
Women and the Mountains

SUE BLACK

Ginette Lesley Harrison

(Plate 39)

There can be few reading this who are unaware of Ginette's death in an avalanche on Dhaulagiri in Nepal on the 24th October 2000. It is really only since her death that much has been written about her achievements and character but it is no surprise to those who knew her personally not only that there is recognition now, but also that the memory of her is as clear and strong as when she was alive. She was a remarkable woman but one of her most endearing traits -- her genuine and unassuming modesty -- meant that she made light of her achievements and, before one success could be registered properly, whether another peak conquered or another medical exam passed, she was away and on to the next.

She continues to make her mark through the Ginette Harrison Memorial Fund. This was set up by her friends to help children in Nepal in her memory. Through the Shiva charity, based in Bristol, the Fund is supporting a school in a valley near Kathmandu which has been renamed the Ginette Harrison school. Children at this school can be sponsored in her name: see website details at the end of the article.

I first met Ginette in 1986 at Ham Green Hospital near Bristol. I had returned to medicine in my 40s and she was my immediate 'senior'. I was very lucky to work with her as she was calm, unflappable and had a facility for solving problems using a combination of natural intelligence and downright common sense. Above all, she was compassionate and shared others' problems, whether patients or colleagues.

To start with, I was unaware of her climbing achievements; she spoke occasionally about her climbing and expeditions, always in passing, and would sometimes disappear for several weeks at a time. She lived very simply, had no car and thought nothing of cycling back and forth between her digs and the hospital, a distance of ten miles.

Ginette's interest in climbing started while she was at school at Katherine Lady Berkeley School in Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire, where she started climbing with the Ranger Guides. At medical school in Bristol, she followed her developing passion by climbing in the Avon Gorge and elsewhere, with the University's climbing club.

Ginette kept in touch after we finished working together and soon I found myself agreeing to become a medical officer on the 1989 Everest Marathon, as she had been asked to organise the 10-strong medical team. (Says I: 'I'm 45, unfit and heights make me dizzy.' Says Ginette: 'You can do it.' -- and I did!)

By this time, 1989, Ginette, at 31, had done two years of research in high-altitude physiology at the Cardiovascular Pulmonary Research Laboratory at Denver, Colorado, and been awarded her MD; was nearing the end of her general practice training posts, gruelling junior jobs with tough on-call rotas; had worked for four months at the Himalayan Rescue Association medical post at Manang in Nepal; and had been medical officer on the 1986 British Bhutan expedition and the 1989 British Masherbrum expedition, which she also led. She had published six scientific papers and eight abstracts and presented four papers at conferences in the UK and North America. She had been on five research expeditions, to Mount Kenya, Mount McKinley, Nepal, Karakoram and Peru, all but Mount McKinley with the Birmingham Medical Research Expeditionary Society. She had summited Mount Kenya (normal route) 1982, Mount McKinley (West Buttress) 1983, Island Peak 1984, Ghondo Khoro, Gundang, Pisang, Thorong, Chulu East 1987, Huascarán (Peru) 1988 and reached 22,500ft on Masherbrum.

Very few, let alone all, of these achievements were known to her friends, as she rarely spoke of them unless it was to relate in passing a funny story or an exciting episode. However, it was obvious to her friends that she wasted not a single minute of any day. I can't remember ever seeing Ginette sitting watching television. She would write letters in the most unlikely places, any time, anywhere. She would cook for her friends at a moment's notice, large delicious meals usually in a borrowed kitchen. She liked nothing better than a beer and chat down the pub or a wild stomp if there was music.

She was a good organiser. On the Everest Marathon expedition we lacked for nothing medically. The whole expedition went very smoothly and competently, Ginette even on several occasions treating the yaks for infected saddle sores. They lined up outside the medical tent along with their owners. At one point, worried about the condition of someone who had been left behind by a day's march, she ran back the way we had come, checked her patient and then ran back again in the dark to join us before we'd gone to sleep in our tents. We were exhausted, she wasn't, despite having done the day's route three times.

