Kangchenjunga Jubilee
1955 ~ 2005

T H Somervell *Kangchenjunga from below Darjeeling*
Presented to E F Norton and inscribed 'EFN from THS 1925'
Watercolour and bodycolour
Private collection

ALAN HINKES

Close Encounters with Kangch'

With luck, by the time you read this I will have climbed Kangchenjunga and my quest to climb all the world's 8000-metre peaks will be over. But, as they say, 'I've been here before,' and as I write this in March 2005, I think back to a previous close encounter with Kangch'.

My personal danger signals were moving into overload. I was absolutely alone near 8000m and pushing for the top. It was five years ago; a solo bid with only my support – a base camp crew of cook, cook-boy and sirdar – 2500m below. There were no other expeditions left on the mountain.

Spindrift was pouring down the avalanche-prone snow slopes and the weather was socking in. I was getting anxious, in fact scared, and knew I must retreat. I really wanted to push on to the summit. It would have been my 12th 8000er and I knew I was so close to the top. But it was not to be and I turned down. As I descended, the weather worsened to a near white-out with a metre of fresh snow aggravating the avalanche risk.

Reaching less steep ground around 6500m, I knew there were now several hidden crevasses to negotiate. At times I sank into waist-deep snow, sometimes I crawled over what I suspected were crevasses. Twice I sank to my chest as snow bridges settled. My racing heart just about burst out of my head each time it happened. Then I fell harder, up to my neck in a slot and banged my arm across on the hard-as-concrete wall of the crevasse. A bone in my elbow snapped with a metallic crack as if my ice axe pick had broken.

Still, I had another arm and two legs, so I just got on with getting out of the crevasse and struggling down to base camp. At least I could still walk and abseil with one arm. It could have been worse. I thought, if Doug (Scott) can crawl down the Ogre with a broken leg, what have I got to complain about? It was almost dark when I reached the old site of camp one at 6000m. There was no tent there now. From here, when uninjured, I had descended to base in 50 minutes. Now, in the dark with a head torch and broken arm, it took me more than three hours. I arrived in camp around midnight, feeling lucky to be alive, though I had not reached the summit. I would have to wait awhile to enter those Five Treasure Houses of the Snows.

That wait became prolonged when a second attempt on Kangchenjunga, in 2003, ended almost before it started. I contracted a SARS-like virus of the upper respiratory tract and that was that.

3. Kangchenjunga south-west face from Camp 1 in 2000, showing the crevasse field where Hinkes fell in and broke his arm. (*Alan Hinkes*)

'Why bother?' I am asked. After all, 12 people have climbed all 14 of the 8000ers already. 'Why not?' I reply. Or why bother indeed to climb any mountain? Eric Shipton thought it was impossible to provide an entirely satisfactory explanation for any recreation, especially mountaineering with its inherent danger. If climbing all 14 was easy or a straightforward succession of plods, then I would not bother. Maybe I would just head off collecting bolt routes in Spain, using uplift and huts in the Alps to enjoy a 4000m peak or an Alpine face route, or making just a short trip to a 6000m peak, all of which I enjoy.

Sometimes near the top of an 8000er I feel like I am on the moon. Perhaps it is the lack of oxygen fuzzing my brain and eyes and the thin, clear atmosphere which make the rock seem lunar in texture and colour. Strangely different to anything I have climbed on or examined as an amateur geologist at lower altitudes, it can be frost-shattered, sickeningly loose and horrible from a rock-climbing aspect. But it is more than that; it has a stark, ethereal quality.

It is common knowledge that humans can only survive at these extreme altitudes for a few days at most. If you become trapped by bad weather or immobile due to an accident, you will die. No helicopter can reach heights above 7000m. Some people think I must have a death wish to keep going above 8000m, but far from it.

