

Gutsy climber challenges Everest

Former U of A student takes on world's tallest summit.

by Kristan McLeod

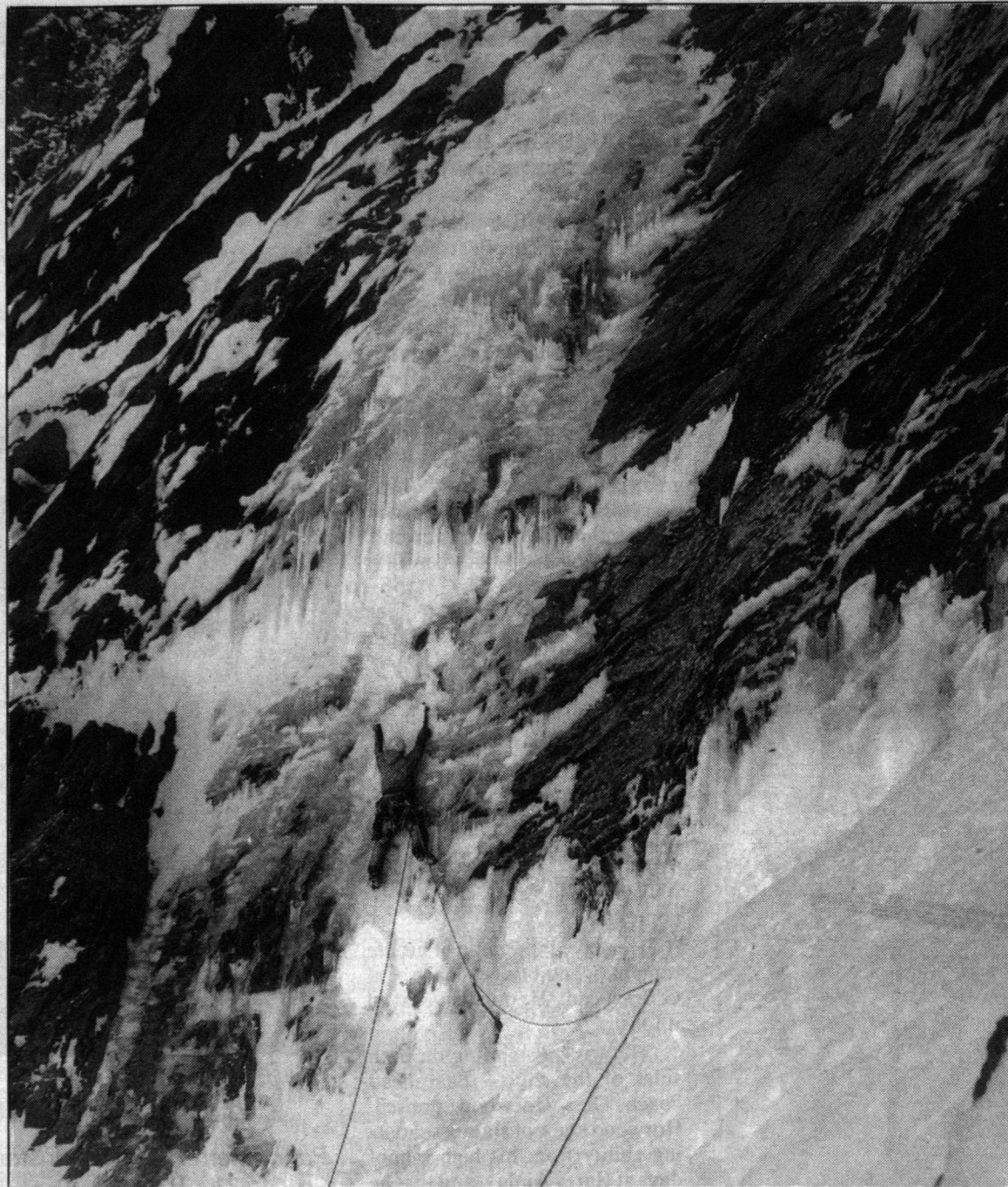
On Nov. 6, 1988, Barry Blanchard returned home to Calgary after his second unsuccessful attempt at climbing Mount Everest. The former U of A student had been a member of the 1986 Everest Light expedition in which the expedition leader had refused to let Blanchard go to the summit for safety reasons.

