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# Everest Kangshung Face – First Ascent of the Neverest Buttress

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(Plates 1–5, 56)

At 6.30pm on Tuesday, 10 May 1988, Robert Anderson, Paul Teare, Ed Webster and I broke through a cornice at the top of the Kangshung face and stepped out on to the world's most desolate mountain pass. We were the first people ever to reach the South Col from Tibet. Two days later I stood on the summit of Everest. Seven days later – after a protracted, harrowing retreat which nearly cost us our lives – we were all safely down at Advanced Base on the Kangshung glacier.

If we had died on Everest, we would perhaps have been dismissed as irresponsible fools but, because we returned, both the public and the mountaineering world have been indulgent, brushing aside uncomfortable questions about some of the risks we took in their eagerness to praise. People like success and ours was a dramatic success. We made the second ascent of the notorious Kangshung face, by a completely new route, starting with some of the most sensational technical climbing ever achieved on the mountain. Our four-man team, climbing without any support and without supplementary oxygen, was the smallest ever to achieve a new route on Everest, and I was the first Briton to reach the summit without oxygen.

The genesis of 'Everest 88' was haphazard. In 1985 an American climber, Robert Anderson, spent eight days above 8000m on the West Ridge Direct, eventually being forced to retreat only 250m from the summit. He applied almost immediately for another attempt on Everest; the first available permit was for the Kangshung face in the spring of 1988. The W ridge attempt had been a huge overstaffed shambles, but this time Robert would be leader and the team would be small. He invited two of his companions from 1985, Ed Webster and Jay Smith, who recommended the Canadian Paul Teare. Then he employed Wendy Davis in New York to raise the money. The expedition became the '35th Anniversary Assault', with Peter Hillary also invited on the climbing team and Tenzing Norgay's son, Norbu, on the support team. The leader of the 1953 expedition, Lord Hunt, agreed to be 'honorary leader' of this anniversary attempt, on condition that a British climber was invited to join what was essentially an American venture. And so in the autumn of 1987, quite out of the blue, I was asked to join the team.

I felt honoured, flattered and very grateful to John Hunt, but I had to think hard before accepting. The only previous ascent of the E face of Everest, in 1983, had been the work of a large team using sophisticated ropework, complete with motorized winches, to tame a gigantic rock-buttress and gain



1. Everest – Kangshung face 1988. Paul Teare climbing fixed ropes on the lower buttress. (p 1)

access to the central glaciated spur. Robert proposed tackling the face with half the number of climbers, by a route further left which, although shorter and therefore more feasible, was possibly more threatened by the notorious Kangshung avalanches. If his plan worked and we did reach the South Col, there would be no possibility of carrying up oxygen for the remaining 850m to the summit. The risks of oxygenless climbing had been graphically illustrated on K2 in 1986 and, of the 20 people who had so far climbed Everest without oxygen, four had not returned.

Several leading American climbers, including John Roskelley, declined invitations. Jay Smith dropped out. Peter Hillary decided not to come after all. That left just four climbers – Robert, Paul, Ed and myself – for now, by Christmas, I had decided to accept. A visit to Tibet's Kama valley, the beautiful approach to the Kangshung face, was an opportunity not to be missed. And if we did actually set foot on the face . . . it was the biggest and most spectacular on the mountain, and it would be an interesting problem. With just four of us there would be no redundancy, for each person would be fully stretched, sharing equally in the drudgery of load-carrying and the excitement of leading. It had to be worth a try.

My hunch that this improbable expedition had a chance of working was reinforced in January 1988, when I met Robert and some of the support team in New York. Six weeks later I met the other two climbers, Ed Webster and Paul Teare, in Kathmandu. Now we were on our way to the mountain and, in the best tradition of the pre-war expeditions, it was to be a gentle leisurely approach. Instead of the usual modern rush, we had time to enjoy radiant mornings at the Swoyumbunath temple and to bicycle out to Bakhtepur, time to wait two days at the Chinese border without fretting, time at Xegar to climb up a 5000m hill and contemplate the great snow-plume streaming from the summit of Everest.

