

sodden to care any more about the rain. Post-prandial activity was confined to a search for Terry's US Everest Expedition sleeping bag shed some way down the trail. All this produced was a prodigious catch of leeches which festooned Terry's arms and legs and postponed bedtime by another hour. Next morning I awoke from my second successive night in the back of a car to find that the rain had turned to hail. Neither of us mentioned the Townsend Spur. We spent the best part of the morning searching for the missing sleeping bag re-tracing our steps even as far as the river. It eventually turned up just short of the car.

And so the last stab at Townsend ended in a shambles. Many months later Hugh Mahon wrote to say that during a long weekend he and another had turned back within a few hundred feet of the summit. Technically, the Spur is no more than a scramble. Its difficulties are those which confront any bush-whacker who ventures into the robust and prolific vegetation that protects the bare bones of the Great Dividing Range. Thrice baulked on Townsend at least we had the satisfaction of learning something about its several facets and various moods. For me it still represents a fringe of unsatisfied curiosity perhaps some far-off day to be resolved.

Nuptse 1975

Jon Fleming

(The aims of the British-Nepalese Army Expedition, 1975, were to climb Nuptse, to test food, equipment, oxygen apparatus and personnel at high altitudes and to select a team to attempt Mount Everest in the pre-Monsoon period of 1976. A total party of 31 was assembled at an acclimatising camp at Dingboche by Good Friday and soon afterwards Base Camp was established at 5200 m in a hollow between the lateral moraine of the Nuptse glacier and a ridge of rocky turrets.)

By 3 April, having moved up to occupy Base Camp, Armstrong and I were ready to reconnoitre the route to and across the Nuptse Glacier to find a suitable place for the Dump. It was noticeably colder in the mornings at this height (5200 m); by 07.50 we were on our way. We took with us some fluorescent marker flags and one high-altitude ration box. It was a pleasant route up to the place where we had to cross the glacier; gently sloping, walking on juniper, with fine views all around us. After 1½ hours we came to the place where we turned right and dropped down into the boulder field. For the next 2 hours we worked hard making the route to the other side of the glacier; clambering up loose scree, tiptoeing over large boulders, dodging falling rocks. At strategic points along the route we would position a marker flag so as not to lose the way on our return. As the day wore on so the sun got hotter and the glare from the white boulders became ever more intense. None too soon we reached the high point of the crossing and began the slow descent to the E side of the glacier. Here we expected to find a suitable place to establish the Dump. However there was no obvious site and since we were so near to the central ridge we decided to press on and see if we could establish a Camp instead. The chaotic boulder field soon gave way to snow, now rather mushy as it was

late in the day. We climbed up a steep slope and found ourselves on a little glacier underneath the ridge which was to be our route up the mountain. A small flat spot was quickly and thankfully found on which Camp 1 at 5480 m would later be established. We had a little to eat and then retraced our steps over the same ankle-breaking terrain to Base Camp. By the time we got there it was snowing. A further 9 people had come up from Dingboche to live at Base Camp. Heartened with our day's work and that at long last we were getting to grips with the mountain it was a jolly supper party that night. The business of ferrying stores, food and fuel to the new camp began the next day so that by 6 April there was sufficient for 4 people to occupy it. Stokes and Lane now took the lead and with Brister and Armstrong in support led out the route up the side of the ridge to its crest to establish Camp 2 at 5790 m. It was a steep but safe route, the first 2 making it; the others putting in the fixed ropes. When they breasted the crest the horizon was filled with the black mass of Makalu nearly 10 miles to the E—an awe-inspiring sight. The 1961 tent-platforms were still evident at Camp 2 and it was upon these that we erected our own tents. The E side of the site dropped spectacularly down some 600 m to the W Lhotse Glacier.

