Trench Warfare on Makalu

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(*Plates 26, 27, 30*)

The lower Makalu Base Camp at the head of the lovely Barun valley must be one of the most beautiful places on earth. It is situated on a flat, grassy shelf, bright with flowers, just above the stony outwash plain of the Barun glacier. The site seems totally safe but it is encircled by rock walls, noisy hanging seracs and fluted ice. Nearest and most dramatic of all is the formidable S face of Makalu itself. An inspiring place to spend a couple of months, you might think; yet for me it was not so. On the contrary, it was a profoundly depressing experience.

Disillusion set in the day we arrived at Base Camp. Initial euphoria turned to disgust as we noticed tin cans everywhere and discovered scraps of polythene and silver foil, bits of rag and old torch batteries under every boulder. Cans were scattered all over the outwash plain, blown by the wind over an area a mile long by half a mile wide. A huge open pit was full to the brim with rubbish. The so-called Hillary Base Camp was the same. So was the Advanced Base, used that year by Spanish, Catalan, American and German expeditions as their Base Camp. Garbage from Britain, Poland, Japan, France, Italy, Germany and Spain was clearly recognisable – the price paid by Makalu for being an international status symbol. Almost every spot that could be camped on looked and often smelt like a municipal tip. Two of us followed the route of a trekking party up to the Sherpani La. It was easy to follow – a paper chase of luxury items imported from France. The overnight camp was a miniature version of Base Camp. No attempt had been made to burn, bury or conceal the rubbish, let alone carry it out. Higher up, every drink stop was waymarked with packets of fruit crystals, isotonic drinks and chocolate-bar wrappers, dropped where they had been opened, in or beside the infrequent melt streams.

Up on the snow, Camps 1 and 2 were surrounded by this year's contribution: gas cylinders, foil packets, Kodachrome boxes simply tossed out of the tents, even when there were large crevasses nearby. Camp 3, above the Makalu La, was kept clear by the good offices of the wind which removed everything to deposit it who knows where. Whatever the motives that bring mountaineers to these high mountains, pleasure in pristine, unsullied landscape is clearly not one of them.

And what of ourselves? It is easy to become 'holier than thou' about these things. More than one neat bagfull of rubbish and good intentions was discovered and broadcast by the ravens. There was British rubbish left behind at Advanced Base and more at Camp 1. Down in the valley we held long debates and agonised over the Base Camp mess – our own and the great communal pit below us. Should we carry everything out? If so, where to? Was it more

acceptable to dump it in a Nepalese village than up in the mountains? What about dropping it in a mountain lake or in the Arun river? If it was not removed, should it be buried or was it better to leave it in an open pit to encourage others to use it? We reached no definite conclusions and in our leaderless, anarchic, British way made only individual, impromptu decisions about it. But we did collect many basketfuls of rubbish and left the place cleaner than we found it. A dozen porterloads of old tins were sent down the valley, although when last seen they were still stacked behind the house of our assistant sirdar. The rest we buried by filling in the pit.

A problem common to all expeditions in Nepal is that the Sherpas apparently regard it as unlucky to burn anything until they leave a camp. Stacked behind a boulder, much of our paper and cardboard migrated down to the outwash plain, to mingle with edelweiss and blue poppy as soon as the wind blew. We had transported our food and equipment in a mixture of plastic barrels and tin trunks. The barrels were highly prized as *baksheesh* and were saleable items. The tin trunks, on the other hand, must have been diabolically uncomfortable to carry and once they had been battered and bashed were of little use to anyone. In the end, we left behind at least 20, on the understanding that the local yak herder would collect them in the spring to build himself a new shelter . . .

