
Expeditions

DOUG SCOTT

Climbing in NE Nepal on Tang Kongma and Drohmo

(Plates 6–8, 58)

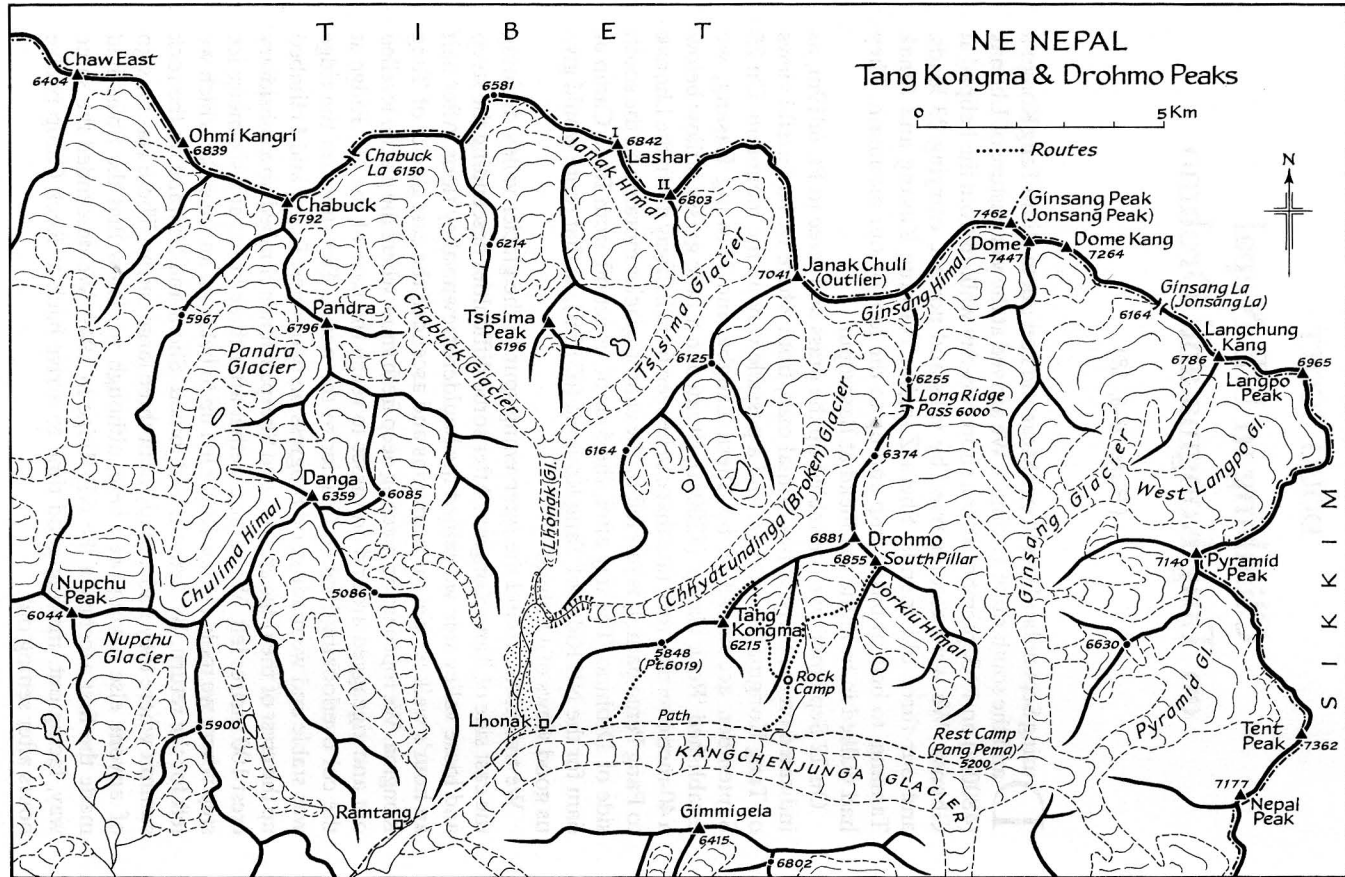
During September 1998 Roger Mear and I set out to climb Tang Kongma and the south rib of Drohmo. We arrived at the yak pasture of Lhonak (4800m) on 19 September after a short two-day walk-in from the helipad at Ghunsa. We were accompanied by yaks and porters, carrying 23 loads, and our three old friends, Shera Zangbu, Nawang Kasang and Janak Tamang, to help at base camp and up to the foot of our mountain. They had walked in from the roadhead at Basantpur.

