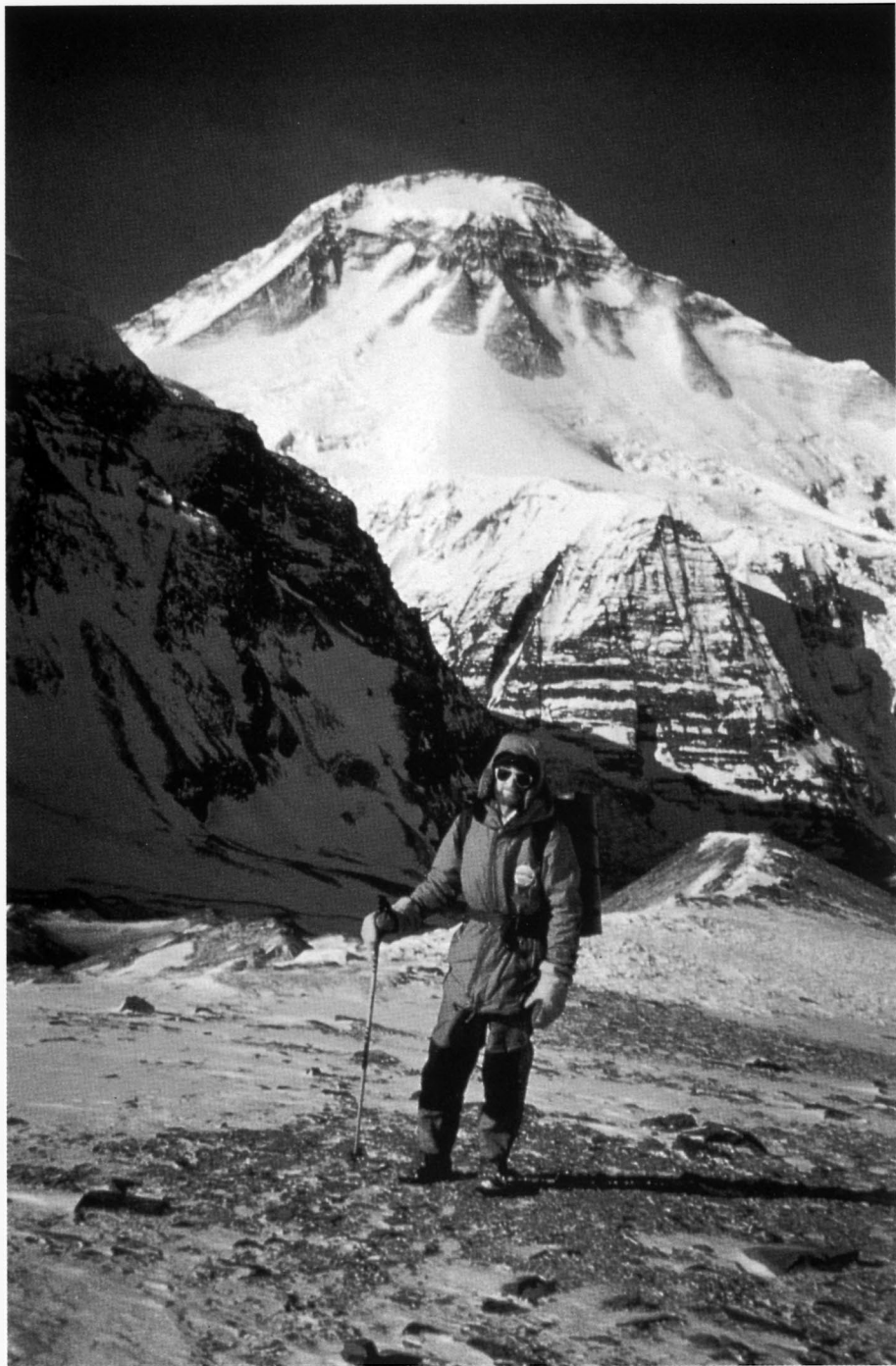

Expeditions



12. Dhaulagiri, 8167m, from the north. In the foreground: Rick Allen.
(Alison Allen) (p43)

RICK ALLEN

Dhaulagiri on Cabbage Soup

(Plates 12–14)

I first caught a glimpse of the 'white mountain' in 1980, walking over from the valley of the Kali Gandaki to enter the Annapurna sanctuary. Above the trees a great white trapezoid hovered on the horizon in the early morning light. Twelve years later I was congratulating Sergei Efimov on the success of his team on the E ridge of Cho Oyu and suggesting that we put together a joint expedition to Nepal, when he mentioned Dhaulagiri. The mental picture returned and I said yes.

Along with most other visitors to central Nepal I had seen the S face of Dhaulagiri, a prodigiously dangerous wall of snow and ice which repulsed Messner and Habeler. Our aspirations were directed at the N face, lying between the normal route of the NE ridge by which Diemberger made the first ascent in 1960 and the much tried NW ridge which eventually succumbed to siege tactics a decade later.

