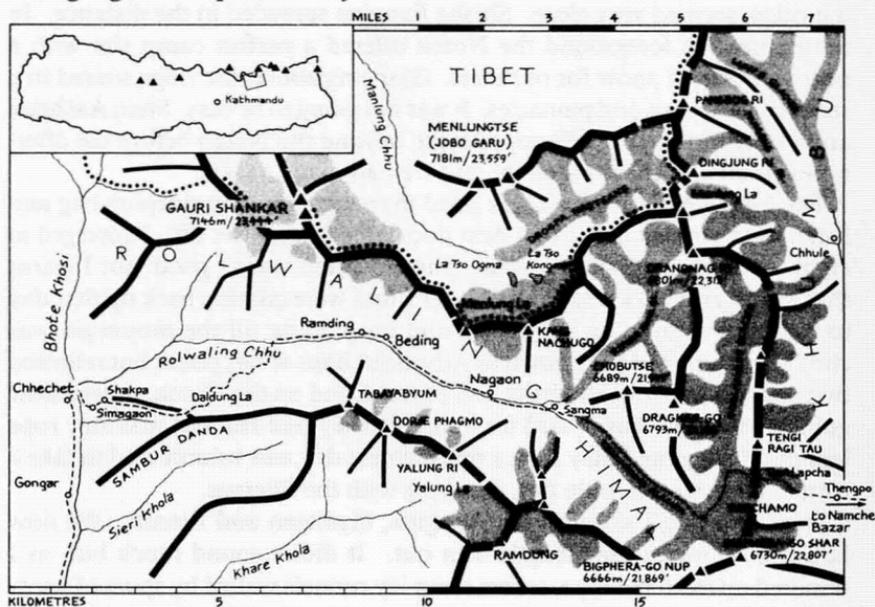


CHRIS BONINGTON

Drangnag-Ri

(Plates 17, 18)

The moment occurred during our expedition to Menlungtse in 1988, when I was attempting an unclimbed peak on the southern rim of a valley on the Tibetan/Nepalese border. We had climbed the headwall of the glacier through the night and reached the crest at dawn. As we pulled over the top of the slope, my eyes were drawn to a peak immediately in front of us. It formed a steep and almost perfect pyramid of black rock, defined by ice and snow, forbidding, unattainable and therefore immensely attractive. Checking the map, I discovered that the peak was called Drangnag-Ri, meaning Black Rock Peak, and was 6801 metres high. Research indicated that no one had ever attempted it, and it stuck in my mind as a mountain I would love to climb. So when Arne Naess, leader of the 1985 Norwegian Everest Expedition, of which I had been the sole British member, decided to have a tenth anniversary expedition, I suggested Drangnag-Ri as a possible objective.



