Patrick Morrow

JOURNEY TO THE STONE AGE

Mountain travels with the Dani of Irian Jaya

BY GEOFF TABIN

Thrusting from the island of New Guinea's steamy equatorial jungle, a snow-capped age people, the Dani. To them, the peak is Dugundugu, which is also their word for white

To the Indonesians who rule Irian Jaya (the western portion of New Guinea, the world's second largest island after Greenland), the mountain is *Puncak Jaya* or "Victory Peak." And to the Western world, it's Carstensz Pyramid, after the Dutch explorer Jan Carstensz who described it from his ship in 1623 during a rare break in the fog. Naming the peak was one thing. Getting there took more than three hundred years. In 1914, a British expedition of 262 people spent fifteen months inching just thirty miles into the jungle. Following the expedition, A.F.R. Wollaston reported to Britain's Alpine Club: "Even if we spent twice that time in the country, I doubt if we should have come as far as the foot of the highest range."

Carstensz Pyramid Patrick Morrow

Indeed, the first foreigners to climb 16,023-foot Carstensz were Heinrich Harrer and team in 1962. They made first ascents of the three highest summits while getting to know the Dani people of the surrounding jungle. In his book, *I come from the Stone Age*, Harrer evocatively describes the climbs and the year he spent among the people he described as "gentle cannibals." Gentle from his own interactions. Cannibals by reputation.

While cannibalism on the island of New Guinea is a fact, the local evidence is unclear. In the late 1960s a Harvard-Peabody anthropology expedition lived with the Dani near Wamena, two hundred miles from Carstensz Pyramid. They discovered piles of bones that seemed to imply occasional cannibalism; and the Dani, when pressed, would admit that perhaps such deeds happened. Mostly, though, the team described constant ritual warfare, with men of rival villages gathering on a hillside to fight with sharpened sticks. The fight ends as soon as someone is mortally wounded, with the losers fleeing to their home territory. Before long, however, both groups begin preparing for the next battle—deaths must be avenged to appease the spirits. Such battles have since been stopped by missionaries and government soldiers.

In 1962, the Dutch turned over control of Irian Jaya to Indonesia. For reasons still unclear, the new proprietors closed access to the entire Carstensz Pyramid area. Perhaps the Indonesians didn't want visitors to think their country primitive. Perhaps there was too much truth to rumors of fighting between natives and Indonesian troops.

In any case, the effect was to limit the Dani's contact with the outside world to a few

mountain pierces its perpetual shroud of mist. Deep in the mountain's shadow live a stone- and ice. They believe the mountain's ice offers strength, like the white meat of their pigs.

inhabiting remote areas close to the mountain had had almost no contact at all. In 1979, Britishers Peter Boardman and Hillary Collins arranged for a missionary pilot to land them illegally near the mountain. They returned with wild stories about the natives—and an alluring photo of an unclimbed two thousand-foot rock wall leading directly to the summit of Carstensz Pyramid. When I saw their slide show, I had to go.

July, 1980: Bob Shapiro, Sam Moses, and I bounce down a grass runway at missionary/pilot Leroy Kelm's home outside of Jayapura, the capital of Irian Jaya. Our Aerocommander lifts off, bound for Ilaga, the closest Dani village to Carstensz Pyramid. We drone inland over an endless expanse of jungle-green hills furrowed with jagged, twisting canyons. The peaks grow larger, more dramatic as we near the Carstensz Massif; flat land is nowhere to be seen.

We wing over a few clusters of round brown huts and terraced fields clinging to the steep green walls. "There's no landing strip," Leroy drawls, "I'll try to put her down in that sweet-potato patch," pointing to an ominously tiny clearing on a hillside above a group of huts. He noses the plane into a sickening dive, muttering the Lord's Prayer under his breath. My terror mounts as we swoop to the sloping, muddy field.

