

EXPEDITION TO BALTISTAN

1959

BY

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When I started this article I soon realized that a bald record of events, apart from being extremely difficult to write, would make but dull reading for the majority, for whom the technicalities of mountaineering hold scant interest. I make no apology, therefore, for an account which is entirely personal, even to the extent of omitting any description of the expedition's finest achievement, in which I played no part.

From my own reading of mountaineering literature, I was aware of several pitfalls confronting me. Firstly, the use of Christian names which so often mars such accounts. Thoroughly familiar to the Author, they serve only to confuse the reader, particularly when the expedition being described is a large one, as this was. Secondly, the difficulty of describing topographical detail with sufficient clarity to enable the reader to form an accurate picture without undue mental exertion. Thirdly, the use of unfamiliar jargon which so often compels the writer to add a glossary—acceptable in a book perhaps but not in an article such as this.

I can only hope that the names I have had to use, the descriptions I have attempted and the terms I have employed will aid and not hinder the narrative.

Introduction

This expedition was organized by the Army Mountaineering Association who invited the other two Services each to send a representative. The R.A.F. declined, having plans of their own, so the Navy was able to nominate two climbers. Jim Fricker, a pilot with most of the hallmarks of the breed and a brand of humour all his own, unhappily killed within six months of our return, and myself, a 'fish-head plumber', were fortunate enough to be chosen. The leader was Captain Tony Streater, late of the Indian and Pakistan armies and now of the Gloucestershire Regiment. This was to be his fifth Himalayan expedition and his second as leader. If I say that in his leadership of the highest quality was allied with a profound knowledge and understanding of the peoples with whom we had to deal; that he was equally at home talking to the Pakistan C.-in-C. or to a Balti village headman and was equally respected by both, it will give some indication of how fortunate we were. The recent publication of a book about his previous expedition, that ended in tragedy, has made me realize that we were not only fortunate, we were privileged. For the rest, there were eight other Army representatives and three Pakistan Army liaison officers.

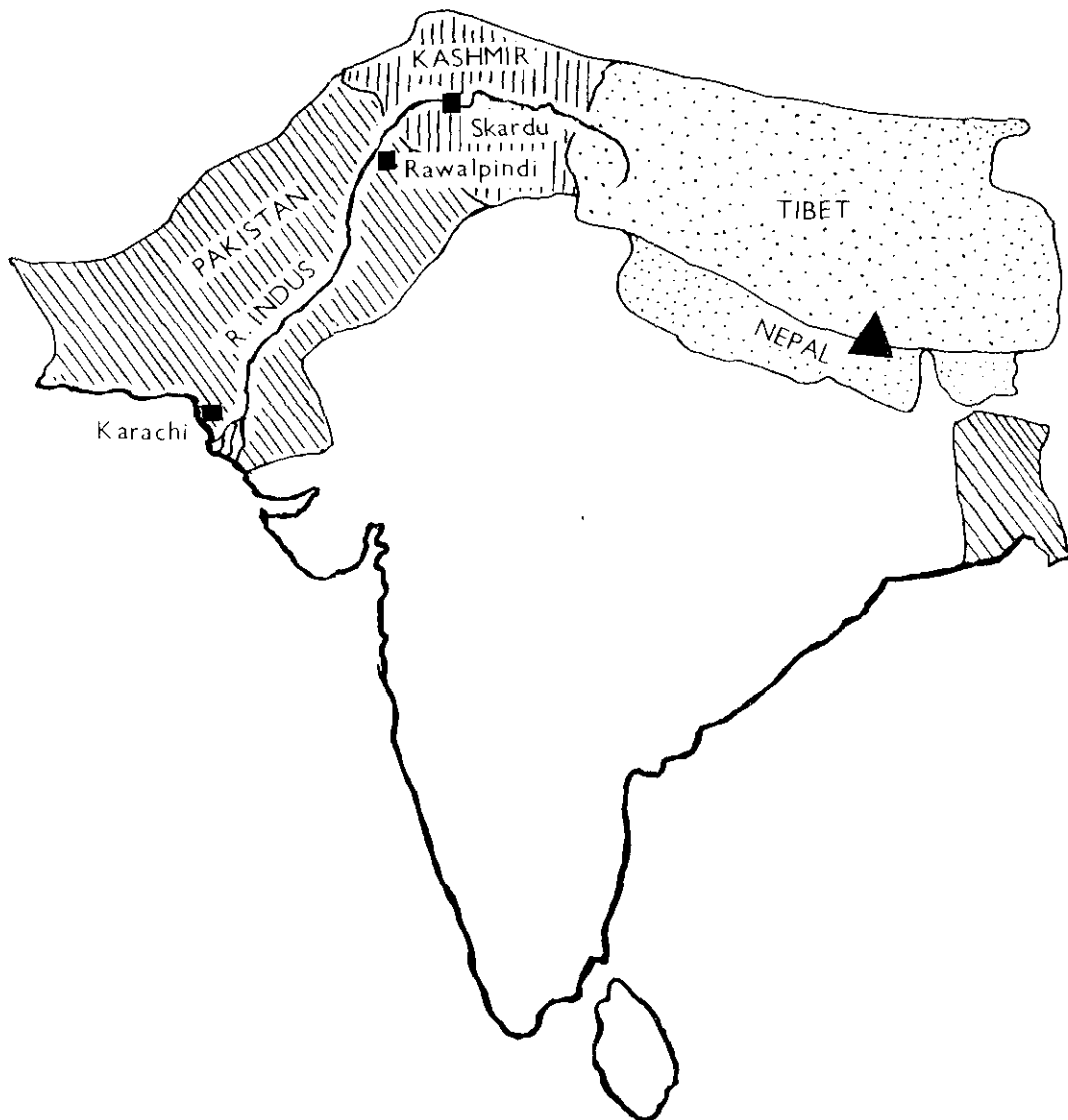
The expedition was extraordinary in that it had no specific peak as its objective. The intention was rather to climb and explore in unknown or comparatively unknown territory, with the broader aims of learning the problems involved in organizing and managing a major expedition, and of 'training' in the widest sense. Not surprisingly in the circumstances, the party was not made up of the best available climbers. Indeed, our collective skill and experience must have been much less than that of any previous party of comparable size visiting a major mountain range.

