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# Cho Oyu 1988

*The First British Ascent*

DAVE WALSH

(Plates 9, 10)

I cannot recall when the idea for the trip was first seeded but, knowing that the incubation period (beyond the initial suggestion) tends to be lengthy, I maintained a low profile, at least until the job of organizing the food had been allocated.

The obvious choice for this task was Derek Price who, having spent the past 35 years eating what is probably best described as an 'uncomplicated' diet was less likely to eat into our already limited funds.

My experience of previous ventures is that the whole project gathers momentum at frightening speed, culminating in last-minute phone calls, followed by futile attempts to compress large amounts of gear into woefully small sacks with one useless arm hanging limply from the shoulder after having been injected (again at the last minute) with all kinds of microscopic nasties.

Our trip was going to be alpine-style. This is a phrase I never quite understand, but our own interpretation was that it should not cost more than an alpine holiday and should not involve half the population of Nepal. Fortunately, we had a leader whose attention to financial detail has a track record which would be the envy of many a household struggling to make ends meet. With his iron fist locked on to the purse-strings and a Gandhi-like outlook on our calorie intake, we were ready (to coin a phrase) to give it our best shot.

The choice of Cho Oyu as our objective was made for several reasons. The fact that it is an 8000m peak was obviously a major attraction, that it had had no British ascent was another, and also we considered it a suitable peak for making a ski descent: there is only one steep section that was unlikely to be skiable.

At the very outset our plans implied a degree of commitment about the trip. We would not use any porters above Base Camp – we had yet to agree if there was to be a Base Camp at all and, if so, where; there would be no doctor, and emergency oxygen was dismissed as being of limited use and too expensive anyway. Much local food was to supplement an already meagre diet, six old 9mm ropes were taken, tents borrowed and rucksacks received as gifts. It was with this miscellaneous assortment that we met at Heathrow to be greeted by the Scottish contingent, festooned in Highland fruit and oatcakes.

Permission to climb Cho Oyu had been granted in 1985; the route was to be via the W flank (climbed by Herbert Tichy in 1952). This approach to the mountain has been the accepted way via Nepal since the Tibetan borders were closed to Westerners many years ago. In 1987 these restrictions were lifted by the Chinese, and the approach through Tibet became the most logical.

But the approach has its drawbacks, not least in the greatly increased costs; also, much of the journey is by vehicle across a barren Tibetan plateau where bouncing about in the back of a dusty lorry soon loses its Eighth-Army-like appeal. Our much less hurried approach – taking six days, walking, eating and sharing accommodation with the local people – acclimatized our group gently into the nuances of the Himalaya.

Himalayan climbing has many bad moments, personal battles with health, fitness, personalities within the group and the many external happenings beyond the control of the expedition. Such factors have combined to ruin many a promising team's aspirations. We were little affected by these afflictions, however, which is quite surprising as several of us had never met before.

The team of Derek Price, Alan Hunt, Dave Walsh, Dave Morris, John Hall, Wes Sterritt and young Dorjee (listed in descending order of age, but not descending very far), along with its cake, arrived safely in Kathmandu on 21 March 1988. Our few days there were taken up with trying to track down the few remaining gas cylinders which had been overlooked by some multinational Everest circus that was being staged at the time. Our liaison officer was assigned, the necessary documentation obtained and we were all set for the flight to Lukla.

