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AACZ Rolwaling Expedition 2005

The Rolwaling expedition actually started on 18th Oct 2003 when I was on top of Kyashar (6769m), a first ascent in the Hinku region, on the previous AACZ expedition. Off to the north-west, well left of Cho Oyu and just right of Menlungtse, were two interesting pointed peaks which later research suggested were Drangnag Ri (6801m, one ascent) and Ripimo Shar (6705m, 2 ascents). The same research also suggested that the Rolwaling was a neglected and relatively unexplored region, despite (or perhaps because of) its proximity to the Khumbu, and that new-route or even new-peak potential on a choice of summits of varying technical difficulty was high.

In autumn 2004, facing the end of a position in Switzerland and an uncertain employment future, it seemed like a good time to plan some expeditions, including my last with help from the AACZ. A team quickly defined itself from among the club members, and would be Bruce Normand (Scotland, leader), Oliver von Rotz (Swiss, deputy leader), Monika Hronsky (Swiss, medic), Paul Hartmann (US), Beatriz Vidondo (Spanish) and Marco Scarsi (Italian). After intensive research into alternative goals, the team voted to return to my original suggestion, with the addition of a Chekigo trekking-peak permit to a Drangnag Ri expedition permit, the AACZ voted to support the venture, and the Rolwaling expedition was on. As departure approached, preparation took the form of old expedition lists from me for equipment, food and medicine being extensively reworked by all the members, and a new list being written for radios and affordable satellite telephone rental.

The trekking agent was the ever-reliable Ang Phurba Sherpa of Wilderness Experience, who as for Kyashar provided the incomparable Dhan Kumar Rai as sirdar, accompanied this time by assistant cook Phule. The well-practised leadership team had the entire expedition food ration bought and packed, paperwork in hand from the Ministry of Tourism, heavy, sharp or combustible team gear rounded up in Thamel, the official seal of approval from Miss Elizabeth Hawley, and 28 hired porters on board a bus to Dolakha (on 16th April) within 48 hours of the team's arrival in Kathmandu. In keeping with this perpetual motion, in Dolakha the porters immediately hoisted their loads and set off downhill to Ratomate on the Bhote Kosi for the first night. The final team "member", our LO, had actually accompanied the expedition to this point, although fortunately he would go straight back to KTM again. As a living example of the malaise imposed on Nepal by its corrupt, clueless and incompetent ruling classes, he did quite a good job on our short acquaintance. It seemed he had never been out of KTM in his life, and his passing resemblance to a frog was heightened considerably when his eyes popped out of his head on watching the porters gearing up - "Are they really going to carry



Our basecamp at ca. 5000m.

that?" Ratomate was our first and last chance for a swim in semi-temperate river water, and marked a sudden change of pace to steady trekking. On the next morning we were greeted at breakfast by some local Maoist rebels, one carrying a concealed revolver, who asked us for "entrance fees" of 3000Rs per person to an area they controlled; we paid 2000Rs (\$28) each in exchange for a stamped chit authorising our presence. Fortunately they were not demanding that our porters or staff pay anything, as this might have led to a less civil response on my part. The rebels also made good stereotypes of their role - Nepalese society's bottom-feeders who have found it easier to make a living from threats than from work. The trek took us along the rushing blue waters of the Bhote Kosi in hot and hazy spring weather, first north-eastwards through Singati to Suri Dobhan, where we played volleyball with the porters and local children, then northwards to Chetchet where we laid off a sick porter with a spreading and contagious skin ailment. Our porters were trying hard to win, rather than lose, a half day offset with the only camps



On the way from basecamp to advanced basecamp with Ripimo Shar.

higher up, and so the next day they gained 1400m in climbing east through Simigaon and on to Gyalche, above the true Rolwaling valley and below the precipitous ramparts of Gaurishankar. The weather was cloudy and cool for the next day into Beding (3600m), the start of the Sherpa region of the upper Rolwaling. Here we paid off half the porters, retaining the other half to carry twice over the last 2 stages while the team took more time to acclimatise.

