The Altos North-East Ridge of Everest 1987 Expedition

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All the obvious ridges, buttresses and faces of Everest have now been climbed, except for the North-East Ridge. There have been four attempts, all British, to climb this last big challenge on the mountain.

The first was Chris Bonington's expedition in the spring of 1982. Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker reached their high point beyond the first pinnacle at approximately 8200m. How far they got beyond this point is not known, but that is where they were last seen. It is assumed that Pete and Joe, in traversing around the next pinnacle on unstable snow, fell down the north-east side of the ridge. They had been at Base Camp (5300m) and above for a total of nine weeks prior to their final summit push. It is also possible that, having lost a great deal of muscle tissue, they succumbed to exhaustion and hypothermia.

In the spring of 1985 the Pilkington expedition led by Mal Duff attempted the ridge. After one massive snow-fall (21 May) and illness amongst the team members, the attempt was called off by the leader. However, during better weather towards the end of May, Rick Allen climbed up the ridge through all the camps to bivouac solo at 7900m. Rick then went on (27 May), up the first pinnacle, to a height of 8150m. It is highly probable that, with more support, Rick would have got further.

In the autumn of 1986 Brummie Stokes and a large team came to the North-East Ridge in the post-monsoon period for the first time. The previous two expeditions had taken the ridge from the Raphu La (6510m). In the autumn the 30-degree slopes leading up from the Raphu La seemed dangerously avalanche-prone. Brummie's team climbed directly up the North buttress, meeting the ridge at 7090m. It is now known as 'Bill's Buttress', after Bill Barker who led most of the route. Harry Taylor and Trevor Pilling reached a high point of 8000m at the bottom of the first pinnacle on 16 October. Despite a very determined effort the expedition was then abandoned, because of incessant snow-falls and hurricane-force (200km/hour) winds which made any further progress physically impossible.

Despite the efforts of some of the best climbers from Britain, well organized, climbing lightweight on the first attempt, and all-out sieging with oxygen on the second and third, the North-East Ridge remained unclimbed. Once again the long ridge-climb was proving more difficult than steep face climbing. On the South-West face of Everest, for instance, the distance from Advanced Base Camp on the glacier to the summit is about 2400m and the face is often sheltered from the winds: especially as, like many faces, it is concave, protected on the sides by the containing buttresses. On the four-mile-long

North-East Ridge, lines of communication are very extended and involve a great variety of climbing.

From whichever direction the winds blow, the climber is at risk from the chill factor and the sheer impossibility of making any progress at all when the winds reach hurricane force.

Obviously the dangers of rock-fall and avalanche are less on the ridge. This is certainly so on the crest, but often the route takes the open slopes to the side, and then there is still danger from avalanche and collapsing cornices on the ridge.

All in all, the North-East Ridge can justly be dubbed the last great problem, if not *the* problem route to Everest's summit.

The Chinese Mountaineering Association knew of Rick Allen's enthusiasm for returning to the North-East Ridge and let it be known to him that an American expedition for the autumn of 1987 was unable to raise the funds. Rick was able to get confirmation of this from the Americans, who gave up their permit to him. Rick asked Sandy Allan, who had been on Everest in 1985 and with Rick on Pumori in 1986, to join him for the autumn slot. Sandy rang me on Christmas Eve 1986, asking if I was interested in going and organizing the trip, as both he and Rick were tied up at work. I accepted with alacrity, and in the next few weeks we gathered together a team of eight. Nick Kekus who had been with Rick and Sandy in 1985 was an obvious choice. I asked Stephen Sustad, an American now living in Britain and married to a British girl, who had been with me on Shivling, Broad Peak and Makalu under very difficult circumstances.