The original plan was to go to Chitral on the N.W. frontier, north of the almost mythical and apparently very beautiful Principality of Swat. The peaks of this area are almost unknown but, unfortunately, only a few miles across the watershed is the Oxus River which there forms the boundary between Afghanistan and Russian Turkestan. The Pakistani authorities decided that they could not allow a Service party so near that particular border and we had to change our plans at short notice. We went instead to Baltistan in the north of Kashmir.

From its source east of Gartok the Indus flows north-eastwards, north of the main Himalayan watershed, for 500 miles before plunging through a two miles-high gorge, round Nanga Parbat, to the plains. Of the many parallel ranges to the north of the river the nearest and greatest is the Karakorum containing many of the world's highest summits; steep and difficult mountains in a harsh and arid region. No regular monsoon rain reaches these hills but because of their great size they give birth to the very largest of mountain glacier systems. The Hispar glacier, for instance, upon whose southern ramparts we were to have such good fortune, is thirty-five miles long and, where we over-looked it, three miles wide.

To the south-west of this region, away from K2 and the great peaks around the Baltoro glacier, the general height is less. A few big mountains remain, Rakaposhi among them, but the majority of the peaks, and they are legion, are around 20,000 ft high. It was there we were going, to Arandu and the peaks whose snows feed the Chogolungma and Kerolungma glaciers.

We were by no means the first climbers to go to that particular area. The redoubtable American, Fanny Bullock-Workman, her husband and guides, had traversed it many times in the first decade of this century and the map they made, inaccurate though it may be in detail, is still in use. Eric Shipton's party was there in 1939, filling in gaps in the survey to the north and east and, most recently of all, a German expedition had climbed a 23,000-ft peak called Spantik



MAP SHOWING GENERAL AREA OF EXPEDITION

at the head of the Chogokungma glacier in 1956. The latter party had also made the first sketch map, so far as I know, of the Kerolungma glacier, which we were to get to know well and is one of those areas that mysteriously get omitted from surveys. That this sketch is appreciably more accurate now is to the credit of the Sapper members of our expedition.

Karachi to Skardu

We travelled by civil aircraft to Karachi, whence the P.A.F. took us and our gear in two stages through Rawalpindi to Skardu on the upper Indus. It took us a week to make all the last minute arrangements, banking, customs clearance, and so on, and to get from Karachi to Skardu.

' And the end of the fight is a tomb stone white
 With the name of the late deceased
 And the epitaph drear : "A fool lies here
 Who tried to hustle the East." '

However, this was something of a record, due almost entirely to Tony's wide acquaintance among the military hierarchy of the country.

Of the enforced wait in Karachi only one day bears thinking about ; we were kindly invited out to the Yacht Club which stands on an island in the harbour. It has been said that the three most useless things to have in a sailing boat are a typewriter, a wheelbarrow and a naval officer, but my conscience remains clear on what was a 'copy-book' capsized. Having been reassured about sharks my only concern was over the loss of a favourite pipe. It wasn't until later that I learnt about the numerous sea-snakes.

