Parasite or Publicity

Climbing Everest with a film crew

LUKE HUGHES

(*Plates* 6–8)

'Sod all those alpine-style suicidal maniacs,' said Dougie Keelan, the expedition leader, as he poured another liberal shot of Scotch into a plastic beaker, 'I want this to be a solid, safe, old-fashioned expedition.' And so it was. With 36 servicemen, five Sherpas, assorted Nepalese cooks, a four-man camera crew from Granada, an expedition artist (à la *Illustrated London News*) and a dozen cases of Famous Grouse, there was not much to distinguish us from the pre-war expeditions to the Rongbuk glacier – an absence of tweed, perhaps, and an absence of the monastery for sure; but at least the Base Camp was in the same place.

We were not without gadgetry: solar panels for recharging radios, wind generators for recharging the neon light-strip at Base Camp, a 'mountain bike' (not that anyone could pedal very hard at 5200m), a computer to plan the logistics, a satcom telephone link, and the prodigious paraphernalia of the film crew. But we were ill-equipped compared with the tri-nation Base Camp. There a joint Chinese-Japanese-Nepalese expedition had gathered a 300-strong battalion which was split into two and set to climb Everest from both sides at once, to arrive at the summit on the same day, to shake hands on the top to foster good-neighbourliness, and to descend the way they hadn't come. They had separate eating facilities for each nation, heaters and telephones in their tents, a truck with a crane to off-load their supplies, a full TV broadcasting link and a transmitter set in a 20cm slab of concrete, not to mention five fax machines receiving daily updates of the weather predictions from Tokyo, Moscow, Washington, Paris and London – and even a metereologist to interpret them.

The Japanese metereologist never made a reliable local prediction. For our part, our computer buff constantly and insistently predicted that we would be climbing with gear weighing a maximum of 4 kilos, and would reach the summit on the specified day. As with all computers, if you put garbage in, you get garbage out; the computer is only as good as the operator. And yet man's folly is not in taking this kind of equipment to such inappropriate places, but in believing in it, deferring to it, being distracted by it. It is especially the kind of distraction that plagues large expeditions. Apart from all the difficulties of protocol (the Duke of Edinburgh had graciously consented to be the Patron), of inter-service etiquette (Dougie had pledged himself to try to get a sailor, a soldier, an airman and a marine on top together), and of the high profile that service authority attracts, there were two especially dynamic distractions.

The first was the satcom telephone, generously loaned by Marconi;

British Telecom donated £15,000-worth of calls. There was much diplomatic bartering with the Chinese about permission to operate the kit in Tibet, and it might be considered a *coup* to have them agree. The team members were not slow in using up the allotment with direct calls home; this facility led to the bizarre but not uncommon occurrence of climbers announcing, 'I think I'm going down to Base Camp today, I want to make a call.' The political opportunities were not lost on 10 Downing Street either, the Prime Minister clearly having recognized the media potential of talking to servicemen on top of Everest. Was it possible, asked the Cabinet Office, to relay the calls through the walkie-talkies? Over a period of a week we had three dress rehearsals with her secretaries, with a view to filming the reception of the news of the actual summit bid by Granada TV in London and at Base Camp. One is reminded of her appearance at the end of some of the James Bond films. When we failed, the Prime Minister was 'unavailable' and we had to make do with the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Even so, the time and energy expended on that exercise were enormous.

The second distraction was the presence of the cameras. Granada Television were keen to make six half-hour documentaries to be screened on the opposing channel to 'East-Enders'. This was obviously attractive to sponsors, who would appreciate their logos featuring at prime-time viewing, but it had other ramifications. On the flight out to Kathmandu, Nick Plowright, the chief cameraman, was foolish enough to leave a postcard lying around the aircraft. I was rude enough to read it:

> Dear Mum and Dad,
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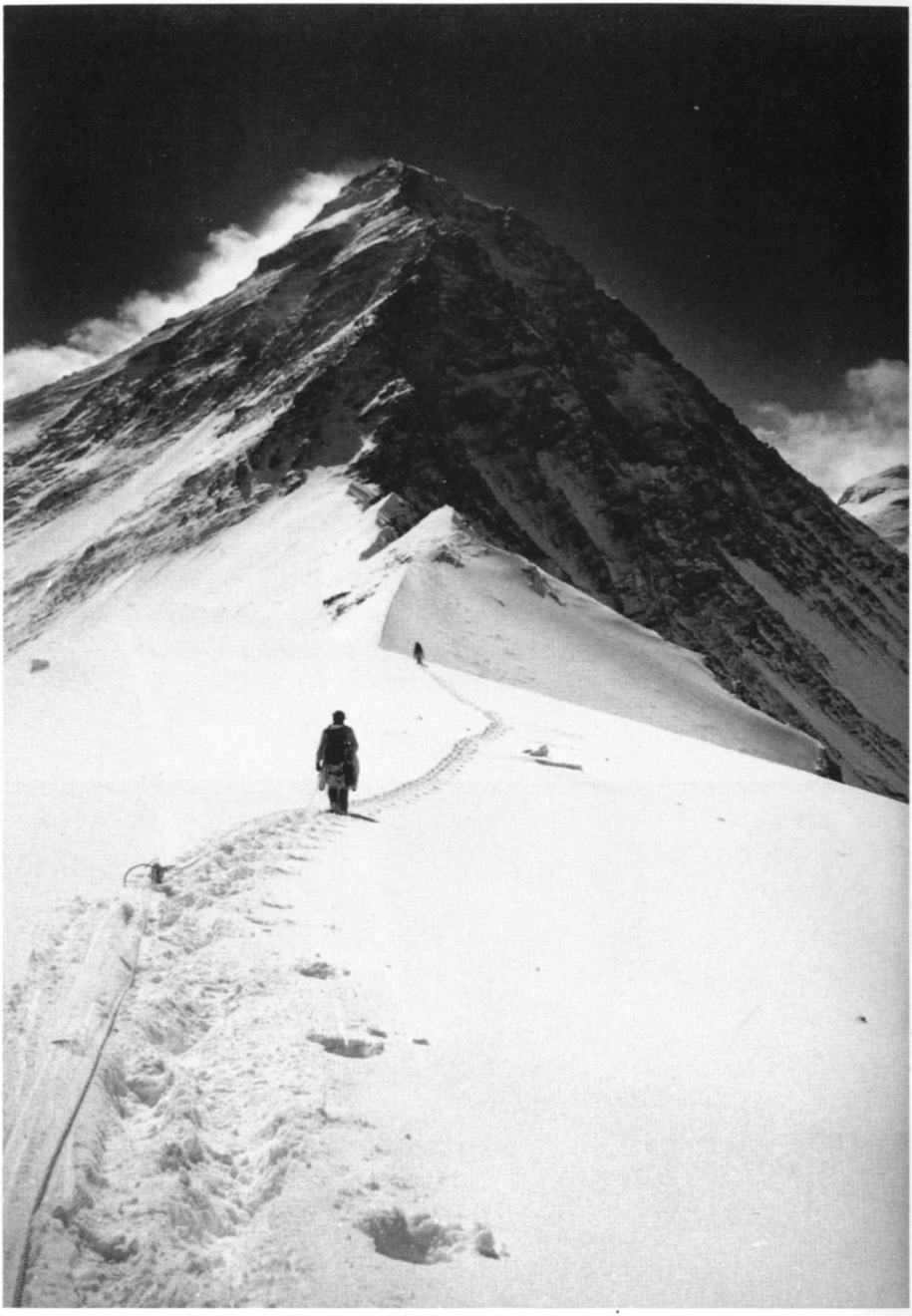
> Finally we're on our way, my first taste of military service has so far been OK . . . we always seem to end up hoping things will go wrong. For the first two weeks people will be walking, eating, and sleeping, albeit in picturesque countryside, but I hope there's some disasters. We hope to make two episodes out of it.

So it was true: all one's reservations might be justified. This realization highlighted two things. First, with the camera around no one wanted to be seen at the wrong end of any disaster, either as victim or as the man responsible. Second, however hard the camera crew might declare their intent to become integrated with the team, there would always be suspicion and reservation.

The first consideration distorted behaviour on the mountain. Military personnel are traditionally wary of the press. Experience in the Falklands or in Ulster justifies this caution and has taught them again and again that the mere presence of a camera can inflame, incite or inhibit the normal course of events. Many of the boys had had direct and unfortunate experiences.

