

EXCERCISE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE 29th MARCH - 20th MAY 1992.

BY WO2 C.R.ASHE-CREGAN R.G.J.

THE TEAM

WO2	ROSS ASHE-CREGAN	R.G.J.	-	ORGANISER & LEADER
CAPT.	CHARLIE BEARDMORE	R.A.M.C.	-	DOCTOR
SGT.	GRAHAM REES	R.E.	-	RATIONS
SGT.	ANDY GALLAGHER	R.A.M.C.	-	MEDIC
CPL.	PAUL JIGGENS	R.A.F.		
POPT.	KEVIN ARNOLD	R.N.		
MR.	MALCOLM DAVIES	R.N.	-	SPONSERED CIVILIAN
S/SGT.	STEVE JONES	A.P.T.C.		

TREKKING TEAM

CAPT.	PETER TRYTHALL	L.I.	-	TREKKING LEADER
CAPT.	PATRICIA HIRST	5L.I.		
SGT	PETE BULLARD	R.G.J.	-	EQUIPMENT
PTE.	JOE RAMOF	L.I.		
L/C	MARK BAKER	6 L.I.		

Excercise Ultimate Challenge was a Tri-Service attempt on AMA DABLAM 6,856 metres in the Solu Khumbu (Everest) region of Nepal.

Dave Orange and I had both been on seperate expeditions to the Khumbu in 89/90 and as the same as numerous expeditions/trekkers that walk past this amazing mountain, we looked in awe, took many photographs and thought longingly about climbing it. Getting together in Tywyn (where we both live) we discussed the possibility of mounting an expedition in the present economic climate. Dave made contact with Golden Wonder (famous for crisps and pot noodles) through a contact, who agreed to be the major sponser, and planning started in late 91 after a 6 month postponement.

Why Ultimate Challenge you may ask - we wanted to do something different with a real buzz and make it a first for the Services. ATFA'S were submitted to IPAT in London with the following aims:-

1. To climb AMA DABLAM by the South East (normal)ridge.
2. To Parapente from the summit.
3. To Canoe the DUDH KOSI.

Once submitted we then started on a team who would have the necessary skills for such an attempt.



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The team as everyone who is involved with mountaineering knows changed frequently, and finding people from all 3 Services who would be free became increasingly difficult.

The original ATFA was submitted by Dave Orange as Leader and myself as Deputy in January 1991. On the application we asked that 2 civilians (who were "expert" parapenters as well as climbers) could be given permission to attend.

The expedition dates would be AUGUST - 31 OCT 91. By the end of January we were one of three expeditions selected by HTV to take part in The Scott Society Award, a sort of mini Mick Burke Award.

In April 91 it was becoming clear that we had a few major problems arising, these were:

1. Withdrawal of Dave Orange - due to personal and private reasons.
2. Failure by IPAT to grant approval for the parapente phase. This was a major blow, as this was a big selling point for potential sponsors - as HTV were interested as well.
3. Withdrawal of Golden Wonder due to para 2 above.
4. Failure by IPAT to grant civilian participation.
5. Lack of time to complete the planning for such a major undertaking.

(A word about Para. 2&4 above, ATFA'S are designed to give clearance and protect participation for overseas expeditions - if servicemen are to be able to take part in more challenging expeditions, they must be given more support by MOD/IPAT, - hurdles, cancellations or just plain objections will very soon stop Leaders planning such worthwhile expeditions. It is very difficult gaining sponsorship in a very adventure orientating population. Even up to the point of landing in Kathmandu I was faced with objections, even abuse by V.S.O's who disagreed with the Aims of the Expedition).

A new AFTA was submitted with myself as Leader with new dates (29th MARCH - 20th MAY 92) and the following aims.

1. To climb AMA DABLAM by S.E. Ridge.
2. To introduce Officers, NCO's and soldiers to Adventure Training in a foreign (Nepal) country.

A team of 9 climbers (with varying degree of experience) and 5 trekkers were selected and real planning started in earnest.

We had lost the HTV contract, and a few minor sponsors, but we managed to persuade Golden Wonder to stay mainly because we "adopted" The Spastics Society as a charity. Planning continued and we were soon in a position to collect all Equipment and Rations in Winchester. Mention here of Lt. Col. Kefford and Majors Richard Mc Allister and Brohco Lane of BSEE 92, and special thanks to their generous assistance, outward and inward in helping us.

