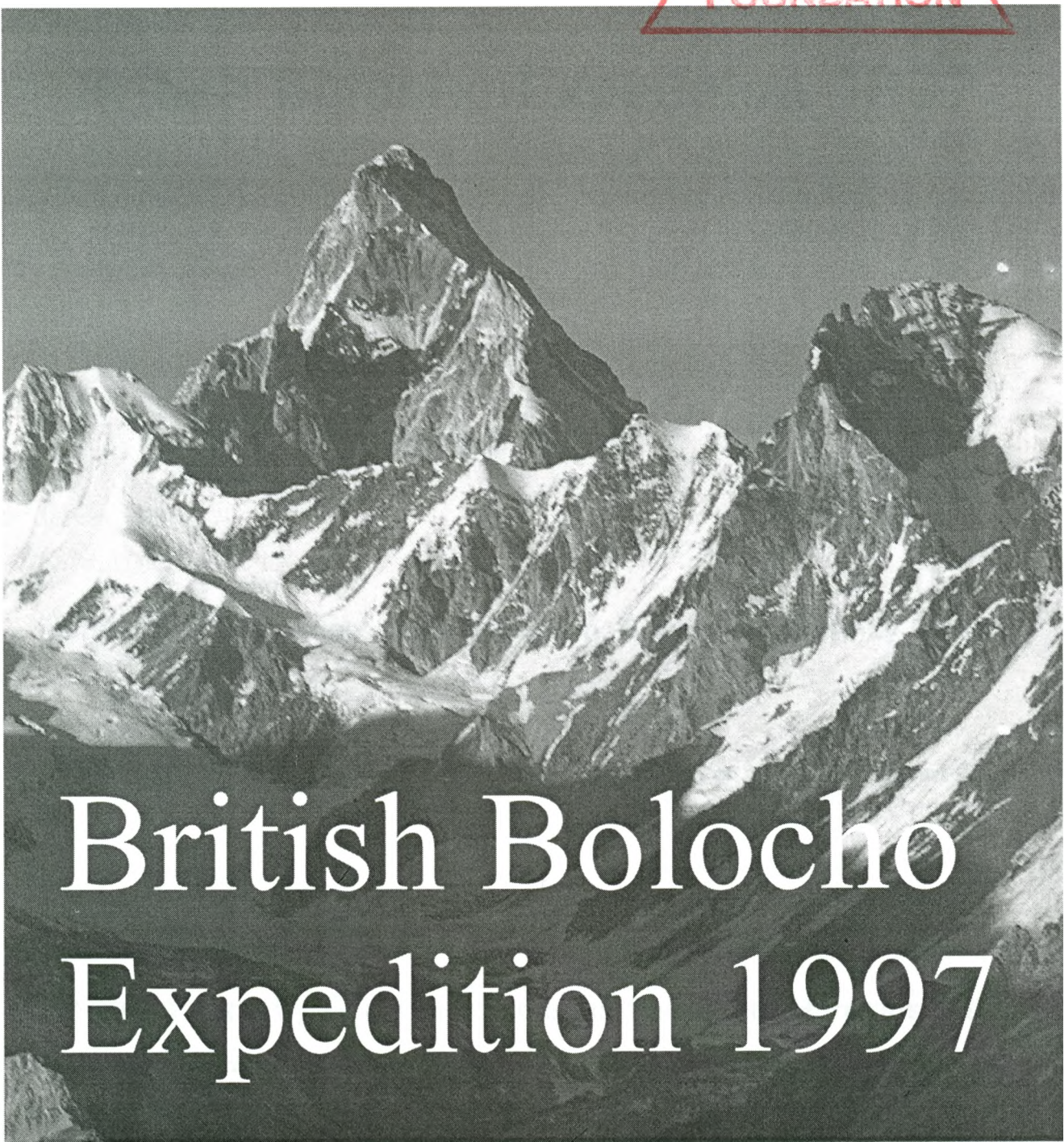


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British Bolocho Expedition 1997

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British Bolocho Expedition 1997

Expedition Report

Members of expedition: Dave Wilkinson, Stewart Muir, Andy Forsyth.

Report text and sketch map by Dave Wilkinson, production of photos by Stewart Muir.

Cover photograph by Geoff Tier: Bolocho Peak from Haramosh Glacier.

Small peaks in middle distance: Bolocho II, Bolocho III, and Bolocho IV (L to R).

This photo probably taken from on or near point 4492m on NW flank of Haramosh glacier (Bullock Workmans' "Riffelhorn").

Contents

Page 3 Introduction

Page 4 Preparations & Journey to the Mountains

Page 5 Acclimatization & Reconnaissance

Page 7 A Dash for the Top

Page 8 Unwinding

Page 8 Return Journey

Page 9 Sketch Map

Pages 11 to 13 Photos

Page 14 Expedition Diary

Page 15 Accounts

Page 16 Acknowledgments

Page 16 References

Introduction

Most of the mountains in the Karakoram are unclimbed. To the uninitiated, this might sound an unlikely statement, but to those who have walked up any but the few *most* popular of the region's glaciers with their eyes open, it's truth is fairly evident. Of course, all the biggest peaks have been done, but these are the minority. There are many thousands of lower mountains in the 5 and 6 thousand metre class, and most of these have not even been attempted. There are good reasons for this neglect. Many climbers are restricted by their life styles to a few expeditions in their lives, and feel that they might as well try one of the big peaks. Those who do prefer a more modest-sized mountain either don't know about the less accessible majority of such mountains, or don't have the time for the lengthier approaches. Climbers, like all people, tend to be conservative, going for well-known objectives rather than the uncertainty of the unknown. And there really are good reasons for avoiding many of the lower peaks: apart from the scale and altitude, lower does not mean easier, and they are often dangerous because lower mountains tend to start from lower valleys which mean higher summer temperatures and stones etc. falling down them.

