

British K2 Expedition

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WHEN we set out from Britain, we were very aware of just how much we were taking on. The team numbered only eight, but because of the scale and technical difficulty of the west ridge of K2 particularly in its upper part, it was obvious that we should have to lay siege to the route and use oxygen for the summit bid. In choosing a route, we had been unable to resist the attractions of those steep untouched ridges on the west side of K2, but had been determined to keep the team as small as possible; we had all had enough of big expeditions.

At first, in spite of the inevitable minor crises of porters and weather on the approach march, our progress was excellent. We left Skardu by jeep for Dasso on May 16 and reached the Japanese Base Camp below Angel Peak on K2, on the 30th. We paid off the bulk of our 300 porters, keeping and equipping as high-altitude porters 25 of the most reliable. These were to ferry our gear up to the site of our permanent Base Camp at the foot of the west ridge on the Savoia Glacier. After two days of ferrying, we moved on June 2 into Base Camp, which was sited at a height of 5400 metres. Our twenty-five porters, with Jim Duff and our liaison officer Captain Shaffiq, were still at the Japanese Base, ferrying loads up to Base Camp. After a further three days we were able to clear the Japanese Base Camp and pay off fifteen of the porters, keeping ten at Base Camp to ferry loads up to Camp I.

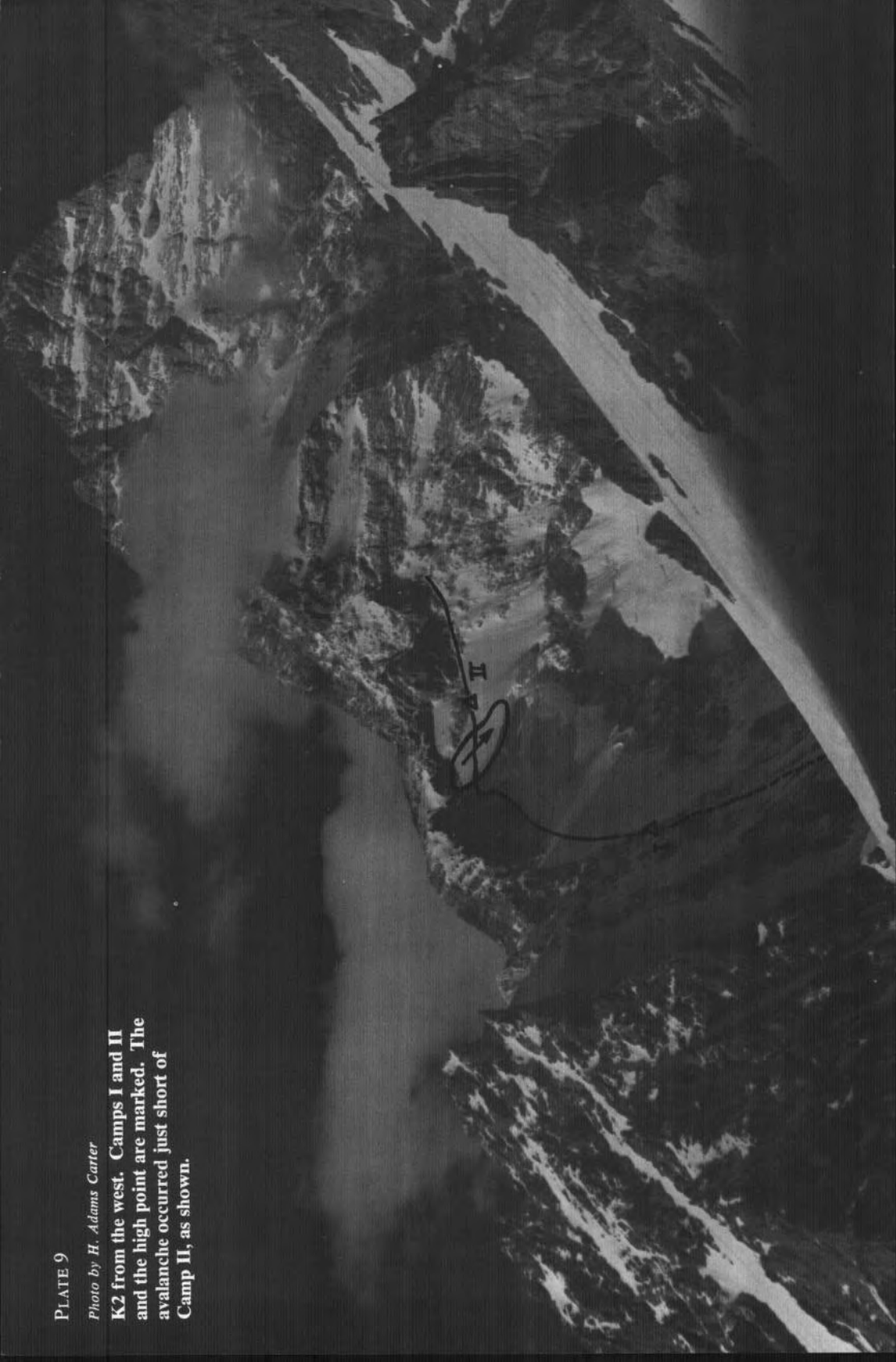
After making a reconnaissance of either side of the west ridge we selected its southern aspect as the most straightforward and on June 4 reached the site of Camp I, which was just below the crest of the lower part of the ridge at a height of 6000 metres. Boardman, Scott and Tasker moved up to Camp I on June 5 and pushed the route out on the 6th a further 1500 feet while I moved up to Camp I and five of our Baltis made a carry.

