The Brick Wall

When Ed Viesturs, America's greatest mountain climber, decided to take on the world's most terrifying peak, he carried with him a boyhood dream and the inspiration of six Frenchmen who, 50 years earlier, were the first to summit spectacular, deadly Annapurna.

BY ED VIESTURS
ILLUSTRATION BY TOMER HANUKA

In April 2000, I started hiking in to Annapurna. Soaring high above the foothills of Nepal, it is, along with Mount Everest and K2, one of the majestic peaks of South Asia's Himalaya Range and, at 26,545 feet, the tenth highest mountain in the world. My three teammates were all veteran climbers. Neal Beidleman, an aerospace engineer from Aspen, had been with me on K2 in 1992. An exceptionally strong climber, he probably would have made the summit that year, except that job pressures forced him to return to the States before we could get in position to go for the top.

Neal recommended Michael Kennedy, with whom he'd done a lot of routes around Aspen. I'd never climbed with Michael, but I'd met and liked him. He'd never been on an 8,000-meter peak, but I had the highest respect for his amazing climbs in Alaska and the Karakoram. I also knew him as the longtime editor of *Climbing,* a magazine he'd singlehandedly turned into perhaps the best mountaineering journal in the world.

My Finnish friend Veikka Gustafsson was fast becoming my favorite partner in the Himalaya. Annapurna in 2000 was our sixth expedition together; eventually we'd pair up on no fewer than 11 attempts on 8,000-meter peaks.

By the spring of 2000, I'd been going after those 8,000ers for thirteen years straight, since my first attempt on Everest in 1987. Annapurna was, in fact, my 23rd such expedition, during which I'd reached the summits of 10 of the 14 highest mountains in the world without using supplemental oxygen. Since 1994, I'd decided to go for all 14, a goal I'd originally thought was far beyond my grasp or means. Now that I had the support of sponsors and a modicum of celebrity, I could seriously devote my life to what I called Endeavor 8000, my campaign to stand on top of all 14. That in doing so I might become the first American to accomplish the feat never had more than a secondary importance to me. It was first and foremost a personal quest—to test my skills and endurance against the highest and some of the hardest mountains on earth.

I was 40 years old that spring. I've always been a conservative climber, but by the year 2000, I had added reasons why it made sense to be very cautious in the big ranges. In my 20s, when I had set out on my first expeditions to 8,000ers, I was single, so I didn't have the responsibilities and commitments that I started to accumulate as I got older. I was completely focused on my climbing and on figuring out how to scratch out a living at the same time. By 2000, however, I was married to Paula, whom I'd met and fallen in love with six years before. Now we had a 2-year-old son, Gil, and as I left for Annapurna, Paula was six months pregnant with our second child. Ella would be born on June 25.

Of course Paula worried about my going off on expeditions, and I could no longer nurse that clean-cut conviction that exposing myself to danger on a big mountain was entirely my own concern. Paula saw how diligently I trained and prepared for each expedition, and she always trusted that I would make prudent decisions, but we both understood that on an 8,000er, I could never completely eliminate the element of risk. For Annapurna, I took along a satellite phone, with which I promised to call her as often as I could.

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My choice of teammates was hardly accidental. As my regular partner, Veikka was a shoo-in. Like me, Michael and Neal were married and had kids. All three of them were mature, seasoned mountaineers; Michael, who would turn 48 on the trip, was almost a decade older than I. Veikka and I had decided that to tackle Annapurna, we wanted a strong team of four, rather than our usual team of two. I figured I could count on Neal's and Michael's judgment and expertise to help keep all of us safe. As I wrote in my diary on March 30, our very first day in Nepal, "Excited to check out Annapurna—but will be very wary & cautious about the ascent. I know the 4 of us are all very conservative & will always shy away from anything that is not acceptable risk."

Supporting our four-man climbing team would be the invaluable Dorje, a Tamang from the Makalu region of Nepal, who'd already been with Veikka and me on other expeditions, helping out with logistics and cooking at base camp. With minimal gear and no oxygen supplies to cart up the mountain, however, we would rely on no other Sherpa support.

