

# Another Kind Of Summit

By Gale Warner



## A historic trek up Mt. Elbrus in the Caucasus

*Gale Warner, a 26-year-old writer and activist, has co-organized and co-led two citizen diplomacy trips to the Soviet Union, one for medical students, about which she wrote "Two Views Of A Meeting", and the climb up Mt. Elbrus described here. Her forthcoming book, Citizen Diplomats, co-authored with Michael Shuman, is described in the "Resources" section.*

DURING JULY 1986, a group of 24 physicians and medical students from the United States, the Soviet Union, and Switzerland spent three weeks backpacking and climbing together in the Caucasus mountains of the Soviet Union. The expedition, sponsored by the Nobel-Peace-Prize-winning International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), was climaxed by a successful joint

ascent of 18,481-foot Mount Elbrus, the highest peak in Europe. On the summit, the physicians and medical students buried a "message to the world" signed by IPPNW co-presidents Dr. Bernard Lown and Dr. Evgeny Chazov, which read in part: "In the nuclear age, the nations of the world are all climbers on a mountain, depending for their survival on the rope of tolerance."

*July 21, 1986*

### **Elbrus, Priutt Hut 13,800 feet**

At midnight I opened the door, prepared for a great icy blast of wind, but the door opened on pure, still silence. No wind. Elbrus smoldered in the moonlight. A full moon, and stars. Somehow the sight of the Big Dipper was reassuring, homey.

## ANOTHER KIND OF SUMMIT

I knew that we would go tonight, that the icy winds that had kept us waiting in the hut an extra day were now past.

One by one we moved into the silver, luminescent landscape outside, taking our places silently in a line, saying little, watching the moon, watching Elbrus seemingly so near, watching the veiled, jagged peaks behind us, the whole Caucasus massif, now turned into a landscape from a fairy tale. Clouds filled the valley, blanketing all but the highest spires of the peaks in a soft, shimmering coverlet, while the dark peaks resembled isolated, magnificent castle fortresses where gods or devils might live.

We began to walk. It was as simple as that – no great hurrah, no cheers and applause. We simply began to walk, the only sounds our steps and the tinny, subdued clatter of ice-axes sinking in the snow. We moved as a unit, all of us lost in waking dreams, but most of the time with our eyes fixed on the boots of the person before us, our feet methodically stepping where he or she stepped. Each of us followed, and each of us led.

Moving up the slope, we reached a group of rocks at about 15,200 feet, a landmark and a customary rest stop. We were glad to rest, at first. But the wind soon took on a new reality. We huddled around one another like a herd of buffalo, our tails to the wind, the less warmly dressed people sheltered by the more warmly dressed ones. I suddenly noticed Volodya sitting on his ice-axe, shivering uncontrollably, and I went to him, putting my arm around his faded orange parka and shaking him gently to warm him. Volodya only had one pair of mittens on; his pants looked thin; we wore only regular leather boots. I was acutely conscious that I was decked in the finest gear that mountaineering technology has yet devised: Koflack double-boots, Goretex pants and jacket, etc. And I was cold. Volodya and I said little; we simply knew that we were grateful for each other. We were all silent in our suffering, in our self-doubts, in our staring at the icy fairyscape far across the valley that now seemed to mock us.

It was a relief to start again. A few of our group were manifesting mountain-sickness. Dave from North Carolina turned back, succumbing to frequent vomiting and dizzy spells. Two other American men began moving very, very slowly, and Lyosha, one of our guides, stayed back with them.

During the next hour I was aware of only a single miracle: the moon that had guided us was setting, splendidly, goldenly, to the southwest, and the sun, its replacement, counterpart, opposite, was rising in the east, behind the huge shoulder of Elbrus to our right. Out of the womb of night was coming day. The peaks behind, nearly shed of the moon-

mist, now were white, blue, pink. Pinkness suffused everything with the shout of "Daybreak!". Color came back into the world.

I walked between Yura and Volodya. Every ten minutes or so, at some brief rest, we would exclaim to one another about the awesome dawn pageant around us. "*Lepota!*" we would shout triumphantly, or "*Ochegn prekrassny!*" These simple, obvious statements were all we had breath or language to share. They were all we needed.

David Kreger – medical student, main organizer of the trek, leader of the American group, and my personal and professional partner – was, I suddenly realized, nowhere to be seen. Finally he caught up to us at a brief rest stop, breathing hard. He had stayed behind with the three slowest members of our group and then pushed himself to catch up. Now he wondered whether that push had depleted him so much that he might not make it. Everyone chipped in to come up with snacks and fruit drinks for him. It is hard to recall how difficult the slightest extraneous motion seemed to us then. The person who took off a pack, searched for candy or water, and then shared it was a hero.

Immediately below a face of the summit now. Slava led the way up the face, amidst rocks and deep fresh snow. We paused at a clump of rock. Martin's altimeter: 5,520 meters. Only 140 meters to go!

It was bitterly cold. With little comment, a dozen of us shoved pieces of chocolate into each other's mouths, huddled around each other, waiting for the six still below us. David, exhausted, put his head in Zhenia's lap; she cradled and stroked it. We wanted to wait, to give our friends a chance to catch up and be with us; we wanted, as much as possible, to live out our ideal of climbing the mountain as a single, harmonious, unified group. We waited for 10, 15 minutes, the chill penetrating and stiffening our bodies, common sense telling us to keep going. At last, a half-dozen more climbers slogged wearily to the rocks.