On 22 September we scrambled up the grass and scree to Pt. 6019m, as indicated on the Swiss Janak Himal map, from where we had useful views of Tang Kongma's west ridge and a possible way up the mountain. On 25 September, accompanied by Shera Zangbu and Nawang Kasang, we established 'Rock Camp' (5200m), situated in a little grassy hollow below a 40-metre vertical rock face that can be seen from halfway down the Lhonak to Pang Pema path. It is just left of the central glacier moraine on the south side of Drohmo. The day after, the four of us set off from Rock Camp at 6am for the NE Ridge of Tang Kongma (6215m), as that route would give us good views of Drohmo.

We traversed around the intervening spur to the glacier valley draining the east side of Tang Kongma. After some difficulties descending the steep and loose valley side we gained the boulder-strewn valley floor. After half an hour's walk we put on crampons and ascended the east glacier of Tang Kongma. We roped up on meeting deep fresh snow where the glacier levelled out and zigzagged around crevasses to reach the base of the NE Ridge at the col overlooking Broken Glacier to the north. The snow on the ridge was stable and we made good progress on two ropes. Roger and I climbed up the crest of the ridge and our two Sherpa friends climbed up a subsidiary crest 100 metres left. We came together after three hours at a six-metre ice step where we took a belay. Roger led up to belay on an ice stake which we left for the return. By 1pm we had joined Shera and Nawang on the rock summit where they had already built three large cairns. There was no sign of anyone else having been here, although we knew that the Swiss had made the first ascent via the NE Ridge in 1949. We descended the same way, facing out, making good time to arrive back at Rock Camp twelve hours after setting out.



58. The South Rib of Drohmo showing first ascent route by Roger Mear and Doug Scott. (*David Geddes*) (p13)



Rain and snow fell continuously from 27 September to 2 October but that gave us a much-needed rest and time to savour our first climb. We walked up to Rock Camp on 1 October taking in a diversion to Pang Pema to check out the progress of a British (Nottingham) Kangchenjunga expedition. On 3 October, with the help of Shera and Nawang, we established ourselves at the head of the south glacier at a point below the steep snow slopes leading up to the south rib of Drohmo. The next day, with low cloud and snow flurries blowing around, Roger and I decided to fix our four ropes up the deep avalanche-prone snow to the base of the rib. I had been here six months before with Lindsay Griffin and Skip Novak. Unfortunately, on that occasion we lacked all the various factors necessary for a good climb – fitness, experience and weather – so it did not happen, but now everything was right.

On 5 October we began our climb, ascending the ropes and taking the last two with us for what we hoped would be a four-day push to the top. As there were only two of us, the food, fuel, cooking gear, rock and ice-climbing equipment and the MacIntyre bivouac tent weighed in heavy and so did the commitment to this prominent and elegant feature of the mountain.

Roger scrambled up over loose mixed ground and disappeared over to the left of the ridge line. Two hours later, all the rope was out. Muffled shouts indicated I should move up to his traverse line, at which point we had an altercation. I had expected to go more or less directly up a line of weakness on the crest of the buttress, and not to cross three steep ribs with soft snow gullies in between plunging down to the glacier, now a thousand feet below. Roger brought the ensuing long-range debate neatly to a close by suggesting that we should perhaps give up the climb! With that I shouldered my rucksack and set off to traverse the 60 metres of atrocious snow and to connect again with Roger. My beaming partner was well pleased with himself for having led such a difficult pitch. He was also pleased, as I was, that the climb could now continue. We both really needed this one. Already I was finding that the hard pitch had stretched my mind and body, dusting away the cobwebs that had accumulated, it having been some time since I had climbed hard pitches in the Himalaya.

The next three pitches went more or less straight up over steep red and rough granite (V) and into snow gullies (IV). The last pitch of the day brought me to a ledge and snow cone suitable for digging out a tent platform (6207m). Roger came up in the gloom as the Everest massif, 75 miles away, was bathed in orange light.

