Ama Dablam 1990

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(*Plates 1, 25–29*)

Ama Dablam, meaning 'mother's necklace' in Nepalese, is a much admired 6852m peak in the Khumbu Himal of Nepal. Ray Delaney had been inspired by the mountain during his first trip to Nepal and had been talking about climbing it ever since. When I heard that he had finally booked the pre-monsoon slot for 1990, I decided it was time to send him a Christmas card. I was not alone in my cunning as it turned out, for Ray was persuaded to invite not only myself but three of my university contemporaries: Robert Durran, Pete Herold and Kate Phillips. He also signed up two of his Sheffield friends, Richard Haszko and Joe Simpson, as well as his long-time sparring partner, Mal Duff.

Just as preparations were nearing completion, Ray telephoned me to pass on the shattering news: Perpetual, an investment management company, had decided to fund the entire trip. This generous deal (negotiated by the sweet-talking Simpson), combined with the financial contribution made by Mal Duff's supporting trek, meant that the British Ama Dablam Expedition 1990 was in the happy position of being guaranteed at least solvency, if not success.

The first wave of the expedition arrived in Kathmandu on 14 February, to be joined a few days later by the rest of the team and our ten trekking companions. Joe was nursing a broken foot at the time (the result of a drinking accident in England), so the inevitable delay in our departure for the mountains proved rather fortunate. A diet of Nepalese rum appeared to be the prescribed treatment and, sure enough, by the time the last of the bureaucratic hurdles had been overcome, a full recovery had been effected.

The walk-in from Jiri was an ideal start to the expedition, although the effort required to keep up with Kate somewhat marred the experience. We had none of the crowds or leeches that are prevalent at other times of the year, and I felt privileged to be able to experience the delights of Nepal in relative peace and comfort. The contrasts with the Karakoram (the only other part of the Himalaya that I had visited) were stark and numerous: the well-worn paths and the frequent tea houses made the walking almost pleasurable! The Iceberg beer (another marked contrast with Pakistan) flowed at every opportunity, fuelling some of the most outlandish stories I have ever heard; Duff and Simpson must rank as two of the most accomplished raconteurs of our time.

We arrived at Base Camp on 5 March, ten days after leaving Jiri. The green and pleasant meadow that we had been promised turned out to be under a foot of snow, but the location, a quiet side-valley ringed by magnificent peaks, provided ample compensation. We took the opportunity to rest for a couple of



1. Ama Dablam: Kate Phillips arriving at the top of the Ramp during the successful summit bid. (Brendan Murphy) (p 8)

days and contemplate our objective, the SW ridge of Ama Dablam. The first section of the route follows a long horizontal rock ridge guarded by occasional gendarmes. Steep mixed ground (breached by the 'Ramp') then leads to an elegant snowy ridge (the 'Mushroom Ridge') and so to the foot of the headwall. The last barrier to the summit is a massive serac band clearly visible from afar (the 'Dablam') which is best turned on the right. This is the original and most popular route up the mountain, and it is surely one of the best.

The ensuing argument about climbing ethics was predictable and doubtless entertaining for our trekkers; alpine-style, capsule-style or siege-style, and what did it all mean anyway? No one wanted to be load-carrying between fixed camps, particularly those who had had bad experiences of this in the past, yet none wanted to find themselves strung out on the mountain in bad weather. After lengthy and sometimes heated discussions, an uneasy compromise was reached, based on the desire to safeguard retreat along the kilometre or so of horizontal ridge. We decided to use a minimal amount of fixed rope and establish a couple of camps: Camp 1 at the start of the ridge, Camp 2 on the 'Yellow Tower' at the end of the ridge. Tactics for higher up on the mountain were to be agreed upon later.

Before concentrating our efforts on Ama Dablam, our first engagement was with Imja Tse (Island Peak, 6189m). This was the prime objective of our trekking party and was seen as a useful acclimatization exercise by the rest of us. In the event, the ascent of Island Peak turned out to be a thoroughly worthwhile experience for all concerned, especially since it gelled the erstwhile disparate groups of climbers and trekkers. Although the normal route is of little technical interest, the summit is a superb vantage point and is at a very respectable altitude. The excursion was only marred by Mal damaging his already-weakened ankle, and he was forced to drop out of the expedition. This failed to dint his high spirits, however, and we left him in Pheriche impressing the locals with his story-telling and beer-drinking exploits.

We arrived back at Base Camp on 13 March and immediately set to work on the mountain. The weather stayed fine, and within a surprisingly short time we had established Camp 2 and consolidated Camp 1. It quickly became apparent that there was a lot of fixed gear already on the ridge, although much of this was in a poor state of repair. This rather detracted from our enjoyment of what was otherwise very fine climbing, but it certainly helped our progress on the lower sections of the route.

It was at this time that an unfortunate indiscretion forced us back to base for a week: Kate started burning our Base Camp rubbish. The problem with this seemingly commendable act is that it brings bad luck, as we were told by our Sherpas, if carried out before the end of an expedition. Bad weather duly followed.

