

# Makalu—Almost

DOUGLAS SCOTT, *Alpine Climbing Group*

WE HAD COME to climb Makalu. This isolated and very beautiful region has a host of attractive, unclimbed peaks: Tutse (6757 metres), Peak 4 (6720 metres) and the summits north and east of Yaupa (Peak 3). It seemed a great waste of time and money organizing travel to the Himalaya for just one climb and so we booked Chamlang and Baruntse and planned to climb on and around Yaupa or Peak 3 (6424 metres), which, by a wide interpretation, came under our permit for the southeast ridge of Makalu.

We were not so much a large expedition of twelve climbers, but more like four expeditions running together. The Alpine holiday atmosphere was enhanced by invitations to family and friends to accompany us up to Base Camp at 4900 metres. To the climbers, Jean Afanassieff, Larry Bruce, Colin (Choe) Brookes, Richard Chaplin, Jim Fullalove, Arianne Giobellina, Brian Hall, Molly Higgins, Terry Mooney, Michael Scott, Stephen Sustad and me, were added Jean's wife Michelle and daughter Jeanne (9), my wife Jan and daughters Martha (11) and Rosie (5), Clive and Sue Davis, Arthur and Rita Lees and Nick Loening.

After our arrival in Base Camp on April 19, while others ventured here and there to acclimatize, Hall, Mooney, Brookes and Sustad climbed P 6170 on April 22. On April 23 Larry Bruce, Molly Higgins, Jim Fullalove, Jean Afanassieff and I climbed to the southeast summit (c. 6300 metres) of Peak 3 by the icy east ridge, a first ascent. The round trip took ten hours. The difficulties were never more than Scottish II and we climbed mostly unroped. We had not the time to traverse north to the unclimbed main summit of Peak 3, but it looked feasible and interesting.

Although the southeast ridge of Baruntse had been climbed before on several occasions, it was the only possible route from Base Camp that suited our purposes. We needed to acclimatize without over-exerting ourselves. Our next climb, on Chamlang, had to be a joint Nepalese-foreign affair and so the three Nepalese climbers, Ang Phurba, Saela Tamang and Pasang Sherpa, would be given a quick apprenticeship in alpine-style climbing; hence we took the relatively non-technical southeast snow-and-ice ridge. We first walked south from Base Camp and crossed the grassy spur at P 4915 before turning west. We climbed alongside the Lower Barun Icefall to establish our first camp at 5400 metres. After some bad weather, we pitched Camp II, Corner Camp at 5600 metres on May 1, still at the base of Peak 4 but where the Chamlang Glacier