Beding also marked the last temple on the road to base camp (BC), and neither Dhan nor Phule could give a Sherpa puja, so Dhan arranged to have our prayer flags and puja offerings for BC sanctified in a morning service by the local lama. After this we continued through Na to a camp site in Sangma Kharka, just below the natural dam holding back the waters of the Tsho Rolpa. With the porters heading back to Beding for more loads and the others resting, Oliver, Phule and I hiked north to the lateral moraine of the Ripimo Shar Glacier, then continued along it on reasonable trails high above the glacier itself almost to the end of this balcony at "Drangnak Kharka",



NW-Face of Chekigo (6257m) with ascent route.

where we found an acceptable site for BC. The next day saw the tireless Phule accompany the porters there with half the equipment, while I took a hike up the south side towards Yalung Ri for some route evaluation and otherwise more resting was accomplished. Oliver, Monika and I moved to BC the next day (24th April), while Bea, Marco and Paul followed 24 hours later after enjoying a further night in the oxygen-rich environs of Na. The next day saw the official inauguration of BC, for which the puja required the construction of a huge prayer-flag triangle with a mast brought from well down the moraine by Dhan, and the burning of much juniper brought up by Phule.

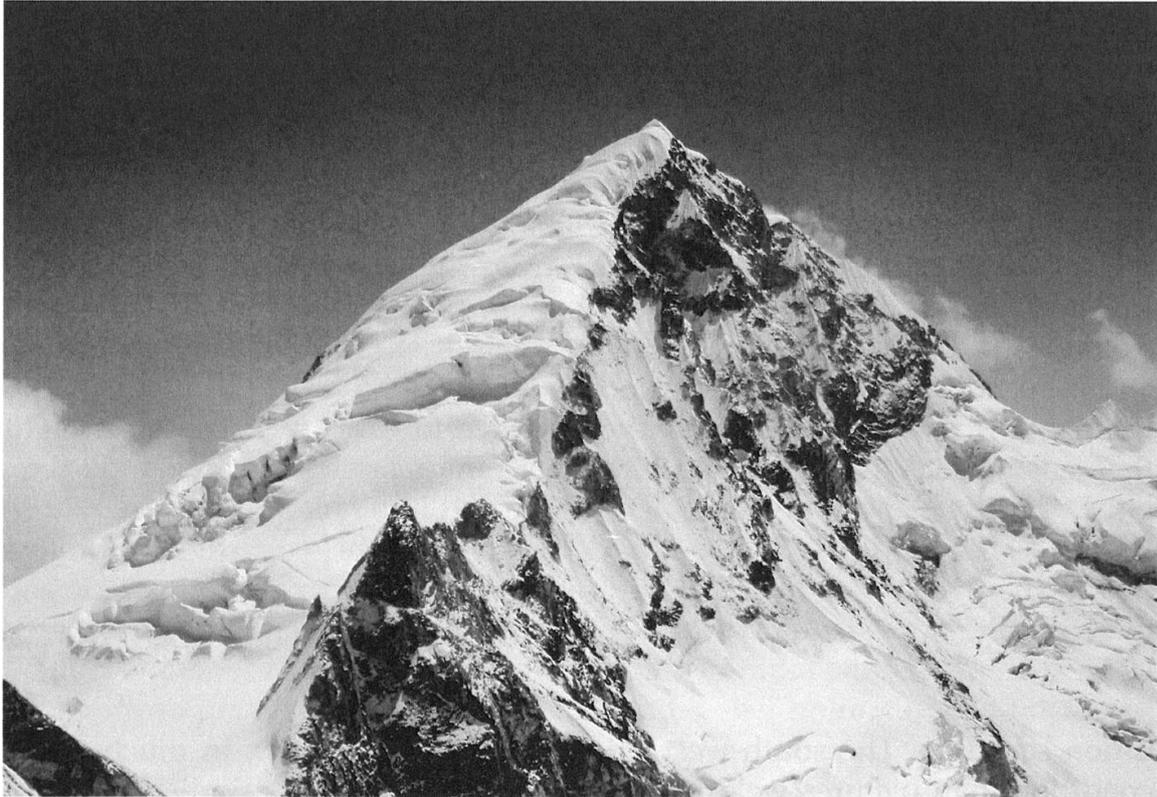
BC was at the foot of a grassy ridge with views of the Ripimo Nup basin and the dominant Kang Nachugo, this ridge rising to the unclimbed P5946. Across the glacier were the commanding bulk of Chobutse, then the delicate fluted peak of Dragkar Go, then P6665 and other 6000m points on the ridge running north the Drangnag Ri. The team split up to tackle acclimatisation hikes according to fitness, while a vanguard used the 2 pairs of showshoes to reconnoitre up-glacier. Oliver and I, then Oliver and Paul carried loads to a dump at 5300m, and Oliver spearheaded a number of bids on the slopes of P5946. The weather showed a generally unstable pattern which deteriorated

