir. Spindrift raged at us, as we held on to our ice-tools. Chunks of ice tore at our Goretex shells. I had no helmet, but it was Rick who seemed to get struck the most. My lead –

grade 4/5 – through a stream of spindrift and biting wind, with ice-tubes frozen useless, adhering to leather-palmed gloves, made me glad of my Scottish experience, as I came to the end of the rope. Belayed to a couple of warthogs, I took in the rope as Rick came up and front-pointed on to the frozen arête. We scampered up this for a few pitches, dug a tiny narrow, cylindrical cave and were glad to be home again. It was only then that we realized that we had omitted to discuss the loss of the bivi tent. We had moved this morning thinking only of ascending. The prospect of the next few nights filled us with exhilarating trepidation.

The night passed in very deep sleep, and the climb next day gave us super, relaxed climbing, at grade 3, occasionally creeping into grade 4. We climbed like this for two days, moving together, on perfect névé and squeaky ice, leading and following as our feelings dictated, admiring the views, down to the Khumbu ice fall, across to the Geneva Spur, the S Col, Lhotse, and Nuptse. We savoured the luxury of being.

7000m and our fifth bivouac. Early morning saw my hands frozen from untangling our remaining 8mm rope. Rick led over the cornice which held our cave, then we were given a view of the rounded summit slopes. We were amazed at being so close and walked together, the wind still blowing bitterly cold. At 10am we were on the summit, and peered from our well-enveloped faces into Tibet and down to Rongbuk, where we had been only a year ago. Our eyes moved on southwards to the pinnacles of Everest's North-East Ridge and we thought of Pete and Joe, and of Brummie and his team battling there at that very moment. We gazed upwards to the high summit of Everest, and on to Lhotse and Nuptse. We were cold and, having completed our photography, we began our descent. We descended the S ridge for a few hundred metres, then unroped and began to down-climb the W face, 60 degree hard pack, front-points penetrating the smooth worn surface. We abseiled only three rope-lengths, over small rock cliffs, and continued steadily down, devising our route as we descended. As darkness came, the vast amphitheatre took on a mysterious nature. The cool breeze ruffled our hoods, occasional ice whirred by. My lithium battery gave only a tiny flicker to my head-torch bulb, so I shadowed Rick, as we climbed downwards, side by side, together into the unknown gloom, sharing the head-torch light.

One more abseil off my last remaining ice-tube, and we stumbled through thigh-deep avalanche debris, roped together till we reached the edge of the fan. 10pm saw us crawling into our Rab bags, to become instantly comatose.

The sun took ages to shine upon us on that new morning. The Changri Shar glacier groaned as we packed our sacks and meandered down and around, through its maze of crevasses and seracs, eventually tumbling out on to the moraine. Migma Tenzing's voice penetrated my tired brain: 'Namaste!'