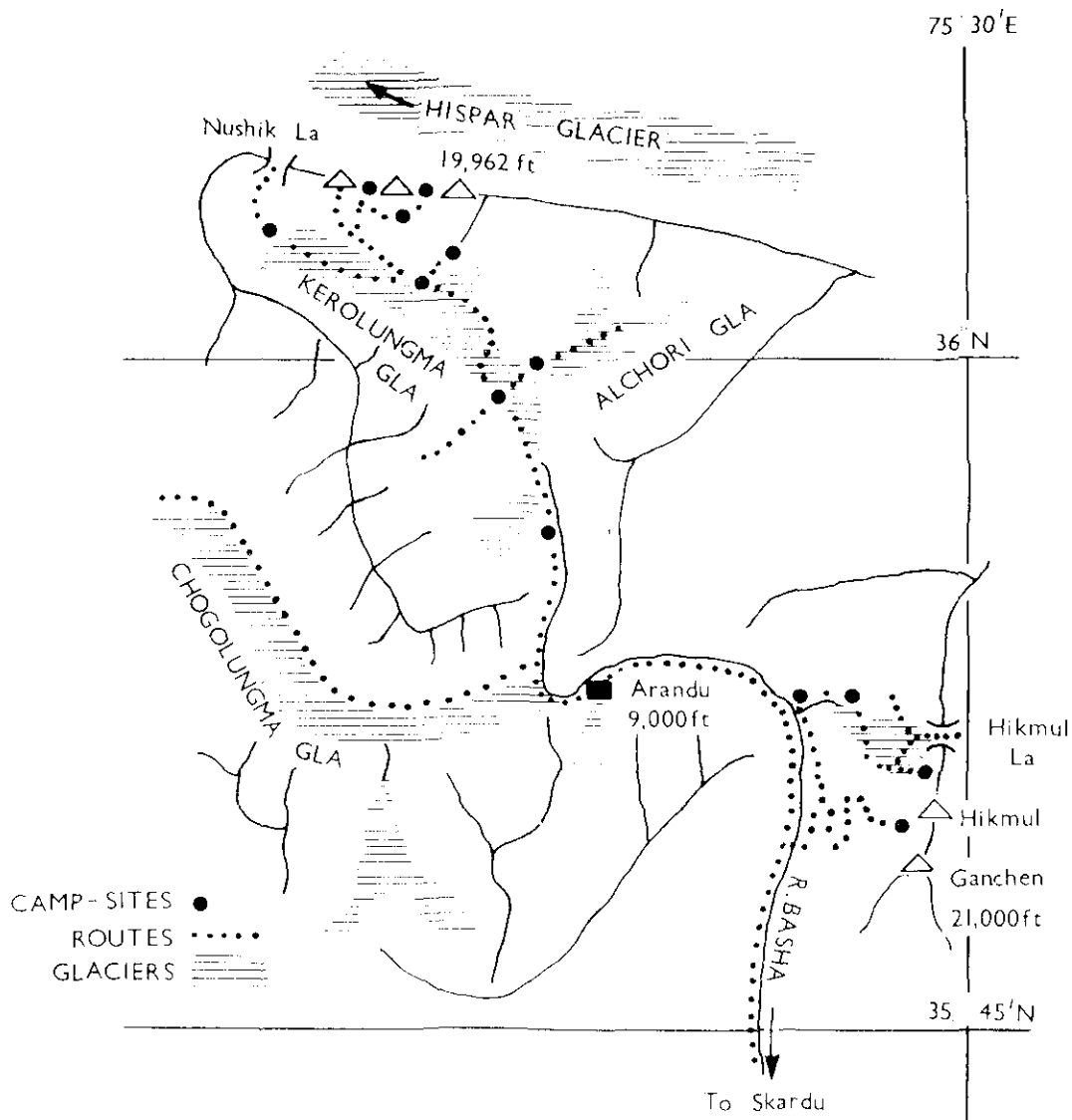
We went up to Rawalpindi in two flights, 48 hours apart. Those who arrived first took the opportunity to visit Peshawar and the Khyber Pass. They were invited to stay for the re-opening of a local feud, scheduled for 1630. Reluctantly they thought it wiser to refuse although Tony explained that feuds aren't what they were, only sporadic sniping. At this time, like many others before me, I was undergoing the common but explosive internal disorder associated with the dust-laden air of Karachi and was quite uninterested in what I was missing.

Finally, the day came when, again in two flights, a P.A.F. Bristol Freighter lifted us out of the plains to Skardu. This flight, which is also flown regularly by Pakistan International Airways, takes two hours or thereabouts, passes entirely over the most uncompromising mountain terrain and is only undertaken when the weather forecast is beyond reproach. As for most things, early morning is the best time and the freighter was in the air heading north for the second time by 0800. This, almost above all, was what we had been waiting for. On the flight into Rawalpindi dust had obscured all views and for most of us this was the day on which we were first to see the Himalayas.

The nature of our approach led to initial disappointment, so far as I was concerned, but it was short-lived. There was no great white wall of mountains, such as Kim and the Lama saw, for we were outflanking the range, following the general line of the Indus and entering the hills at a point where, slashed by great river systems and rising only slowly from the plains their sheer height and immensity is not at first apparent. We flew due north at first over steep but cultivated foot-hills: under the starboard wing the first, rather unimpressive snow summits were soon disregarded in favour of what appeared ahead. Flying at about 13,000 feet we seemed only to scrape over the Babusar Pass to rejoin the Indus and then swung eastwards into the gorge itself. Below, the convulsive white ribbon of the river : rising from it on either hand to well above our wing tips the precipitous, decaying lower slopes and, behind all, the snow peaks we had come to see. To the north, the symmetrical cone of Rakaposhi and the bulk of Haramosh, scenes of triumph and of sublime tragedy, held our attention only until, on the other hand, Nanga Parbat came into view. Passing, as we did, along the north face of this enormous mountain, the grave of so many expeditions, we could see quite clearly the route that had so many times been tried in vain and, above the glistening levels of the Silbersattel, could almost trace the line taken by Buhl on his gallant lone ascent. Impressed beyond measure, it was with the keenest sense of anticipation that we touched down on the somewhat 'Harry Tate' airstrip at Skardu.