Ginette's stamina was always remarkable. Many of her friends will doubtless have postcards and letters saying things like 'kayaked ten miles to the island by moonlight for a lobster BBQ, went for another 21 miles paddle the next day before paddling back – it was brilliant.' A postcard from her honeymoon commented that she'd scratched her ring 'after climbing a desperate crack climb'. She was physically small but her stamina and determination were prodigious, which was probably the secret to her success at extreme high-altitude climbing.

After the 1989 Everest Marathon, Ginette came back and forth to the UK, always 'touching base' with us and meeting up for meals or walks. We spent hilarious hours in an informal revision group before taking the

MRCGP, the final exam for general practice. She left to work at medical jobs all over Australia in the early 1990s, and in between jobs she climbed Aconcagua in 1990, Kosciusko, Mera Peak in Nepal, and Kang Yatse in Ladakh in 1991. In Australia, with her usual enthusiasm and sporting ability, she also pursued a whole range of lower altitude sports including canoeing and scuba diving. But she was drawn back to the mountains. In 1993 she got the opportunity to climb Mount Everest with a Himalayan Kingdoms expedition. She met and fell in love with Gary, an American also on the expedition and they summited hand in hand. They married in 1997. Together they went on to complete the ascent of the highest peak in each of the seven continents – once again, as with Everest, she became the second British woman to achieve this, following Rebecca Stephens. By 1998, she had a further batch of summits: 1994 was Carstenz Pyramid (Irian Jaya), Ngga Pulu (Irian Jaya), Mount Kenya by the Diamond Couloir, Kilimanjaro and Elbrus. In 1995 it was Ojos de Salado in Chile, Mount Vinson in Antarctica and Mount Logan.

Mount Logan was an epic. She and Gary were helicoptered in and dropped on a glacier ready for a traverse; climbing the East Ridge and descending the Trench. The going was more difficult than expected and, owing to bad weather after they'd summited, they arrived at the other end after four weeks instead of the planned three weeks. An extreme test of a relationship.

In 1997, she and Gary summited Ama Dablam and Cho Oyu and then spent a month in New Zealand doing the Grand Traverse of Mount Cook, Mount Aspiring, the Silberhorn/Tasman/Syme ridge and Mount Dixon. A postcard from Ginette in New Zealand says: 'climbed initially on Mount Aspiring – a 17-hour climb with descent to a snowhole in a white out. This was a mere warm up to the next climb on Mount Cook which took 32 hours! – we got a bit lost. Got a little faster from then on and climbed Mount Tasman, Mount Dixon and did a traverse of Mount Cook.'

Ginette and Gary started to lead climbing expeditions to the Himalayan peaks over 8000 metres, and in 1998 she became the first woman to reach the summit of Kangchenjunga, the fifth she had climbed of the fourteen 8000-metre peaks. She went on to reach the summit by herself after meeting two fellow climbers just below the summit on their way down, as Gary had turned back. She felt she still had enough strength and pushed on without oxygen despite passing the body of a recently dead climber from a Japanese expedition.

By this time Ginette was living in Massachusetts with Gary, and had thrown herself into the American Family Medicine training programme (as general practice is known in the States). As ever, she was determined to finance her expeditions through her medical work and was undeterred by the rigours of undergoing more medical exams and hospital training in the American system. When she was killed on Dhaulagiri, she was hoping to

settle down to a part-time job in family medicine near her home in Monson, Massachusetts, and the rest of the time to continue her aim of conquering the 14 highest peaks.

It was not to be. An avalanche swept her and a fellow climber, a Sherpa, to their deaths on 24 October 1999. We were all stunned. Ginette had seemed quietly invincible. But she died in the only way she would have wanted, striving to achieve her next summit in her beloved mountains and in the company of the man she loved. She was 41 years old.

Ginette Harrison Memorial Fund: <http://www.shivacharity.org>
or e-mail bobuppington@hotmail.com



39. Ginette Lesley Harrison (1958-1999) (*South-west News Service*) (p101)