

Tawoche

A retrospectively pleasurable ascent

by MICK FOWLER

Our basecamp at just over 5,000 meters was the highest I'd ever had, and not being a quick acclimatizer I was still nursing a throbbing headache after the first week. Potentially I might have been looking even less healthy than our liaison officer. He was a Tourism Ministry official based in Kathmandu who had never been to the mountains of the Khumbu region before. Whilst he shivered in the cold and looked distinctly unhappy, he could at least count the very substantial wad of money he was accumulating. I had no such compensating thoughts, and lay uncomfortably in the tent whilst Pat Littlejohn, British guide, rock climber extraordinaire and, on this trip, my climbing companion, displayed a distressing amount of energy, even to the extent of wandering up to the foot of the unclimbed northeast buttress of Tawoche (6542 meters) to check out the line a French team had tried in 1990. He returned exuberant to find me still in my sleeping bag whining about my head. Apparently he had spotted some overhanging grooves which he felt should offer what he described as "wonderful climbing."

I managed to delay things by two days but inevitably the time came when we approached the climb together — feeling very small beneath the huge expanse of verticality rearing up above us. The aim of the day was to climb up an overhanging rockband to the foot of a prominent ramp line leading up to the crest of the buttress.

"Looks good, doesn't it?" Pat's enthusiasm was clearly not diminished by our imposing surroundings. I wasn't sure. The line he was pointing at looked to overhang disturbingly. I was glad I'd left my rock boots at home.

"Important to keep the weight down," I explained to an incredulous Pat. It all looked horribly difficult as I sat comfortably watching the proceedings from my well-protected belay.

The heroic rock master inched his way up through the overhangs and then — even more impressively — back down again.

"I don't think that's right." He was soon off again on another line. I watched intrigued as he tried several times to make progress using a tiny, dubious-looking undercut. A good nut protected the move and looked to be an ideal handhold. Pat, though, was clearly reluctant to stoop to my own "pull-on-it-if-it's-easier" Himalayan ethics so early in the climb. And so we continued for 200 feet or so, Pat laybacking, bridging and whooping with joy whilst I struggled along behind with double boots and a large sack.

By late morning we had reached a sheltered belay just to one side of the toe



of the ramp. Above us the heat of the day was now bringing down too many large icicles interspersed with rocks to justify continuing. In any event the main aim of the day was complete and the way to the ramp was open. Keen to ensure that we could regain this point as quickly as possible we abseiled down, leaving our ropes in place, and headed off back down to basecamp.

Two days later we were back. Our big effort was under way.

“Are you sure you’ve got your slings the right length?”

The owner of the voice wafting down from above was clearly aware that the Fowler body was having a bit of trouble. His concern was fully justified. This rope climbing business is supposed to be fast and energy-efficient, and yet here I was after 15 minutes of maximum effort hanging upside down, completely knackered and only a few inches above the ground.

The problems seemed numerous, the main one being my sack, which had the distressing effect of pulling me backward in such a way that I was unable to push the Jümar clamps up the rope. Improvisations flowed thick and fast but the only thing that seemed to make any difference was attaching my rucksack chest straps into the top Jümar. This partially strangled me and seriously restricted the Jümar movement but at least enabled some limited progress to be made. In retrospect I’d have been better off seconding the pitches again. Pat seemed to find all this particularly funny, if rather incomprehensible. (I suppose guides aren’t allowed to revel in incompetence in the same way as us amateurish types.)

Meanwhile, I hung from the rope in full gasping fish mode, vowing to take jümaring lessons at some stage in life. Above us the ramp looked challenging. The French had been up here in 1990 and soon a despicable bolt gave a clue as to their abseil line. Pausing to spit on such an unethical eyesore, we scrambled up awkward mixed ground, heading out to the objectively safe but technically difficult-looking right-hand edge of the horribly huge and intimidating ramp. Pat led a distressingly difficult pitch and belayed in an awkward looking position. He pointed gleefully at his belay — a huge wedged flake sitting precariously in a loose 75-foot groove.

“You can either climb over this and kill us both if it comes off or lead out onto that featureless slab.”