Hard currency was probably not going to be one of the major contributions of my Russian friends, and I knew that I would need to be more organised and better focused in my drive for financial support than ever before. The net result of my efforts was absolutely zero for sponsors, media interest, grants and, virtually, gear. Who had ever heard of Dhaulagiri anyway? Fortunately, Sergei did find some companions who were able to share the costs and we assembled in Kathmandu in March 1993.

Nepali liaison officers know that most British and all Russian expeditions are low on tangible reward and a joint Russian–British team was sure to be a shoestring outfit. Mr Ram came to eye us up at the offices of Mustang Trekking but accepted his charge anyway and proved to be a resilient companion as far as Base Camp.

Our approach from the roadhead at Baglung took us away from the busy trekking route of the Kali Gandaki and up the little frequented valley of the Myagdi Khola. The villages have a subsistence economy and our Tamang porters hired in Kathmandu needed their own food supplies. One night we observed huge hillside fires burning out of control. These appeared to have been started deliberately as a quick and wasteful means of making charcoal for sale in Pokhara, a very disturbing development for the area. After a week we encountered late snow lying at the treeline at about 3500m and we paid off 50 porters, retaining 10 to carry our gear in relays onto the Chondarban glacier. Gear and bonuses were not enough to retain the loyalty of our remnant; they needed food and fuel and our carefully calculated supplies were decimated in three days.

Base Camp was established on the glacier beneath the N face on 8 April and we examined our objective. The northerly aspect of Dhaulagiri which greeted Herzog's reconnaissance party in 1950 as they crossed French Pass is forbidding. A great ice shelf at about 6000m cascades down the bottom third of the face in a jumble of icefalls. Above the shelf an icefield rises to meet a 400m rock barrier. Above the rock a fringe of séracs threatens most of the face, barring access to the summit snowfields. A French party had reached the ice shelf a few years ago but no other attempts on the face are recorded. However, Sergei had done his homework and we thought that we could trace a line up the centre that was neither too dangerous nor too technical. The rock wall is seamed by a prominent rightward-slanting ramp leading to a horizontal break which forms a characteristic '7' shape. Above this the sérac barrier is absent, eliminating the major danger on the face. A sharp, snow-covered moraine arête appeared to offer a route through the lower icefalls and after a day of camp construction we embarked on the face.

Our team consisted of six Russian climbers, two Georgians and one Brit, plus our Russian doctor and my wife who accompanied us as trekking members. Although I was nominally joint leader, Sergei was unquestionably in charge. He would discuss plans with us all and take differing views into account but he had the final word. Expeditions to Alaska, Everest, Kangchenjunga, Cho Oyu and Nanga Parbat, as well as all the 7000m peaks in the former USSR, gave him a depth of experience matched by few of his contemporaries. Two seasons climbing with him had given me respect for both his abilities and his judgement but on Dhaulagiri he also demonstrated mastery of budgets and diplomacy – a truly great expedition leader.

All the climbing members set off on the rib winding up amongst the icefalls. As the moraine narrowed into an acute arête, which shed snow and rubble alternately to right and left, I wondered why my companions seemed less ill at ease than I was. I suspect that the Caucasus consists largely of material like this. During a two-day excursion we were able to get tents to the edge of the zone of séracs where the ice shelf breaks up and felt satisfied with our progress.

We could not claim to be a truly alpine-style expedition but for our numbers we were certainly light-weight. Dhaulagiri was the only permit we had so that was where we acclimatised, pushing our tents higher on each excursion and leaving behind snow-holes or tents at the previous high points. Ropes were fixed only on séracs and crevasse walls. Reascending these ropes was a revelation, as my companions used one jumar and one hand and simply walked up the ice walls with full rucksacks. The sole representative of British mountaineering was reduced to sack hauling when the walls began to impend and was in danger of developing an acute sense of inferiority.

Four excursions over three weeks took us across the ice shelf and up the icefield to a narrow ledge hacked out below the rock wall at 7300m. One severe afternoon squall caused us to bivouac early but the weather



13. Dhaulagiri N face: Ivan Plotnikov (Vanya) and Sergei Efimov starting up the icefield. In the background Dhaulagiri VI. (*Rick Allen*) (p43)



14. Rick Allen on the summit of Dhaulagiri. (*Sergei Efimov*) (p43)

generally remained stable, in spite of radio reports from the Everest region of climbers disappearing in storms. We climbed as three ropes of three much of the time and divided between two home-made hoop tents at night.

Russian mountaineering seems to have developed on the basis of strong regional clubs, overlaid by a system of training and competition at a national level. A strong competitive element was present in the selection of teams for major expeditions in the past. Some of my companions were exceptionally gifted products of that process: Valery Pershin, now a rock-climbing trainer, Sergei Bogomolov, a sports coach, and Ivan (Vanya) Plotnikov, who leads climbing and rafting excursions in the Siberian Altai. While Western and especially British alpinists focus on the 'pair' as the basic unit in the mountains, my Russian friends were more team orientated, happy to function in ropes of three, four or five as the terrain changed or someone wanted to drop back for a rest. There was no subtle jockeying for a chance to go for the summit; it was assumed that we would all go for it together. This goes a long way to explaining the formidable success record of Soviet expeditions in the 1980s on which a very high proportion of members summited.

