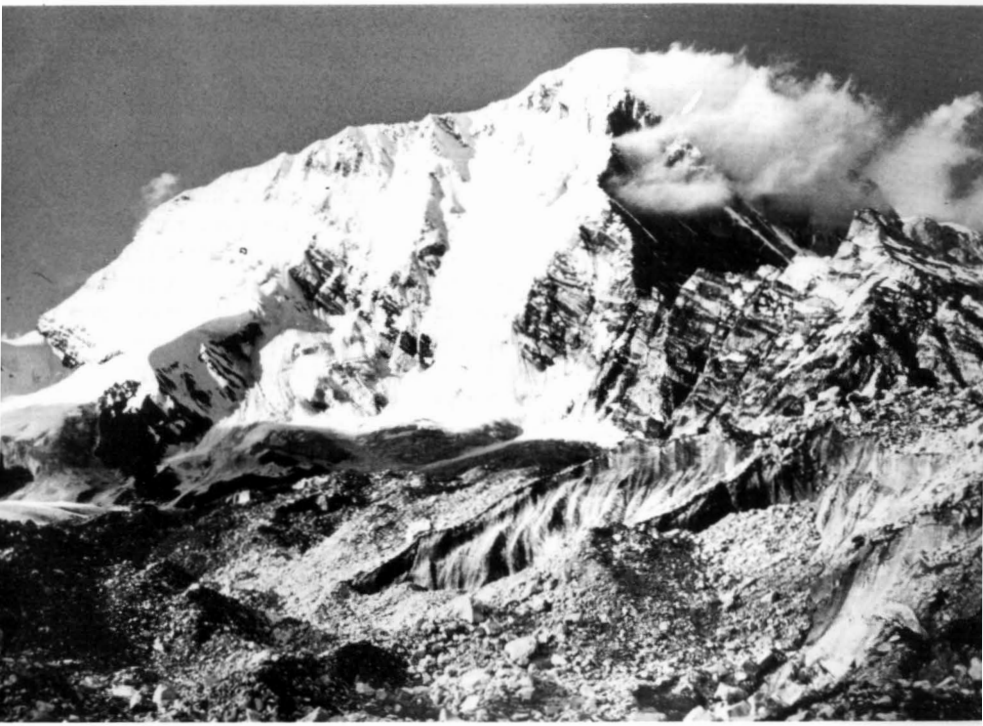
The film was ruined.

The sky was clearing. The icy summits of the Ruwenzori were clear against the last light. It was a fitting conclusion perhaps to a trip among mountains which must be unique in the world. Superb mountains. Exciting mountains. Beautiful mountains. The Mountains of the Moon – indeed, but I shall always consider them the Mountains of Suffering. The price you pay for enjoying the Ruwenzori is certainly a high one.



6 Dunagiri, climbed by the facing ridge (This and next three photos: Joe Tasker)

Small expeditions

Joe Tasker

Much attention is now being focused on small expeditions, not because they are a new concept but because of the growing concern for the long-term harm which can come from repeated, large-scale invasions of wealthy foreigners into a primitive environment. Shipton blamed Everest for the breeding of the 'big expedition' mentality, which subsequently influenced the development of the whole of Himalayan climbing. In recent years small expeditions have achieved some very hard climbs on high Himalayan peaks, ascents previously only expected from or considered by large teams. This has given impetus to the questioning of the validity of large expeditions at all. It is the point of this article to ask why big expeditions are in disfavour and whether small expeditionsare

capable of satisfying the ambitions of the most able mountaineers without damaging the environment in which they are operating.

There is some feeling that the small expeditions of Shipton, Tilman and others were only feasible and able to be organized 'in half an hour on the back of an envelope', because the projects which they were attempting were not very difficult. But, as the standard of achievement of the small expeditions has risen to rival that of any larger expedition, there can no longer be any justification for mass assaults on mountains. It is widely accepted that any route up any mountain can be climbed, technology has advanced so far; but what should be occupying us now is not the infatuation with reaching the summit but rather the style in which the ascent is made.

This is not to say that we must impose artificial handicaps in order to bring ourselves on to a par with the early pioneers with all their limitations in equipment, transportation and lack of knowledge. Nor can one turn the clock back and abolish all that technology has brought in the way of roads, bridges, téléphériques, climbing equipment and rescue services. One cannot prevent such developments by condemnation and proclamations, they answer a need and until that need changes they will be there. Fortunately there exists a wealth of mountaineering problems which will demand all the skill of modern techniques and the reliability of modern equipment. There is enough room for everyone providing that their behaviour is governed by the aim of respecting the place they are in and the people whom they are amongst.