Out on the slab, I was soon in a world where slivers of rock peeled off readily under scraping crampons. I gibbered badly. The French obviously hadn’t come this way.

“What’s it like?”

“Retrospectively pleasurable, Patrick.”

This was to be our pet phrase for the route. It’s often true, of course, if you think about it. After several more retrospectively pleasurable pitches Pat stopped at a horizontal knife-edge crest.

“Bedtime, Michael.”

I looked around hopefully. We had arrived at the prominent shoulder on the northeast buttress, the first real landmark, and reached well within our project-

ed time scale. My hopeful look was soon turning into an acceptance that it would be one of those special nights astride an ice crest or perched with one buttock on a six-inch wide ice ledge. Pat, though, likes his comfort, and started the ice crest with a worrying degree of enthusiasm. The man clearly wasn't as tired as he should have been. Not feeling so energetic, I positioned myself such that I could contribute by ineffectually flicking my ice axe pick at the iron-hard ice. The end result was a campsite perched right on the crest. It lacked amenities and was only big enough for about two-thirds of the floor area of the tent, but I had to admit that it was an awful lot more comfortable than my suggestion of a "perch-on-your-bum" bivouac.

Two pitches further up and we found our final piece of equipment from the French 1990 attempt. The report in the *American Alpine Journal* said that they ground to a halt in the face of "soft snow and technical difficulties." Looking up, the technical difficulties were all too apparent. I just hoped that the white stuff snaking down the corner lines was ice and not the feared soft snow. We had chosen the pre-monsoon season hoping that the powder snow problems experienced by the French would not be so acute. On that front we seemed to have made the right decision. The downside, though, was the weather pattern. It snowed every afternoon, and I mean *every* afternoon. By the end of day four on the face I was getting a bit sick of this. The climbing was difficult, time-consuming work up steep ice-plastered grooves which tended to act as chutes for huge quantities of the stuff. Frequently heavy waves of it would catch me unawares and snow would force its way deep down the front of my jacket.

During our fourth day a prominent ramp line had taken us round to the right side of the buttress when the afternoon's onslaught hit us with even greater ferocity than usual. A bivouac where we were was out of the question, but up to the left was a glimmer of hope — a snow patch, and, though I couldn't be sure, what looked like the entrance to a small cave. Pat had been stationary for a long time whilst I prattled about losing sight under the waves of snow. Not being a fan of inactivity, he jumped at my suggestion that he get some exercise and warm up by climbing a difficult-looking corner that led to the bivouac. Dusk found us both hanging from an ice screw just outside a very constricted looking ice hole with a substantial lip of iron-hard ice overhanging the entrance.

"Doesn't look very nice, does it?"

Pat sounded disheartened. He doesn't like discomfort. As I was (in Pat's eyes) the Master of Uncomfortable Bivouacs, I felt obliged to sound a bit more enthusiastic.

"Be fine once we've dozed off."

Keen to demonstrate this — and even more keen to surround myself in nice, warm, cozy down — I thrust my sleeping bag into the entrance and squeezed in. It was even worse than it had looked. At the entrance the diameter was probably two feet or so, but the feature was more of a wind-formed ice tube than a conventional cave. It sloped downward at about 45° for six feet before

