

THE SECOND ATTEMPT ON MASHERBRUM

BY L. R. HEWITT

DURING the New Zealand winter of 1953, and while the news of the British success on Everest still flashed in headlines across the world, a small group of Canterbury mountaineers embarked upon plans for an expedition to the Karakorum in 1955. The objective was to be Masherbrum—or K₁ as they still call it in Pakistan—a 25,660-ft. pyramidal peak that looks south down the narrow Hushe Nullah to the junction of the Shyok and Saltoro valleys, and in the north faces over some twenty miles of Baltoro ice to its famous neighbour K₂.

Masherbrum had been attempted in 1938 by a British party under the leadership of James Waller. (*A.J.* 50, 199.) His party carried out a speedy and comprehensive survey of the approach to the mountain, and then made a forceful attack on the main peak, by way of the Sérac Glacier and a high snow plateau that led to the final South-east face. The assault pair came within a thousand feet of the summit before being driven back by blizzard conditions. Since then the mountain had remained untouched.

The leader of the Canterbury men was Stanley Conway, of Christchurch, forty-five-year-old senior audit officer of the New Zealand Government Railways. Conway was not a newcomer to Himalayan planning, for in 1938/39 he had organised an expedition to go to the Zemu Valley, to attempt, in the wake of Paul Bauer and his Bavarians, the redoubtable North-east spur of Kangchenjunga. These plans were frustrated by war, and when Conway returned from the fray it was with a left arm that could not be raised above the shoulder, a legacy of artillery warfare in the Western Desert. But with philosophic determination he put aside his pitons and karabiners of the pre-war years, and turned instead to a series of arduous exploration trips into the mountain hinterland of New Zealand. The endurance and meticulous planning necessary for these journeys, together with the gradual repair of his arm, made him the undisputed choice as leader of the Canterbury expedition.

The organising secretary was Robert H. Watson, one of the most active of the present-day New Zealand climbers and an enthusiast for pioneer routes. Watson brought to bear upon the piles of paper work and the administrative hurdles the same tireless energy and efficiency that he was to display some time later on Masherbrum.

W. E. Hannah, accountant turned schoolmaster, took over the portfolio of finance, and handled these arrangements ably. He had been an inseparable companion of Conway's in the latter's post-war exploratory trips, and on our arrival at the foot of the mountain in the middle of April, Conway appointed him deputy-leader of the expedition.

We were fortunate in having in New Zealand at this time Colonel J. B. Harrison, who had been with Waller in 1938 and who, together with Robert Hodgkin, had been higher on Masherbrum than any other person. Harrison placed his photographs and his first-hand knowledge at our disposal, and did everything possible to assist us right up to the time of our departure. Throughout the two years of administrative work and the manual labour of sorting and packing equipment, there was some shuffling and reshuffling of personnel, as seems inevitable in an expedition of eleven climbers, but the team that finally left New Zealand on February 24, 1955, was :

Peter L. M. Bain, aged 23, schoolmaster, of Ashburton.

Raymond Chapman, 26, schoolmaster, of Christchurch.

W. E. Hannah, 30, schoolmaster, of Christchurch.

John Harrison, 22, commercial artist, of Wellington.

L. R. Hewitt, 42, company executive, of Palmerston North.

A. S. Morgan, 47, mechanical engineer, of Christchurch.

Robert H. Watson, 31, airways executive, Ashburton.

Conway was to fly to Pakistan a few weeks later, and would meet us in Rawalpindi. There we would also be joined by Colonel W. Maurice Brown, a New Zealander serving with the United Nations Observer Group, and Major Jahan Zeb of the Guides Cavalry. From Skardu, in the Indus Valley, would come Captain Aslam Khan, who was to act as our medical officer in addition to being in the climbing party.

In glorious weather we sailed in the liner *Arcadia* across the Indian Ocean. At Bombay we transhipped, and on March 27 stepped ashore at Karachi. The following evening we entrained on 'The Khyber Mail,' and for two nights and a day roared through the heat and dust of the Sind Desert, to the welcome coolness and greenery of Rawalpindi. Here Brown and Jahan Zeb took charge of us whilst we checked our food and equipment after the long journey from New Zealand, and repacked it for the 200-mile airlift to Skardu, whence our march to the mountain would start.