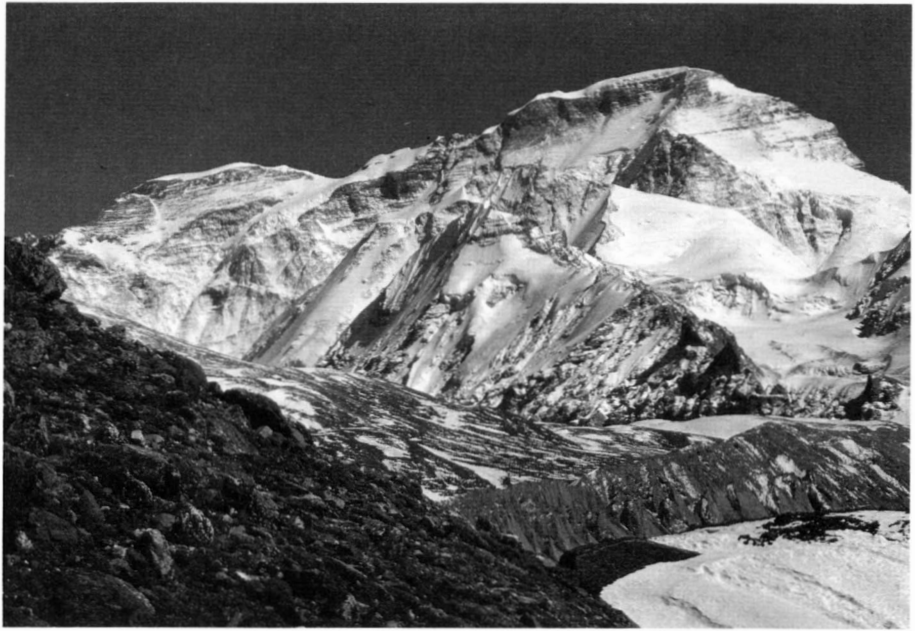
This was preceded by a final meal in town, followed by an embarrassing three hours spent by Derek and myself when we tried to follow Wes (on hired bikes) back to our flat on the outskirts of town. Having lost him after the first turn, our main concern focused on the vulnerability of exposed ankles to the numerous street dogs attracted to our flashing white flesh. Derek, having received the first instalment of his course of anti-rabies inoculations (before discovering the cost) ran the gauntlet of the dogs, steering an erratic course in the general direction of the North Star. My confidence in the law was confirmed when a policeman stepped out of the shadows to reprimand me for short-cutting a roundabout (it was midnight in a deserted suburb of Kathmandu!).

The airport resembled a farmyard auction as sacks of produce, assorted items of furniture and implements were entered on to the plane's manifest. We were once again too heavy for comfort, of course. Taking a back seat, while our agent caused rupees to materialize from the most unlikely places and to disappear with equal speed into the necessary pockets, was a clear lesson in Nepalese airport etiquette.

We boarded the Twin Otter with a quiet sense of relief after observing our baggage being loaded on to the same aircraft. I am pleased to report that our pilot, who was under instruction, made a very passable landing on a not very passable runway.

We had now been joined by Dorjee Lhatoo – and left by Dave Morris, who was to meet us again at Base Camp; a complicated plan, as we were undecided about its location. Dorjee, as organizer of local transport and food, was accompanied by a cook and his assistant who were later to be a great help with load-carrying. After a meal of Dal-Bat and deep-fried apple pie, we organized loads for collection by the yaks.

The walk to Namche Bazar was pleasant and uneventful. Yaks, who walk at a gentle pace and do not insist on a daily cigarette ration, allowed us



10. *Cho Oyu from Fusi La. (p 20)*



11. *Peak (c6350m) in Upper Menlung valley, Rolwaling of Tibet. (p 34)*

plenty of time to reflect on the surroundings. We could afford to walk aimlessly along, drifting in and out of Chi shops along the way, taking in the sights and aroma of a foreign land.

The procession continued on its way to the junction of the Nangpa and Sumna glaciers where the yaks, having encountered several patches of soft snow, became – as it were – stuck in the mud. At this point someone described them as being yackered, a term we would soon attribute to ourselves after we had relieved them of their loads. Having waved a fond farewell (while secretly wishing the yaks were equipped with snow-shoes), we set about ferrying equipment to what appeared to be an idyllic camp-site on the Sumna glacier.

This Shangri La was surrounded by several large boulders on an otherwise flat expanse of ice. Tents were soon erected and the famed Sherpa tea arrived. The large boulders must have weighed between 300 and 400 tons apiece, just about enough to prevent them from being blown off the end of the glacier along with everything else that was left unattended. Our attempt to erect some form of wind-break was just taking shape when Derek, a builder by profession, downed tools at 5pm, mumbling something about the quality of the stone with which we were attempting to keep him supplied. We did not stay long!

Relations between Tibet and Nepal have been strained of late, resulting in a delicate border situation. Unfortunately for us, this change came about after our original request to climb the peak by the Tichy route had been granted, and it now placed us in the difficult position of having to gain the W flank by some circuitous route. We were aided in our choice by the map supplied at our interview at the ministry in Kathmandu on which a red line had been drawn, linking the head of the Sumna glacier with the summit of Cho Oyu; the gradient of the ground straddled by the line was seemingly of little concern. This ridge has yet to be climbed and, being entirely above 7000m, it would present a challenging approach to the mountain.

