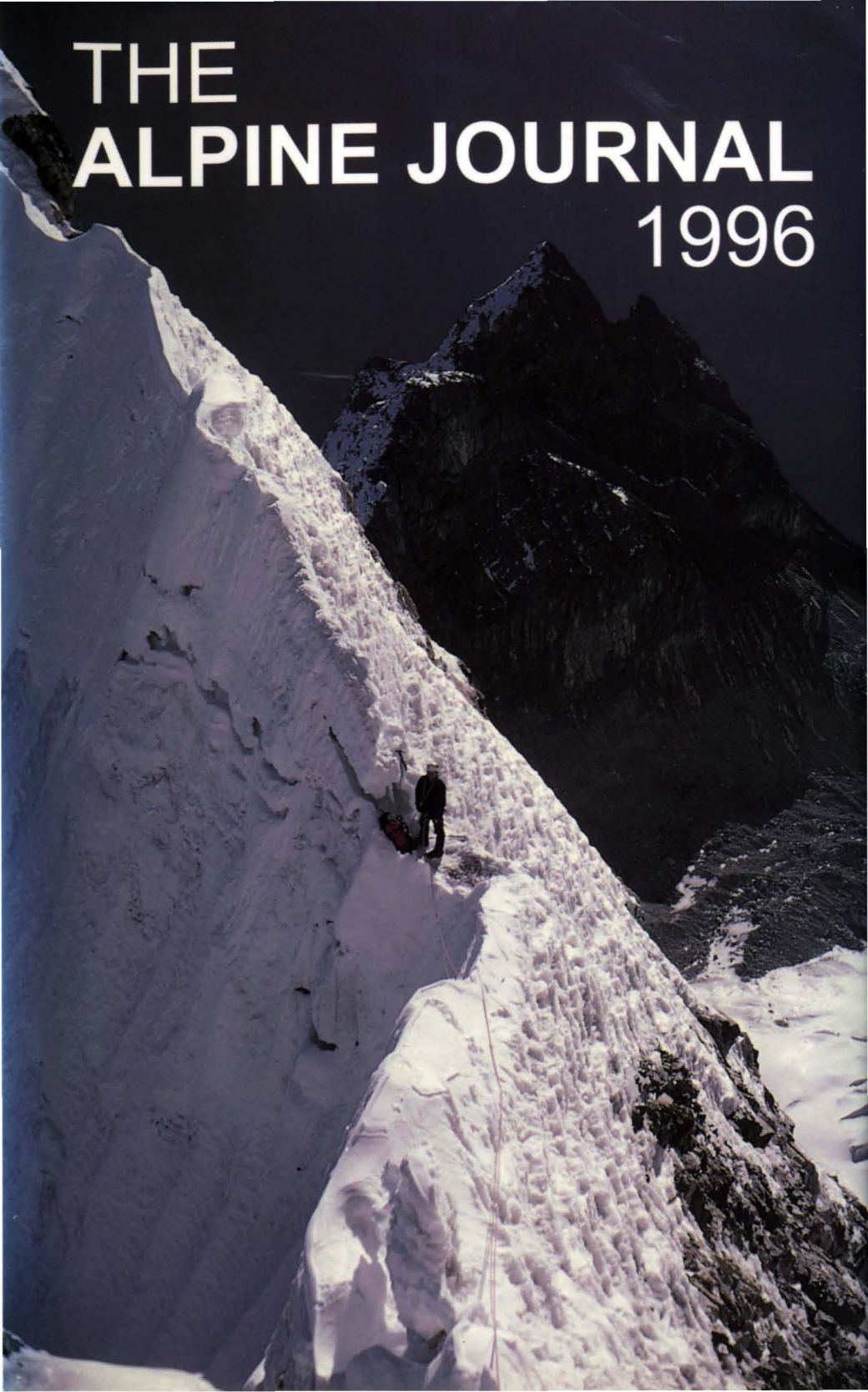


THE ALPINE JOURNAL 1996



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Volume 101

Before Alison Hargreaves reached the summit of K2 and tragically perished in a storm on the descent, she wrote an account of her magnificent solo climb of Everest in May 1995. The article was written at K2 Base Camp and sent out by runner. It is included in this volume by kind permission of Alison's husband James Ballard.