The Government of Pakistan showed us every consideration and, through the Defence Department, gave practical aid. By the end of the week we were ready, but the airfield at Skardu was not. Out-of-season snow and heavy rains had rendered the strip unserviceable and we had to wait for an 'all clear.'

There can be few places as pleasant as Pindi in which to wait for an airlift at this time of the year. Colonel Ata Ulla, head of the Ministry of Health, took us in hand, and helped us to enjoy the stay. I shall remember the evening before we left, when we went to the home of General M. Hayaud Din, Chief of the General Staff. In the coolness that follows the close of the day we sat in the garden and had tea, and the talk was of mountains, for Hayaud Din had been to Rakaposhi with the Cambridge University Expedition the previous year, and Ata Ulla had been to K2 with the Italians under Desio. From the tall trees at

the end of the drive, across the lawn, and past the rose garden, we could hear the nightingales.

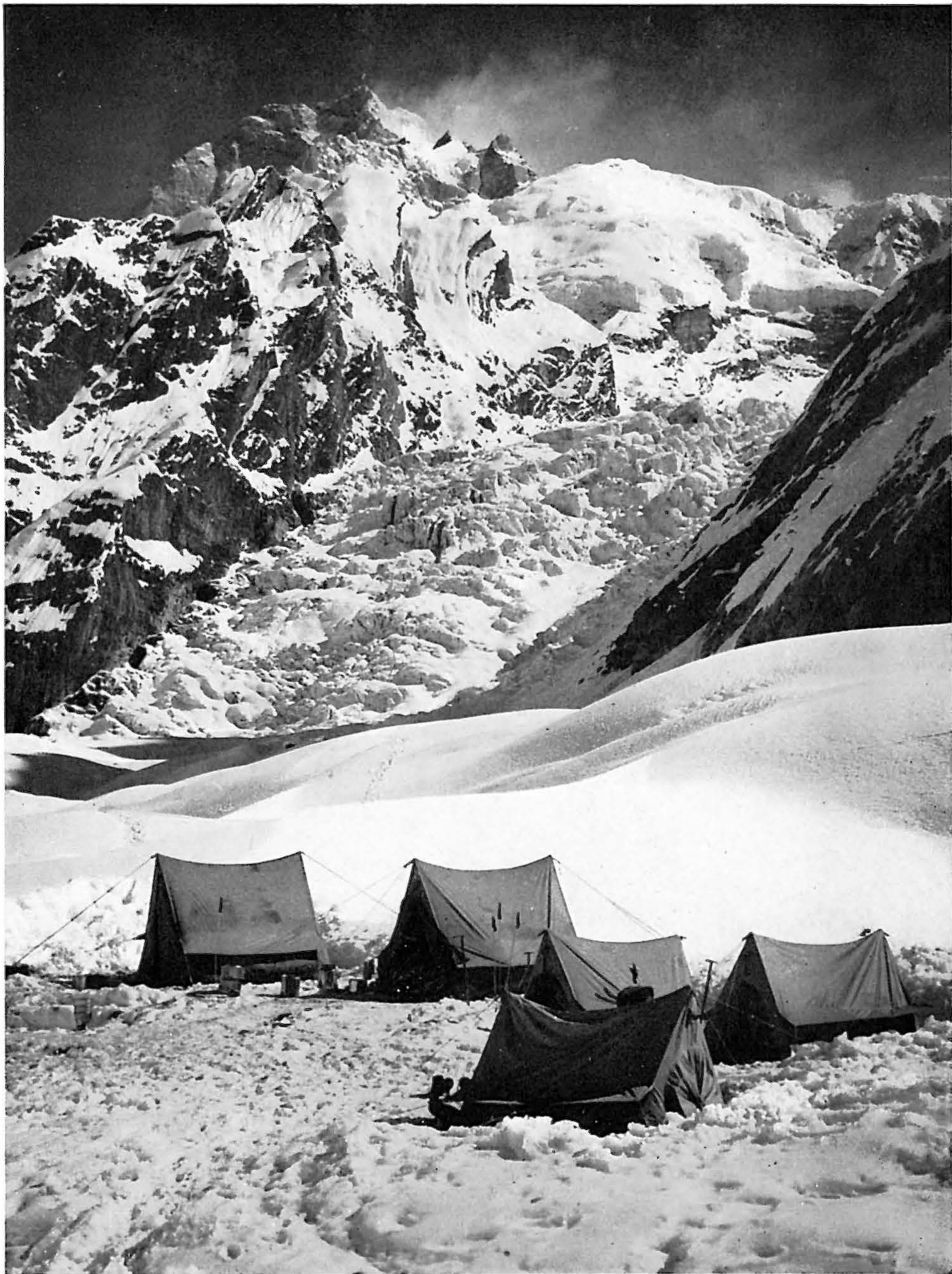
It was a perfect morning when we left early on the flight to Skardu. Our two Bristol freighters wove a way between the cliffs of the Indus Gorge, and flew close to Nanga Parbat. Great folds of ice hung down on the Diamir face, the sun glittered on the Silbersattel. We dropped down into Gilgit, then climbed again in circles past Rakaposhi, to rumble down to the desert escarpment that is Skardu Airfield.

