

# Everest — Pre-Monsoon

**Steve Martin**

*An interview at Tenboche with Ivan Vultchev and Ognian Baldjiski*

On 8 May 1984, Ivan Vultchev and Metodi Savov reached the top of Mount Everest via the W ridge route. They were followed by Kiril Doskov and Nikolay Petkov a day later. The four climbers in fact succeeded in making the second traverse of Mount Everest by descending via the SE ridge. This was the culmination of almost exactly two months' work on the mountain. It was also some reward for the expedition team who had lost Christo Prodanov, one of Bulgaria's foremost climbers, early in the expedition. Prodanov failed to return to camp after his successful burst for the summit.

**Planning** The expedition was sponsored by the Bulgarian Tourist Union to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of Bulgaria's Socialist Revolution and the 80th Anniversary of the Organized Revolutionary Trade Union Movement in Bulgaria. Planning began three years before, when the State asked the Bulgarian Mountaineering Federation to put forward a list of the top alpinists in the country. Various Alpine Clubs put forward their candidates and 100 climbers were selected. In 1982, the Bulgarian Mountaineering Federation wrote to the Nepali Government for permission to climb Everest. The Indians had already received permission to reach Everest via the traditional South Col route for 1984, so the Bulgarians chose the W ridge route. This was to be the second Himalayan expedition for the Bulgarians; the previous one was in 1981.

The tallest peak in Bulgaria is Musala — 2925m — and although there are many fine rock climbs and harsh winter conditions there, the climbers needed high-altitude training. Training for the Himalaya was done during 1983 in Russia. During the winter they climbed Mount Elbrus, 5630m and in the summer, Mount Komunizmus, 7500m and Mount Lenin, 7140m.

These climbs reduced the choice from the 100 nominated climbers to 24, and forged a team capable of climbing Everest. The team and its leader Avram Avramon received a great deal of help and assistance from the Yugoslav W ridge team of 1982.

**The Climb** Twenty-four people, eighteen climbers, a doctor-cameraman and base camp organisers, left Sofia on 20 February and flew into Kathmandu via Delhi. The high altitude Sherpas were hired in Kathmandu. The first of three groups left Kathmandu on 3 March. The base camp organizers stayed longer to sort things out and then flew ahead of the others to Lukla. They had Base Camp ready for the others when they arrived on 21 March.

Avoiding the Khumbu ice-fall, they followed the route up to the Lhola and then up to the W peak and on to Everest W ridge proper. The climb up the Lhola began on 10 March. The base camp set up a winching system on the last vertical

section of the climb up to the pass. This was the same system as was used by the Yugoslavs.

Camp 1 was set up on top of the snow covered Lhola at 6060m. There were not as many problems as had been anticipated, and they were not troubled by rock-falls. However, they did encounter some problems. Powerful winds on the W ridge blew away the tent on the Lhola. Luckily, they found the tent in a place sheltered from the wind, which was a much more suitable site, under Khumbutse. Another problem was that the motor on the winching system only lasted one day. After that they winched up loads manually. Camp 2 of the W peak ridge suffered from the worst winds as far as tent damage went; three were broken and blown away, so the team had to build a four-man and a six-man snow cave. Camp 3 was eventually established on the other side of the W peak at 7120m. The team managed to set up two tents, and built a four-man cave. Winds were a constant menace and movement on the mountain was restricted for two or three days at a time. At Camp 4, at 7500m, two tents were uprooted within 15 minutes of being erected. Wind velocities of 100km an hour were the norm.

Camp 5 was established on 19 April, and it was from here that the first attempt on the summit was made. On 20 April at 6 am, 41 year old Christo Prodanov, one of Bulgaria's foremost alpinists, left for the summit with Sherpa Chouang Ringde. Camp 5 was at 8120m, so they had to climb more than 700m and descend without oxygen in one day. By 11 am, this pair had reached 8500m. While they were climbing the Manfreda Chimney, Prodanov dislodged an empty oxygen bottle left from a previous expedition. This fell and hit Ringde in the chest. A little later, Ringde descended, affected by altitude. The rest of the team heard this by way of the Japanese Kenwood walkie-talkie system, which every team member carried.

