



Alex MacIntyre

A Recollection by Climbing Companion John Porter
Photos by the author

Looking at the advances in climbing techniques, change is a gradual process, not a sudden occurrence. Where does change come from? As with everything, from the experience and experimentation of individuals – mountaineers who have a clear understanding about the relationship between design, materials, manufacturing and the application of equipment. And more significantly, of the need to develop the vision and mental and physical ability to make proper use of that equipment.

MacIntyre was one of them. He had those attributes, but there are at least two other key ingredients that placed Alex in the middle of rapid advances, which were unique to the time: having the right challenges and grabbing the moment. Alex just happened to be around at one of these moments. In the late seventies and early eighties, there was a concerted effort to climb all the remaining major unclimbed ridges and faces on the 8,000m peaks. Alex wanted to be part of this.

Alex had a morbid fear of rock fall. We all do, I suppose, but in my years of climbing with Alex, I identified this as his greatest fear, so much so that I wonder if he had a premonition about his fate. A single stone struck him on the head on that October afternoon in 1982. He was sent tumbling 500m to the bottom of the face. Rene Ghilini reported that he had been killed instantly.

Alex was only 27. In the few short years at the top of his sport, he became internationally known for his audacious lightweight ascents in the Alps, Himalayas and Andes. Among these were the NE Face of Bandaka (1977) with Kurtyka and myself, described by Doug Scott as the first pure alpine style ascent of a major new face. The South Face of Changabang (1978) made with me, Kurtyka and Christof



Top: The Leeds team in Chamoni 1973: B. Newman, John Powell, John Porter, Alex and John Eames

Above left: On Changabang South Face

Above right: Alex MacIntyre looking destitute outside the Manchester YHA, 1978

Above: Alex (right) on a bivouac on the descent from Bandaka

Zurek was the first alpine style ascent of a Himalayan big wall. We carried all we needed for an eleven-day ascent with climbing graded at 5.11, A3 and Scottish 5. Five nights were spent above 20,000 feet suspended in hammocks. The first ascent of the East Face of Dhauligiri (1981) with Kurtyka and Rene Ghilini, and a new route on the South West Face of Shisha Pangma (1982) with Doug Scott and Roger Baxter-Jones sealed his reputation as a Himalayan master.

His vision of the possible was backed up by an unnerving intellect and total commitment to an almost scientifically developed lightweight approach. It was this application of a concept that led Messner to make his famous pronouncement, which described Alex as the purest exponent of alpine style climbing in the Himalayas. When he died on Annapurna, he and Ghilini were carrying only one ice screw, two rock pegs, one rope plus the sheath of another, light sleeping bags and bivouac sack, and food and gas for four days.

Some have suggested that Alex might have broken his own rules in going this light on a route where there would be some technical difficulties. But it was a balancing act – Alex never intended to carry more than 23 kilos to the base of any Himalayan route. On Annapurna, he tried to get this down to less than 20 kilos. By going light, you increased your speed and reduced the exposure to danger. In was a simple theory – in lightness and speed lay safety. But an ambition to climb many of the last great unclimbed routes on the 8,000m peaks was in fact exposure to incalculable dangers. Very few climbers have got away with it.

John Porter is the author of a book about Alex MacIntyre to be published later this year.