

DISTAGHIL SAR (25,868 ft.)

The account of the Austrian Karakorum Expedition 1960

BY WOLFGANG STEFAN

(Translated by Hugh Merrick)

AS THE little Dakota gained height, it was with a feeling of relief that we gazed down on the strange-looking houses of Rawalpindi, with the hot plain of the Indus stretching away behind them. We were flying towards a brown wall of hills. Mud-huts clung like toys to the slopes of the deeply carved valleys. With growing excitement we saw the first snow-covered summits rising ahead. My companions Gottfried Mayr, Herbert Raditschnig, Günther Stärker and Diether Marchart crowded round the little windows to see the remarkable view. As we flew across a deeply indented ridge at 19,700 ft. all eyes were drawn to the huge mass of Nanga Parbat, to our right. Below us the Indus forced its winding way through the ranges. We picked out Rakaposhi, Malubiting and Haramosh, whose imposing summits dominated a savage wall of peaks, all over 23,000 ft. high. And all the time our eyes were busy searching the distance where our own mountain, Distaghil, might be.

The narrow valley fanned out. At the entrance to the Vale of Hunza we could see the tiny houses of the small town of Gilgit, scattered far below. A few minutes later we were on terra firma again. The sun beat down on us as we drove in a couple of jeeps along the bumpy road to our lodging. Our two tons of heavy baggage had almost doubled in Rawalpindi, owing to the addition of provisions for the porters. Cases and sacks piled up at the little rest-house of Chenar Garden, which we had to ourselves. There was much hard work to be done in Gilgit, where we arranged for porters and our transport to Nagar, fifty miles away, with the assistance of the Political Agent. We hoped to cover the stage by jeep in a single day, as against a four-day march on foot. We heard that the new bridge at Chalt, half-way to Nagar, across the Hunza river, a gentle stream at this time of year, would be finished in a few days. It would pay to wait, so as to reach Nagar more quickly and at less cost than with pack-animals.

At that moment the elements decided to assert themselves. The sky unloaded torrents of water and in a few hours the road was cut by landslides at several points. Mechanical aids were out of the question, so there was nothing for it but to resurrect pack-animals, the tried

support of mankind for centuries past. It took us three long days to move from Nomal, a small village some twenty miles beyond Gilgit, to Nagar, with a train of sixty heavily-laden horses and donkeys.

Tall poplars pin-pointed the palace of the local prince, the Mir of Nagar, from afar. He welcomed us with a band and, in our honour and to the delight of his people, organised a polo-match. The players raced across the polo-ground on their wild mounts with incredible control. These rough lads swung their sticks with skill and accuracy and were just as adept in blocking an opponent's stroke. It was a tough game and there were plenty of minor injuries.

In spite of the presence of the Mir the porters' rations were distributed in the greatest confusion. When it came to issuing loads, small scuffles broke out frequently among the coolies.

On May 12 we left Nagar, with eighty-three porters, in glorious weather, leaving Günther there for a few days to nurse an injured leg. A narrow track led us along steep slopes, high above the deep ravine of the Hispar torrent, to the small green oasis of Hura set in an arid waste of rubble-covered slopes. Eagerly we sipped the clear, cold mountain water which gaily gushes from under a huge rock to transform this dry valley-floor into fertile ground.

Our next staging-post was Hispar, the last village before the glacier. The faces of the inhabitants of this high and lonely valley reflected the hardness of their lives. The endless struggle with Nature has stamped on their features an inherent pride and they do, in fact, consider themselves superior to the people who live lower down the valleys.

As we made our way up the Hispar glacier, the peaks on either hand towered higher and higher into the heavens. Makrong Chhish loomed like a gigantic wedge opposite the confluence with the Khiang glacier. We were a little worried because the steady fair weather of the past days seemed gradually to be shaping for a change. At Bularung, a place of sparse vegetation, we pitched our last approach camp; it was snowing lightly as we did so. That day a crisis arose with the porters, who were carrying our high-altitude tents; it was only after a good lecture, interpreted by our liaison officer—Aman for short—that they quietened down. It snowed during the night, but stopped on the morning of May 17. Our procession moved on up the Khiang glacier, with its covering of rubble and snow. We found some pieces of wood marking a camp-site of the 1957 British expedition, the first to approach Distaghil.