Litter was not the only thing to mar my enjoyment. A hundred years ago and more, Leslie Stephen described the Alps as 'the playground of Europe'. Today, the Alps are more like a fairground and Nepal has the dubious distinction of being the new playground. Climbers from all over the world flock to its prestigious 8000m peaks and to the cheaper and more accessible, if misleadingly named, trekking peaks. Some of the fine peaks in between are quiet by comparison. Makalu has become so popular a goal that it now sports a guidebook in German. Hand in hand with the guidebook mentality, not only cairns but blobs of green paint mark the route up the moraine-covered glacier to Advanced Base – a piece of idiocy if ever there was one; glaciers do not move at a conveniently uniform rate and the paint marks are already more of a hindrance than a help. But then, like so many aspects of behaviour in our society, the markers were painted for the short-term benefit of one small group, with no thought for others or for the future. This is not just conservationist whinging. At the root of any global problem you care to think of lies the inability of both governments and individuals to consider consequences, to think of other people or other species, to look to the future.

Nepal is suffering drastically from deforestation, largely as a result of population growth; but in the upper valleys climbers and trekkers have undoubtedly played their part. The Barun valley is one of the few well-wooded areas left in Nepal – but for how long? Ministry of Tourism regulations are explicit that live wood must not be cut to provide fuel for base camps and that all rubbish must be taken out. Yet, almost every day, porters laden with firewood passed through on their way to the higher base camps. Here, at least, we had a clear conscience.

Down on the outwash plain below us, a French expedition pitched its tents. I found it sad to be woken in the morning by a generator providing the power for



26. Flowers outside tent at Base Camp on Makalu. (*Rob Collister*) (p85)



27. Trekkers' overnight camp, Sherpani Col, Makalu. (*Rob Collister*) (p85)

a satellite dish, so that a journalist could telephone daily reports to Paris. I was glad that, although we had film-makers with us, we were not under that sort of pressure to succeed; we were climbers climbing for ourselves, not gladiators performing in a public arena.

Up on the mountain, tents and fixed ropes were expendable. Once established, it seemed there was never any intention of removing them. Only the Americans and ourselves seemed particularly concerned about how the mountain was treated. And we, too, abandoned a tent. There is a school of thought that regards leaving camps as totally reasonable, as they either disappear or become fair game for the next party. A variation on this attitude is that, in the total scheme of things, both ourselves and our litter are so infinitesimal that it is a waste of energy worrying about them. I cannot agree with either view. After all, we live in the here and now and react to what we see. Beauty in mountains is akin to mood. It is a personal, subjective response – an emotion in individuals rather than an objective, concrete reality. It is easily damaged, even destroyed. For me, on Makalu, it was certainly badly bruised. An incomparable mountainscape was being diminished, and the quality of what we could feel and experience there cheapened. Not everyone saw it that way, to be sure. Some appeared to see only the glory of the place and seemed unaware of the tawdriness we had introduced. Was I being over sensitive? Some will think so, I know. Or was it just that being alone, in a small group, in a genuinely wild, untrammelled landscape, and responding to it heart and soul, is an experience harder to come by in this age of packaged and, all too often, irresponsible adventure? If you have never experienced unsullied 'wilderness', maybe you will suffer no pangs when you visit Makalu Base Camp; but you will also have missed out on a most precious gift. It is like a guided tour of some great medieval cathedral, with postcards to buy and a cream tea afterwards, compared with the worship of a fervent congregation or kneeling there alone at dusk.

For me, it was a new experience to be on a Himalayan mountain with five other teams, not to mention a party on Baruntse and innumerable trekking groups. In some ways it was fun – a bit like climbing in Chamonix. We all made good friends with climbers of other nationalities. The downside was that I had a rope and an ice-axe stolen from Camp 1, by whom I know not. After we had decided not to go for the SW ridge, with its infamous descent into the Cwm of Despair, and had switched our attention to the ordinary route, the Catalans suddenly became very uptight. It transpired that they resented breaking trail endlessly through deep monsoon snow and fixing ropes in a couple of places, only for others, like ourselves, to take advantage of them. It was at this point that Calvin Torrans suggested that 'trench warfare' would be an apt description of the climbing and a good title for an article. My thanks (or apologies) to him. Relations improved again after we started to do our share of trench-making. In retrospect, the most enjoyable part of the trip for me was the few days Pete Getzels and I spent mountaineering and acclimatising in perfect solitude on the big high plateau between Sherpani La and West Col.