Prodanov battled on through the wind during the afternoon, and although he was making progress towards the summit, he must have realized that his chances of returning by way of the W ridge, in darkness and alone, were being reduced as time went on. He had no food or water, and was only carrying medicine. At 6 pm he reached the summit and took some film with the 8mm video camera. He left it on the summit, where it was found later by other team members. Prodanov began his descent in approaching darkness and increasingly violent winds. The other team members were obviously anxious for his well-being, and were in constant touch with him by radio. A four-man team set off up the ridge to meet him, one man suffered frost-bite in his fingers. The rescue team were unable to reach Prodanov in these severe conditions. The last radio contact with Prodanov was at 7.45 am on 21 April. Prodanov said he was having difficulty pressing the button on the radio, and that he had lost feeling in his legs and feet. He was the 151st man to climb to the summit of Mount Everest.

After the loss of Prodanov, the expedition leaders were asked by the Bulgarian Government to use oxygen in any further attempts on the summit. The expedition team retreated from the mountain for some time.

When they returned to the mountain, the weather conditions proved just as difficult, and further attempts to establish Camp 6 at around 8600m were abandoned. The difficulties of finding enough level space, and the prospect of the tent being ripped from its moorings led the team to the conclusion that it would be

easier to attempt the summit from Camp 5.

The second and third attempts began on 8 May, after the summit-climbers had been down to Periche and Lobuche for recuperation. Periche, at 4200m, is a day's walk down from base camp.

On 8 May at 4am, Ivan Vultchev and Metodi Savov left Camp 5 for the summit. New snow had fallen, and caused some indecision as to whether they should wait a day or two. As they went on, the snow was up to their thighs, which made the going extremely tiring and they often lost their way in the dark. The risk of avalanche was great as the new snow had fallen on hard ice. Vultchev and Savov had problems locating the Manfreda Chimney, as they kept seeing three look-alikes. The effort at this altitude was immense. Above the Manfreda Chimney, at about 8200m, they encountered the grey band. This is a band of very crumbly grey sedimentary rock which caused great difficulty. Vultchev reported that there had been no technical difficulties up to Camp 4, but said that conditions were worst of all on the grey band. Towards the summit the winds grew increasingly strong and bitter, and the temperature was down to  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$ . As they neared the summit they found the rucksack belonging to Prodanov. They finally reached the summit at 5.15 pm on 8 May.

They had no special gear for spending the night on the mountain, and for food they only had chocolate. Exhausted after a 12 hour climb through heavily drifted snow, they decided that the Indian camps on the SE ridge would be easier to reach, rather than their own camp on the W ridge. They decided to spend the night in a crevasse 20m below the summit. Their oxygen had run out at the summit, and their chances of survival looked very slim. The Bulgarian team members knew of their plight through the radio contact. It was, however, impossible to contact the Indian team, as they had no radio network on the mountain.

During 8 May, Doskov and Petkov had moved up to Camp 5 and after several false starts they set out for the summit at 3.30am on 9 May. Conditions were better for these two, as the snow had hardened in the intervening 24 hours. They were helped also by the footprints of Vultchev and Savov. They were told not to stop to take pictures as Savov's condition was deteriorating and he was losing feeling in his legs. Doskov and Petkov reached the summit at 9.30am on 9 May. It had taken them only six hours. Meanwhile, when the sun was up, Vultchev and Savov started moving down the S ridge after spending some uncomfortable hours resting, but losing body heat, in the crevasse.

Vultchev and Savov were nearing the South Col when Doskov and Petkov caught up with them. They still had oxygen and aided the ailing Savov who was having trouble walking. Vultchev stumbled down the South Col to be met by the Indian team who offered him tea and oxygen. It was 12 pm. Four Bulgarians had completed the second traverse of Mount Everest.

On arrival at Base Camp, Savov was helicoptered out to Kathmandu and on to Sofia. There is still concern about his legs.