Suddenly the porters mutinied. Gesturing wildly, they held unintelligible conferences and almost came to blows with their foremen. We tried to calm them and to get them to pick up their loads; we even offered them a bonus for the day's work. All in vain; they were just very frightened, frightened of the snow and the fog, which would make

it difficult for them to find their way back. As soon as they had left us in a kind of panic flight, we quickly established our 'Provisional' Camp at a height of 13,800 ft.

Every day we and our four high-altitude porters lugged 450 to 500 lb of stores to our projected Base Camp. We got the bare essentials of equipment and provisions up there inside a week. On May 21 we passed the old Swiss camp-site of the previous year for the last time. During the first days at Base our activities ran into a serious snag; it snowed incessantly, putting paid to any attempt at a reconnaissance of the route ahead.

The only two possible lines of ascent on the South side of Distaghil were those already attempted and we soon agreed that, for a small party like ours, the only chance of success lay in following the British route straight up the South face. The Swiss route up the South-east ridge, longer by several miles, would call for far too many camps; over and above this, any retreat enforced by bad weather would be long and difficult.

All around our camp, rock- and ice-slopes swept sheer up to the sky. To the north-west Trivor closed in the head of the valley; adjoining it, an unnamed 22,000-ft. peak connected up with the highest peak of all, Distaghil; and to the south-east the huge bulk of Khinyang Chhish dominated the scene. As soon as the weather improved, on May 24, Günther, Diether and I left camp very early to push on up the lower slopes of the South face of our mountain.

At the end of the medial moraine, which we had been following since leaving camp, we roped up and stamped a trail endlessly through a tangle of snowed-up crevasses till we reached a steepening avalanche-slope. Here we found a safe resting-place below a crevasse. This we crossed and came to a steep couloir more than 3,000 ft. above Base Camp. Below the bergschrund we dumped the contents of our rucksacks. Through binoculars from Base Camp we had seen a small terrace about 650 ft. higher up, where we wanted to site our Camp I. Today, however, we were too tired to push on and after an extended rest made our way quickly back to Base. The plan was for Sepperl, one of our Hunza porters, to go up next day with Gottfried and Herbert and try to establish Camp I at the site selected. They left very early and, in the rays of the morning sun, we saw them at the bottom of the couloir leading up to the camp-site. In the event, they succeeded not only in reaching the level projection but also in fixing ropes to safeguard the more difficult sections of the couloir. They got back to Base during the afternoon, while the high-altitude porters Shaban, Saffer, Ali and Balli brought up fresh loads from the 'Provisional' Camp.

