electron ladder from the Herrligkoffer expedition of 1970. With radio messages relayed via Base Camp, communication was made with Camp 2. From their sheltered position in the ice-cave they could easily be fooled into believing conditions were 'not too bad'. Once out in the open, the full force of the wind soon changed their minds and sent them fleeing to Camp 1, frostnipped and exhausted.

It was 14 January and the expedition seemed to be grinding to a halt. Most of us now felt physically worn out and we had all lost weight. Simply surviving at Base Camp took its toll. The Poles, who looked robust at the start, were now thin-faced and drawn, while the slimline Brits became more like matchstick-men every day. We had set ourselves a maximum of 60 days at Base Camp, of which only 14 now remained. We all returned there now to decide our future on Nanga Parbat.

Our arrival at Base Camp had taken place in perfect weather. In fact the weather had been fine since well before our arrival in Pakistan on 21 November. People in Gilgit informed us that clear, calm conditions had prevailed since early October. It certainly made us think: perhaps we were two months too late. Instead of the traditional summer months, the autumn period could be a good time to climb in the Karakoram, especially if the peaks being attempted have ease of access and are not subject to major logistical problems should the winter snows come early. The advantages seem obvious: colder temperatures make for safer snow and ice conditions (though an extra pullover might be necessary for those long cold nights!). With few people in the mountains and the possibility of stable weather, it might be an ideal time for small, lightweight expeditions.

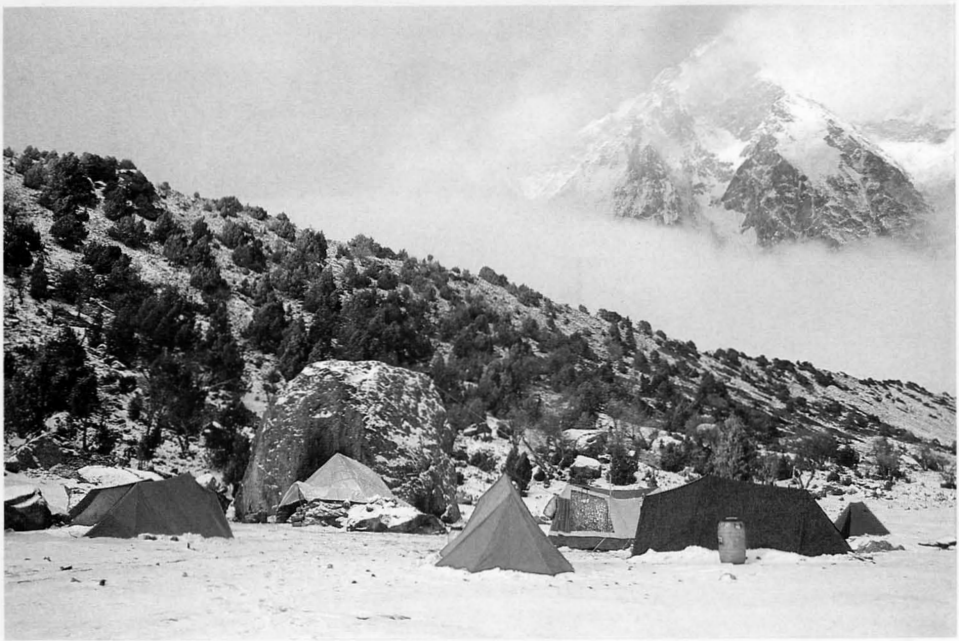
The one-day walk-in from the roadhead at Tarshing had been a pleasant experience despite the rapid altitude gain. In winter one loses the bright colours of summer fields, but the subtle browns and ochres of the Rupal valley have their own charm in the sharp winter light. The people appear more friendly when they are not tied to the rigours of agriculture, as in the summer; winter allows them more time to themselves, and they sit around their homes offering tea and being sociable.

Base Camp was set up below the final moraine ridge of the Bazhin glacier on the true left bank at 3500m – 'The Polish Base Camp'. This was the site of previous expeditions: the Polish Pillar team of 1985 when Kukuczka reached the summit via the SE pillar, and Maceij Berbeka's first attempt in the winter of 1988–9. It is an agreeable site but not quite as beautiful as the Herrligkoffer Base Camp in the Tap valley, which (importantly in winter) receives the sun for longer. However, we were pitched on grass – a rare experience in the Karakoram; and, significantly for the Poles, our Base Camp could be reached in one porter stage less than would be needed to cross the glacier to the Tap valley.

The route we had come to climb was the Rupal Direct. It has a vertical interval from the glacier to the summit of almost 4500m: 'The Biggest Wall in the World'. This huge wall was first climbed in 1970 by the Messner brothers and, a day later, by Felix Kuen and Peter Scholz. (Despite several subsequent attempts it has still not received a second ascent.) That expedition was the source of bitter recriminations following the death of Gunther Messner during the brothers' epic descent of the Diamir Face. Dr Herrligkoffer, the expedition



11. Nanga Parbat in winter. Approaching Camp 1.5 in fine weather early in the expedition. (*Nick Kekus*) (p43)



12. Base Camp with snow. (*Nick Kekus*) (p43)

leader, came in for much criticism from Reinhold Messner, and he went so far as to get an injunction stopping the distribution of Messner's book *Red Rocket on Nanga Parbat*. The full story is shrouded in mystery and, 20 years after the event, the injunction still stands.

