
PAT PARSONS

The Gimmigela Adventure

(Plates 33–35)

The outcome of any adventure is, by definition, uncertain. If that were not the case, there would be little point in doing it. In the spring of 1997 Gimmigela provided the adventure of a lifetime for fourteen British Servicemen. The mountain kept us guessing right to the end and even the day before the summit, after five gut-busting weeks, I felt sure we were staring defeat in the face. The weather was deteriorating and time running out. However, by the skin of our teeth we achieved our goal.

I had been looking for such a mountain for some time. Remote and isolated, Gimmigela was still a virgin 7000m peak in 1993. I couldn't believe my luck, therefore, when the Nepalese authorities made it available for mountaineering. Kit Spencer, an old friend of mine in Kathmandu, told me this news in December 1994, and so it was that Gimmigela became our expedition objective. My dreams of a first ascent were soon dashed, however, when I heard that the Japanese had climbed it, just a few months earlier, from the Sikkim side. Imagine my dismay when I heard of their second ascent in 1995, this time from the Nepalese side. Nevertheless, it was still a remote and relatively unknown peak and therefore a worthy objective.

Despite being in the shadow of Kangchenjunga's north face, Gimmigela stands alone and has its own character. It is a beautiful mountain to look at but proved deceptively difficult to climb. Perhaps the greatest surprise was the quality of the climbing. Although loose in places, this followed the most compelling line and was continually steep and exciting.

The idea of leading an expedition had been in the back of my mind for some time. Over the years, I have gained much from the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Mountaineering Club (RN&RMMC) and the time seemed right to put something back in. I half-seriously asked my appointer for the time off to do the trip and, to my astonishment, he agreed. My bluff was called and the game was on! For such a venture, the team is all-important and we were blessed with a good one. Most of its members came from the Club (RN&RMMC) with two Army members and one from the RAF. For the most part we were a happy and harmonious group and worked well together. As one might expect from such a gathering, humour was in abundance and there were few dull moments.

The aim of the expedition was to make the first British ascent of Gimmigela, ideally by a new route. My unstated objectives, in order of

priority, were to get everybody back in one piece, to summit and still to be talking to each other afterwards. Thankfully, all these aims were achieved.

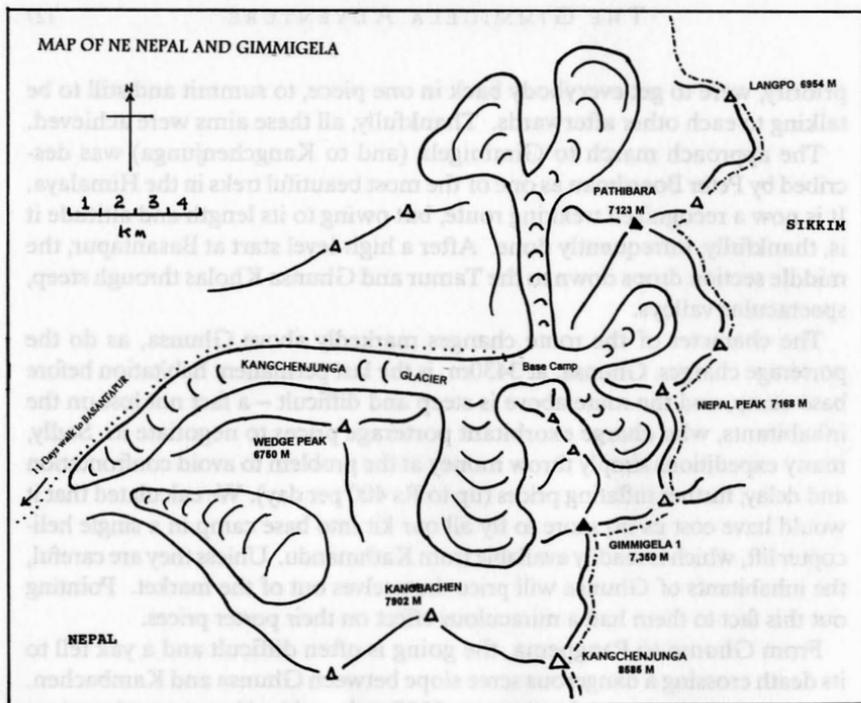
The approach march to Gimmigela (and to Kangchenjunga) was described by Peter Boardman as one of the most beautiful treks in the Himalaya. It is now a recognised trekking route, but owing to its length and altitude it is, thankfully, infrequently done. After a high-level start at Basantapur, the middle section drops down to the Tamur and Ghunsa Kholas through steep, spectacular valleys.

