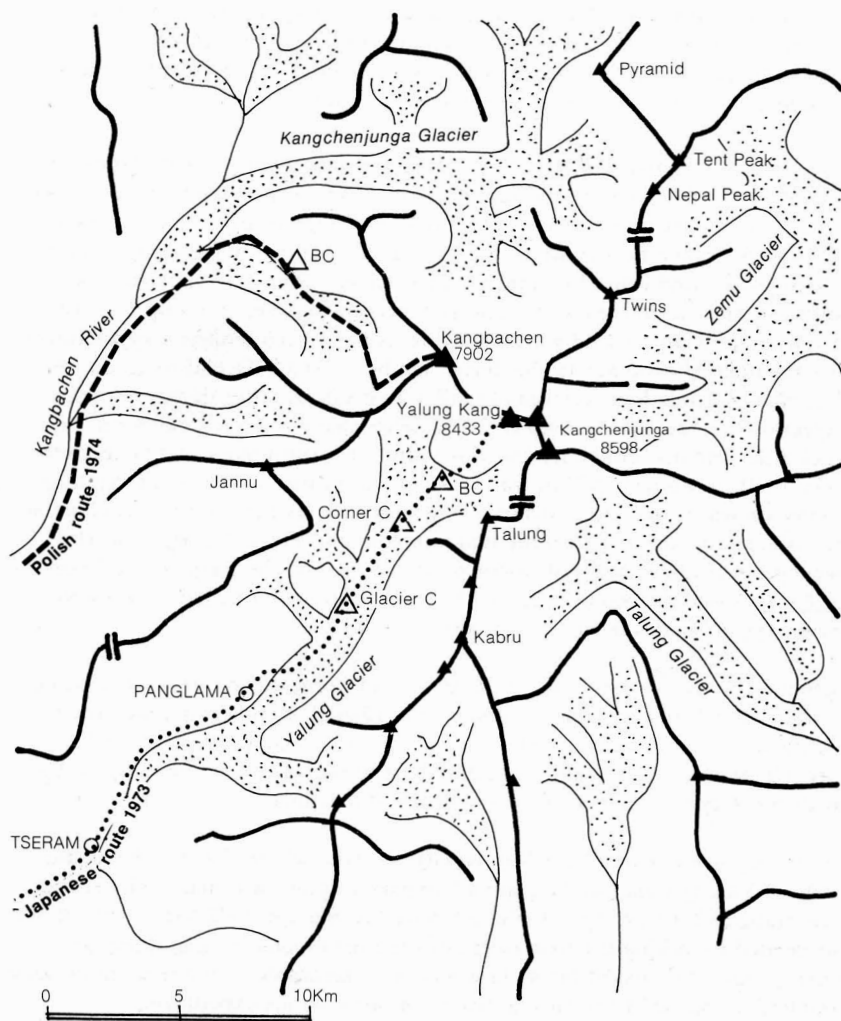


Kangchenjunga, showing routes of expeditions 1973/4



The first ascent of Kangbachen (7902m)

The Polish expedition to the Nepal Himalaya 1974

Kazimierz W. Olech

Translation: Andrzej Kus

Preface

The purpose of this Polish expedition was to climb the virgin Kangbachen Peak from Ramtang Valley. We scaled the peak on 26 May at 11.20am, the summit team consisting of W. Brański, W. Kłaput, M. Malatyński, K. Olech and Z. Rubinowski. The successful attack was carried out without oxygen from Camp 4 (6800 m) using Alpine tactics. Three bivouacs were needed instead of establishing solid camps and the necessary bivouac equipment was carried with us up to 7450 m. The members were: Wojciech Brański, Andrzej Cardas, Wiesław Kłaput, Marek Malatyński, Piotr Młotecki (leader), Kazimierz Olech (deputy leader), Józef Olszewski, Maciej Piątkowski, Andrzej Pietraszek (doctor), Marek Rogalski, Zbigniew Rubinowski, Andrzej Sobolewski, Zbigniew Staszyszyn, Andrzej Strumillo and Szymon Wdowiak. Liaison officer: Capt Birbadur Jondzun.