The weather continued fine in early December and we made rapid progress. Camp 1 (4700m) was established below the Wieland rocks on 1 December. Fresh with enthusiasm and Maceij's route knowledge we pushed on, fixing rope to establish a temporary camp at 5500m. Camp 1.5 became a half-way springboard from which to extend the route to Camp 2 (6100m). Once Camp 2 was in, it was removed. However, this left a vertical interval of 1400m between the two camps. The distance was just a bit too far in one day, and it was necessary to leave very early for the eight- to nine-hour slog. It left one feeling extremely tired and hard pushed to be effective for the following day's climbing. Both nationalities struggled here, preferring the 'slowly, slowly but progress' tactic advocated by Maceij, rather than a Tomo Cesen style sprint for the summit.

The good weather could not last and it finally broke on 8 December, but not before it had us questioning whether we should change our plan and try a fast ascent of the Schell route. To get up the mountain was the prime objective, claimed some of the Poles, but Maceij's perception of the situation showed his experience. He pointed out that the reason why the Schell route had been climbed so late (1976) was that the route was exposed to the wind. Its easier-angled upper slopes would form dangerous windslab conditions, making retreat in a winter storm a very serious prospect.

The weather continued unsettled; our progress was sporadic and slow, to say the least. Having taken only six days to gain 2000m it took until 22 December to establish Camp 2. It was a frustrating period, as team after team struggled to gain height. The tedium was broken on 19 December. Being woken at Base Camp from a fitful sleep by the sound of avalanches was nothing new; they happened frequently, sometimes as many as six in one day. But this one was different – louder for a start, and with two distinct crashes? I only had a few seconds to ponder; then the wind came. It all happened so quickly: the violent shaking grew to a crescendo, as the tent buckled and then collapsed with what sounded like crashing ice-blocks being trundled around.

Instinctively I leapt forward, still trapped in my enveloping sleeping-bag. The tent was virtually flattened as I tore the zipped door open into the raging storm. I huddled in the remnants of the doorway, head up for fear of being buried. After what seemed an eternity the wind eased and the whiteout conditions subsided. In the dim light of 6am I could see the mayhem of crumpled tents. Maceij shouted for help as Krzysztof, trapped in an adjacent tent, struggled to free himself. The scene was one of utter devastation. Finally we all emerged unhurt from the remains of our tents, still stunned and confused by what had happened.

Apparently a giant serac had broken away from the Rupal Face – later I could see clearly the path it had taken. From about 7000m, it had made a vertical drop of 3500m, smashing into the glacier below. The serac had fallen with such force that it had atomised instantly, forcing the mass of air in its path to sweep down

the valley – a high-speed powder-ball which destroyed everything in its path. Branches of trees were severed, empty tents were blown away, and ice screws lost from tents were found over 500m away. Fortunately no one was hurt and the fact that it happened at night, while we were all asleep in our tents, may have saved us. Anyone caught out in the open could have been in serious trouble. Base Camp was never the same again; we never felt completely relaxed there after that, and whenever a rumble came from the mountain our heads would turn anxiously to check the avalanche's intensity and see if it was heading our way.

With Camp 2 finally established just before Christmas, some of us thought we would be justified in taking a break from the mountain to celebrate the festive season; others felt we should stay on the mountain, Christmas or not. In the end the weather decided for us. On 24 December, having improved the tent accommodation and fixed a short section of rope above the camp, we retreated back to Base Camp, with the weather deteriorating as rapidly as we were descending. Christmas was a cheerful and high-spirited occasion, though the small quantities of alcohol available were sadly short of the Poles' capacity. However, a visit from our friend Mohammed Ali Chengasi on Christmas Day renewed our interest in the festivities, as the two aid workers he had in tow produced some more booze and Mohammed himself contributed a wonderful array of fruit, sweetmeats and other delicacies. In the midst of all the merriment winter truly arrived. It snowed for eight days, confining us all to Base Camp where the restrictive daily routine got everyone down.

Meanwhile, Simon had an infection in the sole of his foot, caused by stepping on a thorn while in southern India two months before. It had become badly infected and, despite the doctor's efforts with antibiotics, it gradually got worse. Finally, on 28 September, Dr Krzysztof Witkowski decided to perform a minor operation, cutting the wound open to release the poisonous pus. Simon was effectively out of action and could take no further part in the climbing. But the frustrating thing was that he could not go home either. Firstly, the weather conditions made travel for him impossible and, secondly, the doctor refused to let him go while the wound was in such a vulnerable state. Also it was obviously necessary for the doctor to stay with the expedition and he could not accompany him out. Simon spent the rest of the time hobbling around with the aid of ski poles, reading every book in camp and quietly going crazy. We had to admire Simon – the way he coped with it all so well; and this coming after a previous illness that stopped him from climbing Shivling in the autumn of 1990.

