

# Kangchenjunga from the North

DOUGLAS K. SCOTT, *Alpine Climbing Group*

FOR MOST OF THE YEAR THE world's third highest peak, 28,208-foot Kangchenjunga, is hammered by the fierce, westerly-moving air currents which make climbing on the upper reaches of the mountain such a difficult proposition. There is reported to be, toward the end of May, a period of relative calm preceding the onset of the monsoon. It was at this time that the mountain was first climbed by the British in 1955, when Charles Evans' party put two teams on the summit via the southwest face. In 1977 an Indian expedition was the second successful group on the mountain, reaching the top up the northeast ridge just prior to the monsoon.

The object of the 1979 British expedition was to make a new route from the Kangchenjunga Glacier northwest of the peak. We made a number of definite decisions. We would not use oxygen equipment but did take one bottle of oxygen, mask and regulator for use in a medical emergency; happily this was left untouched. We did not use radios, winches and other encumbrances and kept our porter support to two Sherpas who went only as far as the north col. From the start we limited the team to four members and financed the project from our resources as far as possible. (We are of course grateful for some outside help.) We did not seek the support of a single main sponsor and avoided commitments to the media and film making. Our only commitment, therefore, was to ourselves and the mountain. The original team had to be changed when Paul Braithwaite withdrew because of illness and his place was filled a few weeks before departure by Georges Bettembourg from Chamonix. He had made an impressive two-man ascent, with Yannick Seigneur, of 26,400-foot Broad Peak in 1978. Peter Boardman and I had both climbed Everest in 1975 and Joe Tasker had been to 23,184 feet when he climbed Dunagiri. Between us, the four members had been on over twenty Himalayan expeditions.

Mike Cheney of Sherpa Cooperative Trekking (P) Ltd. provided two Sherpas who would help to establish us on the mountain. One of them was a good friend, Ang Phurba, Sirdar, who had been to Camp VI on

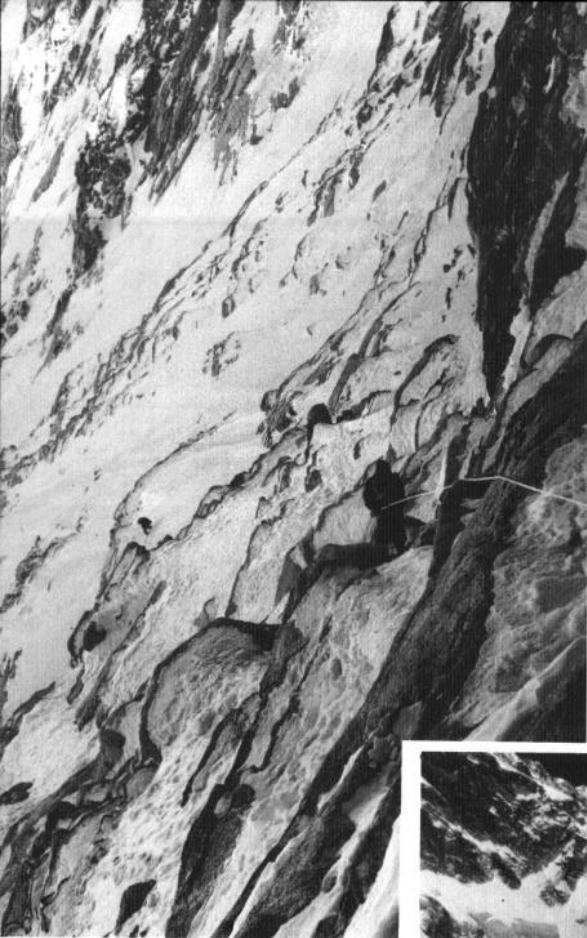


*Photo by Doug Scott*

KANGCHENJUNGA from the North. Camps are marked. Camp III is in the North Col. The Twins are left of the col.







# PLATE 33

*Photos by Doug Scott*

**Fixed rope on the West Wall of  
Kangchenjunga's North Col.**



# PLATE 34

**Georges Bettembourg at 22,000 feet  
on the brittle ice of the West Wall.  
West Summit at right.**



Everest's southwest face with me and to Nuptse with Tasker and me in 1978. Fifty-year-old Nima Tenzing was the second Sherpa; he had been a young porter on the 1955 Kangchenjunga expedition! Sherpa Cooperative also provided us with cook and kitchen boy, Kami and Nima Tamang, who produced excellent food under difficult conditions and with considerable imagination. Nima Wangdi, mail runner, took out and brought to Base Camp three lots of mail, taking 14 days for the round-trip from Ghunsa to Dharan Bazar. Ang Phurba managed the hiring of 49 porters for the 60-pound loads of equipment and food and succeeded in organizing the walk into and out from Base Camp without any hitch, a considerable achievement. Throughout, the expedition was accompanied by Lieutenant Mohan Thapa, an excellent liaison officer. He showed great patience in remaining at Base Camp for six weeks in support of any emergency that might have arisen.