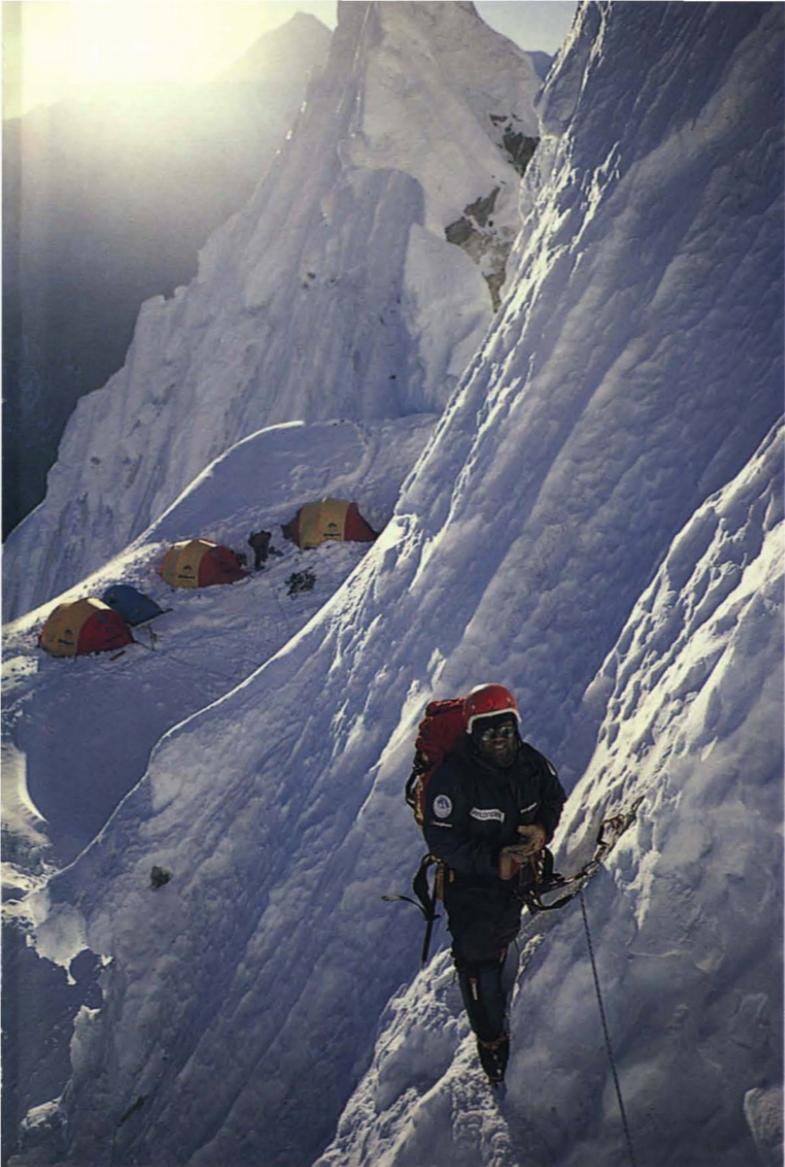
(Reproduced from Bill O'Connor's *Adventure Treks Nepal*, by courtesy of the Crowood Press and the author.)

All but one of the members of the 1985 team joined us in Kathmandu at the end of March 1995, together with six of the Sherpas who had been with us on Everest. Just getting to Drangnag-Ri was an expedition in itself. From Lukla we had to cross the 5750m Tesi Lapcha Pass leading into the Rolwaling. On the other side a long glacier snaked its way through the mountains towards our objective. The view at its head was amazing. The glacier became an airy shelf perched above an immense drop into the deep-cut valley that leads up to the Nangpa La. It was like being in the dress circle of a gigantic open-air theatre, with a backdrop of some of the highest mountains on earth: Makalu, Lhotse, Everest, Gyachung Kang and Cho Oyu.

By 20 April we were able to turn our attention to the mountain, establishing a camp at its foot at around 6200m, which left 600m to go to the summit. Since it looked extremely steep, we had already decided to put out fixed ropes to enable as many team members as possible to reach the top. We had chosen as the most likely route the right-hand skyline which we could reach from a small col or notch about a third of the way up. After three days' work, we reached a point just below the Notch. It was my good fortune to be out in front on 25 April just below the Notch. My first lead on the mountain was up 60° ice. Climbing ice at altitude is an exhausting business. You are poised on the points of your crampons, each swing of your ice tool taking several pants, and yet you hardly notice the fatigue in the tension of the moment. I was nearly at the top when a bulge of snow pushed me off balance. I planted my axe, pushing it in to its head, and heaved up. Suddenly the view opened out. Menlungtse, part hidden by the ridge, seemed very close. Shisha Pangma sprawled in the distance. In the immediate foreground the Notch offered a perfect camp site with a neat platform of snow for our tents. Glancing above, the ridge soared in a series of ice towers and pinnacles. It was not going to be easy. Stein Aasheim and I only ran out a single rope-length beyond the Notch before the afternoon cloud and snow rolled in; but we had made a start.