Skardu to Arandu

When we of the second party reached the Rest-House, set on earthen cliffs overlooking the Indus and eight dusty miles from the airstrip, it was to find chaos already well-established. The compound was stacked high with boxes that were being systematically rifled by climbers anxious to sight boots, axes and other belongings that had left England by sea six weeks previously. Nothing had gone astray. Off-stage the Rest-House cook and general factotum was preparing tea, a task which kept him occupied for about three hours during



MAP SHOWING RIDGES ONLY

which throats became progressively more dust-laden. It wasn't so much the lack of facilities as a case of acute incompetence in the face of unaccustomed demand. However, it arrived at last and Tony took the opportunity to explain that because of the quantity of gear and the number of porters that we would need we would be going up the valley in two parties, 24 hours apart. He also gave us all specific responsibilities. I was delighted to be detailed off to look after the climbing equipment, a task likely to be less exacting than administering the food, for instance, and much less open to criticism.

The more or less frantic activity that had characterized our stay was intensified the following day. Six high altitude porters were selected, Baltis from the nearby village of Satpura who had first made a name for themselves on Houston's expedition to K2 in 1953 and had acquired a deal of experience since. These we issued with boots and other equipment which they promptly donned, to look more villainous than before; presumably prestige outweighed the discomfort of Balaclava helmets and flannel shirts in the blazing sunshine at 7,000 ft. Arrangements were made for the first contingent of coolies to

appear at 0600 the following morning and, largest task of all, every scrap of gear and food was unpacked and repacked in 60 lb coolie loads. Our plans on reaching Arandu, five days march away at the foot of the Chogolungma glacier, would depend on a number of factors and in any case would involve a halt of 24 hours so the packing at this stage was straightforward and did not involve making up special loads as would be the case when we started climbing in earnest. Private gear also had to be sorted, one kit bag per head, the balance being left behind in the charge of the Political Agent. This helpful official presently invited us to what was a memorable dinner party at which we met all the heads of local administration, including the lawyer who had been born and bred in Skardu, had qualified in Lahore and elsewhere and had returned to practise in his home, the only legal authority for 33,000 people. His work, he told us, was largely concerned with land tenure, there had been only one murder in the previous ten years.

Next morning we were up at 0500 and this was to be the pattern for the march. As it was dark at 2000 we were invariably asleep soon after, apart from which, by starting off by seven one had two cool hours walking, the best of the day. At first, anxious to get fit, most of us carried personal loads of up to thirty pounds ; few did so after the first couple of days. This relapse into decadence did not apparently affect the rate at which we became fit, and subsequently, acclimatized. It is arguable that the more violent, one might say masochistic, approach to fitness is as pointless as it is painful.

One of the first to leave, I had at last leisure to appreciate the beauty of situation that is Skardu's. For a space of a dozen miles or so the valley opens out to a level strath, perhaps seven miles wide at the most and in the centre of this space a great rock, a thousand feet high and more and a couple of miles long, dominates the valley and diverts the river in a sharp bow to the north. At the apex of this bend, the Shigar, the tributary we were to follow, joins the main stream : to the south of the rock, on an alluvial plain and irrigated by the streams which flow from the hills to the south, lies the town. Astride the northernmost line of east-west communication on the sub-continent, it is a town of strategic significance, as the ancient fort halfway up the rock bore witness, and even in recent times it has seen much fighting, the Kashmir Cease-Fire Line being only a few miles further up the Indus. The natives live the lives of subsistence farmers in the main, as do the inhabitants of the side valleys, and the Government of Pakistan, while anxious to help, is understandably reluctant to spend money on territory, the sovereignty of which is still in dispute. Undoubtedly much can be done but the most important advance of civilization in those parts so far as been the establishment of a military hospital which the civilian population is slowly beginning to make use of.

Retrospectively, the march in was a delight. At the time its concomitant discomforts could not easily be disregarded. On the first day we crossed the Indus in a ferry that Alexander's soldiers might have recognized and walked twelve level, dusty miles to a camp-site on the polo field at Shigar. Thence the valley turned westwards, wide and open with the river spread and passive among sand bars. Such was our lack of appreciation of the clearness of the air that from Shigar we were picking out as the next night's halting place the green shade of a village thirty-five miles distant. The second day, as always, was quite the worst ; there were seventeen miles of it, predominantly it seemed, of sand. First, however, we had to cross the Shigar by zakh or goatskin raft. This was quite exciting, the river being far from placid. The rafts, about eight feet square, consist of some thirty goatskins lashed to a bamboo framework. The propitiatory prayers, chanted at each departure, are a little alarming until one realizes the skill of the supplicants. The crossing took some time as there were about eighty coolies and only two rafts but the policeman and the two

Northern Scouts, who had been lent to us for the purpose, maintained a semblance of discipline and there were no hitches. The day's travail was redeemed by the camp-fire at Ghulabpore, Place of the Roses. Here the village schoolmaster brought us fruit, the children gathered round in wonder at the strangers and were won in an hilarious half-hour which owed much to the Goon Show.