The character of the route changes markedly above Ghunsa, as do the porterage charges. Ghunsa, at 3430m, is the last permanent habitation before base camp, and the route above is steep and difficult – a fact not lost on the inhabitants, who charge exorbitant porterage prices to negotiate it. Sadly, many expeditions simply throw money at the problem to avoid confrontation and delay, further inflating prices (up to Rs 400 per day). We calculated that it would have cost us no more to fly all our kit into base camp in a single helicopter lift, which is readily available from Kathmandu. Unless they are careful, the inhabitants of Ghunsa will price themselves out of the market. Pointing out this fact to them had a miraculous effect on their porter prices.

From Ghunsa to Pangpema, the going is often difficult and a yak fell to its death crossing a dangerous scree slope between Ghunsa and Kambachen. Pangpema, a summer yak pasture at 5139m, is an ideal base camp location. At the confluence of the Kangchenjunga Glacier, it is set in magnificent surroundings with stunning mountain views. Particularly impressive were Wedge Peak and, of course, Kangchenjunga itself. Normally a remote and isolated spot, this season we shared Pangpema with four other expeditions: Spanish, Slovakian, American/British and Korean, all attempting the big prize: Kangchenjunga's North Face.

Our plan, which had evolved from photos back in the UK, was to climb Gimmigela's South-West Ridge. It appeared to offer the most natural and the safest line to the summit, a fact confirmed when we saw it. The route followed the true line of the ridge from foot to summit and had never been attempted before. (The Japanese climbed the NW Face from the col between Cross Peak and Gimmigela).

As a Services team, I wanted to get as many people as high as possible, so that all might benefit equally. We therefore elected to climb in traditional style using tented camps and fixed ropes. In any case, the nature of the route mitigated against an Alpine-style ascent, the ridge being over three kilometres long from glacier to summit. In the event, about 1500m of rope were fixed (and stripped after the climb). No high-altitude porters were used and oxygen was taken (but not used) for medicinal purposes only. We divided the team into two climbing groups, led by Tug Wilson and Ted Atkins respectively. Initially, the two groups alternated between lead climbing and supporting and this even-handed approach was partly responsible for the slow rate of progress early on. Later, less democratic measures were adopted.



The route from Base Camp to Advanced Base Camp is some six kilometres long and, for the most part, follows the Kangchenjunga Glacier. It was the most frequently travelled part of the entire route, with most members traversing it at least a dozen times. It was also mind-numbingly tedious, the only relief being the staggering mountain views in every direction. From Base Camp a 400ft descent was made down onto the main glacier – this was a real gut-buster on the return trip. Once on the glacier, the first section resembled a trek through a 'Dr Who' set with enormous, scree-covered ice penitents frequently covered with fresh snow.

The next section was on snow and ice and followed the main glacier towards Kangchenjunga. Flatter than the first section, the going was easier, especially after a hard freeze. However, during the heat of the day, the glare and heat were intolerable, so early starts were the order of the day. Latterly, as winter receded, some small crevasses opened up and rivers appeared from nowhere across the main track. To cross them we were frequently wading up to our knees.

Initially, ferrying a load from Base Camp to ABC in a single push was too much. We therefore established a temporary campsite where loads could be dumped before the final long steep push up glacial moraine the following day. ABC itself was in a magnificent position overlooking the main glacier, with stunning views of Pangpema, Drohmo, Wedge Peak, Ramtang and of course, Kangchenjunga's North Face just a stone's throw away – or so it appeared.

Advanced Base Camp (Camp 1) was sited as high and as close as possible to the foot of the route. This followed a steep snow gully, a loose and exposed rock ridge and a short snow field. The ridge comprised towers of shattered blocks perched amongst razor-sharp slates. The climbing was precarious, Scottish II/III with moves of Hard Severe. The fixed rope was in constant danger of being cut and the entire line was eventually moved into the adjacent gully (where it was avalanched instead!). A variety of protection devices were used to secure the rope to the shattered rock.

A characteristic problem with this part of the route was one of perspective. From BC it looked like an easy 45° plod. In reality, it was steep and sustained mixed climbing all the way to Camp 2, some 800m above. This was the hardest part of the climb and took 17 days to complete. From below, the route looked grossly foreshortened and the cry 'Camp 2 tomorrow' every day for 10 days became slightly wearing. Halfway up, the lead climbers frequently became 'lost' in the vastness of the mountain and found it difficult to judge their relative positions and, indeed, the way ahead. Only by standing back (on the other side of the Kangchenjunga Glacier) could the full picture be seen and the key gully leading to Camp 2 identified.

