

helped organize a team of six women to climb the mountain, North America's highest—and did so on their own. By 1972, she had reached higher points in Nepal, and after a British climber Alison Chadwick died on Annapurna peak, the two resolved to form a women's expedition to Annapurna—26,545 feet—in 1975. In 1975, she was denied access to its renowned summits, allowing her to return to Nepal in 1976 with an expedition to Mount Everest, she learned that a permit for Annapurna for 1978. Now, a decade after she was determined to reach one of the world's highest peaks, towering nearly three miles

above sea level, the 8,000-meter peak to be conquered, a formidable challenge. The human body is not designed for prolonged exposure above 20,000 feet, and the weather is often severe. Its slopes are swept by thunderstorms, and temperatures plunge below zero. The first expedition encountered appalling conditions on Annapurna; they had lost a mitten on the summit and suffered frostbite. Lionel Terray and Gaston Reber, two of the most famous figures in French mountaineering, had died on Annapurna. In previous attempts, only four had placed their feet on the mountain; the other mountaineers had perished in the snow. In the first attempt, one in ten had not

survived. In the second, Blum and her women's Himalayan Expedition, Blum and her women, with substantial experience above 20,000 feet, were the first women to have found space on previously unclimbed rock. Still, she was able to recruit a team of women. Among them were two long-time climbers, a 46-year-old computer scientist, and a 40-year-old physicist at IBM with daughters

aged 12 and 16. The others were Joan Firey, age 49, an artist and physical therapist; Piro Kramar, age 40, a surgeon; Alison Chadwick-Onyszkiewicz, age 36, an artist; Vera Komarkova, age 35, a plant ecologist; Elizabeth Klobusicky-Mailänder, age 34, an English teacher; and Annie Whitehouse, age 21, and Margi Rusmore, age 20, both university students. Chadwick was British, Klobusicky lived in Germany, but the rest resided in the U.S. Most serious climbers dream of a Himalayan climb, a visit to mountaineering's Mecca, and Himalayan climbers are believed to be at their best in their thirties. For some of the women, this expedition might be their last shot. To raise the \$80,000 required to finance the expedition, Arlene Blum and her compatriots had sold 15,000 T-shirts emblazoned with the expedition's slogan, "A Woman's Place Is on Top."

After flying into Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal and gateway to the mountains, the party motored along eighty miles of twisting mountain roads to the town of Pokhara in the shadow of Annapurna. Then it traveled on foot for another eighty miles. For ten days team members wended their way through one of the deepest gorges in the world to the more accessible back side of the mountain. "The summit, floating more than four vertical miles above us in the clouds," wrote Blum, was "so remote that our desire to stand there seemed arrogant." They were now looking at six weeks of endless shuttling of supplies—tents, food, sleeping bags, climbing gear, and oxygen tanks—among the five camps they would establish between base camp and the top.

A key objective was to place a camp on the Dutch Rib, a slice of rock and ice connecting the mountain's lower glacial highways to its upper snowfields. Doing so would require arduous technical climbing up a nearly vertical face hung with mammoth icicles. There, on top of a sinuous ridge, they would perch a tent as a vital way station for bringing essential supplies up and spent gear down. With a thousand feet of free space on either side, the narrow platform would have to do, but its location was precarious. (A year later, when three American climbers were