Determined to make it to the 29,028 foot summit, Blanchard organized his own expedition, Everest Express, to scale both Everest and Nanga Parbat in the Pakistani Karakorum.

The biggest difference about Blanchard's expedition was that he employed the alpine technique rather than the sieging technique that most Everest expeditions have used in the past. The climbers

They spent nearly a month and a half training on neighboring mountains.

scale the mountain in one, all-out attempt without the help of a fixed line to basecamp, support personnel, or any advance basecamps. The sieging method is much more costly, requiring more time, personnel, and equipment. Alpine climbers experience more isolation and consequently more personal challenge in this bolder, dangerous method.



Blanchard also wanted to be the first to scale the summit of Everest without the aid of auxiliary oxygen. At altitudes of over 25,000 feet, this requires several years of training, tremendous athletic endurance and sufficient acclimatization to avoid altitude sickness.

Blanchard, Mark Francis

Twight of Seattle, Ward Robinson of Canmore, and Kevin Doyle of Calgary arrived at Nanja Parbat on May 22. They spent approximately a month and a half training on neighbouring mountains, acclimatizing their bodies to the altitude.

"We were really cleaning up on the peaks," said Blanchard, and he felt confident on July 9 when the team made their first attempt on the Rupal face of Nanga Parbat.

They made very good progress until July 13, having climbed from 11,700 feet to 25,300 feet.

The experience was like standing in an elevator shaft with tons of flour being dumped on you.

At that point, they were in Merkl Valley, a gully in the rock face about ten feet wide and fifty feet high.

Without apparent warning, a Himalayan storm hit from the far side of the mountain with 70 mile per hour descending winds, lightning, and enormous amounts of snow.

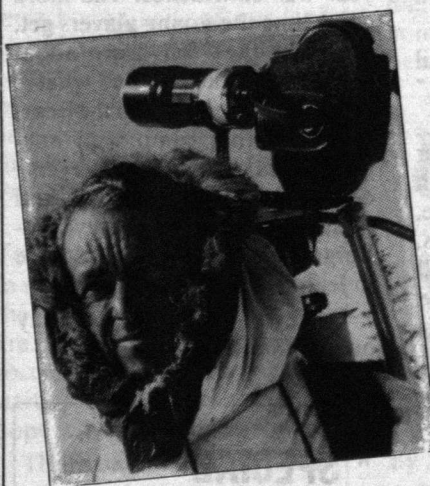
The four men had to bend their heads to create an airspace in which to breathe. Blanchard likens the experience to standing in an elevator shaft with tons of flour being dumped on you.

"What was terrifying about the situation," he said, "was we had 700 lbs of bodyweight on one rig that could only take 1000 lbs. All you're worried about that whole time is survival. The first thing I thought of was, 'I'm never going to see my wife again.'"

When the snow shower finally did subside, Blanchard ordered the group to "get the fuck out of here!" As they started to descend out of the gully, however, Robinson experienced a problem with altitude sickness. He was bent over the rope, gasping, unable to breathe properly. The others lowered Robinson out of the gully with one rope and his rucksack

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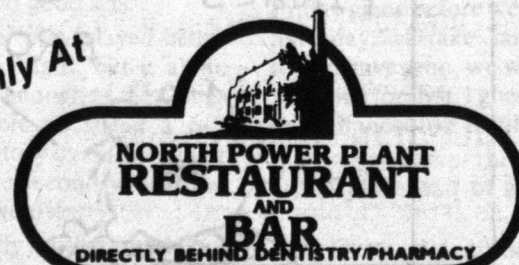
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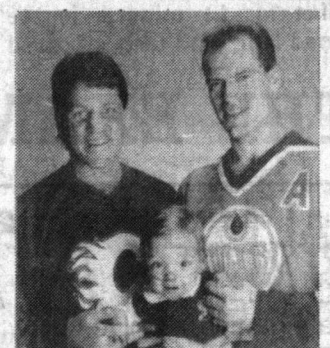
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