As the route progressed it took more and more time to reach the previous day's high point. Progress, already hindered by daily afternoon snowstorms, slowed right down. A halfway camp known as 'Intermediate' was therefore established precariously on the ridge above the first snowfield. The line up to this point was climbed and descended many times and much time was spent improving, replacing and doubling the fixed ropes where necessary. From ABC to Intermediate took, on average, about four hours to climb.

Above Intermediate, the climbing changed in character. Far from easing off, as we had fervently hoped it would, it became steeper. The exposed and very steep mixed ridge above Intermediate was climbed for about 500ft before we realised it was a dead end. It was therefore stripped and the focus shifted to a very steep ice gully, spotted from the other side of the glacier. For over 300m the gully steepened until it reached the near-vertical 'Ice Monster', so named after its gleaming eyes and gaping crevasse for a mouth. The run-out from the gully was even longer – some 1000m straight down onto the Kangchenjunga Glacier. From Intermediate, it took a further six days to reach the Ice Monster, which proved to be the key to the route as it led up to Camp 2 and the main Gimmigela ridge. Towards the end, the load carriers were able to complete a carry from ABC to Camp 2 in a single day. Indeed, they had to, to keep the supply route open.

Camp 2 was not established until 26 April, over three weeks after our arrival at Pangpema. It was increasingly clear that at this rate we would not summit in the next two weeks, which we needed to do if we were to strip the mountain before our departure. We were barely halfway up! A rethink was needed and the existing teams reorganised. From now on, three pairs of the strongest lead climbers were selected to push hard until

they reached the summit. Each pair would rotate the lead for three days and then be replaced without losing momentum. The rest of the team were dedicated to supporting the leaders and a plan was drawn up detailing individual duties over the next two weeks. Of course, its success depended upon the weather.

Camp 2, at 6350m, was perched on an excellent site with views of Makalu and into Tibet. The climbing above was open snow and ice on the main SW ridge of Gimmigela. Up to this point the whole route had been fixed; above, it would only be fixed on the steepest sections. The conditions improved with height as the winds blew away any fresh snow before it could settle. We now used only our lightest equipment, fixing 6mm ropes to reduce weight, swapping the comfort of Quasar tents for tiny Gemini assault tents and eating only freeze-dried rations. As the route progressed along the ridge and the lines of communication extended, so it became harder to support the lead climbers.

The wind and cold intensified. We had to keep moving on this magnificent knife-edged ridge with few breaks for chocolate or drinks. Twice, teams failed to reach Camp 3 because of the severity of the winds and were forced to turn back. It was here that Paul Hart was blown off; he fell a full rope length but was held by his partner, Marty Hallett. Camp 3 was established at 6700m on 4 May by Tug Wilson and Larry Foden. It was the same site as the Japanese had used some 18 months earlier and marked the end of the new ground. The route above followed their general line to the summit.

Clinging to a steep slope with an alarming degree of exposure, Camp 3 had atmosphere. But it was not as comfortable as Camp 2 and the Gemini tents were coffin-like compared with the Quasars below. Time now presented a new pressure, the amount left being measured in days. We had completed the difficult climbing but, as we climbed higher, each day brought worsening conditions. Defeat was staring us in the face.

The first summit bid, starting from Camp 3, was, perhaps, a little ambitious. And there were other problems: for instance, a huge tower on the ridge above, christened 'The Cioch', blocked the way to the summit. The team set off full of characteristic, if unfounded, optimism – into the wind. After eight hours The Cioch had still not been reached and visibility became limited by driven snow. Ted Atkins and Rob Magowan pressed on and climbed The Cioch; however, the day was nearly done and with no summit in sight, they turned back to face the long retreat to Camp 3.

A higher camp was required for the next team to have any chance of summiting. Despite deteriorating conditions and against all expectations, Pea Peacock and Bert Lane established Camp 4 at 7050m the following day. They were now above any fixed ropes and on their own. After a delayed start on 10 May, they set off into a gale. They elected to drop down from the main ridge onto the south side of the mountain, effectively bypassing The Cioch.