The Political Agent, Ashraf Hussain, and the Medical Superintendent, Major H. B. Khan, were good friends to us during our three days in Skardu. We were joined here by Aslam Khan, who was able to help Conway with the selection of potential high-altitude porters from among the many Baltis who offered their services. Expeditions are no longer a novelty in Skardu, and several of these men had carried for the Americans and Italians on K2, and for the Germans on Gasherbrum and Broad Peak.

We left Skardu on the ninety-mile trek to the foot of Masherbrum on April 8, with fifty-one ponies plus thirty-eight porters carrying our five tons of supplies. The march-in was by way of the ferry over the Indus at Gol, along the north bank of the Shyok to its junction with the Saltoro, and then up the Hushe Valley to the foot of the Masherbrum massif. On April 15 we passed through Hushe, last village on the route, and pitched a temporary base camp two miles above this village on the west bank of the Hushe River. It was a pleasant spot, sprinkled with cedars and willows, and we think directly opposite where Waller's party first camped.

During the next ten days several reconnaissance parties went up the Masherbrum Glacier. We were convinced that the 1938 expedition had found the most likely route to the summit and we were prepared to concentrate on their line of approach. But the signs of winter were still about us. Ice rivulets clung to the walls of rock that rose on either side of the valley. There was a great depth of snow on the Masherbrum Glacier, and where coolies had carried for Waller in 1938 barefoot and lightly clad, we had to resort to our high-altitude men, fully equipped.

On April 25, Bain, Hannah, Morgan and I established Base Camp at 13,000 ft. on the Masherbrum Glacier and about one mile from the foot of the Sérac Glacier. Hannah supervised the flow of supplies now coming up the valley, while Bain, Morgan and I set out to inspect the possibilities of the Sérac Glacier. This glacier falls in three great icefalls from the Sérac Glacier Basin at 19,000 ft. to join the Masherbrum at approximately 13,000 ft., and is the key to the ascent of the mountain. The 1938 party had managed to by-pass each icefall, turning them on the true left or eastern edge. As we regarded the bottom icefall now, we elected to try for a route through the middle of the séracs and crevasses, in preference to forcing a way up the side of the icefall along a somewhat unprepossessing gully that our predecessors had named 'Scaly Alley.' The late winter snows had served to choke up many of the crevasses, and we made a route through the icefall without much



Photo, John Harrison.]

MASHERBRUM MASSIF FROM BASE CAMP, EARLY MAY 1955. BOTTOM ICE-FALL OF SÉRAC GLACIER IS SEEN. THE CAMP IS PITCHED ON MASHERBRUM GLACIER AT ABOUT 14,000 FT.

difficulty. It was the sort of work to which we were accustomed in our Southern Alps and we enjoyed it. The second or middle icefall presented easy slopes on the eastern edge and we moved over towards them. The slopes were studded with snow-avalanche debris, presumably the run-off from the rock face above, but this face was now clear of snow and the route appeared safe. Bain went well and kicked steps energetically to put us above the second icefall at an estimated 17,000 ft. There was quite a plateau here and we selected a site for Camp I, some 4,000 ft. above the Base Camp. The third and final icefall of the Sérac lay half a mile away and looked negotiable. Beyond that we could not see, for drifting cloud, which we were to discover was the usual afternoon phenomenon, hid the rest of the mountain. We returned down the edge of the bottom icefall to inspect the Scaly Alley route at close quarters, and had to scratch to get through. It confirmed our opinion that the alley was not a good highway under its present condition and should only be used as an escape route.

