ALISON JANE HARGREAVES

Everest Unsupported and without supplementary oxygen

(Plates 1 and 83)

In June 1995 Alison accepted a commission from the Alpine Journal *to write about her Everest ascent in May. The following article, intended for a Japanese magazine, was written at K2 Base Camp and sent out by runner. It is published by kind permission of Alison's husband James Ballard.*

Outside the wind is howling. The tent has not stopped flapping for the last thirty hours. The wind, trying to tear the tent to shreds, is doing a good job – pulling at the thin layers of cloth and striving to drag down both me and my fragile shelter. It is decision time. Either I must descend from here back to Camp 2 – down the Lhotse Face in search of shelter – or I must make an attempt on the summit. From here, on this desolate windy col at around 8000m, I still have a long way to go. The weather is against me, but this may be my last chance and I have to try ...

On that attempt to climb Everest via the Western Cwm and South Col in the autumn of 1994, I had to turn back at around 8400m or risk severe frostbite and the possibility of losing some fingers and toes. The decision was a calculated judgement based on what was happening to my digits. Bad weather and lack of oxygen had all combined to accentuate the onset of frostbite. With less wind and with supplementary bottled oxygen things might have been different, but this was the way I had chosen to climb Everest – and for me it was the only way.

Returning to the UK I felt empty – I had put in so much energy, both physical and mental, into carrying all my own equipment onto the mountain. But a mountain is nothing without a summit – and so far the summit had eluded me ...

Finally, in the middle of March 1995, after much disappointment and refusals by expeditions to let me join them, I found an expedition, led by Russell Brice of *Himalayan Experience*, who were prepared to let me join their permit, yet were happy for me to act totally independently on the mountain above Base Camp. As before, I hoped to climb alone and without the use of supplementary oxygen. On Everest in 1994 I had given myself no more than a five to ten per cent chance of reaching the summit in this

style – but what is a goal unless it is a distant one? This somehow seemed to make it even more challenging.

So now, finally accepted on a permit and with only two weeks to prepare before the latest arrival date in Kathmandu (when the team would be leaving for Tibet), things became frantic. In seven days' time the freight would be sent from London, and currently I had no money to pay for the expedition either! A few days in Switzerland on a photo-shoot gave me some time to think and I returned to green and wet Scotland with renewed energy. With the help of a friend, Richard Allen, I put together equipment lists, prioritising, and chased up various sponsors who efficiently sent essential food and kit just in time for the packing. Then the grand pack – everything crammed into plastic sealed barrels after being laid out and listed on my parents' living-room floor – and the equipment was sent off with Richard for freighting. And now I had a week to sort out everything else.

The candle was being burnt at both ends. I was still carrying on my regular daily training of running, plus the odd really long day in the mountains, while tying up last-minute paperwork, sometimes working in the office by the fax machine until the early hours of the morning. Then there were the family, children and general household duties! Finally, on the evening of 28th March, I said cheerio to my family and boarded the overnight sleeper from Scotland to London. Ben Nevis, plastered in its winter coat of snow, glistened in the evening light.

Meeting my parents in London, we crossed the city in the early hours and headed out to Heathrow. After checking my bags at the desk and wishing my parents goodbye, we boarded the plane – my second attempt on Everest was about to begin.

Kathmandu was much the same as I had left it only five months before. When I descended from Everest in the autumn I had felt empty – as if someone had ripped out my stomach. Now, with renewed energy and motivation, I was happy to be back. As we ambled down the streets from the airport to the Hotel Gauri Shankar everything was much the same as it always was – with old and the modern combined. There are now as many four-wheel-drive vehicles as rickshaws. Ringing bells and bleeping horns are still the main mode of communication, but the vehicles co-operate and thus are able to make headway along the congested roads. Wafts of aromas and smells come drifting through the windows – yes, here I was back in Kathmandu.