On the third day we passed the confluence of the Braldu and the Basha, the two tributaries which together form the Shigar and as we followed the latter the valley became narrower, the sides steeper and the path rougher. The last camp site before Arandu I shall always remember. On a small terrace some 300 ft above the river, it looked downstream, across a profusion of lush green cultivation. Gone were the interminable scree fans, two and three miles wide, of the lower valley and over against us a snow peak of peerless grace bound the spell. At mid-morning on the fifth day we rounded the last bend of the valley and saw, a short four miles ahead, the last patch of cultivation that was Arandu and the grey rubble-strewn tongue of the Chogolungma glacier.

Arandu, at 9,500 ft is the highest village in this valley that is permanently inhabited. Intense local irrigation makes it a pleasant place of restful colour in summer, but it must be very different in winter under threat of avalanche and sunless for many weeks. The Chogolungma glacier, which menaced the village at the turn of the century, has retreated in the last fifty years and now ends half a mile beyond. Filling the whole width of the valley and covered in dirt and debris, its mournful appearance is typical of the lower parts of large glaciers.

High to the left of a narrow gorge revealed the snout of a smaller glacier, the snow basin behind it and a segment of glittering ridge. To the right another gorge, more deeply cut, led, we knew, to the Kerolungma glacier and the south side of the Hispar Wall.

We suffered a day's delay at Arandu. A day spent in inactivity, calling the bluff of the local coolies who had asked for 50 per cent above Government rates. As predicted by Tony, they returned amenable.

Our first concern was to reconnoitre the Chogolungma and Kerolungma glaciers and the surrounding peaks and to get acclimatized. We divided, therefore, into two parties of which the largest and the first to leave was bound for the Kerolungma basin. Acclimatization is a matter of persistence allied with patience and, as will be seen, we made height slowly. A point to which Tony attached much importance was that, to start with, we should sleep below the highest point we had reached. I do not know how much this practice contributed but certainly, we suffered only transitorily from the effects of altitude.

The Kerolungma and the Hispar Wall

During the early part of the expedition there was a succession of occasions on which one felt that at last one was 'off'. The day we left Arandu for the Kerolungma glacier was the last of these—we really were. The Kero, to use the obvious abbreviation, appeared from the map to be about ten miles long and to have a number of small tributaries. On the north it was bounded by part of a twenty-mile east-west ridge called the Hispar Wall and it was on this ridge that we hoped to find some climbable peaks.

The route lay up the gorge on the north side of the main valley and, the bridge being down, it was necessary first to cross the tongue of the Chogolungma glacier. It is worthwhile, perhaps, to describe, briefly, the end of a large glacier such as this. From the valley rises a wall of dirty ice 300 ft high. This wall is probably not unbroken and access to the glacier not difficult. More or less in the centre of the wall is a large hole from which emerges the stream.



LOOKING ACROSS THE KEROLUNGMA GLACIER
FROM ADVANCED BASE CAMP

for want of a better word, brown and raging at its very birth. The surface of the glacier is by no means level and is completely covered in rubble which is, of course, by no means stable. The Chogo was in fact covered in detritus from the hillsides for two and a half days' march up it. It will be readily understood that such a surface is both treacherous and uncomfortable to walk on. Normally it is avoided until the snow is reached by making use of the lateral moraines, walls of earth pushed up on either side of the glacier, or the small valleys formed between these moraines and the hillside. However, we were crossing it and had no easy option. At its tongue the Chogo is a good mile across and it took us little less than an hour to get over.

Off the ice, we passed the site of an old fort which indicated that we were on an old raiding and trading route between the Shigar and Indus valleys and the sub-montane regions of the north-west. We were to find sufficient reason why this route is no longer popular. The gorge we entered was thoroughly unpleasant and the path a

vestigial affair traversing excessively steep slopes of unstable earth peppered with large and apparently very insecure boulders, mostly the size of small cottages. On the second day we emerged on to a pleasant green alp at about 12,000 ft—summer grazing, though how the cattle enjoyed the trip up cannot be surmised. The view down the narrow cleft of the gorge which framed a conical snow peak some four thousand feet above us, was acclaimed the best yet and by noon we were slithering about on the slag-heap that was the snout of the Kero.

Here the party divided and six of us, including Tony Streather, with two high altitude porters and some coolies continued up the left hand side of the Kero to a pleasant camp-site beside a small lake. The others crossed the glacier to follow its major tributary, the Alchori. That day we made camp about noon and later ascended a small nodule of about 15,000 ft partly to spy out the land and partly for acclimatization. The next, we crossed the glacier and went a mile or two further up it to a fine camp site that we were to get to know well. The same afternoon the training programme continued with an appalling slog up a steep and uninteresting grass spur behind the camp. The sight of a herd of ibex, after which the camp was named, did something to take one's mind off one's feet, lungs and legs but by the time we reached 16,000 ft, on snow by then, I was on my hands and knees.