We touch down softly enough, but Leroy's wide-eyed look says something is seriously wrong. The plane doesn't slow down, instead it skids on the mud as if it were ice. The end of the clearing looms closer at an alarming rate. We slide diagonally until one tire sticks in the mud, and spin violently to a halt with the left wingtip five feet from the dropoff to an oblivion of jungle.

Rainwear, Dani-style Geoff Tabin

As Leroy chops the engine and silence washes over us, my heart races with giddy relief. But when I look around, new sights and sounds electrify me with a jolt of adrenalin. From all sides, men and boys come at us, screaming a guttural "oooh-whah, oooh-whah," with their voices cracking to a falsetto on the "whah." Each carries a spear or a stone. All are naked except for a *kebouak*, or penis gourd, which they pound with their palms, drumming a resonant counterpoint to their shrieks. They surround the plane, pounding and screeching.

Leroy steps out, a big grin splitting his silver muttonchop sideburns. He makes eye contact with a couple of Dani in the front. They

chanting on a small cassette recorder, and when he plays it back the sounds break the ice completely. Dani boys close in around us, yelling and singing, curiousity filling their eyes.

Below us stretch terraced sweet-potato fields, some only fifteen feet wide, linked by footpaths down to a central group of dwellings. Scattered on the surrounding slopes are a smattering of round huts and other fields carved out of the foliage. Further below and all around, tangled rainforest hems the inhabited land. Here in the high foothills, warm tropical air sweeps up to meet cool mountain breezes, creating a zone of near-constant mist and precipitation.

Leroy's inventive pantomime organizes a group of Dani men to wrestle his plane out of the mud. We unload our packs and he hops aboard, revs the engines, and takes off, leaving the three of us to find our way to the mountain. We have a two-hundred-word Dani vocabulary list from the Harvard anthropologists and ten loads of gear. We hope to enlist ten Dani men as porters to haul it all to the base of Carstensz Pyramid—or Dugundugu, as we understand in the Dani tongue. For payment we've brought ten steel axe-heads, ten bags of salt, ten bags of sugar and ten Boy Scout knives.

The Dani are still little touched by the modern world. Geoff Tabin

We embark on our own wild game of charades trying to explain what we want. Only three of our Dani words seem familiar to these Ilaga villagers two hundred miles from the tribesmen that the anthropologists studied. We draw pictures and show photographs of the mountain. One older man, Seppanous, becomes very excited and demands my pen. I hand it to him. He immediately removes the am whyak, or boar's tusk, from his nose and proudly inserts the pen.

We sit on the ground amid a cluster of thatched huts, negotiating, gesticulating, laughing. The women go bare-breasted, wearing only beads and loose grass skirts. Naked infants and children play in the mud around us. Pigs, their only domesticated animals, roam freely. Women carrying stone hoes walk past on their way to and from the fields. A few steel axes are the only visible sign that we aren't in the Stone Age.

We are at eight-thousand feet, and despite our proximity to the equator, when it clouds over and rains, I feel chilled. The naked Dani seem perfectly comfortable and a bit amused as I search for my rain top.

Eventually we think we've struck an agreement: ten men will carry our loads and escort us through the jungle to Dugundugu. After a night of singing we hand out ten equally-weighted packs. To our horror, the Dani rip the bags open and spread gear all over the ground. Villagers come by, picking from our things. Bob, Sam, and I stare at each other in disbelief, amazed

quickly our climb is over. As we watch helplessly, dozens of men, women, and children gather up our belongings and file out into the forest, chanting a song.

We're left with no choice. We get up and follow the merry expedition past the farthest cultivated fields and into the cool, dark jungle. We wander under a canopy of dense foliage, sometimes in thick mud, sometimes on rotting logs suspended high above the ground, always on trails that I could never follow on my own. At first, the compass says we are traveling north; a few minutes later it reads south. Before long, we put the maps away and just walk along, hoping we are hiking toward Dugundugu.