I have always preferred to avoid the biggest peaks. Some might say this shows my inability to get up them. With my advancing years, there might be some truth in this. But I really do enjoy the pioneering feel of many of these little gems of peaks, and, much as I enjoy the company of my fellow humans, I go to the hills partly to escape our overcrowded cities, and going to overcrowded mountains is no such escape.

In 1995, we went to climb one such little gem of a peak, Haramosh II. From the Haramosh glacier, the view to the north east was dominated by a splendid and unknown mountain, which rose above an intervening ridge, resembling a smaller version of K2. Someone in the party dubbed it "Paramount peak" for its imagined resemblance to the mountain in the film logo. (I have since studied our pictures against the credits shown after "Star Trek", and the resemblance is no more than superficial). The map (ref.1) showed nothing of any importance in the area where it lay.

The following year, we returned to try and find it, and climb it. For this trip, we abandoned the facetious "Paramount" name, and provisionally called it "Nushik Peak", imagining it was somewhere near the Nushik La. Even before we left to start the trip, we realized that it wasn't specially near this pass, so *that* name was also discarded.

After careful study of map and photos, we tentatively identified it as a certain "dot on the map", but unmarked with name or height. It seemed we could approach it by any of three glaciers: the Bolocho, the East Makrong, or the Kero Lungma. We chose the latter for the selfish reasons that this was the biggest of the three, so should have plenty of opt-out choices; and none of us had been there before.

We were made to suffer for this. We discovered a slight but fatal error in the map, which meant that our mountain was not, after all, directly accessible from the Kero Lungma. We had gone up the wrong valley. But all was not lost, and we climbed some alternative peaks, got a good look at our mountain, and now knew where it was. We estimated its height as approximately 5999 metres! We had now got pictures from the south-west (Haramosh) from the east (Kero Lungma), and Simon Yates kindly sent me two excellent shots from the north-west (from Makrong Chhish). Our reconnaissance was complete.

Mountains in the form of a single ridge tend to look most impressive when viewed end-on, and less so from the side. Cnicht and Elidyr Fawr are examples closer to home. Our mountain turned out to be such a one, a ridge running NE to SW, with the summit at the SW end. It was precipitous on three sides, but the north ridge looked easier, from a snowy col at c. 5300 m. to a fore-peak. However, this would finish with a long traverse of the summit ridge.

I put a print of the most impressive view of the mountain on my wall at home, Geoff Tier's excellent telephoto shot from the south-west. Continual sight of this picture tempted me to make another visit, a temptation to which I succumbed. For various reasons, none of the members of the '95 or '96 trips could manage '97. But a well trusted climbing friend from the Midlands, Stewart Muir, asked if I had anything on that year. I showed him the photo, and that was soon settled. Later on, we enrolled another old Midlands friend, Andy Forsyth, now living in Sheffield.

Preparations & Journey to the Mountains

The north ridge looked the easiest route, and our photos indicated that this could be more easily reached from the east (Bolocho) side. This meant going via Skardu and Arandu again, not much of a change for me, but decisions had to be made on mountaineering criteria rather than touring ones. Our latest (last?) name for the mountain is "Bolocho Peak". It is the highest above the glacier of that name. It also went down well with the locals. "Bolocho" is the Arandu men's name for the camp at the junction with the Chogo Lungma, and is used regularly by them as a stop-off when portering on the walk-in to Spantik, etc., so this name for our peak had a familiar appeal to them.

As the mountain is (we claim) not above 6000 metres high, permit, peak fee and liaison officer are not required. So our trip was not much harder to organize than an alpine holiday or Welsh weekend. We applied for grants from the MEF and BMC, booked flights with PIA, packed our bags, and flew out to Rawalpindi in early July, then on to Skardu by minibus. Most supplies were bought in 'Pind or Skardu, except for a few specialist items unobtainable in Pakistan, such as some kinds of hill food.

Little snow had fallen that winter and spring, and the year was generally a dry one. Consequently, the jeep roads were in good condition, and we were able to drive all the way to Arandu. The now familiar walk-in up the Chogo Lungma went without a hitch in two days to Bolocho, then a very short day to our base camp on a small grassy meadow in the ablation valley on the north-west bank of the Bolocho glacier, not far above the snout. This appears to be more or less the same place as the Bullock-Workmans' "Rivulet camp", although the name was rather inappropriate. The Arandu porters have a rather bad reputation for dishonesty and poor value for money. We had no such problems this year. They do have very short "stages", but charge a lower rate per stage than in some other valleys nearby, and are willing to do two stages per day. Having been here before and being familiar with the stages were advantages in dealing with them. Their reputation may be justified, but such things can be exaggerated, and I have found them to be quite likable rogues.

This year, we hired a cook, "Abbas" from Satpara (a village close to Skardu). He had accosted me in the main street in Skardu, touting for work. He was obviously quite a pushy character, but a chat over tea in a street cafe showed he was also amiable enough. In addition to cooking, he offered to work as head porter and also as "guide" (whatever that entailed). When pressed, he insisted that he would be happy at base camp on his own when we were away on the hill for days at a time, without the need for an "assistant cook". So we agreed to employ him on that basis. But now at base camp, he decided he did after all need some company when we were away. I was rather angry at this change of heart. My initial reaction was that he must stay on his own as agreed, or depart without pay, and we'd cook for ourselves.