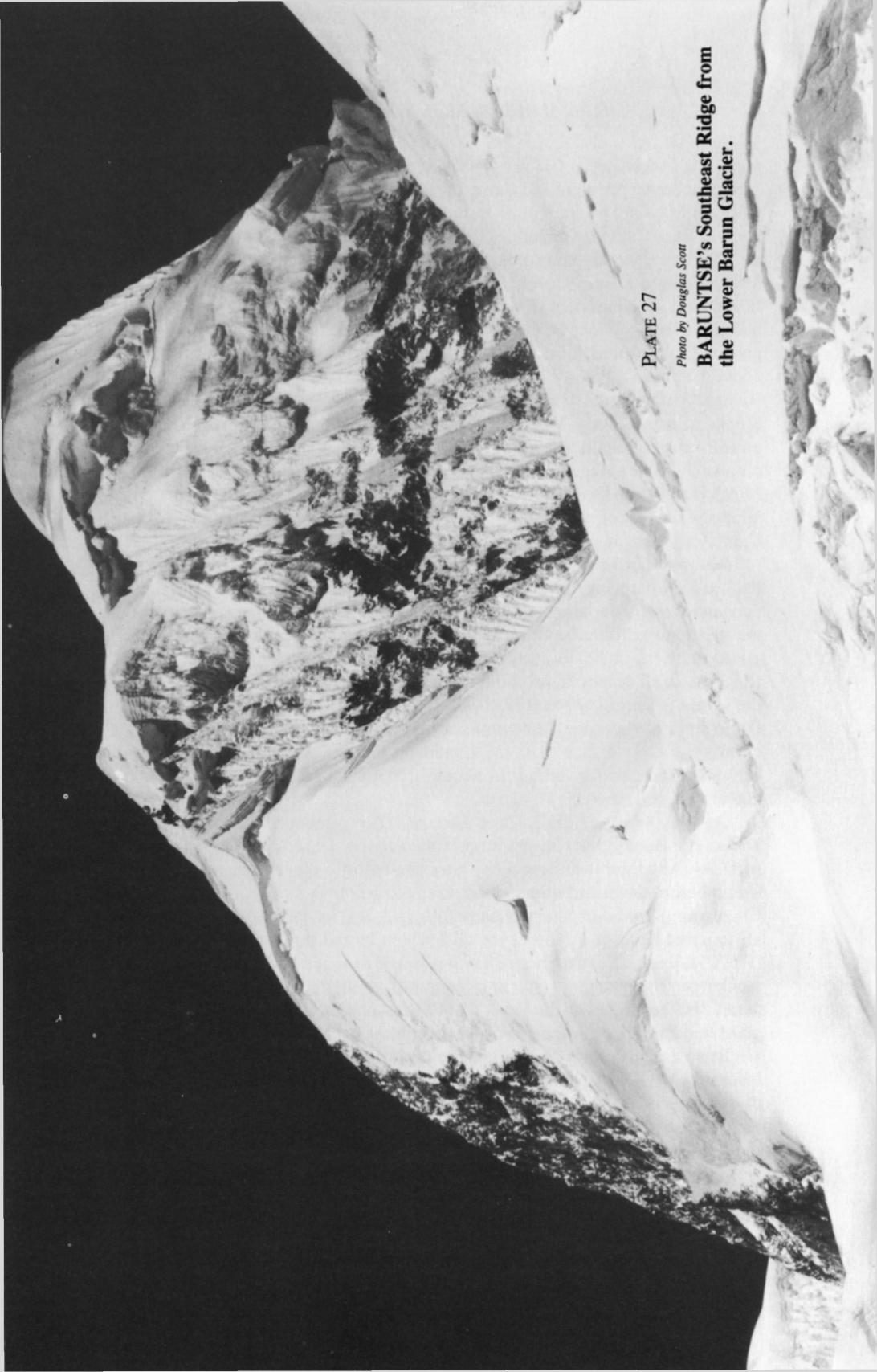


PLATE 27

*Photo by Douglas Scott*

**BARUNTSE's Southeast Ridge from  
the Lower Barun Glacier.**

meets the Lower Barun Glacier. The next day we established Camp III at 6100 metres under the west col and Camp IV at 6700 metres halfway up the southeast ridge on May 3. The summit of Baruntse was reached on May 4 and we were back in Base Camp by the 6th.

This may sound pretty straightforward, but of the sixteen who set out, Michael returned immediately with stomach problems; Jim got lost before the first camp; Arianne went down to Base Camp with hepatitis from Camp II, accompanied by Nick; Brian was struck down with laryngitis, so he and his partner Choe retired from Camp IV whilst Richard succumbed to headaches above Camp IV. Pasang had not the ability to climb a steep ice step above Richard's high point, so the two of them went down, leaving Jean Afanassieff, Stephen Sustad, Terry Mooney, Saela, Ang Phurba and me to reach the top amidst swirling cloud and falling snow. Larry Bruce and wife Molly Higgins climbed a 50° ice slope to the top of P 6730, a southern outlier of Baruntse, on May 3 from Camp III, completing a full circuit to Base Camp via the main Barun Glacier. The rest of us returned the way we had come to deposit gear at Corner Camp for Chamlang.

With the confidence acquired from our eight-day Baruntse excursion, we packed for Chamlang. The only previous ascent of the 7319-metre summit had been made by the Japanese in 1962, using 3500 feet of fixed rope and ladders on the apparently difficult south ridge. From the main summit an impressive exposed ridge top stretches away east-northeast for five miles to the east summit (P 7235). In all its length, no point on the ridge is more than 1000 feet lower than the summit. During September 1981, Reinhold Messner, Pasang Sherpa, Ang Dorje and I had reached the lowest part of the ridge after a fairly easy two-day climb up the north face from the Chamlang Glacier. We then waded up soft snow west to a minor summit of about 7010 metres before descending to the glacier the same day.