A more serious indiscretion, however, was my suggestion to Gavin that he call in at Base Camp during his trip around the world. I had assumed that the vagueness of the directions I had left him would assure our continued seclusion, but I had underestimated the ability of one who has been travelling for six months to sniff out a free meal. The novelty of his arrival quickly wore off as his true character became known to the rest of the party; our serenity was rudely

shattered. I was required to apologize for my blunder at all too regular intervals.

A further potential disaster was only narrowly averted during this period of enforced confinement at Base Camp. Despite the worst of intentions, Joe's attempt at poisoning the ravens failed dismally. These birds were serious pests (they pecked our Goretex tents to pieces), but we later found out that they are sacred creatures and that our survival depended on their well-being! We turned to card-playing to alleviate the boredom in the hope that this would be considered a more virtuous pastime. The democracy riots in Kathmandu that we were following on the World Service seemed to belong to a different world.

As soon as the weather improved, Joe and Ray went back up the hill to explore the route past Camp 2. Pete, Kate and I followed a few days later, intending to consolidate Camp 2 and take over at the front. When the five of us met up at Camp 2, the way looked open to the summit. Joe and Ray had reached the foot of the Ramp, and an alpine push from there looked in order.

Bad weather that night put paid to our hopes. We had a frustrating time the next day floundering through deep powder, and it became obvious that success was not going to come easily. Joe, Ray and Pete decided to return to Camp 2; Kate and I opted to press on regardless. We made a fair amount of progress up the Ramp, only to discover two hours before sundown that the stove was still in Pete's sack. We had no option but to retreat. To cap it all, Delaney and Simpson had scoffed the precious tin of tuna that I had carried all the way from Base Camp. It was April Fool's Day.

The next morning dawned fine. Kate and I quickly regained our high point while the others returned to base. It was great to be exploring new ground as we pitched our way towards the start of the Mushroom Ridge. Just as daylight was failing, we reached the crest of the ridge and were rewarded by the discovery of a comfortable ice-cave bivvy. A further treat was a superb sunset over the cloud-filled valley before the arrival of the evening snow.

Despite the further dump of snow during the night, we decided to forge on, safe in the knowledge that retreat to the tents and gas dump at Camp 2 would be relatively straightforward from this point. Much to my relief, the Mushroom Ridge failed to live up to its name; we had none of the nightmares experienced by the British climbers Cave and Perkins on this section a few years previously. The poor visibility robbed us of any views, but protected us from feelings of exposure. We moved together along this fragile snow-crest, reaching the snow plateau at the foot of the headwall by late afternoon. As we excavated our bivvy in the end of a crevasse, our hopes were high for the morrow. Good weather the next day was all we needed.

I dozed uneasily that night, searching the sky for stars. A lot of low cloud was drifting over and we delayed our departure until dawn. It was bitterly cold. We abandoned almost everything at the bivvy and started picking our way up the headwall. A brief break in the cloud below us allowed our friends at Base Camp to catch a glimpse of two specks moving ever so slowly towards the summit; this was the first sighting they had had of us since we had left Camp 2, and it was to be their last for the next three days.

Crossing a small arête at the top of the lower snow slopes brought us in to a gully at the base of the seracs; it looked like the key to the summit. But as one

hard pitch followed another and the hours ticked by, my spirits steadily sank. By the time I had emerged on to the upper snow slopes, I had resigned myself to retreat. Although the last of the technical difficulties was now behind us, I knew we had no chance of reaching the summit and returning to our bivvy before dark. I swallowed my disappointment and discussed the options with Kate, fully expecting her to elect for descent. To my surprise and great pleasure, she was as enthusiastic as ever, seemingly undaunted by the late hour of the day. I pressed on with renewed optimism, convinced now that we would make the top.

For many long hours we plodded upwards, following the steep ice ridge dividing the upper headwall. I could only manage a few steps at a time, pausing regularly to claw at the cold dry air. Intermediary landmarks became temporary goals in an effort to sustain my willpower. Occasional glimpses of the fringing rock buttresses through the swirling cloud were the only way I could gauge our progress. Eventually, and quite unexpectedly, the ridge relented and I found myself collapsed in a heap on the summit. Kate joined me a few minutes later, racked by an evil cough but looking extremely happy. It was 6pm, 4 April 1990.

Any sense of achievement was completely masked by anxiety at the prospect of retreat in the dark. My immediate concern, however, was for the state of my feet which had been numb for much of the day. I spent the few remaining minutes of daylight massaging my toes in a vain attempt to restore the circulation while Kate rummaged for her spare socks. We braced ourselves for an epic.

The six-hour descent was sufficiently harrowing for it to be engraved in my memory for ever. Fortunately, however, it proceeded with clockwork precision and we were spared the ordeal I had feared. I had made a mental note during the day of each of the abseils we would require to get off and, despite failing head-torch batteries and a dropped sticht plate, we made steady progress towards safety. Our biggest worry was the security of the snow-stake anchors, since these could be pushed into the soft snow by hand and tended to wobble alarmingly. Finding the belays in the dark was tricky enough, but the more stressful role fell to the second who was left to watch the inevitable creep of the stake and ponder the merits of unclipping. Our spindrift-swept bivvy was sweet sanctuary indeed.

