

JOINT SERVICES MOUNTAINEERING EXPEDITION

MAKALU 2004



In the summer of 2004 a team of 26 mountaineers from across the 3 branches of the British Armed Forces, undertook an expedition to the Himalayas. The main objective of this expedition was to climb the world's 5th highest mountain, Makalu (8463m).

First climbed in 1955, the South East Ridge was not conquered until 1970. Since then only 4 successful ascents have been made on this face.

The party consisted of 2 teams. The Main Team, led by Squadron Leader Colin Scott RAF attempted Makalu, while the High Altitude Development Team, led by Surgeon Commander Andrew Hughes RN, set their sights on Baruntse (7129m).

Flying from UK to Nepal, both teams then had a two-week trek across remote terrain, to their respective starting points. On completion of their climbs, the teams had a similar return walk to the airhead. In all the expedition would take about six weeks.

Situated within the Makalu-Barun National Park and Conservation Area, the area around Makalu, contains some of the richest and most diverse pockets of plants and animals in Nepal, but little in the way of a fixed communications infrastructure.

Establishing and maintaining good communications would be vital, to ensure the expedition's safety; the communication system also had to ensure that links with Kathmandu and the UK could be maintained, and that the teams could access the constantly changing meteorological reports made available by HQ Strike Command. The communication system deployed would also have to facilitate the updating of the website regularly, giving access to a number of educational institutions and support teams

NSSL sponsored the expedition with the provision of satellite communications systems, and power generating, solar panels. This enabled the website to be updated daily and gave timely reports on progress. It also facilitated the speedy and safe extraction of one casualty suffering from acute altitude sickness, from Baruntse, by helicopter, for return to Kathmandu. At high altitude the wind powered generators were less effective, and the solar panels provided the main source of energy supply in the crucial last phases of the climbs. In

addition to the provision of equipment, a comprehensive training package was provided by NSSL, to ensure optimum use was made of the equipment and applications.

The utility of the communications system was further demonstrated when the Makalu team were joined by 3 French climbers, who had been unable to complete their ascent of Makalu, had followed the progress of the UK team on their web site and decided to join them, half way up the mountain.

Although the aim of reaching the summit of Makalu was not successful, because of several days of exceedingly bad weather, both teams returned safely to the UK, and a number of supporting objectives were achieved thanks to the effective and reliable communications provided by NSSL.