On May 12 Brian Hall, Choe Brookes, Terry Mooney, Stephen Sustad, Saela and Pasang left Base Camp, followed by Jean Afanassieff, my son Michael, Ang Phurba and me a day later. On the 14th the lead party left Corner Camp before dawn and climbed the steep ice below the virgin east summit of Chamlang. Four hours later our party followed, and by early afternoon we were all together beneath a 50-foot ice cliff which barred the way to the shoulder (P 6705), Pasang's inexperience having slowed the pace of the first party. Choe tackled the overhanging snow and ice in just a few minutes and we all bivouacked 300 feet higher on the lower lip of a bergschrund at 6100 metres after Jean and I had fixed our climbing ropes ready for the following day.

Brian and his group bivouacked the next night on the shoulder whilst Jean, Michael, Ang Phurba and I climbed the "Tower" or rather the difficult ice left of the rocks on the steep northeast ridge leading up to the east summit. Michael and I led two pitches each of Scottish Grade II/III. Our progress here was interrupted when Ang Phurba's crampons came adrift several times on the hard ice. Eventually we bivouacked 350 feet below the east summit with a strong, cold northerly wind blowing over the ridge. There were magnificent views of

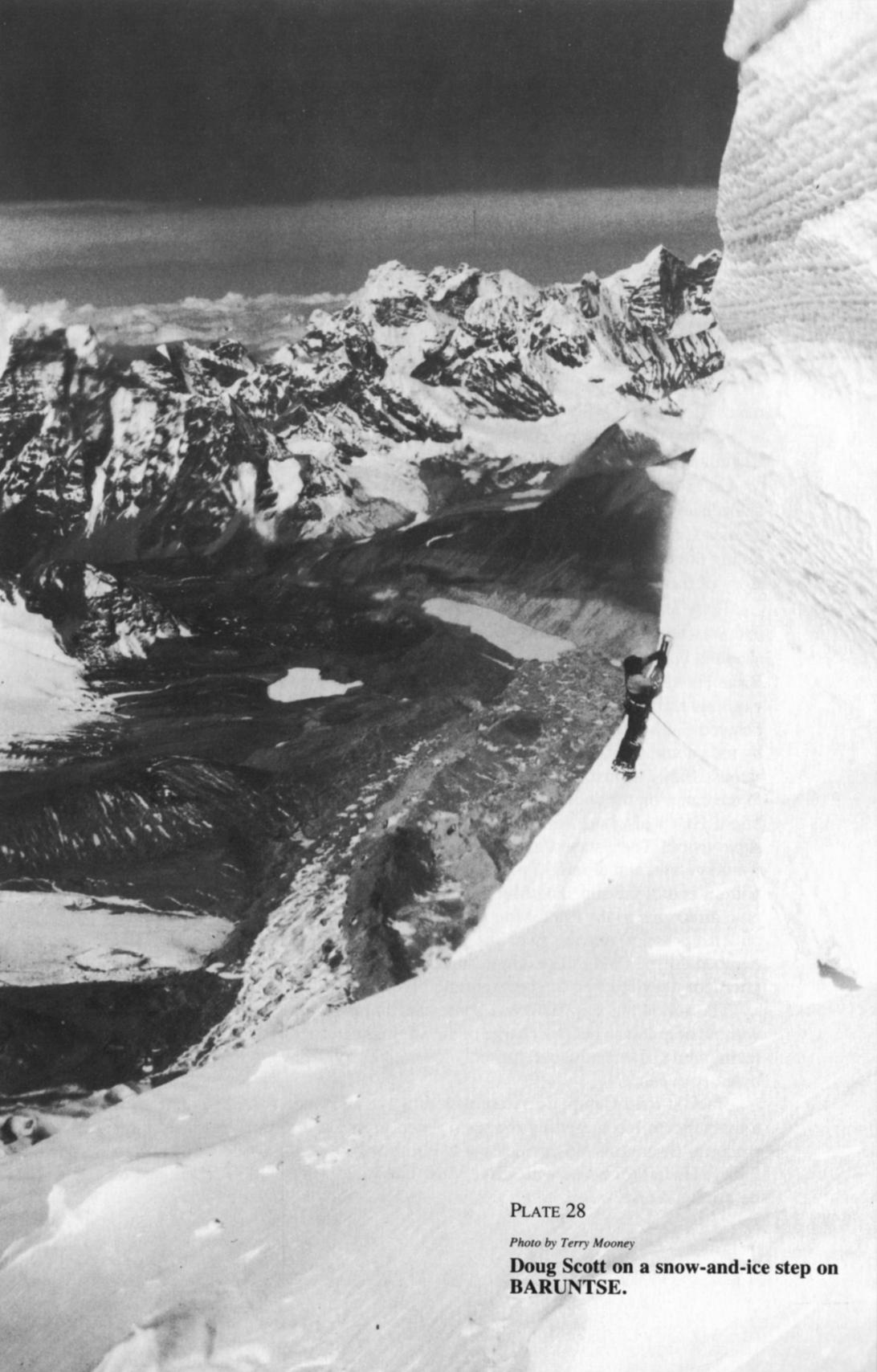


PLATE 28

*Photo by Terry Mooney*

**Doug Scott on a snow-and-ice step on  
BARUNTSE.**

Makalu, Everest, Lhotse and the peaks of the Hunku silhouetted by the setting sun. The next morning, the 16th, we reached the east summit (7235 metres) at nine o'clock and an hour later traversed the central summit (7180 metres).

The main summit of Chamlang at the westerly end of this long, flat-topped mountain was still 3½ miles away and would have been a fine climb, but we did not want to draw too heavily on our reserves before our attempt on Makalu and so we descended and *did* draw heavily on our reserves! My fickle memory failed to recall the easy line of our 1981 route and my alternative proved desperate. Just before dark we arrived at an impasse of steep, 70° rock and ice still 2000 feet above the Chamlang Glacier. Jean was not amused, Ang Phuba was a worried man and Michael, with the innocence and energy of youth, relished the situation as we bivouacked awkwardly between two séracs which hung out over the Chamlang Glacier.

On May 20 we traversed 400 feet of green ice diagonally right and then, after a dozen abseils and climbing on loose rock and crumbling ice, we stumbled into Corner Camp helped by the light of Choe's headtorch. As we quenched our raging thirst with cups of tea, we listened to Brian and Choe tell the harrowing story of their epic retreat from near the east summit of Chamlang.

