



The Canadians, travelling by camel, approach Muz Tagh Ata.

west of Kashgar and forms a geological structure in which the great Tian Shan, Karakorum, Kunlun and Hindu Kush mountain system radiate. (Pamir means a high intermountain plateau-like valley, hemmed in by parallel mountain ranges.)

A ten-hour ride took us through the Gez Defile, the steep canyon between Mounts Kongur and Chakragil of the eastern Pamir. We dusted ourselves off on the shores of Little Karakul Lake where Muz Tagh Ata rose vertically above us out of the Sarikol Valley. This valley is the home of the Kirghiz, a once nomadic tribe who have large herds of sheep, yaks, camels and horses. Kirghiz legend tells of Janaidar, an ancient city on top of Muz Tagh Ata, where fruit trees bear



Team members John Amatt and Steve Bezruchka ski along the mountain.

year round, flowers never wither, and people remain youthful forever. This story contrasted with the valley where we were shivering in the cold breeze in spite of our heavy clothing.

In four attempts on the mountain in 1894, the Swedish explorer, Sven Hedin reached 6 278 metres. Having arrived at that altitude on the broad back of a yak, he contended that the secret of freedom from the troubles of altitude is the avoidance of bodily exertion.

However well acclimatized his yak may have been, it lacked the technical prowess needed to thread its way through the crevassed field on the lower slopes of the mountain, and the climber and his hairy mount were turned back.

Camels used

Ours was the fourth successful climb of the mountain after Chinese, Russian and American parties. Nine camels and several drivers were recruited from the fields to carry us and our supplies to base camp at 4 420 metres. Our liaison officer, Song Zhi-Yi and interpreter Tien Sheng-Yuan, remained at base while we prepared to establish camps higher up the mountain. Mr. Song had been to 8 200 metres on Qomolangma (Mount Everest) on the CMA's ascent of that mountain in 1975, so he had as much altitude experience as anyone on our team.

Next day, we made a vain attempt to drive three camels to the snowline. They faltered 150 metres above base camp, and we were left to carry the loads on our own backs.

We prepared a snow platform for our tent at 5 330 metres and sat out a two-

day storm, catching up on some reading and getting a little rest. The effects of altitude were beginning to show — most of us experienced intermittent headaches, nausea, and slept poorly. The increasing altitude demanded complete concentration and a maximum output of energy. Advance a ski, rest, take three or four breaths, advance the other ski... and on and on.

Push to the summit

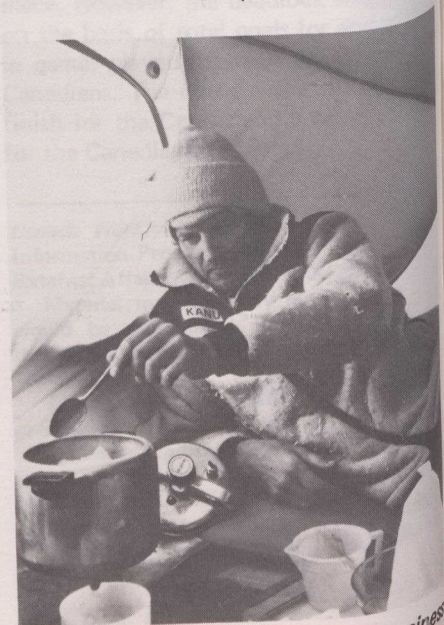
Several days of endless horizons brought us to Camp Four at 6 705 metres. This was the highest any of us had camped. We pondered the fact that on Everest the challenging climbing begins above this height! We spent a day in our sleeping bags preparing for a summit push the next day.

The morning dawned clear and cold —30 degrees Celsius. We gulped fluids and put on our skis and started slowly for the top. With his fingers frost-nipped from putting on his skis, John returned to the tent.

The snow was windpacked, and as we entered a high basin, the weight of our bodies forced the snow to collapse. A horrible renting sound ripped through the basin. Breathless, we stared at the upper slopes looking for a fracture line. Miraculously, no avalanche had been triggered. We pushed on another seven hours on the rock-hard snow with the wind clawing viciously at our backs.

And then came the reward. Instead of the lost city of Janaidar, we saw a lovely mushroom of rime ice reaching 46 metres

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John Amatt, the expedition's business manager, inside the tent at base camp.