The walk-in from the roadhead at Kharta, which was supposed to take four days, took 23, because heavy snowfalls reinforced the Tibetan porters' traditional antipathy to the work ethic. But again, this gave us the chance to get to know each other, to unwind and acclimatize. Four times we broke trail up to the 5500m Langma La, and on every occasion the light was different as we enjoyed one of the finest mountain views in the world – Chomolonzo, Makalu, Pethangtse, Lhotse and Everest, encircling the meadows and glaciers of the Kama valley.

When we did eventually reach Base Camp on 29 March, we must have been one of the best-prepared teams ever to attempt the mountain. We were perfectly acclimatized and reasonably fit; but, more important, we were mentally prepared. There was a calmness and confidence which no amount of 'training' at home could have achieved. And now we knew each other, appreciating our complementary qualities. Paul, like me, was no great rock-climber – more an all-round mountaineer, with a streak of impatience. Our tastes and personalities were very different, but I and everyone else found him warm-hearted and funny, and it was mainly his banter which had kept the porters sweet during the approach. Ed was quieter, more contemplative, slower, perhaps more sensitive to the risks; but he had enormous reserves of

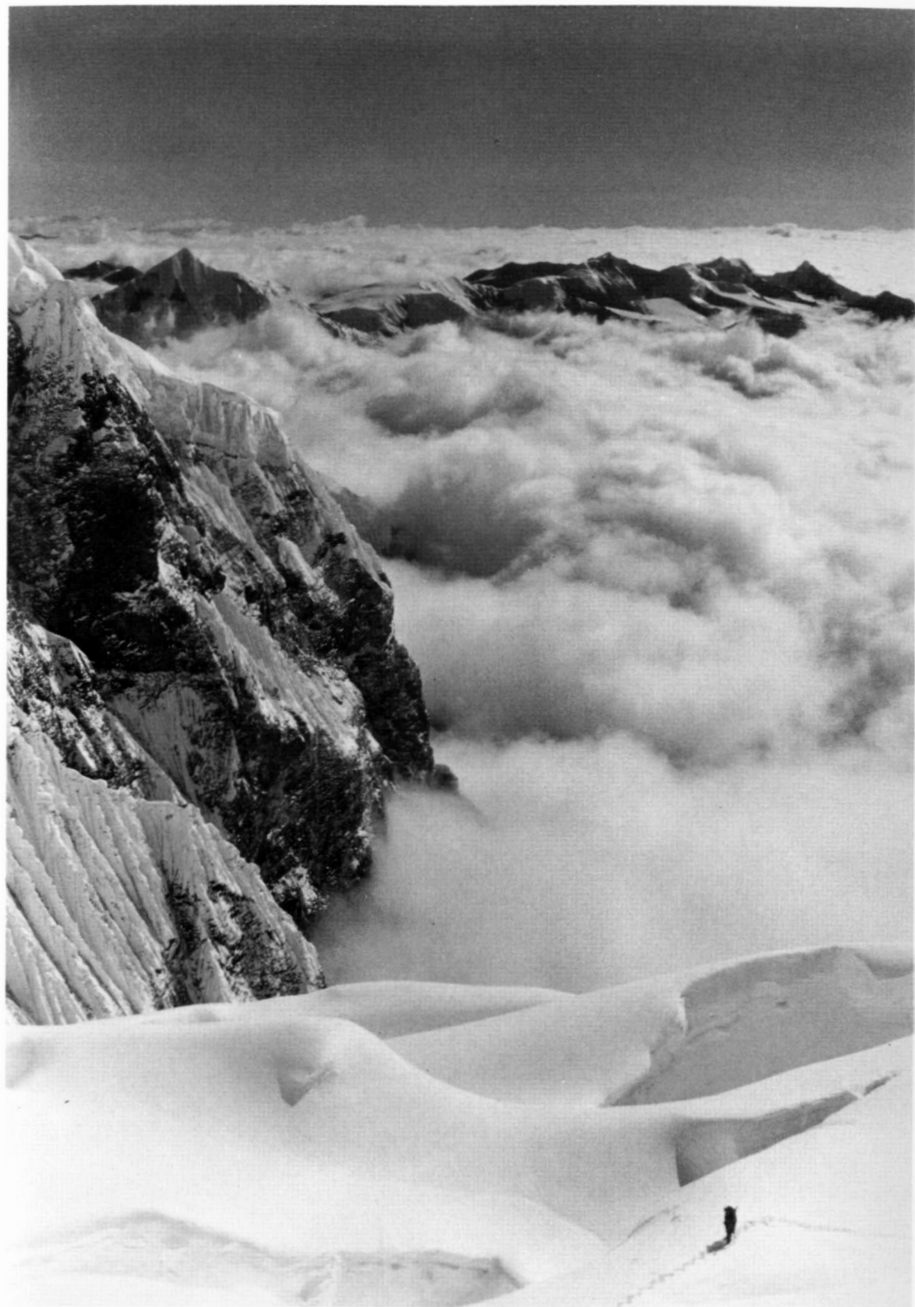
strength and experience and was certainly the most talented climber on the team – our chief technician. Robert, as chairman, made the right decision to keep us swapping partners – avoiding a destructive ‘A Team’/‘B Team’ mentality – and as instigator of the whole mad project he maintained an insuppressible optimism that inspired us all.