On the 7th June Boardman, Scott, Tasker and I made the route up to the site of Camp II at 6500 metres, under a bergschrund just short of the Pear Buttress by the First Step, while Estcourt and Kamajan, one of our two Hunza porters, moved up to Camp I. The way to the camp

PLATE 9

Photo by H. Adams Carter

K2 from the west. Camps I and II and the high point are marked. The avalanche occurred just short of Camp II, as shown.



led across an easy snow slope of about 30° and at the time it seemed unnecessary to fix-rope it.

The following day Boardman and Tasker moved up to Camp II to start work on the First Step. This was followed by two days of snowfall. About ten inches fell at Base Camp and we were all restricted to our camps. The weather improved on the 11th and amongst swirling spin-drift Estcourt, Kamajan, Scott and I made a carry to the end of the fixed rope at the beginning of the easy snow slope where we dumped our loads, for fear of avalanche risk. Meanwhile Boardman and Tasker started pushing the route out up towards the First Step.

The 12th was also a fine day. I was feeling sick and therefore stayed in camp, while Estcourt, Kamajan and Scott set out with loads for Camp I. We had decided that the ground was sufficiently straightforward for our Balti porters to ferry loads all the way up to Camp II, but felt that the easy slope across to the camp needed protecting with a hand rail so that the porters could be clipped into a rope the whole time. On arriving at the top of the existing rope, they all added the loads brought up the previous day to their existing loads and Scott set out over the slope running out a light line of 5mm nylon. He put in several snow anchor points on the way across, tying them off as he went. He had very nearly reached the other side and Estcourt had already started across, reaching the middle of the slope, when the entire slope, about 600 feet across, broke away in a windslab avalanche, about 200 feet above them. Scott was just outside the area of the avalanche, but was dragged, head over heels down the slope, by the rope attached to his waist. He was probably saved by the size of his load, which dug deep into the snow, acting as an anchor. As a result, the line between Scott and Estcourt parted, saving Scott's life. Tragically, however, caught in the middle of the avalanche, Estcourt was swept down inexorably by what must have been hundreds of tons of snow. The line between him and Kamajan was also broken and he was swept over 2500 feet of ice and rock cliffs to the glacier below. Everyone was desperately shaken and grief stricken by the accident. Scott searched the avalanche cone the following morning but found no sign of Estcourt. We all dropped back to Base Camp to discuss the future of the expedition.

Quite apart from our grief at the loss of a close friend, we were already short of manpower on the climb. Paul Braithwaite had bronchitis that later developed into pleurisy. This left only four lead climbers, since we had never envisaged Jim Duff, our doctor, or Tony Riley, our climbing cameraman, taking on more than a support role. In spite of the speed of the initial run-out, it was obvious that we had insufficient strength to complete the climb. There seemed no justification in risking further life, particularly those of our porters, who, if we were to continue, would inevitably have to be more deeply involved than we had originally planned. We therefore decided to abandon the expedition.