After cooler reflection and discussion with Stewart and Andy, we decided that he *was* quite a good cook, and having him to guard the camp from potential thieves (human and animal) was probably worth the extra cost. So he was dispatched to Arandu, a single day's walk for the unloaded, and returned with "Fidali", who had sold us a goat and portered for us on the walk-in. He was also an old friend of Abbas'. A pre-arranged ruse? who knows?, but at least they would get on together, and Fidali had already shown himself as an easy-going and reliable man, so things could have been worse; although a three-man party does not really need two cooks.

Acclimatization & Reconnaissance

Our next objectives were two-fold: reconnaissance of approaches and ascent route of our mountain, and acclimatization to the altitude. We hoped to do these simultaneously.

We started the very day after arriving at base camp with a walk up the glacier. From the base camp, we walked on up the continuation of the ablation valley until it petered out. Then we descended steep scree and moraine slopes to the Bolocho glacier, and walked up the glacier for another 2 hours to the junction of its shorter east branch with the main north branch. This gave us a good view of Bolocho Peak from the south-east. The approach to the north ridge (seen the previous year) would involve continuing up the glacier's north branch past an icefall section, and would clearly take more than a day from base camp. Another possible route was visible, up the south-east facet. This was shorter to walk to, and probably avoided the long summit ridge traverse; but had a dangerous-looking approach couloir. It would give a long ascent catching the early-morning sun, no bivouac sites were visible, and we weren't completely certain that it led directly to the summit. We returned to base camp, and next day made further explorations.

Andy had an old ankle injury acquired in Derbyshire the previous summer. This had recovered quite well, but apparently not well enough for continual walks up and down rubble-covered glaciers, so he decided it needed a rest. Next day, Stewart and Dave continued up the slopes above the west bank of the Bolocho glacier, making an ascending traverse to a continuation of the ablation valley at a higher level. We had seen this the previous day. It led round to the first side glacier above this side of the Bolocho glacier, from which we hoped to climb a small peak which would give us good training, and a further view of Bolocho peak.

We returned to Base camp, and next day, all three of us carried tents and food etc. to a small camp on the side glacier. Early the following morning, we left the glacier, and climbed loose schist slopes to the east ridge of our little peak, which we followed to the summit. The ridge was mostly easy snow, with only the penultimate pitch needing the rope on. This went at Scottish III/IV. The summit measured 5240 metres on Andy's wrist-watch-altimeter. From here, we had an excellent view of most of the Bolocho glacier basin.

We had not heard of any of the surrounding peaks having been climbed. They were all below 6000 metres (with the possible exception of Bolocho Peak itself). Aren Cho and Entok, above the glacier's east bank, were the only peaks named on the map (ref.1). The seven peaks in a ridge above the west bank (culminating in our "Bolocho Peak") were unnamed and apparently all unclimbed. We later gave them the unimaginative but practical names of Bolocho I to VII inclusive, in order along the ridge from north to south. This made the peak we had just done "Bolocho V"; and the main peak would be "Bolocho I", or simply "Bolocho Peak".

The precise location of the fabled "Bolocho La" has been open to some doubt. A pass between the Bolocho glacier and the Kero Lungma was crossed in 1903 by Fanny Bullock Workman, with her husband and a large party of porters (see ref. 2). The map (ref.1) shows *two* passes between these two glaciers, one from the short east branch and the other from the longer north branch of the Bolocho glacier, the latter of these being marked as the "Bolocho La". But from reading their account, it appears that the Bullock Workman team crossed the other one, as also did the Alpine Club party who visited the region in the mid 1980s. We suggest using the name "Bolocho La" for the pass crossed by these parties, and the name "North Bolocho La" for the other one. Unambiguous names are useful for clearing up confusion. I have not heard of anyone *crossing* the North Bolocho La, although we reached it from the Kero Lungma side in 1996. The Bolocho side of this col is on snow and ice, steep but short. The actual cols themselves look to be of about equal difficulty, but the northern col appears harder overall, because of the longer and more difficult glacier approaches, with icefalls on both sides.

After four days' rest, with indifferent weather, we did a fuller reconnaissance of our mountain. We walked up the main north branch of the Bolocho glacier, negotiated the icefall on it's left (west) side, and camped just above the icefall, where the glacier became snow-covered. This campsite ("camp 1") was directly below the approach to the south-east facet of Bolocho Peak. The approach looked very dangerous, and the face itself had lost more of it's snow cover, showing some uninviting streaks of black ice. The north ridge seemed to beckon. Andy's ankle was again feeling sore, so early next morning, traveling light, Stewart and Dave set off up the glacier, with some tortuous crevasse-dodging. At one point, a huge crevasse seemed to span the glacier's complete width. We could only pass this by using a cone of avalanche debris directly under a couloir in the SE face of the mountain. This was very dangerous on the sunlit return - we christened the place "the lion's mouth". Easy walking then led us to a small branch glacier opposite the "North Bolocho La". We then walked westwards up the branch glacier, to the north col of Bolocho Peak at approx. 5300 metres. As far as we could see, the ridge looked reasonable, and we found a good camp site by some rocks on the ridge a short distance above the col the other way. We spent a couple of hours excavating and building a tent platform, then back to base camp. Andy sensibly decided that his ankle was not good enough, and opted out of any further attempt on the main peak. A couple of days later, Stewart and Dave returned heavily laden, and left food, fuel and climbing gear on the col ("camp 2") ready for an attempt on the route.

