

Teamwork is secret of Makalu success: Part One

A Training and Adventure news article 19 Sep 08

Forty-one members of the British Armed Forces conquered Makalu - the world's fifth highest mountain - as a team. They have now returned safely from the extremes of high altitude Himalayan mountaineering and are back in their day jobs. Report by Danny Chapman.



Dick Gale of the Royal Engineers poses for a shot above Camp Two
[Picture: MOD]

Frostbitten, exhausted, having faced wind so strong they couldn't breathe and temperatures so cold their goggles froze, the members of the Makalu 2008 expedition undertook inspirational feats of endurance.

During his presentation to the Royal Geographical Society last week, Air Vice Marshal Nick Kurth, Chairman of the Expedition Committee, reminded everyone of the trip's strapline – 'Endeavour, endurance, excellence,' adding:

"The team achieved these qualities in abundance. It was one of the most successful Service expeditions ever."

The British Services' Makalu Expedition 2008 took place between March and June this year. At 8,463 metres Makalu is not only the world's fifth-highest mountain; it is also considered to be one of the most difficult to climb. Edmund Hillary attempted to climb it twice and failed both times.

The 41 expedition members were divided into four teams, each one with different objectives: the main team's aim was to reach the summit via the North East Ridge; the South East Ridge Team aimed to reach the summit from the other side of the mountain, a feat last successfully completed 32 years ago; The High Altitude Development Team aimed to develop the high altitude mountaineers of the future, seeing them trek the valleys around Makalu and climbing two 6,000 metre-plus peaks; and the junior team aimed to introduce the mountaineering beginners to high altitude peaks, going on to ascend a 6,400 metre peak, which the majority of the team succeeded in doing.

Before this year's expedition only five Britons had reached the summit of Makalu. In 2004, a British Service expedition involving some of the same personnel as the 2008 trip attempted to conquer the unforgiving South East Ridge of the mountain but was driven back due to weather.

This 'unfinished business' was put to rest as the 2008 expedition succeeded in placing three members of the main team on Makalu's summit, each from a different Service.



Service climbers on Makalu
[Picture: MOD]

The RAF's Flight Lieutenant Jonathan Percival was the first of the team to reach the summit, spending 15 minutes near the very top of the world on 4 May 2008 with his Sherpa, Dawa:

"I had a 48 hour adrenalin rush when I saw the summit," Flt Lt Percival said. "It was non stop."

Major Matt Hing from the Royal Logistic Corps and the Royal Navy's Lieutenant Lara Herbert reached the summit on 18 May 2008. Lt Herbert became only the second British woman to do so.

The RAF Regiment's Wing Commander David Tait, a former Commanding Officer of II Squadron, RAF Regiment, was the British Services Makalu 2008 expedition leader. He said:

"Considering the mountain had only had five British ascents before us, the fact we managed to get the sixth, seventh, eighth, and only the second British woman to the summit, means I'm thrilled to bits."

Also from the main team, Wg Cdr Tait, along with climbing partner Flt Lt Kate Simmonds from RAF Shawbury, almost made the summit themselves, having to turn back with just an hour and a half to go due to bad weather:

"The wind was too strong," explained Flt Lt Simmonds. "It was wind that stopped you breathing and you couldn't see due to the spin drift freezing to your goggles. It was miserable, horrid and extreme. You can feel it all the time and it's impossible to do anything. But overall it was an awesome, amazing experience. You look out the tent to see the most amazing view."



Climbers pit their wits against the elements on Makalu
[Picture: MOD]

"After three years of preparation to get so close and to turn round was disappointing but not many people make it to the summit so we were lucky as a nine person team to get anybody up there."

Flt Lt Simmonds is under no doubt that turning round was the right thing to do, her colleague Wg Cdr Tait is still suffering from frostbite he contracted while on the mountain and she herself got frost nip, the condition that occurs before frostbite:

"I couldn't feel my fingers for about a month after I got back and if we'd stayed there longer I could have lost bits of my nose or fingers or toes."

There were also four Sherpas who worked with the main team fixing ropes ahead of the British Service personnel making their ascent somewhat easier. But in no way was this journey easy.

Before even reaching the base camp, the 41 members of the expedition had to undertake an 11 day trek of over 150km (93.2 miles) with 150 porters carrying over two tonnes of equipment. This included 10.3km of rope; 1,200kg of food; 2,000 packets of biscuits; 1,600 chocolate bars; and 1,500 litres of powdered energy drinks.