

Everest's Northeast Ridge

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THE EXPEDITION was one of the most arduous any of us had ever been on. Our small team was tackling the long, unclimbed northeast ridge of Everest without oxygen and with its main difficulties situated near its end between 26,000 feet and 27,500 feet, where the ridge was joined by the north ridge, the route taken by the pre-World War II expeditions and the successful Chinese expeditions of 1960 and 1975.

The climbing team consisted of Peter Boardman, Dick Renshaw, Joe Tasker and myself, supported by Charles Clarke, who was expedition doctor, and Adrian Gordon, neither of whom planned to go beyond Advance Base.

Base Camp was reached on March 16 after a three-day drive from Lhasa with halts at the towns of Xigaze and Xegur. The team was accompanied by a group of ten trekkers led by David Newbigging, chairman of Jardine Matheson of Hong Kong who sponsored the expedition. Base Camp was situated at 17,000 feet, near the foot of the Rongbuk Glacier and a few hundred yards above the site of the pre-war British camps. We spent the first week acclimatizing and exploring the route up the Rongbuk Glacier, which the trekking party was able to share in, some of them reaching 20,000 feet.

Advance Base was established on April 4 at 21,000 feet, after a three-day trek with 13 yaks carrying the loads up the rock-covered moraines that lead to the head of the East Rongbuk Glacier. There were two more ferries by the yaks of all the food and gear needed by the expedition, while the climbing team started work on the northeast ridge. It was still bitterly cold with constant high winds sweeping down the glacier.

The team was, in effect, employing siege tactics but using a minimal quantity of fixed rope and digging snow holes for all the lower camps. This approach had the advantage of reducing the weight of gear to be ferried up the ridge and also ensured that our camps were secure, since tents would have been at great risk in the high winds. Using snow holes also had the advantage that the four members of the team were always together which made discussion of plans and ideas very much easier.

Our first snow cave was established on April 10 at 22,500 feet, just below the crest of the ridge. We then pushed the route across steep snow slopes to reach the site of our second snow cave at 23,800 feet on April 12 and began digging out a cave but almost immediately hit rock. Fortunately it was very

PLATE 9

Photo by Adrian Gordon

**The Northeast Ridge of EVEREST
from the north. Three snow caves
and Second Pinnacle are marked.**



crumbly and we were able to dig the rock away, but as a result it took around fourteen hours of work spread over several days to dig out a snow hole big enough for four.

We went down for a rest at Advance Base on April 14, returning to the ridge on the 18th and moving into our second snow cave on the 20th. While we did this Adrian and Charlie were supervising the yak herders who were ferrying our gear up from Base Camp. Above the second snow cave, the ridge steepened into two steps, which we climbed on the 21st and 22nd respectively. The first was up a steep snow gully and the second on broken rock. These were the first stretches where fixed ropes were placed. We then dropped back to Advance Base on the 23rd, but this time descended to Base Camp for a few days rest, having found that it was impossible to recover fully at 21,000 feet.

We returned to Advance Base on April 29, making the journey in a day. While Charlie and Adrian made an attempt on Point 6919 on the eastern side of the upper Rongbuk Glacier, the rest of us returned to the ridge, reaching the second snow cave on May 1. The following day, Pete and Dick moved up to the top of the snow shoulder at 25,700 feet to camp there for the night, whilst Joe and I carried food and gas cylinders up to their high point and returned to the second snow cave. We moved up with our personal gear the following day, while Pete and Dick dug out a snow cave just below the crest of the ridge on its southeastern side.

Several hundred yards of gently ascending ridge led to the foot of the first pinnacle. This was where the main difficulties of the climb started, at a height of 26,250 feet, higher than all but fourteen mountains in the world. The ridge now narrowed into a knife-edged crest of snow, barred by a series of rocky pinnacles. This section was just under half a mile in length, with a height gain of nearly 1300 feet before it was joined by the original Chinese route which took the north ridge leading up from the North Col. We knew that this part of the ridge, before it joined the old route, would probably give us some of the most difficult climbing ever attempted at that altitude. Once we had climbed this section, however, we would be on known ground which would be technically easy compared to the unclimbed stretch before us.

On May 4 Pete and I started climbing the first pinnacle, Pete making a very bold lead up ice and broken rock that provided no secure cracks for piton anchors. As a result, I had to join two ropes together to let him make a run-out of around 250 feet. He was going so strongly I was very happy to let him stay in the lead, and that day he pushed out another 300 feet of rope to reach a notch in the ridge giving a view of the eastern side of the ridge.

The following day, Dick and Joe went out in front, Dick leading a pitch which was by far the most difficult so far, on steep and very insubstantial snow. At the end of this difficult stretch of climbing at a height of around 26,700 feet, he experienced a strange tingling down one side of his body. He therefore returned to the snow cave, while Pete belayed Joe for another pitch leading up towards the top of the pinnacle. That day they reached a height of around 26,900 feet.