Our next attempt was dogged by bad luck. It started to snow so

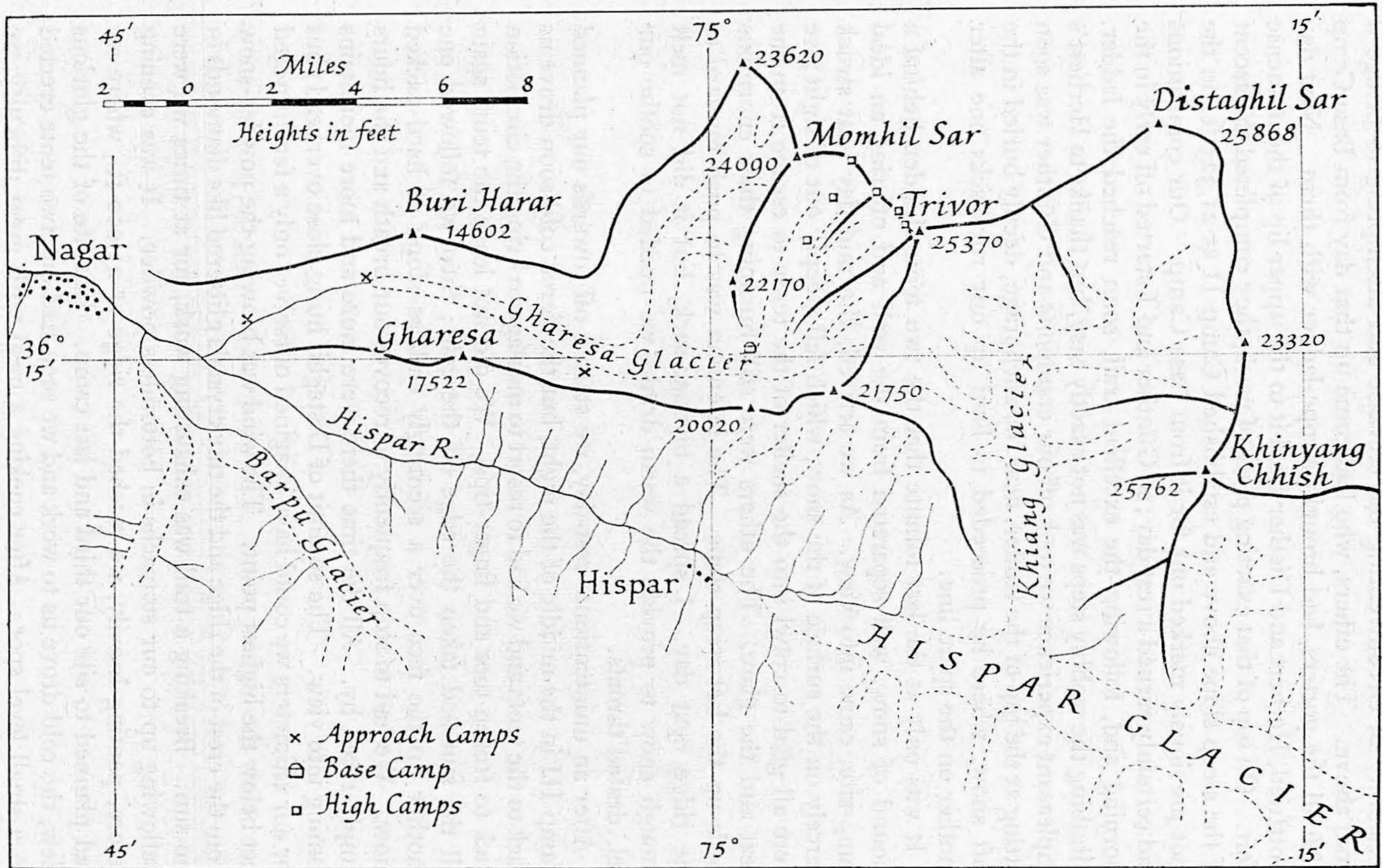
heavily just below the couloir that we made all haste back to Base Camp. The bad weather did not last very long; as soon as it was over, the five of us, with Sepperl and Shaban moved up to Camp I again. Our big high-altitude boots left deep holes in the glittering white surface of the snow. At the bergschrund our already sufficient loads were swollen by the equipment we had carted up on our first foray. Stamping our way up the steep couloir taxed our strength to the utmost and we were very grateful for the aid of the rope Gottfried and Herbert had fixed to protect the steep traverse at the exit from the couloir. We were now only three ropes' lengths from the terrace which was our objective. We wallowed our exhausting way through masses of fresh snow and finally reached the camp-site utterly spent. However, a refreshing drink soon had us on our feet again. Shaban and Sepperl went down again as soon as we had the tents standing. The sun disappeared behind the ridge and the cold grew bitter. The flame of our little spirit-cooker fought stubbornly against the icy hand which clutches the cooking utensils and hinders the heating of food and drink. Avalanches kept thundering down through the silence of the night, waking us from the light sleep we managed to achieve.