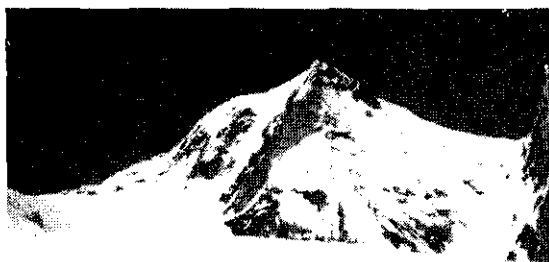
By this time Tony had decided that the prospects of finding climbable peaks was good enough to get the rest of the party up from Arandu. So, having helped four of us to establish a camp, on snow at last, at about 14,500 ft he and one other and the two porters went back to Arandu; whereupon the weather, which had been thoroughly friendly, fell from grace. The day after the others had left we went on up to the Nushik La, the pass at the extreme head of the glacier, beneath an iron-grey sky with a double corona round the sun.

The La is 16,000 ft high and to my delight I made it on my feet—this is not only more dignified but is recommended by the text books. This was the point where the erstwhile trading route already referred to crossed the Hispar Wall but there have been some major changes in the structure of its northern side in the last hundred years. We peered down a very steep wall, about 4,000 ft high, threatened by dilapidated snow cornices and pinnacles of ice, and leading abruptly to a small glacier which debouched into the Hispar glacier itself. Beneath this threatening weather the three-mile-wide tumult of this enormous river of ice and three great 25,000 ft peaks behind it were sombre and almost menacing. We did not linger. Next morning it was raining lightly but persistently from a 16,000-ft cloud base. Equally ungracious, we retired, reaching IbeX camp as it began to snow.

It continued to snow, on and off, mostly on, for forty-eight hours during which period David Philpott, with whom I was sharing a tent, spent much time in culinary experiment, some of it almost successful; I composed a particularly uninspired crossword and we both listened with decreasing apprehension to a persistent and adjacent avalanche, familiarity breeding indifference. We also had the pleasure of digging the tent out at 4 o'clock of a Sunday morning. Wakened by a slight sense of suffocation I realized our predicament at the same time as David fought his way, grumbling, through the entrance sleeve. His reappearance, after clearing his own side only, shattered my scarce-formed illusion and, in my turn, I blundered out to this repellent task.

In all, about 2½ feet of snow fell and there was abundant time to consider the implications. As the temporary leader of the party I had very much in mind a remark made by Tony, at some earlier stage, to the effect that one must avoid being in a position where the onset of bad weather means a choice between a retreat, dangerous either because of the weather itself or the soft snow that it probably brings, and starvation. Our food supplies were undoubtedly limited and the passage of the gorge in heavy snow or rain might prove dangerous and even impossible. In the event, no critical decision was forced upon me, the relief party of a dozen porters were only 24 hours late, but there had been some substance in my fears. The party that had gone up the Alehori returned down the gorge as arranged at the height of the storm and had an exciting time. In the gorge it was raining heavily, much of the path had been washed out and it was while they were examining a particularly *mauvais pas* across a rotten gully that the inevitable fall of rock occurred. It was far too close for comfort but the only casualties were a few coolie loads of gear, from which the coolies had providently detached themselves shortly beforehand.

With a clear sky once again the thaw was rapid, avalanches incessant and the heat and light intense. Only by covering the tents with sleeping bags and other gear was it possible to keep reasonably cool and the reflected sunlight off the new snow was searing, despite snow goggles. On the second day after the snow had stopped it seemed safe to attempt something whilst waiting for the others to join us. With one intermediate camp we climbed a minor peak of about 17,000 ft behind IbeX Camp. Concerned at the quantity of new snow we left the last camp at first light while it was yet firmly frozen and were rewarded by the perfect, breathless beauty of a mountain sunrise. From the peak, which was really the final lump on a spur running south from the Hispar Wall, we had our first clear view of a considerable portion of the Wall itself and, over it, the tops of the high peaks we had seen from the Nushik La. In the low early morning light every detail was crystal clear and washed with blue and gold. Conscious of the beauty we were, nevertheless, more interested in the palpable possibility of a route which lead safely to the crest of the Wall whence something might be done on the adjacent peaks. It appeared that by moving up the Kero to the next spur west and then climbing up or alongside that spur we



THE RIGHT-HAND PEAK FROM
ADVANCED BASE CAMP



JIM FRICKER AND DAVID PHILPOTT ON THE
SUMMIT OF THE RIGHT-HAND PEAK

might be able to avoid the barricade of icefalls where subsidiary glaciers, coming from the Wall, tumbled the last thousand feet or so on to the Kero.

In the next two days we prospected this approach and, in due course and without much difficulty, found an ideal site for an Advanced Base on a more or less level snow-field at about 16,500 ft. The site lay on what was in effect a terrace, half-way up the southern slope of the Wall and close beside three great rock teeth that here formed the crest of the spur that we had followed. Between the uppermost tooth and its neighbour was an easy snow col leading to a similar snow and ice terrace to the one that we were on. It seemed probable that we could gain the crest of the Wall both east and west of the peak that subtended our spur and hence would have a chance at least of climbing three peaks, the one at the top of the spur and the two adjacent ones. Leaving a tent and as much gear as possible we went straight back, through deep wet snow, to Ibx Camp, where we hoped to find the others, to organize porter loads to stock the Advanced Base for our campaign.