After buying supplies in Kathmandu, the Nepali capital, we took an arduous ten-hour bus ride to the hill town of Beni, situated only twenty-five miles as the crow flies from Annapurna, though much longer by the trails we would have to hike. Beni's a squalid, depressing outpost—as I wrote in my diary, "A real dump of a place—end-of-the-road truck stop. Muddy and unkempt. Terrible service, [lousy] food." From Beni we hit the trail north along the banks of the great Kali Gandaki. Once we got away from the truck stop, we passed through a series of pleasant, clean villages—Tatopani, Dana, Kabre, and Ghasa.

At the village of Lete we left the main trail, crossed the Kali Gandaki, and headed east across a series of passes and gorges until we entered the deep ravine of the Miristi Khola. The scenery is stunning as you pass through bamboo and evergreen forests and hillsides lush with rhododendron. But it's a grueling and even dangerous passage: you climb 4,000 feet to one pass, then immediately descend 3,000 feet on the other side, and so on. In places, the grassy slopes we traversed were so steep that a slip off the trail by a heavily loaded porter could have been fatal. You almost think you ought to have crampons and an ice ax on those

Peak Experience Team Annapurna 2000—Ed Viesturs, Veikka Gustafsson, Dorje Tamung, Michael Kennedy, and Neil Beidleman—sport their tans and flags at base camp.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ED VIESTURS COLLECTION

slopes. To help finance his expedition, Veikka had brought along four trekkers from Finland, clients paying handsome fees for the privilege of going to base camp with an expedition of "real" climbers. By the time these four reached base camp, on our sixth day out of Beni, they were (as I noted in my diary) "completely spent, almost shattered."

The hike to Everest base camp is a straightforward trek, made by hundreds of tourists every spring season. On the north, or Tibetan, side of Everest, you can ride in a truck all the way to base camp at 18,000 feet. But the hike to Annapurna base camp is a very serious proposition, not for the faint of heart, the out-of-shape, or anyone with a fear of heights. As I would later recognize, that trek in to the lower slopes of Annapurna amounts to by far the most difficult approach posed by any of the fourteen 8,000-meter peaks.

Bone-Chilling Heights This breathtaking ice mass knifes across Annapurna's north face at 23,000 feet. Viesturs calls the ridge "monstrous."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ED VIESTURS

I felt good on the hike in, and relished its strenuous ups and downs as training and acclimatization for the mountain itself. And the four of us got along splendidly. But what added a huge bonus to the experience was my awareness of the history of the route.

AT THE AGE OF SIXTEEN I read Maurice Herzog's classic account of the 1950 expedition, titled in English simply *Annapurna*. It's no accident that that book remains the best-selling mountaineering account of all time, for the story Herzog tells is at turns thrilling and excruciating, triumphant and heartrending. On June 3, Herzog and Louis Lachenal reached the summit. It was not only the first 8,000er ever climbed—Everest would not fall for another three years—but it remains forever the only one of the fourteen highest mountains on which the first party to attempt it succeeded in reaching the summit. The team's retreat, however, turned into a desperate ordeal. In the end, Herzog would lose all his toes and fingers to amputation on account of the frostbite he incurred on summit day, but he declared in *Annapurna* (and has steadfastly maintained ever since) that his life was magically fulfilled by the team's accomplishment. The ascent was, he wrote on the last page of the book, "a treasure on which we should live the rest of our days."

More than any other adventure book I've read (and as a teenager I avidly devoured both mountaineering and polar narratives), *Annapurna* inspired me. It was the single most important push in the determination I formed by the age of twenty to become a mountaineer myself. The six principal French climbers—Herzog, the leader; the ace Chamonix guides Lachenal, Lionel Terray, and Gaston Rébuffat; and the two superb "junior" members, Marcel Schatz and Jean Couzy—were heroes of mine. No, they were beyond heroes; they were legends in my imaginative universe.

In 2000, on the hike in, day after day I was acutely aware that we were following in the footsteps of those pioneers. And I was impressed with how blithely they had solved the puzzles of that treacherous approach, especially without reliable maps and with the monsoon threatening to arrive far too soon. Exhilarating though it was to retrace the path discovered by the French, I carried with me in 2000 a certain burden of anxiety, even a taste

of dread in my throat. We knew by now that Annapurna was one of the most dangerous mountains in the world. For every three climbers who reached its summit, one died trying. In those stark statistical terms, Annapurna was the deadliest of all fourteen 8,000ers, even more perilous than K2.