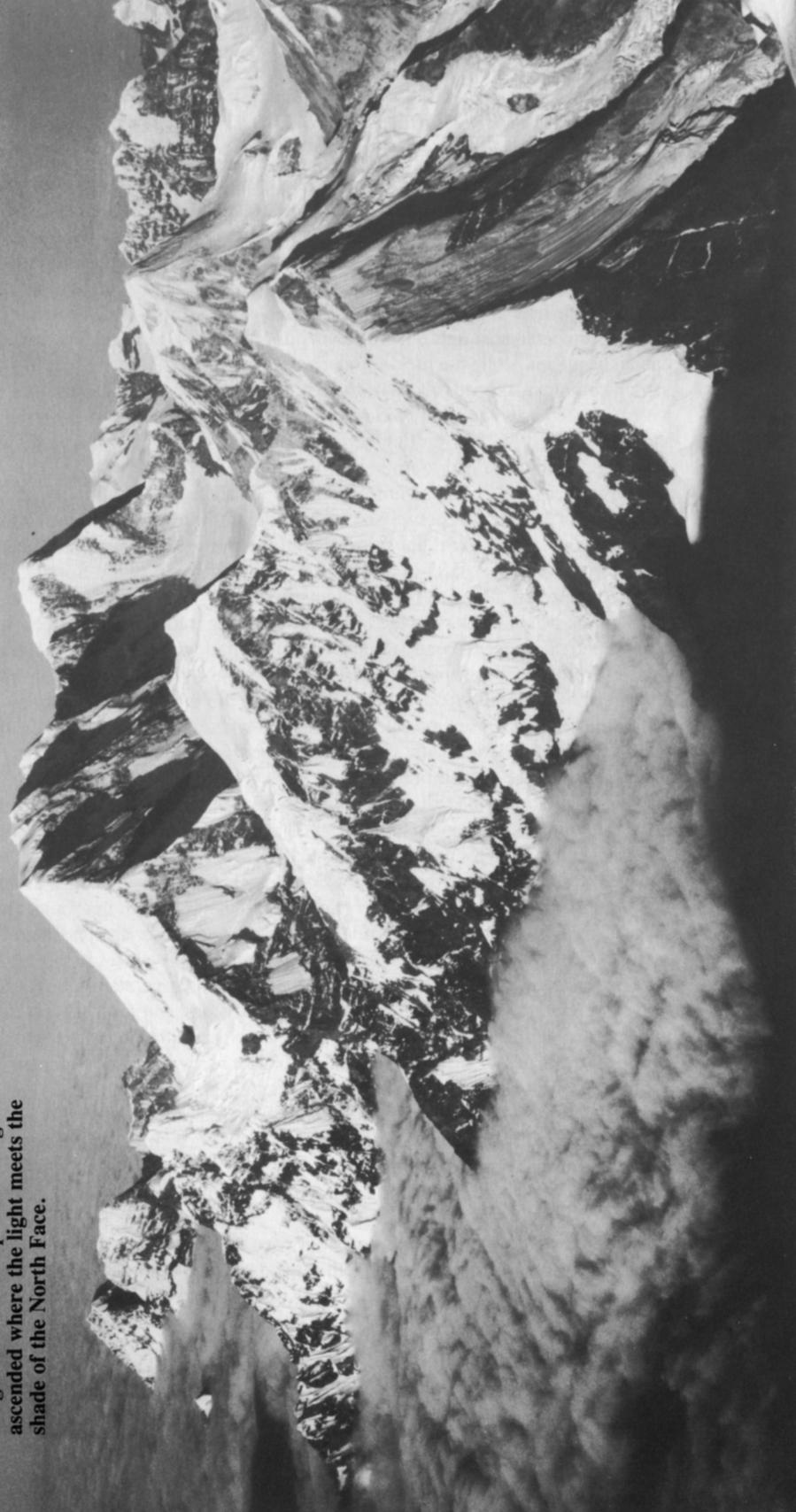
Terry Mooney had developed snow blindness during the night of May 16 and was totally blind and in great pain. The two Sherpas were still in their sleeping bags, none too keen to continue but prepared to wait with Terry whilst Brian Hall, Steve Sustad and Choe Brookes tried for the summit. They set off, gaining height rapidly and confident that they would reach the summit. As Hall belayed Sustad on some difficulties at 7000 metres, he was struck on the head by ice knocked off by Sustad 140 feet above and knocked momentarily unconscious. Hall was just able to stagger, enabling Choe and Stephen to lower him to the camp on the shoulder. The situation was desperate, with Terry Mooney blind, Hall with a suspected fractured skull and two Sherpas needing constant supervision. They stayed as one group, lowering 300 feet at a time. Sustad would go first and arrange a belay. Then the rope was pulled up and Hall at the bottom end of the rope and Mooney ten feet higher climbed down. Hall could give directions to the blind Mooney. When they reached Sustad, the rope was pulled up again and the two Sherpas were lowered. Finally Choe Brookes climbed down. Using this complicated and time-consuming procedure, by late afternoon they reached the bergschrund bivouac.

The following day Hall was somewhat improved and could just manage without help and so he took charge of the Sherpas and continued the descent with them, while Choe and Steve patiently lowered Terry. They got to Corner Camp by early evening.