We made an efficient four-man climbing team, but we needed relief from each other at Base Camp. Mimi Zieman, our doctor, Joe Blackburn, the photographer, Pasang Nurbu, the cook (whose first Everest expedition had been under Angharkay in 1962) and Kasang Tsering, his young assistant from Kharta, brought our numbers up to eight. Without their company it would have been a much duller expedition, and I doubt whether we could have climbed the mountain. Our only disappointment was that the additional support team never reached Base Camp because of the delayed approach. Wendy Davis, helped by Miklos Pinther of the United Nations and Sandy Wylie from New Zealand, had secured sponsorship from American Express, Burroughs Wellcome, Kiehl Cosmetics, Lindblad Travel, Kodak, Petroconsultants, Rolex and the Weaver Coat Company, thus making the expedition possible. Robert Dorival had done a superb job in organizing the food. Norbu Tenzing had organized all the travel, and it was a great shame that he never saw the E face of the mountain about which he had heard so much from his father.

Base Camp was at about 5000m in a grassy ablation valley on the north bank of the Kangshung glacier. We kept on 20 porters to do one carry to Advanced Base so that we could install ourselves immediately, at 5450m, ready to start work on 3 April.

Robert offered me first lead, so that on my very first day’s climbing on Everest I found myself exploring interesting ground – in this case an 80m wall of banded granite and quartzite, smeared with enough ice to make it interesting – probably Scottish Grade 4. We fixed nearly 400m of rope that day, and during the following five days we continued to make steady progress up the initial buttress. I tend to succumb too readily to superlatives, but I really think that those six days were amongst the best I have ever spent in the mountains. Contrary to popular myth, an Everest expedition can be enormous fun. The actual climbing – technical, varied and demanding – would have been a delight anywhere; but it was the surroundings – *la grande ambiance*, as the French guidebooks would have it – that made it so special. Our buttress projected from the back of a huge amphitheatre, with the unclimbed 3000m NE face of Lhotse on one side and the Americans’ 1983 buttress on the right. It was a fantastic world of huge striated rock-walls, exquisitely fragile snow-flutings and improbable ice-towers, which soon acquired names like Big Al, the Greyhound Bus, the Gargoyle and the Cauliflower Towers, prompted by familiarity tinged with fear. Sections of the route, particularly the great seracs of the Cauliflower Ridge, were a little dubious, but certainly no more dangerous than the Khumbu ice-fall in an average year.