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Jacket photographs:

Front Taweche (Nepal), 6542m.
Bivvy site on the North-East Buttress.
(*Mick Fowler*)

Back Guanako in Southern Patagonia.
In the background the Towers of Paine.
(*Marko Prezelj*)



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MICK FOWLER

Taweche North-East Buttress

(Plates 29, 30 and front cover)

Mr Sustad was not sounding happy: 'It's a real bummer. I just can't make it – it's the trip I was most looking forward to this year and now the bloody doctor tells me I can't go.'

Stephen Sustad was in an uncharacteristically abusive mood. The problem was his toe. It had gone a very unhealthy black colour and begun to smell badly after a frostbite injury incurred during a South American epic. Stephen, though, did not seem too worried about the imminent loss of a useful digit. His concern was that he was going to miss out on a trip to have a go at Taweche's NE buttress in Nepal. This distressed him.

Taweche is a 6500m peak about ten miles south-west of Everest. It was first climbed in 1975 and by 1995 had had about ten ascents – almost all by the first ascensionists' line up the SE and S faces. Our attention, though, was drawn to a magnificent mixed-buttress line forming the NE corner of the mountain. I first became aware of this feature from a photograph in the 1991 'North Face' catalogue.

'East Faces are pretty inspiring too ...' said the caption. Perhaps it should also have included reference to NE buttresses! Quibbling aside, I couldn't help but agree. Jeff Lowe and John Roskelley climbed the appealing but dangerous couloir line in the face in winter 1988 but the objectively safer NE buttress remained unclimbed. A couple of teams had sniffed around it but only the French in 1990 had made any real impression. They reached a shoulder at around 5700m which marked the start of the continuously steep main section of the spur. The *American Alpine Journal* reported that they were stopped by a combination of technical difficulty and powder snow. They went post-monsoon when it is colder and more prone to powdery conditions. We chose pre-monsoon, when we could expect less settled weather but hopefully less powder snow.

But the problem was the team. We had arranged to climb strictly as two teams of two. Mike Morrison and Chris Watts made up one team, Steve Sustad and me the other. Steve's toe problem meant that we were a person short. But who could replace him? Finding someone willing to spend six weeks in Nepal with only three weeks' notice is difficult enough. To find someone who I would also feel comfortable climbing with seemed a virtual impossibility.

I phoned around hopefully. I couldn't cancel the trip now, but whoever would be able to make it? The answer came quite quickly: Pat Littlejohn. Pat is a busy man with a heavy schedule – but an inspiring photo can work wonders on a full diary.

Three weeks later we were all squeezed into the heavily-loaded ex-Aeroflot helicopter experiencing Everest Air's inflight catering services *en route* to Lukla from Kathmandu. About twenty of us sat squeezed together with our knees hard against a huge central mound of cargo. The air hostess first passed round cottonwool ear bungs and then a plate of boiled sweets. Luxury travel indeed – and a lot quicker than the nine or so days' walk from Kathmandu. Modern Nepal is well within reach of us restricted holiday boys.

Only Chris Watts had been to Nepal before. The rest of us marvelled at the intricate terrace-work below and stared gobsmacked at the huge mountains ahead. I had heard all about the runway at Lukla but, though I knew it to be memorably spectacular, I had at least expected brick-sized rocks to be swept to one side. Sturdy specimens, these small planes. I was glad to be in a nice helicopter which simply plonked itself down in a clearing at the top of the runway, covering the village in yet another film of dust.