Warm sunshine and a respite from the howling wind the next morning brought a great sense of relief. I had spent much of the night in a private world of misery, groaning with pain as the blood filtered back to my feet; the improvement in the weather and the opportunity to dry out our gear rekindled my spirits. My pleasure at our success was somewhat tainted by worry about the rest of the descent, but I was confident that we could cope with the remaining obstacles.

The next couple of days were relatively uneventful, if not entirely enjoyable. We continued painstakingly to retrace our steps, ever mindful of the dangers of complacency. The ice-encrusted tents of Camp 2 were a welcome haven and we passed the night in relative comfort. The weather continued to improve the next day and we were quickly spotted by our friends; they had been extremely concerned for our safety. Only years of conditioning allowed me to

hold back the tears as we were all reunited at Base Camp. We had been on the hill for eight days.

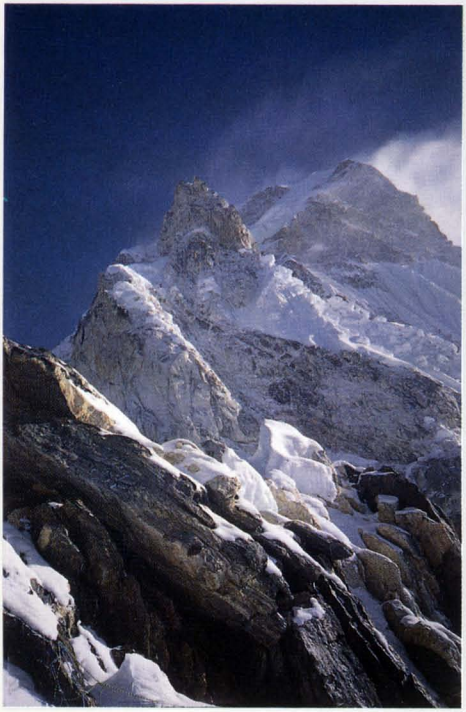
On 12 April Joe and Ray left their high camp for the summit and topped out in perfect conditions; their patience and experience were rewarded by stunning views and a daytime descent of the headwall! Kate and I went back up to Camp 2 one last time to dismantle our tents and strip a lot of old rope. While some would argue that this was an unnecessary additional risk, it seemed the very least we could do for the mountain.

Perhaps the strongest impression I have, thinking back on the expedition, was the great sense of camaraderie, surely the key to our success. Four of us had the pleasure of reaching the summit, but all of us have fond memories of the trip. Kate and I are especially conscious of our good fortune: our gamble on the headwall paid off. Kate was only the second British national to reach the summit (the other was Mike Ward on the first ascent in 1961); my ascent was the first by an Irishman.

All of us were impressed by the beauty of the Khumbu and appalled by its obvious abuse. Both Base Camps we visited were strewn with rubbish, much of which could have been burned or carried out. Even the majestic Ama Dablam itself is littered with old gear, much of it useless, all of it offensive. Perhaps our greatest source of satisfaction should be the knowledge that at least we left the mountain and its Base Camp in a better state than we had found them.



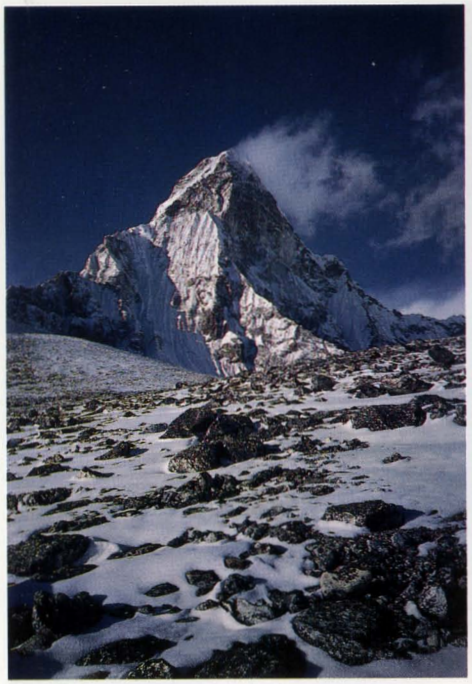
27. *Ama Dablam: looking W from below Camp 1.* (Brendan Murphy) (p 8)



28. *Looking towards The Ramp and Headwall from Camp 2.* (Brendan Murphy) (p 8)



29. *Ray Delaney jumaring up steep ground above Camp 2.* (Kate Phillips) (p 8)



25. *Ama Dablam from below Camp 1. SW ridge is the left skyline.* (Brendan Murphy) (p 8)

26. *Brendan Murphy silhouetted against Ama Dablam.* (Kate Phillips) (p 8)