Back at Base Camp, Terry recovered. Steve and Choe, who had done such a magnificent job in getting the team down in difficult terrain, regained their strength. Brian sensibly decided not to climb any more at altitude with such an injury. He left for home with Clive, Sue, Larry and Molly, all of whom had to be back at work.

*Photo by Douglas Scott*

**Chamlang from Makalu's Southeast  
Ridge. The Route up Chamlang East  
ascended where the light meets the  
shade of the North Face.**



On May 24 Jean Afanassieff, Steve Sustad and I were ready to attempt the traverse of Makalu via its six-mile-long southeast ridge and down the original northwest route. In 1980 I had attempted the same route. Terry Mooney, Jim Fullalove, Michael Scott and Choe Brookes were to attempt unsuccessfully the normal route from the northwest. My eleven-year-old daughter Martha came with us to the first camp on the southeast ridge, with Sherpas Deata and Saela to help her down the next day. The following day Martha, Deata and Saela accompanied us up and along the rock-and-ice ridge for another thousand feet to a fine vantage point with superb views of Everest, Lhotse and Lhotse Shar. To the east we could see across a sea of clouds to Kangchenjunga. Martha spotted the col she had reached in 1981 on the Nepalese-Tibetan frontier and was somewhat disappointed that she had to return.

Steve, Jean and I climbed unroped on the ice arêtes and steep rocky ground leading to P 6260. Jean accomplished quite a bit of filming with his cine camera. It was a good day on excellent snow conditions and we continued with Jean in the lead, traversing P 6285 to arrive at the saddle known as the South Col of Makalu; there the ridge steepens appreciably.

