The Boys and the White Stuff

The First Crossing of the Pinnacles on the NE Ridge of Everest

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It's a strange feeling, climbing with lads whom you've known for years but probably have never climbed with before. This summer a group of 16–20 of us assembled at the Rongbuk for an attempt on the NE Ridge of Everest. The group varied in numbers because doctors changed over in midstream, and also cameramen and TV presenters came and went as they pleased. The expedition was labelled by the climbing press as the 'Golden Oldies' Expedition', mainly because of the inclusion of Joe Brown, 57, Philip Horniblow, 60 and Mo Anthoine, aged 50+ (but with the mind of a 21-year-old). The team also included plenty of 40+'s, all quite experienced and still quite fit!

The expedition was full of hassles from the word go. It started when we had to take a rubber raft from Heathrow to Kathmandu – nothing to do with the expedition, we were just doing a favour for a rafting company based in Nepal. We spent several days delayed in Kathmandu because of the normal customs routine, and left on 5 June heading up the road to Lamosangu where we spent the night. We would have progressed further, but we had endless trouble at police checkpoints even though we had all the necessary permits and permission to use the military road up to the border with China. After a reluctant early rise the following day, we waited for several hours and were then told that the road was still closed to us because our permit was now out of date: it was valid for only one day, the day we departed Kathmandu. After several meetings with military personnel we were allowed to continue and arrived at the Chinese-Nepalese border at 6pm, only to find once again that the border was closed – and this time we were told that it was for three weeks!

Back in Kathmandu, a little poorer but wiser for the experience, we had to rethink our plans. Brummie Stokes, the expedition leader, busied himself visiting the Nepalese and Chinese Embassies and the British Military Attaché to try to find out the exact score on the border closure. Meanwhile the remainder of the team milled around Kathmandu, wondering what to do with our six tons of equipment and how to get to Base Camp.

Mo Anthoine had left Great Britain three weeks earlier, to take over a Base Camp cardboard hut from the Joint Services Everest Expedition. So he would be sitting at Base Camp, wondering when we were all going to arrive; this was causing us concern as the longer we took to reach him, the more likely he was to think that we weren't coming at all. He had also collected a lot of equipment which the expedition had left in Lhasa in 1986, after an attempt on the same route. All this gear had now been transported to Base Camp and was

waiting on our arrival, along with Mo and one Sherpa, Lhakpa Dorje. Back in Kathmandu we decided that it was best for three of us to fly from there to Lhasa and to get to Base Camp as quickly as possible; not only would this put Mo and the rest of the expedition at ease, but we could also report back on the state of the road and the border situation on the Chinese side. Pete Long, Harry Taylor and I were 'volunteered' to form this advance party, and we got ourselves a flight to Lhasa on 11 June. There we were duly met by the Chinese Mountaineering Association representative and taken to the Lhasa Hotel. From there it was a jeep ride of two days to Base Camp where at last we met Mo, who was pretty glad to see us. Over the next few days he kept us amused by tales of his journey to Base Camp and of the Joint Services' efforts on Everest. He had done a fantastic job in setting up Base Camp, so there was very little for us to do when we arrived except to acclimatize. Harry and Pete made a couple of forays up to where Mo had left a tent which was to be an interim camp between Base and Advanced Base at approximately 5900m. After one week there was still no news of the remainder of the expedition, so we made tentative plans for a four-man assault and what to do about food if the others didn't turn up. As it turned out, we were down to one pint of petrol for cooking when (as if they had been listening) the others arrived with three trucks and a jeep, and the team was at last complete. They had all had to fly to Lhasa, as the border was still closed. We had masses of gear to organize and weigh out into loads for yaks to carry up to Advanced Base Camp, 22km away.

Before the expedition could be formally started in the eyes of the Sherpas we had to have a *puja*, a religious ceremony which ensures the safe return of all members. Shortly after the ceremony Pete Long left with the first load of yaks for the two-day walk to Advanced Base Camp; a day later I joined him. Our job was to organize and set up Advanced Base Camp and then to cross the glacier to the foot of the buttress – Bill's Buttress, named after Bill Barker from the 1986 attempt on the ridge. Over the next five or six days Pete and I made several journeys across the glacier and up the buttress, fixing new ropes and also finding ropes from our last attempt. We also found fixed rope from Doug Scott's expedition in the autumn of 1987. Harry and Russell Brice had joined us by this time at Advanced Base Camp, and we soon had Camp 1 established at 6400m on the ridge. The conditions on the hill were similar to those of two years previously, with deep unconsolidated snow above 6700m, but below that there was considerably less snow than before and it was much warmer.

Time is now pressing on, it's the beginning of July and the weather is extremely unsettled. Members are slowly drifting up to Advanced Base Camp, and we have a rota system of working in fours. Generally speaking this means doing a week's work as high on the mountain as one can get, along with the Sherpas, and then returning to Base Camp for a rest of about five days. So, at any one stage, there could be two groups up working from Advanced Base Camp, a third on the way up to Advanced Base and a fourth group resting at Base Camp. The mountain certainly seems to eat up all the numbers and quite often – depending on where you are – you might not see other members for two weeks.

