The Grosse Spitzkop – Matterhorn of Namibia

A Climbing History

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(*Plates 77, 78*)

With Namibian independence in terms of UN Resolution 435 a reality from 21 March 1990, it seems an appropriate time to publicize the territory's mountains – and in particular the remarkable Spitzkop.

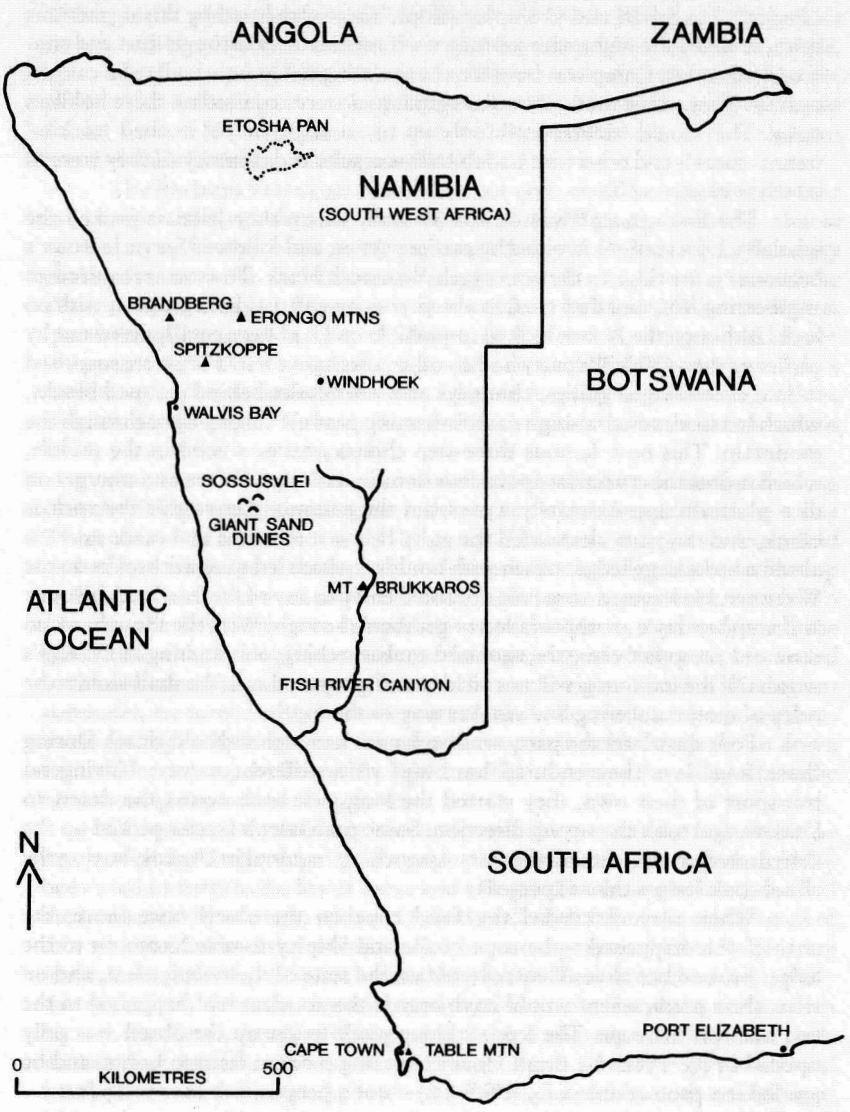
Like a shimmering mirage, the peak rises towering above burning, arid plains in the heart of Damaraland, 50km from Usakos, the nearest town. This rosy granite inselberg has an altitude of 1728m. Its proud pyramid shape has been flattened on a north–south axis to form a mile-long serrated ridge behind the summit cone. Vast sweeps of smooth walls rise for some 700m sheer out of the plains, and massive columns of blistered crumbling rock give little encouragement to the climber's eye seeking an easy line.

Legend has it that a German party forced a way up, sent a smoke signal, then failed to return. No proof of this enterprise exists, and the mountaineering discovery in modern times is credited to the redoubtable Dennis Woods, who cited it as the most memorable landmark on his trip through the deserts in 1938.