It was a novelty, too, to be a member of such a large team and to know no one well beforehand. I enjoyed making new friends, and meals in the big mess tent made out of tarpaulins were a time for wide-ranging conversation and some

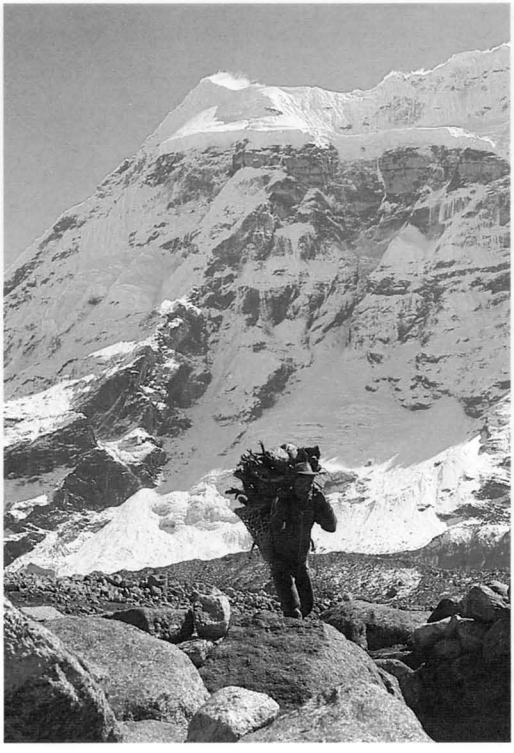
good laughs. We were a diverse group of 16, a big expedition by any standards. There were ten climbers with one doubling as a doctor, four film-makers involved in two separate films, a nutritionist who gleefully monitored our body fat with a pair of giant pincers and weighed every plateful of food, a nanny – and baby Rachel, aged 2½, who was easily the most cheerful and resilient member of the team.

Unfortunately, throughout the three months we were in Nepal, there was an underlying tension between some of the climbers and one of the film crews. What surprised me was that some very experienced, otherwise sensible, mature people made no attempt to conceal or sublimate their antagonism for the duration of the trip. In terms of human relations, to my mind just as important as the climbing outcome, the trip was a disaster. The effort required on an expedition is not just physical.

I suppose another factor in my mixed feelings about the expedition was the time away from home and loved ones. Three months is a long time. But big mountains need a lot of time – for bureaucratic hassles, for a long walk-in, for thorough acclimatisation and for repeated attempts. Moreover, big peaks are undeniably dangerous and it does not help when wife and children are well aware of it. Perhaps high-altitude mountaineering should be a single person's indulgence. At all events, at the back of my personal urgent desire to climb Makalu was a sense of guilt and the knowledge that it was highly unlikely that I would ever again bring myself to be so wittingly selfish.

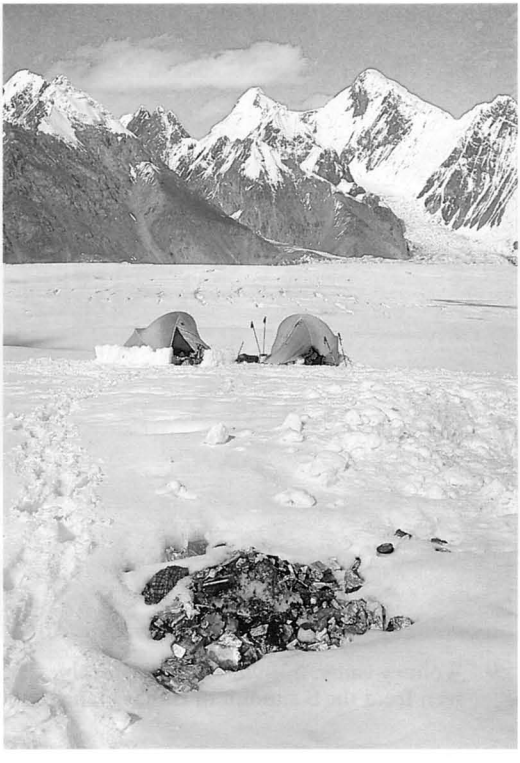
We did not get up the mountain. The unsettled weather of the monsoon ended with a two-metre dump of snow and almost immediately the jet-stream winds of winter set in, converting all that snow to windslab. The 'window' of fine weather we had been waiting for never materialised. At Base Camp, we enjoyed blue skies and warm sunshine throughout October. Above the Makalu La temperatures were in the -30s, the wind blew persistently at 60–70mph and the snow became steadily more dangerous. I did my best, have never tried harder, despite reaching only 7600m. I might have been more successful, personally, if I had had an established climbing partner. I learned that two days' rest after a big effort at altitude is not nearly enough. We might all have been more successful if we had recognised that, under prevailing conditions and on a non-technical route, it was more sensible to work together as a team rather than in ones and twos. But we never really had a chance of reaching the summit.