The weather during July and August that year was the best seen in recent years in the Karakoram. But it was not all perfect, and the only bad spell now came, with five days of rather poor weather, showery during the day, and heavier rain and snow during the night. We had plenty of books to read, and our plastic barrel of home-brewed beer was now ready to drink, so life was not all bad. During the night of 4th Aug., the snow descended to base camp, but it had melted by midday, and the weather then cleared up again. On the 6th, Stewart and Dave arrived back at camp 2 for their attempt.

A Dash for the Top

A problem with the lower Karakoram peaks is the higher temperatures resulting from their lower altitude. This can cause stonefall, which did not threaten our route which was a ridge. But it also results in poor daytime snow conditions. This was a bad problem on our route, as heavy cornices adorned the west side of the ridge, which meant we had to keep to the east-facing slopes, which got the full force of the morning sun. We were going to have to start very early, and climb in the dark. On the previous visits to the col, the ridge looked very icy, but the bad weather had dumped plenty of snow, which now lay on top of the ice in a semi-settled condition. We didn't know whether this would make conditions better or worse. Probably, they were just different.

We awoke at 10.30, and set off at midnight with two full length ropes and an assortment of belaying gear, mainly in case of abseils. We took a stove for melting snow, and a bit of food, but no tent or sleeping bags. The first part of the route had been clearly visible from the camp. We started unroped on 40° snow, steepening to 55° ice near the top, where a steeper pitch turned the first tier of the final monster cornice on its right. We then tied on to one rope for a long right traverse, which outflanked the second tier of the cornice and brought us out on the summit ridge, beyond its first forepeak, at first light.

A long ridge traverse separated us from the summit at its other end. We would have to move fast to beat the softening of the snow which would inevitably come with the rising sun. We unroped, and Dave left Stewart to coil the rope, while he went on to investigate the ridge. The sun was not yet up, but the fresh snow was soft enough without it. A steep step in the ridge really needed the rope again. But speed was the crucial factor if we were to complete our route. So we did it unroped, a frightening, calf-aching pitch of Scottish grade III/IV on steep ice, dinner-plating under our picks. We continued along the broader ridge, with a few steps. Snow conditions worsened; so did body conditions, as fatigue set in. The ridge narrowed, giving another frightening section of knife-edge aretes of soft snow on top of ice. We arrived at the crux, where the ridge steepened and became rocky.

From the distance, a rocky overhang had been visible, jutting out over the crest; but close to, a gully appeared separating a protruding ear of rock from the main mass of the mountain. The rock at camp 2 had been schist, loose and black. Now we were greeted with sight of orange granite, glowing warmly in the morning sun. Ropes were donned, and Stewart led the technical crux, a gully pitch at Scottish IV/V. One more pitch, and at 9.00 am, we stood on the summit, and soaked in the view. In all directions, the seemingly endless ranks of the Karakoram peaks stretched out to the horizons.

Our summit rest was all too short. We now had to get down. We abseiled the two top pitches, and kept a rope on for the knife-edge traverses, which were getting alarmingly soft. We continued the broader part of the ridge, with a couple of abseils. We were now about half way along the summit ridge, and grinding to a halt. We had been on the go for twelve hours without a rest. The snow was getting softer and softer, and fatigue and dehydration were taking over in the midday heat.. At 12 O'clock, we found a place to excavate a rock platform, and settle down for rest and rehydration, and even a bite to eat. Several hours were spent with the gas stove purring away, melting snow, as we drank our fill of fruit-crystal drink, and soaked in the scenery. The sun sank to the horizon, and the temperature plummeted. The lack of bivouac gear now had its effect. Night was upon us. The thin crescent of the new moon shone on us with its frosty light, next to it was the evening star: a strange allusion to the star and crescent of the Pakistani flag.

We lay in the dark, getting colder and colder. Dave weakened first, and called for a move at 8 pm. We had our breakfast brew and set off at 9 pm. The hard frost had sent us on our way earlier than expected, but at least the snow would be firming-up well. Abseiling the steepest pitches and climbing unroped down the rest, we got back to our camp 2 at 3 am, and the warmth of our sleeping bags. The next day was spent sleeping, eating, drinking and resting. Then back to base camp.