The following morning it was good to snuggle into my sleeping-bag and listen to the others in the tent next door preparing to set off. I emerged at eight to make the first radio call. The reception wasn't good, but I learnt that Ralph Høybakk and Bjørn Myrer Lund were coming back up that day to establish a camp on the Notch and keep going till the mountain was climbed. I dropped back down to Advanced Base at this point, but returned two days later to join Høybakk and Myrer Lund on the Notch. It was slow going and in two days' hard ice climbing they had run out just four rope lengths. I suggested they took a rest the next day and volunteered to take a turn at pushing the route out, climbing with the Sherpas.

Next morning I set out with Mingma, Gyaltzen and Rinzin. We now had five 50-metre rope-lengths run out. It didn't sound much but, as I jumared up the fixed rope, across steep icy runnels walled by spurs of snow and ice, it felt a long way and I was impressed by the difficulty of the climbing. The route went through an icy arch and up over little rock walls and



Above

17. Drangnag-Ri, 6801m.
Ola Einang above Camp 2
which was pitched by a
huge snow drift created
by wind whipping
around the notch.
(Chris Bonington) (p77)

Right

18. Retreat from the summit
during an electric storm.
(Chris Bonington) (p82)



then, suddenly, the fixed rope ended and I was at the high point, marked by a bundle of pitons and karabiners hanging from an ice peg. Before we could start pushing the route out further we had to haul in all the slack of the fixed rope, sort out the climbing rope, rack the gear I thought I would need, and at last we were ready. I couldn't help feeling apprehensive.

'Is it all right if Rinzin belays you?' asked Mingma. 'He's more used to it than I am.'

'Sure. No problem.'

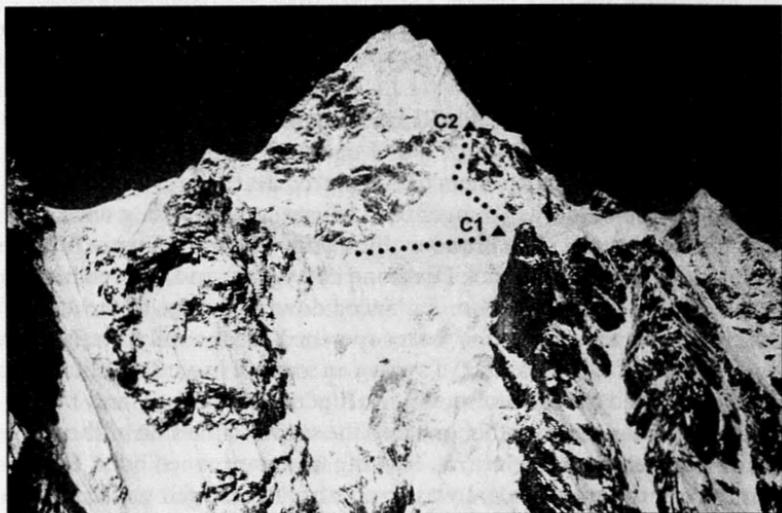
There was another delay while Rinzin caught up on the fixed rope – time for me to begin to feel nervous. Was I up to it? Would I make the same amount of progress as the others had achieved on the previous day?

Rinzin arrived. He was younger than Mingma, with a long narrow face which nearly always held a broad wolfish grin. He had a Figure of Eight, but I loaned him my own Black Diamond belay plate and showed him how to use it. It was time for action. I glanced down the ridge to the camp far below, with the tents, like tiny boxes, perched on the only available flat snow ledge on it. Time to start. I swung an ice tool in a curve, flicking the pick as it touched the hard smooth ice. It penetrated neatly and I knew it would hold. I banged the other one into the snow on the side of the runnel. It cut through easily but felt firm. Kicking in a cramponed boot, I stepped up and my nerves vanished. I was concentrating and felt good, although panting hard now at 6500 metres. A few more moves and I was ten metres up, the drop spiralling below for over 300 metres to a snow shelf which concealed a further drop of over 2000 metres to the valley below. I pulled up round the bordering snow ridge towards some broken rock protruding grey-brown from the ice. It was time for some protection and I put in an ice screw. I felt an intense elation. I was going better than I had for years, reading the ground, attuned to this environment in which I had worked and ventured for so many years. This was why I was still climbing at the age of sixty.