Woods returned in 1940 with Servie le Roux and I C Smith. The soaring, conical shaft of pink granite towering above the surrounding wastes reminded them of an elephant's tusk or rhino's horn. To Woods it was '2000ft of naked stone piercing the blue of the firmament like a great scimitar'. He perceived the summit curving over in a manner reminiscent of the Matterhorn, and commented that 'the changing shades of pink and purple lighting the precipices in the glory of the sunset, or flush of dawn, are unforgettable'.

The group made two attempts on the peak. After the first, having followed a system of gullies choked with huge boulders on the E wall, Woods returned with a wrenched knee. Smith and le Roux continued the line and fought their way up ledges and corridors, climbing hard jam-cracks and chimneys of rough crumbling rock, to be stopped by the massive, unclimbably smooth gendarme block behind the summit. This block was to prove the nemesis of many other parties coming later. Frustrated like this, it is small wonder that Smith felt the peak's magic had turned hostile, the poisonous, prickly vegetation on the hot slopes lying like a curse on the unwary.

In 1945, a party of German climbers from Swakopmund tried the peak by the same route, prepared to force their way with all the post-war climbing aids, but they got no further.


ANGOLA
ZAMBIA
ETOSHA PAN
NAMIBIA
(SOUTH WEST AFRICA)
BRANDBERG
ERONGO MTNS
SPITZKOPPE
WINDHOEK
BOTSWANA
WALVIS BAY
SOSSUSVLEI
GIANT SAND DUNES
MT BRUKKAROS
ATLANTIC OCEAN
FISH RIVER CANYON
N
SOUTH AFRICA
PORT ELIZABETH
CAPE TOWN
TABLE MTN
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500

July 1946 saw a strong contingent from Cape Town arrive: P O'Neill ('Peggy'), Les Schaff and O Shipley (Ship). They were lured by this mysterious spire, to make the nightmare journey via train and lorry through dust and sun-scorched desert. Camp was between the towering red granite walls of a canyon nearby. They noted that unfamiliar techniques were required on these holdless slabs. They could friction-walk only up to an angle of 50° in their 'tackies' (tennis shoes), and otherwise had to follow cracks and chimneys if they were to advance at all.

The first attempt was on the W wall, where they friction-walked the whaleback formations avoided by earlier parties, and followed Servie le Roux's beacons on the ridge to the 20m eggshell-smooth block. To cross it required an engineering feat, and they tried to abseil 30m on either side to get past, with no luck. Although the N face looked impossible and had been totally ruled out by earlier parties, O'Neill's party had no other alternative left. They were surprised to find camouflaged gullies, chimneys and wormholes behind jammed blocks, which led to a cathedral-high narrow leaning passage cutting right through the mountain. This now famous three-step chimney takes a bend in the middle, which means the crucial last portion is done in darkness, before one emerges on to a platform approximately 25m from the summit. Above this the rock is blank, and the party descended the gully below it to a tree and made an 18m abseil on to a large ledge strewn with boulders which led to easier breaks on the W corner. However, a 10m bulge blocked entry to any of the breaks. A bivouac and another day's attempts failed to get them through. With the thought of 'so near and yet so far' came the agonized soul-searching, culminating in O'Neill's words: 'If the mountain will not yield to ordinary methods, we shall violate the rules of mountaineering and *cut* our way to the top!'

Four days later the party was back with hammer and cold chisel. During those four days they endured hardships of a different nature. Having no transport of their own, they started the long trek back across the desert to Usakos, and took the wrong direction. Some time later a farmer picked up the dehydrated group; with all the thirst-quenching required in Usakos, buying the chisel took longer than expected!

When they descended the fixed rope on the abseil once more, the unthinkable happened – the rope broke and Shipley tumbled 10m on to the ledge, bruised but alive. They reflected on the state of their equipment, and on what their predicament would have been if the accident had happened to the last man on the rope. The free-climbing pitch to get up the abseil was only opened in the 1960s by Brian Honey, wearing modern friction boots, and he graded it a protectionless F3 (USA-5.8) – not a proposition for the 1940s.