It might be pointed out here that the major problem of climbing high mountains is one of logistics - how much of what must be carried to a particular camp to support so many climbers for so many days. The purely technical problem of getting up the mountain may be much simpler. Unlike climbing in the lesser ranges such as the Alps, one is so completely dependent upon oneself and the scale is so vast that it boils down to finding the easiest route that is safe. If a safe route cannot be found one goes elsewhere. Clearly such a statement cannot stand unqualified, though it was literally true of this expedition. To eschew all objective dangers, I do not speak of subjective error, may be to relinquish all hope of achieving the prize one has come so far to gain. Hillary records that he was by no means happy about the condition of the snow during the first part of his climb to the summit of Everest. On a lesser mountain he might well have turned back but



THE CENTRE PEAK FROM CORNICIE CAMP

'this was Everest' and he decided to 'push it' a bit. Who is to say that he was wrong? To condemn those who have deliberately exposed themselves and paid the price of their temerity is easy. It is also arrogant in the extreme, inferring as it does that they had not even recognized that a choice lay before them.

Two days later we re-occupied the Advanced Base camp in strength and discovered its chronic disadvantage. The sun was off it by 1530. At no time did we experience any very low temperatures but the rapidity with which the temperature fell at sunset was at first startling; half an hour after wallowing in knee-deep snow one was sliding and stumbling over its frozen surface.

The following day four of us crossed the col in the spur to the terrace beyond, climbed a steep and wilting snow-wall and gained by easy slopes the col between the left-hand pair of peaks. We carried enough gear for two to stay there for two nights, and having started late and worried about the effect of the

morning sun on that beastly wall, David Philpott and I wasted little time before setting off back for the Advanced Base, where we arrived at the same time as Tony Streater, a porter and some more food.

We lunched, moved the camp a hundred yards eastwards, where the sun would last a little longer, sorted gear, read, listened avidly to Tony's yarns of the Frontier and watched, with some apprehension, the steady approach of a pall of cloud from the south-west. Ere it had turned a disagreeable shade of blackish-purple we were resigned to the worst and had made sure that we knew where to find everything with the minimum of digging. The night was distressingly warm but only a few inches of snow fell and the morning, though unsettled, was clear.

We left, leisurely, at seven, the four of us taking turns to break the trail in the soft snow. We were bound for the col between the right-hand pair of peaks, Tony and Jan Ridd the porter helping to carry the gear for David and me. Though very conscious of the labour I was keyed up at the thought of what the next two days might bring. The chance of two first ascents, uncertain as it was, begat partially suppressed excitement, determination and hope tinged with fear--of failure I suppose. A twinge of jealousy that the other two had a better chance, a day's start and a quite likely route up the centre peak from their side, asserted itself but didn't last long.

The way led easily along and up the shelf on which we had pitched the Advanced Base. At its further end, we knew, this shelf broke away in a confusion of ice-cliffs to a deep trench which ran at right angles to the Wall and cut deeply back into it between us and the right-hand peak. As we moved higher we saw that the back of the shelf was also growing steeper and eventually formed an upper tier of ice-cliffs. Where these cliffs started, however, a steep but easy slope led to an upper terrace whence it seemed that the col could be gained. We followed this line without concern for, although it led through a tumble



CORNICE CAMP AND THE UPPER PART OF THE HISPAR WALL.

of avalanche debris and where an avalanche has once fallen another may follow, this was the remains of a new snow avalanche and the slopes above had done their worst. As we had hoped, the upper terrace proved accommodating, though very soft, and led without serious difficulty to a point on the crest of the ridge, just short of the col, where a pile of rocks emerged from the smother.

Tony didn't linger—the snow was getting softer every moment and would be thoroughly unpleasant to descend. He had beaten the back of the cornice on the far side of the ridge with his axe and pronounced it safe—there was nowhere else to pitch the tent anyway and ploughed off with Jan Ridd, thigh deep. Doubtfully, David and I applied ourselves to the job of levelling out enough space for the tent. Our faith in Tony's judgement, which had only wavered slightly, was restored when we found the cornice to be of iron-hard ice about eight feet thick and well supported from below. Still, it was an airy site.

Not only airy, it was magnificent. We sat on the extreme crest of the Hispar Wall: behind us, our route, the trench of the Kero, a mass of intervening peaks and beyond, over all, Nanga Parbat, 50 miles away and filling the sky; to the left the ridge fell slightly and rose easily to the centre peak—in the bag; to the right our pile of rocks hid the col behind and the eye flew straight to the much more imposing face of the right-hand peak—food for thought; in front of us, space—at our feet, 7,000 breathtaking feet below, the crumpled carpet of the Hispar glacier, creeping westwards from the Hispar Pass; beyond it the bastion of Kanjut Sar, 14,000 ft above the glacier, a tangle of peaks and Sinkiang.

The eagle was not impressed. Held motionless at our level by some chance of updraught, it observed, unwinkingly, our intrusion. A disdainful lift of a wing tip and it glided across the ridge crest below us and out and down towards the Hispar. Long before it had reached the centre of the glacier it was lost to view in that enormity of space.