The advance party of myself, Doctor, Rations and Equipment members left on 29th March and arrived in Kathmandu after a very pleasant and uneventful flight by P.I.A. via Karachi.

On a previous expedition I had used Highland Sherpa (who's Managing

Director Ang Zhumbu is married to Diana Peany of BUFO VENTURES - who organizes the Everest Marathon) they were to handle all in country arrangements and provided us with all trekking staff etc., as well as an excellent Sirdar, Dawa "Balau" Sherpa, himself from the village of Jumbesi (in the Khumbu).

They were at the airport to meet us and help us through the infuriating Customs at Kathmandu and help to the Hotel in Thamel. After a beer and shower it was good to be sitting in KC's again eating one of their sizzling steaks.

A week was spent repacking and distributing loads, checking itinerary and routes, visiting tourist attractions, even meeting old friends unexpectedly - walking through Thamel (the tourist region of Kathmandu) we bumped into Bob Churcher, using trekking for groups as an excuse to be in Nepal.

The main group arrived on 6th May, and after many catching the infamous "Kathmandu Quick - Step" in the first couple of days, it was time to depart for the first objective which was to be Namchee Bazaar where the team were to split.

We followed the traditional Everest walk-in and for the first-timers it was an excellent introduction to customs and culture in Nepal. The 10 day walk-in was fairly uneventful, apart from the huge forest fires that raged in the area of KoraKola, it gave everybody time to get acclimatized and get to know each other.

When we arrived in Namchee it was a very hot 100c and a welcome beer was waiting for us. Time to re-organize now into 2 separate expeditions - the walkers (5 in number) would go to Gokyo over the Cho-la pass, visit BSEE 92 in Base Camp and then join the climbing team in AMA DABLAM base camp, the climbers would move to TYANBOCHE and up to Base Camp (2 days).

Porters paid off, yaks arranged, visit to Namchee's Saturday market and the climbers departed.

(I have to confess to be selfish now because I am only going to write about the climbing team, however I can supply a full route description of 10 days duration in the Khumbu should anyone require it).

Our base camp was to be in a beautiful meadow at 14,500ft under the West Face (what a sight - awe inspiring to say the least). We shared our camp with a Basque team and a commercial team with Himalayan Kingdoms. We arrived fairly early and spent the day making camp as comfortable as we could - the following day was to be the PUJA Ceremony (to wish us luck and safe climbing). After just getting into my sleeping bag at about 1900hrs a lad from Himalayan Kingdoms arrived to say that there had been an accident and one of the Basque team had fallen to his death, after a 4 man successful summit bid. Contact had been made with the other 3, the fallen climbers partner was in a crevasse/bergsrund about 600ft down from the summit, the remaining 2 were to stay on the summit for the night.

A plan was made and I offered any assistance necessary to help them, (bearing in mind we had just arrived). Steve Monks and the Himalayan Kingdom clients did a fantastic job and after a tense 3 days they managed to get them down safely, and Charlie Beardmore and Andy Gallagher our medical team treated them for frost bite before they were casevaced to Kathmandu.

Camp 1 was at 19,000ft. at the start of the ridge on a very exposed shelf, and it was to be a long and labourious load carry to this site, made many times by all members, we managed to get 2 tents here (a third

was added later) and a good view was had of the remainder of the route. Various sources and references have said that with a good snow covering it is technical but fairly straight forward. This was not the case, loose, frost shattered rock, lack of snow, rock hard ice and spindrift avalanches made it a very different prospect.

Camp 2 was established 500ft. higher at the end of the rocky ridge which was fixed the whole way because we shared the route with the H.K. team and as space was limited we only got one tent here.

After 10 days everything was going pretty well. Camp 1 and 2 was occupied and well stocked and at least 6 of the team were going fairly strongly, we had our share of snow showers but the sun would burn it off and upwards progress being made. (A mail runner arrived from the trekking team, they were now in Lobuche having crossed the Cho-La Pass and were fit and happy). On the 29th April a very heavy snowfall prevented any movement - high winds were developing and the pressure was dropping - it was a good opportunity to bring everyone down for a rest.