Journey from Poland to Nepal

The baggage of the expedition weighed around 7.2 tons and consisted of 200 loads. It was transported by sea from Gdańsk to Madras between 28/01 and 19/03 and then by road with 2 lorries via Calcutta to Biratnagar (reached on 27 March) and Dharan Bazar. From Dharan Bazar a caravan of 200 porters brought the loads to Ghunza by 21 April. Within 3 days from Ghunza the caravan with the aid of local porters and supported by yaks had shifted the baggage up to Base Camp in the Ramtang Valley.

The members of the party were transported to Nepal by air or by 2 cars at different times depending on their functions in the preliminary stage of the expedition. The appointed meeting place was the Virat Hotel in Biratnagar. During the transporting of the baggage we were all in continuous communication by means of telegraph and telex to coordinate precisely the whole action. On 27 March all the expedition members gathered at Virat Hotel and the Nepalese liaison officer and Sherpas joined the group. From this moment the party numbered 24 persons.

Approach march

In spite of serious efforts that were undertaken continuously we were not in a position to prevent a delay in the expedition's planned timetable. Some steps were taken to make up for the lost time with help of a Pilatus-Porter plane, that the expedition had at its disposal. We intended to shift with it the baggage and a party of the expedition's members to Taplejung. The other group and Sherpas would go there on foot. That group, comprising A. Gardas, M. Malatyński, K. Olech, J. Olszewski, M. Rogalski, A. Pietraszek, Z. Staszyszyn, S. Wdowiak, Jępa, Wangchuck, Angcheng Tsering together with Pasang Dawa, Tashi and Dorjee who had to enroll the porters, left Biratnagar on 29 March.

In the meantime we reached Taplejung on 4 April along the itinerary: Dharan Bazar–Dhankuta–Hile–Basandapur–Manglabari–Gorza–Dhoban which led through the mountain ranges over the Tamur River Valley. Pasang Dawa with 2 assistants remained at Hile with orders to send porters to Taplejung or Dharan Bazar on a telephonic request from the sirdar.

In Taplejung we were told that due to heavy atmospheric conditions and the bad state of the aerodrome (being still under construction) only one flight was possible and so A. Sobolewski came here with 19 loads on 2 April. This caused us to split again into 2 groups. A. Pietraszek, Z. Staszyszyn, S. Wdowiak and Sherpa Wangchuck with the cook went down to Dhoban to wait for the main caravan while the others went to Ramtang Valley. We hired 15 porters at Taplejung and left for Ghunza on 7 April. We reached it on 12 April via Militung, Chirua Shegatum, Amdileza, Jabla along the mountain slopes surrounding the valleys of the rivers Tamur, Car Cu and Kangbachen. At Ghunza we had some misunderstandings with the porters and their ringleader Urken Lama. We dismissed them and engaged new people. We left for the Ramtang Valley on 14 April with 12 porters and reached the site of the Yugoslav Base Camp of 1965 on 16 April. The main caravan left Dharan Bazar on 7 April with the additional delay of 5 days and after having partially changed the porters at Ghunza came finally to the Base Camp on 24 April.

Description of the Kangbachen Massif¹

Kangbachen Peak is situated in the group of Kangchenjunga (8598 m), the third highest summit in the world. This group is to be found in a side ridge running out to the S from the main Himalayan Range beginning on the E summit of Jonsong Peak (7420 m).

The geological explorations of Ramtang Valley confirm that the character of its metamorphic rocks and composites is very differentiated. At the entry of the valley the light-grey mesh gneisses can be found. Higher there appear layers of quartzites and mica schists, resulting from the metamorphosis of sedimentary rocks. These rocks are accessible for observation on the slopes of the valley at 4600–5400 m. The upper part of the NW face of Kangbachen rises above an ice-terrace running approximately at 6700 m. The face is made of rosy coloured granites, probably of intrusive origin, and includes blackish seams of ultrabasic rocks. One such black fragment can be seen in the highest part of the summit crest of Kangbachen Peak. Between Kangbachen and the W summit of Kangchenjunga is situated the meridional axis of the syncline (tectonic element) running from the Ginsang Valley in the N to the Yalung Valley in the S. (According to T. Hagen the structure of the Kangchenjunga group is a result of the translation of 2 tectonic units moved from N towards S). The geomorphological exploration of Dr Rubinowski done during the Polish expedition shows that the tectonic crescent movements of the E part of the Great Himalaya occurred here with different intensity and are still continuing in our time.

¹ This description is based on the geological observations of Dr Z. Rubinowski.