It was not by accident that I had put off attempting Annapurna for more than a decade. Only after 1994, when I made the decision to go after all fourteen 8,000ers, did Annapurna cross my radar screen as a future objective. I knew I couldn't put the mountain off indefinitely, but I wanted to make sure I had a wealth of experience under my belt before I made an attempt. A big part of the challenge for me in 2000 was seeing how well I might stack up against those brilliant French climbers who, when I first read about their great ascent, had seemed almost mythical figures. On the 50th anniversary of that climb, we planned to try the same route the 1950 expedition had put up—which angles across a monstrously large snow-and-ice bowl constantly menaced by avalanches and teetering seracs, before breaking through the massive ice cliff the French called the Sickle, which forms the upper brow of the whole face. But just how dangerous was that route? What would the conditions on it be like in the spring of 2000?

Between 1951 and 1999 seven expeditions had succeeded in repeating the French route. But another thirteen had failed. And during that time, on the French route and its variant to the east, known as the Dutch Rib, no fewer than ten good climbers had died. During some years—1990 and 1997, for example—despite a number of high-powered expeditions converging on Annapurna's flanks, not a single climber reached its summit. In contrast, on Mount Everest, you had to go all the way back to 1974 to find a year when no mountaineer stood on top.

> As an avalanche cut loose above Veikka and me, we took off running at top speed, actually sprinting across the rock slabs.

On April 8, Veikka, Michael, Neal, and I reached base camp, a flat spot on a lateral moraine at 13,500 feet, with even a few tufts of grass sticking through the rocks. Another 13,000 feet of mountain thrust into the sky above us. During the next few days, as we watched the mountain and studied the upper part of the north face, we silently came to a unanimous conclusion. Annapurna was going to be an extremely tough and scary climb.

TWO DAYS LATER, on April 10, Veikka's four trekkers started their hike out. I wrote in my diary, "Trekkers are gone—yahoo! We have our own space." That sounds a bit heartless, but let's put it in context. The four Finns who hiked in with us were nice enough people, but Veikka had to take care of them, so he was constantly distracted. As long as they were with us, we had to share breakfast and dinner with them, and in effect keep them entertained. On an expedition, I prefer to be alone with my teammates, not sharing camp with superfluous people, so that I can focus on the task at hand. That's the reason I've never solicited base camp trekkers myself, even in the early days, when I could barely scrape up enough cash to go on each trip to an 8,000er.

We were in high spirits those first days, and I stayed optimistic. I'd heard so many bad things about Annapurna, about how dangerous even the French route was, but I kept thinking, maybe it won't turn out to be as rough as people say. Yet, slowly, doubts crept over us. On April 11, only three days after getting to base camp, our mood shifted slightly. From my diary:

> Clouds & wind from the N/NE this morning—something felt funky, like a change in the weather. At breakfast we all seemed ambivalent about going up. Outside we looked around, no one made any moves. I suggested a rest day & everyone agreed immediately.

In and of itself, that ambivalence meant little. After the arduous hike in and nine days of nonstop activity, we needed a break. Nobody had any real motivation that day. We figured, let's just park it.

We still had a fair amount of work ahead of us, spending the next several weeks carrying multiple loads of equipment up the mountain to establish a series of four camps, the highest of which would be our launch point for the summit push. The time and energy to do this can sometimes be debilitating, but it's necessary work and it also allows our bodies time to acclimatize to the thinner and thinner air.

On one such carry between base camp and Camp I, an avalanche cut loose above Veikka and me. It wasn't even sloughing off Annapurna, just off a subsidiary ridge on a nameless buttress on the approach to the peak. We took off running at top speed, actually sprinting across the sloping rock slabs—I called it a "hundred-yard dash" in my diary. We hid behind a big boulder while the debris thundered past behind us. At such an altitude, "running" becomes an anaerobic exercise. It took us fifteen minutes just to catch our breaths. I wouldn't call it a true close call, but it was certainly unsettling. If this kind of objective hazard could give us the willies way down on the approach to the foot of the mountain, what were we in for on the north face itself?

At the time, the only other team on this side of the mountain was a Spanish outfit. They were there to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the first ascent, but they didn't seem either very ambitious or particularly expert. After several days I wrote in my diary, "Met with the Spanish & they seem indecisive but will probably follow our lead." After we'd reached base camp, a third team arrived, made up of French guides, also bent on commemorating the landmark first ascent by their countrymen half a century before. These were a first-rate bunch; they had their act together from the start. As I always had on other expeditions, now we took the time to visit with the teams camped near us, in part to coordinate our efforts on the mountain, but more just to socialize. Our exchanges of food tilted in our favor, as we walked away with scrumptious meats and cheeses in return for our Pringles and M&Ms.