The climbing was initially across a highly unstable, avalanche-prone slope some 3000ft above the upper Kanch glacier. The wind was gusting up to 90 mph, adding to the sense of commitment. Time was running out and exhaustion setting in as they reached the first false summit. Pressing on, the wind forced them to drop down from the ridge until they reached a final steep ice gully leading to the summit ridge. The pair eventually summited at 1600hrs after a supreme effort and an epic climb.

My diary entry for 10 May captures the changing mood at Base Camp: from despondency to jubilation.

On my way down from ABC I kept looking back up at the mountain. There was a jet-stream plume coming off the summit and my heart sank. No chance of the summit today and time is running out like sand through my fingers. I knew that Pea and Bert had made a late start this morning because of the wind and, no doubt, they would soon be turning back. I hope they make it down to their tent OK in this wind. When I got to BC Huan Davies told me they were 250m from the summit on their last radio call. Better news than I had ever dared hope for. At 1240, Pea calls up to say he is just 5m from the summit and is bringing Bert up to join him. He'll call again when they're both up. UNBELIEVABLE! Jubilation and congratulations all round. I grab the satcom and call up CinC Fleet (the Royal Navy Headquarters in Northwood). Create a bit of a stir by asking to speak to the First Sea Lord, (the expedition Patron), I had forgotten it's Saturday! Eventually persuade the Duty Fleet Controller that I'm serious and I am given Admiral Slater's home number. He is expecting my call in a couple of minutes.

A tense and silent hour later, Pea calls to say he is still an hour from the summit and the wind is horrendous. DEJECTION! It must have been a false summit – I thought it was too good to be true! The tension in Ted's Shed is palpable for the next hour. Pea's next call does nothing to reassure us. He is now just two pitches from the summit but on a pitch of 'grade V'. I leave the shed for some relief. Looking through the telescope the summit is clogged in. Then, all of a sudden it clears, and yes, there they are! Two tiny figures crawling up to the summit! We really have done it this time! In two minutes Admiral Sir Jock Slater is personally congratulating Pea and Bert who, naturally enough, think it is a wind-up!

The commitment shown by Nigel Lane and Neil Peacock on their successful summit bid was inspirational. Despite all odds, they eventually made it to the summit and staggered back down to their tent just as darkness fell. The second bid was made two days later by the remaining four lead climbers: Ted Atkins, Rob Magowan, Larry Foden and Tug Wilson. The conditions

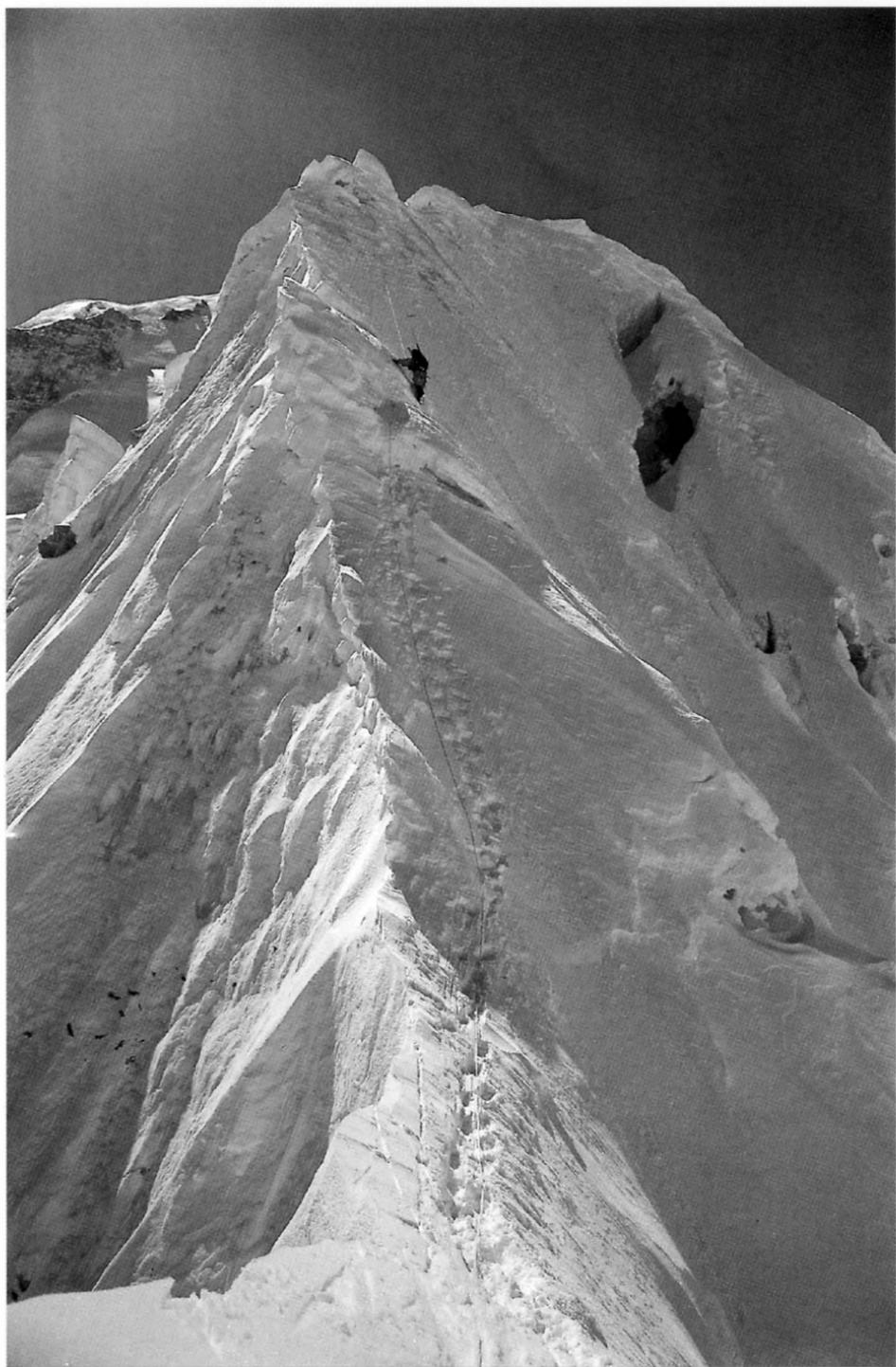
were still cold but less windy and it did not snow. They took a slightly different line but the climbing was excellent and they enjoyed the stunning summit views denied to the first team.