The ridge now steepened considerably. Early in the day the snow was in excellent condition and crampons bit effectively. Soon we came to a place where the route was blocked by an almost vertical slab of rock, some 60 ft

40 Camp 1. This and next two photos: British Army Nuptse expedition, 1975



high, rent from top to bottom by a gash just too wide for a foot jam. Stokes led the way up this in fine style; at the top the effects of altitude overcame him and he lay panting like a fish out of water. With his crampons scrabbling against the rock Lane managed to follow him and then this indefatigable pair pressed on up steep ice-slopes to Camp 3. Meanwhile Brister and Armstrong continued placing fixed ropes. Later on a ladder was fixed here making load carrying easier and safer. The climbing was technical, steep, exhilarating and hard. Front pointing techniques were used by the lead pair while the second pair improved the route and hacked out steps in the hard ice. Camp 3 was put at 6030 m on a very small ledge just big enough for 2 tents. The exposure was



41 *The central ridge with the summit couloir above*

impressive indeed; the site was carved out of the side of the icy mountain—exhausting work at this height. Ice screws and ropes were used to lash the tents snugly into the flank of the ridge; it was unsafe to move outside these tents without the use of the fixed rope. On 13 April, with Camp 3 now firmly established and occupied, Stokes and Lane returned to Base Camp for a rest. Brister and Armstrong took over the lead supported by Agnew and Walshaw. The route upwards became even more complex. It narrowed down to a huge spine composed of vast rotting hunks of ice. The ridge had to be traversed on one flank or the other; sometimes one was on the rotting crest, at other times some 60 ft below it, the whole route threatened by tottering seracs. At times one had actually to tunnel a way through the ridge to gain access to the other side. The lead pair did a magnificent job in finding a route through this ice-jumbled maze, a day's work sometimes amounting to only 200 ft of progress.

Usually by midday they were working in white-out conditions. By 17 April I judged it time to replace them, though they were unwilling to go back to Base Camp because they were enjoying the climbing so much; but they had done a fine job and deserved a break. Agnew and Walshaw now took over the lead with Dilly and Kefford in support improving the route and putting in the fixed ropes. We could not have had a better pair doing this job at this crucial time for both were very strong, hard workers. Before long huge bucket steps appeared in the sides of the 'spine' while the fixed ropes were expertly positioned for maximum safety. Progress out in the front became tantalisingly slow, although this did give a chance for the logistic tail to catch up, for all the while Camps 1, 2 and 3 were being steadily stocked from below by the rest of the Team at Base Camp under the supervision of Winship, the Base Camp Manager. Now, however health troubles began. Khagendra crept into Base Camp one evening complaining of a pain in his left arm. He was quite unable to use it and because of this he never again went up above Base Camp. We missed his strength a great deal; nevertheless he worked hard at Base Camp thus freeing others to work on the mountain. The second casualty at this time was Walshaw out in front. He had developed an abscess in his mouth and had to return to Base Camp for treatment. Walshaw's place was taken by Fleming, who with Agnew then formed the lead pair while Lane and Stokes having had their rest replaced Dilly and Kefford. It soon became obvious to us that the ridge between Camp 3 and the proposed Camp 4 was so long and complicated that an intermediate Camp would have to be established. The main reason for this was that the lead pair were finding that by the time they got to the end of the previous day's fixed ropes there was very little time left to push the route out any more than a couple of pitches. This was usually performed in bad weather conditions.

On 22 April I noted in my diary: 'Awoke 05.30. Got breakfast at 06.00. It always takes one such ages to get ready for the day's climbing by the time one puts on crampons, Whillans harness, jumars and glacier cream etc. So not until nearly 08.00 were we away.' From this unpromising start we set out to establish and occupy the intermediate camp, Camp 3a at 6220 m. This we did early in the afternoon and pitched a tunnel tent in the only possible place, a very small niche in the bend of the ridge. We then went on to extend the route for a further 2 pitches before returning to spend our first night in Camp 3a and out in front. We both felt exhilarated to be in the lead, although I must confess at a certain feeling of guilt that as Leader I was so far ahead.