By April 12 the four of us were well installed at Camp I, with tents, fixed ropes, hardware, and ten days' food. I was still feeling optimistic. The next day, we finally got onto the mountain, as we pushed a route to look for a safe

site for Camp II. "Good night's sleep," I wrote in my diary, "but awakened twice by big avalanche noise—then 30 seconds later our camp would get blasted by wind & spindrift. Scary, but our camp is very safe."

Scary and *safe*. Those two adjectives epitomized our experience during the next week—a constant vacillation between the two. On the thirteenth, we found a site for Camp II, where, the next day, we got our tents pitched tight to the lee side of a small ice cliff, above which the slope was seamed with huge, gaping crevasses.

Among the climbers' care-package treats was a copy of *Sports Illustrated*'s swimsuit issue—with 3-D glasses!

Our camp was Spartan: Veikka and I in our tiny tent, Neal and Michael in theirs. During our last several expeditions together, to save weight, Veikka and I had decided not to use two separate sleeping bags; instead, we brought a single down quilt that I had designed. The space inside our tent was so cramped anyway that to sleep you were forced to "spoon," so why not simply share that body heat? If you also have all your clothes on, the quilt provides sufficient insulation to keep you warm.

Our meals were as Spartan as our sleeping arrangements. Veikka's and my experience together had taught us what we knew we'd want to eat, and how little food we needed to bring. In general, your appetite decreases the higher you go. We'd worked out our standard menus. Breakfast was typically a couple of cups of coffee and a handful of granola with powdered milk. We'd fill our water bottles with sweet tea for drinking during the day. While climbing, instead of stopping for a true lunch, we'd snack on energy bars or gels, just to keep things simple. Back in the tent late in the day, we'd snack on dried fruit, nuts, crackers, cheese, and a little jerky. Dinner consisted of a cup of soup, a shared freeze-dried meal, a few cookies, and more hot drinks. On some occasions we'd be so exhausted from that effort that we'd skip dinner altogether.

Although the weather stayed fine during the next week, our doubts steadily grew. Something just didn't feel right. It was only

April, but it seemed really warm. It was as if the mountain were melting and crumbling above us. Every day we'd see big avalanches pouring off one part or another of the north face, and during some nights, we'd be jolted out of our sleep by the sound of big slides crashing to the base.

On April 16, after the four of us had climbed higher and I studied the upper face from a vantage point above Camp II, I wrote in my diary, "There is no safe way to get to *any* of the 'normal' routes. All threatened by a series of ice cliffs. The risks are too high & there is no way to justify attempting any of the routes." We agreed to dismantle Camp II, descend to Camp I, where we'd deposit the gear, then push on down to base camp to reevaluate our options.

After hours of climbing, Michael was in the lead. Suddenly he stopped. "I don't like these conditions," he said.

I felt both puzzled and frustrated. I knew that since 1950 eight expeditions had succeeded in climbing the French route all the way to the summit. Except for the 1950 pioneers, I knew almost no details about the climbers who had made those ascents, not because I wasn't willing to do my homework, but because their accounts—in Russian, Chinese, and Korean, among other languages—were almost impossible to find. I began to wonder if those climbers had simply accepted higher levels of risk than we were willing to.

Back at base camp, we spent much of our time engaged in conversation or playing heated hands of hearts. Base camp was also a place where we could look through the personal treasures each of us had brought along. Before each of my expeditions, Paula would write me a beautiful card, which I'd read on the flight over and carry with me in my pocket during the ascent. Neal's and Michael's wives had sneaked "care packages" into their duffels, which they discovered only at base camp. These packages contained a trove of special treats, such as family photos, magazines, and gourmet candies and snacks. Neal's wife had thrown in the current copy of *Sports Illustrated*'s swimsuit issue, complete with 3-D

glasses! That kept us howling with laughter for some time.

On April 20 we pushed out of Camp I again, angling toward a line to the left of the north face proper. If we could get up this possibly safer route, we would need to traverse the east and central summits of Annapurna, both above 25,000 feet, just to gain the main summit. After hours of climbing, Michael was in the lead. Suddenly he stopped. "I don't like these conditions," he said. We looked at one another, then seconded Michael's assessment. So we simply turned and retreated. The mood was low in camp that afternoon. "We've looked at all the options, it seems," I wrote. "Not sure what to do at this point. Nothing feels right."