In the Ramtang Valley as well as in the other neighbouring valleys the fragments of the characteristic equalisation surfaces are preserved. They verify the longer periods of the relative tectonic peace. The questing geologist managed to distinguish 5 such surfaces. The oldest one is preserved at the altitude of 7500-7600 m in the shape of a vast firn plateau, that stretches between Kangbachen Peak and the remote (over 3 km) W summit of Kangchenjunga. The other fragments of equalisation surfaces are at the altitudes: 7000-7100 m, 6600-6800 m (upper terrace), 5900-6100 m (lower terrace) and 5200-5400 m. At these altitudes the characteristic firn fields, ice-terraces or slightly inclined surfaces and levelled fragments of ridges that separate the abrupt, nearly vertical rock and ice elements are preserved.

The Ramtang Glacier is 10 km long. The average height of the snow-line is 5000-5100 m. The lower part of the glacier coming down to 4500 m with its pure ice is covered with a deep layer of ablation material. The width of the glacier snout near its head is only 300 m. The left lateral (orographically) moraine has a relict character, while the right one rises 30-50 m above the glacier surface. This creates a steep and dangerous debris slope, where stone-avalanches are thundering continuously. The higher part of the glacier over the snow-line becomes more spacious and fills up the vast basin between the steep slopes of Kangbachen, Ramtang (6679 m) and White Wave (6960 m). Below the SW faces of Wedge Peak (6750 m) and Ramtang are 3 small hanging valleys, where a few small glaciers are flowing down. Two of these glaciers still have relict snouts. The state of snow and ice cover on the faces surrounding the Ramtang Valley confirms that winds from SW and S directions prevail.

Mountain action

The first party of expedition members including A. Gardas, M. Malatyński, K. Olech, J. Olszewski, M. Rogalski, A. Sobolewski with Jępa, Sonam and 12 porters came to the Ramtang Valley on 16 April, as mentioned before, and established the Base Camp at the place where the Yugoslav Expedition had theirs in 1965. From the first day we started to work preparing Base for the main caravan group, doing reconnaissance in the upper part of the valley and observing the ice-fall and moraine through which the Yugoslavs reached the first Terrace of Kangbachen.

The ice-fall formed in 2 stages was very fractured and the snow covering its surface made the early observation of crevasses difficult. Both left and right sides of the ice-fall were threatened by avalanches, that eventually might be caused by séracs from the barrier of the 1st Terrace. The lateral moraine had another hazard, a stone-fall coming down regularly after 10am every day and causing avalanches of different size. As a result of the reconnaissance we decided to adopt a route via the middle of the ice-fall, in a relatively sheltered part between séracs and snow-fields, as we supposed. We prepared the route as 2 parties in turn. Three men were marking and preparing the stretch through the ice-fall while the other 3 were looking for a safe route via the moraine below the Base Camp for the main caravan.

On 20 April we pitched the first temporary tent high on the embankment of the 1st Terrace (5750 m). Two days later we discovered a route via the moraine which was less threatened by stone-avalanches than the old one of the Yugoslavs. On 22 April I went down with A. Gardas to meet the caravan. They bivouaced 2 hours above Ghunza. On 24 April the caravan reached the Base Camp and together we enlarged all its arrangements. Camp 1 was established on 28 April at 5400 m in the middle of the ice-fall mainly for use when transporting loads. Camp 2 (5850 m) was $\frac{1}{3}$ the way up the 1st Terrace and we brought the first tent there from 5750 m. By 6 May we were in a temporary tent at 6200 m, under a steep face leading to the apparent saddle between the 1st Terrace and Jannu Valley. This exposed pitch was safeguarded with fixed ropes. Our work was done in continuous snow-fall with wind blowing regularly before noon. Early in the morning of 11 May I left the tent at 6200 m with A. Sobolewski for the Base Camp. We went down quickly—1 hour to Camp 2, $1\frac{1}{2}$ to Camp 1 and by 9.30 we were in Base Camp. The route via the ice-fall no longer existed. Between Camps 2 and 1 we moved fearfully through the broken fields of séracs. Fixed ropes and markers were under ice debris. There must have been tremendous shocks but we did not notice them, probably very absorbed by the heavy work of safeguarding the route.