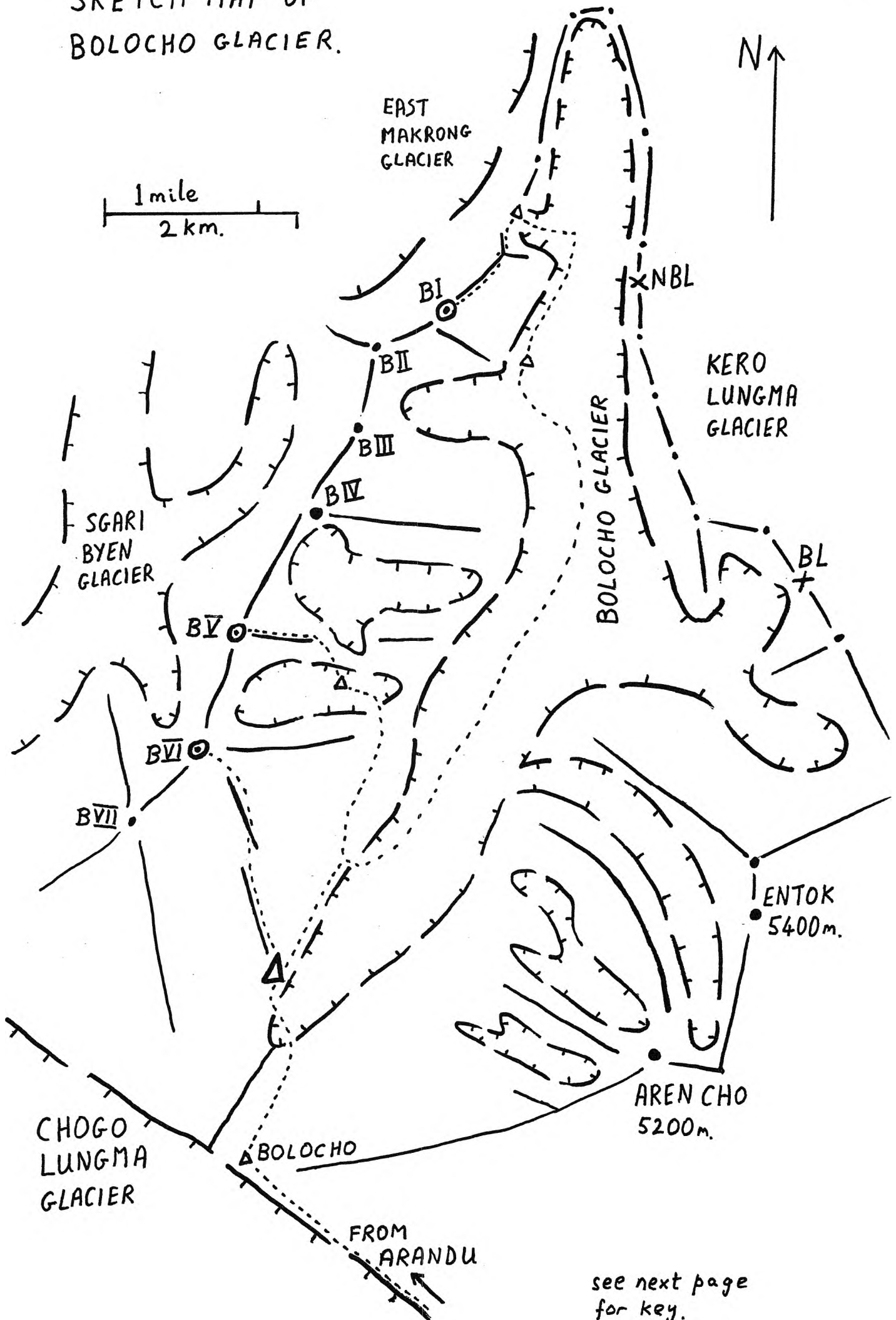
Unwinding

Andy had meanwhile been sitting patiently at base camp, reading and walking about. The other two may have been tempted to rest on their laurels, but after a few days of idleness, another route was done, partly for Andy's sake. The cook, Abbas, had gone down to arrange porters and jeep, but the "assistant cook" Fidali was still with us. He was a keen and amiable young man from Arandu, and his father (uncle?) had worked as a high altitude porter. He asked if he could come with us. We lent him some clothing, but boots and crampons would be a problem. Starting at 6 am, the three members plus Fidali set off up the hill directly above base camp ("Bolocho VI"). Steep grass slopes led to scree and loose scrambling on schist. The locals are at least as fit and adept on this sort of terrain as the so-called climbers. The snow line came a couple of rope's lengths before the top. A 35° icy slope and a short cornice step led to the summit. Stewart and Dave went first, while Andy and Fidali stayed at the snow line having a brew. After Stewart's return, Fidali borrowed his plastic boots and crampons, and Andy guided him to the 5200m summit. As with all the locals, he was much less confident on snow and ice. Not really surprising as this was the first time he had worn crampons. We were back at base camp for lunch.

Return Journey

The day after Bolocho VI, the porters arrived at lunch time, and we set off that afternoon, getting to Arandu the following afternoon. Abbas had done well, and awaited us with a jeep. So, bidding Fidali and the other Arandu men an over-hasty farewell, we drove off and were back in Skardu by midnight. This rapid progress, and an unplanned flight back to 'Pindi made possible by the unprecedented good weather, meant we had very leisurely stays in Skardu and 'Pindi.

SKETCH MAP OF BOLOCHO GLACIER.



1 mile
2 km.

N ↑

EAST
MAKRONG
GLACIER

KERO
LUNGMA
GLACIER

SGARI
BYEN
GLACIER

BOLOCHO GLACIER

CHOGO
LUNGMA
GLACIER

ENTOK
5400m.

AREN CHO
5200m.

FROM
ARANDU

see next page
for key.

Key to sketch map on previous page

- ⊙ Peaks climbed by the expedition: BI Bolocho peak, c. 6000 m.
BV Bolocho V, c. 5200 m.
BVI Bolocho VI, c. 5200 m.
- Other peaks: BII Bolocho II, BIII Bolocho III, both c. 5200 m.
BIV Bolocho IV, c. 5300m., BVII Bolocho VII, c. 5100 m.

/ Ridges.

↘ Glacier edges.

⋯ Routes of ascent/approach.

△ Base camp.

▲ Other camps.

× Cols. BL Bolocho La, NBL North Bolocho La.

Accurate maps of the region have apparently been made by the Pakistani armed services, but they are not available to the public, being regarded as military secrets!