We climbed Gimmigela with just one day to spare and were extremely lucky to get the necessary weather windows during a prolonged period of poor weather. The same weather caused three out of the four international expeditions on Kangchenjunga to fail. Our concern now was to get everyone down safely – always the most dangerous part. It was also our intention to bring everything from the hill down to Base Camp. In the event we left only a short section of fixed line on the Ice Monster. Everything else was recovered and carried out.

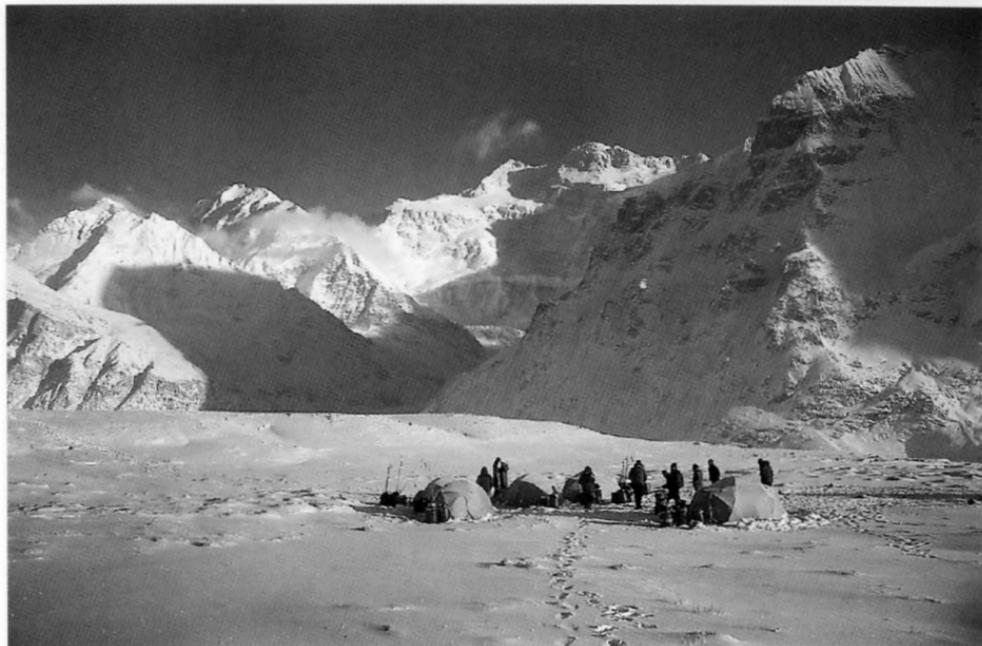
We left Pangpema on 18 May and were some four hours out of Base Camp when a shocked and breathless Tom Herries from Jonathan Pratt's Kangchenjunga Expedition caught us up. He explained that Roddy McArthur had fallen over an ice cliff and actually landed in their Camp 3. Roddy had been ill for a couple of days and was making his way down by himself when he fell. Tom actually witnessed the fall through a telescope and was not optimistic about Roddy's chances. Nevertheless, we used our satcom to call for a helicopter in the hope that Roddy was still alive. Luckily, he was. We saw him the following day in Ghunsa when his helicopter briefly touched down on its way to Kathmandu. Luckily, he made a full recovery.