During the next week, supplies moved slowly from the temporary base to Base Camp and up to the prospective Camp I site. The late winter conditions on the Masherbrum Glacier and the intricacies of the Sérac Glacier meant that only our potential high-altitude porters could be employed in the carry, and every carry, in all fairness to the porters, required sahib escort.

On May 4, Conway despatched Harrison, Watson and myself to establish Camp I and to reconnoitre the route through the top icefall of the Sérac Glacier to the site of Camp II. We pitched a flying camp at 17,000 ft. on the snow plateau between the middle and top icefall, well out from the great rock cliffs. We thought the site was beyond the range of the daily avalanches that swept down from these cliffs, but twice during our initial stay at Camp I, avalanche blast shook the tent and powder snow poured in upon us. Later parties moved the permanent Camp I further out still. We expected to spend two days at the most on this reconnaissance, but an exceptionally heavy snow-storm, which swept the mountain as far down as our temporary base in the Hushe Valley, confined us to the tent for five days and completely sabotaged carrying operations below. On May 9 we retreated during a lull in the storm down to Base Camp, where Conway had been feeling some concern for us.

Six days later, after the mountain had shed its heavy coating of fresh snow, Watson and Bain reoccupied Camp I with three porters. Watson had seen sufficient of the top icefall during his previous spell at Camp I to essay a carry without further reconnaissance, and on the following day, he and Bain set out with the three porters. It was an arduous day and the porters did not go well, but they found a safe route through the icefall and dumped their loads on the rim of the Sérac Glacier basin at 18,500 ft. The next day was not good but they decided to make another bid to reach a site for Camp II. One of the porters, a Northern Scout, complained of a headache and was left in camp. A note was left for Hannah, who would be up from Base on a carry, that the porter



Photo, John Harrison.]

TENTS OF CAMP II ON LOWER SLOPES OF THE DOME AT 19,200 FT., LATE MAY 1955. IN BACKGROUND ARE THE ICE CLIFFS OF RIDGE FROM THE DOME TO SÉRAC PEAK WHICH AVALANCHED AND WIPED OUT FOOD DUMP IN SÉRAC GLACIER BASIN.

had better descend if still unwell and be replaced. Watson and Bain, with the two remaining porters, went to the limit of the previous day's carry, at which point another of their porters became unwell. They divided his load, and pushed on while the porter waited. The weather had deteriorated and visibility was down to a hundred feet. They flagged the route as they went. At an estimated 500 ft. below the site they had in mind for Camp II, they dumped the loads, for the next pitch must necessarily be done in better visibility. They returned to the rim of the Sérac Glacier Basin, picked up the previous day's loads and took them on to the dump made that morning. They then all returned to Camp I.

Here they found that the porter who had been left in camp that morning had elected not to descend with Hannah's party. Towards evening the porter's condition deteriorated, and Watson advised Base Camp on the scheduled 6 P.M. R/T call. During the night the sick porter became delirious and coughed violently. The oxygen that we had brought on the expedition for medicinal purposes had not arrived from Base and they were not able to give this aid. At 5 A.M. the porter died of suspected pneumonia. The news was relayed to the other camps and out to Skardu, and as many sahibs and high-altitude porters as possible assembled at Base Camp. The next two days were occupied in bringing the body down through the icefall and out to Hushe.

This porter had been one of the four Northern Scouts accompanying the expedition. He had been our strongest and fittest man and a willing worker. The following message came to us from the O.C. Wing Northern Scouts: 'For Conway from Shazada. Loss of Mehdi should not discourage my men in particular and Expedition in general. Convey to my men to face the task of conquering the mountain boldly, and with determination, observing all precautionary measures and your instructions. Mehdi will be received and buried with full honours, unprecedented in history of Baltistan. We pray for success and safety to your Expedition.'

Encouraged by this message, Conway was anxious to push on without delay, and Harrison, Morgan, Watson and I were reinstalled in Camp I immediately. On the night of our arrival the snow began to fall, and the weather, which had remained fine during rescue operations, now deteriorated generally. We suffered this for a further three days and then on May 24 could bear the loss of time no longer. We plodded up to the Sérac Glacier Basin in visibility that was down to 200 yards. In the basin we were not able to find any one of the numerous marker flags that Watson and Bain had placed some days earlier. We moved on in the direction of the food dump and encountered several large ice-blocks. Watson was convinced these had not been there the previous week. Visibility did not improve and we were unable to locate the food dump.