On Day 5 Ed climbed the gently overhanging ice of Webster’s Wall at 6400m, and we thought that we had almost cracked the buttress. However, the next day we were stopped dead by a huge crevasse spanning the entire slope, so we all retired to Base Camp, very conscious that we were due for a rest. Sieging a



2. Everest Kangshung face. Ed Webster on the easy middle section starting for Camp II on 9 May. The spectacular 1983 buttress rises out of the clouds. Khartse, climbed by Mallory in 1921, is the obvious pyramid on the left horizon. (p 1)

big route with only four climbers is hard work. During this and later weeks on the mountain we often spent three days in succession leading and load-carrying – and they were long days, with perhaps 12 hours spent on the route. In 1975, at the same altitude in the Khumbu ice-fall, the SW face sahibs tended to work only on alternate days, saving themselves for higher up. With our heavier work-load we had to be extremely careful to pace ourselves, so we now spent three days at Base Camp doing some serious eating.

The second phase on the mountain was much slower, hampered by bad weather. While Paul and I ferried loads up to Camp 1 on the Cauliflower Ridge, the other two slept there for three nights and dealt with the crevasse, abseiling into it so that Ed could aid his way on ice-screws up the 30m overhanging wall on the far side. It took another day to fix ropes across the gap, then Paul and I had a turn in front, marvelling at the Tyrolean over the Jaws of Doom, then stomping up deep snow above and fixing a final 100m length of rope through a dangerous jumble of seracs. Now we had finally broken through the lower lip of the hanging glacier and reached the easy undulations of the upper snow-slopes. At 6650m we had cracked the technical-crux of the route and the way was open to the South Col.

The weather, however, was not good and every day the upper face was becoming more dangerously laden with new snow. So once again we retreated to Base Camp, where we waited a week before returning to the mountain.

There are many attractive reasons for going on expeditions. One is the opportunity during rest periods for unlimited sleep; another is the chance to get some uninterrupted reading done, usually on subjects that have nothing whatsoever to do with mountains. However, on this occasion we did have a small climbing library of Bill Murray's *Story of Everest*, Audrey Salkeld's Mallory book and *White Limbo*, the account of the 1984 Australian expedition. During the days of watching and waiting we were all acutely aware of our predecessors, particularly E H Norton and his solo push to 8600m in 1924. Surely, if he, Wager, Smythe and Wyn-Harris could get that high in the 1920s and 1930s without oxygen – surely we, with our vastly improved climbing gear and clothing, could reach a little higher now? But, of course, far more important than equipment was the huge psychological advantage of knowing that what Messner and Habeler had done 10 years earlier had been repeated by others.

The Australians' 1984 ascent of the N face without oxygen was the greatest inspiration because they, like all of us except Robert, had never been to 8000m before Everest. Also like us, they were a small team climbing a new route. Ours started lower, with much harder climbing, but theirs finished with Norton's insecure traverse out of the Great Couloir, whereas we would complete our ascent by the easier SE ridge. We were now approaching optimum fitness and acclimatization and wanted to make the big push before we started to deteriorate. Our original plan had been to complete the route to the South Col, leave a cache there and descend to rest before the final push. Now, however, we changed that plan – partly because of delays, partly because of the precedents on the N face. In 1984 the Australians only went once to about 7000m before leaving on the final push. Messner, during his 1980 solo, and

Troillet and Loretan in 1986, barely went higher than 6500m before dashing for the summit. The message was clear: get really fit and acclimatized between 6000 and 7000m, but don't waste energy burning yourself out at 8000m before the final push – particularly if, like all of us in 1988, you have no fat reserves. So the plan now was to reconnoitre only as far as Camp 2 – 7450m – and never to sleep above Camp 1 until the summit push.

It was a tense time with all these calculations, hopes and fears going through our minds, even on the beautiful day when Ed, Joe and I walked up towards Khartse, the snow pyramid which Mallory had called the loveliest peak in the world. It would have been fun to have taken Mimi and Joe climbing on some of the lower snow peaks, and to explore further in such magnificent walking country; but, like Mallory, we were compelled to concentrate on the job in hand. Everest, like no other mountain, is a place of history and tradition, and we had a chance to take our place in that tradition. It was very poignant to watch the evening clouds, backlit by great shafts of setting sunlight, swirling around the NE ridge, and to think of Mallory, Boardman and Tasker, and to ponder the problems of ambition. By all accounts, Mallory wanted desperately to finish the job in 1924 so that he would not have to come back again. Boardman and Tasker seem to have been similarly driven in 1982, as were Julie Tullis and Alan Rouse in 1986, on K2.

