

# Tang Kongma and Drohmo

## Building a bigger window

by Doug Scott, *United Kingdom*

To climb new routes, alpine style, up high, it is necessary to have experience and strength. How quickly the pursuit is taken up depends on one's window of opportunity. Inevitably, strength will diminish to the point where the burden of food and equipment cannot be carried or carried fast enough. For most regular Himalayan climbers, this window lasts for 15 to 20 years. As Shakespeare commented upon opportunity, "Which taken at the flood leads on to fortune/Omitted, all the voyage of life/Is found in shallows and in miseries." There will only be regret if those vital years were spent doing what others had done 40 years earlier and probably with a better acceptance of a far greater commitment.

This is often the case with those chasing the 8000-meter summits as they are caught up in the tyranny of numbers. The main gain when men, setting off in isolation and going for it with a self-contained team of one or two friends, and mountains meet is the experience of the aftermath once you are back down safe, and before habitual routines are resumed. In those delicious moments you find a clear head and returning strength, you are self aware and have greater understanding, are more tolerant, objective and enthused for life back home. The trick, of course, is to keep it going for as long as possible, and to retain it as a useful reference point when all seems lost again.

Last autumn, only a few new routes were climbed in Nepal, and yet at the same time 28 expeditions were "climbing" (mostly jumaring fixed ropes) on Ama Dablam. What kind of aftermath awaited those climbers when they descended to the distraction of so many others, the space between their thoughts completely full with the stress of exiting out of the Lukla airfield?

There are other good reasons for climbing new routes, especially mixed rock, snow and ice routes. There is the intrinsic interest to be found in the judgments and decisions that have to be made en route: where the route should go, where to belay, whether to bivouac the night, whether to turn back or go on in the face of uncertain weather, avalanche potential, serac collapse, rock fall. All these uncertainties focus you right there, stopping the mind from wandering onto useless trivia for days on end.

It is easy to get hooked on alpine-style climbing, but hard to get off. Well past my window of opportunity, I launched a trip to Drohmo in the spring of 1998. Not all the various ingredients for a good and safe climb were in place, so the attempt was abandoned at the start of the climb before I could know how it would turn out or how I would cope.

I had to find out. More to the point, I simply yearned to lose and then to surpass myself in the process of discovery. In September, Roger Mear and I returned to northeast Nepal and set out to climb Tang Kongma and the south rib of Drohmo.

We arrived at the yak pasture of Lhonak (4800m) on September 19 after a short two-day walk from the heli-pad at Ghunsa. We were accompanied by yaks and porters carrying 23 loads. Our three old friends, Shera Zangbu, Nawang Kasang and Janak Tamang, walked in



*A view from high on Kangchenjunga, showing A: Ramtang Peak, B: Wedge Peak, C: Tang Kongma, and D: Drohmo. The route up Drohmo is marked. DOUG SCOTT*

from the road head at Basantapur and were with us to help out at base camp and up to the foot of our mountain.

On September 22, we scrambled up the grass and scree to Pt. 6019 (as indicated on the Swiss Janak Himal map), from where we had useful views of Tang Kongma's (6215m) west ridge and a possible way up the mountain. On September 25, accompanied by Shera Zangbu and Nawang Kasang, we established "Rock Camp" (5200m) in a little grassy hollow below a 40-meter vertical rock face that can be seen from halfway down the Lhonak-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 6 a.m. for the northeast ridge of Tang Kongma, knowing the route would give us good views of Drohmo.

We traversed around the intervening spur to the glacier valley that drains the east side of Tang Kongma. After some difficulties descending the steep and loose valley side, we gained the boulder-strewn valley floor. Half an hour's walk later, we put on crampons and ascended the east glacier of Tang Kongma. We roped up on meeting deep fresh snow where the glacier leveled out and zig-zagged around crevasses to reach the base of the northeast 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 meters left. We came together after three hours at a six-meter ice step where we took a belay. Roger led up to belay on an ice stake, which we left for the return. By 1 p.m., Roger and I joined Shera and Nawang on the rocky summit where they had already built three large cairns. There was no sign of any one else having been here, though we knew that the Swiss had made the first ascent via the Northeast Ridge in 1949. We descended the same way, facing out, and arrived back at Rock Camp 12 hours after setting off.

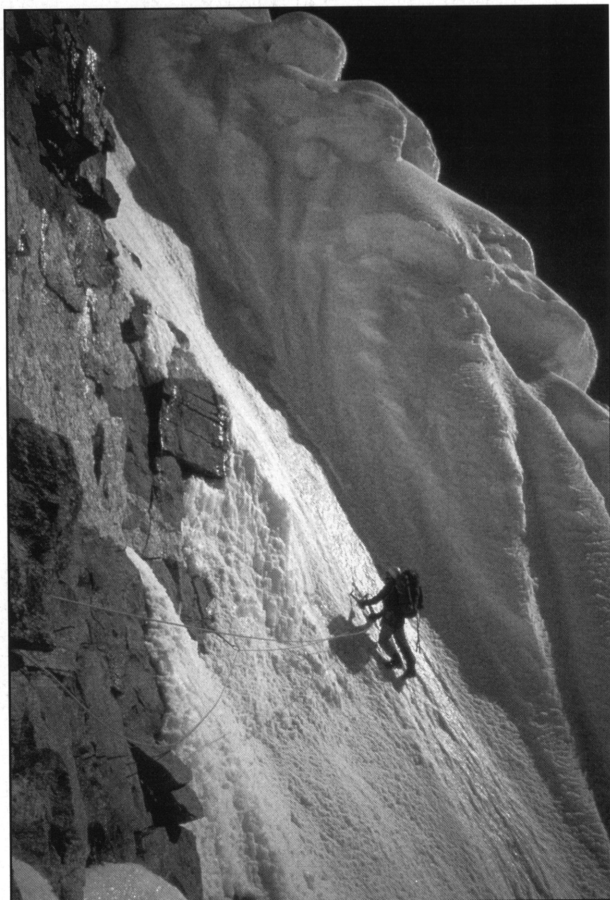


Rain and snow fell continuously from September 27 to October 2, but that gave us a well-needed rest and time to savor our first climb. We walked up to Rock Camp on October 1, taking in a diversion to Pang Pema to check out the progress of a British Kangchenjunga expedition.