To some extent this wariness was part of another syndrome: servicemen's anxiety about History. Official histories of service activities tend to glamorize *pour encourager les autres*. The VC citation of Colonel H Jones's performance at Goose Green, for example, bears little resemblance to what eyewitnesses can relate. In fact, service life is rarely 'active' these days and there is scant opportunity for immortality. Mess chat revolves around a mixture of gossip, myth and legend. Absolute truth should never be allowed to get in the way of a



6. *W ridge of Everest, c7300m. Climber: Ted Atkins.* (p 15)

good story, so the adage goes. The Everest trip, with all the hype associated with the largest Joint Service Venture since the Falklands invasion, was just the kind of event from which official histories – not to mention the gossip, myth and legend – were likely to emanate. What came out of the cutting room might just tell a less massaged story. To Dougie's eternal credit, he forswore any editorial control of the final film.

The result of this was a tendency for everyone to appear utterly, boringly sensible. Rash actions and hot-headed decisions have little place on a mountain, but there are times when boldness is required; risks are involved and people must be found to take them. I am left with the lingering thought that we might have pushed the boat out further (especially on the three summit bids) had there not been the beady eye of Granada's lens recording every detail for the 'Great British Public', wise after the event, to judge from the comfort of their sitting-rooms whether the right decision had been made. Dougie, I suspect, was under far greater pressure in this respect than any of us appreciated at the time. There is a certain bitter-sweet satisfaction in knowing when to turn back. On this expedition we played safe, more fearful than usual of what might be said if one of us failed to return.

Another result was that we were all impressively loyal to one another when the camera was around. Four months of living together in aggressive conditions is bound to throw up tensions; sometimes these are aired explosively, and they would have made marvellous television. But there was no way the team members would start griping about each other with the knowledge that the arguments would be immortalized on celluloid. That said, if any of the climbers were using the little video camera at the higher camps in the privacy of the snow holes, indiscretion would have abounded. This might be considered to indicate that the loyalty was inspired less by the presence of the camera than by the presence of the film crew.

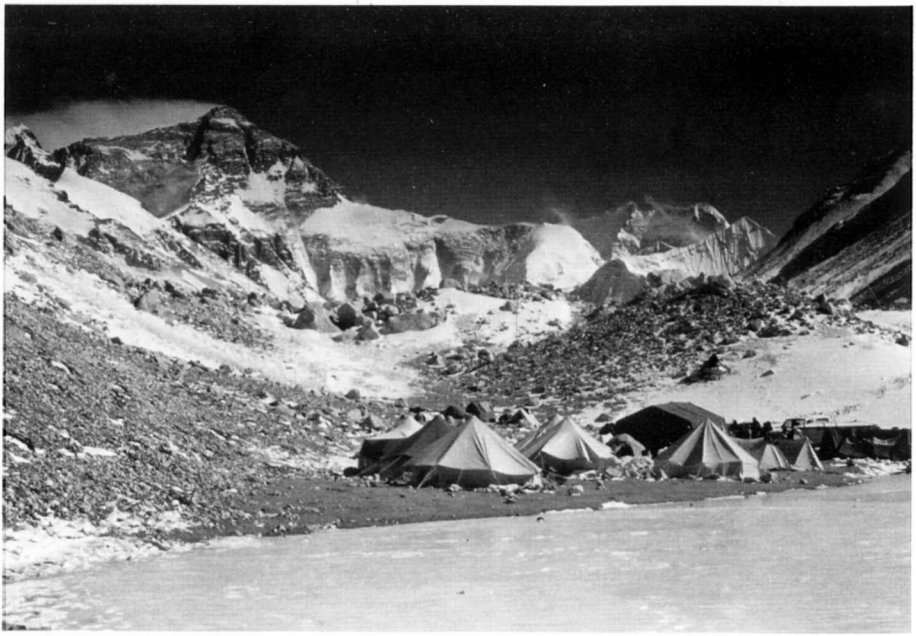
The effect of the second point might seem obvious. Media men are not naturally imbued with team spirit, whereas the services select people on the strength of it and are skilful at fostering it in training. Much camaraderie and team spirit is either based on hardship mutually experienced (a former Operation, or even a previous expedition) or on respect for another's similar adventures. As a climber, one will naturally find an affinity with a man who has been to the Himalaya four or five times before. The chances are that he knows what he is doing in that environment. The camera crew clearly did not. The daily pantomime of their putting up their tent on the trek; their self-pitying misery as victims of altitude sickness; their complaints about the non-existent weight of their rucksacks; their griping about the cold and the conditions; all these made the climbing team feel the need to behave like a benign host towards a parasite. Allowances clearly had to be made, but this was sometimes difficult. One evening over a game of Scrabble, details of their formidable earnings were revealed – in the region of £1,000 per week on top of their normal salary; it was felt that this more than compensated for any temporary discomforts. It has to be said that Base Camp was one of the most palatial I've ever occupied. Moreover it was clear that in making the programme their careers benefited hugely. Ludicrous pay, good prospects . . . what were they complaining about? Alan