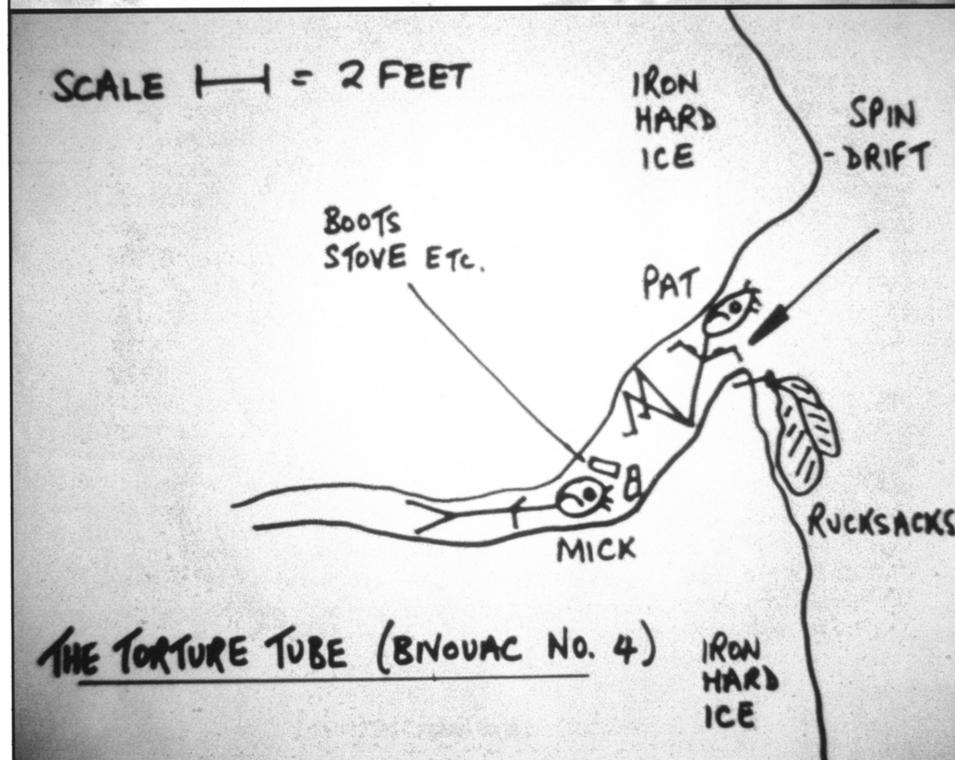
leveling off. Unfortunately, though, by the time it leveled out it had narrowed to about 12 inches across by 18 inches high. I lay on my side, at the bottom. Even my weedy shoulders and hips were too broad to turn over. I tried hard to control a rising sense of claustrophobia and keep smiling whilst Pat's swearing up above suggested that the entrance area was uncomfortable if less claustrophobic. Every now and then various objects would be dropped down on me: a Thermos, Pat's boots, the stove....