On October 3, 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. Six months earlier, with Lindsay Griffin and Skip Novak, the various factors necessary for a good climb—fitness, experience and weather—had not been in place. But now everything was right.

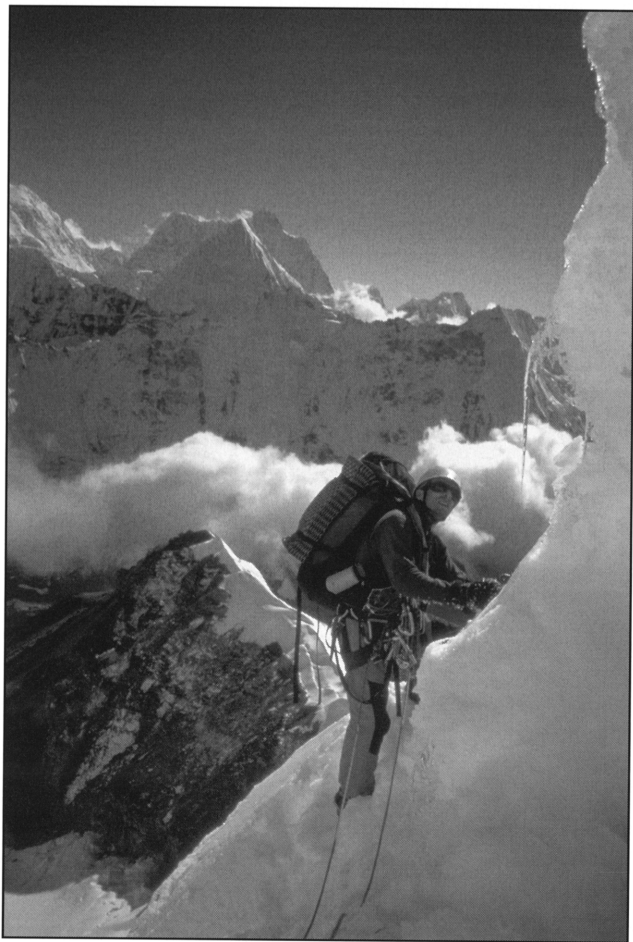
On October 5, we began our climb, ascending the ropes and taking the last two with us for what we hoped would be a four-day push to the top. As there were only two of us, the food, fuel, cooking gear, rock and ice climbing equipment and the MacIntyre bivouac tent weighed in heavy, as did the commitment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

Roger scrambled up 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 cross three steep ribs with soft snow gullies in between that plunged 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 meters 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 was I, 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



*Roger Mear on the south rib. DOUG SCOTT*





*Roger Mear on day 3. DOUG SCOTT*

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 (6207m) suitable for digging out a tent platform. Roger came up in the gloom as the Everest group was bathed in orange light 75 miles away.

That 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 meters to a belay on loose blocks. The sun was now shining 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 on through, angling up left back to the crest of the

buttress, placing runners on flakes of granite that poked out of the snow and ice. We were 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 rock or good ice. We had intended to sleep on the gentle slopes above the cauliflower, but after a 20-meter probe, Roger returned while the sun sank down beyond Everest and the full moon came up over Kangchenjunga. We settled into our tent, pitched inside an icy grotto.

Another bright and frosty morning helped us make good progress up the steep snow arête, then up a vertical and difficult band of rock (V). By midday, we were 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 down, inducing lethargy, so we put the tent up and took the early afternoon off in favor 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 October 8, we left our tent and set off up the ropes with light sacks. It was such a relief to be liberated from our burden and to make good time up the ropes. The end of our route was now 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 our rib and for some reason, never as pleasant as the northeast ridge of Tang Kongma.

At 2:30 p.m., I joined Roger at the top of the south rib of Drohmo. We were now on the long summit ridge of the mountain where clouds had been gathering, blown up by strong southerly winds. To the north we caught glimpses of the rounded peaks below Jannak 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 3 p.m. on top of a corniced peak overhanging the north face. We registered 6855 meters 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 6881 meters, 26 meters higher than where we were. Although we could not see it through the clouds, 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 the next day to share our obvious delight and to help us remove our two fixed ropes and move the glacier camp down to Base Camp.

**R**oger, fit and faster from two months' guiding in the Alps, and more youthful than I, had led the majority of the route. To compensate, I had carried 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 those first four pitches, which took 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 rib of Drohmo and putting the rest of life to one side while we engaged rock and ice and a lot of monsoon snow and were carried along by that urge for clarity that comes from (near) total commitment to this simple self-imposed task. We took every pitch as it came, not knowing how we would do it, 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 other good friends and where the outcome remains uncertain to the end.

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Nepal Himalaya

FIRST ASCENT: The northeast ridge of Tang Kongma (6215m), September 26, Shera Zangbu, Nawang Kasang, Janak Tamang, Roger Mear, Doug Scott; the south rib of Drohmo (6881m) to the south summit (6855m), October 4-9, Roger Mear and Doug Scott

PERSONNEL: Shera Zangbu, Nawang Kasang, Janak Tamang, Roger Mear, Doug Scott