Already, with the immediate demands and deadlines of work, a unique adventure is fading into a memory. But what a memory: one to be treasured for the rest of our days. My one regret is that Gimmigela kept us so busy that we were unable to explore the hidden delights that the area so obviously holds. I would love to return to Pangpema to fully explore the area and possibly to climb Pathibara (Pyramid Peak) which we actually had a permit for, but time ran out. At 7123m this fine peak still awaits an ascent from the Nepalese side. I believe the British Services may go to Kangchenjunga for a Millennium expedition but, for me at least, exploring the lesser peaks provides the greater sport and adventure, and from what I saw, there is sport and adventure in abundance in the Pangpema area of north-east Nepal.

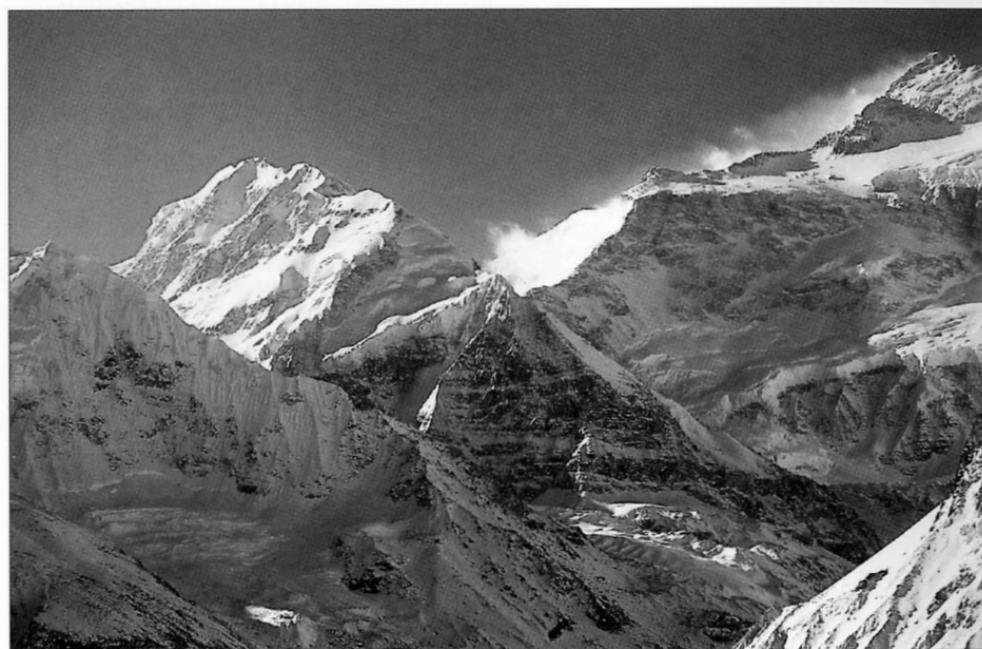
Summary: The British Services Gimmigela Expedition, led by Royal Marine Pat Parsons, made the third ascent and first British ascent of this 7350m peak lying on the Nepal/Sikkim border just north of Kangchenjunga. They climbed the SW Ridge, over 3km in length, with a vertical height gain of 2150m. Nigel Lane and Neil Peacock (Royal Marines) summited on 10 May. Two days later Ted Atkins (RAF), and Royal Marines Larry Foden, Rob Magowan and Tug Wilson reached the summit. Before leaving Pangpema Base Camp on 18 May, the mountain was stripped of fixed ropes and garbage.



33. Gimmigela, 7350m (the 'Ice Monster') (*Pat Parsons*) (p126)



34. Pangpema – Base Camp for the British Services Gimmigela Expedition, May 1997. (*Pat Parsons*) (p126)



35. Looking south towards Gimmigela (*left*) with Kangchenjunga (*right*). (*Pat Parsons*) (p126)