

Riders of the Storm

The West Ridge of Thamserku

Mal Duff

*He either fears his fate too much
or his deserts are small, that
dares not put it to the touch
to win or lose it all*

Montrose

A day to savour the full forces of nature, to experience all that is worthwhile in a plastic packaged world. The power of things natural. Vast grey buttresses lost in a constantly changing kaleidoscope of swirling mists, roaring monsoon-swollen rivers, rain lashing diagonal patterns, the all pervading scent of pine. . . .

I arrived in Namche Bazaar in a wave of euphoria, pounding the last hill in a seemingly necessary but pointless test. The glorious solitude evaporated, replaced with quiet satisfaction; we had made it, no mishaps, all gear still with us. All the evils of organising a Himalayan expedition seemed worthwhile, climbing still to come, the hard work accomplished, our reward excitingly close.

Our objective, Thamserku (6608m) loomed large over Namche and although not huge by Himalayan standards more than compensated for its lack of stature by an awe inspiring presence, sharp ridged and menacing. Our planned route, the west ridge, spent most of the time hidden in dense monsoon clouds. When occasionally we got an early morning glimpse of the serried ranks of gendarmes atop the ridge I realised why this potential route had impressed itself upon me the previous year. Scenically wonderful but frankly, from a climbing point of view — unlikely. I extolled the virtues of ambition, whilst the rest of the expedition doubted the workings of my mind and expressed concern for my eyesight.

After several days our Sherpa staff, together with Sandy and Martin, left along with 17 Sherpanis to establish our base camp. This looked like a fearsome problem, for the whole area beneath the Thamserku West Glacier consisted of ravines, crags and unstable scree. Deviously, I opted to collect our mail from Kunde hospital. For this piece of cowardice I unfortunately missed an exciting day's exploration and an evening during which Sherpani Dorme stated that Sandy was to sleep with her. Agreeing, his rising passion was somewhat damped by the 24 other people sleeping in the same room and compounded by his lack of knowledge with regard to the unwrapping process! He was responsible for the expedition's first failure!

The simple task of mail collecting somehow resulted in a mammoth chang drinking contest in which Bill March (Canadian Expedition Leader) and myself reduced ourselves to gabbling morons much to the amusement of our Sherpa hosts. Eventually extracting myself, Houdini like, I set off to catch up with my expedition; a leader's responsibility. . . . Four hours later, hopelessly lost with fading headtorch, dark thoughts of leopards and yetis brought a swift return to sobriety. I settled into the foetid quarters provided by a small cave.

Base was perched spectacularly on a knife-edged ridge. The lads had done a great job in managing to get the tents to stand at all, especially as no flat ground existed. My exhortations to, above all, site a safe base had been dramatically followed. The place was further adorned by a 6m tree that Dawa our cook had carried up to act as a roof support for the kitchen tarpaulin. As the route up to base had thoroughly frightened me with dramatic scrambles and ravine crossings, I thought Dawa's concern for our comfort rather overplayed.

Several days elapsed, generally spent in early morning reconnaissance, an art which Sandy seemed to have refined to a point akin to mysticism, thus guaranteeing that he got all the really dangerous sections. Martin and I were quite content to erect a cairn trail in his wake. Afternoons huddled in rainlashed tents whilst the monsoon tattooed stormy impressions on wet taut flysheets.

I must not fear. Fear is the mind killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain. Herbert.

Off up the cairn trail, 4am, the big day, a last impression of base atop the ridge, thick white smoke from the Sherpas' incense burner, tents like eaglets ready to flutter into the void below. Two hours later Martin was valley-wards bound with dysentery. Sandy and I carried on. Martin and Sandy had previously probed the lower half of the glacier and despite considerable threat from seracs and dubious crevasse crossings they had returned with the impression that access to the foot of the N face would not be too time-consuming. Four hours later the two of us stood huddled in the epicentre of a collapsed and collapsing depression, contemplating this grievous miscalculation. Five hours later, frying from white-hot sun reflections, I watched rather impressed as Sandy climbed the vertical face of a 12m fragile serac; much more impressed when on struggling to the top myself I discovered the front face to be a detached flake of ice. I had wondered dimly at the rather peculiar noises caused by my progress.

Arrival at the foot of the face was heralded by a sun-induced barrage of miscellaneous projectiles. No further excuse was required, digging and brewing we constructed our snowhole.

Dawn: reflected yellows and pinks; away to the west, nameless mountains flickering light. . . . Stamping furiously to retain circulation I watched, detached, as Sandy performed front point ballet in a narrow couloir 60m above. It was 5am. . . . A reflected dawn of yellows and pinks and nameless mountains. . . .

Immensely happy, I concentrated upwards. Swinging leads we crept on, always deceived by clear air distances. An explosion of visual stimulus as our views expanded over the ridge northwards to Everest, Lhotse and Nuptse, snow plumed and cloud threatened. Idle thoughts for the future. Up and up, overtaken first by the sun strident with an intense energy-sapping heat and then in Tolkienese fashion by swooping dark clouds scurrying over the ridge above to descend and fasten us into their numb battering environment. Windsuit blue, occasionally visible, breaking the stormy loneliness. Sandy existed — I existed and we pushed slowly upwards. Joyous howlings swirled down through the mist, an initial rope tightening response, then realisation; Sandy was out onto the ridge

somewhere high above. I followed, rope snaking a small buttress, and tumbled into a cave depression. Sandy grinned through a fringe of ice, the wind a mere distant whispering. Dig like crazy; home! A day's climbing of intensity level 10 over. Mutual and self congratulation. 'Better than the Droites'. 'Well harder anyway.' Casually we started to refill the stove — Whoomph. Flames, golden tongued everywhere, a towering inferno threatened; eventual calm as we located caps sealing stove and fuel bottle. Our smug attitudes of the moment before reduced considerably.

Grey glow brought the night's vigil to a harsh end, up and out. No warm-up as I moved into the vertical plane, wild country, so a high 'friend'; every move becoming harder; time distorted as progress slowed. Every movement a whispered internal plea for survival. Lay back on a blunt edge, sparkling style loss as crampons bit granite. Verging on unconsciousness, I lassoed a block belay. A full lifetime away.

Sandy came up with an air of disbelief — his pitch looked harder. 30m out, a pinnacle collapsed and Sandy was the top-most section of a tottering tower. The S face echoed from whirring stonefall. Gees, that was close. 'OK?' 'OK!' Shaky reply, up rope to rejoin his runner. Continue, continue, push, push — until a mutually perceived moment. We had crossed the line, control had been lost pitches below; the threat of severe physical damage was an increasing certainty. Reversal and abseil, 30 points of solid scare. Glacial whiteout and a lucky stumble into the uptracks.

Sleep: on this one we were not going back.