"Veikka!" I shouted. "Look at that!" In the glow of the moonlight, the monster avalanche was boiling toward us.

By 5:00 p.m., we had decided to give up our attempt on Annapurna. "The risks are too great—even for one round trip [to Camp II]," I wrote in my diary. "So tomorrow we'll start hauling our stuff to base camp." I felt, though, that I had to rationalize giving up. "I know I'm making the right decision—it feels right *not* to go back into that stuff. We had no close calls & that's the way it should be. This mountain has too many uncontrollable risks."

I'll have to admit, however, that the setback stung. On only one other expedition, to the treacherous Kangshung Face of Everest in 1988, had I been stopped cold so low on the mountain. It was as if Annapurna were a brick wall and we had run smack into it. Our egos were bruised, even if our bodies were healthy. But I'd learned by now to accept such defeat. The mountain always calls the shots.

THERE WAS a full moon that night. I was having trouble sleeping, but beside me, Veikka was deep in slumberland. Suddenly a deep, powerful rumbling sound tore through the silence. I scrambled half out of my bag and zipped open the tent door. Above me I saw a huge cloud of snow and mist. A gigantic avalanche was plunging down the north face. "Veikka!" I shouted, waking up my partner. "Look at that!" Soon he had his head out the door as well. In the

blue glow of moonlight, the monster avalanche was boiling toward us. It was so huge and the distance it traveled was so great that it seemed to roll forward in slow motion, engulfing everything in its path. The sight was both mesmerizing and terrifying.

We shouted over to Neal and Michael in the other tent. "Get ready!" I yelled.

The brick wall we'd run head-on into on the north face of Annapurna haunted me for months afterward.

We knew we were safe, since we'd pitched Camp I a good two miles away from the base of the mountain. But we also knew that a slide as big as this one would push a veritable hurricane of wind and fine powder snow ahead of it.

It seemed to take forever for the avalanche to clear the face. At the last minute, I zipped shut the door and grabbed the tent poles. Veikka did the same, as did Michael and Neal in their tent.

When the blast finally hit, it was all we could do to hang on to our tent and keep it from getting blown loose. In the midst of the assault, Veikka and I stared at each other, wide-eyed. At last the wind stopped, but the spindrift took many minutes to settle over camp.

That was the biggest avalanche any of us had ever seen. It remains the biggest I've ever witnessed. In the morning, we saw to our horror that the farthest-flung blocks of ice had come to rest only a couple of hundred yards short of our tents. The face of the mountain had been swept clean—features that we'd memorized over the previous ten days were simply gone. Had we been camped anywhere on the French route, the avalanche would have taken us with it. I can't remember which one of us said it, but we all shared the verdict: "Man, did we ever make the right decision!"

On April 25 we started the long, difficult hike out. We moved so fast it took us only three days to reach the hill town of Jomsom, an outpost on the Annapurna circuit trail that has a small airport. From there, with the assistance of a local fixer retained by our agents in Kathmandu, we arranged a flight out. We were back in Nepal's capital on April 28.

By itself, that first defeat hadn't yet turned Annapurna into my personal nemesis. After all, there had been other 8,000ers I'd failed at on my first attempts. And the fact is, nobody, not even the crack French guides, got up Annapurna in the spring of 2000.

But the brick wall we'd run head-on into on the north face haunted me for months afterward. Again and again my thoughts returned to the French in 1950. How had those guys—with infinitely poorer equipment than ours, with no other 8,000er yet climbed, and with Annapurna completely unexplored before their last-ditch assault—solved all the dangers of the face and pushed two men to the top just before the monsoon hit? Did they know something we didn't?

Maybe their very ignorance of the Himalaya had been a blessing in disguise. Maybe what they didn't know about big mountains was their strongest asset. Or maybe they really were the mythic figures they had seemed to me when I first read *Annapurna* at the age of sixteen.

I would take inspiration from them again, when, twice more in the years that followed, I pitted my will to climb against the harsh contours and dark secrets of Annapurna. A gift, I knew, awaited me at its summit—a kinship of shared adventure, the likes of which few human pursuits can engender.