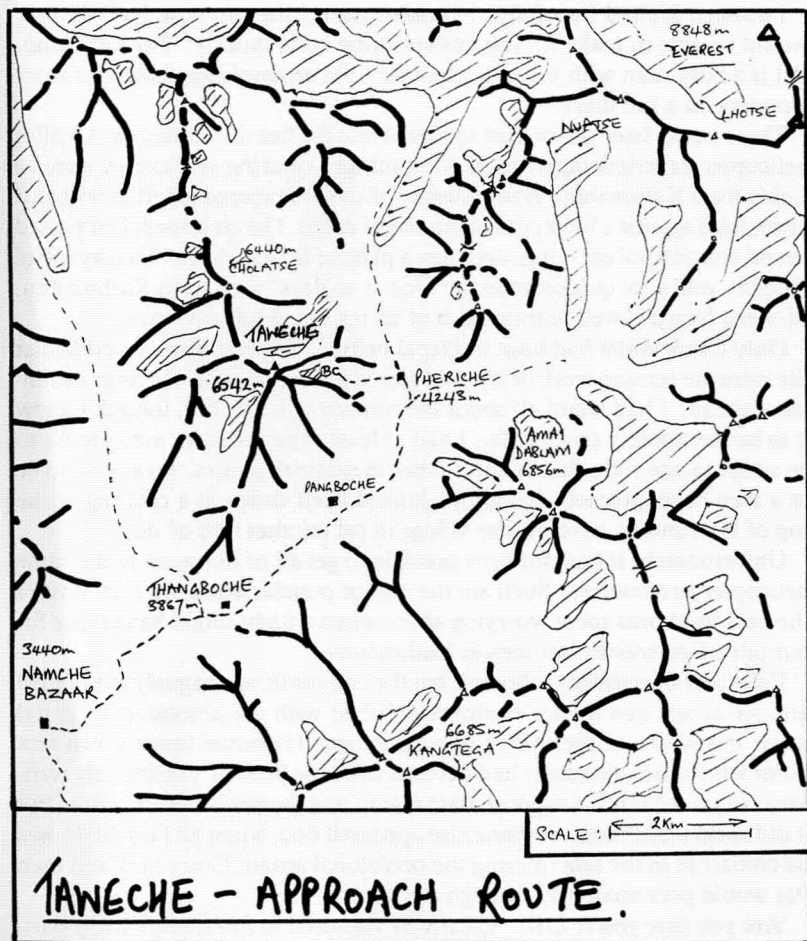
Unfortunately, it had not been possible to get all of our gear on the same helicopter as ourselves. Such are the joys of popular areas. In fact most of the next week was spent worrying about when a flight might have space for our pile of essentials, last seen at Kathmandu.

Epics and uncertainty followed, but the end result was vaguely as planned and we at last saw a Base Camp established with the absolutely essential items installed and the rest of our equipment 1½ hours lower down at a point which the yak-herder had decreed to be the limit of yak-friendly territory. My head hurt. I suppose Base Camp was marginally over 5000m but it did seem unfair that everyone else appeared fine, when all I could do was lie comatose in the tent uttering the occasional groan. Every now and then Pat would peer anxiously through the door:

'Are you sure you're OK?' Clearly he was used to fitter, more lively partners.

'Perfectly normal,' I would groan in response to his regular looks of concern. The others, who knew me better, confirmed the truth of my answer. It seems I am not too quick on this acclimatisation business.

After a couple of days, though, it became clear that it was time to sniff around the buttress and to check out both the route and my body's ability to cope with the higher altitude. We staggered listlessly around on the lower part of the buttress. On the north side the snow consistency was the much-feared bottomless powder, whilst to the south it was just horribly steep and difficult, with plenty of loose rock. After a couple of days of 'acclimatising' we retreated to Base Camp to consider. Both ropes had been cut and my knee was painfully twisted. Not a good start. On the bright side, though, my head didn't hurt quite so much now.



A decision was made to follow the line of the French attempt up an obvious diagonal ramp, reaching the crest of the buttress at the point where it steepened and looked horribly difficult. I delayed action for two days, using the hurt knee excuse, whilst Pat oozed energy and even bounded up to the foot of the face to check things out. The first 200ft were nastily steep and technical and a fixed rope foray was to aid progress here. Eventually, ten days after arriving at Base Camp, we were ready to go.

Staggering up the snow slopes beneath the face, I was surprised to hear a shout from above and see a dark cylindrical shape heading erratically towards a large crevasse about 50ft ahead of me. I recognised it immediately ... our bivouac tent. Pat was waving the broken carrying strap and gesticulating wildly.



29. Taweche (Nepal), 6542m. Pat Littlejohn on the second pitch (day 1) of the North-East Buttress. (*Mick Fowler*) (p68)



30. Day 7. Bivvy at the head of the descent gully. Pat looking out of the tent. (*Mick Fowler*) (p68)

Running at altitude is not something that I am very good at. Fortunately the tent veered in my direction and a combination of a short (very short) sprint, followed by a faultless (although I say it myself) piece of fielding, saw the tent back in our hands.

Excitement over for the moment, our attention was turned to the joys of jumaring up to our gear which we had left at the top of 200ft of fixed ropes. Pat seemed to be good at this. He flowed gracefully up over overhangs and disappeared moving strongly upwards. Meanwhile I felt comparatively incompetent. The rucksack pulled me backwards and somehow, whatever I did, the sling lengths seemed to be wrong. Progress looked to be impossible. I contemplated leaving my rucksack behind and pulling it up afterwards but that too posed problems as the rope was secured to occasional interim anchor-points.