I also asked Robert Schauer, an Austrian climber from Graz, who has climbed perhaps the most difficult route in the Himalaya, the W face of Gasherbrum 4, with Wojciech Kurtyka from Poland. Robert had climbed five 8000m summits, all but Everest in lightweight style. Sandy suggested my son Michael who had climbed with me up Chamalang's eastern and central summits, Diran, and had been up to 7300m on Nanga Parbat and 7800m on Makalu. I asked Sharavati Prabhu from Bombay to join us. She had reached 7300m with the Indian women's expedition to Everest in 1984, and had climbed on half a dozen peaks in the Indian Himalaya. She was also the first Indian mountaineer to climb in Chinese Tibet. Michael brought Eva Jansson from Sweden to be our Base Camp manageress. The brothers Mangal Sing (Nima) Tamang and Sila Tamang joined the expedition as cooks. They had been with me on all my expeditions to Nepal since 1979.

Fuel and food were generously donated or given at favourable discounts by manufacturers from all over the UK, Austria and Germany. However, after many near misses, we were still very short of funds. In fact, two weeks before our departure date in July we had given up on Everest and had decided to stay in Nepal and hopefully climb Annapurna.

At the eleventh hour Rick made contact with Archie Thomas of Altos Computers who generously and wholeheartedly gave us their financial support. Rick came out to Nepal, where the rest of us were by then, with the good news.

Most of us spent 10 days in the Langtang Mountains north of Kathmandu, acclimatizing and climbing Naya Kanga (5846m). Michael and Eva were busy moving loads along the Friendship Highway towards the

Chinese border, a task made more difficult by five landslips. All the loads had to be portered round, but vehicles had been trapped between landslips, and were thus able to carry the gear to the next one, where porters were again available to carry the gear to another van, and so on until they reached Friendship Bridge. We joined them there and had porters take all our gear up to Zhangmu (Khasa) and the waiting CMA vehicles.

After two nights spent at the town of Xegar (Shekar Dzong), we arrived at Base Camp on 4 September, three days after leaving the border. After three days acclimatizing, sorting loads and waiting for the yak men to arrive, we set off for Advanced Base Camp at the head of the East Rongphu glacier. On the 7th we stopped at 'Camp 1' at 5500m, on the 8th at 'Camp 2' at 6000m, and on the 9th we finally reached Advanced Base Camp at 6400m. The yaks returned the same day and ourselves the day after to start the second yak run on the 12th and to stock Advanced Base Camp completely by 14 September.

A strong 14-man American expedition camped nearby and was already working away at the route to the North col and the North ridge of Everest.

On 15 September Robert and Sandy started to climb 'Bill's Buttress'. On the 19th Nick Kekus and I reached the top of the rib and Pt7090, where we left two tents. The rib had been climbed by all members. It was difficult because of all the snow lying on it and the high winds which blew across from the N col, so we were glad to unearth blue rope left by the Brummie Stokes expedition, and also to connect missing portions with Chinese rope found by the American lads *en route* to the N col, which they had generously given to us. Camp 1 was thus established, but tenting was abandoned after wind destruction in favour of a huge snow-cave dug out by Nick, Robert and Rick on the 22nd.

On the 25th Rick, Sandy and I attempted the easy-angled section between our first camp and the first rock-step. We had not gone far before we retreated in snow well up our thighs that seemed in danger of avalanching off. There followed severe snow-storms which lessened as the winds became stronger. It was not until 3 October that conditions improved and Steve and Robert managed to reach the first buttress. By that time Michael had decided to return home, having had constant problems with diarrhoea and sickness. He and Eva departed.

Sharavati was also having problems with her stomach, having swallowed a sharp-edged salt plum-stone which caused her to vomit blood and pass blood in her stools. Thanks to the good medication provided by Dr Tom McCullough of the American expedition, she recovered but was left somewhat emaciated and weakened.

7 October proved a more fruitful day with carries from our first camp to the first rock-step at 7500m. Sharavati carried gas cylinders, Steve carried food and Robert filmed, as Sandy and I climbed the first rock-step fixing 180m of rope, mainly because of avalanche-prone snow. At the top of the first step Rick came through and continued solo up the second rock-step to make a cave at 7900m – a very fine effort leaving us all with a haven and marker for our future attempt at the pinnacles above. Nick later made a further carry to the bottom of the first rock-step, but by now most of the team were suffering frostbite or frostnip, most particularly Robert who had spent long periods stationary

during his filming operations. Nick was also much affected by the winds and the ensuing chill factor. He had suffered severe frostbite and amputation of his big toe when winter-climbing in the Alps a few years earlier.