Stephen was first away in the morning, breaking trail across the steepening col and onto the ridge beyond, a ridge we were to find strewn with ropes running parallel from previous Japanese in 1970, Spanish in 1976 and Korean in 1982. By careful route-finding, we wound our way up the face and encountered few difficulties except for several pitches at the top where we roped up. I led a final section of ice festooned with ancient Japanese dural ladders on the left. This pitch put us on the "Mushroom" for our last comfortable night.

The next day dawned clear and beautiful as the sun rose to the northeast of Kangchenjunga, skimming its light across the cotton-wool clouds which filled the intervening 70 miles and all the land to the south as far as we could see. Jean and I followed Steve's footprints at the bottom of holes two feet deep. The snow was so uninspiring that Jean was rapidly losing his interest in the route. It got progressively steeper in a series of ice-and-snow steps. After lunch, Steve and I led 500 feet of difficult steep rock and intervening snow gullies to the edge of the Eastern Cwm. At this point beneath the Black Gendarme the southeast ridge curls around to the left. It was here that we left it by descending 1000 feet to the floor of the cwm. We all broke trail by turns during the afternoon for more than a mile to séracs below the headwall, about 300 feet below our 1980 bivouac. The Eastern Cwm of Makalu is the highest and most isolated hanging valley in the world. I felt more confident than in 1980: we were climbing faster, our loads were lighter and it seemed as if nothing would stop our climbing the headwall to the summit and then down the easier northwest ridge.

Stephen Sustad describes the climb on the headwall:

"The snow, now knee-deep, slows our pace to a crawl. After an exhausting day we gain only 600 feet, often climbing diagonally right. Jean has stopped breaking trail at this point and never resumes for the remainder of the climb. Doug somehow takes up most of Jean's share of the work. The act of carving