The next day we were determined to establish Camp 4 at the place where this seemingly interminable ridge abutted on to the S face of the mountain; this would become Advance Base Camp, which we could stock up for the push through the rock band and the final move to the summit. We woke at 05.00 and were away by 07.00. It was very cold indeed with a strong wind and clouds were already welling up from the valley beneath. From the previous day's fixed ropes Agnew led out into the mist. There was powder snow everywhere and this made it difficult to find the holds. Route finding was a real problem but luckily at one stage Fleming perceived through the gloom and the now swirling snow an orange fixed rope of the 1961 expedition. We fixed our own ropes as we went along. After a lengthy traverse we came to an airy stance from which the route led almost vertically upwards into the fog. Agnew led

off climbing steadily; eventually the rope went tight and I followed him. He was sitting in the snow on a plateau—Camp 4 at last, 6400 m. We looked around the area, had a quick lunch in the worsening weather and then retraced our steps to Camp 3a. There had been so much snow that all our holds had been filled in already. It was not until 17.00 that we got back to the camp site, tired indeed but elated that we had established Camp 4 and made a safe route for the load carriers.

Agnew and Fleming went down to Base Camp on the 24th for a rest. Stokes and Lane continued to improve the route to Camp 4 while the load carrying parties moved up and down the ridge to leave their loads at Camp 3a. On 27 April Camp 4 was occupied at last by Gifford, King, Krishna and Pasang. It had taken us just 20 days from Camp 1. After their rest Agnew and Fleming moved up to Camp 3a direct from Base Camp amid murmurings that 'they are attempting the impossible'. It took us $8\frac{1}{4}$ hours! Also on this day we were cheered by Brister's achievement of making Camp 3 to Camp 4 and back in a day, with a heavy load.

While Camp 4 was being stocked, Gifford, King, Pasang and Fleming reconnoitred the route forward to Camp 5. We felt it a great relief to be away from the claustrophobic feeling of the ridge; the camp-site at 4 was exceptionally windy. At first the route up to Camp 5 lay up straightforward slopes of bare ice. There then followed a very tricky ice traverse to a shallow gully down which debris often whined at frightening speeds. We pulled up to a line of crevasses which cut the snow-field below the rock band; in the end crevasse we put Camp 5 at 6810 m. We hoped thereby that all the stone-fall would pass harmlessly over the top and down the long S face to the glacier below. The camp was established on 30 April and occupied by Agnew and Gifford on 1 May. There was a little levelling to be done before putting up the two small tents. The next day Owens and Summerton moved up to Camp 5. They were our two most experienced Himalayan climbers having been on Tirich Mir in 1969 and Annapurna in 1970, while Owens had been on Indrasan and Deo Tibba in 1973. The plan was for them, supported by Agnew and Gifford, to force a route through the rock band; to continue along the $\frac{1}{2}$ mile traverse and then if possible to make the first summit bid. Steep slabs of hard snow led up from the line of crevasses in which Camp 5 was placed; our crampons bit effectively, and upward progress was rapid despite the shortness of breath. The view was exhilarating but the wind was so bitter that we could not stay to admire it. Soon we crossed another line of crevasses and looking up saw that the whole route was threatened by a huge serac glistening white against the dark black of the rocks. This was an uncomfortable threat, but it was the only part of the whole route (so far) which held objective dangers. The route through the rock band had never been obvious from below, but as we got closer a feasible route seemed to open out. The crux appeared to be a steep rock crack which led to a spectacularly hanging snow-field. Above this obstacle we hoped to put Camp 6. The crack was led by Agnew with Owens following. The red corlene fixed rope of the 1961 expedition was still in place confirming that we were 'on route'. The crack was choked with ice. At one stage one had to climb out of it on to the left-hand face; the exposure was breathtaking and I wriggled back into the safety of the gully as soon as I could. The snow-field was a tricky piece of climbing on powder snow; nevertheless we waded through

it and so on to the S face of the mountain once again. Camp 6 was established on 5 May and occupied on 6 May by Owens, Summerton, Brister and Armstrong. We discovered that digging the tent platforms was hard and breathless work at this height. But now it was discovered that our paraffin stoves were malfunctioning. Apparently we were the first expedition for many years not to use gas in this part of the Himalayas. We had in fact wished to test out the gas stoves for use on Mount Everest in 1976 but in the end we were unable to take them. At Camp 6 and above it was found that our stoves worked at only 50% efficiency and this meant that we were unable to melt sufficient snow for each man to have the 8-pints of liquid per day needed at this height.