When we tried this route in 1986 we had no Sherpas at all and found that

the ferrying of loads was wearing members out, so much so that after four or five carries we virtually had to have a week off, and in the long term no one was sufficiently fit to get high enough to make an attempt on the pinnacles. This time we decided to have Sherpas along to help resolve the situation; we had 10 in all, two of whom were cooks, leaving eight working members on the mountain. Unfortunately several of the Sherpas became quite ill: two got pneumonia, one had very bad teeth and suffered extremely painful toothache, and another got a blood-clot in his leg; so our work-force was greatly reduced.

Our progress seemed to have ground to a standstill: first of all we were three weeks behind because of our late arrival; then we made good progress in getting Camp 1 established, but now Camp 2 seemed to be miles away because of the deep snow. Several teams have been working on the section between Camps 1 and 2 but progress is slow: there are many avalanches and high winds, making life very difficult. Eventually Harry and Russ reach Camp 2, having waded all day in chest-deep snow, with four of the Sherpas carrying loads behind. Camp 2 is established at last. Harry and Russ manage to fix some rope towards Camp 3, finding one of Chris Bonington's ropes from the first attempt on the ridge in 1982, with a team that included Pete Boardman, Joe Tasker and Dick Renshaw. Conditions aren't good, with very deep snow making progress extremely slow. Harry and Russ are pretty tired – they have been on the hill for five days now. Pete Long and I are going to have a go up front, to try to push the ropes out a little further.

We arrived at Camp 2 just after midday, just as Harry and Russ were departing for Advanced Base Camp. The following morning I was feeling pretty rough and was not able to accompany Pete up the fixed ropes towards Camp 3. Pete did a good day's work fixing rope almost to Camp 3, about 200m short of the proposed camp. The next day the weather was awful and we had no chance of returning to establish Camp 3; instead we waded chest-deep in snow down to Camp 1 and then onwards to Advanced Base Camp. The weather remained bad for some time and the majority of the team were confined to Base Camp; it was pointless to stay up at Advanced Base Camp, as one does not recover very well at that altitude. It was now nearly the end of July; Mo, Joe, Ian Nicolson and Davey Jones were all being hindered by the deep snow and finding it difficult to live at above 7000m – most of them find it difficult enough to live at sea-level! Time was getting short, and it looked as if we might have a repeat of our last unsuccessful attempt. Harry and Russ went up to relieve Mo and Joe's team on 30 July, in the belief that it would be our last attempt on the ridge. The efforts of Mo, Joe and Sam Roberts to reach and excavate Camp 2 had been thwarted by the bad weather and the poor conditions. Ang Lhakpa Dorje, who had previously accompanied Chris Bonington to the summit of Everest via the South Col on the Norwegian expedition, along with Rinsing Sherpa joined Harry and Russ later the same day. A comfortable night was spent at Camp 1, with clear skies which afforded magnificent views of Makalu and Kangchenjunga in the distance.

The next day saw the four at Camp 2, armed with shovels to dig out the tents which had been avalanched. Several hours later, the tents had been re-sited and anchored down. It was a comforting thought that, although covered by five

feet of snow, Mo's box-tent withstood the onslaught and, if the camp had been manned, the occupants would have survived. An early start on the morning of 1 August enabled them to reach our previous high point at 7750m. The winds – which had been gusting all night – now roared along the ridge, blowing crystalline swords into their faces. Progress was difficult and painful, sense prevailed and they headed down to Camp 2. Spindrift had all but covered the tents and, after repeated attempts to clear the Snowdon Mouldings Limpet, Lhakpa announced that he and Rinsing would go down to Camp 1 for a comfortable night. On arrival at Camp 1 both Sherpas decided that the weather was too bad for them, and they descended to Advanced Base Camp. The wind abated in the night, and at 5am Harry and Russ left Camp 2 with small loads, re-ascended the ropes to the high point and then continued to fix a small amount of rope to 7900m, where they were able to establish Camp 3. They erected a lightweight tent and sat for a few hours brewing up, before heading down to Camp 2 in buoyant mood.

In effect a 'double six' had been thrown: the Pinnacles now appeared imminently close, the game could begin!

Lhakpa Gelo and Norbu Sherpa moved up to Camp 2 to assist Harry and Russ, and on the following day they moved up to Camp 3 carrying loads of food, gaz and oxygen. The afternoon was spent filming, interspersed with the usual non-stop brewing. They also managed to link up with Brummie in Hereford via the Racal radio and the Dymac satellite system, situated 20km away at Base Camp. Harry thought it quite perverse to be sitting at 8000m talking to someone thousands of miles away in his home, but it was none the less a welcome interlude.

They were off by 5.30 the following morning and 45 minutes of steady plodding took them to the start of the first Pinnacle. The familiar orange and blue rope that belonged to Chris Bonington's expedition was visible at the start, alongside several harnesses, cookers and gaz canisters belonging to either the Duff or the Scott/Allan attempts.