The third phase started on 28 April, when we returned to Advanced Base. The weather was now much better as Ed and I did two carries to Camp 1, while Robert and Paul started to break trail towards Camp 2. On 1 May all four of us carried loads to the Flying Wing – a huge roof of ice at 7450m which would provide total protection for Camp 2. This middle part of the Kangshung face, once one has surmounted the spectacular lower cliffs, lies back at a gentle angle – meandering hanging glacier terrain, similar to but less steep than the Lhotse face on the normal route. We had always been concerned about avalanche danger. Judging Himalayan snow-slopes is an extremely inexact science, but these particular slopes did seem quite safe, and we picked a careful route through the hummocks and crevasses, avoiding steep undercut slopes and staying close to the crest of the spur, well clear of the giant avalanche gullies on either side.

It took 11 hours to reach Camp 2, marking the route with wands. On the final stretch I slowed to two steps at a time, with three breaths per step, but I was pleased to discover that I had no headache when we reached the haven of the Wing. We left the supplies for Camp 2 there, then slid back down to Camp 1 in 1½ hours. Everything was now in place for the summit attempt, but we were frustrated for another week by changing weather before we could finally leave. Advanced Base at 4am on 8 May.

The journey to the South Col was long and slow. On 8 May we rested, ate and drank at Camp 1, enjoying the familiar view down to the valley to Chomolonzo. On 9 May it took 14 hours to break a new trail to Camp 2. It snowed most of that day, but the 10th dawned clear; we left at 8am, carrying tents, stoves, gas, food and all our personal gear, and leaving just three gas cylinders and some scraps of food for the descent. In spite of the 20kg load on my back I was enjoying myself, feeling incredibly lucky to be up here on this





3. Everest Kangshung face. The 1983 buttress is at extreme R. The 1988 buttress is L of the huge central depression (Big Al Gully) and rises to the South Col. (p 1)



4. Everest Kangshung face. Venables, Teare and Anderson leaving Camp II for the South Col on 10 May. Peak 38 is on the extreme R. In the centre is the skyline of Chomolonzo (L), Makalu II and Makalu. (p 1)



5. The Kangshung face from the Langma La. A big plume blows from Lhotse on the L. Everest is on the R, with the 1988 route partially visible, rising to the South Col in the centre. (p 1)



beautiful morning, completing our new route on the E face of Everest. However, as the day wore on and it began to snow again, elation gave way to resigned drudgery, and in the end it took us 11 hours to reach the South Col.

We emerged into a blasting wind which continued all night, shaking and battering our tents, pressing the icy fabric against our faces and intensifying breathless claustrophobia. Pasang, who had been here in 1969, had advised us to rest only briefly at the Col before pressing on to the summit. But our plan was starting to disintegrate. Even though we had deliberately placed Camp 2 only 550m below the Col, it had taken us 11 exhausting hours to cover that final stage. We were too tired, and in any case the wind was too strong on 11 May for us to continue to the summit.

Paul was ill that morning, possibly developing oedema, and the only choice for him was to descend immediately. We uneasily accepted his decision to go down alone and he set off, bitterly disappointed, for Advanced Base, which he reached in just seven hours. That left three of us waiting and hoping at 8000m, eating some food, drinking lots of liquid and discovering that, contrary to received wisdom, it was possible to recuperate slightly at this altitude. By the evening, when the wind miraculously dropped, I felt much stronger.

We left the South Col at 11pm on 11 May, each carrying just one long ice axe, one prusik loop, camera, spare mittens, bar of chocolate and a litre of Rehydrate juice. Our only hope of completing the remaining 850m was to travel light like this, and we hoped to be on the summit, taking lovely photographs in the early light, by about 11 the next morning.