Strands from palm leaves make organic thread. Geoff Tabin

After five hours we stop in a small clearing. The Dani spread out, shouting and laughing, each taking on a task. Some gather firewood while others chop at large trees with stone axes. Yoni, a graceful athletic young man, takes dry moss out of his kebowak, strikes two flints together, catches the spark in the moss, blows gently, puts the glowing pile on the ground, covers it with wet wood, and fans it into roaring flame.

Women take Pandanus fronds, break the tips and pull single strands from the fibrous palm leaf to make instant organic needles with thread. Then they sew the fronds together to make a waterproof covering for their shelter. When a giant oak is about to topple, great debate ensues about where it will fall. As it comes down, much "oooh-whah-ing" and pounding on the *kebowaks* accompanies the descent. By the time we set up our tent, the Dani have built a wooden hut covered with a waterproof layer of Pandanus leaves.

Minutes later, Martinus, one of the older men, sees me struggling to boil water on my pack stove. He returns with a pot of boiling water. I thank him with a piece of chocolate and watch, amazed, as he takes only a tiny nibble and then brings it around so everyone can have a taste. At night they build a huge fire in their shelter with the flames licking at the wooden roof. Songs and laughter radiate from the smoky hut well into the night.

"I come to see that the Dani live in utter harmony with the rugged forest."

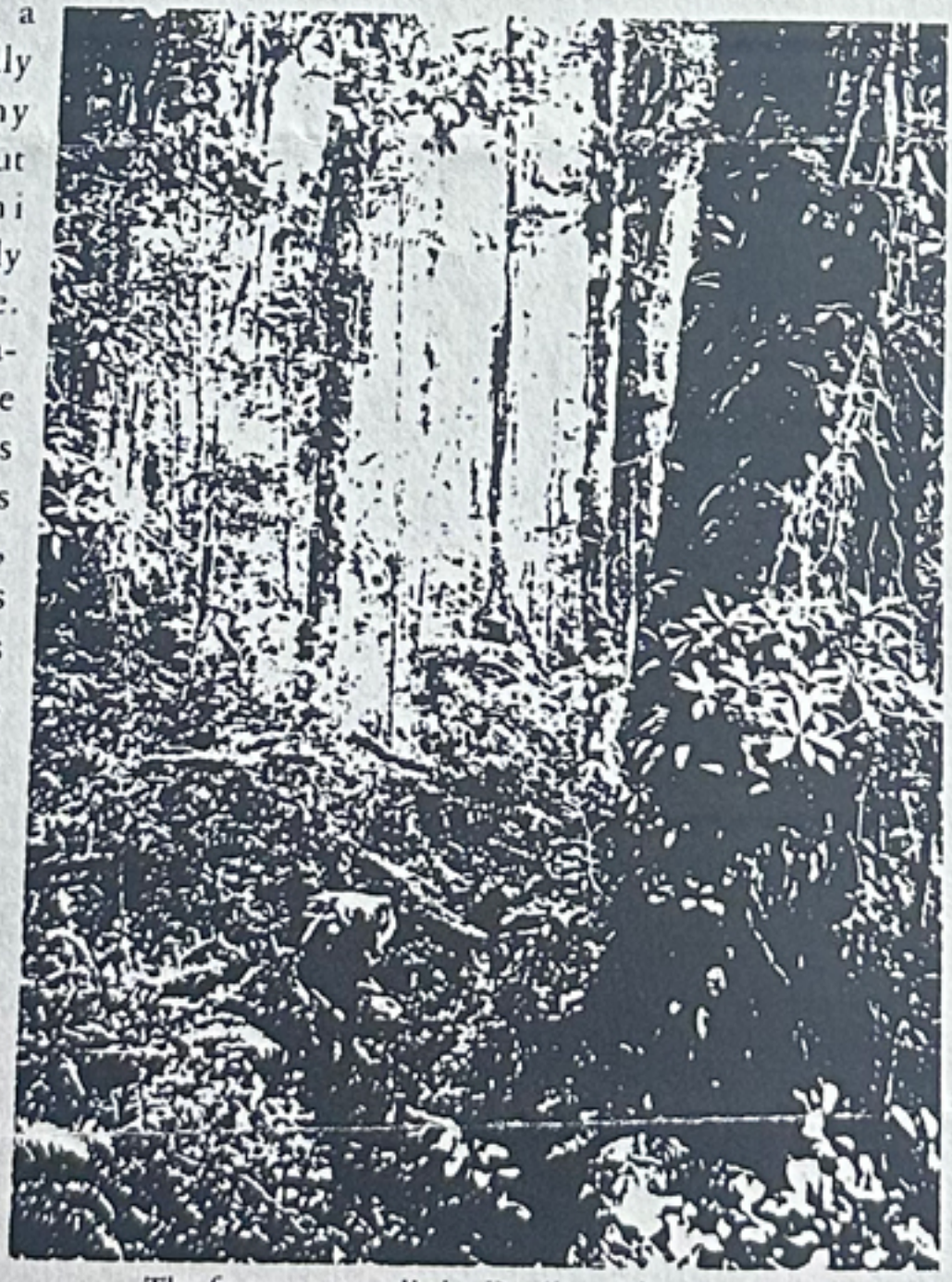
As I observe the Dani, they observe me. They are fascinated by miracles (like zippers) that I take for granted. But I see no sign of jealously, either toward us or among themselves. Not a single item of ours will disappear. When the stronger Dani men drop their loads at the top of hills, they go back to help the older and slower members.