Just above the camp there rose an enormous tower of ice, with only one weak spot offering the possibility of climbing it. Herbert and Diether tackled this horrid bulge of ice with a spare rope and ice-pitons. They soon contrived reliable protective measures over the very nasty pitch.

The hard-trodden snow by the tents crunched under our feet as we put on our crampons with fingers frozen stiff. We climbed the steep slope above the camp in the icy cold of the shadow. Before us Khinyang Chhish rose like some mighty fortress, its battlements gilded by the morning sun. Wherever we looked, range upon range of mighty peaks hemmed in the view. We moved forward up the broad groove in the middle of the face at a snail's pace. In vain our feet sought firm holds in the soft snow under the hard layer on top; every step in the foul friable crust was an effort. At 20,700 ft. a thirty-foot cliff brought us to a halt. It seemed impossible to climb its overhanging face. Heavy snow began to fall and we followed our trail back despondently to Camp I, while Herbert and Diether pushed on down to Base Camp.

It cleared up in the evening and the sky lay bright with stars above our tents. We wrapped ourselves in our warm down-clothing and lingered outside in the clear night for a long time gazing at the gigantic white wall above us on which the light of the moon traced spectral shadows.

Next day after a fruitless ascent to the great crevasse, which had turned us back two days before, Günther and I returned once more to Camp I.



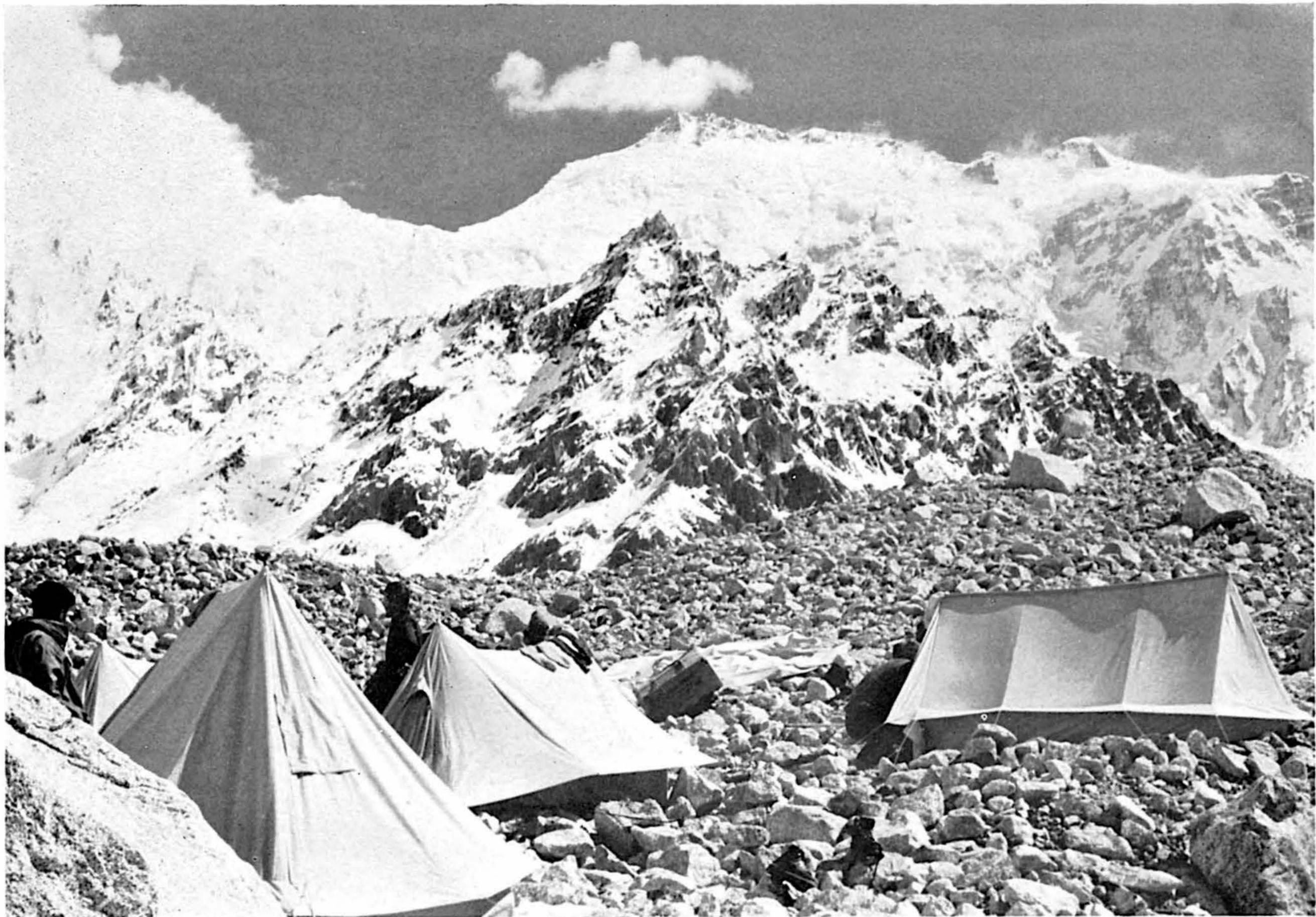
DISTAGHIL SAR and TRIVOR.