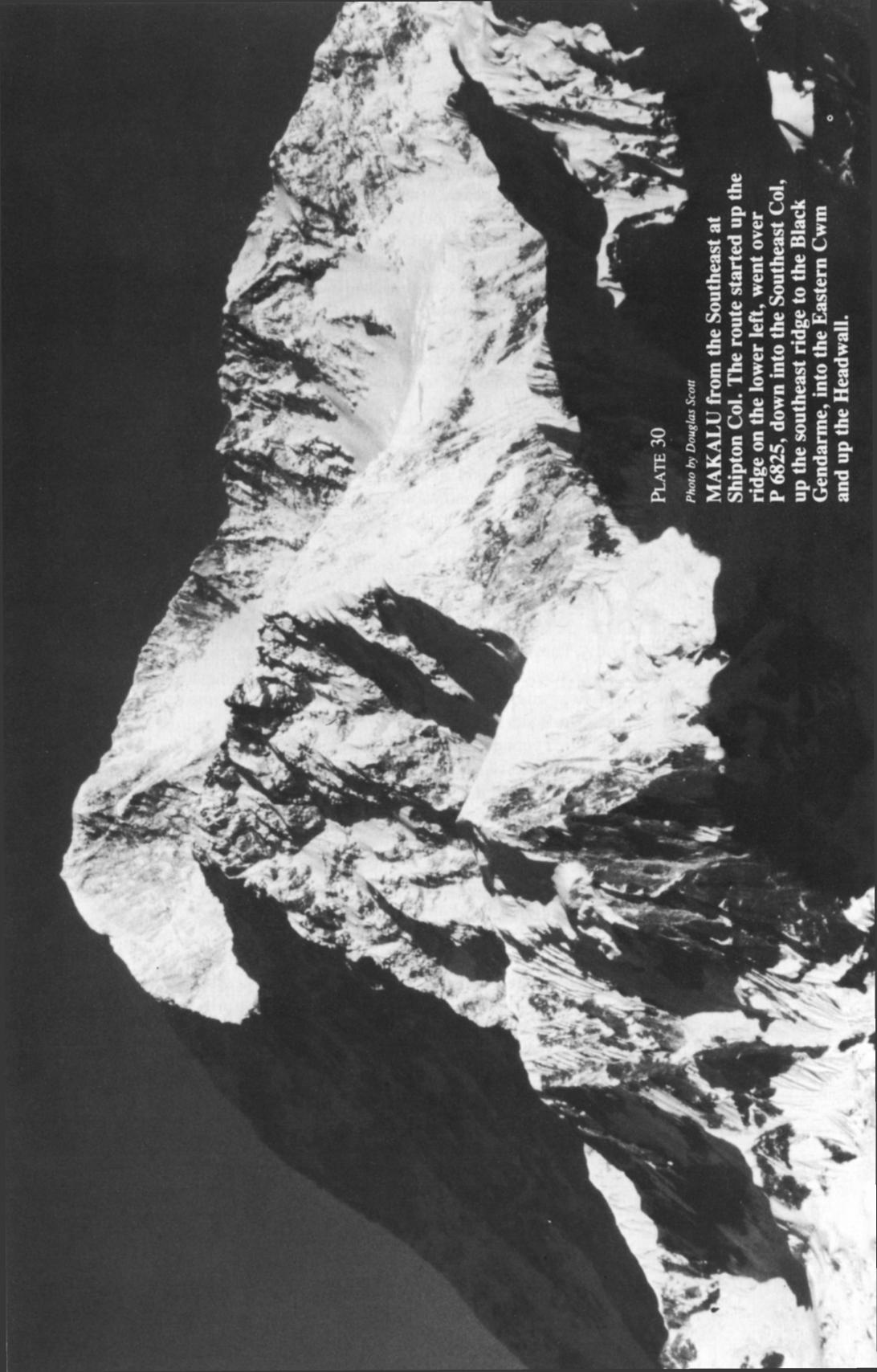


PLATE 30

*Photo by Douglas Scott*

**MAKALU from the Southeast at Shipton Col. The route started up the ridge on the lower left, went over P 6825, down into the Southeast Col, up the southeast ridge to the Black Gendarme, into the Eastern Cwm and up the Headwall.**

a platform takes well over an hour, even though the snow is soft. Disaster strikes when a fuel canister doesn't seal and we nearly have an explosion. This leaves us with only one cartridge. A sleepless night is rudely interrupted when the tent shifts and I find myself in a hammock hanging over the edge. Jean ventures out and pulls us back, anchoring everything down securely. A few hours later we realize that the tent is in danger of collapsing from snow pressing in on the sides. Doug goes out and shovels everything clear. By the time he returns, he is nearly frozen. Our second day on the headwall is a repeat of the first, 600 feet of deep snow. Doug starts up the final section, stops and shouts down that he has found a tent or, jokingly, a body. He moves for a closer look. 'It is a body.' \* Karel Schubert sat among the rocks as if in an armchair in which he had nodded off to sleep, never to wake up. At first I felt sickened and then my mind blanked out the horror of it. We moved up another twenty feet and stopped for lunch, completely forgetting his presence. Another thirty feet and we were on the summit ridge. Doug and Jean went ahead and tried to skirt a 200-foot rock tower on the left."

We turned back after 100 feet or so. Although this way was possible, we might as well go for the soft snow on the right side of the tower. We all met at an eyrie of ledges and decided to bivouac perhaps 300 feet below the top. I went down to check out the snow on the right side of the tower and in doing so once again passed the body. The snow was deep but feasible if we had the strength. Back at the bivy site Jean was airing his wet sleeping bag in the late afternoon sun; he seemed very tired and had been complaining of a ringing noise in his head. I thought the extra load he carried and the fact that his attention and strength were often divided between filming and climbing were taking their toll. Stephen and I set to for the next two hours making a snow platform for the tent. It was hard work and I felt drained. I had developed a sore throat during the day. Stephen and Jean had set out with fairly bad sore throats, so now there were three of us barking at the tent fabric. After soup, I was unable to drink the hot chocolate which followed, for by then I was coughing so much that I vomited.

As the dawn of my 43rd birthday came up, we dismantled the tent and packed our gear. We had only a few yards to go after so many, but now with clouds above and below us, drained by three nights on the headwall, we moved slowly into gear. Steve started floundering upward as Jean became impatient. He was now arguing for descending, pointing out that we had only half a cylinder of gaz left, that the weather looked threatening and that we were all tired. To me it seemed even more logical to go up and over for the easy descent of the original French route. Jean shot off down twenty feet. I pleaded for two hours of climbing, but with "I go," he was gone. Stephen and I looked at each other, gave a shrug and followed.