The snowfall lasted for 2 days and many a crash of an avalanche was heard pouring the West face.

After resting and reorganizing the teams to give us the best possible chance for success it was time to move up again, and Team 1 consisting of Steve Jones, Paul Jiggins, Taff Rees and Kami Sherpa moved up to Camp 1 at the same time that H.K. team decided to abort their attempt - but their rope fixing and support made us grateful for their efforts and we felt their disappointment. The teams slowly progressed up the mountain, always 2 men leading, 2 in support and 4 more in support lower down so that eventually we had:

Camp 1 = 19,000ft. Andy Gallagher, Malcolm Davies, Martin Oakes, Phuri Sherpa.

Camp 2 = 19,500ft. Steve Jones, Taff Rees.

Camp 3 = 21,600ft. Paul Jiggins, Kami Sherpa.

In base camp myself, Charlie Beardmore, and Kevin Arnold who both moved into Camp 2 later on.

On the radio call on 3rd May, Paul and Kami announced they were strong and would make a summit bid tomorrow. On the 4th the weather had closed in and the view was obscure. I talked to Paul at 0500hrs. and they were just about to set off (radio contact was then lost).

Leaving camp 3 in nil vis, route finding through crevasses and seracs was not helped by the high winds and very soft fresh powder snow, after a couple of hours they both decided to return to 3.

It was now early morning and the trekkers had arrived having had a very good time and maybe it was appropriate that they arrived on Summit day.

I could talk to 1 and 2 and they could not see any movement at all and were sitting tight (in fact Steve and Taff were considering moving up - but I persuaded them otherwise) Charlie and Kevin left for 1 and it was a very tense leader waiting with the trekkers in Base Camp. At about 3 o'clock the sun burnt through and we could see the upper snow field and exit gully (what else) - there in the centre 2 figures going strong for the top - quick radio call (I told them to stay on open net) no answer, then the damn cloud closed in. What a tense time, all sorts of things going through my mind. Should I move Steve and Taff up - no only 1 answer "Wait" at 1705 hrs on 4th May - Paul on the radio - "We are up, we are on the summit (the 99th

and 100th persons).

What a relief, hugs and kisses (why are mountaineers emotional) - a couple of minutes to compose myself and then a long chat to Paul (our RAF member) - weather conditions were not good - no view - cornices everywhere (in fact they nearly walked through one on the other side). I asked Paul to be extremely careful and to give me a call when they reached Camp 3. Needless to say no call arrived and I was very glad when dawn arrived and I could scan the route/face with my bino's - was that 2 specks there - we hadn't seen them there before - where are they - speak to me Paul, please.

Steve and Taff were chomping at the bit ready to take off, but no the conditions were not good, I couldn't take the risk. There a figure by the mushroom ridge, another, both moving down slowly - they were safe, thank God. Steve and Taff in 2 moved up to help them and all 4 arrive safely in 2.

The following day I spoke to Paul who advised me that weather conditions and the route were not favourable for another summit bid at that time.

I agonized over making the decision, but eventually announced that due to the weather we would not be making any further attempts on the summit, and all our efforts would be directed at getting everybody down safely, with as much equipment as possible. By the 6th May everybody and equipment was safely back in Base Camp - and we were all grateful for Matthew Gloag for providing us with Famous Grouse Whiskey to celebrate.

A couple of days were spent cleaning up before the yaks and porters arrived to carry us down to Namche and on to Lukla.

3 days later we were sitting on the airfield awaiting, no, not the STOL aircraft, but a SUPER PUMA helicopter which we chartered to fly us and equipment back to Kathmandu, what a pleasure. 2 weeks of walking and sweating took us 40 minutes to fly back.

We actually planned on 3 days in Kathmandu, but it turned out to be nearly a week, 2 members going off to Chitwan for a few days, the remainder sightseeing and shopping - and it was in various groups that the team flew back to UK, the last ones arriving back on 20th May.

Ex Ultimate Challenge proved to be a very exciting and successful trip - at one stage I considered changing the name - but after overcoming many hurdles and objections my wife made me keep the name, because that's what climbing AMA DABLAM proved to be.