We all met in Base Camp. Here we decided to make a new route to the 1st Terrace via the upper part of the lateral moraine where we observed now rather less falling stones than 3 weeks earlier. On 12 May all went up with loads except A. Sobolewski, me, J. Olszewski who cured an abscess of a tooth with antibiotics and Z. Staszyszyn looking after the Base Camp. The Sherpas broke up Camp 1 and brought its equipment to Camp 2. After this date Camp 1 no longer existed but we continued with the previous numbering. Two parties besides the Sherpas were at this time on the mountain. The first included: P. Mżotecki, A. Pietraszek, M. Rogalski, S. Wdowiak and the second one consisted of W. Brański, W. Kłaput, M. Malatyński, Z. Rubinowski who established Camp 3 (6350 m) on the saddle.

We operated still in bad weather and a new clearing up of the route by each climbing group was necessary almost every day. Due to the fresh snow-falls we were depressed by the fear of avalanches. We remembered from the reference books of Himalaya (G. O. Dyhrenfurth, F. S. Smythe, C. Evans, J. K. Dorawski), that heavy snow was a characteristic of the Kangchenjunga Group. Previous expeditions here also had snow-falls every day. We came to the conclusion, that the frequent, short snow-fall is due to strong sunshine causing the sublimation of snow and its combination with older layers. This explanation gave us some courage. In fact the windslab avalanches, so characteristic of fresh snow in the Tatra or the Alps, could not be observed on the surrounding slopes. Our work of transporting and climbing was exactly coordinated in time and modified according to the weather, personal and other circumstances by means of radio-communication. We used for this purpose excellent Polish radiotelephones.



7 The NW face of Kangbachen with 1st and 2nd terraces. Photo: K. Olech

Summit attack

On 14 May, while the group of W. Brański established Camp 3, we left the Base Camp together with J. Olszewski and went to Camp 2. The route via the moraine was logically marked with stone cairns by S. Wdowiak and Sherpa Wangchuck who showed a serious artistic ability for the work. We carried up a big tent, food and a lot of other gear. The group of P. Młotecki came down the same day to the Base Camp. All the other team-members were here except the sirdar who went to Ghunza.

Next day we reached Camp 3 with loads and returned for the night to the tent under the saddle, where the wind was not so piercing. On 16 May a strong wind made effective action very difficult. The group of W. Brański moved ahead over the saddle, then abseiled putting 2 ropes together and descended to Base Camp. Next day we fixed these ropes for continuous use, made them longer by about 100 m and turned back for the night to Camp 3 at the saddle.

M. Młotecki and his party who brought a 5-man tent here went down to sleep under the saddle. Later, in sleeping-bags we exchanged with J. Olszewski the impressions of the past day. The weather was fine, there was light wind and only a little snow and the heat of the sun hidden in mist was not at all annoying. Nobody moved up from the Base Camp. On the contrary A. Sobolewski and A. Gardas left the expedition due to ending of holidays. 18 and 19 May were very windy days. We did not waste the time and put some fixed ropes higher on the ice-slope separating us from the Jannu Valley. We reached here the Japanese fixed rope of the previous year hanging in perfect condition. Against the face (c 350 m high) we found the destroyed tents of an old Japanese Camp (6550 m). We repaired one of the tents and spent the night