Eventually, having rigged up a complex arrangement of slings to (inadequately) support my sack, I succeeded in gasping my way up towards an incredulous Pat. He seemed unable to understand how someone who has been climbing for so long could be so poor at jumaring.

As a result of my snail-like jumaring pace, the first rocks were already bouncing down the face as we stepped onto the exposed foot of the prominent ramp line leading up right to the shoulder. Shortly after the rocks came the heat. Himalayan sun never ceases to amaze me. Most people know about the frostbite risks and assume the weather is continually cold; few seem aware of the energy-sapping sun and the risks of Himalayan sun-stroke.

The Fowler body does not go well in the heat. Pitch after pitch, we alternated our way up the ramp keeping well out to the right edge where we were less exposed to rockfall. The difficulties were mainly moderate but the sun was taking its toll. Not only were our bodies (well, mine anyway) suffering badly but the ice-trickle in the corner of the ramp was rapidly growing into a raging torrent full of bouncing boulders and shattering ice blocks.

The right edge of the ramp was comparative bliss. Only the really freak bouncers could reach us here. I began to feel a bit happier. The rock here was not too good though. Steep slabby grooves held precariously-poised sheets of loose material. We picked our way cautiously upwards, heading for the prominent shoulder, which we understood to be the French high point. With luck there would be a good bivouac spot there.

Needless to say, we arrived as the last rays of daylight faded, to find nothing but a razor-sharp arête of solid ice. It looked as if we were in for a six-inch-wide bum-ledge bivvy. Pat, though, was keen for some creature comforts and (perhaps more significantly) feeling more energetic than I was.

'We'll just chop the top off and pitch the tent.'

I looked at him uncertainly. The energy involved would be immense. Also, I couldn't help but remember the problems caused by broken axes on my last Himalayan trip. But Patrick was strong and determined. Ice chips flew as pickaxe blows rained down hard and the Fowler body lay draped

over the crest to one side. Every now and then I would make a token swing with my axe, but it was, I have to admit, a mere tickle compared with Pat's resilient pounding.

Mesmerised, I was privileged to see the single-handed transformation of a solid ice ridge into a very acceptable tent platform. These super-fit guide types are pretty useful.

Next morning I peered hopefully upwards, expecting that a night's rest would have moderated the previous evening's impression of distressing difficulty ahead. On this occasion, though, any optimism was misplaced and difficulty was still readily apparent. Beyond the shoulder the angle increased to 70 or 75 degrees, and the best way clearly lay up a series of ice-streaked corners connected by challenging rock traverses. At the end of the knife-edged crest forming the shoulder, the first rock traverse fell to me.

'Looks Grade III,' came wafting up from below, as I rubbed my nose against the verticality and contemplated placing a peg behind a selection of dubious flakes. Either Pat's judgement on this difficulty business was a bit awry or there was a heavy hint of sarcasm in his voice that I had missed. Either way, extremis soon followed. Wild pulls on flaky pinch-grips and strenuously spectacular layaways seemed mildly out of place on the Himalayan severity. There must have been something slightly difficult about it as even Pat took back the Grade III rating and complained of a pulled shoulder afterwards. But he did make it look horribly easy. It can be demoralising for us civil servant tax-man types to climb with these super-competent professionals.

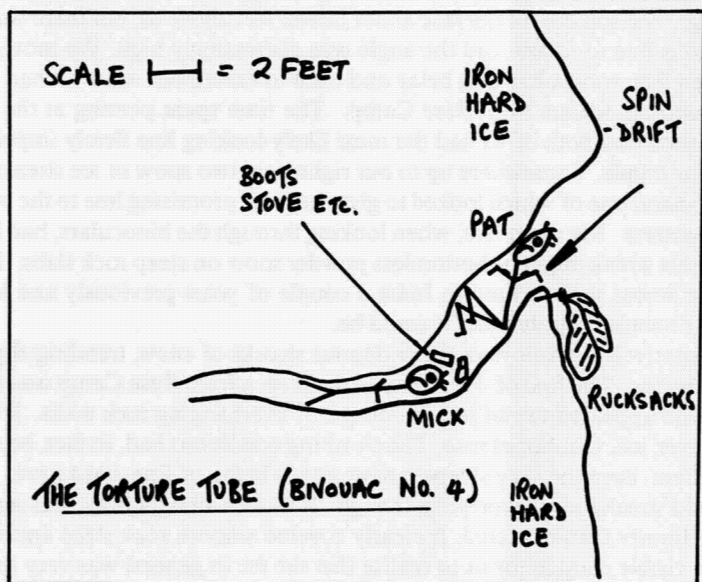
Difficulty continued. I suppose we knew it would, but one must, of course, remain optimistic that a break might allow some height to be gained quickly. Here, though, it didn't. Icy grooves and difficult rock cracks slowed progress to the extent that we only managed five pitches before the usual afternoon storms (which had miraculously held off the day before) moved in and Pat was once again called upon to exercise his excavation skills and magic up a ledge for the night. Perhaps he was tiring slightly (unlikely in retrospect!) but, for whatever reason, when I squeezed into the tent first I was uncomfortably aware that one-third of the floor space was hanging in mid-air. Looking back towards the entrance, I was treated to the sight of waves of spindrift pouring in, whilst Pat stood there fighting to sort out the gear before zipping us in. We sat huddled together listening to the wind and snow. There was no doubt about it – these afternoon storms slowed things down and were not exactly morale-boosting. The mornings, though, were invariably bright and sunny and had to be taken full advantage of. On we went. Steep icy grooves with delightful white ice, which occasionally took placements good enough to allow clipped-in rests – a novelty for the super-ethical Mr Littlejohn.