from rising clouds and mist on some days to driving snowshowers and even a lightning storm before noon on others; at times there was no running water in BC despite the nominal spring warming. Feeling suitably acclimatised, on 30th April Paul and I carried more loads to and through the dump in a typical snowstorm, establishing an advanced BC on the first flat, icy part of the upper Ripimo Shar, at c. 5500m at the base of the west face. We completed our day's work with 2 further carries from the dump to empty it. On 1st May we crossed the upper basin to hike up a snow peak P5965, scoring the expedition's first summit but seeing nothing at all in the cloudy conditions, and descended to BC in the afternoon.

On 2nd May the other four climbers walked to ABC for a breathless night, then enjoyed a beautiful day on P5965 with impressive views of, among others, Drangnag Ri, Ripimo Shar, Menlungtse and Kang Nachugo. At ABC they traded places with Paul and me, back for a bid on the west ridge of Ripimo Shar which started with an ill-advised "short-cut" up the south face and ended in the now-standard white-out at an unknown spot (later discovered to be 200m below the summit) high on the broad, snowy ridge. Back at BC some strategic planning was required as the clock was ticking on the expedition schedule. The south-west ridge of Drangnag Ri was in much worse condition than pictures we'd seen, and the north side was similarly impassable; Paul and I were the only takers for the technical difficulties of the west face. Dhan and Phule predicted that stable weather would come with the new moon by the 9th, and seemed to be backed up by the radio forecast. Bea and Marco had to leave a week before the rest of us, and elected to use their time to trek out by the Trashi Labsta to the Khumbu. Monika wanted to use her time for a leisurely approach to Chekigo with Oliver, rather than trying any other routes from BC.

Oliver and I kicked off the campaign of serious summitting by returning to the west ridge of Ripimo Shar. This time we took the long but easy approach to the ridge, being rewarded by spectacular sunrise views west to Menlungtse and north to Cho Oyu. After skirting the first crevasse the "climbing" was mostly deep trail-breaking. Rising cumulus beat us to the summit, so the main views were of each other, but at least it didn't snow. This was the third known ascent of Ripimo Shar (6705m), and ostensibly a new route although it seemed far the easiest on the mountain. Back at ABC in the evening we were met by Monika, who was up on a solo acclimatisation run, and had the stoves going for us. The 8th was finally a stable, cloudless, high-pressure sort of day; while Monika and Oliver went down, I waited and rested as Paul came up, and we readied ourselves for the big show.

The west face of Drangnag Ri is a huge triangle dominated by a buttress of pink, granitic rock in its centre. The left side is heavily serac-hung and the



Ripimo Shar (6705m).