We were all worried about Dick's symptoms and now, after four nights at nearly 26,000 feet, we were extremely tired. We decided to descend to Base Camp for another rest, where Charles diagnosed that Dick had had a mild stroke and recommended that he should return to sea level as soon as possible. He accompanied Dick as far as Chengdu.

Back at Base Camp I also came to the conclusion that I had gone as far as I was able, particularly as I was so much slower than Pete or Joe and might well hold them up in a bid for the summit, which we hoped to make on our return to the mountain. In addition, we had always hoped to reach the North Col, establish a dump of food there and mark the route back down, so that this could be used as a line of descent once the unclimbed section of the northeast ridge had been negotiated. We had not had the time nor the energy to do this, but it now seemed a useful function for Adrian and me to perform while Pete and Joe tried to complete the ridge and go for the summit.

Pete, Joe, Adrian and I returned to Advance Base on May 13 and on the 15th, Pete and Joe went straight up to the second snow cave in six hours, a sign of how well they had recovered from the previous sortie on the ridge. They reached the third snow cave the following day. They were well set up, with a good stock of food and fuel and about 800 feet of rope for fixing at the high point.

Meanwhile Adrian and I tried to reach the col, but the route was more complex and difficult than we had anticipated and by six o'clock on the evening of the 16th, we were still about 300 feet below the North Col, our way barred by a broad crevasse below a sérac wall. It was here that we had our last radio contact with Pete and Joe. We agreed that there should be two radio calls the next day, one at three in the afternoon and the next at six. Pete, who took the call, sounded full of optimism and said that he and Joe were both going well. Adrian and I then returned to Advance Base, planning to have a rest the following day, before trying to complete the route to the North Col.

Throughout the 17th we were able to watch the progress of Pete and Joe through our powerful telescope. They had obviously made a very early start, probably at dawn, for they were at the previous high point by nine in the morning, but then their progress slowed and it took them the rest of the day to run out around four rope-lengths on new ground, most of it on the northwest side between the rock and the crest of snow, in clear view from Advance Base. They climbed late into the evening, reaching the foot of the second pinnacle, where they disappeared round the corner onto the snow on the eastern side of the ridge. We assumed that they were having difficulty in finding suitable snow for a tent platform or snow cave. They had not answered our radio calls at either three o'clock or at six, and we assumed that either they had been too engrossed in the climbing or that perhaps their walkie-talkie had developed a fault.

On the morning of the 18th, Adrian and I set out for the North Col carrying our personal gear. Throughout the day we searched the crest of the east-northeast ridge concentrating on the area where we knew they had to come back into view since the way on the other side of the ridge was barred by steep rock.

