
NICK BULLOCK

Shadows on Teng Kangpoche

The plane touched down with a screech of tyres. The warm humid air hit us like a blast furnace and here I was once again in Kathmandu. This time it was different. This time Cartwright wasn't with me. His memory was, though. His ghost lingered. I saw him in the airport. I saw him as I met friends from last year who were compassionate and inquisitive. I saw him and felt him in the streets, the cafes and the bars. I missed my friend who was no longer with us. I vowed to do his memory justice and hoped I could live up to the standard he set on the hill.

Nick Carter was my partner for round two on Teng Kangpoche's north-west face. Carter was no Cartwright. He was easygoing, driven in a quiet kind of way. He was even willing to listen and compromise. He was happy to let me make the decisions and would be content with a successful ascent by whatever line. Mostly, though, I would not have to keep a close eye on the expedition funds whenever we were near a bar.

The weather was unseasonable. 2003 had given one day of snow. So far in 2004 there had been storms in Kathmandu, delays at Lukla and frustration for me. Carter and I had attempted my solo line from the previous year, *Love and Hate* (AJ 2004) on the north-east face of Teng Kangpoche, hoping to bag the summit. We were lucky to escape with our lives. My high point from the year before was still a long way up when we turned. The snow slid past on more than one occasion, hunting, searching... Fortunately we avoided the white-sliding harbinger of misery and cautiously ran to the valley.

Eventually the waiting and reading, the eating, sitting and sleeping drove us to the chosen line on the north-west face, where Cartwright, Powell and I had struggled in 2003.

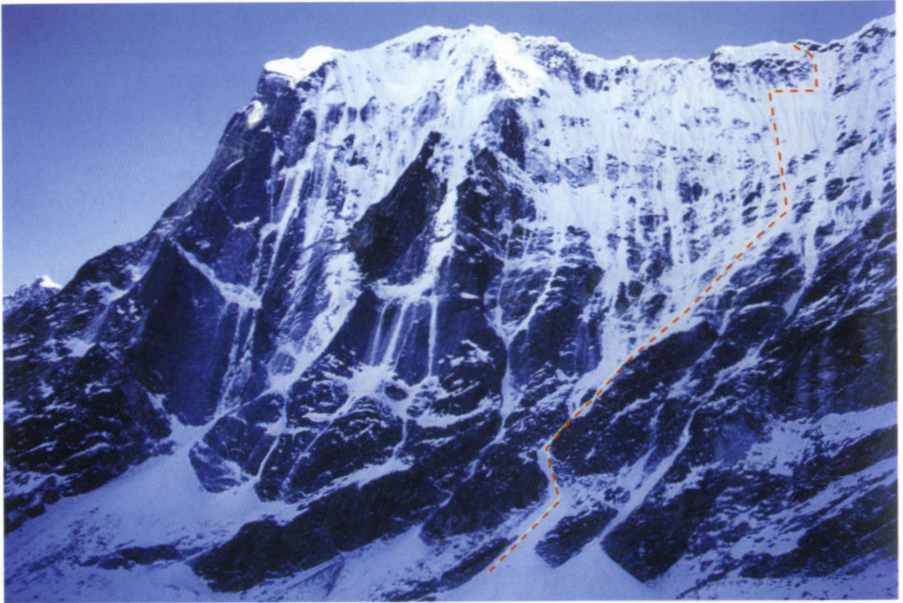
'We will just take a look.'

There was no doubt that the snow would be treacherous, and with nerves scorched like the fresh growth on a flower caught in a late spring frost, we made our way to the end of the moraine.

The snow on the edge of the initial snow cone tumbled away in blocks with each plunge of the boot. Carter was ready to turn. I could see it in those haunted eyes.

'I'll take a look in the middle.'

Out into no-man's-land the powder had pummelled and pressed, cut a furrow as deep as a storm drain and given us a consolidated way up. Up into the massive void of white nothing, up into the very heart of the mile-high hell of the loose, the soft, and the uncertain.



38. North-west face of Teng Kangpoche, above Thame in the Khumbu, Nepal.
(Nick Bullock)



39. Nick Bullock on the upper section of *Edge of Darkness* on the north-west face of Teng Kangpoche. (Nick Carter)

We followed a toboggan run; curves and twists carved by spindrift made the going good and took us deep into the depths of the north-west face. We soloed, as the climbing was not difficult and speed was safety. The dawn lit our awe-inspiring position like a floodlight on a football pitch. Snow crept across the miles of the vertical desert. Hunting cracks and fissures, it whispered to me in a mesmerising melancholy: 'What are you doing here? You don't belong here. Turn back.'

The snow slapped my face, it woke me from my dark-lonely thoughts, it whipped and snaked, cutting cleaves as clean and as sharp as the edge of a tile. Midday found us high and committed. 1300 metres opened out beneath our feet. Fins and crests of ice and snow surrounded our lonely position. Folds sharp, sagging and random like the points of a jester's hat made for a mad moon-like maelstrom. The cold gnawed into flesh; hands and feet had long given up the struggle for feeling. We decided to stop and re-warm. Recovery was required if the final 300 metres was to be successfully tackled tomorrow.

The second day of the climb started and finished in the dark and in bone-numbing cold. The final 300 metres were more technical than any of the climbing below. Vertical and hard-plated ice peeled from rock. Out in the middle of nowhere, 1500 metres high, fighting the fight in the dark, in a deep unconsolidated runnel of powder, I wondered why? By 7pm, with 11 hours already done, deep lines etched and creased a face that had seen too many years and lost too many friends. Wet with sweat and melting snow, I sprinted for the summit ridge. This torture was finally coming to an end and with it I hoped for peace and recovery from the ghosts.

Carter joined me beneath a mushroom of snow balanced on the summit ridge. It was 8pm and we would go no further. The ridge to the summit shone in the light of the crescent moon. Gargoyles of snow, hideous, sagging monstrosities, clung to a tenuous existence, struggling to remain in touch with the reality of the ridge. Having walked the tightrope once already this year along a ridge of insanity in Peru, I was not prepared to repeat it. Tomorrow would see us heading down and I was sure that would be no easy ride.

Sweat froze. I sat shivering waiting for Carter at the side of the initial snow cone and took comfort in feeling the cold, knowing soon I would return to life and living. Sensations, feelings and emotions coursed through my body. Waiting for Carter, the dark moved in for my last time on Teng Kangpoche.

I replayed a conversation with a friend. We talked about loss and about my climbs. 'You think it'll never happen to you, don't you? You think it will always be the other person?'

'No, I actually do think I'll kill myself.' She looked shocked.

I continued, 'It's a matter of time and percentages. If you place yourself in a dangerous situation repeatedly and push, the chances are something will happen at some point. I just hope it's not for a long time, I still have a lot of living to do.'



40. Nick Carter on *Edge of Darkness*, north-west face of Teng Kangpoche, with Everest in the distance. (Nick Bullock)

Ice tinkled from the dark. Carter was near and the worry I had experienced waiting for him now subsided. I wasn't ready to lose more friends. I will always have pain and I will never forget. I will continually question and try to understand. Pain is appreciation.

Summary: Nick Bullock and Nick Carter. The first ascent of the north-west face of Teng Kangpoche, Khumbu, Nepal. *Edge of Darkness*. TD+/ED1 Scottish IV 1600m. 23-25 October 2004.

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