4. Climbing the rock step below Camp 1. (*Alan Hinkes*)

5. Kangchenjunga base camp, south-west face, with track leading off to Camp 1. (*Alan Hinkes*)

I have always gravitated and aspired to the big hills. Even when I started rock climbing I always went for length. Bouldering was never for me. I served an apprenticeship in the Alps, lower Himalayan peaks and Scotland in winter, long before getting hooked on the big 14. Over the last 20 years I have been on 25 expeditions to 8000m peaks, as well as trips to mountains in the 5000-7000m range and plenty of rock climbing.

My first taste of a big hill was in 1984, when I attempted the north side of Everest with the Cumbrian Everest Expedition, but it was not until 1987 that I climbed my first 8000er, Shisha Pangma (8046m). Steve Untch (USA) and myself climbed a new route on the north face up the central couloir in alpine style. Messner had looked at this line but decided against it and went up the route of the first ascent. Steve and I were part of a Polish expedition led by Jerzy Kukuczka.

For 'Jurek', it was his 14th 8000er and he became the second person to climb the full set. I learnt a lot on that expedition, especially not to underestimate an 8000er and always to take a tent. Steve and I had bivouacked at 7800m on the ascent with no tent. We just dug two tiny coffin-sized ledges in the snow and ice, tied ourselves on and laid down in sleeping bags. Spindrift poured over us for most of the night and it was difficult to use a stove to melt snow. The next day we carried on to the top – the real top of Shisha Pangma – and descended part way to around 6900m. Steve had horribly frostbitten feet. Back in the USA he had several toes amputated.

I did not go home after Shisha Pangma but trekked in to Lhotse south face for an attempt with Krzysztof Wielicki. We were battered back down from high on the face by some of the worst October storms in the Himalaya. The logistics, level of commitment and danger on one of these 8000ers fascinated me. In '88 after climbing a hard new line on Menlungtse West (7013m) with Andy Fanshawe, I tried Makalu, alpine style, with Rick Allen on an expedition organised by Doug Scott. Disaster struck at 8200m when Rick was avalanched 400m. Miraculously he survived although badly cut up, disorientated and shocked. It was a minor epic to get Rick down. Unusually, but fortunately, the weather remained settled and lower down we were helped by a Catalan team. Any lesser mortal than Rick would have given up and died.

In late '88 I was telephoned by Benoît Chamoux who invited me on his *L'Esprit d'Equipe* expeditions. I flew over to Paris on Christmas Eve 1988 and agreed to climb Manaslu in '89 and Cho Oyo and Shisha Pangma (by a new route) in 1990. *L'Esprit* had fairly good sponsorship from French companies; there was a team of seven climbers from France, Italy, the Czech Republic, Netherlands and England (me), but it was really a Franco-Italian affair. Benoît had openly stated his aim to climb all the 8000ers and be the first Frenchman to do so. I still had no desire for this 'grand slam' and nor did I see the possibility of being able to achieve it had I wanted to. I was only interested in climbing and was enjoying the luxury of being involved

in well-sponsored trips. I didn't have to worry about airfares, hotels, porters to base camp, food or anything other than climbing.

Benoît was easygoing, but very determined and fit. He was a mountain guide, like myself, and lived near Chamonix. We climbed Manaslu by the south face route. Hardly anyone had been on it for several years and we had to hack a path through the jungle to base camp. The first part of the route was steep rock followed by a high glacier valley, steepening again to the summit. It was the first British ascent of Manaslu (still the only British ascent). The following year we did Cho Oyu almost as an acclimatisation peak for Shisha Pangma where we climbed a steep couloir left of the one I climbed in '87. In 1995 Benoît disappeared on Kangchenjunga, his 13th 8000er.

In '91 I was on another big expedition, this time to Broad Peak where I was guiding for Himalayan Kingdoms, now Jagged Globe. Broad Peak belies its reputation and name and is neither an easy plod nor is it broad near the top. The summit ridge from the col at 7800m is narrow and steep. Broad Peak was my fourth 8000er. Whilst there I visited K2 base camp and met Sigi Haupfaur. It was like meeting one of the Gods. He had been on the Eiger in winter and climbed 10 of the 8000ers. I could not imagine climbing another six, let alone all 14, but K2 impressed me; it burnt itself into my psyche. I had to climb K2 but I still had no ambition to climb all 14.

