DOUG SCOTT

Kangchenjunga 1979

(*Plates 11–14*)

I first saw Kangchenjunga from Everest in 1975 – 75 miles away on the map as the crow flies – and it took from late '75 to '79 to get permission to climb it. John Hunt was a great help with this and we had to bring all the big guns to bear on the problem because Nepal had never officially opened Kangchenjunga for climbing. All the people coming in from Sikkim had just done it without permission from the Nepalese government, but by 1979 things were a lot tighter. We felt very privileged to be there and to be the first to go to the west side of the mountain since Frank Smythe and the Swiss were there in 1930 and 1931. From our reading of those times and of the reconnaissance trips and the successful trip in 1955, we knew that we should expect very high winds and avalanches. It was an avalanche, of course, that put Smythe and his party off. In 1930 Sherpa Chettan was killed when an avalanche broke off low down and they gave up on this side. Avalanches had also deterred the Swiss and Germans from going this way. So we were lucky to be able to go there because, as late as 1979, there was a whole side of this third highest mountain in the world that no one had really attempted. It's amazing to think now that as late as '79 we were there to make only the third ascent of Kangchenjunga, whereas nowadays the mountain is climbed two, three or even four times a year.

Having thought about the avalanches and having seen them when we got there, our plan was to run the gauntlet quickly and get onto the West Face leading to the North Col. That was going to be our biggest technical problem – a 3500ft wall not unlike the North Face of the Droites – but here rising to about 23,000ft, to the North Col.

The walk-in took 18 days, with rests at Ghunsa, along wonderful trails. Trekking in Nepal, even though a lot of people do it now, is still a wonderful event. Just to get into this steady routine of exercise and rest and to start to really get into the country and the people and yourselves; to enjoy your food, to wake up in the morning well rested after four or five days on the trail, and to wake up naturally like you used to do when you were a kid, with nothing on your mind at all and nothing to do but do the walk – marvellous!

The advances that have come to Himalayan climbing since the war all occurred after Griffith Pugh showed, conclusively and scientifically, just

how much we need to stop and take liquid on our Himalayan climbs. Before then dehydration was always confused with lack of oxygen, whereas it might not have been caused by lack of oxygen at all but simply by not drinking enough. So we really took this to heart and always stopped at eleven for a brew. 1 o'clock was the main meal of the day and we stopped at 4 o'clock for another brew. It does take time but it enables you to get your ideas together and make sure that you are in harmony with yourselves, which is essential on these sort of lightweight trips on which you can't afford any kind of disagreement or confusion at all. You need to be channelling all your energies together in one direction if you're going to do it. So this is a good time to make sure you are all in harmony with each other.

My companions in 1979 were Peter Boardman, Joe Tasker and Georges Bettembourg from Argentière. Peter had a fall while bouldering by the Tamur river – George gave him a playful push back at the top of a slab and Peter went sliding down and his foot went over with a loud crack on a tussock of grass. He thought he had broken it but we told him he hadn't (not really knowing), but he was talking about going home. As that represented one quarter of our strength we weren't having that, so we had this carriage constructed and Peter was carried (he was 187lbs) by three Sherpas in relays, all day and everyday, for the next five or six days. (The Sherpas probably only weighed about 120lbs!)

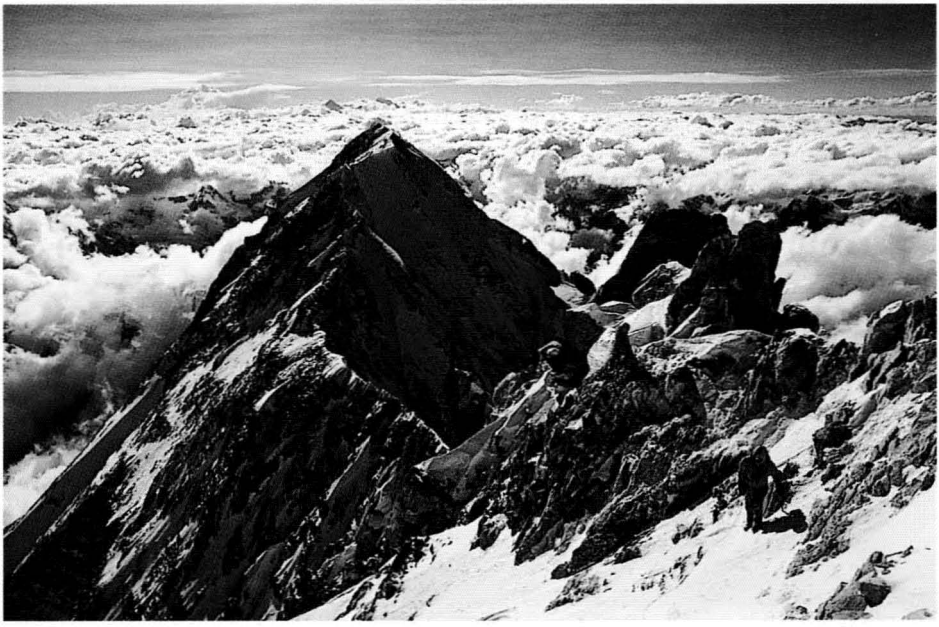
The 75-mile walk to Jannu and Kangchenjunga was quite wonderful – to start with along the ridge from Hille from which we could see the Everest group – Chamlang and Makalu. The path was precipitous in places and Peter must sometimes have felt quite insecure wobbling about on the porters' backs. He would come in at night long after us, but we kept him at it and eventually, around Ghunsa, he started to take a few tentative steps and thereafter he could walk.