DISTAGHIL SAR



Photo, W. Stefan]

CAMP SITE AT FOOT OF KHIANG GLACIER, MAKRONG CHHISH BEHIND.



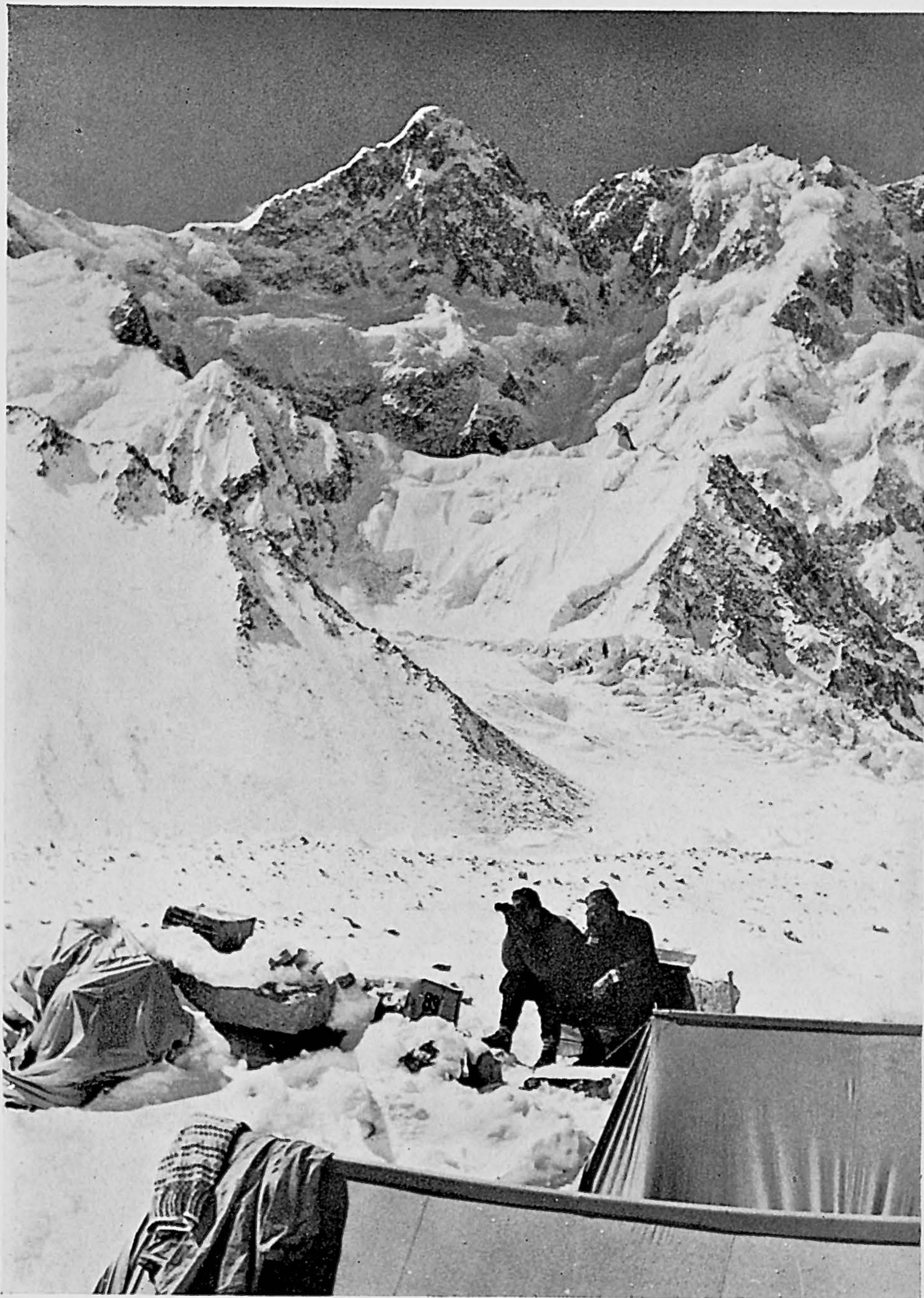
Photo, W. Stefan]