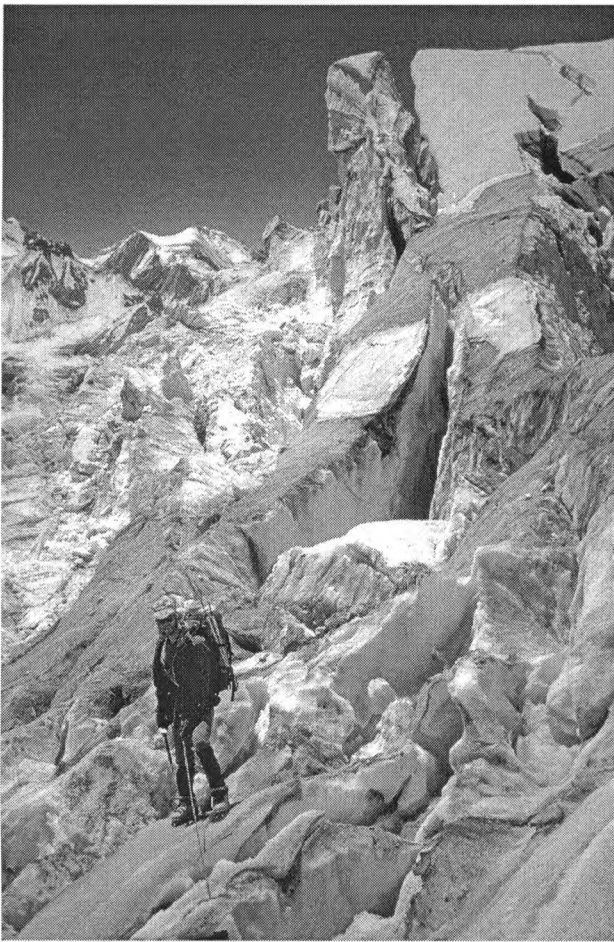
The best that *is* available is Jersey Wala's excellent sketch map (ref. 1). This has been painstakingly produced and revised over many years, from all available sources. But one cannot expect perfect accuracy from such a production. It is most accurate in the most visited parts of the region, where more information has been made available. The Bolocho glacier is not such a part, and the map was found to be less accurate here than usual. Hence this redrawn sketch.

This map was sketched from the following sources:

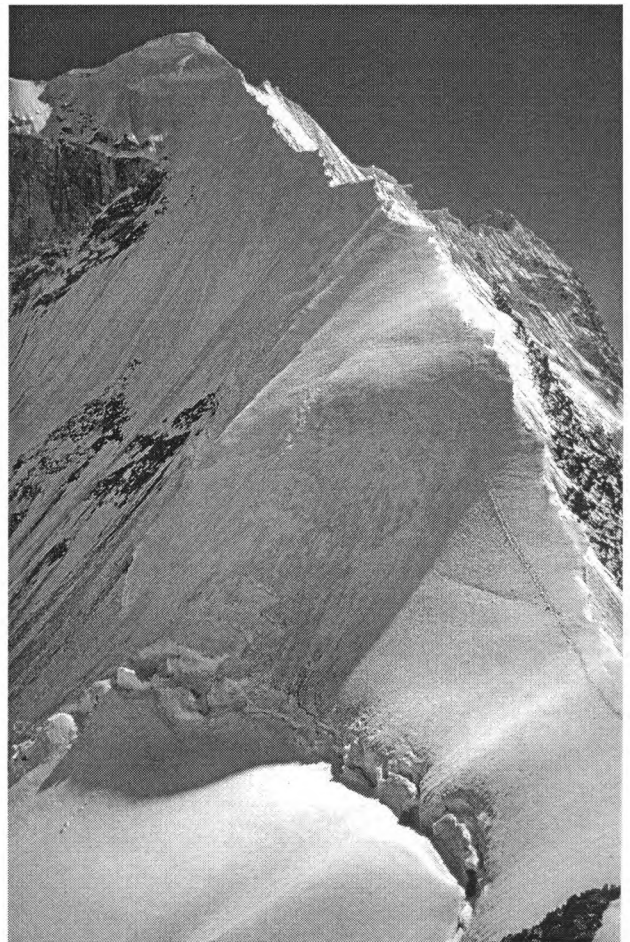
- (i) Jersey Wala map;
- (ii) photocopy of a NASA Landsat provided by Mike Searle, Oxford University,
(This source provided good information only about west bank of Bolocho glacier, and both sides near head);
- (iii) photos and notes taken on the 1997 trip, and the two previous years.

Main alterations from Jersey Wala map:

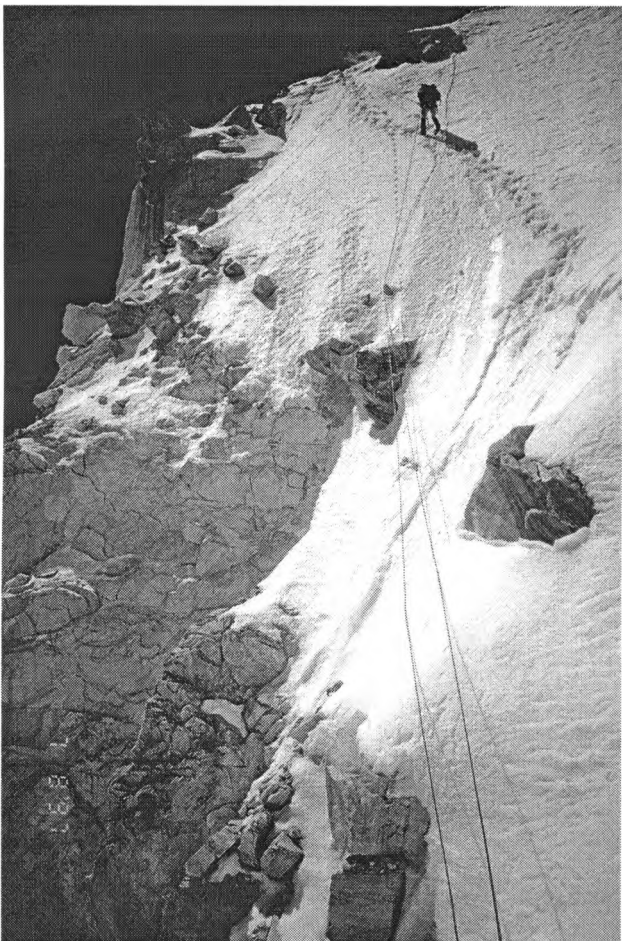
- (i) snout of Bolocho glacier does not reach Chogo Lungma (noted by Bullock Workman party, ref. 2);
- (ii) same is true for the nearby Sgari Byen and Kilwuru glaciers;
- (iii) upper portion of Bolocho glacier is much longer;
- (iv) Bolocho La and North Bolocho La both renamed and repositioned;
- (v) peaks, ridges and subsidiary glaciers on both sides of the Bolocho glacier have been redrawn;
- (vi) heights of Aren Cho and Entok have been transposed - the latter is definitely higher.



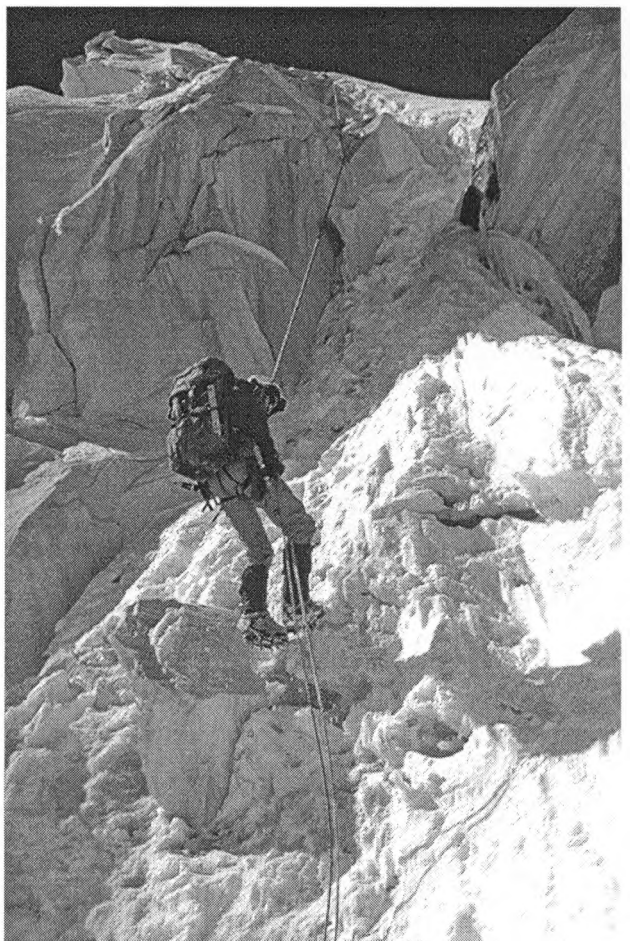
The ice fall that we had to negotiate to reach the upper Bolocho glacier
photo- Stewart Muir