right is fluted and cornice-hung, so the easiest available route skirts the rock just to its right. Paul and I started early and were most of the way across the preliminary snowfield below the rock buttress by the time the sun was up on the peaks behind us. The hard climbing takes the form of 4 mostly-ice pitches with a little rock on the lower ones, in order to pass between the main rock buttress on the left and a small prow on the right. The first 2 pitches had shorter sections up to off-vertical and the third was a connector. The fourth took us up a full rope-length of high-quality, 80-degree ice. From here the climbing was less aesthetic, and involved partly icy gullies with occasional spicule showers from above. A messy traversing pitch in soft snow cost time and took us into a long exit couloir by sundown. Here there was enough dripping water to get us wet then freeze, and the ice was soft but froze on contact with the screws, costing 15-minute delays at each belay to empty them. We crawled on up into the night until I knew I was near the ridge when the ice turned to meringue. Despite exaggerated care I managed to take a 20m fall and end up back beside Paul, fortunately without injuring either of us. With both of us running out of gas after 24 hours on the go I tried to

crawl into a minute hole next to us and discovered another, much larger one in the next fluting. Saved. In fact it was a walk-through (and blow-through) crevasse with a bottomless hole at one side, but we weren't feeling at our most discriminating and levelled the best bits for 2 bivouac sacks and a stove. We had climbed 15 pitches and reached 6300m. The sky was brightening as we went to sleep.

I awoke at 9:30 to find another perfect day in full swing outside. Paul was suffering severe leg cramps and decided he wasn't going anywhere, but we wouldn't be going down before dark anyway. I had some breakfast, packed a minimum and climbed out into the sun to see where we were. The flute had a firm crest leading all the way to the main ridge, which turned out to be very convoluted - hollow ice formations gave ledges and overhangs with a long, steep drop down to the east. I followed some of these, finding alternately soft snow and bullet-hard ice, turned a pinnacle with a good view clear to ABC, and knew I would have to find a different way back. Having eyeballed this I carried on up more predictable ground to the snowfield where the south-west ridge becomes the east-west summit ridge. At this point clouds blew in on a cold west wind and the day seemed to be over for photographic purposes. I carried on to the top (6801m, 4pm, 10th May) and was rewarded by most of the local clouds clearing again, giving me excellent views south to BC, where Monika was watching with binoculars, south-east to Teng Ragi Tau and east into the Khumbu. Cho Oyu to the north remained in cloud, but there was an excellent bird's eye perspective of Ripimo Shar. With the end of the day coming in fast, I retraced my steps, then avoided the worst of the ridge with some ice downclimbing (to 60 degrees) on its east side, and was back at the cave-with-a-view just after dark. Paul got the stove on and balanced our calorie and fluid budgets.

We left shortly after midnight, worming back through the old hole to the belay we'd left in the ascent gully. The ice was still sticky and uncooperative, so making Abalakov anchors was a cold and slow process, but by noon we were unroping on the lower snowfield in the warm sun to walk back to ABC. We were supposed to clear ABC, but Paul's back couldn't face this and he stashed his half to start the descent. I shouldered my half and staggered behind, barely able to recognise the trail with all the melt-off which had occurred over 5 days of real sun. Monika, Oliver and a porter had come out to meet us, and shared out our loads for the last hour of moraine to BC.

Eleven porters were already in BC to evacuate us for Project Chekigo. Phule wasn't prepared to wait for his exhausted clients, and had retrieved Paul's gear before breakfast. With 2 more loads than available porters, Dhan and Phule shouldered one each without comment. The weather had turned again, and we walked back through Sangma to Na in clouds and a prolonged snow-



Oli in the highcamp on Chekigo (ca. 5550m), a few meters below Menlung La Pass.

shower. While Paul and I stayed with BC in Na, Monika and Oliver went further to try to get a head's start for the climb to Chekigo BC the next day, leaving some gear with Dhan to give to a porter. The next day was a repeat performance - early sun while the porters pointed me to the ascent trail, cloudy and grey when I met Monika, Oliver and the porter, and finally a good-going snowstorm as we ascended slowly to 5000m. The porter was well behind, extremely upset that we weren't going to the intermediate camp he'd expected, and I had to return to find him and spare him the snowy part of the climb. We crushed into the 2.5-person tent for a dry night. There was no change in the pattern the next day either: we left BC on a morning of wan sun, crossed snowed-up moraine and gained the glacier in cloud, and finally became completely lost in a white-out just when we thought we were on the Manlung La (5600m). We pitched the tent in a hollow and tried to keep the howling spindrift out for the afternoon.