On 12 October, knowing that the wind and cold would from now on only increase as winter grew nearer, six of us set off from Base Camp to make our first summit push. Steve turned back at the bottom of Bill's Buttress and Sandy 300m higher, both feeling that there was no chance. Robert and Nick with numb toes retreated from the top of the first rock buttress on 13 October. Rick and I continued in high winds to reach Rick's cave at the top of the second buttress. On 14 October we set out from the cave in extremely strong winds. We climbed two-thirds of the way up the first pinnacle to a height of 8100m, at which point Rick's middle fingers had become numb and 'wooden'. It seemed prudent to descend to the cave. In any case it seemed unlikely that we could erect our bivouac tent in the hurricane-force winds that were screaming across the ridge.

On 15 October we set out again from the cave, but stopped short of our previous high point. The winds were so strong that they lifted small rocks and blew them uphill. They had us crouched over our ice axes, braced, and even so managed to blow us about and make us dance around, trying to regain position. Vast quantities of snow were blowing off the mountain in huge streamers, thousands of feet across the Kangshung Face, and we feared that the winds could blow us off as well. It was physically impossible to make any further progress, so we descended the same day all the way to Base Camp, arriving there three hours after dark on skis from the bottom of Bill's Buttress.

We talked of making a further attempt, but on the 18th the first big storm blew in, depositing about a foot of snow along the East Rongphu glacier and moraine. On the 19th a further storm, much bigger, hit Base Camp where most of us were. There was 36 hours of actual precipitation, the winds were horrendous and snow began to drift in off the hills after the actual storm.

We awaited the arrival of Sila and Nima who had remained at the half-way camp along the East Rongphu glacier. On the 20th Sila came staggering in and dropped down on to his knees, sobbing that his brother had been killed by an avalanche. Rick, Sandy and myself rushed straight off and found the avalanche on the yak trail between our Base Camp and those of American, Japanese and Irish teams on the north side of Everest and Changtse. We dug into the snow until after dark, but could not find Nima's body. On the 21st, with help from the North ridge American team, we dug again into the avalanche. Robert, using a fibreglass tent pole taped together at the joints, located the body on his fifth probe. This was the seventh such body that Robert had located over the years in the Alps and the Himalaya. That night we sadly towed Nima's body down to Base Camp. We later carried on pulling the body to the Rongphu monastery where Nima was cremated on 24 October.

Nima was a great man. All of us who knew him knew that we gained far more from him than he ever did from us. He was a man in balance who asked for nothing, was completely self-effacing, always cheerful and hard-working under the most difficult circumstances. For me this was a great personal loss, for since 1979, when he was a young cook on Kangchenjunga, he had been cooking and

managing Base Camps for us whilst we climbed such peaks as Nuptse, Makalu, Chamalang and Baruntse. At Advanced Base Camp I had offered him my foam sleeping mat, as I was going down to Base Camp for a few days. Nima had said that it would be really good to have the foam, but I would come back and need it and he would then miss it, so he would rather not bother.

He was a Buddhist through and through and, if anyone knew that the body is but a garment to put on and take off, it was he. Looking back, it seemed that he was ready to pass on, but how difficult it was for us to accept that his garment was taken off so early. He was only 30, and had been married for a year to a girl from his village in Solu Khumbu.

Nima, with Sila a few paces behind, had been walking along the snowed-up track across the hillside near Base Camp when he triggered off an avalanche. He was still on the surface of the snow as Sila was going down to him, when a second avalanche from way above came down and buried him. It seemed to us that someone else wanted Nima.

Sandy, Sharavati, Sila and myself ski'd or walked on down to the village of Chadzong to bring back yaks to transport our equipment down to wherever we could get a truck. Along with every other expedition on the mountain we had problems of transport. All the trucks and jeeps at Base Camp were snowed in for the winter and had to await the spring thaw.