We mostly had Sherpanis driving the yaks with our luggage on board up the valleys to Base Camp. As we gained height, passing the great West Face of Jannu, it was all we could do to stop ourselves vomiting from the effects of the altitude, while the Sherpanis were dancing for three or four hours at a stretch, all afternoon and into the evening. The Sherpas went up to a little village shrine to put offerings for our safety: 'it all helps', we thought. We then had to go down to the glacier (they are all shrinking, of course) and round the corner to the West Face.

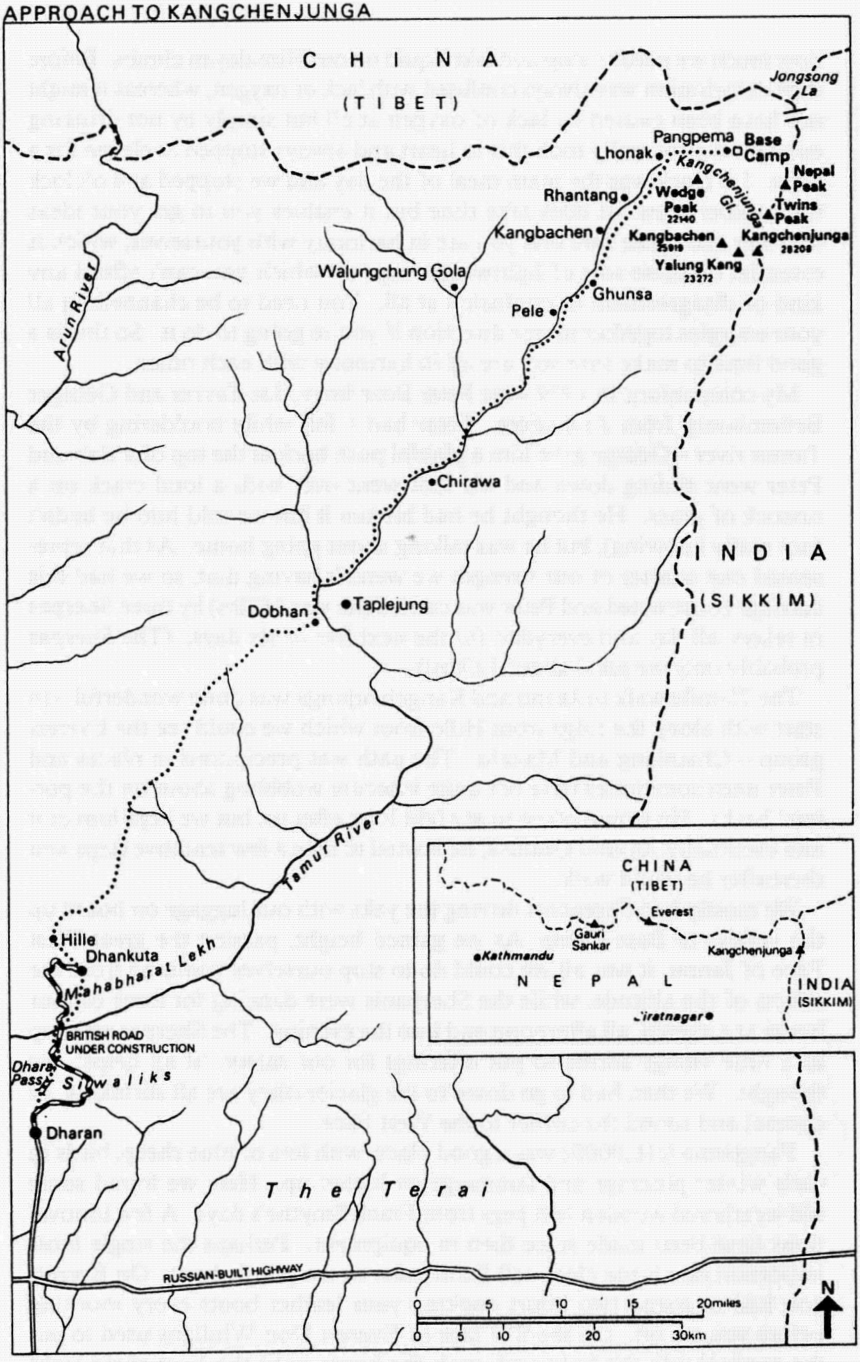
Pangpema (*c*16,000ft) was a good place, with lots of blue sheep, birds in their winter plumage and lammergeyer higher up. Here we found some old weathered wooden tent pegs from Frank Smythe's days. A few innovations have been made since then in equipment. Perhaps the single most important one is the close-cell foam inner to the plastic boot. On Everest you had to spend two hours cooking your leather boots every morning before you set off. On the SW face of Everest Don Whillans used to put the stove inside the boot and cook the boots until the heat came right through the leather – never mind the smell! Now all that was a thing of



