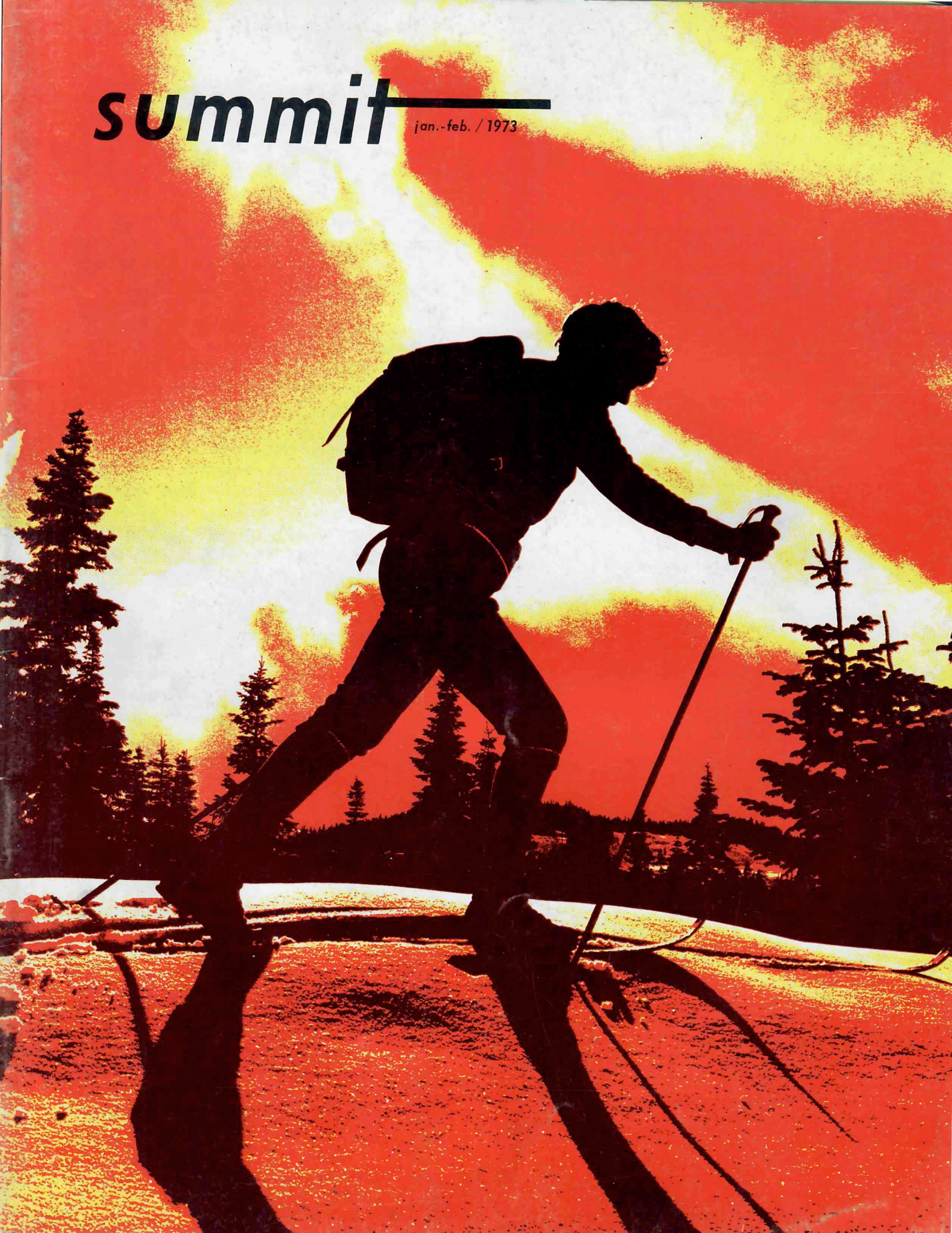


summit

jan.-feb. / 1973



"NOT QUITE NOSHAQ"

By Arlene Blum

*If I were a bear and a big bear too,
I wouldn't care if it frizz or snew,
I wouldn't care if it snew or frizz.
I'd be all wrapped in a coat like his.*

Our last trip was pretty different from all the rest, more like a real expedition. Dave and Anne George, Sue Darling, Margaret Young, Earl Furman, and Bill Griffin joined us from the States making a rather ponderous group of ten. With the help of the American Alpine Club we had received permission to climb in the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan. Look at a map and you'll see that the Wakhan is a narrow strip of land bordering on Russia, China and Pakistan — rather politically sensitive. In 1969 a group led by Richard Hechtal had climbed Noshaq reporting it to be a pleasant climb in a remote wild area. Sounded like a good place to go.