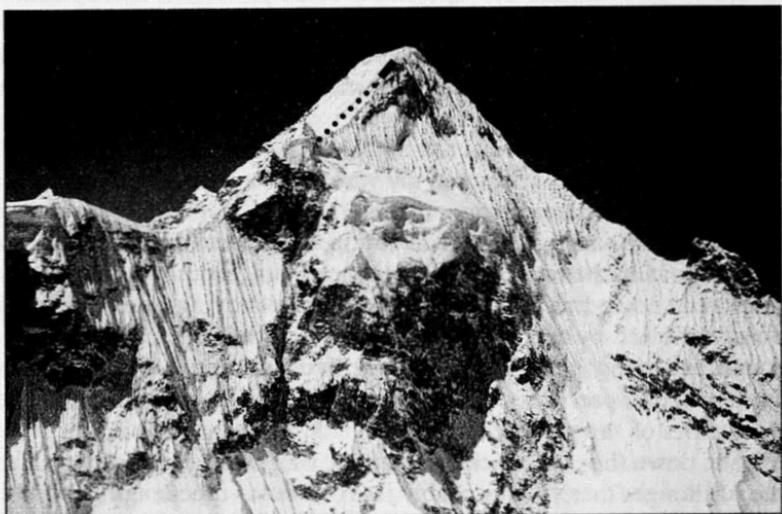
Mingma and Rinzin were out of sight now. Alone, barely aware of the rope snaking behind me, I picked my way up past a huge snow cone that clung to the crest of the ridge. Sometimes on rock, sometimes on snow or ice, I slowly gained height until a shout from below warned me that I had nearly run out all the rope. I found a tiny rock ledge, put in a couple of ice screws and shouted to the two Sherpas to start moving up. A long wait ensued, followed by the complex business of fixing the rope, hauling it through and tying it off to the intermediate runners. Matching Bjørn's achievement the previous day, I led one more rope-length before the afternoon flurries of snow swept in.

We slid down the ropes back to the camp, well pleased with what we had done. I thought there was probably just one more rope-length before the angle started easing and we would be able to make a push for the summit. We could go for it the following day, 30 April. Exactly ten years ago we had all been taking our turn to top out on Everest.

The camp on the Notch had become a small village, Klaus Eric Okstad, the cameraman, and Ola Einang had moved up, pitching a tent on the very brink of the ledge. Everyone wanted to have a go at the summit – this was going to mean that ten of us would be going for the top the next day.



Drangnag-Ri from the SE showing the route to the Notch (Camp 2) with Menlungtse behind (R). The head of the Tram Bau glacier is to the left of Camp 1 and gives the only easy approach to the mountain.



Drangnag-Ri from the E, showing its huge East Face and the route to the summit from Camp 2 on the Notch, which is reached from the other side.

It was Bjørn's turn out in front. On reaching my high point, he disappeared behind an ice bulge and was out of sight for an hour. In the meantime, the rest of the team – all nine of us – caught up to wait, festooned on various ice pitons, as the sun slowly climbed into a cloud-flecked sky. It took Bjørn nearly two hours to run out 50 metres of rope whilst we waited anxiously below. Ralph Høybakk, who was belaying him, followed up and I followed Ralph. I could see why it had taken Bjørn so long, for the climbing was steep and hard and the difficulties were not yet over. Bjørn had belayed in an open gully of steep snow that soared into a convex bulge. It was no longer technically difficult but the snow seemed bottomless and we discovered that we only had one snow anchor with us. The rest had been used on our tents in the camp below. The morning had slipped away, it was beginning to cloud over and ten people on the route were too many. Ralph and I talked it through and decided that some of the team would have to go back down, but who? I certainly wanted to go to the top and was the only team member, other than Bjørn, who was happy leading on this steep ground. Ralph then suggested that Bjørn, Pema Dorje and I should go for the summit. I knew how much Ralph wanted to go for the top and was impressed by his self-sacrifice.