PROVISIONAL BASE CAMP, DISTAGHIL SAR IN THE BACKGROUND.

Our climb had, however, not been wholly in vain, for we had seen a possibility of circumventing the crevasse and attempting to bridge it from above. The others, who had come up that day from Base Camp with all the porters, had brought a rope-ladder with them. Next day Gottfried, Herbert and Diether fixed it to the upper lip of the immense cleft. On top of that exacting piece of work, they completed the ascent of the steep slope above and established Camp II at 21,325 ft. on the spot previously marked out for it from Base Camp. Our companions had certainly earned a rest day; so Günther and I started off early in the morning and, following the excellent trail, soon reached the ladder. Climbing the wobbly steps was not exactly easy, but thanks to Herbert's unpleasant experience we took off our crampons and Günther was soon sitting at the top of the ladder, near the anchorage, deeply buried in the soft snow, where he proceeded to haul up our rucksacks one after another on the spare line.

It was only at the last minute that the two tents, hidden behind a mound of snow, well separated from the wall and offering an ideal camp-site, came into view. As we arrived, the mid-day heat struck fiercely on the surface of the snow, which fell steeply out of sight; we were all glad to crawl into the shelter of the tents to escape from the heat and the glare. The others were still humping their enormous loads up the last steep slope. The intention was to push forward to the ridge next day. I spread a bivouac-sack, but it did not melt enough snow to provide the warm drinks we needed to soothe our dehydrated throats.

After an unintentional rest-day, we started off towards our planned Camp III in the middle of the night, but the fierce cold soon drove us back to the tents and we had to resort to massage to bring the circulation back to frozen toes and finger-tips. We did not leave the tents again till the sun had taken the edge off the cold; then we followed one another up the face over a seemingly endless slope of hard-packed snow. We had to stop frequently to recover our breath and the hours simply raced by. All the time there were more and more mountains coming into view. The summit of Distaghil hung close overhead; but for our altimeters we could have imagined ourselves only a few hundred feet below the highest point. The wind was blowing the powder-snow from the crest of the ridge and the tiny crystals glittered like diamonds in the sun. Breaking a trail was exhausting work, for at times we were wallowing up to our stomachs in bottomless powder. It was evening before, panting heavily, we reached the ridge at 23,000 ft., where we had planned to site our third and last camp. In spite of the glorious view, the cold drove us to work and we soon had our two tents erected on a small level spot. After cooking a meal with great difficulty, we tried to sleep.