A different climbing culture is not assimilated overnight and occasionally I simply managed to blend the worst of my rope management habits with the worst of theirs but for the most part things went smoothly. I was undoubtedly considered lazy for not getting up early to dig the tents out but a brew in the morning was always my first priority.

Therein lay the source of a running argument which we never satisfactorily resolved. I am utterly convinced that the more liquid I can consume at altitude the better my body will like me and the further it will go. This is anything but an extreme or eccentric view amongst my acquaintances but to Sergei it was a Western fad.

'You want more tea?', he would ask, as Oliver Twist stretched out an empty mug. 'This is not necessary.' In vain I watched for signs of weakness in my dehydrated companions as we gained height, while I survived by drinking the washing-up water (sic).

Our food on the mountain was basic but substantial, almost identical to food at Base Camp with a few nuts, raisins and smoked Volga fish thrown in. A consignment of gas canisters had vanished in transit from Llanberis so we relied entirely on petrol stoves and lightweight pressure cookers to prepare a stew of cabbage and potatoes or rice each evening. This Tilman-esque existence suited me well and I had to agree with Sergei when he said that he couldn't understand how British climbers survived on a diet of muesli bars.

After four days of rest we packed our sacks on 5 May with food and petrol for nine days and straggled out of Base Camp under our burdens. Nights in snow caves at previous high points gave me welcome hours of sleep, a sure sign of effective acclimatisation. However, Merab, one of our Georgian friends, passed the night at 7300m in pain and anxiety and he decided that he could not risk continuing. His countryman Gia renounced his chance of the summit to escort his friend down in the morning.

Seven of us moved on into the ramp system that cut across the lower rock wall, moving quickly at first on ropes fixed the previous evening by Sergei B. and Vanya. The back pair recovered the ropes and fed them up through the chain of climbers to the leader who fixed each pitch after leading it. In this way we moved almost continuously up the mixed pitches of Scottish III to a horizontal break. Here the petrol stove was fired up for a midday brew. The lead was then taken by Alexei Lebedikhin, a metallurgist from Sverdlovsk, all of whose gear with the exception of his boots was home made. He adjusted the laces which held on his personally welded crampons and set off on snowy rock which steepened into Scottish IV. His *tour de force* that afternoon took us to a rocky ledge at 7600m and while we dug out boulders and gravel for two tents he calmly descended the ropes to recover his sack.

The next morning Sergei E. led us almost horizontally towards a tongue of the summit snowfield which bypassed the hanging séracs to the left. In one and a half days we had cracked the crucial rock wall by the 'route of 7' and, as we sat in the snow to brew up, the summit seemed suddenly within our grasp. I pushed on up the snow, breaking trail in a slow rhythm towards a shelf that would accommodate our tents.

Sergei E., Sergei B., Alexei and I set off early towards the rocky ridge and after an hour Vanya caught up with us. Valery was still in his tent, apparently discussing with Boris Sedusov the merits of continuing. Boris was our least experienced high-altitude climber and had already suffered cold problems in his hands and feet. However, he did not lack strength or determination and the pair eventually set off in mid-morning. Our group of five reached the summit of Dhaulagiri at 11am on 11 May in gathering cloud and strong winds. We snatched some photos in the intense cold and descended quickly, meeting Valery and Boris at the crest of the ridge. In spite of the fierce winds, they were also able to reach the summit and descend to the tents safely.

That night the wind shook our home-made tents in paroxysms of cracking fabric and I was convinced that it would burst into our precarious cocoon. Boris moved over to share the warmth of a full tent because he was deeply chilled and I dozed with my boots on in case the fabric ripped.

The storm moderated in the morning enough to begin the tricky descent of the wall but there was much delay as ropes were passed down the chain. Boris's crampons repeatedly came loose and he lost all feeling in his hands as he attempted to fasten them. By mid-afternoon we had only reached the foot of the rock wall but Boris was in a state of exhaustion and four of us remained with him there while Vanya and Sergei B. continued down. We had left our single bottle of oxygen at this ledge and Boris was able to regain some strength with its help. The descent continued for another day and a half, as we helped our frostbitten companion off the mountain and fought to retain our own concentration against creeping fatigue.

Porters were already waiting for us at Base Camp, where the food had virtually run out, and most of us simply changed our boots and started walking down the glacier. The doctor and three others remained with

Boris who was subsequently evacuated by helicopter after attempting unsuccessfully to walk out. His toes were eventually amputated in a Russian hospital, but he seemed to have no regrets about his decision to go for the summit.

Our expedition, culminating in the ascent of the 'Route of 7' on the N face of Dhaulagiri, was profoundly happy and rewarding for me. It was almost completely devoid of the dissension and divisions which have so often marred multinational trips. Good weather helps but old-fashioned commitment to the team was evident in everyone. Special food, fancy gear and media coverage were, strangely, absent.

Summary: An account of the first ascent of the N face of Dhaulagiri, 8167m, via the 'Route of 7', by a joint Russian-British expedition. The joint leaders were Sergei Efimov and Rick Allen. Seven team members reached the summit on 11 May 1993.