By this time Bjørn had run out another rope-length, so I followed him up to take a spell out in front. I found him wedged in a small crevasse, acting as a human belay. He didn't have the solitary snow anchor and there was no ice in sight for an ice screw. I floundered up some more snow to reach a rocky outcrop and at last fixed a solid anchor by driving a rock peg into a crack. Half an hour later Pema Dorje arrived, accompanied by Lhakpa Gyalu and Ralph. Pema had wanted Lhakpa along to carry some more rope, so Ralph had felt justified in coming up as well.

Out in front I felt good, and focused on reaching the summit. The angle had now eased but the snow was deep and prone to avalanche. I moved forward tentatively, sinking up to my knees at each step as I traversed out across the slope towards a sérac wall that would give me an ice anchor; but the rope ran out before I could reach it. Nothing for it. I buried my solitary snow stake horizontally in the soft snow. It just about held. I sat on top of it and waited for the others to arrive. The two Sherpas came first. Pema had another rope with him and on easy-angled ground the Sherpas were stronger and faster than I was. I waved him through and he broke trail up to the sérac wall where we got in an ice anchor.

By this time the cloud has swirled in around us and we were limited to a grey-white world, the sérac wall stretching as far as we could see on either side. Pema was happy to yield the lead – the Sherpas have little experience of climbing steep ice. After wallowing in deep insecure snow and nearly falling into a bergschrund, I decided to tackle the ice wall direct. It was just off vertical but the ice was quite soft and it was easier than I had anticipated. Above, the angle eased and I slowly plodded on until once again the rope ran out. I had recovered our one snow stake, put that in and waited

for the others to catch up. The cloud shifted above, and I glimpsed another sérac wall ahead. Surely we must be somewhere near the summit, and yet in the mist the glimpses of ice seemed far above us. The angle being easy, I now abandoned the rope and plodded on up the slope, until Lhakpa Gyalu caught me up and surged ahead towards the next ice wall. This proved to be another bergschrund, but he produced a further rope from his sack. I belayed him across. He reached the ice, put in an ice screw and once again I took over for the next steep section.

We were now on the crest of the ridge, and as I pulled over it, the slope dropped away giddily on the other side. I hardly noticed the altitude, my concentration on the summit was so great. It was as if 40 years had dropped away from me. I felt I had regained all the drive and single-minded focus of my youth to take me up the steep ice of that soaring ridge. The rope ran out just short of the crest. I hammered in my axe, tied the rope to it, planted my ice hammer over the top and heaved up onto a little platform. Glancing up, I suddenly realised that I had nearly run out of mountain. The ridge tapered just above me into a gentle knife-edged curve. We had made it. We were very nearly on the summit of Drangnag-Ri.

I let out a whoop and waited for the others. Lhakpa Gyalu was first up, so I waved him past. It seemed only right that he should be the first to stand on this unclimbed summit in his own country. He had been with me in 1972 and 1975 on the South-West Face of Everest and then again in 1985 on our Norwegian Expedition, but he had never been to the summit of Everest. He demurred, but I pushed him past me and followed up. He was standing balanced precariously on the knife-edged ridge, the slope dropping away on every side into the mist, when suddenly I felt an electric shock course through me; the air around me seemed alive with an all-pervasive hissing. I yelled at Lhakpa Gyalu to get off the summit and fled back to the platform a short way below. Bjørn and Ralph had just arrived. I shouted that we should get the hell out of it, but Ralph was prepared to take the risk, and had started for the final little summit ridge when the atmosphere sizzled again. We turned tail and, one at a time, slid back down the top rope. I was the last, feeling very vulnerable as I waited my turn. Abandoning my axe, which was acting as anchor, I abseiled carefully down the summit crest.

The descent seemed endless but at last the tents came into sight. The others were waiting for me as I stumbled down, embraced them and couldn't stop myself crying, from relief, exhaustion and an immense feeling of affection for my Norwegian and Sherpa comrades who had shared the experience with me.

Summary: The first ascent of Drangnag-Ri (6801m) in the Rolwaling Himal was made by Chris Bonington, Pema Dorge, Lhakpa Gyalu, Ralph Høybakk and Bjørn Myrer Lund on 30 April 1995.