The next frosty morning, under a cloudless sky, we set off up the buttress, climbing more snowed-up rock to a belay point from where we could traverse right for 80 metres and a belay on loose blocks. The sun was now shining in over Tent Peak right onto our route, making the next two pitches of snow-covered steep ice (IV) a worrying lead for Roger. Eventually I led through, angling up left back to the crest of the buttress and placing tape runners on flakes of granite poking up out of the snow and ice. We were



6. Roger Mear climbing steep rock during the first day of the first ascent of the South Rib of Drohmo. (*Doug Scott*) (p13)



7. Roger Mear at the top of the South Rib of Drohmo. (*Doug Scott*) (p13)

now above the prominent rock bands that are an obvious feature of the lower third of our route.

Roger led the next four pitches up the snow arête to the left of the great overhung bulge of ice we dubbed 'the cauliflower'. Sound belays were hard to find under all the monsoon snow. It usually entailed considerable digging to find good rock and ice. We had intended to sleep on the gentle slopes above the cauliflower but after a 20-metre probe, Roger returned as the sun sank down beyond Everest. As the full moon came up over Kangchenjunga we settled into our tent for the night, pitched inside an ice grotto.

Another bright and frosty morning helped us make good progress up the steep snow arête and up a vertical and difficult band of rock (V) and then, by midday, walking over the top of the cauliflower to the base of the right-hand of two summit snow and ice ribs. The sun was blasting off the snow, inducing lethargy, so we put the tent up and took the early afternoon off work in favour of a brew and a snooze. Thus refreshed, we fixed our two ropes up steep ice and rock steps before descending to our third bivouac.

On 8 October we left our tent and set off up the ropes with light sacks. It was such a relief to be liberated from the burden and to make good time up the ropes with the end of our route in sight. There is usually a sting in the tail and here it was mushy snow and more dubious belays; the last two pitches were unprotected apart from me sitting in huge bucket steps dug out of the arête. Even after digging down six feet, the ice axes just disappeared into the unconsolidated snow. The snow was particularly soft on the west side of the rib and for some reason, never as pleasant as the NE Ridge of Tang Kongma. At 2.30pm I joined Roger at the top of the south rib of Drohmo. We were now on the long summit ridge of the mountain where cloud had been gathering, blown up by strong southerly winds. To the north we caught glimpses of the rounded peaks below Janak and the Tibetan Plateau beyond. The chances of climbing Drohmo from the north looked bleak, if not impossible, as so much soft snow lay above overhung ice cliffs.

We climbed up and along the summit ridge to the west and called it a day at 3pm on top of a corniced peak overhanging the North Face. We registered 6855m on the altimeter. According to the latest map of Nepal, produced by the Finns last year, the highest summit of Drohmo is at least half a mile away and at 6881m, 26 metres higher than where we were. Although we couldn't see it through the cloud, we must assume it to be a fact, as the latest calculations should be the most trustworthy. We were well satisfied with the 28 pitches we had climbed from the glacier up the South Pillar of our mountain. We down-climbed and abseiled back to our last bivouac and next day reached the glacier after a total of 25 abseils. Nawang and Shera came up next day to share our obvious delight and to help us remove our two fixed ropes and the glacier camp down to base camp.

Roger, fit and faster from two months of guiding in the Alps, and more youthful than me, had led most of the route. To compensate, I had carried



8. Roger Mear climbing steep snow during the summit day of the first ascent of the South Rib of Drohmo. (*Doug Scott*) (p13)

a bit more and took on the chores of cooking; but still I wish now I had led my share of the climb. I also feel uneasy that we had fixed ropes on those first four pitches, taking away a little of the commitment. These are just personal regrets that every climber must have when he does not lead when he could, and fixes rope when his courage fails him. Still, the overall impressions of being up there with Roger remain good ones.

It was not a big thing in itself to spend those four days checking out a way up the South Pillar of Drohmo, to put the rest of life to one side, to engage rock and ice and a lot of monsoon snow, carried along by that urge for clarity that comes from total or near-total commitment to this simple self-imposed task, taking every pitch as it came, not knowing how but finding a way and a sense of well-being after each difficulty was passed. So it had done the trick, lifted my spirits as it always does when on a new route with just one or two good friends and where the outcome remains uncertain to the end.