The following morning we were up in the basin early. It was apparent that an immense avalanche had broken away from the ice cliffs that lay between Sérac Peak and the 21,000-ft. Dome, and had

swept the greater part of the Sérac Glacier Basin, covering our dump of 240 lb. of high-altitude rations and levelling our marker flags. It was useless to look for this food amid that avalanche debris, but we made the gesture, and then continued on to prospect a site for Camp II. We chose a snow mound on the lower slopes of the Dome at an estimated height of 19,000 ft. Watson was going very strongly and would have willingly kicked steps farther up the Dome, but it was considered too late to push higher that day.

Two bad weather days followed, but on May 27 we were able to put Morgan and Watson into Camp II. Conway joined them there and brought up our medical officer, Aslam Khan. Harrison and I remained at Camp I with the bulk of the porters to supervise the carry to the forward camps. Below us Bain, Chapman, Hannah, Brown and Jahan Zeb were still ferrying supplies from as far back as Temporary Base.

The day after the arrival at Camp II, Conway, Morgan and Watson ascended the Dome. It was not a good day, with visibility poor and the snow soft. When they reached the summit they were unable to see across the plateau which we knew led to the South-east face of Masherbrum, but they were able to select a probable site for Camp III within a few feet of the summit of the Dome, slightly on the northern side.

May 29 was a perfect morning and it was to be the all-important day when the carry to Camp III would commence. Camp III had been selected to serve as an advance base and was to be well stocked with food and equipment. This day, however, all four of the porters who had been left with Conway's party at Camp II were out of action, complaining of headaches and sore throats. When Harrison and I arrived from Camp I, Aslam Khan considered that two of the incapacitated porters should descend with us. We left two of our own porters to replace them. Another good morning followed this, but yet another of the porters at Camp II had to come down, and once again there was no forward movement from our top camp.

Down at Camp I, Harrison and I were also having porter trouble. The condition of one of the porters who had been brought down from the higher camp was such that Aslam Khan descended to examine him and subsequently took him out to Base, together with two of the men who had been complaining at Camp I.

At this stage we were left with only five porters capable of going higher, and Conway decided to recruit three Hushe men who had shown promise in earlier sorties on the Masherbrum Glacier. Jahan Zeb went through to Hushe and arranged for this reinforcement, for we were now all becoming concerned at the slow progress in our upward movement. We had originally anticipated being able to establish Advance Base on the Dome by May 15, but it was now June 1 and no supplies whatever had gone beyond Camp II.

On June 2, Harrison, Watson and myself, with three porters, left for the Dome with the first loads. We had a tiring plod through very

soft snow, and at about 20,000 ft. encountered an ice-wall covered with a few inches of snow, the upper part of a wide schrund that cuts right across the face of the Dome about two-thirds of the way up. The 1938 Expedition had taken a somewhat different route on the face of the Dome, traversing diagonally out to the west, and probably did not encounter this schrund. We tried several lines to see if better snow conditions could be found, but without success. The only solution to ensure a safe route for porters would be to spend some time in scraping off surface snow then hacking good steps in the ice beneath. It was too late in the day to attempt the work at that stage so we descended to camp.

The following morning Morgan and I went up to work on the schrund in poor weather. We cut side steps in the ice for 150 ft. and then kicked steps for a further 100 ft. until good shaft anchorages could be obtained. Two days later Conway, Harrison and Watson fixed several hundred feet of rope with pitons alongside the 'staircase' and the route was rendered safe for porter traffic. That day also, they managed to get three porters to the summit of the Dome with loads. There followed a further three good days, and by June 8 the site for Camp III was sufficiently well stocked to enable Conway, Harrison and myself to establish permanent camp there. The 9th of June was another good day and we left Camp III on the way to the high snow plateau at the foot of the South-east face of Masherbrum to dump loads on a prospective site for Camp IV. We stopped at 22,200 ft. and unloaded and studied the South-east face. From this aspect it was difficult to discern sites free from avalanche danger higher up the mountain, though we could probably make our next site (our Camp V) somewhere near the 1938 Camp VI at 23,500 ft. on the slopes of the South-east face near to the East ridge. However, that decision could wait till we had established Camp IV.