of 18/19 May there after having cooked our meal on Japanese gas and completed our dinner with the left-over provisions. The crabs in particular were excellent as a supplement to our Polish food, and we hardly managed to keep our appetites in cautious temperance. On 18 May the party of P. Młotecki supplied Camp 3 with food and next day brought the provisions to the Japanese Camp. The party of W. Brański, completed with Sherpas and M. Piątkowski² reached Camp 2 this day coming up quickly from Base Camp. We both felt very tired and came down with J. Olszewski for a rest in Camp 3, staying there the whole of 20 May. The party of P. Młotecki came down to Base Camp except for S. Wdowiak,³ who stayed in Camp 3 for filming and photography. The same day the party of W. Brański reached Camp 3 and the Sherpas returned to sleep in the tent beneath the saddle. May 21st was a day of fine weather. We divided now into the following 3 parties: W. Brański, Z. Rubinowski and me, W. Kłaput, M. Malatyński and J. Olszewski and finally Sherpas. After reaching the Japanese Camp our colleagues made preparations to lunch there. In the meantime W. Brański and I safe-guarded the steep parts of the spur leading to the 2nd Terrace. We reached it ultimately on 22 May, when W. Kłaput, M. Malatyński and Z. Rubinowski put fixed ropes on the last pitch of the route and established Camp 4 (6800 m) there. The Sherpas went down to Camp 2 for food. The day was clear, some wind and snow worried us in the morning but plenty of sunshine came later. In the evening we were in touch with the Base Camp by radiotelephone. They told us that the monsoon was due before the end of May. The experienced Sherpas in our party appreciated that our time was becoming short. Furthermore we were informed by the Base that one Japanese expedition had climbed Jannu and another had given up only 200 m from the summit of Yalung Kang. This news given by our liaison officer was not cheering. We decided to use Alpine tactics. All six of us in Camp 4 had the necessary experience and we had used this method before in the Pamirs in 1970 and 1972 and in the Hindu Kush in 1968 when Luncho-i Dosare (6902 m) and Kohe Urgunt (7036 m) were climbed. We started the attack on the summit on 23 May. Our challenge was the time remaining before the monsoon. The risk was that we might not have enough time due to slow moving up with all gear, but on the other hand we could feel much safer having bivouac equipment with us. Our decision was confirmed in the evening by the leader. We had two tents with us, some food, enough climbing and camping equipment. Our only request was for Base Camp to push up more food to Camp 4 and for the Sherpas to bring the oxygen equipment there also. We took into account its eventual use in case of need for medical help, but we were not planning oxygen for the summit bid.

After having slept well and awakening early we left Camp 4 about 7.30. We tied on in 3 cooperating rope-parties: W. Brański and Z. Rubinowski, W. Kłaput and M. Malatyński and J. Olszewski with me. The wind was feeble but there was much deep, inconvenient snow. We traversed the Terrace diag-

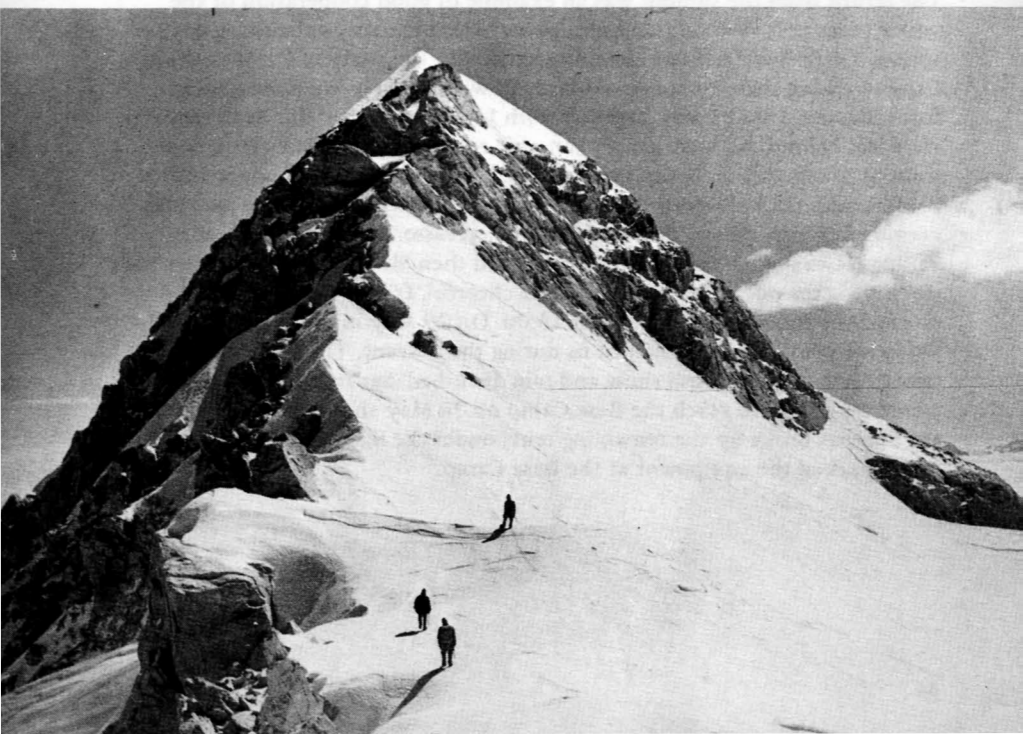
² M. Piątkowski came up to Camp 4 on 22 May and then descended with Sherpas to Base with an intermediate night in Camp 2.