Having dismissed this approach as being beyond our resources, the alternative was brutally obvious. Two cols had to be crossed to gain access to the W flank. By now the cook-boys together with Dorjee had set off on the Nangpa glacier approach and were to meet us later. Dave had not yet caught up with us. This left five of us to ferry loads for the next two weeks, setting up an intermediate camp at each col. With load carrying you are confronted with a number of alternatives: one heavy load or two lighter ones? short or long carries? The terrain was not much help either, consisting of a rubble-laden glacier with steep mobile sides. On the second col we were confronted by a steep slope of hard ice, down which we lowered our heavy packs 200m to the glacier.

Much has been written about the tedium of expedition life, sporadically broken by bouts of exhilarating climbing or fear of some impending disaster. Between these bursts of mental and physical activity there are hours of inactivity, mostly spent lying in a tent filling time with cooking, reading in eye-straining light or just talking about all manner of things, usually not associated with the event that has brought us together. Most evenings I spent with a couple of batteries in my groin, trying to cajole some life into their chilled innards.

At this point in the expedition we were able to use skis for the first time to

speed up the load carrying. By now it was becoming increasingly obvious that our peak was not likely to become over-popular with the ski fraternity. The W ridge was visible in profile, and so was the summit cone; both seemed to be a mixture of bare ice and rock.

At last we assembled our belongings at the foot of the ice slope after spending the whole day coaxing reluctant overweight bags into sliding down our fixed ropes. The next section on to the Nangpa glacier looked easy, a gentle slope with not too many crevasses: we could sledge down! As soon as the suggestion had been made plans were submitted and passed and the prototypes began to take shape. Alan was first away, disappearing crablike off the end of the glacier, followed shortly by Wes and John who adopted a Shackleton approach; they too disappeared over the lip. Derek and I were more pragmatic and secured lashings of which Baden Powell would have been proud. Pull as we might, nothing moved; the bags had slipped between the skis and were firmly set in the snow. We arrived at the camp late, having hauled the bags over the snow, tempers and ropes frayed, to be greeted sympathetically by the others who were cocooned in down and clutching mugs of tea.

For the first time since leaving Kathmandu we were together as a team. Ahead lay a two-day haul up the moraine-choked Nangpa glacier to its junction with the Gyabrag glacier. The upper reaches of the Nangpa glacier become less steep and have many hidden crevasses; the skis were particularly useful here. The view from the head of the glacier gave us an opportunity to study the various sections of the route in some detail. First the Gyabrag glacier had to be crossed and a camp made at the foot of the infamous 500m scree slope. At this point we took stock of the remaining food: six days' supply at a rate which was already barely enough to sustain us. So far the weather had been fine, with only light winds and mostly clear skies.

The ascent of the scree was a pleasant change from the slipping and sliding amongst the moraine and bare ice of the glaciers; the mind could slip into an indifferent state, free to wander at will. Thoughts never strayed far from food: freshly baked bread with slabs of farmhouse cheese would drift across visions of family camping holidays spent in the Highlands. Three hours later, two tents were set on chiselled ledges overlooking Tibet. Wes and I whiled away the hours brewing tea and discussing the merits of free-falling from university buildings, something he had tried in his youth but didn't enjoy.

A decision had been taken to leave the skis at the bottom of the scree slope; in retrospect it was the right one. The next section of the ridge consisted of a series of ice steps which were covered in places with powder snow. Sections of the ridge had the remains of fixed ropes left by other teams; some of them were set into the ice and gave me a strange psychological boost, even though they were several inches below the surface. Fortunately a kindly group of Swiss was also on the ridge at the same time. Although moving more slowly, they had placed a number of fixed ropes on the steeper sections.

We were now at nearly 7000m and four of us were going reasonably well, helped along by the stable weather. At this point there is an ice-fall which forms the main technical section of the climb. Our camp here afforded tremendous views of the surrounding peaks, dominated by Everest to the SW only 30km



9. *Cho Oyu, W flank.* (p 20)

away. Much closer to the south are the two unclimbed peaks of Nangpa Gosum 1 (7352m) and 2 (7296m), linked by a 3km-long ridge above 7000m. This same ridge continues for a further 5km to the summit of Cho Oyu.