In 1992 I went with Doug Scott to attempt the Mazeno ridge on Nanga Parbat. The following year I made my first attempt on K2 from the Pakistan side. It was thwarted by having to help down an exhausted climber from another team after his partner had fallen to his death. I realised that K2 had very short weather windows so you needed to set off in poor conditions and be high on the mountain for when a summit opportunity arose. Generally on any 8000er there are only a handful of days when it is possible to summit. The rest of the time it is too cold, too windy, too avalanche prone or generally just too inhospitable. I reckon K2 is the hardest of all the mountains, and for me it gets the gold medal. Kangchenjunga may well get the silver with Everest taking the bronze.

In 1994 I tried K2 from China. The north face is more difficult to approach than the south-east ridge. Technically, it is no more difficult when you are on it, but it does have worse objective dangers. The lower slopes are avalanche prone and the icefield around 6800m is raked by stonefall like the *Eigerwand*. Our expedition fixed double ropes across the icefield and regularly both would be cut by stones. The upper hanging snowfield is also avalanche prone. I decided to turn back here, possibly only five hours from the top. I just could not accept the avalanche danger.

I went straight back to the Abruzzi ridge route the following year. People had started to suggest I was obsessed with K2. 'What is wrong with that?' I would say. 'What about Mallory and Everest, Whymper and the Matterhorn or a rock climber working a route to redpoint it?' Anyway, K2 was not an obsession. I just wanted to climb it, so I reckoned I was showing

true Yorkshire Grit, as fine a human quality as it is rock for climbing. Almscliffe has given me as much pleasure as K2.

Alison Hargreaves and I joined the 1995 American K2 expedition. We climbed together for two weeks before both teaming up with Americans. My partner dropped out around 6500m and I pushed on alone to the top on the same day as two Pakistanis and two Dutch climbers. Only five of us summiters survived that year; eight were killed, including Alison. K2 truly is a 'Savage Mountain' and I would never go back.

In the 12 months July '95 to July '96 I climbed four 8000ers: K2, Everest, Gasherbrum I and Gasherbrum II. That was the point, in late '96, when I decided I ought to climb all 14. I had done eight and only had six left to do. My grand plan was actually to climb all six in one year: Lhotse, Makalu, Kangchenjunga, Nanga Parbat, Annapurna and Dhaulagiri. It was not to be. Weather and injury conspired against me. It was well into May when I climbed Lhotse, leaving no time for Makalu before the monsoon hit. I cancelled Kangchenjunga and went to Nanga Parbat.

I was more burnt out than I realised and by the time I reached Nanga Parbat it was my seventh attempt on an 8000er in 24 months. I had pushed my body hard with no support or back-up team. Lifting heavy loads to gauge the weight for porters, I strained my back. The final straw came when I sneezed on some chapatti flour and prolapsed a disc – a bizarre and ignominious end to an expedition, but a salutary and painful lesson.

I got fit with physiotherapy and rock climbing and went back in '98 to climb Nanga Parbat; in 1999 I made a lightweight, two-man ascent of Makalu; and 2000 saw me nearly summit on Kangchenjunga (the broken arm trip).

Annapurna had always seemed a particularly dangerous mountain. Statistics can be misleading but on paper it seemed to have had around 100 ascents and 60 fatalities before I attempted it. My tactics changed from a slow acclimatisation to a relatively rapid push, non-stop Kathmandu-base camp-summit-base camp. Nineteen days after leaving Kathmandu I was on the summit via a new route. It was the first British ascent since Don Whillans and Dougal Haston some 32 years earlier.

I thought Dhaulagiri, in 2004, would not be too bad as far as big mountains go. But once again it was far more difficult than I had expected, with steep ice slopes and rockfall like incoming mortar fire. The summit of Dhaulagiri must be one of the most inhospitable, wind-blasted places on earth. Bare brown exposed slabs of rock, blown clear of snow by jet-stream winds, make it utterly uninviting. All I could think of when I literally 'touch-tagged' the highest point of shattered rock was getting down. I couldn't face filming, photographing or even savouring the moment.