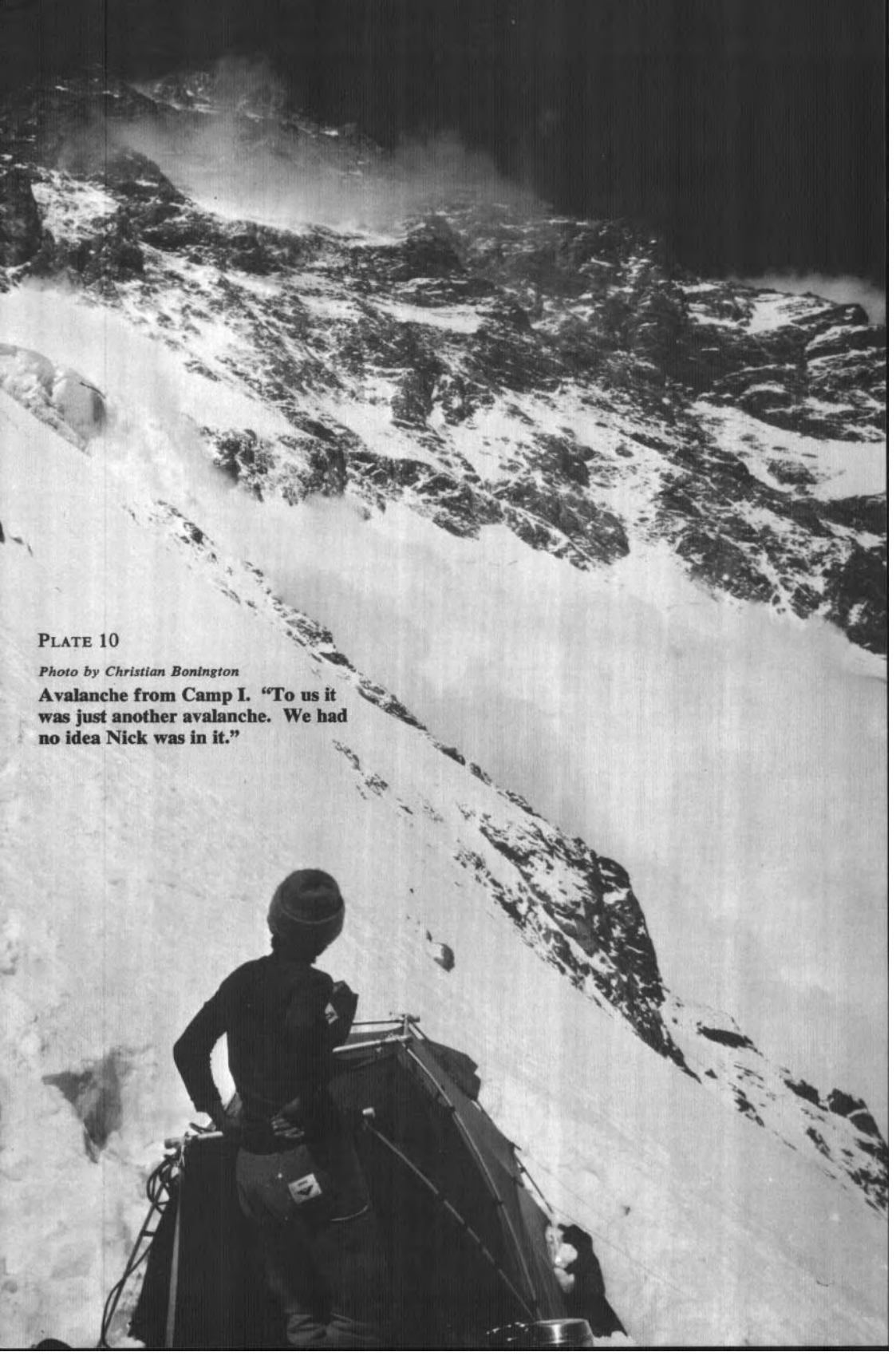


PLATE 10

Photo by Christian Bonington

Avalanche from Camp I. "To us it was just another avalanche. We had no idea Nick was in it."

Summary of Statistics

AREA: K2, Karakoram, Pakistan.

ATTEMPTED NEW ROUTE: West Ridge of K2 to a height of approximately 6700 meters or about 22,000 feet.