Rather than adopt the negative, sterile attitude of regretting the current mountain scene with its cultural and ecological pollution it is necessary to seek out a positive approach which is acceptable and desirable because it satisfies

7 Base Camp, Dunagiri



the mountaineers, the local people and government too. Small expeditions to high mountains or remote regions are the only means by which mountains can be climbed or regions explored in a manner which does justice to the ceaseless search for new challenges and at the same time does justice to the region and the people of the region.

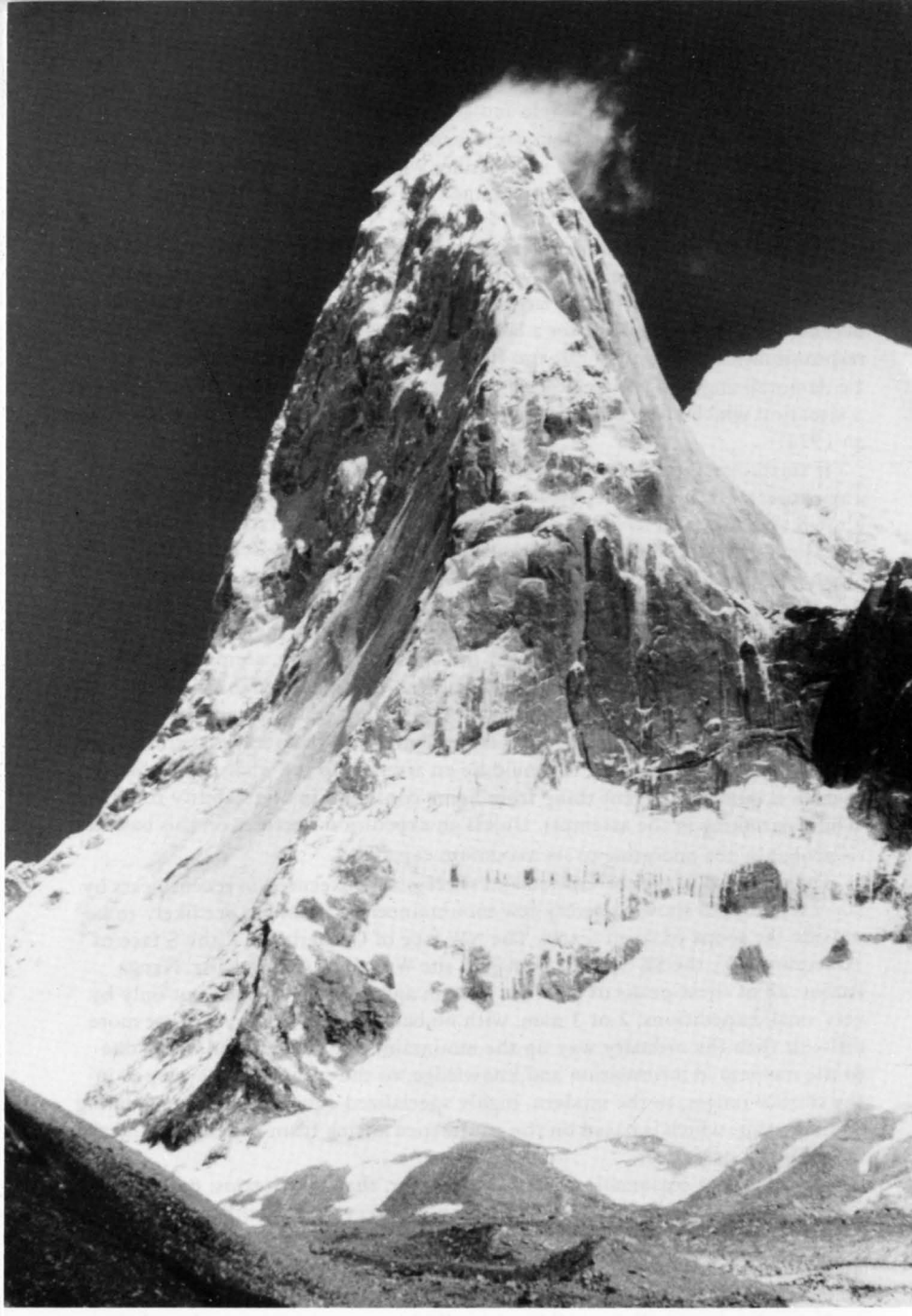
The involvment of each member in a small expedition is much more satisfying than participation, as one of many, in the customarily larger expeditions. Shipton said that he loathed the fuss of large expeditions and felt a lack of involvement because of the distribution over a large number of people of the work load and responsibilities. He pointed out too that membership of a large expedition can be demoralizing in that some capable members may feel superfluous. This was a situation which arose most drastically in the International Everest Expedition in 1971.