Using some rope gymnastics and support from a home-made massive piton hammered behind a flake, O'Neill and Schaff balanced precariously for two hours and managed to chip four steps. At this stage storm clouds were rolling in, and they retreated in gale-force winds. After seven days of battling against the Spitzkop defences, the peak was baring its fangs in final defiance. O'Neill had few regrets, as he felt they had unlocked the weakest link in the peak's closely-guarded chain of secrets.

Some months later, during November 1946, Hans and Else Wongt-

schowski arrived. They were known as the Wongs in much of the literature – their full surname was too difficult. With them was a young Jan de Villiers Graaff and a non-climbing companion, Rex Dey. Led by Hans the three climbers set off. Following the normal route they were soon belaying off the large piton. Then the leader stood on the second man's shoulders to reach the first two steps. They are fairly spacious, but nearly three metres up. (Nowadays this is F2 in friction boots, although the steps have been considerably enlarged over the years, and F3 if one avoids the steps altogether.)

Jannie Graaff wrote that it must have required exceptional balance to have stood there in tennis shoes cutting the steps, and was probably unjustifiable without the support of the piton. Initially they were unable to move higher than the second set of two steps, which were only toe size, and on their second day's attempts they managed to chip a fifth hold, with some difficulty. The red, weathered surface has first to be cleared off, to expose the hard blue granite underneath. Stepping on to the vague depression made, the leader could friction-walk to easier ground. There followed a series of cracks and chimneys; the last one – a fierce struggle for large people – was mastered by handing over the lead to Jannie, and then they were on the summit.

Until April 1960 the route of the original climb remained the only one to the top. It took over 10 years until the second ascent was accomplished, by Dave Smith and Graham Louw on 2 January 1957. They were followed in June 1957 by the third ascent party, comprising Horst Lachenmann and Rosalie and Ken Bethune. The latter were to figure prominently in the formation of the South-West Africa mountain club, whilst Horst later participated in the opening of the W face route.

A year later, in July 1958, Lachenmann accompanied Friedrich Schreiber up the *voie normale*, carrying three sections of metre-long angle-iron which had formed part of a worn-out Herkules windmill that pumped water for 50 years on a nearby farm. It had been imported from the Dresdener Windturbinen-werke in the old German colonial days. From the girders they erected a summit cross which was still standing proudly in July 1966, when I made the 19th ascent of the peak in Colin Inglis's party. On my second visit, in December 1989, Barrie Cheetham and I formed the 235th party, and the cross was gone. The records tin was damaged by lightning, and finally, in September 1988, the cross was taken down by Adam Roff and Duncan Elliot. They felt an uncluttered summit was preferable.

Lachenmann, Schreiber and Bethune waited two years before they returned on 13 January 1960 and climbed the E wall via a number of chimneys to a point below the nek between the infamous gendarme and the peak. They did not wish to use mechanical means or top-roping to get over the smooth 8m overhang blocking their way, so instead they made the 10th ascent via the normal route and got on to the 'unclimbable gendarme' at last, from the back.

Restraint with mechanical aid was abandoned when Schreiber and Lachenmann, now with the addition of Richard Helm, on 16–17 April 1960 pioneered the weaknesses of the W wall – long thought to be the smooth and impractical side. They used 40 pitons and twice needed rope tension to aid them across awkward traverses. At one stage they formed a precarious climbing tree,

when all three men stood on each other's shoulders like the Bremer town musicians, so that the leader could reach the holds. Their route gave them problems with loose rocks, crumbling piton cracks and strong winds which blew one hat right off the owner's head. On the second day after their bivouac at the gendarme nek, the wind strengthened to gale force, so a fixed rope was used to bypass the gendarme, and they finished up the final chimney crack used by the first ascensionists. Even so, the route was recognized as a separate ascent line, but it was not attempted again for 14 years.

This was the 11th ascent of the peak, and the first by a new route up a peak that at that stage had been climbed by only 19 different people, three of them ladies.