The ice-fall gave a couple of pitches of what at a more sensible altitude would be enjoyable Grade 3 climbing. At this height, carrying around 20kg, with lungs fibrillating madly inside a skeletal representation of one's former self, this particular word was never further from my mind. We slumped in an untidy heap of ropes and ironmongery at the top of the ice-fall. Happily, the next 200m were set at a more reasonable angle. The evidence of old fixed rope belied the innocent appearance; the angle was fine, about 45 degrees, but the ice was green and hard. A sharp pair of crampons would have helped, but it is a long time since I owned a pair of those, so after commiserating with our calf muscles we shinned up the fixed ropes.

Others had selected the same spot for their camp in the past; the remains of a tent projected from the snow to serve as a reminder to future visitors of the impartiality of the climate. We expected that the siting of the next camp would put us within range of the summit. A seemingly endless slope ascended in a series of giant zig-zags, finally ending below the NE face at 7500m.

Four of us arrived at the site, hoping to attempt the summit the next day. Unfortunately, Dorjee was experiencing severe headaches and descended the same day. Feeling better, he returned the day after, only to suffer the same effects and to be forced down again.

The morning of our summit bid, we were awake at 5am. This did not induce an alpine-like frenzy of activity but rather a resigned, bleary-eyed view of the inch or so of ice crystals hanging precariously from the inside of the tent. A handful of these down the neck at this hour of the day is not to be recommended. I sat up carefully and set the stove on my lap, a hot drink being an essential catalyst to elevate mountaineers from the supine to the vertical plane. For the next two hours I sat, attempting to melt enough snow for three cups of tea.

Half a cup of warm tea was the long-awaited prize, just enough to wash down some fruit-cake and chocolate. The day looked set to be fine and I set off ahead of the others, anxious to get to grips with what we all hoped would be the final day. 200m on I stopped for a breather. We had turned back and Dave was moving very slowly, stopping frequently. He had walked at his own pace throughout the trip, and there seemed little point in waiting for him.

I knew that there were two rock-bands. The first looked like Stange Edge, with the colour of Chamonix granite. At the highest point it was probably 50m high, tapering off to around 15m. I was making for the obvious weakness on the left side and, after an abortive attempt at a short cut, I emerged above the rock-band faced with a long diagonal traverse back right.

Broken ground and a short snow-slope were followed by the second rock-band. This one consisted of layered sandstone and was only 10m high; set at an easy angle, it was soon climbed. The remaining gentle slopes of rock and snow led to the summit plateau. It was 5pm on 30 April 1988.

It had taken eight hours from the camp; I was tired and conscious of the limited daylight left. I set off down almost straight away, only then realizing just

how weak my legs were; frightened of a slip, I picked my way. The weather was beginning to change, the sky gradually clouding over and the wind picking up. In the distance I could see Dave just above the first rock-band, but off to one side. I detoured over to him.

He was preparing to spend the night there. I told him that I didn't think this a good idea at almost 7900m, but he said he felt too tired to go on and thought he could try again tomorrow. I gave him what spare clothes I had and continued down, reaching the tent at 7.30pm to a welcome cup of tea. Wes had developed a chest infection and had suffered severe bouts of coughing which were to prevent him from making any further attempt on the summit. He volunteered to stay at the camp to await the outcome of Dave's attempt the next day. About midday I left Wes, intending to make my way slowly down.

My reunion with John and Dorjee on the scree slope was an emotional one; they had started back up the mountain to assist where they could. As I expected Wes and Dave to appear the next day, we all returned to our camp below the scree slope.

The pair had not returned two days later, during which time there had been a period of bad weather. Dorjee went back up to do what he could and found them at one of the Swiss camps, in reasonable shape but not fully aware of the danger they were in. Dave had frostbitten hands and feet, and Wes had frostbite in his fingers.

We met Derek at a lower camp. He had kept a lonely vigil for a week, not knowing what was happening to the rest of us.

Stumbling back home in various states of repair, thoughts turned to the subject of food. With shrunken stomachs we attacked all that was put before us with vigour, and never mind the human cost!