We set off again. Sasha – Alexander Tcherbakov, the secretary-treasurer of the Soviet affiliate of IPPNW and overall leader of the Soviet delegation – had worked out an order for the final ascent with the other leaders: first Martin, from neutral Switzerland, carrying the declaration; then David, then Sasha, then the rest of the group. We were on rocks and snow; ice-axes and crampons clanged against the rock. And then the earth turned just in time to dazzle us and overwhelm once again any thoughts of limited bodies. The sun came over the mountain, igniting snow and rock, edging everything in fire; an explosion, a burst of light, in which our silhouetted bodies were bathed; we were aflame, walking into the new fire, the new dawn,

the new kingdom.

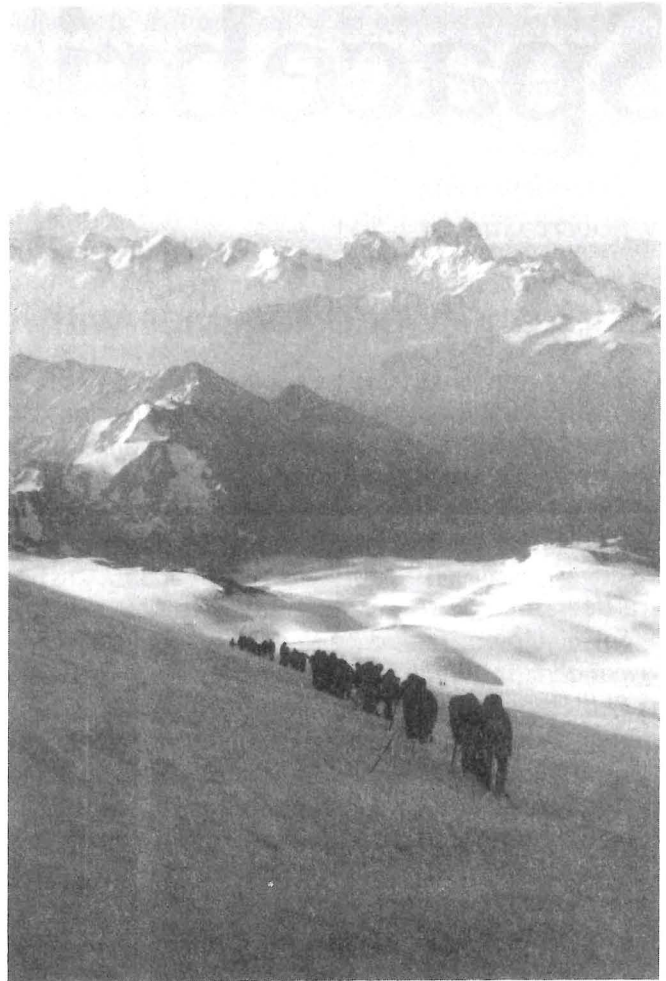
Onward. It couldn't be much farther. We were now a group of twelve: seven Soviets, one Swiss, four Americans. The others were far below, too far for us to wait for again without becoming debilitated by the cold. They would make it, but not with the rest of us. At least we had been together all the way to 18,000 feet. We set off again. Parts were steep. I concentrated, breathed, a few steps behind Volodya. We must be getting there. I remember feeling alone, but not minding it.

Then I looked up and saw Volodya waiting for me, a few steps ahead. I drew near. "Galya - we will go *together*," he said firmly, and took my hand. "Only 20 steps to go." His steps were faster than mine; we took four or five; we were both panting. "Only 19 steps to go," he said, half-shouting above the wind. Again four or five steps. "Only - 18 steps to go." Our hands clung together through the layers of mittens. We looked, not at each other, but only at the mountain before us, which was now, astonishingly, strangely flatter. I looked up and saw Martin, David, and Sasha, arms around each other, marching resolutely towards what had to be the top. The sun, the glare, the air - no, no air. Volodya was going too *fast*; we ought to catch our breath. "Only 10 steps." I lost my balance for a moment, felt his hand clench as he brought me back on balance. "Only - five - steps", he huffed, and I gasped back, "Yes - yes - *da - da*", feeling my body screaming in protest - feeling my strength gather - *only a little more to go, you can do it, you can do anything* - feeling my steps come more rapidly, the odd flatness, suddenly -

There.

Volodya raising my arm high, in triumph. We are hugging, half-sobbing the words "together" and "vmesty"; we plant our ice-axes, and in a blur difficult to recall, soon all of us are hugging each other, calling each other's names, standing awe-struck before the vast array of mountains to the south, the valley and plains to the north and east, the twin peak and still more mountains, fading toward the Black Sea, to the west. Sasha and David are crying. Slava's face is glowing with triumph. There are no longings in this moment, no past or future. We can do anything. In this moment all of us know that, with a knowing beyond words. Martin digs a hole with his ice-axe and we bury the declaration a foot deep in the snow.

This message, buried beneath the snows of Mt. Elbrus by an international group of physicians and medical students, represents their struggle and commitment to prevent nuclear



war and maintain life on earth.

When climbers are roped together on a steep mountainside, their linked security depends upon their ability to cooperate. It is inconceivable that climbers would threaten one another by shaking the rope that binds them. In the nuclear age, the nations of the world are all climbers on a mountain, depending for their survival on the rope of tolerance. Either they co-exist or they cease to exist.

The bonds of friendship forged in the wilderness are threads spanning the chasm between countries long separated by fear and ignorance. Each thread may itself be miniscule on the world scale, but thousands of threads together will weave a sturdy fabric that can resist forces leading to perilous confrontation and bind countries together in lasting stability.

May all people learn to care for this beautiful planet with a love that is faithful and constant. May there be future generations to discover these words and know their meaning. □