We were moving slowly but steadily upwards, onto a prominent ramp, an uneventful bivouac and then, round onto the right-hand side of the buttress and a whole new panorama. Below and to our right the unclimbed N face

fell sharply away, looking cold and challenging. Up above, we had seen what looked like snow streaks from Base Camp but from this angle they were hidden above vertical rock walls.

The afternoon storms started whilst we were still in no-man's-land somewhere between the ramp and the white streaks leading towards the top. Spindrift roared down from up on high and progress soon became impossible. Forays to various prospective bivouac sites proved fruitless but a small hole and possible snow patch up to Pat's left looked hopeful. Getting there, though, looked to be extremely challenging. I scabbled back to the stance and handed over to Pat.

It was as hard as it looked but by dusk Pat had belayed, brought me up and the two of us were peering into an eighteen-inch-wide ice tube which funnelled down deep into my snow patch (which, of course, consisted of iron-hard ice).



'Nice bedroom, Patrick.' I tried to sound enthusiastic.

Pat still didn't look very keen as I squirmed into my sleeping-bag and slid committingly into the slippery orifice. The angle eased after ten feet or so, but it was particularly nasty and claustrophobic being stuck at the bottom of a hole. I lay motionless, trying to quell a sense of rising panic. Could I last the night in this position? The chances felt no more than fifty-fifty.

After a few minutes the stove clanged down on top of me, as did Pat's boots which caught me painfully on the shoulder. Then, after a series of contortions of which any flexibility-freak would have been proud, I was just about to light the stove when a blast of spindrift posed a new problem.

Up until this point I had at least been protected from the elements. Now the wind had obviously changed and it was as if a fireman had suddenly directed his hose down into my little bedroom. To begin with I abandoned my efforts to light the stove and fought to prevent the snow getting into my sleeping-bag. But I was fighting a losing battle. The snow just kept on coming. Soon it was beginning to block my only exit. Priorities changed fast as I scrambled to haul on Pat's legs and squirm back up the frictionless tube. Ultimately we settled down without our sleeping-bags, wedged into the slightly under-45° section of tube. It was an excruciatingly unpleasant night during which the endless hours passed with a rising tide of groans and moans about our respective problems.

Morning was impossible for me to appreciate. Firstly, Pat was above me and blocked out 90% of the light; secondly, the entrance to our torture-tube faced north-west and missed out on the warmth-giving early morning sun. We crawled out, cold and stiff, but the view upwards was not over-encouraging. The sun did hit the face about fifteen feet above us, but there was no obvious line to follow and the angle was distressingly high. We moved up fifteen feet, took a hanging belay and tried to remember what we had seen through binoculars from Base Camp. The time spent peering at the face was such that both of us had the most likely-looking line firmly imprinted on our minds. Somewhere up to our right were two snow or ice streaks the right-hand one of which looked to give the most promising line to the top of the buttress. My main fear, when looking through the binoculars, had been that this streak might be bottomless powder snow on steep rock slabs. I had come across such ground in India a couple of years previously and knew how downright frightening it could be.

Tentatively we followed discontinuous streaks of snow, trending slightly rightwards. The first of the vertical streaks seen from Base Camp was obvious and appeared to end in a cul-de-sac of overhanging rock walls. It was, however, ice. Our hopes rose. The climbing conditions had, in fact, become excellent, even the very steepest snow bands being of fine, hard *névé*. The second streak looked worrying, though. It was ice all right but it was steeper and thinner than expected. It clearly covered smooth rock slabs and these were visible enough for us to realise that the ice in general was very thin.