Our first hint that things had changed since 1969 came in Iran. Descending Demavend, we

met a mammoth group of forty Italians who had flown to Iran for a climb organized by a tour group called Alpinismus International. Their leader, Beppi Tenti, had previously achieved what he called "The mountaineering expedition of the future — the first group ascent of a Himalayan Peak." (Himalayan Journal, Vol. 30, Page 206 1970.) Nineteen people reached the top of Deo Tibba, a 19,687-foot high lump near Manali in India. Beppi had also led forty-eight people to the top of Kilimanjaro in a group. And now as his greatest achievement he proudly told us that he was bringing one hundred climbers, guides, and Sherpas to Afghanistan to climb Nawshaq. The same as Noshaq? But, of course. We consoled ourselves thinking that they would never get permission.

August 1 we were in Quazi Deh. Everything, including our lungs, was thickly coated with dust after a five-day drive on very rough dirt roads. The new Russian Wazi truck we'd rented broke down frequently, allowing us ample time to see the countryside. We bounced along the Afghan



Our Afghanistan Expedition members.

road just south of the Oxus river watching cars speeding by on the good Russian road north of the river and only a few hundred yards away.

The village of Quasi Deh is a typical remote Afghan community. However, its traditional ways are being altered by the increasing number of climbers coming to Noshaq every year. I wonder how a primitive society exposed only to mountain climbers will develop? At present we saw children playing with ski poles and much of the populace wearing climbing gear.

The village chief arranged porters for us and, as we later found out, kept the rice, sugar, cigarettes and about \$20 intended for the porters. We were pleased to help arrange his ouster from his job.

After an easy 2½-day walk, we reached the village of Noshaq basecamp. Approaching, we saw a large tent with windows and curtains. The Alpinismus group had indeed gotten permission. They had eighteen Nepali Sherpas, two French guides, two Indian cooks, and Rheinhold Messner to get them to the top. In addition a German

party had just left, and there was a Norwegian-American party of five and a Polish party of eleven. We camped slightly above expedition central, at about 15,500 feet.

Margaret, Bill and Earl, who had to drive back to Europe before September 1, began carrying loads the day we reached basecamp. As they only had about twelve days in which to climb Noshaq, we were concerned about their safety. Last year, a Bulgarian party had porters establish their camps and then climbed without acclimatization. Five members of this group died at Camp III of exhaustion and exposure.

Next day, the Polish party who had hiked in at the same time we had were trudging by with heavy packs to establish their first camp. They felt that load carrying at high altitude was the best way to acclimatize. We, on the other hand, had decided upon a much superior technique. We lay out in the sun for days looking at mountains and occasionally packaging some meals. When other parties asked us what in the world we were doing, we told them we were working hard to



One of our poorly-clad porters.



Two porters load up for the descent.

test out a new concept in high altitude mountaineering — sloth acclimatization.

A few days later, we walked up Korpusht-e-Yakhi (18,700 feet) to get a better view of the area. The thigh-deep snow we encountered near the top briefly upset our training routine of exerting little effort. Soon we were on top looking at

views of Tirich Mir, the Pamirs, and numerous nameless peaks in all directions. After a few minutes the view deteriorated. The weather was still perfect, but a swarm of people arrived on the small summit. We retreated!

Fearing that Noshag's west ridge route would be equally crowded, we decided to check the



One of our rest stops enroute to camp.



Sue congratulates Joel on his successful ascent of Noshag in the background.

south ridge for an alternate route. As Aspe Safid (21,300 feet) gave good views of this ridge, we climbed it to take a look. Our first camp was at 17,500 feet and our second at 19,300 feet on the pass between Noshag and Aspe Safid. The view from this col was dramatic: Istor-o-Nal and Tirich Mir far above us in billowing clouds.

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Next day we followed the road up the mountain made earlier by the Alpinismus group. Our summit view was obscured by the cloud we were in and the heavily falling snow. Down we went, rather disgusted. So far one summit had been spoiled by hordes of people and the second by a snowstorm. Still, after five months in Asia, we'd



*The
mountains of
Afghanistan.*

adopted the philosophy that "It hardly matters." Next morning was clear. Before we descended, I wandered back up to 20,000 feet or so on Aspe Safid to take some photos, but felt that going to the top again would not be in accord with the principle of minimization of work that we were striving to follow.

Back at basecamp, we found that Margaret, Bill and Earl had already left for Europe. Margaret and Earl had reached the highest summit of Noshag (29,500 feet) in ten days just as they'd planned. We were very relieved that they'd climbed in this short amount of time without mishap. As Anne had a bad case of tendonitis, she and Dave left to do some traveling and the rest of us decided to try climbing the west ridge of Noshag. Most of the other parties had left the area by now, reducing the traffic congestion considerably.