The 18-day walk-in to Base Camp began on March 18 from the British Gurkha Camp at Dharan Bazar. We reached the last permanent village, Ghunsa, on March 30. After a two-day rest, during which we bought provisions and hired new porters, we continued up to Base Camp at Pang Pema at 16,500 feet, reaching there on April 4. The approach march was the most magnificent that any of us had experienced in the Himalaya. Unfortunately, our appreciation of the superb mountain scenery was tempered by the fact that Peter Boardman, whilst bouldering, damaged a ligament in his ankle and had to be carried for four days, from Chirowa to Ghunsa, in a wicker basket by a three-man team of strong porters. Although he began to recover after reaching Base Camp, it was not until a month later that his foot was strong enough to allow him to lead any hard climbing.

Six porters were retained for a one-day carry to temporary Camp I at 17,000 feet at the head of the Kangchenjunga Glacier. On April 14 we established Camp II at 18,500 feet.

During the next two weeks, after many setbacks with the weather and stonefall, which damaged a tendon in Peter Boardman's wrist, we climbed and fixed rope up the 3000-foot mixed ice-and-rock west face of the north col to establish Camp III at 22,600 feet. This face was reminiscent of the difficult northeast spur of the Droites in the Mont Blanc range. In teams of two we had now systematically climbed the major technical difficulties of the mountain.

On May 1 Joe Tasker descended with severe headaches to Camp II. The rest of us reached a suitable site for Camp IV after climbing 1800 feet up the north ridge to 24,400 feet. With no sign of Joe at Camp II, assuming that he had retired to Base Camp, we three moved up the ridge on May 2 to dig a snow cave for Camp IV. After digging for five hours, we had a magnificent grotto and a firm base from which to tackle the remaining difficulties of the mountain. The next day we climbed the



steep avalanche-prone snow slope above to a rock step up which we forced a way and fixed 300 feet of rope, all we had left.

Peter Boardman, Georges Bettembourg and I left for the summit on May 4. We reclimbed the rock step and exited onto the great scree terrace and snow slope on the west of the north ridge. We were now at the mercy of the westerly winds, blowing in gusts to 60 or 70 mph, which just allowed us to proceed intermittently alongside the north ridge until at 26,000 feet we decided to find shelter on the other, the Sikkimese, side of the ridge. We crossed over with great difficulty as the winds were now blowing at 80 to 90 mph. The winds blow from the Everest-Makalu group without interruption. We were now catching the full force of them. Crossing over a little snow col, we experienced violent static electricity that made it feel as if our backs and buttocks were disintegrating. As soon as we were across the ridge, the wind dropped and we were able laboriously to collect our thoughts and carve a ledge fifty feet below the ridge on the ice slope for the bivouac tent. After digging for three hours, we had the tent pitched and settled down for the night in anticipation of the first summit bid.

At 1:30 A.M. on May 5 the wind changed direction and rapidly increased in violence until it snapped the centre hoop of the double-skin tunnel tent. We soon had on boots and gaiters, but at half past two the tent was blown two feet along the ledge. We had to hold onto it from the outside whilst the gear was packed and the tent evacuated. The hurricane-force wind ripped strips of fabric from the tent. We had to collapse it forcibly to lower the resistance to the wind, but by then the outer skin was gone. The inner tent in its turn was torn to shreds, released and snatched away by the wind. We sat on that steep slope at 26,000 feet at the mercy of the cold and the tempest. The wind was so strong that it blew Georges' rucksack down the mountain. It required three attempts before we could cross the col back into Nepal and beat a retreat to safety. We descended 10,000 feet and covered five miles of mountain and glacier that same day, down to Base Camp. Boardman had frostnip on his big toe and I sustained frostbite on the upper joints of four fingers from holding onto the tent.

On May 11 we returned to the Camp IV snow cave. This time the team was complete, since Tasker had made a fine recovery from his headache. Ang Phurba had reached the north col twice, carrying 30 pounds of food and the emergency oxygen bottle in support.

On May 12 we waited out a rare fine day to rest and on May 13 decided to go for the summit a second time. This time we intended to go directly from Camp IV without tents or sleeping bags. However, as the weather now looked threatening, we took along a shovel to dig, if necessary, an emergency shelter. Setting off in the evening to use the light of the full moon, we soon reached the great terrace. The wind be-





PLATE 35

*Photo by Doug Scott*

Looking down the North Ridge onto  
the North Col of KANGCHEN-  
JUNGA. The steep 3000-foot West  
Wall lies in the shadow below.