Their emotions seem very close to the surface. Displeasure shows quickly, often evoking tears. But moments later, the same two people embrace and laugh. They are constantly amused by my struggles to adapt to the changing environment and care for myself with all my bulky possessions.

Every day I grow more amazed by our companions. We mountaineers are immedi-

ately dependent on them for our directions. By the second night they bring us water, fire, and other necessities—treating us like children who have not yet learned to care for themselves. When I try to kindle the sopping wet wood using a lighter and finally fuel from my stove—all without success—Yoni watches knowingly from a distance. Just as my frustration peaks, he walks over, plucks a clump of moss from his *kebowak*, strikes two pieces of flint, blows, piles on soaked wood, blows some more, and stands back, smiling at the blaze.

I come to see that the Dani live in utter harmony with the rugged, hilly rainforest. The forest meets their needs as surely as the malls provide ours at home. Most of their diet consists of fire-roasted *mbee*, or sweet potatoes, which they carry in *yuns*, orchid-decorated woven reed bags that hang from their foreheads down their backs. But they also gather roots, grubs, and insects to eat as we walk.



The forest meets all the Dani's needs. Geoff Tabin

On our third day in the jungle, Wanimbo, a tall athletic Dani in his mid-twenties, presents me with a live bat he's holding by the feet. He smiles gently; I flinch away. With a shrug he takes an arrow, pushes it into the bat's anus and sticks it into the fire. A few minutes later he carefully divides the meat among everyone.

Twenty-four Dani stay with us for the full ten days it takes to reach Dugundugu. In the last days, we climb steep, muddy hills to finally emerge from the forest onto the expansive Ngorilong Plateau, a flat, moss-covered bog. At 12,000 feet, our naked escorts stay warm with frequent fires and Pandanus-leaf ponchos made on the spot. We cross a snow-covered, sharp-cobbled limestone pass at nearly 15,000 feet; they all pad along barefoot.

No one seems surprised to see snow; they have clearly come this way before. I wonder why naked people would climb to a snowy mountain. Perhaps the easiest trade route involves climbing through the high mountain passes rather than fighting thick jungle. Unfortunately, we are still communicating through gestures and I cannot ask such a complex question.

In the end, we succeed in making our planned first ascent on Carstensz and a few other fine climbs besides. And while I came for these routes, the real experience was the privilege of spending time with the Dani. To their mountains we have brought the latest in Gore-Tex rainwear, freeze-dried foods, high-tech everything. Still, we are humbled by our Stone Age companions. With one stitch of a palm-leaf needle, one strike of a flint against *kebowak*-dry moss, I learn how much we have sacrificed in our modern world.