Evans, the assistant cameraman, was the most at home, having a climbing background and a passion for fell-running. Nick turned out to be the comfort clown, complaining like a union convener about his rights and clearly missing the deep leather sofas of the Holiday Inn. Ian Hills, the sound man, seemed totally dazed most of the time and in the early stages had to be bullied to eat, drink or even take his boots off. 'I think the altitude is slowing down his thought process,' remarked Nick one evening at supper. 'Really?!' exclaimed Mark Anderson, himself surprisingly equable in the environment – though not, however, a man to get out of his sleeping bag one night to help rescue a mess tent blown away amidst a clatter of poles and frenzied cries for help.

Inertia ruled. When they did move to Camps 1 or 2, they were extremely unwilling to move again. At Camp 2, in the early stages, this caused particularly bad feeling amongst the climbing team who had been lugging the food themselves and were more than a little irritated to watch it being wolfed by those who did no carrying. They were also extremely slow. One morning they set off two hours ahead of the main party, thinking it appropriate to film the yaks crossing the East Rongbuk river. Yaks are slow, lumbering beasts and it is normal for walkers to move ahead and not wait. In the history of load-carrying, Granada are unique in being overtaken by the yaks; they didn't even have a chance to film. As they limped into camp late that evening, Mark said, 'Well, we may be slow, but at least we're rich.'

Now that the trip has long passed, the programmes have all been screened, the post-mortems have been held and it is possible to look more objectively at the reasons why we failed, I have to admit that the final film is terrific, especially if you have a chance to see it not in six parts but in one. There is some sensational footage of some memorable adventures. Most of the footage high on the mountain was obtained with 8mm Sony videos by the climbers; it has subsequently been enhanced and is of excellent quality. The film also records well the atmosphere of an extremely happy expedition. The evening when the last programme was first broadcast, I had dinner with Mark and his girl-friend Vicky Price, who was also the editor. They had been working non-stop in the cutting room for five months. Mark had thus spent nearly 10 months attached to the project – four and a half on the mountain. Vicky knew every detail of every character on the expedition and every occurrence rather better than if she had been there herself. While we had our mountain to climb, they surely had their stable to clean. We had very different goals.

And that, ultimately, seems to be the problem of old-fashioned Himalayan expeditions: there are too many distractions, too many interested parties with different objectives. It becomes too easy to dissipate energy on gadgetry and public profile, and to lose sight of actually getting up. In last year's *Alpine Journal*, in an article by Trevor Braham, there were revealing statistics about fatalities and successes in the Himalaya. I do not know of any statistical comparison between alpine-style climbing expeditions and the bigger, more conventional efforts, but my hunch is that the 'alpine-style maniacs' are not as suicidal as all that.



7. Base Camp, c5000m, British Services Everest Expedition 1988 (as used by all pre-war British Everest expeditions). (p 15)

8. Looking W along the W ridge towards Pumori (centre) and Cho Oyu (right), c7500m. Climber: Nigel Williams. (p 15)

Summary

The British Service Everest Expedition 1988 set out to climb the W ridge of Everest by the northern approach. It was led by Lt Col Douglas Keelan OBE, RM, and comprised climbers from the Marines, the Royal Air Force, the Navy, the Army, and from their reserves. There were three summit attempts; Luke Hughes was on the second and third. The highest point was reached in the Hornbein Couloir by Dave Nicholls and Al Macleod (*c*8500m). The attempt was abandoned in blizzard conditions. Oxygen was used.