No one that season climbed the NW ridge of Makalu, though there were nearly 50 people trying to. The only successful ascent was of the S face by Pierre Beghin, solo. My admiration for this feat is not whole-hearted. Beghin works in an avalanche institute; he knows the effect of strong winds on powder snow. He was in radio contact with the Spaniards at Camp 3, above the Makalu La, before and during his climb. Yet when his friends decided to turn back he chose to go on, fully aware that he would have to descend the NW side of the mountain loaded with windslab. In the event he was avalanched twice, surviving falls of 200m and 400m. No one can dispute his skill, daring and fortitude. But would he, I wonder, have climbed the S face if that journalist had not been sitting beside the telephone at Base Camp, desperate for copy to send back to a French nation celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Revolution?



30. *Left* Wood being brought up to a high camp on Makalu. (*Rob Collister*) (p85)

31. *Right* Abandoned rubbish in the Tien Shan. (*Roger Payne*) (p79)



When *Mountain* magazine declared that 'the Makalu massif was the place to be last summer', it may have been true for Beghin, it may even have been true for Steve Sustad and Victor Saunders who, in bad weather, climbed a fine line on the W face of Makalu II and made it back down by the skin of their teeth; but it was certainly not true for everybody. Admittedly, within our team a lot of effort went into convincing ourselves and the world that we *had* been successful really. But it was not true. Even if we did climb 17 summits, one or two of them good ones, we were there to climb Makalu and we came nowhere near it. We were all disappointed. Why not admit it?

I will be accused of sour grapes, no doubt. Had I climbed the mountain I might feel a little better about the expedition as a whole. But only a little. My experience on Makalu makes me seriously wonder whether Ruskin was right all those years ago.[1] Perhaps all that climbers really need *is* a greased pole (or an indoor wall?). I had always assumed that, under even the most macho exterior, deep down all climbers cared for rocks and mountains, for wild places and beautiful landscapes. Why else would they climb? In Britain, self-inflicted wounds, such as Craig-y-Forwen,[2] made me wonder. But those were caused by irresponsible young rock-jocks, weren't they? Mountaineers are different, surely. I suppose the state of every summit in the Alps gives the lie to that one. But still I had faith. Not any more, alas.

I don't know what the solution is. Probably there isn't one. But I will not be going back to the really big mountains. A 7000m peak with a small group of mates – perhaps some of the friends made this time? Yes, I hope so. But an eightthousander . . . never again.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1 John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 1865. 'The alps themselves, which your own poets used to love so reverently, you look upon as soaped poles in a bear-garden, which you set yourselves to climb and slide down again, "with shrieks of delight".' Later, after an agreeable visit as a guest, Ruskin became a member of the Alpine Club in 1869.

2 Craig-y-Forwen is a delightful limestone crag on the coast of N Wales near Colwyn Bay, to which climbers have been denied access for several years as a result of bad language floating over the farm and caravan site below, inconsiderate parking, litter and excrement at the base of the crag, and persistent discourtesy to the owner.