Within a couple of days expedition visas were tidied up and sorted with the various government bodies, and the group, which consisted of about twelve people, boarded the flight to Lhasa. This time I was going to attempt Everest from Tibet and the north side of the mountain, which had a much harder reputation. I was excited at the prospect of a more interesting challenge! As we approached the airstrip at Lhasa the aircraft was buzzing with excitement. But within seconds this turned into disappointment as the plane started to bounce violently, and the Captain tried to break the news gently



1. Alison Hargreaves, the first woman to climb Everest alone and without oxygen. 12.08pm, 13 May 1995. (p9)

that we wouldn't be going to Lhasa after all – but instead to a god-forsaken place in China called Chengdu! It had been too turbulent to land, so we all consoled ourselves with the thought that perhaps tomorrow would be better. But the next day the same thing happened – and we returned again to our favourite hotel in Chengdu! When we finally touched down in Lhasa on the third day, it was to cheers and great relief. At last we were in Tibet and our adventures could begin.

Instantly I fell in love with Tibet. Its stark barrenness filled me with excitement. After boarding the jeeps to drive from the airport to the city of Lhasa itself, I jumped out at every opportunity to snap a photo and take in the ambience. There was something about the Tibetan Plateau which made me feel alive. We spent a couple of days in Lhasa acclimatising and sightseeing at the beautiful and famous Potala Palace. Soon we were again boarding jeeps piled high with rucksacks and equipment and were on our way to the mountains. This was very different from the days of leisurely trekking necessary to penetrate most other remote mountain areas. Bouncing along un-tarmacked roads, we spent three days travelling across the Tibetan Plateau, listening to Western/Tibetan music on the tape deck – finally arriving at Base Camp bounced, battered and shaken, unacclimatised but ready for the climb! On 11th April we drove into Base Camp. I had had an upset stomach since Lhasa and now, feeling absolutely wasted, I slumped into a shallow sleep, only to wake at our destination with a cramped and twisted back – and greatly in need of some strengthening and sobering exercise!

Within two days I was active – and happy! Over the next few days I spent long days hiking on the surrounding 6000m hills above Base Camp, getting fit, acclimatising and mentally preparing. By now I felt very comfortable sleeping at Base Camp at around 5400m and was ready to make the long journey, 15 miles up, towards Advanced Base Camp. On the day I arrived I felt great, even though I had jumped to 6400m. My body had been ready and coped well. However, in my excitement I found it hard to sleep and was up and wide awake at 4am, trying to find things to do. Advanced Base still needed some finishing touches – and by keeping busy I was able to contribute and help towards the overall comfort and happiness of all of us.

Now that I was able to see my goal I was able to focus and start to formulate a plan of action. Over the next few days I started to move my equipment up the mountain. Above lay the angled slopes of the glacier leading to the steep slopes below the North Col. I would get up reasonably early and at around dawn, after some hot drinks and biscuits, shoulder my heavy rucksack and start the long haul up the glacier. After three such carries and a night sleeping up there, I felt in a much stronger position. So I decided to descend right back down to Base Camp, even though it was 15 miles away, for what I hoped would be a rest. One of the advantages/disadvantages of coming down from a higher to a lower altitude is the amount of energy it seems to give you. Long evenings of drinking and discussions crushed my good intentions of total rest and relaxation!

Within three days I was back at Advanced Base Camp and starting to look towards moving higher up the mountain. I knew my summit attempt would have to be made from a camp much higher than the North Col at 7000m, so I worked towards getting a tent and equipment set up at around 7600m. When I first arrived there I felt breathless, lethargic and exhausted. The previous day I had carried a load up to 7400m, and left it there to descend back down to a more comfortable altitude. The following day, I had gone up again, with another load, to 7400m. I wanted to sleep higher but needed both loads in order to set up a camp. There was no way I felt I could carry higher, descend back down and carry up the second load. If I wanted to sleep high that night, there was only one option – to strap the loads together and do it in one push!