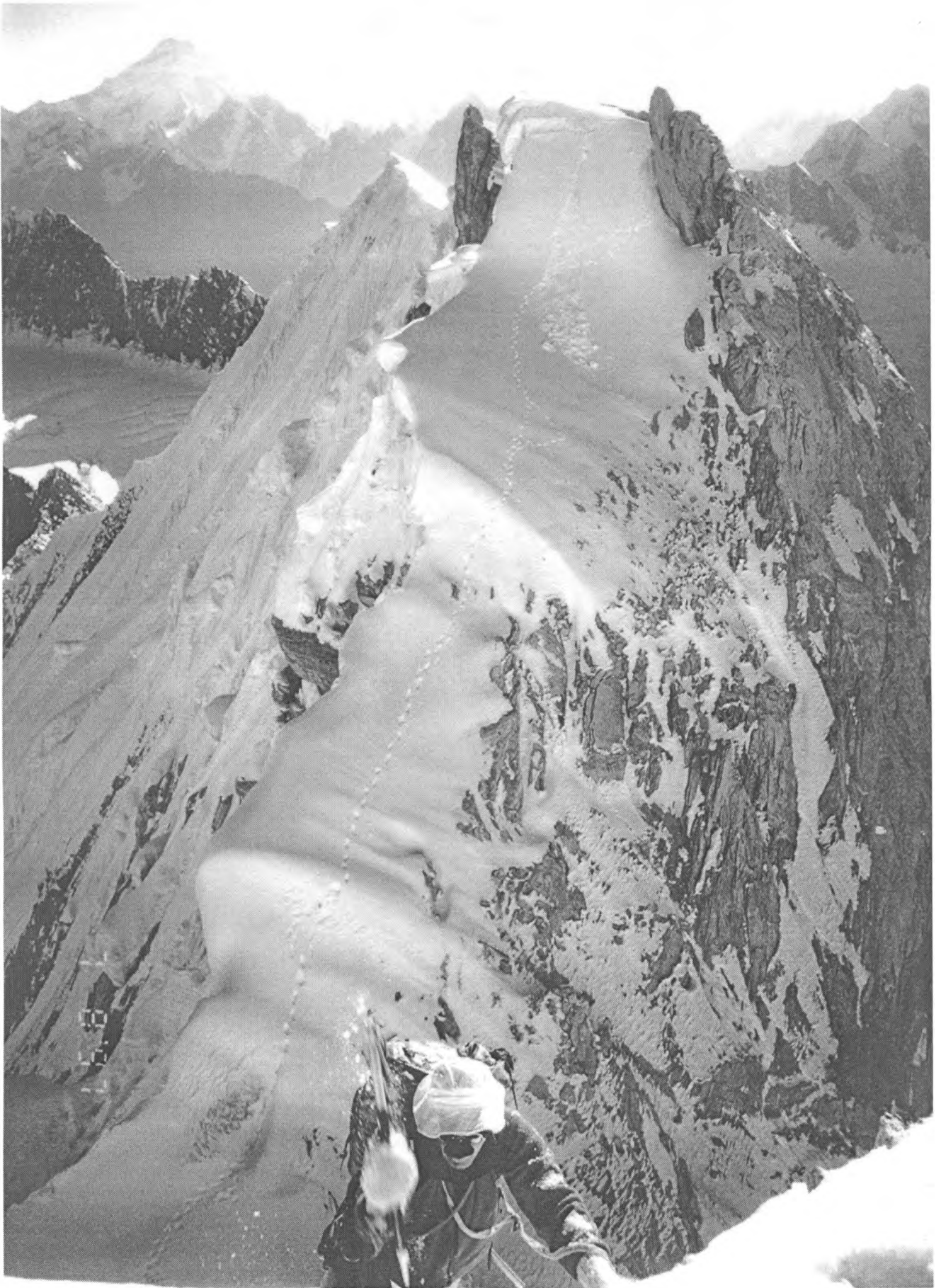
The North Ridge of Bolocho Peak taken from camp 2. Our line of ascent can be seen
photo- Stewart Muir



On the descent we abseiled in many places that we had soloed that morning
photo- Stewart Muir



Abseiling the crux pitch not far from the summit
photo- Dave Wilkinson



Time was of the essence on the traverse of the summit ridge. Although we climbed the north ridge (on the left hand side of the photo) in the dark, we still had a long way to gain the summit .

photo- Stewart Muir



On the return from the summit we moved together with a rope. But by now it was 10am and the snow had deteriorated to an uncomfortable level. Somehow it felt safer to traverse close to the cornice...if either of us fell at least you had the option of jumping off in the opposite direction.

photo- Dave Wilkinson



The Bolocho La taken from approx 5000m on Bolocho V.

photo- Stewart Muir

Expedition Diary

- July 6th Depart Manchester Airport.
- 7th Arrive Rawalpindi.
- 9th Leave 'Pindi by road.
- 10th Arrive Skardu early morning.
- 12th Jeep Skardu to Arandu.
- 15th Arrive base camp.
- 19th Bolocho V.
- 25th Reconnaissance to north col of Bolocho Peak.
- Aug. 7th Summit of Bolocho Peak.
- 14th Bolocho VI.
- 15th Depart base camp.
- 16th Arrive Skardu.
- 20th Fly Skardu to 'Pindi.
- 24th Fly 'Pindi to Manchester.

Accounts

Income (£)

Grant from Mount Everest Foundation	700
Grant from British Mountaineering Council	650
Members' contributions (3 @ 927.17)	2781.51
Total Income	£4131.51

Expenditure (£)

3 Air fares UK to Pakistan & return (including airport taxes in UK & Pakistan)	1548
Transport in Pakistan	
Minibus 'Pindi to Skardu	177.09
3 Flights Skardu to 'Pindi	108.02
Jeeps	103.67
Local buses & taxis	22.11
Total transport in Pakistan	410.98
Porters & cooks	
Porters' wages & allowances	378.53
Goat for porters (& sahibs)	33
Cook's wages	147.57
Cook's clothing	104.70
Assistant cook's wages	82.64
Porters' & cooks' insurance	17.66
Total porters & cooks	764.10
Food & accommodation	
Food bought in UK	66
Exped. food bought in Pak.	253.84
Food in hotels & cafes	160.88
Hotel accommodation	160.51
Total food & accommodation	641.23
Other supplies	
Paraffin	10.33
Gas	30.99
Kitchen supplies, packaging, etc.	109.97
Total non-food supplies	151.29
Members' insurance (BMC, 3 @ 148)	444
Visas (3 @ 40)	120
Medical	23
Sundry costs	29
Total Expenditure	£4131.51

Acknowledgments

We would like to record our gratitude to the following organizations and people, who helped us in various ways:

Mount Everest Foundation and British Mountaineering Council/Sports Council, for grants of money.

Bill Church, for medical help.

Simon Yates, for pictures of our mountain from the Makrong side.

Mile Searle, for a Landsat photocopy.

Pakistan International Airways, for their understanding attitude to our baggage.

The many people who helped us in Pakistan, especially the porters of Baltistan, for carrying our luggage into the mountains.

References

- 1) Map Orographical Sketch Map of the Karakoram, by Jerzy Wala, Krakov, Poland; published by the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research, Zurich, 1990.
- 2) Book Ice Bound Heights of the Mustagh, by Fanny Bullock Workman and William Hunter Workman, published by Constable, London 1908. Chapt. XII.