On 7 May the 4 lead climbers left Camp 6 to make the route along the traverse and to establish and occupy Camp 7. Owens and Summerton made the route carrying their own personal gear, while Armstrong and Brister carried the camp. It was fascinating to watch them; minute black specks creeping across that huge face on the glaring white surface. Luckily the surface was snow rather than ice, but it was sugary and so they had to exercise a great deal of care. It took them the whole day to get to Camp 7, which they put in the mouth of the final summit couloir—just 100 ft or so below the place used as Camp 8 in 1961. Again they had to dig a large platform for the tent. By the time all this was done it was too late for Armstrong and Brister to return to Camp 6 so all 4 had to spend the night in the 2-man tent. After a long and tiring day and with the stove not working properly it was an uncomfortable camp, and for the supporting pair a cold one since they had not brought their sleeping bags. At long last came an unforgettable dawn. Owens and Summerton had a rest day in preparation for their bid on the summit due for the 9 May. Armstrong and Brister returned to Camp 6 and comfort, while Agnew and Krishna moved up to Camp 7 to take their places. Lower down the mountain stocking the camps continued. At the radio check that evening we wished the summit pair well for their attempt. Agnew and Krishna were to remain at Camp 7 in support. As the lights went out in the little tents up and down the mountain I think we all felt that final success was close. Everything had gone perfectly and now we had sufficient stores, food, fuel and climbers at the right camps to sustain at least 4 summit bids. The weather seemed set fair, Peacock at Base Camp having relayed a good forecast for the next day to those at Camp 7.

At 07.15 on 9 May Owens and Summerton left Camp 7 for the top, 2300 ft above. In 1961 this had taken a full 12-hour day, the couloir then having been ice; in 1975 it was snow (certainly in its lower reaches). The 2 climbers were moving well one at a time up the couloir. After nearly 3 hours of climbing they were 2/3 of the way up. The accident must have happened at about this time, 10.00. Those at Base Camp noticed that the couloir was empty; those climbing between camps 3 and 4 saw a stonefall on the S face of the mountain to their left, amongst the stones was a rucksack and an orange polythene bag. None of this news could be transmitted to me until 16.30 when we had our normal radio schedule. As I sat there at Camp 5 listening to this endless stream of words coming out of the earpiece of the walkie-talkie I could not at first believe that this was happening. Even then, while there was still some hope, one tried not to fear the worst. All that evening we waited in vain for the missing couple; for the sharp bright light to come over the summit col and make

its way down the summit couloir. It began to snow. We all spent a sleepless night: could 2 climbers of such experience possibly disappear like this? We invented excuses as to why they had been delayed. The next day I asked Agnew and Krishna to go up into the couloir to search. But Krishna had been hit on the head by some rocks on the previous day and was not going too well. They saw nothing. We asked for a helicopter to come up from Kathmandu so that we could search the mountain face, but owing to bad weather it did not arrive until 11 May. Peacock and Gifford climbed aboard and guided by radio by Muston and Winship, who had seen the original stonefall, landed as near to the head of the Nuptse Glacier as they could. Soon they located the bodies of Owens and Summerton in a crevasse, about 30 ft down, underneath the huge S face of the mountain. The weather was closing in again and there was no time to give a proper burial to our fallen friends. Deeply shocked they returned to Base Camp and gave me the news.



42 *The top section of the mountain with sites of camps and accidents*

That night Peacock and I discussed over the radio what we should do next. We all felt that our dead friends would have wished us to push on for a further attempt having overcome the major difficulties on the mountain. The whole team was ready to have another try, weather permitting. Brister and Pasang had joined Agnew and Krishna at Camp 7 on 10 May. The latter 2 came down to Camp 5 on 11 May, the same day that Armstrong reached Base Camp with