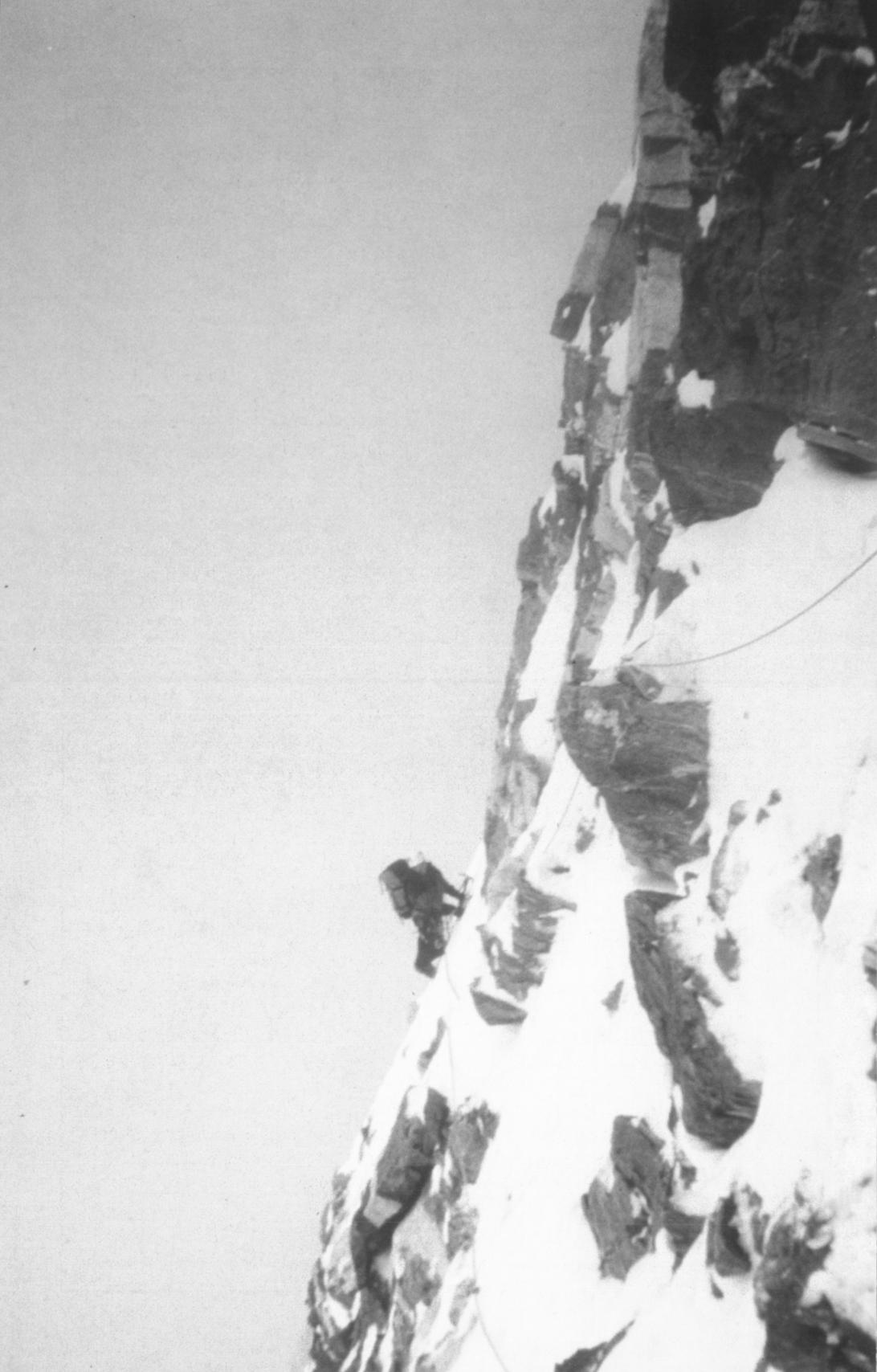
I was staring intently at the stove wondering how to position myself to make a brew when there was a distinct and unexpected change for the worse. The wind, which up to now had been in our favor, had clearly changed; suddenly it was as if a fireman had directed his hose straight into my bedroom. Spindrift piled up with alarming speed, immediately burying everything Pat had dropped down to me. My initial concern was keeping the snow out of my sleeping bag. I lifted the entrance out of the main flow, but the volume was such that within seconds my priorities had changed and I was more concerned that I would be trapped inside the tube by a wall of spindrift. Abandoning every other thought, I fought to extricate myself from this cold and constricted hellhole and fight my way back to the surface. This proved challenging in the smooth 45° section. My struggles and screams prompted comments of the "I thought you liked this kind of thing" category, but at least had the desired end result. The night, though, was but young as I dived head first in an effort to retrieve boots and stove whilst Pat grappled with the complexities of extracting the tent and arranging the fabric in such a way that we could both be at least partially protected....

And so began what was undoubtedly the most uncomfortable night of my life. We were both supposed to have the tent over our heads, but the angle of the tube was such that my head was level with Pat's feet. I spent the night trying to prevent myself from sliding down into oblivion by holding onto the fabric around the door whilst Pat cursed and swore about the pressure on his head and shoulders. Fortunately for me it wasn't until much later that we realized that my efforts and Pat's problems were connected. We never did manage to get into our sleeping bags again: the awkwardness of the situation, fear of melting spindrift freezing the down, and a conviction that we should make it anyway tempted us to stay as we were.

After 12 hours of -25° C or so a blast of sunlight is decidedly welcome. Unfortunately, though, our hole (or the "Torture Tube" as we now familiarly referred to it) was mean to the last, and necessitated 10 feet of climbing before we could soak up the sun. Surprisingly enough, our first pitch of the next day was only 10 feet long.

Bright sunlight and calm weather have a remarkably positive effect on the body. By the end of the first full-length pitch the rigors of the Torture Tube were receding and our minds were fully engrossed in the climbing difficulties. We were just to the right of the crest of the buttress now and, as this was the north





side, we feared that the permanently sub-zero temperatures would allow a build-up of bottomless powder snow. Our binoculars had revealed very steep white streaks hereabouts and we were prepared for a precarious wallow. How wrong can one be?

Distressingly steep streaks of hard ice soared up for hundreds of feet. In places they were truly vertical. Pat was belayed below what was clearly to be the first really steep pure ice pitch.

“How many ice screws have we got?”