'Your pitch, Michael.'

Unfortunately it was. Equally unfortunately we had only brought three ice screws. I clipped into my axe as soon as sensibly possible and contemplated our pure ice rack. Why ever had I insisted on cutting it down so much? Pat had pressed for more, but ever conscious of my inability to carry heavy loads, I had insisted that 'one on each belay and one for a runner' would be OK. That, though, had assumed that all three would be bomb-proof. My first effort bottomed against the rock after only two inches. Twenty feet higher I managed to get one in halfway, and felt slightly better. It still felt a harrowing pitch and I had used all three screws before spotting a rock crack to one side for a belay.

The ground continued in a similarly precarious manner but with no obvious rock cracks to head for. I was glad that it was Pat's lead. But I was in for a shock. A short groove, which had offered an escape from the icy openness, stopped the master in his tracks.

'Coming down,' came from up to my right, as he fought his way back to the stance.

This was worrying. I had come to regard Pat as an infallible climbing machine. Failure was not something that I had considered. His next moves, however, were even more worrying. Amidst comments about the ice looking thicker over to our left, he lowered twenty feet and traversed thirty feet to gain his preferred position. The absence of screws meant that, from the second's point of view, the adrenaline flow was building up rapidly. Pat continued impressively upwards, always trending slightly left, and thereby increasing the already frightening pendulum potential. Eventually he was able to slip in one of our big steel screws right up to the hilt and belay. I followed gibbering and, much against the grain, leaving a sling and karabiner for a back rope. Even so, the ropes hung clear from the face and injected a certain amount of 'extra interest' into the proceedings. By the time I had joined him, the afternoon dose of bad weather was imminent and bivouac sites were looking, if anything, even more non-existent than the night before. We fumbled on for a couple more exciting pitches before spotting a hole piercing the icy crest of the buttress just to our left. Holes, of course, were not popular after the previous night's antics. But this one looked slightly more friendly. It was clearly wind-formed but at least had a vaguely flat floor and was not so claustrophobic as the previous night's offering. Somewhere, not far above us, we sensed the top of the buttress. But mist swirled around, denying essential visibility. It could be one pitch, it could be five. Fearful of a night hanging in slings on the exposed open face, the decision was made. We would make the best of it.

In retrospect it wasn't too bad. It was impossible to pitch the tent properly but at least we managed to get inside our sleeping-bags and use the tent fabric as a kind of double bivouac sack. I lay there, warm and cosy, thankful that I had suffered the night before in order to make sure that my sleeping-bag stayed dry.

The morning dawned crystal clear but, even so, it was still difficult to judge how far we had to go. Pat's first pitch of the day looked distressingly difficult but beyond that it was impossible to be specific. Steep ice just stretched up into the distance, eventually merging with the dark blue sky.

In the end it was midday when a very cautious team, maximising the protection potential in three ice screws, pulled over the sharp crest of the ridge forming the top of Taweche's NE buttress.

A sudden clearing revealed the summit to be some way off.

'Your lead, Patrick.'

I am a self-confessed, incompetent snow-plodder, a fact which must have become increasingly apparent to Pat over the next few hours. He, though,

ploughed on bravely whilst I floundered behind. A complete whiteout all afternoon resulted in the wonderful sensation of bivouacking in a totally unknown position and waking up surprisingly close to the summit.

At 7.30 the next morning we shook hands on the highest point. It was a gesture which somehow failed to sum up the significance of the moment.

'Time to look for another Taweche-style buttress, Michael.'

Although collapsed in the snow, I swivelled round hopefully. Decisions like what to climb next are so difficult.

'First, time for some retrospective pleasure, Patrick.'

Now, I am back in the tax office – even the torture-tube bivouac has a memorably masochistic tang of pleasure about it and the search for another Taweche-style buttress can begin in earnest.

Summary: Mick Fowler and Pat Littlejohn climbed the NE buttress of Taweche, 6542m, in Nepal. They took 5½ days to reach the summit on 28 April 1995. The route was 43 pitches long with sustained technical difficulties of VI (ice); E3, A2 (rock); overall grade ED Sup. The other team was unlucky: Mike Morrison was ill for the duration of the trip, which prevented him and his partner Chris Watts from doing any climbing.