PERSONNEL: Peter Boardman, Chris Bonington (leader), Paul Braithwaite, Jim Duff (doctor), Nick Estcourt, Tony Riley, Doug Scott, Joe Tasker.

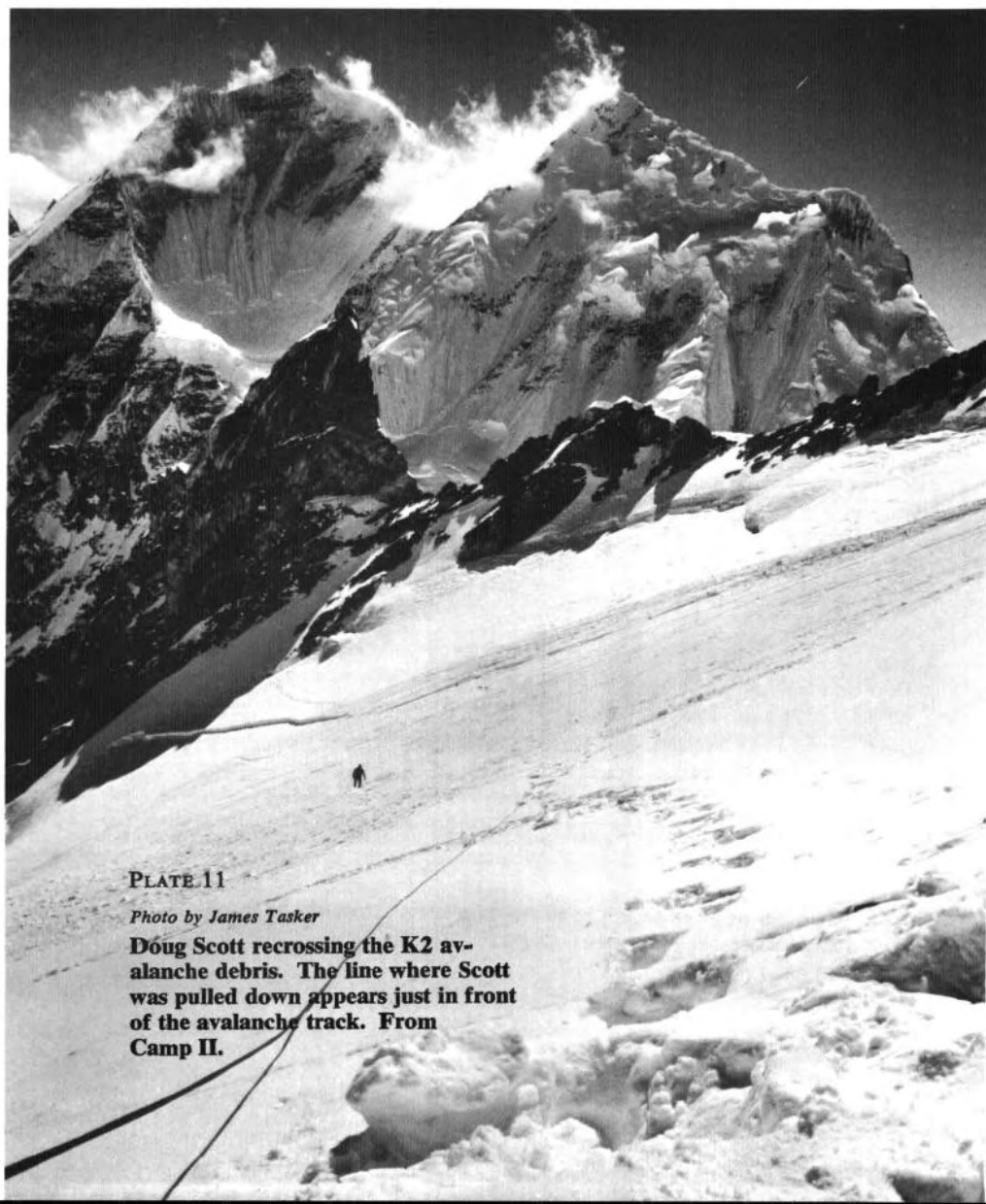
**PLATE 11**

Photo by James Tasker

Doug Scott recrossing the K2 avalanche debris. The line where Scott was pulled down appears just in front of the avalanche track. From Camp II.