But at 11am on 12 May I was still below the South Summit. Robert and Ed were lower still and I was beginning seriously to doubt whether I was capable of reaching the top. However, after an hour's rest I decided to give it a try. One of the biggest problems, after four nights with little or no sleep, was staying awake, so I took two caffeine pills. They seemed to help and with a new determination I continued to the South Summit, reaching it at 1.30pm. Once again, in spite of chronic exhaustion, I was swept along by emotion and instinct, thrilled to be up there, looking down, down to the Western Cwm and Pumori, and across to the W ridge and the big traverse on the SW face and, just ahead of me, the final narrow crest of the SE ridge leading across to the Hillary Step. I continued, confident that I could reach the summit, turn round by 4pm and return to the South Col before darkness fell at 7pm.

For a while my instincts were correct. I found myself enjoying the rock scrambling beyond the South Summit. The Hillary Step sported the expected fixed ropes and I was able to safeguard myself with a Bachman Knot. Then, on the final 300m or so to the summit, I was thrilled to find the snow firmly crusted and at last, after all the hours of trail-breaking on loose slabby snow, I could walk on the surface, keeping well to the left of the big cornices and stopping every three or four steps to rest and cough, telling myself that it really was time to give up smoking. At 3.40pm, just ahead of my revised schedule, I stepped on to the crest of the W ridge, turned right and took the remaining three or four steps to the summit. Three empty oxygen cylinders left by the Asian Friendship Expedition on 5 May were adorned with prayer flags, the letters 'CNJ' for China-Nepal-Japan and some remains of television transmission equipment.

So far instinct had served me well, but when I started down at 3.50pm the clouds, which had been building up steadily, enveloped the summit ridge completely. Suddenly I was struggling for my life, terrified of re-enacting Mick Burke's sad fate in 1975, as my glasses froze over and I groped my way through the mist, collapsing several times from oxygen deficit, hyperventilating furiously to refill my lungs. I had always suspected that the problem would not be climbing Everest without oxygen, but getting down again, and now for the first time in my life I was having to draw on a whole new reserve of will and strength. I had grossly underestimated my level of exhaustion and the problems of orientation in the mist, so that when darkness fell I had still only just crossed back over the South Summit. Our tents on the South Col were far below and, even with my head-torch, I could not find the correct route.

The only safe thing to do was what we had tried so hard to avoid by leaving the South Col so early – settle down for a long lonely bivouac in the open at about 8600m. Luckily the afternoon storm had blown over and it was a fine night and, like most of the people who have spent a night out hereabouts, I survived.

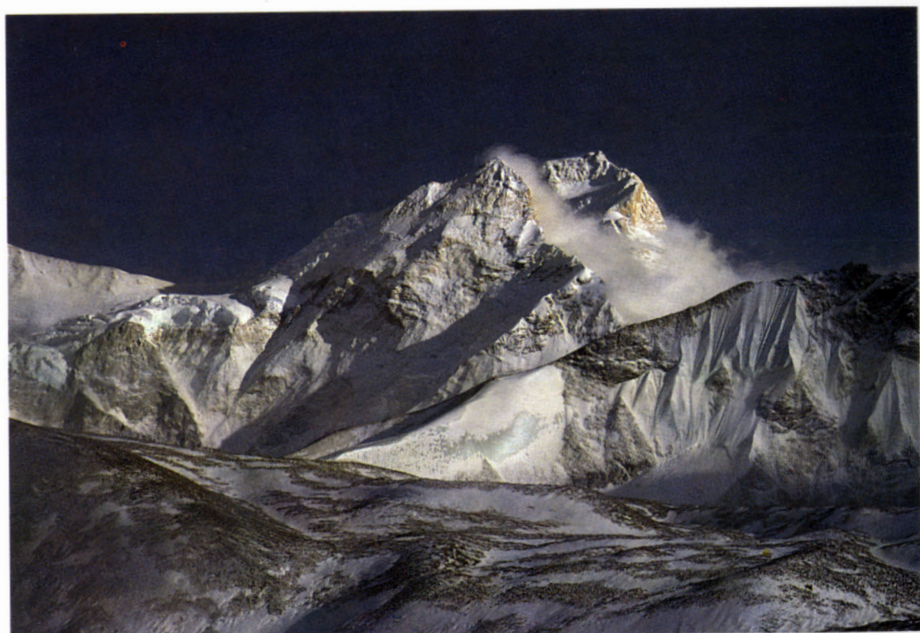
At about 3.30 that afternoon Ed had reached the South Summit, frightened by hallucinations and the possibility of blacking out and, like me, very conscious of Mick Burke's fate. He had wisely decided to turn back, soon passing Robert, who later also reached the South Summit before retreating. The two of them had descended as far as an abandoned Japanese tent in the big couloir, where they spent the night sheltering without sleeping bags. In spite of the numbing effects of cold and hypoxia on my dulled brain, I felt incredibly moved when I rejoined them early the next morning and the three of us tied symbolically to one rope to descend the remaining 300m to the South Col.