On June 11 Conway and Watson moved into Camp IV at 22,200 ft. on the snow plateau, with Harrison, Morgan and myself in support at Camp III. It was a perfect day, followed by another good day on the 12th, but the weather could not be used to best advantage for not one of the porters was able to operate, all complaining of exhaustion. All three sahibs at Camp III carried loads up to Camp IV, where we met Conway and Watson shortly after midday returning from a reconnaissance of the South-east face of Masherbrum. They had decided that there were no difficulties as far as the prospective Camp V, but the country beyond looked technical for at least a thousand feet and it seemed that a long traverse across the bottom of the South-east face would be necessary before a suitable site for Camp VI could be gained. A Camp VII would be desirable to place a summit team within a reasonable striking distance of the peak.

The spell of fine weather now ceased and for four days we had snow and zero visibility. There was no movement from Camp III or IV, but lower down the mountain the other sahibs, now reinforced by the three Hushe men, were still operating. At the first signs of clearance,

Conway moved Harrison and myself, with our two best porters, to Camp IV. We had but a few days left, for we had been scheduled to descend from the mountain on June 15, at which date, by an odd coincidence, the monsoon had been forecast to reach the Masherbrum area. The 18th of June dawned well, and it was decided that Harrison and I should be established in Camp V that afternoon, and on the following day the remaining occupants of Camp IV would come up and endeavour to put us into a Camp VI as high on the mountain as possible, whence we would attempt the summit on the next day. We had a maximum of three days in hand before we must necessarily embark on our descent from the mountain.

We laboured up the slopes of the South-east face in weather that became threatening. Not far above the camp it was obvious that one of our porters was failing. He was certainly trying hard, as he had done throughout our whole time on the mountain, but the task was quite beyond him at that height. Conway had to force him to give up his load, which was divided between us, and insist that he return to Camp IV. We knew that our medical officer, Aslam Khan, was coming up to Camp IV that day and would be able to examine the sick porter, so the four sahibs and our one remaining porter pushed on up the slope. By early afternoon we were at 23,200 ft. and weaving a way between avalanche debris on the lower portion of the South-east face. As we climbed higher the difficulties ahead became more pronounced and we could see that the way above winding between great ice steps, looked quite involved. The only route that did not involve cutting up steep ice cliffs was through a gully over towards the East ridge and then back across the South-east face until a place to camp could be found. The whole of the area where we stood and the slopes ahead were littered with ice-avalanche debris. It was felt that there were many days of work ahead even if we risked this route, and bearing in mind the shortness of our time left, the inadequate portorage, and the advent of the monsoon, we decided upon retreat. Conway was mainly concerned about the weather, as he did not wish to have Harrison and myself up in Camp VI inadequately supported at any stage, let alone in bad weather conditions.

Back at Camp IV the decision to retreat was relayed to all camps by R/T and the following day evacuation of the high camps was commenced. There followed a week of very bad weather and it was June 24 before all personnel were out to Base Camp. We had an uneventful journey back along the route of our march-in and landed at Chaklala Field, Rawalpindi, on July 11 just in time for our boat connections from Karachi.

There is a feeling that one should not hold post mortems on expeditions that are not successful, but unless such failures are analysed and criticised the same mistakes can be made again. When homeward bound on the boat we would fall naturally into discussion on our Masherbrum effort, and the general conclusions were that we might have performed better had our time in the area been post-dated by a

month, and had we employed more high-altitude porters. The twelve Baltis that we had were willing enough, but they did not have the mountaineering traditions and experience of the world-renowned Sherpas, who are not now permitted into Pakistan for political reasons. Conway has suggested to Colonel Ata Ulla that a register be kept of those porters who have proved themselves at high altitude, so that future expeditions can select men upon whom they can rely.

This was an expensive expedition by New Zealand standards, costing in the vicinity of £10,000. We were assisted financially by the Himalayan Fund Committee, the Canterbury Mountaineering Club, and the New Zealand Alpine Club, and in addition received numerous private donations. Many business houses provided food and equipment free of charge and at concession rates. The individual members of the expedition subscribed £500 each.

Some of us might return to Masherbrum one day. For my part I should like to go back, not only to tread the final South-east face of snow and ice, or to try and weave a route again through the three-tiered icefall of the Sérac Glacier, but also to yarn with our Pakistan friends over the log fires that we used to build among the cedar trees in our Hushe camp, to talk again with the good people of Skardu, to fly past lovely, isolated Nanga Parbat, and to listen to those nightingales that sang from the leafy shisham trees that lined the long, wide roads of Rawalpindi.