Dhaulagiri left me burnt out mentally and physically. In June 2004 I returned to Britain and tried not to think of Kangchenjunga, my final 8000er. I needed mental rest from just the thought of extreme altitude, and that isn't easy when people want to know when you're going back or are asking for talks on the 8000er experience.

6. Alan Hinkes with the traditional family photo – daughter Fiona and grandson Jay – on the summit of Dhaulagiri in 2004. (*Alan Hinkes*)

7. Number 13 on the Hinkes hit list, Dhaulagiri from above the Kali Gandaki. (*Alan Hinkes*)

8. The summit ridge of Dhaulagiri at about 8100m. (*Alan Hinkes*)

But then you have to be able to suffer at this game, and I've always liked a bit of suffering. Kangchenjunga offers plenty of it and by 2005 I felt ready. It is a very, very big mountain, not much lower than K2 and perhaps just as difficult. Even getting to base camp is an arduous challenge, not a tea-house jaunt like the Khumbu approach to Everest. It may take 10 or 12 days just to reach base camp. The final glacier can be very tricky with a rock step requiring fixed rope just below base camp at around 5400m. If I had a bigger budget I would contemplate using a helicopter to ferry all my supplies to base camp rather than using porters.

The summit push will be a long, committing and dangerous, maybe over 15 hours. I am anxious about my attempt, but looking forward to it. Kangch' feels like an old friend waiting for me. And the timing seems auspicious, the chance to complete all 14 of the 8000ers on Kangchenjunga in this 50th anniversary year of the first ascent. The fantastic achievement of Joe Brown, George Band, Tony Streather and Norman Hardie will be in my thoughts. I just hope I can make it to the top this time, at least to just below the holy summit, and then, more importantly, get back down.

'Challenge 8000' has been my personal quest. Climbing all the 8000m peaks is a quantifiable achievement, like the four-minute mile. From a bagging point of view it is no better or worse than collecting all the Munros, VS routes on Stanage or 4000m peaks in the Alps. It is, however, somewhat more dangerous and it will be a British first. Only 12 people have climbed all 14 8000ers – that is the same number of people who have stood on the moon. When it is done I will feel a sense of freedom, ready to go and climb anywhere I want. There are still lots more challenges for me in the hills.

Postscript:

Bad weather beset Kangchenjunga for much of May 2005. But while other climbers departed, Alan Hinkes and his climbing partner Pasang hung on in the hope of a late attempt on the 8586m summit. As the AJ was going to the publishers, Alan sent the following account from base camp:

'The final summit push was without a doubt the hardest climb of my life. Pasang and I left base camp on Thursday 26 May and began to push up the mountain. The weather had not been good which meant there was an awful lot of fresh snow to break through. Risk of avalanche was incredibly high and every step of the way was a matter of physical and mental endurance. The snow was so deep that we were unable to make camp three and had to bivvi on the hillside at around 7400m. We tried for a summit attempt on the 29 May but we were beaten back by the weather.

'A second summit attempt saw us leave at about 1am next day. More snow had fallen but we made good time. Pasang had to stop around 15 minutes short of the summit due to exhaustion. I reached the summit on the 30 May at around 7pm in driving snow and wind. It was the worst summit conditions I can remember. I took the obligatory photo spent around 10 minutes on the summit and then began my descent.

'It was about 9pm when I caught up with Pasang but with no head torch it was difficult to locate him and I honestly thought he was dead. It was with great elation that I found him and we got back to the bivvi site around 27 hours after setting off. The next couple of days saw us descending through fresh snow with high risk of avalanche. Getting back to base camp was one of the best feelings of my life. I sat down in my tent and thought, "I've finally done it!"'

9. Showing the strain at the end of his Challenge 8000, Alan on Kangchenjunga, 30 May 2005, in wild weather. Only recently a father at the start of his marathon, he was a grandfather by the finish. (*Alan Hinkes*)