East Side, Quest Side

Harvard med student among those challenging Mt. Everest's unconquered face

By David Arnold
Globe Staff

Overhanging glaciers, a 4000-foot vertical cliff, rock slides and avalanches guard the unclimbed east face of Mt. Everest.

Surveying the mountain to find a route to the summit in 1921, British mountaineer George Mallory wrote of the east face, "... other men, less wise, might attempt this way if they would, but, emphatically, it was not for us." Nor has it been for more than a dozen successful ascents of Everest since 1953.

The east face is Everest's last frontier – but perhaps only until next month.

Geoffry Tabin, 27, a third-year student at Harvard Medical School, is one of three residents of Greater Boston who head for the mountain next Wednesday. They are part of an American team of 13 that includes some of the country's best mountaineers. Although Tabin's record boasts some impressive first ascents, he is the team's least experienced climber and one of its youngest.

However, he says the challenge awaiting him in the Himalayas cannot compare with the challenge he recently overcame right here, which was, "explaining to my Jewish grandmother that I've got to take time off from medical school to do it."

His grandmother should be comforted to know how difficult it was for him to sandwich this interview between neurology clinics.

Tabin's jokes are part humor, part escape material, a buffer between himself and the deadly serious adventure in a region where almost one in 15 expert climbers dies from elements beyond his control.

On the surface, Tabin appeared cavalier about his quest. A similar whimsy introduced him to the sport eight years ago; a whimsy that, he says, keeps him from getting too headstrong. He acts as though humility, more than his skills and conditioning, is the best protection against fate in this bid for the last unbeaten path to the top of the world.

Tabin has a deceptively modest stature for a man who runs the length of the Presidential Range in [illegible] for a workout; his fingers are calloused but surprisingly small when you consider the mountains they have assaulted. He never seems at a loss for conversation, but Tabin has a lot to talk about. Such as ...

Tabin the Jumper, bounding at the end of a 200-foot bungee cord in Royal Gorge for NBC's "That's Incredible!"; Tabin the Climber, logging a new route up Carstensz Pyramid in West New Guinea and the first ascent of the Diamond Buttress on Mt. Kenya without artificial climbing aids; Tabin the Naturalist, living with the Dani tribe in the tropics, dressed in nothing more than a kebawak; Tabin the captain of the Yale tennis team, the cum laude graduate, the winner of a Marshall Scholarship and an Oxford Exploration Grant ...

□

Mt. Everest straddles the Nepal-Tibet border. Sir Edmund Hillary and Tensing Norgay, a Sherpa, first scaled the mountain in 1953, working up the the Southwest Ridge from Nepal. Mallory's observations of the east face three decades earlier had nixed an eastern approach from Tibet. The route was not feasible anyway because the Chinese had closed Tibet's borders following the 1949 revolution.

Following the Ping-Pong Diplomacy thaw, an American team that included Tabin attempted an east face ascent from Tibet in 1981, but failed partly because of dwindling supplies and poor weather. The climbers did surmount a major obstacle, a 4000-foot buttress at the base of the face, proving to themselves that the route was possible.

With their ropes still in place, and with several veteran members of the '81 expedition back for the second try, the Americans hope to retrace their steps from base camp to "Helmut Camp" in just 15 days. Helmut was the limit of the '81 attempt, which took over four weeks to reach. Twenty days later, on Sept. 6, they hope to reach the summit at 29,028 feet. Others on the team include David Breashears, 27, of Newton, and David Coombs, 32, of Dorchester, both expert climbers.

Tabin, a Chicago native who lives in Cambridge, had an introduction to climbing that was less than planned.

One night in 1975, buried between bookshelves of the Yale library, Tabin mused that all things important to life – love, tennis and school work, in that order – were spiraling downward rapidly. Then his eyes caught the title "Mountain Disaster Stories" buried in a bookshelf, whereupon he learned that life could get much, much worse.