PLATE 36

*Photos by Doug Scott*

**HURRICANE-FORCE WINDS!**  
Bettembourg and Boardman on Great  
Scree Terrace.

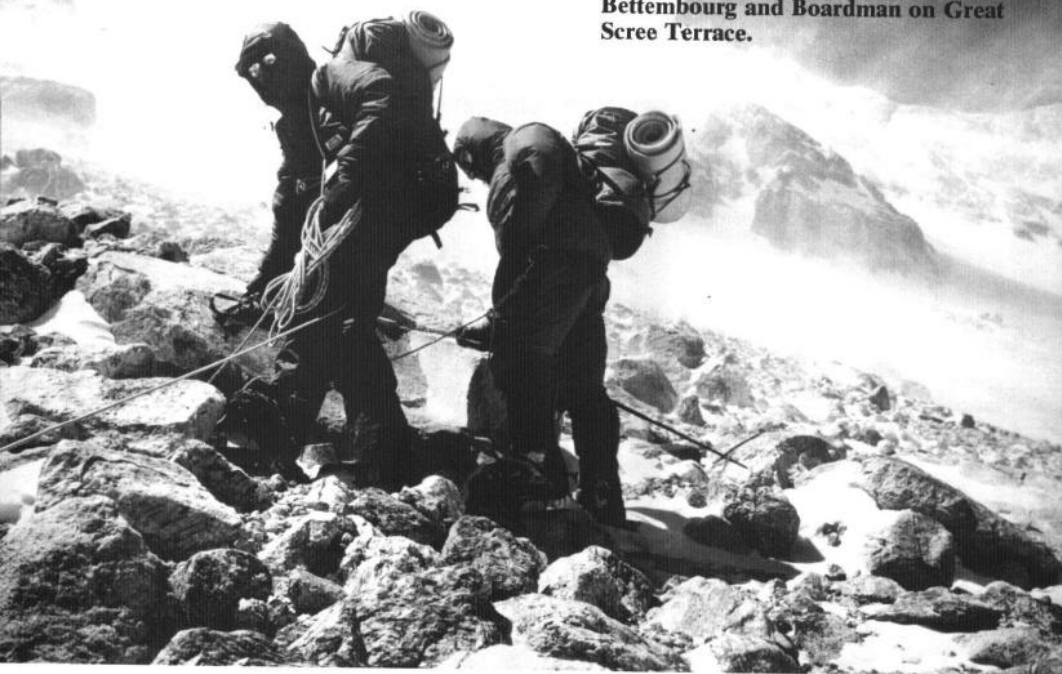


PLATE 37

**Tasker and Boardman traversing  
broken ground below the summit of  
KANGCHENJUNGA. Behind lies  
the Western summit, Yalung Kang.**





came stronger and snow flurries blew up. We looked for a place to dig a snow cave at midnight. Joe Tasker and I started digging under a rock mass; Peter Boardman and Georges Bettembourg looked for a place further up the slope. Joe and I sat in our cave until 3:30 A.M. and then left to look for Peter and Georges. We found them sheltered in a natural cave formed by a bergschrund, having returned there to rest after climbing 450 feet higher to a rock step where they had waited for the weather and visibility to improve. However, the weather deteriorated and they descended. We retreated back to Camp IV on May 14.

On May 15 Peter Boardman, Joe Tasker and I set off for a third go. Georges Bettembourg, mistrusting the weather and fearing another storm, descended to Base Camp. At last the weather was kind and we made a reasonable bivouac out of the small bergschrund cave to spend a good night there on May 15. Good weather prevailed on the 16th and we set off optimistically at eight o'clock. We made good progress up the band of snow that is the main feature of the upper summit triangle. After 2000 feet of climbing, we reached the pinnacles on the 1955 route at four P.M. and at five o'clock we had climbed the last 500 feet and got to the summit for a magnificent sunset and a fantastic view of the surrounding mountains. It was, surprisingly, a very enjoyable day, despite the lack of oxygen, although the descent to the bergschrund cave was something of a trial which did not end until our arrival at nine P.M.

Two days later the mountain had been evacuated of most of the equipment and remaining food and we left Base Camp for Kathmandu on May 20. We arrived there on May 29, tired but happy that the four of us had been able to sustain this team effort through so many trials and over the ten weeks of the expedition.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Eastern frontier of Nepal with Sikkim.

THIRD ASCENT: Kangchenjunga, 28,208 feet, by a new route, the North Ridge, May 15, 1979 (Boardman, Scott, Tasker).

PERSONNEL: Georges Bettembourg, Peter D. Boardman, Douglas K. Scott, Joseph T. Tasker.