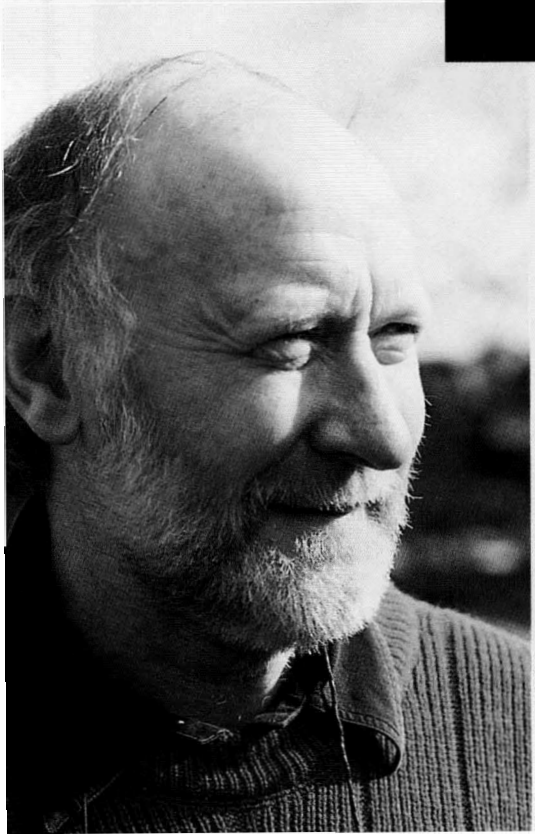
The incentive of knowing that it was wise to sleep high helped me; without that knowledge I could never have made it. The weight of the double load was really too much for me but I knew my goal and slowly, slowly scrambled up towards it. Finally I arrived at an area of old campsites. Most previous platforms had been demolished by the twisting and turning of the ice layer underneath – but I was able to construct a very comfortable level area from large flat stones. Using the yards of old tent fabric strewn around I prevented the base from slipping, and secured the tent quite satisfactorily with old French line/rope. The site would be exposed to high winds channelling through the tunnel above the North Col. It needed to be secure.

Finally my campsite was complete. All I needed to do now was to fill a nylon stuff sack full of snow and ice to melt later into liquid in the tent, and then I could crawl into my home and make myself comfortable. First I laid out the closed-cell foam mat that I had brought along both to insulate the tent and protect it from the rock and ice underneath. Then I set about arranging all my essential equipment. Stacking comestibles on one side, along with the gaz, stove and bag of snow, on the other side I put all the spare items of clothing I would need higher up: gloves, balaclavas, electric socks, etc. Then it was time to drink and sleep. With the stove constantly burning and melting snow into water, I put on more warm clothes, down suit etc, and crawled into my sleeping-bag to rest.

At 7600m I was totally on my own, but that evening I felt as though I was not. I was convinced that someone/something was pacing around my tent – I was frightened to open the door. I knew there couldn't be anyone there, but at least it felt friendly. I consoled myself that they/it was checking that everything was OK – and I was able to drift into a deep and much-needed sleep.

Now I felt totally ready for a summit attempt. Given good weather and some relaxation, I felt in a strong position to try. I returned to Advanced Base Camp and aired my thoughts to a couple of friends. The barometer was set high and, as long as the weather held and I got enough rest, it seemed as though I should make an attempt. The next couple of days I just relaxed, playing cards and Monopoly. I slept a great deal and ate and drank as much as I felt I could take.





83. Alison Jane Hargreaves
1962–1995 (p339)

Left

84. Paul James Nunn
1943–1995
(*Bill O'Connor*) (p325)

On Thursday 11th May I set off from camp. Leaving my tent at around 6am, I quickly 'motored' up to the North Col. Then, collecting the tent from there, I continued on up towards the camp at 7600m. Today was the day to rehydrate – tomorrow I would be going much higher and I needed to have a lot of liquid inside me to help cope with the altitude and guard against the dreaded high-altitude mountain sickness. That evening I slept well, excited at the prospect of going even higher tomorrow. I drank a load, slept a load – and got some much-needed rest.