11. The NW side of Kangchenjunga in 1979. (*Doug Scott*) (p44)



12. Joe Tasker and Peter Boardman just below the summit of Kangchenjunga. Yalung Kang is in the middle distance. (*Doug Scott*) (p44)



The approach to Kangchenjunga in 1979

the past. Plastic boots and the foam inner were a fantastic advance – that was the first time they were used, in '79. It's very difficult to get yourself frostbitten today.

We were going to use some fixed rope on the wall. We couldn't see how we could carry everything up this steep wall and up the long ridge leading up to the summit. We discovered that we had calculated the amount in feet instead of metres, so we only had one-third of the rope we needed. Luckily there was a Czech expedition on Jannu and we went down there with some Guinness cake and other goodies and they gave us all the rope we required.

Nima Tensing told me that he had been a porter up to the Base Camp of Kangchenjunga in 1955. We asked him about this a lot – he was supposed to have been about 18 years old at the time. Anyway, he and Ang Phurba were going to help us up to the North Col and it was going up there that we dislodged some rock and one piece hit Nima Tensing on the chest. It wasn't too bad but it could have been a lot worse, even killed him, if it had hit him on the head. It was then that I thought: do we really need to put these lads in dangerous positions any more? When we first came we needed all the help we could get, but for me personally, and for most of us climbing together at that time, we decided we wouldn't take our Sherpas beyond base camp, that is unless they wanted to come along as climbing friends rather than being hired for money.

When we went back to Kangchenjunga in 1989 Nima Tensing was with us, and we discovered that, since Mike Cheney's death, these lads had got in with agents in Kathmandu who weren't paying them. They were being told that they were lucky to get on these trips and get tips from foreigners, and they weren't getting any regular wages at all. It was then that we got them together, with a lot more of our old Sherpas, and formed the Specialist Trekking Co-operative. In many ways Kangch has been quite interesting from the point of view of the Sherpa and what has become of him since.

On the West Face leading up to the North Col, Georges Bettembourg was very much at home. The rock was good solid granite like you get round Chamonix and just as steep. Peter was able to carry half-loads and measure his steps carefully. He had probably ripped a tendon – but he was improving daily.

The weather wasn't always bad and we had a mixture of good and bad days, with a lot of snow falling, and all the time these winds roaring above us. We eventually got to the North Col. Unfortunately, after four days of suffering from the altitude, Joe had to go down to Base Camp where there was more oxygen.

Georges, Peter and I went up the ridge to a point at 25,500ft where we established a snow cave as a protection against the wind. We climbed through to the Great Terrace, which is really just a great slope of scree and boulders, but it was there that we felt the full effect of the westerly winds,



13. Joe Tasker in 1979. (*Doug Scott*) (p44)



14. Kabru, 7338m, from near the summit of Kangchenjunga. (*Doug Scott*) (p44)

the jet stream, which slammed into the cliffs below and then blew over the top with their full force. We were getting winds so strong that, if we disturbed the scree, small stones were actually blown uphill. Not a place for camping, so we had to go on over the divide into Sikkim, where it was more sheltered, to camp. During the night the wind changed, the tent disintegrated and we found ourselves trying to get our boots and crampons on at 26,000ft at 4.30 in the morning with no tent, because it had broken up and flown away! We lost interest in the summit and all we could think about was trying to get back down and it took a lot of effort. That was the first time I thought I was going to die on a mountain. We had gone a bit too far. But we did manage to survive and got ourselves down the other side before dark and back to Base Camp that same day. We dropped down about 10,000ft in the day – five miles of mountain. Peter got himself frostbitten on the ear and the nose and all my finger ends were frostbitten from trying to grapple with the tent. Georges was snow blind, having lost his rucksack with his goggles in it. So it was 'mountain one, climbers nil'!