³ S. Wdowiak was at the high altitude for the longest time (12 May till 30 May). He supported the summit team very actively during the descent.

onally upwards to reach the rocks on the edge of a big plateau. Beneath them the danger of avalanches was decreased. The route there was much safer but technically more difficult. We crossed ribs and spurs of snow and rock, and steep snow-fields where we had to use ice-screws as belays. About 17.00 we began to prepare Bivouac 1 on an exposed rib (7100 m), we just made two snow platforms for the tents. The 4-man tent was too big to stay on them but we could not find more space for the platforms. As a result Z. Rubinowski was compelled to stay for the night in the tent of W. Kłaput and M. Malatyński on the upper platform. We slept secured, having put the ropes through the tent wall and clipped to them with karabiners. The same day the Sherpas descended to the Saddle and P. Młotecki, A. Pietraszek, M. Rogalski left the Base for Camp 2.

On 24 May we started late about midday. The previous difficult day, hard work preparing the bivouac platforms and long cooking in the night caused this delay. The weather conditions and the climb were very similar to the day before. We went till 16.00 only and began to arrange Bivouac 2 (7300 m), again on an uncomfortable snow and rock rib. This time we managed to pitch the tents perfectly. At 19.00 we were already in our sleeping bags cooking a plentiful meal. The party of P. Młotecki bringing food to Camp 4 slept on the saddle. On 25 May we awoke early in the morning and were ready to go on at 9.00. First followed a steep descent into a couloir, partly with abseiling, and then we climbed upwards in deep snow. Before noon the S wind was blowing. It was hard work breaking the trail. Finally about 16.00 we reached

8 Kangbachen summit. Photo: Z. Rubinowski



some big stone blocks (7450 m). Under their overhangs we prepared comfortable platforms for the last Bivouac 3. Here we again put on the securing rope and slept quietly. Before that we prepared a reserve of food for the next day, our appetites were not weakened by the altitude. We left the tents on 26 May about 7.30. J. Olszewski was feeling weak in consequence of antibiotic healing several days earlier and too intensive work after it. He remained in the tent, belayed by the fixed rope. We walked about 200 m steeply up the mountain, against a strong wind blowing snow-dust in our faces. We reached the flattened part closing the couloir over rocks and discovered with astonishment that instead of the pass a vast ice-plateau stretched ahead. Several tens of metres to the left rose the rock and ice ridge of Kangbachen; far ahead the ridge of Yalung Kang appeared. The main summit of Kangchenjunga was not visible. At first the ridge was not difficult. Before the presumed summit of Kangbachen was a rock-tower, which we passed by with abseiling and then climbing up, rather burdensome at this altitude. Behind the tower was again a group of small rocks and two snowy elevations of the summit. I took one splinter of the rock as a souvenir. It was difficult to judge which elevation was higher. We climbed both of them. It was approximately 11.20. The wind was not strong and it was not very cold, however the film when loaded into my camera broke. Wojtek Brański measured the temperature of snow, it was -13°C . Beneath us clouds and fog were hiding the panorama more and more. We took pictures and waited for some clearing up of clouds for better photography. We started to go down at 13.00. Passing by the small rocks we left a note of our ascent. At 14.45 we were already back in the third bivouac place under the big stone blocks.

The return from the summit was an example of good cooperation of the whole team that gave us essential support after the many exhausting days of action. From Bivouac 3 we communicated with the party of P. Młotecki in Camp 4 asking them to come and meet us with oxygen. We moved down from Bivouac 3 on 27 May together with J. Olszewski at 9.00. Both tents were left behind, we were simply not able to carry them. We were in continuous touch with Z. Staszyszyn at Base Camp, steering us to meet with P. Młotecki and A. Pietraszek. When joined all together we bivouacked this evening in warm, peaceful snow-holes in a crevasse. Next day Japa and Pasang Dawa met us first (with oxygen) and then M. Rogalski and Wangchuck (with a big tea-pot of hot drink). In the cheerful, friendly atmosphere we reached the tents of Camp 4 about 16.00. On 29 May in Camp 3 we met S. Wdowiak who efficiently helped us during the descent. The snow was all the time heavy and wet, fresh snow and rain disturbed our return but finally we were very happy to reach the Base Camp on 30 May about 18.00. Next day the Sherpas broke up the remaining tents under the Saddle and Camp 2 while we all packed the equipment at the Base Camp.