After all that trail-breaking up the E face, all those sleepless nights, the ridiculously slow 16½-hour ascent to the summit and now another sleepless night, we were exhausted. We knew perfectly well that we should descend immediately, but we were so desperate to lie down, drink and sleep that we stayed another day and night at our Camp 3. On 14 May lethargy started to take over and when we finally left at 3.45pm we had been 93 hours above 8000m. We had broken the rules and we were to continue to break them – allowing heat, hunger and thirst to reinforce our lethargy as we delayed feebly, wasting another whole day at the Flying Wing, so that when we started down from 7450m on 16 May, we knew that this was our final chance to escape alive.

Lying in the snow on that final morning, taking one hour to find the strength to stand up, I thought with detachment that this was how they must have felt on the shoulder of K2 in 1986, and we did not even have the excuse of a major storm. We were luckier and we all returned safely, despite many questionable decisions – agreeing to Paul's solo descent, climbing unroped to the summit, allowing lethargy to get the better of us, delaying dangerously, fooling ourselves that it was a good idea to descend unroped so that we could glissade more easily, leaving Robert behind on the fixed ropes on the final night of the descent . . . However, in our defence I have to point out that, although we ate virtually no food for four days, we still had spare gas for melting snow at the Flying Wing and further reserves and tents at Camp 1. Tackling such a big



56. *Makalu NW face, partially obscured by Makalu II, from Everest Kangshung Base Camp. (p 1)*



57. *Menlungtse West (7023m), from NW. (p 34)*

problem with such a small team obviously has its risks, but we all knew what we were letting ourselves in for. Although people on the Nepalese side saw us above the South Col, we never saw them and we never seriously considered the possibility of outside help, preferring to rely on our own prepared line of retreat down the E face. Our descent to 6650m was marked, albeit sketchily, with wands and below that we had a safety line of meticulously fixed ropes. It took a whole night excavating and abseiling those final 1600m of descent, but it was rewarding to discover that one did still have the instinct and control to cope safely with all the changeovers at anchors.

We were too weak to help each other physically, yet I am convinced that during that harrowing retreat we were spurred on by an extraordinary, intangible bond. Afterwards all three of us admitted independently to a strong sensation that Paul had also been on the mountain, and I think that each of us, in his private struggle, was sustained by the close team-spirit that had made the whole climb possible. Down at Advanced Base Paul, Joe, Mimi, Pasang and Kasang took over, nursing us back to some semblance of health for the return to Kharta. Robert eventually lost half a big toe from frostbite. I lost 3½ toes. Ed lost parts of three toes and eight fingers. Many people would say that Ed paid too high a price. I cannot answer for him – only report the courage and humour he has shown throughout the trauma of operations, without the sustaining bonus of those final 80m to the main summit of the mountain. I was luckier and, although I am saddened by the loss of toes, it seems a price worth paying for an incomparable adventure with people who will always remain good friends.