Photo, W. Stefan]

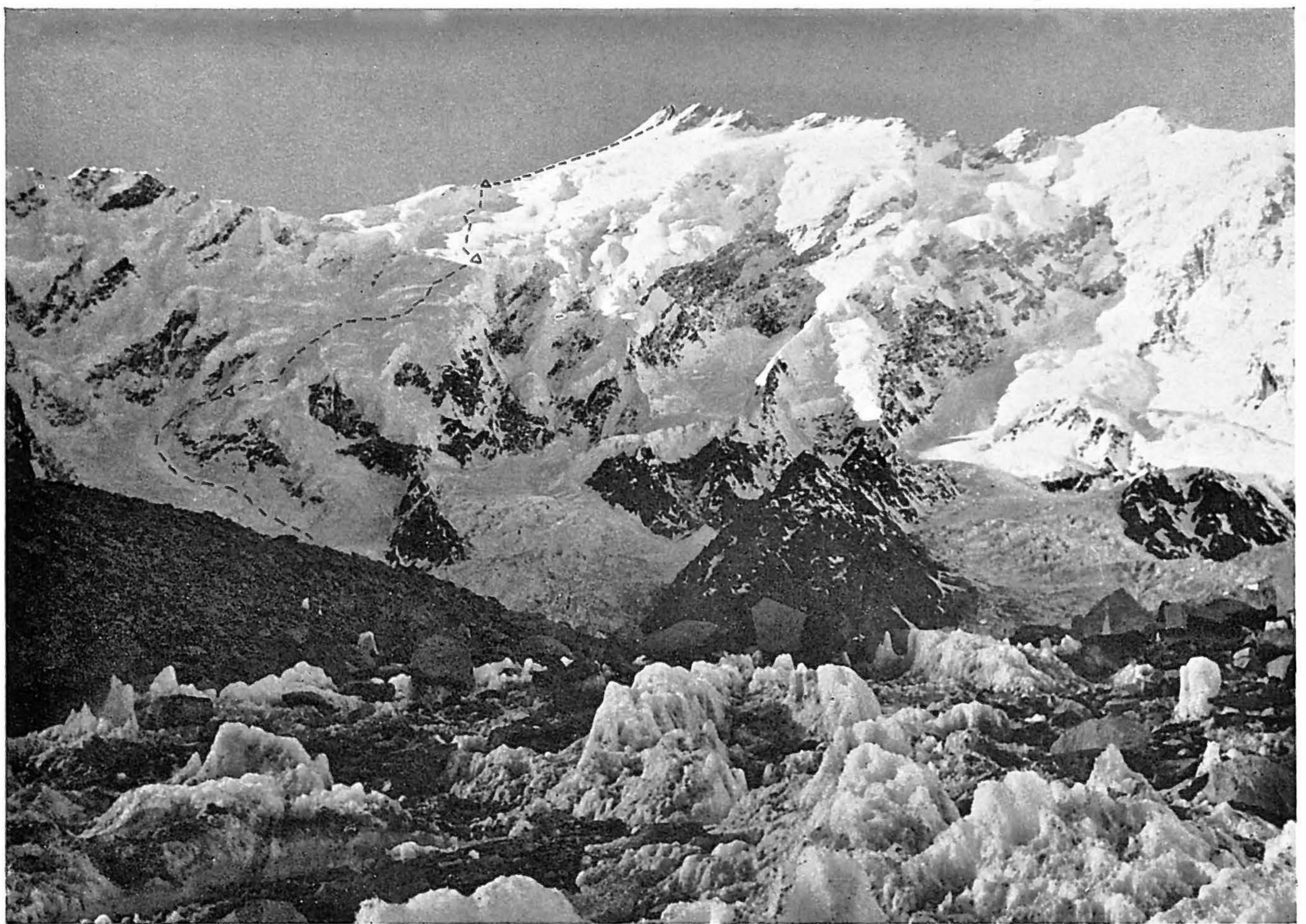
BASE CAMP WITH KHINYANG CHHISH, 7,852 M., BEHIND.

