

WHAT WERE THEY THINKING?

great moments in exploration as told to Jim Clash

CONQUERING K2: VANESSA O'BRIEN

AFTER THREE TRIES, VANESSA O'BRIEN ON JULY 28, 2017, BECAME THE FIRST AMERICAN WOMAN TO SUMMIT PAKISTAN'S K2, AT 8,611 METERS, THE WORLD'S SECOND-HIGHEST PEAK. O'BRIEN, 52, HAD HELD THE WOMEN'S EXPLORERS GRAND SLAM RECORD IN 2012 WHEN SHE CLIMBED ALL SEVEN SUMMITS (HIGHEST MOUNTAIN ON EACH CONTINENT) PLUS SKIED THE LAST DEGREE TO THE NORTH AND SOUTH POLES, DOING SO IN JUST 11 MONTHS. WE CAUGHT UP WITH THE FORMER MORGAN STANLEY BANKER, A MEMBER OF THE EXPLORERS CLUB SINCE 2013 WHO RESIDES IN NEW YORK WITH HER HUSBAND JONATHAN, TO TALK K2.

JC: What does it mean to be the first American woman up K2?

VOB: It means a lot to me, personally. And it didn't come easy. I had to work for it – three overall years of my life [2015, 2016, 2017] and almost six months sitting on a glacier [two months each year] studying the mountain. It took an incredible amount of planning, patience, perseverance, and, ultimately, risk.

JC: What were you thinking on top?

VOB: Hell, it's going to be dark by the time we get down. Not exactly Plan A [laughs]. Only at the top of an 8,000-meter peak can extreme exhilaration, extreme exhaustion,

and extreme anxiety coexist. It would make an interesting anti-depressant drug.

JC: Did you ever consider turning around?

VOB: From the moment I left at 11 P.M. until I returned at 10 P.M. the next day, I worried about conditions versus progress, when and whether to "pull the plug." I was so preoccupied that before I knew it, we were 200 meters from the summit and I still hadn't suggested turning around.

JC: You had climbed Everest. Why so obsessed with K2?

VOB: It is said when you climb Everest, you are a mountaineer in the eyes of the

world, but when you climb K2, you are a mountaineer in the eyes of other climbers.

JC: What's next?

VOB: I would love to dive the Mariana Trench, which is deeper than Everest is high, and to see the Kármán line at an altitude of 100 kilometers.

A fellow of The Explorers Club since 1999, Jim Clash is the author of *The Right Stuff: Interviews with Icons of the 1960s*.