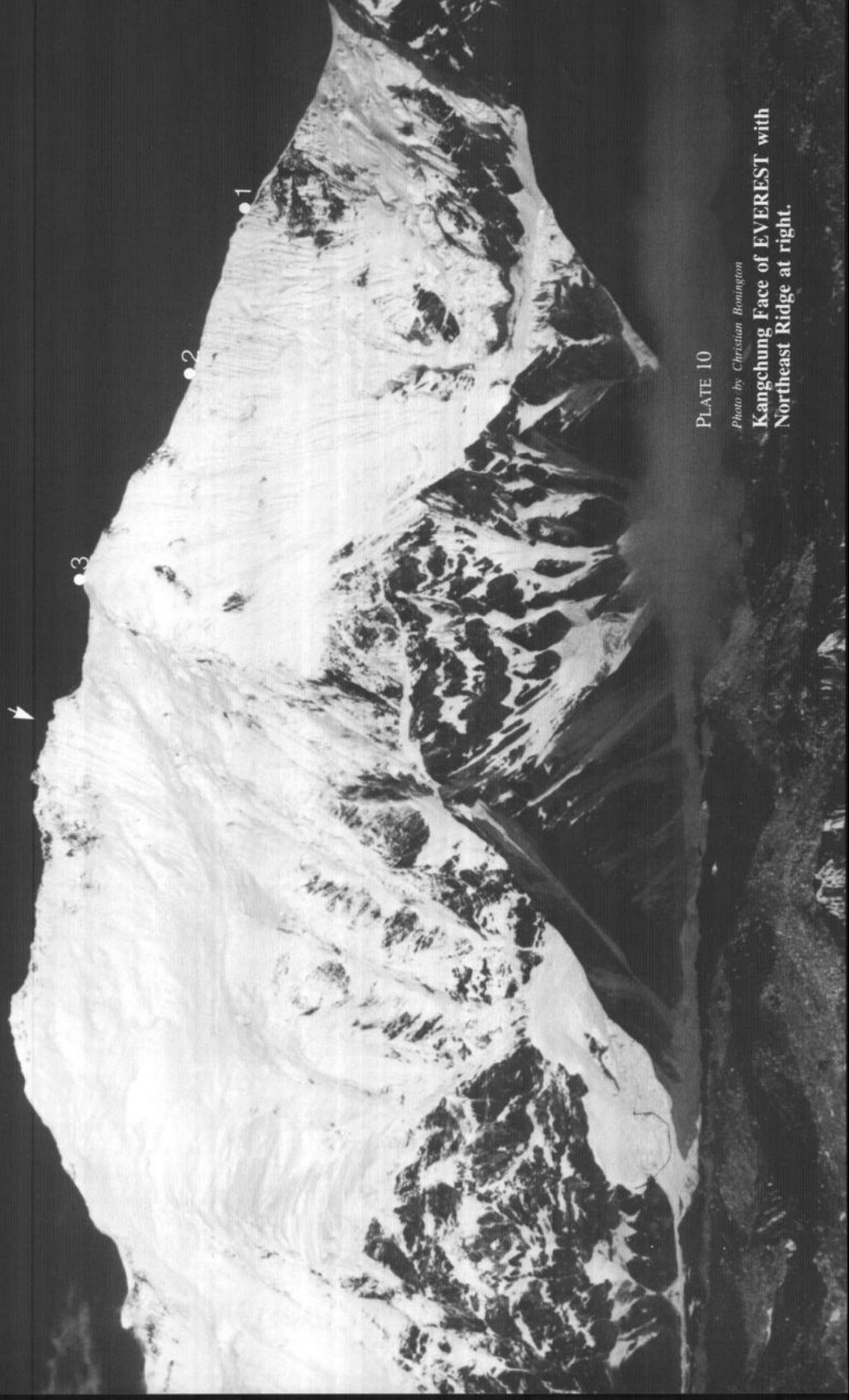


PLATE 10

Photo by Christian Bonington

**Kangchung Face of EVEREST with
Northeast Ridge at right.**

The view from the slopes of the North Col was particularly good since it looked directly onto this part of the ridge.

That day we only reached our previous high point, camping on the edge of the crevasse and completing the route to the North Col on the morning of the 19th. We continued to examine the crest of the ridge throughout that day and the next through our binoculars, getting increasingly worried when they failed to come into sight. We knew that they could not reach the upper slopes of the north ridge without coming into view.

In view of the very short distance that they would have had to cover on the other side of the ridge before being forced back into view on our side, there seemed only one explanation for their disappearance—that they had both had a fall, perhaps as a result of a snow slip, on the Kangshung side.

By this time Charlie had returned to Advance Base making the journey back from Chengdu, at near sea level, to 21,000 feet in only five days and we decided that it was essential to make a search to try to see what might have happened. Neither Charlie nor Adrian had the mountaineering ability or experience to venture with me onto the ridge itself, and anyway, unless we had been able to reach the high point we would not have been able to see anything. On the other hand, there seemed an outside chance that they might have descended to the Kangshung valley on the other side of the ridge, and by getting to its head we should at least have seen that side of the ridge. We decided therefore that Charlie and I should travel round to the Kangshung Glacier while Adrian held a grim and solitary vigil at our Advance Base in the remote hope that they might still come down the ridge.

Charlie and I returned to Base Camp on May 22, drove by truck to the village of Kharta on the eastern side of the mountain and then made a forty-mile trek over the Langma La Pass and up the Kangshung Glacier, until, from its head we could examine the entire huge face. There was no sign of them, but we could see that if they had fallen down it, they could not possibly have survived.

And yet we still did not give up hope. As we drove back to Base Camp, I almost convinced myself that I had completely misinterpreted the situation, that Pete and Joe would be there, laughing at our panicked response to their disappearance, insisting on going back for another go. But they were not at Base Camp. Adrian, who had stayed at our Advance Base until the 28th, had seen nothing. We had to accept that they were dead. Charlie carved a plaque in their memory on a stone chosen from near the site of the memorial to Mallory and Irvine and we mounted it on a cairn on a small knoll above Base Camp.

We had been so close to success, had worked harder, and had been more stretched both physically and mentally than we had ever been before. But there was extraordinarily little discussion about plans, for it was as if, through the many climbs we had done together, that we all knew and agreed instinctively what should be done at each stage of our climb. We were totally united in what we were doing, and until the tragedy it was the happiest expedition any of us had been on.

PLATE 11

Photo by Christian Bonington

Boardman, Tasker and Renshaw on Everest's Northeast Ridge. Note climbers on First Pinnacle at 26,500 feet.



Pete and Joe are an immense loss to the entire mountain world and to an even wider field. Not only were they outstanding mountaineers, they were also fine creative writers and warmly compassionate people, who had already achieved an extraordinary amount for their years, and yet had such a huge potential for development before them.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Tibetan side of Mount Everest.

ATTEMPTED ASCENT: Mount Everest via the Northeast Ridge to about 27,000 feet, where Boardman and Tasker were last seen.

PERSONNEL: Christian Bonington, leader; Peter Boardman, Dr. Charles Clarke, Adrian Gordon, Richard Renshaw, Joseph Tasker.