Rick, Steve, Nick and Robert went back up to Advanced Base Camp to bring down the more important items. Food and the larger tents just had to be abandoned. We apologize now to future climbers and trekkers who may be put out by any rubbish that could not be located under some five feet of snow and burnt. Clearly we should have disposed of our waste each day to avoid this possibility.

Finding the road from Xegar to Kathmandu blocked by huge falls of snow for some 30km, first Sandy and then Sharavati, Sila and myself went east to Lhasa. We were able to obtain Nima's death certificate from sympathetic CMA officials. Sandy flew home via Hong Kong, and the three of us returned west to meet up with Rick and the others at the hotel in Nyalam. From there we went to Kathmandu, returning home variously on 7, 8 and 9 November.

Everest and also K2 have not been climbed for 18 months, despite attempts by many expeditions consisting of some of the world's most experienced Himalayan climbers. Himalayan weather last year and the year before has been unfavourable in the extreme. The storm that put paid to our attempts and those of all the other expeditions last autumn was said to be the biggest to have hit this part of the Himalaya in living memory. There is endless speculation as to what is happening to the weather in the Himalaya and indeed all over the world at the moment. It may just be a bad point in the cycle of long-term weather systems, or it may be to do with holes in the ozone layer or the greenhouse effect from all the pollution that is being put into the atmosphere in ever-increasing quantities. Whatever it is, climbers will no doubt remain undaunted, and indeed Everest is now booked up on the South side until 1995 and on the North until 1991.

Altos, our sponsors, were pleased with our efforts and the exposure they received. On hearing of Nima's death they immediately advanced £3000 for

Nima's young widow and sufficient funds to cover the extra costs incurred because of the big storm. We could not have hoped for better sponsors. They have kept faith with us and our style of climbing and have offered to fund another expedition should we manage to get permission in the future.

Of course we hope that we will get this chance, but, if the mountain is climbed before we do, then we all hope that it will be climbed in an as adventurous a way as possible, for at the moment it remains, this North-East Ridge, a great step into the unknown, an exciting goal for the future, a symbol of all our strivings.

We know from the results of many siege-style expeditions to Everest, such as the one up the South-West face that, if enough well-led and experienced men and women are engaged on the route, if they have enough money and material and if the weather is reasonable, then the route will be climbed. So what is the point of repeating this particular exercise, since the essence of mountaineering is all about facing up to a degree of uncertainty and risk? Of course the route can be attempted after the sieged climb in lightweight style, without the oxygen and all the logistical support and fixing of ropes that taking oxygen bottles demands, but by then all the little secrets of the route will be known. It will no longer be the step into the unknown which it is at this present time, a tantalizing prospect urging climbers up to see if they have the energy and skill to negotiate the pinnacles, and if they can keep their heads on the last mile to the summit. It is not the ethics of using oxygen which puts us off, but the fact that the weight of the bottles simply does not justify the contents and that they become an unnecessary burden, particularly on steep ground such as that around the pinnacles.

The weather is crucial to any approach to this exposed route. It is unlikely that reasonable conditions will prevail after September, so the most favourable period would be pre-monsoon, or possibly during the monsoon.

The optimum size of the team on such a long and demanding route might be between six and 10 climbers, depending on their experience of very high altitude climbing and their fitness on the day. Whatever the size, the team would need to be in sympathy with each other and be able to exercise great discipline and accept precise organization, so as to make best use of the short periods of good weather. In any case, no time should be wasted at Base Camp, as higher up steady physical deterioration will set in.

It would be a fine thing if a British party, or any other, were able to complete what Chris Bonington, Dick Renshaw, Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker attempted in 1982. It would be a fitting tribute to everything Peter and Joe stood for if the North-East Ridge were to be climbed in the bold lightweight style of the pioneers.

It may be that many years will pass before everything is favourable for a successful ascent in this way. Is it not worth the wait, for by then success will be just that, in every sense of the word?