We went back for another attempt on the night of the full moon in late April and thought we would go at eleven at night and climb by the full moon, get to the top for a glorious dawn and then come back with daylight to play with. But unfortunately the moon was on the wrong side of the mountain so we had the serious challenge of darkness and also a storm which blew up at 2.30am and had us pinned down at about 26,500ft. We had to dig in. We then went back to the cave at 25,500ft and had a big discussion. Georges said he was going to give up and go down because he didn't trust the weather. We three were thinking about going back to the tents on the North Col (near the points reached by Reginald Cooke and John Hunt, probably within about 200 or 300ft of the summit). These discussions during the night ranged over our worry that we might take a step too far here, since we had brought no oxygen apart from one medicinal bottle which we had lost in the snow. And there was always this worry that we might end up with somebody getting cerebral or pulmonary oedema, and we knew we couldn't carry anyone down. We could put a safety rope on them, but that person would have to actually physically get themselves down. We had all these worries, and perhaps a bit of homesickness creeping in from being away for so long.

But next morning we woke up to a glorious morning. Despite all my powers of persuasion, Georges decided he was still not coming and would go down, so the three of us, Joe, Peter and myself, set off up – and it was beautiful. What we were noticing was that the westerly winds had suddenly stopped and we could see billowing clouds coming in from the south. The monsoon checks the power of the westerlies by pushing them further north and we were going between the monsoon and the westerlies. Because of all the cloud I built a series of cairns which are still there – the highest footpath in the world! This was to make absolutely certain that we could get ourselves back again, as it was such a long, amorphous route. Starting at

about 26,000ft, we went through the rocks, heading towards the Pinnacles. From here we could look across to peaks on the Nepalese–Tibetan border that are still unclimbed to this day, and beyond to the Great Plateau of Tibet.

I mentioned that Joe did not take part in our first attempt because of altitude sickness, but he came through here tremendously. It has been shown that those who are slow to acclimatise often come through very strongly later on, and this was certainly the case with Joe.

We reached the Summit Ridge and the Pinnacles. We were at 28,000ft now, without canned oxygen, and although we were moving very slowly we were still able to appreciate being there. I must say, after my experience of oxygen on Everest, and carrying what was then 36lbs (two bottles and all the fittings), it was marvellous to be up here with just a 'butty' bag on your back, with only a head torch, a spare pair of gloves and food. It did occur to me after this trip that the contents of oxygen bottles are not worth the weight. It was a fantastic day and we were very lucky; this was the only good weather we had on the whole trip. And we needed it because this last bit was quite complex.

It is a remarkable fact that in 1907 two Norwegians, I. Monrad-Aas and Carl Rubenson, aged 19 and 21, got themselves through British bureaucracy to the bottom of Kabru, hired local people and climbed up the flanks of the mountain to the Plateau. They didn't actually go to the very summit but they got to 24,000ft – an amazing thing to have done, for the time. They climbed in very lightweight style, so this is no new thing. It's how everyone naturally approached the mountains before the time of the big national expeditions, starting with the Duke of Abruzzi's on K2 in 1909.

We stayed just below the summit, about 10ft down, and I tried to walk right round it. At 5 o'clock we descended in a lightning storm and got ourselves down to The Croissant snow cave and next day down to Base Camp into the arms of Georges. He was genuinely overjoyed that we had made it. He himself had played a big part in overcoming the technicalities of the climb by doing most of the hard leading up the 3500ft West Face to the North Col.

For me, it had been the most demanding climb I ever did. At that time none of the big mountains had been climbed lightweight, only one had been climbed without oxygen and none without oxygen being around from others on the mountain at the time. So because of that there was always this hard edge to it. But that's what going to the Himalaya has always been about – taking a big step into the unknown. It's about pioneering new routes, not just for the recognition this brings to the first ascensionist, which I quite like, but also, and mainly, for the intrinsic interest of seeing how the route will connect up lines of weakness, finding a safe passage, belay ledges, bivouac places, and getting back down – intriguing stuff, the stuff of Himalayan climbing.