Two weeks after arriving at basecamp we reluctantly put on forty-pound packs and did our first carry to Camp I on the west ridge of Noshag (18,300 feet). Too much work. Still the carry took just three to four hours for us now. With no acclimatization, it had taken the others eight. Sloth

acclimatization had been proven. It really did work. We could carry heavy loads at altitude at least as easily as parties that had gotten fit by working hard. I should admit that we didn't always rigorously follow our training program, but did occasionally cheat and go for walks in the area.

August 19 we moved to Camp I. The campsite was fine except for all the disgusting partially burned garbage that had been left there.

From now on we were careful to make sure that we got enough to eat and drink. This wasn't difficult as our appetites had not been affected by the altitude. In fact, up to Camp III, the higher we went, the more we ate. Reason was we'd bought all our food in Afghanistan. It was very old and tended to contain protein in the form of weevils. Much of the U. S. food was packaged before zip codes were instituted. The small amount of reasonably palatable food was reserved for high altitude and we devoured it with enthusiasm.

We carried loads to Camp II (20,900 feet) and then rested. On August 22 we moved to Camp II and the good weather ended, as did our views

of the surrounding mountains. After a day of eating and watching the snow fall, we moved to Camp III (23,000) in yet another snowstorm.

The trudge to Camp III with thirty-five pounds was not much fun. There was one thousand feet of wretched loose rock covered with deep snow, and above that a cliff band festooned with ropes. The latter was rather solid rock and somewhat enjoyable. A short exposed traverse was followed by flat snow. Putting the tent up here in a storm took an hour and was exhausting as was doing most everything else. The altitude was finally making a difference. I suspect part of the problem was that our equipment had not been planned to be used this high. Since we were planning to climb for fifteen months around the world, mostly in tropical countries, we'd chosen relatively light-weight equipment suited for benign conditions. It certainly was not benign at Camp III. It blew and it snowed and we frizz.

Our summit day dawned cold and snowy, so we didn't manage to start until 10 a.m. At noon we had gained about half our elevation (23,700 feet), but were very cold. Joel went alone to the middle summit of Noshag (24,300 feet) which he reached at 1:00 p.m., while the rest of us turned back. How sad. No views at all. Joel couldn't stand on the summit ridge due to the wind and he soon came down. Meanwhile, four of the Poles reached the main summit (24,450 feet) but didn't get back to camp until 2 a.m.

Next day we descended. Getting back to the thicker air of Camp II really felt good. Joel decided he did not want to carry a heavy pack down the gully below Camp I so he put the tent and rope in a burlap bag and threw them down the gully. As they began bouncing wildly down the slope, we remembered that the tent poles were still inside. They tumbled about two thousand feet down the gully, fortunately without damage.

Down at basecamp, now deserted except for the Poles and ourselves, we went over this summer's record on Noshag. Three of our party had climbed the highest summit without incident. Nine of the Alpinismus group, Rheinhold Messner and the head Sherpa had reached the top with five cases of frostbite. Eight of the Poles had

climbed Noshag, three by the southwest face, a new route. All five members of the Norwegian party climbed some summit though one member got pneumonia in both lungs and severe frostbite. All the camps on the mountain were full of partially burned garbage. Several parties had not had latrine areas leading to a general disgusting odor at the camps. This was certainly not the pleasant climbing in a remote area which we had hoped to find.

The porters, whose standard of living has risen considerably with the advent of climbing, told us proudly that every year more people come to Noshag. We could not help wondering what it would be like in 1982. In my past letters, I've written details that would make it easier for others to visit the areas in which we'd climbed. After seeing what is happening to the Noshag area, I begin to question whether this is justifiable.

Right now, we are very eager to go to Nepal and perhaps do some climbing, though we have few illusions left about visiting the remote Himalaya.

Sincerely,
Arlene

P.S. For the record, our trip cost \$185.00 for thirty-three days in the mountains and nine days spent traveling to and from. Permits for climbing or trekking in Afghanistan can be arranged in Kabul through Mir Hamid Hooseney, Cultural Section, Foreign Ministry, who we found to be most efficient and helpful. To our surprise, when we walked into his office, he immediately pulled out a file pertaining to our group. For a climbing expedition, it's better to get permission in advance through the State Department. The American Alpine Club is very helpful with this. If possible, bring all your food, especially meat, from outside Afghanistan. Maps of most of the Hindu Kush can be found in old Polish mountaineering journals as the Poles have had *many* expeditions to Afghanistan. Rumor has it that the weather in the Hindu Kush is consistently sunny in July and August making this the best time to climb in Afghanistan. This summer, we found scant confirmation for this.