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\* Karel Schubert in 1976 became separated from Milan Kriššak, a fellow Czech, and Jordi Camprudi, Spanish, during the descent after making the fifth ascent of Makalu.

Jean was leaping down the headwall at an incredible rate. His long legs pumped in and out of the snow. I was impressed at his ability to move over soft unstable snow. One by one we passed the fifth bivouac site and continued down to the fourth, where I caught up with Jean sitting on his sack, coughing. I sat on mine and did the same. Fifteen minutes later Stephen arrived badly shaken. He had had to extricate himself from an avalanche.

During the afternoon we waded down the soft snow lying in the bed of the cwm. At the point where we had to traverse across and up the right side of the basin, we stopped for the night, putting up the bivy tent on top of an ice cliff. The gaz was all gone and we had only frozen snow around to quench a raging thirst. I filled my water bottles with snow. To melt it, I put it next to my body and fell asleep as the wind drove pellets of ice and snow at the tent. We awoke to the sun beating into the cwm from away over Kangchenjunga. We nibbled frozen cheese and sucked on frozen snow mush. Then we began to wade through the soft stuff toward the shoulder.

Stephen describes this half mile of unremitting toil:

“At this point I was beginning to wonder if we would survive or if one by one we would drop off. I looked back to see Jean unroped and sleeping in a fetal position. After a lot of screaming, I finally got him to move. It happened again later in the day. All the way through the agonizing climb back up was the temptation to stop for an eternal sleep. Doug, through an almost super-human effort, did two-thirds of the trail breaking. I could never go more than fifty feet at one stretch.”

For all of us this was a close encounter with the limits of our endurance. Stephen did a magnificent job, drawing on reserves from his skinny young body. He now led around rocks which put us out of avalanche danger for the first time that day. Then it was one more rope-length and I was on the crest of the ridge. Jean gathered up our other climbing rope, which we had abandoned four days before. I arranged the first abseil and threw both ropes down the steep rocks. With every foot of descent we recovered a little more and our worst fears gave way to relief and finally to elation. We found frozen tinned fish on the Mushroom and then swarmed down the fixed ropes to the South Col. Jean was now in his element, sliding down at breakneck speed but just in control. Finally he stopped after descending a Grade II gully on his backside and we camped for our eighth night.

The next morning, with a touch of *déjà vu*, Jean, like Georges Bettembourg three years before, led us down through the complicated séracs to the red rock pool where we fell asleep for an hour, safe at last. Jean went on to Base Camp. For me and to a lesser extent Steve, it was a case of stopping every few yards to rest. Martha came up the path to meet us. I leaned on her shoulder and stumbled into camp.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Makalu and Barun Himal, Eastern Nepal.

ASCENTS: P 6170, 20,243 feet (southernmost peak on the ridge extending southwest from Chago; 5½ kms west of Makalu), April 22, 1984 (Hall, Brookes, Mooney, Sustad).

Yaupa Southeast (Peak 3 Southeast), c. 6300 metres, c. 20,670 feet, first ascent, via east ridge, April 23, 1984 (Bruce, Higgins, Fullalove, Afanassieff, D. Scott).

Baruntse Southeast, 6730 metres, 22,080 feet, via west face, May 3, 1984 (Bruce, Higgins).

Baruntse, 7129 metres, 23,390 feet, via southeast ridge, May 4, 1984 (Afanassieff, Ang Phurba, Mooney, Saela, D. Scott, Sustad).

Chamlang East, 7235 metres, 23,737 feet, via north face and northeast ridge and traverse to Chamlang Central, 7180 metres, 23,557 feet, both first ascents, May 16, 1984 (Afanassieff, Ang Phurba, D. Scott, M. Scott).

Makalu, 8463 metres, 27,766 feet, attempt via southeast ridge and eastern cwm, high point of 8370 meters, c. 27,500 feet, reached on May 29, 1984 (Afanassieff, D. Scott, Sustad).

PERSONNEL: Douglas Scott, *leader*; Colin (Choe) Brookes, Richard Chaplin, James Fullalove, Adrienne Giobellina, Brian Hall, Michael Scott, *British*; Jean Afanassieff, *French*; Terry Mooney, *Irish* Larry Bruce, Molly Higgins, Stephen Sustad, *Americans*; Ang Phurba, Pasang Sherpa, Saela Tamang, *Nepalese*.