The next day was slow and difficult as I carried up my equipment for the night – tent, stove, gas, etc. My sack felt heavy and the higher I went so it seemed to increase in weight! As I touched 8000m I hit a 'wall' and my speed reduced rapidly. The snowfield that had looked so small from below seemed to take an age. After every few steps I needed much longer to recover and I felt as if I would never reach my destination. Finally, in the late afternoon, I arrived at 8300m and the site of a few other tents – camps of other groups set up by Sherpas and ready to be occupied once the climbers were ready to reach them. But where was I to camp? All available flat spots had been taken – there was not a single flat area to pitch my tent on. I would have to start work and make one myself. I ambled round slowly, tired from the day's climb and lethargic with the altitude – but I *had* to make a platform. Without it I could not pitch my tent and without that I would have no essential shelter in which to spend the night.

Eventually I found an area of ice/rubble on a 45-degree slope and, on my hands and knees, set about chopping the ice with my axe and moving stones with my hands to form a ledge approximately 6ft long and 2ft wide. Exhausted, I erected my tent and tied it off to a large boulder. At around 4ft wide, the tent overhung the ledge somewhat, but the ledge was wide enough to allow me to lie flat on my foam mat, and for brewing I could sit, feet dangling, but cosy inside my tent. I was tired – overtired. Today had been an exceptionally hard day and I still had another even harder one to come. I made an effort to rehydrate and was able to force down around four litres of liquid. I tried to sleep, but without a sleeping-bag (which I was unable to carry) I would nod off and every half-hour wake up shivering – and have to go through the motions again of moving every part of my body individually to get back feeling and mobility and stop my body from shaking. It was going to be a long night! Around 2am I started to prepare to make a move. It was still dark outside so I used my headlamp torch to put on my boots and neoprene overboots with crampons attached. Around 3.30am I stepped outside into the night – but it was hostile, cold and dark and I could feel the cold biting up from the ground. In these temperatures my feet would be vulnerable to frostbite. I decided to go back in my tent.

Around 4.40am I finally set off. By now it was almost light; the temperature had risen a little and I was able to move without a headlamp. I was excited. I had waited for this day a long time – and now finally I was able to have it. Fresh snow overlay the rocks, but as I climbed up the ramp towards

the ridge the snow became more consolidated – and the higher I climbed the more excited I became. Around 9.30am I approached the ridge – and was greeted by an amazing sight. As I looked straight across towards the steep face of Makalu and further right to the famous summit ridges of Lhotse, I felt inspired and motivated to go on.

The traversing became a little delicate. I was very much aware that one slip would end in disaster. The blank featureless slopes beneath me would not help a stop – and every step had to be deliberate and cautious.

By mid-morning I had passed the famous first and second rock steps. Once more I was on the crest of the ridge and feeling very positive. My pace was slow – but I radioed down to Base Camp and told them I felt strong and hoped to be summiting within the next couple of hours. I sensed the excitement from below – that helped to secure my positiveness – and even though every step I took became slower as I got higher, I felt more and more excited at the prospect of reaching the summit!

Around 12 noon, having reached the top of the last rock/snow pyramid, I suddenly saw the summit. I could see the curving ridge rising gradually towards the final summit cone. Tears overcame me. Weeping with emotion, I radioed down 'I can see the summit', and the next ten minutes for me were like walking on air. The snow was perfect crisp, crunchy névé – and I could sense getting there. Even though I could only make a few steps before having to stop and rest, I knew I could reach it. It was just a matter of minutes.

At 12.08, 13th May 1995, I stood on the top of Everest and, radioing down to Base Camp amongst tears from me and cheers and tears from below, I relayed my message: 'To my 2 children Tom & Kate – I am stood on the top of the world and I love you dearly.'

Leaving red silk flowers in memory of those who perished or didn't make it, I took a few photos – and turned around to start my long descent back down the mountain.

Thanks must go to all those who helped me reach the summit. Their names are too numerous to list here, but without them I could not have reached my goal.