a frostbitten heel. Also on 11 May Stokes and Lane moved across to Camp 7 to join Brister and Pasang. The 12th of May was fixed for the next summit bid. Conditions, however, were not suitable for such an attempt so those at Camp 7 sat tight. Dilly and Fleming moved up to Camp 6 in support but on the way they were avalanched and narrowly escaped with their lives, stopping the slide barely 20 ft above a 1200 m drop on to the Nuptse Glacier. Fleming sustained a broken nose. Rather chastened we returned to Camp 5 to await improvement, but the next day the weather was even worse. It began to snow at 07.00 and never stopped all day. There was no question of any movement anywhere on the mountain. Even so Walshaw and King made a journey to Camp 4. At about 19.30 Agnew and Fleming left their tent to celebrate Agnew's birthday with a brew in the lower tent at Camp 5. Two minutes later there was a prolonged roar and a huge snow slide smothered Camp 5. When all was still and the 'dust' had settled we looked out to see what had happened. The sight was staggering. Nothing whatsoever could be seen of our tent, and the crevasse behind it had been completely filled. The tent in which we had all been sitting only escaped burial because the crevasse overhung a little on its upper side. The roar began again and sent us scurrying inside the one remaining tent for shelter. It was still snowing. Although it was dark we began to dig out the buried tent. It was a complete wreck; we salvaged as much of our kit as we could and then settled down to endure the long night with 5 people in a 2-man tunnel tent. This avalanche seemed to justify a decision that I had taken earlier that evening to evacuate the mountain temporarily before we were trapped by the bad weather. My plan was to give everyone a rest at Base Camp for 3 days, then to climb the mountain by a fast lightweight summit push using all the camps that we would leave in place. They would be fully stocked with food and fuel by the Sherpas during our rest. The next day Brister, Pasang, Lane and Stokes would descend to Camp 6 or to Camp 5 if they could make it in the time; Dilly, Agnew and Fleming would descend to Camp 2, while Walshaw and King would remain at Camp 5 until all those at the higher Camps had passed through safely on their way down.

After a thoroughly uncomfortable night at Camp 5, Dilly, Agnew and Fleming, stiff and chilled, began their long descent. Conditions were very bad and we had to wade through drifts of powder snow not knowing exactly where we were putting our feet. At about 11.00 we saw the first pair leave Camp 7 for Camp 6. They had obviously waited hoping that the sun might melt off some of the surface snow. They moved very gingerly along the traverse; the conditions must have been very frightening. About an hour later we saw the second pair leave Camp 7 for their descent. Because they were following in the others' tracks their progress appeared to be quicker. By mid-day we were in thick cloud and it was snowing. We reached Camp 4 after 5 hours hard slog in white-out conditions and decided to continue to Camp 3 at least. The going was terribly slow. There was powder snow everywhere and yet more was falling; the fixed ropes were difficult to find. Eventually we reached Camp 3 at 18.00. Having had almost no sleep the night before we had a quick supper and went to bed. Further up the mountain it was not until after dark that Lane and Stokes reached Camp 5 and awoke a very relieved King and Walshaw. Having seen Brister and Pasang only a little way behind them just as they had completed the traverse of the Ramp (which was near the end of the

traverse of the face) and seen enough of them to be able to exchange words of encouragement, Lane and Stokes assumed that Brister and Pasang had reached Camp 6 safely.

At 07.00 the next day I was awoken at Camp 3 by the engine of a helicopter overhead. Peacock and Gifford had decided to give a proper burial to the bodies of Owens and Summerton. They discovered that the snow which had fallen during the previous days had done their work for them. Gifford took from his sack 2 small wooden crosses and placed them in the snow. They knelt down in silent prayer. Then leaving the graveside for the last time they returned to Base Camp in the helicopter. Dilly, Agnew and Fleming continued their descent, the weather a little more sunny now. Nevertheless they did not get back to Base Camp until 16.30 that afternoon. The relief and joy at being back in warm and comfortable surroundings was marred by the information that no movement whatsoever had been seen at Camp 6 all day. Moreover Peacock said that he could see a new 'black dot' on the face, below the rock band. At about 17.00 Walshaw and King climbed to the foot of the rockband and shouted up to Camp 6. There was no reply. I asked them over the radio to investigate Camp 6 thoroughly the next day.