No new climbing was done for 10 years, until in 1970 the American Dr Tom Choate came touring SWA with Val and Anne King. They climbed a N face gully variation to the start of the normal route, then avoided the cut steps on the crux section by traversing on friction climbing over to the left, where a layback move got them into a crack and gully which joins the usual route higher up.

Two University of Cape Town students, Tim Hughes and Rodney Lichtman, who had practised on the granite of Lion's Head in Cape Town, visited the peak in November 1972. They did a NE Frontal, apparently somewhat to the right of the 1960 E face attempt, by following parallel cracks up two huge columns leaning against the peak. Tim remarked that from the correct angle one could see right through a gap behind the columns. They ended on top of the blocks above the three-step chimney on the original route and, hanging precariously and boldly off two bathook moves, they could reach moderate climbing to the top. Back on the peak after two years' break, Tim and Rodney repeated Schreiber's 1960 route, eliminating most of the aid and, more significantly, avoiding the traverse on to the standard route by climbing the smooth 8m overhang at grade F3 on 18 December 1974.

It was inevitable that the exploratory rock-climber Eckhard Haber would get to the Spitzkop, and he did so in 1982, when over three days he opened the 550m-high SW wall route with Clive Ward. Totally modern in style and approach, it has desperately hard, thin climbing with bold leads, where protection consists only of a few bolt hangers far apart.

Since then the climbing explosion on the main peak and on the subsidiary Pontok (or Pondok) Spitze has resulted in a guidebook to the area, along with, somewhat more sadly, better roads, meaning easier access, more litter, more denudation of vegetation, and less chance nowadays that you will have the Spitzkop all to yourself for a memorable climbing trip on a unique mountain.

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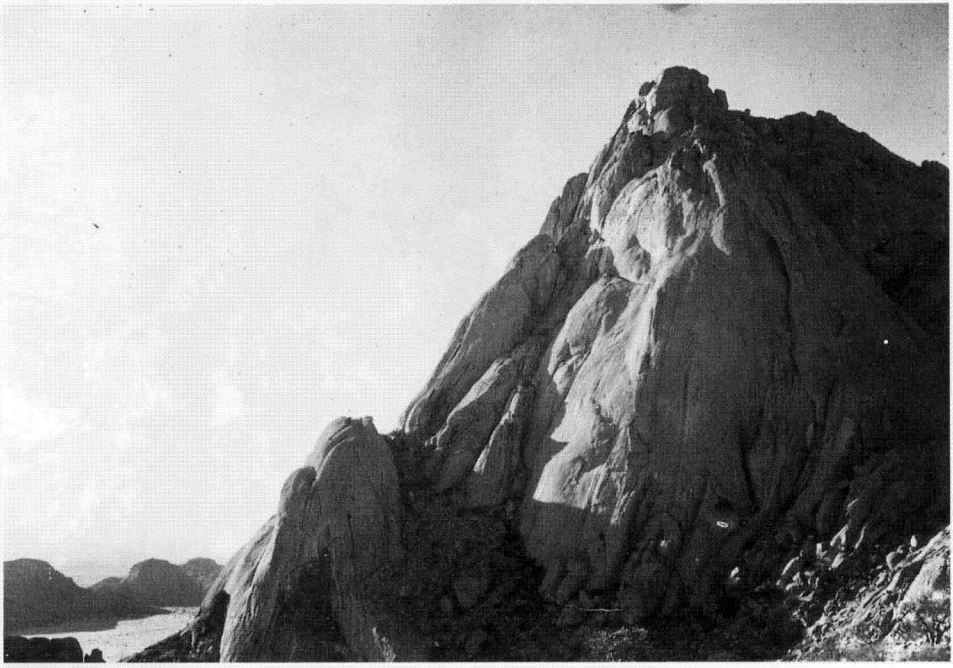
77. *First ascensionist Hans Wongtschowski. Grosse Spitzkop, 1946.* (Else Wongtschowski) (p 160)



78. *NW face of the Grosse Spitzkop, showing the final sections of the original route coming round from the left skyline. Schreiber's W face route is the diagonal line in the shade on the right.* (Michael Scott) (p 160)