If small expeditions are to be put forward as the only means of continuing the exploration and development of the world's big mountains, it must be shown that they can tackle the same problems, with a fair rate of success and a reasonable chance of bringing things to a safe conclusion. Because of the investment, sponsorship and publicity involved in an expedition, especially to the Himalaya, there has been the tendency to try to guarantee success by increasing the numbers in the team. This desire to map out the progression towards success, before even leaving for the chosen objective, seems to smother the basic spontaneity of exploration and climbing; the desire to find out; as Longstaff put it: to 'rub your nose in a place before being certain that it won't go'. At its most satisfying, there is a large element of uncertainty as to the outcome of a climbing project; it should be an attempt to see what is possible (which is quite a different thing from being confident in one's ability to be safe whilst partaking in the attempt). Unless an expedition operates on this basis it is probably not operating to its maximum capability.

The standard of climbs tackled and successfully executed in recent years by small teams does show that very few mountaineering problems are likely to be outside the scope of small teams. The NW face of Gasherbrum I, the S face of Annapurna IV, the SE Spur of Dunagiri, the W Wall of Changabang, Nanga Parbat; all of these peaks of between 6800m and 8100m, climbed not only by very small expeditions, 2 or 3 men, with no back-up, but also by a route more difficult than the ordinary way up the mountain. The rise in standards is due to the increase in information and knowledge, to the techniques developed in the smaller ranges, to the modern, highly specialized equipment and to a daring commitment, which is based on the confidence arising from experience and the reliability of one's gear.

It may seem a reasonable objection, however, that small teams, especially '2-man' teams, can have little if any margin of safety. On the other hand it only requires some little investigation to realize that the commitment and techniques adopted by a small team promote and contain elements of safety which may be lacking in a larger team. 'The strongest mountaineering party is one in which each member has implicit confidence in all his companions, recognizes their vital importance in the common effort and feels himself to have an equally indispensable part to play.' (Shipton.)

There are great dangers and if one member of a small team sustains an injury,



8 Changabang with Kalanka beyond

retreat with the injured will be extremely difficult. But, in a small team, accidents due to misunderstanding, lack of coordination or disagreement, are minimized. Practically the members of a small team have to move their own equipment up the mountain and are thus never very far from their means of survival. Many accidents take place because a member of a team fails to reach or regain a camp; this need not happen when each member is virtually carrying with him his requisites for survival and can stop almost anywhere in order to wait out bad weather or to rest. In these circumstances larger numbers on a mountain would be an embarrassment since the steeper, more difficult routes now being tackled rarely have places big enough to accommodate large numbers.

There are obstacles, outside of the mountains, which are very frustrating to small teams. Inevitably the competence of a team comes to be linked with its fame and the amount of publicity which it provokes. For all that the objective may be as estimable as any, a small team may feel reluctant to court the attentions of the media. On a small expedition, personal commitment is total; the



9 Peter Boardman on steep ice-field

success of the project rests very heavily upon the individual efforts of each member and to be thrust into the limelight puts an unwelcome strain on the undertaking and may begin to influence decisions which should only be based on the situation as it is found on the mountain.

It is difficult not to be affected by the pressures of opinion and to maintain confidence in the enterprise when informed, as well as uninformed, comment expresses surprise at the modest preparations for a project which has previously been tackled with a small army of climbers, Sherpas and porters with all the attendant publicity. This may make it more difficult to raise the money and obtain the equipment required, but what is more problematical is that the government, from whom permission must be sought, will find it hard to believe that a small team is capable of such an undertaking and may refuse permission. The 'large expedition mentality' prevails right across the climbing world. The situation may change as the standards of climbing rise within the countries concerned and as equipment improves and techniques are mastered.