"Whenever my problems seemed out of hand, I'd always head for the climbing books and zero in on the horrific parts of all the biographies."

Tabin became well versed in climbing literature. During a tennis tour of Europe the following summer, he learned that Swiss guides were soliciting climbers for an ascent of the Piz Roseg in the Alps, and inquired: "Oh, now, might that be by the '56 Walter Bonatti route or the '71 Rene Desmaisons route?"

Determined to join the climb, Tabin had the experts fooled into believing he knew which end of a mountain was up, although he hadn't the slightest idea how to tie into a climbing rope. The Piz Roseg remains a horrible chapter in the education of Geoffry Tabin – guides hauled him up the entire mountain, calling him a name unlikely to be printed (even unstranslated from the German) in this family newspaper.

"But I learned a lot that day."

Tabin's climbing education continued through college with classmate and experienced climber Henry Lester in the lead. There he learned the basics on nearby cliffs. The duo also found Yale's sandstone buildings challenging, particularly the series of gargoyles up one edge of Calhoun College. Campus police put an end to the '76 Calhoun route late one Friday night when an occupant of the women's bathroom, located midway up the climb, complained. Tabin still pleads innocently that "all the windows looked alike."

Tabin's ability to laugh at himself allows alternative solutions to problems that might stifle someone less self-effacing. For instance, when an Egyptian customs agent prohibited Tabin's passage through Cairo because of excess baggage weight, Tabin slipped into an airport bathroom to don his entire climbing outfit, rope and all. With lighter bags, yet dressed for an icy summit, Tabin boarded the airplane for Mt. Kenya in 110-degree heat.

"My inept beginnings, combined with medical school responsibilities, sort of keep me aware of my climbing limitations," Tabin said. "I'd like to think they buffer me from an excessive ego."

But his self-effacement does not prevent him from setting lofty goals. "Only from the summit of Everest," said Tabin, "can I really hear the wind whistle through the holes in my head."

Dan Reid, 40, a California resident whose log includes three different routes up El Capitan and the '81 east face expedition, says Tabin is "aggressive, energetic and, frankly, fearless."

Louis Reichardt, also of California, was that expedition's leader. "Tabin is remarkably capable, his style free and amazingly smooth," Reichardt said. Tabin's smoothness, he notes, comes best when a fall "carries consequence."