The night cleared and in the morning we saw that the pattern had broken. With clear skies and a strong north wind it was now or never. We were 50m below the Manlung La, and quickly took stock from there. The north ridge seemed passable but questionable lower down, while the west face was direct but perhaps steeper. We chose the latter and set off up a long snow/ice

ridge towards the snow bowl at the base of the final 350m face. The ridge was exposed and Monika lacked the confidence to solo it at speed. I was in too much of a hurry to start belaying at this stage, and Monika accepted this with good grace, turning back to wait at the high camp. Oliver and I finished the ridge and roped up for some knee-deep snow onto the slope below the face, during which I fell 5m into a well-hidden crevasse. The face itself was straightforward, giving 8 pitches of firm or ice to 55 degrees, and was behind us in 4.5 hours, putting us on the summit for the first ascent of Chekigo (6257m) at 2:30pm on 15th May. Unfortunately the rising cumulus had arrived an hour before us, so again there was little in the background of our summit shots. The north ridge seen from above looked eminently feasible. Presumably previous parties failing on Chekigo were insufficiently acclimatised, or possibly unprepared for steep climbing as the mountain has been sold as a "trekking trip" (also for commercial expeditions). Our abseil descent was efficient and the walk out problem-free, as we avoided the narrow ridge in exchange for a sprint down a serac-threatened slope. We were back at high camp with soup in our hands by nightfall.

The next day's weather was back to business as usual, but we were oblivious to it. With Oliver shouldering the heaviest load, we were back in Beding to find our relocated BC by mid-afternoon. Snow showers outside were accompanied by a repacking blizzard inside, while a blizzard of celebratory cookery went on in the kitchen. The trek out was fast and furious, as the porters wanted to earn their pay in 2 days (Simigaon, Singati) and the tired climbers had been there long enough. Chekigo finally deigned to show itself as the queen of the lower valley as we left Beding, but the rest of the walk was uneventful. Near Gyalche, Dhan turned to me and said solemnly "That must have been very good puja ... You know we Nepali people believe that mountains are living gods, and if we step on heads they may get angry. Very good puja ...".

On 19th May we were suddenly catapulted back into the real, cruel world where the Nepalis live and suffer, with objective danger in the form of crazed bus drivers, Maoist blockades, rip-off merchants, baksheesh anglers and traffic accidents. By 9pm in a downpour in Kathmandu we'd had our fill of all of the above, but somehow hadn't lost or injured anything. We consecrated the occasion by cooking a real Swiss fondue on a gas stove in the hotel room. The expedition was wrapped up the next day with trips to Wilderness Experience and the Ministry, a visit from Miss Hawley and the resale of unused team gear. We burned the last of the expedition rupee stash by taking Dhan and Phule to dinner at a fancy restaurant and giving them the huge tips they had so thoroughly deserved. The hadn't put a foot wrong in the preparation, organisation or coordination, and had kept us on time, under budget, fed,



NW-Face of Chekigo (6257m) and NW-Ridge.

hydrated and clean even under the most miserable circumstances.

For me and the team it was certainly a successful expedition and a rich set of experiences. Clouding this for me was the vision of the current state of Nepal, especially in comparison with the roaring '90s. The Maoist rebellion is finally a country-wide scourge, and is being met only with political and military incompetence and paralysis. Tourists are not coming, restaurants are empty, trekking agencies are closing and the man in the street, who sees nothing of foreign aid (or, heaven forbid, his own tax rupees), is unemployed, penniless and frightened. This is reflected in more begging, more praying, fewer smiles on once-bright faces and even things as basic as standards of civil behaviour - Nepalis in 2005 seem to yell at each other, push past each other and try to dodge fares or otherwise cheat and steal much more than before. One can only hope that this state of affairs is temporary.

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Bruce Normand (text), Oli von Rotz and Monika Hronsky (pictures)