There is sympathy with some parties who try to avoid all the delays due to obtaining permission and receiving little cooperation, and who go there to climb quietly and without permission. But this must be a short-lived and short-sighted tendency, although demonstrating a desire to operate free of restrictions and untainted by the fuss of publicity.

One can understand the reluctance of the governments to encourage small expeditions which bring much less money into an area than does a massive, well publicized expedition. However, the influx of wealth and a materialistic ethos into primitive areas is not the best way of assisting the local populace, nor the region itself. The people of Ladakh have made a move to have tourists banned from the area in order to arrest the erosion of their culture. Much as one regrets the closing of a beautiful area, one cannot but agree with their desire to preserve their identity.

Big expeditions bring with them the elements for their own failure. It is hard not to be amused at the stories of 500 porters striking for more money or footwear (which they will only hang round their necks anyway) when it is the very unwieldiness of the expedition which has put the porters in such a strong bargaining position. Small parties going into an area will do much less damage to the personality of a people and the ecology of a region. There are benefits on both sides. Without being swamped by an invasion, the natives of an area can experience other cultures and the member of the expedition has the opportunity for informal and democratic interaction which is a healthy development from the anonymous servant role, a legacy which expeditions have inherited from a colonial past.

Mountaineering expeditions may start the trend towards visiting unknown regions, and, if they are too big, introduce all the crises which go with overpopulation and cultural change, but in their wake will come the trekkers and tour operators, and the scene will change with escalating rapidity. Their arrival can tend to destroy the charm and wildness which they have come to seek. At the moment the restrictions on tourists are erratic and unguided by purposeful policy. It is essential that the trek organizers and promoters be aware of their responsibilities to the area in which they operate, and realize, at the very least, that the tendency to make a lot of money by bringing as many people as possible to an area is, in the end, self-defeating.



10 Joe Tasker on Changabang (Photo: Peter Boardman)

It is likely that the governing bodies of these regions will become more organized in their endeavour to exploit the potential of the numbers of visitors to the wild areas and that the financial advantages will be more evenly distributed. Some steps have been taken in fixing rates of pay for porters but, when

the demand for them heavily outweighs their availability, a fixed rate does not prevent strikes nor demands for more gifts. The porters are becoming the *nouveaux-riches* of the Himalaya, with all the imbalances which this implies. Some systems such as that employed by the Swiss, where proceeds are shared on a commune basis, might be a more equitable way of distributing the benefits. This too would be able to cope more readily with a changing situation in which trekking parties and tourists will become more numerous even than large climbing expeditons.

A big expedition can be fun; a prolonged holiday in the company of friends, but, at the worst, it can also be an ordeal of rivalry, bickering and recrimination. No matter what the internal circumstances of the expedition, the long-term penalties are too disastrous to allow us to overrun an area with armies of friends. There is much romantic idealism put forward by people about small expeditions, without any real appreciation of just what is involved. A small expedition is primarily very hard work, both in the organizational and practical stages. Membership of a small team requires a level of tolerance and maturity far beyond normal demands, if the project is to succeed. It would need a raconteur of genius to maintain a flow of conversation into the second and third month of an expedition with one or two people whose every whim and trait have become so well known and to whom comments about the weather or the view seem like ridiculous imitations of sitting-room small talk.

It might seem that a mild fanaticism or intense dedication is needed for a small team to carry out a difficult project successfully; the strains, tensions and commitment are of a very high order. But this must be the sport at its healthiest—healthy because it is satisfying to a person attempting, with a chance of succeeding, something at the limit of his capabilities; and healthy for the environment in which he is attempting it as a visitor and not an invader.

Winter at 8250 metres

Polish expedition to Lhotse 1974

Andrzej Zawada
(Translation: Peter and Ingeborga Cochlin)

It was 1973. We were going down to the Hindukush Valley; we could feel that Spring was coming. The grass had already started to turn green and could be seen here and there through the snow. It was warm and peaceful. The memories we had of the awful bitter winds we had struggled against on the ridges were quickly forgotten. There was only one thought which was important – the first winter expedition to 7000m had ended in complete success.

It was 13 February, 1973 and we were standing on the top of Noshaq at 7492m. Perhaps it was then while warming ourselves in the Afghan spring sun that we began to think about our next winter expedition: but this time it would be to 8000m. I think that the test of our endurance we had undergone