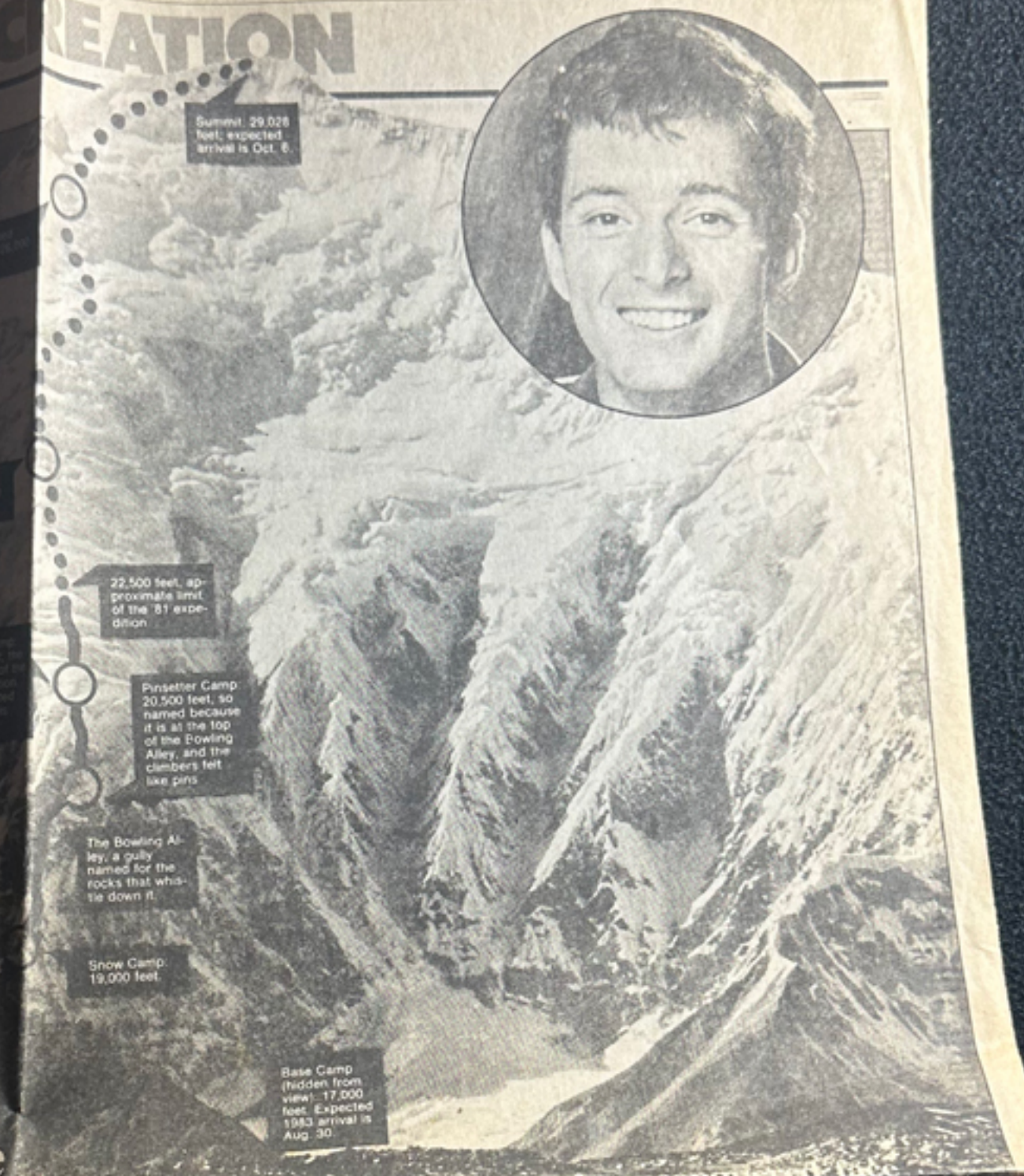
Advanced climbing requires more than fingers, toes, balance and strength. "There's a mind to it that forces me to focus, perhaps in a move that shifts my fingers only four inches," Tabin said. Climbing is meditation for him, an exercise in concentration that summons an intensity he finds in no other activity.

Mt. Everest appears to be a most inhospitable place to meditate. In the '81 attempt, Tabin kept a diary and his handwriting clearly degenerates to a scrawl at about 22,000 feet, where lack of oxygen begins to affect coordination. His pulse throbbed incessantly in his temple; at rest his heart pounded 115 times a minute. Insomnia was common. So were avalanches and rock slides, particularly down a gully that team members dubbed the Bowling Alley. Ailments among climbers included a cracked vertebra, a cracked rib, a lung infection and coughing fits that brought up cups of blood. Talk of risk brought an unusual moment of silence to Tabin.

"I guess I try not to think about it," he said after the pause. Thinking about elements out of his control made his feet stir and his eyes dart. Jumping into a Colorado gorge for the NBC television cameras in 1980 was safe, Tabin said; he tied the knots, he inspected the bungee cord, he researched its tolerances.

But the death rate of competent climbers in the Himalayas is not good. "About one in 15," Tabin said. There was another pause, then salutations, a handshake, and he was off to the neurology clinic.

Moments later, he ran back. "Part of justifying this risk is simply the privilege of being on this team," Tabin explained, half to himself, seemingly more aware that he was embarking on an adventure where drama and privilege come at a higher cost.



Working against Geoffry Tabin (inset) will be Mt. Everest's perilous east face. Working for him? Smoothness afoot, intense concentration and a wry sense of humor.