“Er... three.”

I sheepishly recalled throwing out the extras that Pat had packed, insisting that three would be sufficient. Somehow one ice screw at each stance and one for a runner didn't seem very satisfactory now that we were here. Very careful climbing ensued for a few pitches until the inevitable afternoon spindrift onslaught started.

A hole up to our left beckoned uncomfortably: I was wary of holes after the Torture Tube. This one, though, looked different. Initial impressions were quite good; it was an ice hole which pierced the crest of the 65° buttress but was perhaps three feet high, four feet across and five feet long. It had a flat floor, and one of the finest views in the world. To the east Makalu, Everest, and Ama Dablam with the east face of Tawoche dropping away below; to the west Cho Oyu, Cholatse and below us the unclimbed north face of Tawoche. Unfortunately, it was clearly created by the wind, which duly started to gust through our “campsite” as we struggled to establish ourselves in our half-erect tent. Inside, the fabric flapped incessantly and hoar frost rained down.

“Why do we do this, Patrick?”

“You like it, Michael. Makes holidays more memorable.”

I lay back and contemplated. It was true, of course, that if everything went according to plan, life would be pretty boring. Inside my sleeping bag life was warm and cozy and dry — pretty good, really. I was glad that we'd suffered the sleeping bag-less masochism of the Torture Tube and kept our sleeping bags dry.

We were somewhere near the top of the buttress now, but it was difficult to say how close. Above us was that very special sort of uncertain ground: very steep and very white. It was Pat's turn to lead the first pitch of the day whilst I belayed uncomfortably in the tunnel, which had become even colder and windier without the blocking and protective qualities of the tent. I concluded from Pat's progress that the first pitch was (very) hard ice where, judging by his comments, more than three ice screws would have been distinctly useful. By the time I was engrossed in the second pitch the daily dose of bad weather was again closing in fast.

“Watch out,” Pat had said. “Belay's not very good.”

These words kept repeating uncomfortably in my head as I struggled away in my own little white wind-swept world. Somewhere above me was the top of the buttress. I should be able to do it in one pitch if only I control myself on the

ice screw placements.

Somehow, precarious ice climbing seems so much more difficult when you have to keep looking down. But judging how far I had come and weighing the distance up against the fear factor was the only way to limit my protection to the means available. It felt a long pitch; soon I couldn't see Pat any longer and concentrated on my last screw and the ground ahead. The end came all rather suddenly. There was hardly any easing of the angle, just a sudden realization that I was about to swing my axe into thin air over a narrow snow crest.

The other side of the crest was easy-angled. It felt strange after five and a half days of steep, technical ground. Walking has never been my strong point, but here I felt even less attuned than usual to the joys of stumbling over bottomless powder. Pat seemed not to be so badly afflicted by loss of balance and general lethargy. Strong chaps, these guides — far too much energy.

A solitary glimpse of the summit was all we were to get that night before staggering off along the not-very-obvious ridge leading in its general direction. Somewhere in the limitless white, an area that looked to be flat enough to pitch the tent materialized, and we collapsed in a horizontal position, lost in our cozy sleeping bags and lulled asleep by the purring stove.

It was a memorably pleasant experience to wake up and find we were much closer to the summit than expected. Perhaps half an hour above us was the top of Tawoche. Being terribly English, we shook hands formally on the top. I think we were even emotional enough to manage a (very) small French-style hug.

“Look at all these things to do.” Pat was bouncing around enthusiastically. Meanwhile I contemplated whether I could summon the energy to rotate my body sufficiently to manage a summit panorama from a sitting position. I could.... And now back in Britain I too am able to enthuse about the numerous unclimbed possibilities the world has to offer. I have to agree with Pat's on-the-spot assessment.

“There's still a lot to be done.”

And he is even older than me. There's hope for a few more years yet.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Nepalese Himalaya.

NEW ROUTE: The *Fowler-Littlejohn* Route (ED (Sup), 43 pitches) on the northeast buttress of Tawoche (6542 meters), April 22-28, 1995 (Mick Fowler and Pat Littlejohn).

PERSONNEL: Mick Fowler (leader), Pat Littlejohn, Chris Watts, Mike Morrison.