As January wore on, our efforts to reach Camp 3 became ever more urgent. Jon Tinker and I completed the fixed ropes on the Welzenbach spur, while Maceij and Tiger pressed on to reach the Welzenbach couloir. Though we did not know it at the time, this was our highest point. Subsequent teams could get no further, and on 14 January we all gathered at Base Camp to discuss our future on the mountain.

At the beginning of the expedition Jon had joked with me: 'You wait,' he had said, 'The Poles will plod away until there's two weeks left; then they'll throw away their sleeping-bags and rush for the summit!' What Maceij suggested next was not so far removed. The options seemed clear enough: continue with the



13. John Tinker approaching Camp 2 in poor weather.
(*Nick Kekus*) (p43)

direct route, go home, or change route altogether. After much discussion we chose the latter and it seemed that Jon's prophesy was coming true. The Schell route, on the extreme left-hand side of the Rupal Face, is thought to be the easiest way to the summit of Nanga Parbat – if one exists! Maceij proposed that we mount an alpine-style attempt on the route, first climbing to about 7000m for acclimatisation, followed by a last-ditch effort for the summit.

Three days later, on 18 January, Tiger and I set off for the Tap valley, followed the next day by Jon and Maceij. We spent an uncomfortable night on the approach to the first difficult rock buttress. Three people in a two-man tent, with meagre food supplies, made me see the foolishness of it all. I decided to retreat, leaving Tiger and Jacek with a better chance. On the way down I met Jon and Maceij who were strong and later caught up with the first pair. The four continued, finding difficult climbing on the rock buttress. Above, on the easy snow ridge, they were exposed to cruel winds and had to struggle to keep going. By 21 January they reached 6600m but that evening they informed us over the radio that Tiger had frost-bitten toes and they would all retreat the following morning.

We organised a team to field them down, but they made such a fast descent that they were off the mountain and coming down the Tap valley when we met. Thankfully, Andrzej's toes were not seriously frost-bitten, but I was amazed to hear that, once rested, the four still wished to make another attempt. This seemed to me the height of folly after our earlier caution. Even our first attempt on the Schell route had been rushed and ill-prepared; a second attempt would be even worse, since the hill food was all but finished and the lads were now visibly exhausted. All this determination was too much for Sean, Simon and me, so we made rapid arrangements to leave Base Camp. Simon's foot was now sufficiently improved for him to be moved and we obtained a horse to carry him to the roadhead. The three of us left Base Camp on 23 January, making the irksome return to Gilgit and Islamabad via the Karakoram Highway.

Jon Tinker elected to stay for that 'one last attempt' with the Poles. Two days later they all quit as, once again, the weather deteriorated. Their return journey was fraught with problems as roads were washed away and a Richter scale 6 earthquake closed the Karakoram Highway; in Rawalpindi, Muslim feeling was mounting in the wake of the Gulf War.

In retrospect the expedition was a great experience – we had a 'good go' but the weather had been awful. High winds above 6000m made the climbing difficult and at times impossible, yet it had been surprisingly good fun. The cold was just about bearable – one obviously becomes acclimatised to it, as with altitude. However, it was interesting to note that we struggled with acclimatisation problems at lower altitudes than we expected. As Jon said: 'Everything feels 1000m higher in winter!'

The Poles, who are renowned for their determination and success on 8000m peaks in winter, were also pleasant, extremely friendly, and revealed a sense of humour not unlike the British. But it was their pragmatic approach to mountaineering that impressed me as much as anything. One of the ways they fund their expeditions is to recruit climbers from the west to help out with equipment and hard cash; on the mountain they are sensible and cautious. The

Poles do not have the same ethical restraints that often inhibit climbers from the west; for instance, they are not afraid to use fixed ropes and siege tactics if it seems appropriate, nor to make bold, lightweight pushes if they think they can get away with it.

Winter climbing on the highest mountains will never be easy or popular, but it does open up a whole new theatre of adventure for those who seek an extra challenge in our increasingly crowded mountains. The Poles are the undisputed leaders and their past record on winter 8000m peaks is evidence of their skill and endurance. Krowa (the Happy Cow) summed up the Polish attitude to winter climbing with his regular pronouncement when things turned grim: 'Nick! . . . don't worry, life no easy!'

Summary: Nick Kekus joined an Anglo–Polish team which attempted an ascent of the Rupal Direct on Nanga Parbat, 8125m – a vertical interval from glacier to summit of almost 4500m – during the winter of 1990–91. Having established Camp 2 at 6100m, a violent storm and avalanches forced a retreat to Base Camp. Adverse weather conditions foiled a subsequent attempt to establish Camp 3. A last-ditch attempt on the Schell route had to be abandoned at 6600m owing to strong winds and frost-bite.