Harry tells the story: *I led off on relatively easy ground; the conditions were not good but certainly workable. After 100 metres the angle steepened as I then began to parallel the ridge proper. Snow conditions deteriorated and wading became the norm, something at which this team had become very adept! Progress was slow but methodical, and soon the 200m of 8mm polyprop was* in situ. *Russell jumared up with consummate ease, a quick chat, and off he led with the second drum of rope. From my airy stance I had a good view of the E (the so-called 'Fantasy') ridge which joined the NE ridge by our Camp 3 at 8000m.*

I decided that this route would have to be attempted by someone with a strong sense of humour! Near the top of the first Pinnacle the ridge started to sharpen, but Russell made good progress leaving his ice-axe behind to secure the descent. We arrived back at Camp 3 just after 5pm, after over 11 hours' climbing above 8000m. On the radio scheduled that night we spoke to Paul at Camp 1 and informed him of our progress and of the fact that we would go lightweight from now on in a bid through the Pinnacles along to the summit.

When asked how the Pinnacles looked from the first one onwards,

Russell spoke the immortal words 'they're a piece of weasel piss!' We spent an almost sleepless night even though we were on oxygen, and the next morning it was 6am before we got away, laden with sacks weighing 30kg. We carried bivvy kit, no sleeping bags or tent, a small oxygen bottle each and masks for sleeping, and the Sony video along with the Racal radio. Our climbing gear was minimal, one length of 8mm polyprop to climb on, one ice-tool each and one deadman between us.

By 9am we were at our high point. Russell led off, and I filmed him. It was a testament to the route that the video never saw the light of day again until the following day on the N ridge. The ridge was truly knife-like, with cornices blown to either side and difficult mushrooms to negotiate. Progress was decidedly slow, but momentum was maintained by methodically knocking off the top 45cm of loose snow and virtually climbing heel-to-toe. It was a sobering experience, with the gullies sweeping down to our right, and steep flutings of the Kangshung face immediately to our left. After four hours of tightrope walking a 55° ramp led off right to the second Pinnacle. The snow conditions were now atrocious, with almost bottomless snow on the ramp which left us both gasping like old men. The weather was now also looking decidedly ominous, with thick cloud billowing up from the Kharta Valley.

The top of the ramp brought us behind the second Pinnacle: the Pinnacle itself is not en route *and is indeed set forward to the north by some 30 metres. The difficulties remained constant for another two hours until a subsidiary ridge met us from the north. It was our first opportunity to sit down without having to* cheval *the route, and we took it gladly. A brew was made and I opened up on the radio, to be greeted by the enthusiastic voices of Davey Jones and then Paul. He and Bill Barker had moved up to Camp 3 as our back-up, with the intention of following us through the next day. We were now just short of the third Pinnacle and were clearly visible to Advanced Base Camp, even with the naked eye. Only two hours of daylight remained as we set off again. Just before the third Pinnacle we cut down into a gully, then on to a small arête where our bivvy would have to be. It was now dark and it began to snow. We hit rock after two feet of digging, so the scene was set for an uncomfortable night. We clambered into bivvy bags and had a brew and delved into our sacks for the oxygen gear. The regulator on my set had broken, so the night was spent passing the one set to and fro between us. Both of us slept with and without the comfort of oxygen. Our plan, to leave at midnight to push to the summit, was dashed when the snows began. Heavy flakes fell constantly throughout the night. We set off at 5am in a virtual whiteout, having once again gained the ridge. It took two hours to reach the last Pinnacle where we descended into a large gully at its foot and traversed around it to the north. Over 45cm of snow had fallen in the night, and we were constantly setting off slides and small avalanches. Visibility was still very poor, so we sat down for a much-needed brew and came up on the radio. Communications to Advanced Base Camp were only just workable, but Joe Brown came in loud and clear from Base Camp. He said that the weather there was clearing a little and suggested that we sit tight, in order to find our way down the N ridge. True to form, Joe was right and the clouds lifted and gave us a glimpse of the summit which appeared tantalizingly close. We were in fact*

below and to the left of the First Step. The time was now 11.30am.

Our only option was to descend the N ridge: the weather and conditions were atrocious, and our time had run out. The decision to forgo the summit was bitter for both of us: Russell had already been to 8000m on the W ridge when he and Paddy Freany made a bold alpine-style ascent in 1981, and this was my third attempt on Everest.

The descent was torture; both of us were extremely tired and we had to rest frequently. Mo Anthoine spotted our descent off the North Col; we took a line to the north which Mo described as a 'bum-slide'. In fact we front-pointed the whole 500m down. John English, Davey Jones and the Sherpas were there to greet us at the bottom, and all that remained was a walk back to Advanced Base Camp for that welcome brew!

After Harry and Russell's 'good day out' I decided to call off the expedition as the weather and conditions had continued to deteriorate. The expedition slowly made its way back to Kathmandu – not without incident.

Although we didn't reach the summit, we had reached the peak of effort and had shown to ourselves that it could be done. Despite missing the joy of the summit, we had experienced the pleasure of the climbing and had learnt many of the lessons which we had come to learn.