Although the weather had improved a little and it was sunny the snow conditions were as bad as ever. It was not until 08.00 that Walshaw and King judged it safe to make the climb to Camp 6. From Base Camp we followed their every footstep, living with them the whole of the $8\frac{1}{2}$ -hour day. At last at 16.30 we saw them make the final moves to Camp 6. Over the walkie-talkie the sad voice of Walshaw crackled that there was no one in the Camp and that nobody had been there since Lane and Stokes had been through 48 hours before. Brister and Pasang, the two youngest climbers on the expedition, must have fallen very soon after they were last seen by Lane and Stokes on 14 May while completing the traverse to Camp 6. Once again we had to ask for the helicopter to search the face. There was no point in Walshaw and King staying at the inhospitable Camp 6 so I asked them to return to 5 at best speed before darkness fell.

No mountain is worth one life, let alone four. Because of this and because neither the weather nor the conditions showed any signs of improving we decided to abandon the climb at this point.

Fortunately the weather was sufficiently good the next day for the helicopter to come up to Base Camp from Syangboche where it had been allowed to spend the night. Stripped to the very bare minimum the French pilot Pierre Lefloch took the machine up to nearly 7000 m in a superb piece of flying. Peacock identified the body of Brister as being the 'black dot'. Leading from it and upwards was a rope which led to a crevasse. On the end of this rope was Pasang. As for the earlier victims there was no question of moving the bodies. For the next 3 days we recovered as much of the equipment off the mountain as we safely could. We built a huge cairn to our fallen companions on top of which we placed a big aluminium cross. The last thing we did before departing from Base Camp on 20 May was to say a small, simple yet poignant Service round the cairn and cross.

Summary

The party comprised: C. H. Agnew, G. P. Armstrong, D. A. J. Brister, P. N. Dilly, J. W. Fleming (leader), N. F. Gifford, M. H. Kefford, M. T. King, M. P.

Lane, A. J. Muston, G. F. Owens, J. D. C. Peacock, J. H. Stokes, R. A. Summerton, E. C. Walshaw, and E. A. N. Winship from the British Armed Services, 3 serving members of the Royal Nepalese Army and 3 members of a Gurkha regiment. They were supported by 6 other Gurkhas and 3 Sherpas.

The attempt on Nuptse was abandoned on 16 May after the deaths of Owens, Summerton, Brister and Pasang.

Island Peak (6817 m) was climbed on 29 March by Owens, Brister and Peacock.

Silvanus Thompson—Alpine painter

James Greig¹

Many engineers and scientists have engaged in Alpine climbing and walking as a hobby and some few have combined with these activities the painting of Alpine scenes. Of these Silvanus Philips Thompson was one of the most interesting. Writing to his father in the summer of 1874 when, as a young man of 23, he was making his first visit to the Continent, he described his first view of the High Alps:

'What is that sharp unearthly streak of light that shoots up clear above the clouds into the blue? It is the Jungfrau—and now I see them—there they are, clear out above the white piles of cumulus—the Aletschhorn, the Monch, the Eiger—in fact the whole range of the Oberland—and then further to the south the peaks of some unknown heights, the sharp flat top of the Monte Rosa and then the Matterhorn. . . . Well, one of the dreams of my life has been at last fulfilled. The snow peaks of the Alps are stamped into my mind for ever.'

Thompson was at that time a junior master at Bootham School, York, where his father was a senior master. He had graduated BA in the University of London 5 years earlier and he was preparing by private study to take in addition a first degree in Science. The Thompsons were a quiet, cultured, Quaker family and the young Silvanus had been carefully nurtured and encouraged early in the study of nature and in the cultivation of his natural skill in drawing. Already at school he had achieved a mischievous distinction in caricature.

On this first continental visit Thompson sketched extensively and probably did some painting, but he did not attempt to paint the Alpine peaks which he regarded as 'utterly unapproachable'. Thompson had built up from childhood a substantial knowledge of botany and he had a deep appreciation of the beauty of wild flowers. This enhanced, in no small degree, his enjoyment of his visits to Switzerland. The blue of the Gentians and the rich red of the Alpenrose featured in many of his sketches. In one of his lectures he remarked:

¹ A biography of Silvanus P. Thompson by James Greig will be published shortly by the Science Museum.