When we woke up next morning white tatters of cloud were driving across the summit; it seemed as if our long spell of fine weather was breaking up. The morning of June 9 slipped away all too quickly. At half past ten Diether and Günther decided to have a go at the summit. At first I thought of going along, though it seemed far too late for a successful ascent in time to get back safely to camp; besides which, my own physical condition left much to be desired. I impressed the danger of frost-bite on my companions, reminding them of our unpleasant experiences the morning we left Camp II too early. Diether promised me to turn back at 3 p.m. and so relieved my misgivings somewhat. A few heart-felt words of farewell and the pair of them left camp and moved on up the broad ridge. Hours went by before we saw the two black dots nearing the summit; then thick banners of mist closed in on the mountain. It was a long, anxious wait from then on. The hour-hands of our watches moved on all too swiftly—6 p.m., 7 p.m., and still they weren't back. We waited anxiously outside the tents. Binoculars were no use any more, for the clouds on the mountain refused to lift. It grew darker and colder. We began to wonder whether there had been an accident.

It was half past nine when we heard voices outside; hurriedly we undid the small tubular entrances to the tents. In reply to our first anxious question, 'did you have an accident?' they just shook their heads without saying a word. When at last they began to talk, they said: 'We were on top at about six o'clock,' in weary, exhausted tones. But the words held a joyful message which immediately came home to us others. Soon Diether was lying in the tent next to me, slowly reporting on his great experience of the last few hours.

'We came to a gap', he told me, 'between two summits of about the same height. We climbed one of them only to discover that the other was the higher. So we climbed down into the gap again and from it we reached the true summit, which is capped by a narrow snow-crest.' He said nothing of the exertions all this must have entailed at 25,600 ft. I was anxious to hear more and he went on: 'We took a short rest and climbed down again by the steep couloir. Günther lost one of his ski-sticks and one of his crampons nearly went down the mountain.' So ended his report, as he settled down, tired but happy, in his sleeping-bag. The wind then began to assert itself, driving a fine cloud of snow-dust against the tent wall. We tried to sleep, in spite of everything.

Next morning, after the laborious work of putting on high-altitude boots, carefully protected from freezing overnight, I took a first inquisitive look outside. There was no blue early-morning sky; we were wrapped in a tight layer of cloud. Clouds were swirling in the valleys below and presently it began to snow. We obviously had to get down, and quickly. Günther and Diether were severely handicapped by frost-



Photo, W. Stefan]

DISTAGHIL SAR FROM THE UPPER KHIANG GLACIER. CAMP SITES MARKED AT 5,740 M., 6,500 M., AND 7,010 M.

bite, incurred during their nocturnal descent from the summit, and we had to safeguard them with the greatest care down the steep face. Our old trail had been obliterated by deep falls of fresh snow and the dense mist made route-finding difficult. Luckily it cleared just above Camp II and visibility was good on the last critical traverse. We were tired out and glad to get under cover without delay.

The weather next day was no better. The blizzard howled around our tents, piling up mountains of snow. Our fuel gave out. In spite of the raging gale, this fact alone was enough to drive us on down to Camp I. It was only by the aid of a few prominent séracs, which we recognised from the ascent, that we were able to find our way down through the impenetrable fog. Suddenly we came upon the fixed rope above Camp I; the tents below it were hardly discernible under a smother of white. With a sense of relief we beat the snow from our anoraks and packs, and set to work to get the camp more shipshape. It had now been snowing incessantly for five days; it had piled up to the considerable depth of three feet or more.

For the last time on the long descent we mechanically strapped our crampons on, but our thoughts were already down at Base Camp. There were lots of little matters down there to make it a highly desirable objective—a dip in the glacier torrent, a decent meal, all the letters from home the runner had brought up a few days before.

We stepped up the pace on the dried-out moraine and felt safe and almost at ease on the broad, inviting levels of the glacier. Sepperl was the first to spot us and came running towards us, shouting with joy, to embrace us, brimming over with delight. Our liaison officer and the other porters joined in the noisy, joyous welcome. Balli, the youngest of our high-altitude porters, with a happy grin on his broad features summed it all up to perfection in his broken English. 'Distaghil finished', he announced.