Despite our efforts of the previous day, the advanced base, a dot with smaller dots that moved, still lost the sun early. Contentedly, we supped in a golden stillness and determined to go for the centre peak next day. It was the rational decision allowing another day for acclimatization before we tried its loftier, more difficult neighbour. Another day too for the sun to shift every scrap of new snow from that beetling face. But, more than this, only by climbing the centre peak first could we hope to be the first on both. I do not think that this consideration swayed us but I am sure that it was in the back of our minds. Had our baser instincts not coincided with our judgement there would have had to be an unpleasant renunciation. Sunset, at this camp, was in instalments; twice did it re-appear from behind upthrusts of cornice on the ridge before leaving us finally. At this moment, had we known, the other party was descending the left-hand peak, out of our sight, barely beating the darkness.

Early next morning I became aware of persistent chatter. This was unusual as David was wont to maintain a decorously morose silence on these occasions. Gathering that there was something or someone to be seen I went through the convulsions necessary to emerge from a double sleeping bag in a confined space and stuck a face out. A short mile away on the Hispar side of the Wall and a little beyond the centre peak, just below one of the larger cornices and with all space below, was one of our Pakistan liaison officers. This unusual circumstance murdered sleep. A variety of possible reasons for this behaviour suggested themselves, all more or less disturbing, but he seemed quite unconcerned and soon disappeared from view towards easier ground. We had to wait 48 hours for an explanation— it seemed that this was the last of a series of abortive attempts to reach the centre peak from the other side. Of course a white nylon rope does not show up well against a white snow-slope in bright sunlight but as a spectacle it was unattractive, especially at five in the morning.

In due course we set out for the centre peak. An hour sufficed but it was not entirely plain sailing. The ridge swung left as we approached the peak which lay back a little way from the main ridge line. It was straightforward enough but, fifty feet below the summit there was a vertical step some twenty feet high. This appeared to be composed of rotten rock plastered inartistically with bulges of wet snow. The face to the right was no less steep and of similar construction and we were forced to traverse leftwards for two hundred feet on steep snow, thawing rapidly in the early sun, to gain the south ridge. This led, without ado, to a pleasantly attenuated summit. Sitting at probably rather less than 19,000 feet, we could see clearly the two sections of ridge linking the three peaks ; on the left hand section the pair from the other camp were moving away from us and beyond them their footsteps on the top of the left-hand peak were clearly visible. After the alarms and excursions of the earlier morning it was pleasant to see them and doubly so to observe that they had not preceded us. Down the line of the south ridge we could see the tracks leading up to Cornice Camp and a party of four coming up from advanced base. The snow was softening rapidly and we wasted little time in descending the south ridge to greet the others on the upper terrace.

These four, Tony, Jim, John Clegg and Inayat Ullah, were hoping also to climb the centre peak and, not twenty minutes after we had met them, set off up the south ridge. It was too late. After a few hundred feet of treading in snow that was rapidly becoming dangerous as well as exhausting they had to give up and followed David and me back to Cornice Camp, for the view.

It was decided that Jim should remain with us to strengthen the essay on the right-hand peak on the morrow. This presented minor problems, two lifos and double sleeping bags and a two-man tent between three, but it was only for one night since we would have to move down after our attempt to make room for another pair. Jim's presence also gave rise to some mildly acrimonious discussion. As a professional pilot he had a distrust, indeed contempt, of instruments in general and of altimeters in particular. Apparently he preferred to lean out of the window and have a look. David on the other hand is a Sapper and as such had been entrusted with both a prismatic compass and a pocket altimeter to enable him to make a reliable sketch map of the Kero basin. 'Guesstimation' and observation of known points at once clashed with the scientific approach. Tone was lent to the brawl by such O.K. phrases as 'diurnal variation' and I happily maintained an outward appearance of neutrality, though my sympathies were with Jim. The higher the better. A subsequent visit to the R.G.S. showed that the instrument was on one occasion reading about 900 ft low but Jim prejudiced his case by trying to persuade Tony that the peak that looked like Haramosh wasn't. Tony's acquaintance with that mountain was too recent for there to have been any chance of error.

After the others had gone we scrambled up the rocks in stockinged feet to consider our problem and argument temporarily ceased. Beyond the rock, the ridge fell a few hundred feet and then rose in a rightwards curve, levelling off about 1,500 ft above to form the summit which, like its neighbour, lay back a little to the south. To the left, heavy cornices threatened the unbroken sweep of the north side of the Wall, plunging to the Hispar glacier. The face of the mountain resembled the upper part of the letter D, seen backwards. Viewed *en face*, it looked appallingly steep but we knew from other views that this was largely illusory, though it was likely to be quite steep enough.

From just below the summit an ice-couloir of impressive proportions occupied all the right-hand of the face and swept, unbroken, down to a deep trench several thousand feet below us. What little snow the couloir held was getting short shrift from the afternoon sun and the hiss of its parting was continuous.

To the left of the couloir a prow of rock projected from the face and argued an easing of the slope above while to the left again, between the prow and the ridge, an area of mixed snow, ice and rock seemed to offer the only chance of a route. By no means satisfied but aware that the longer we looked the less we would like it we returned to the tent and the wrangling.

Unable to deviate from a martial rigidity we spent a cramped night but not a cold one, in the restricted space. It is worthy of remark that this was not one of the occasions when we ate off the floor of the tent, despite the difficulties of cooking. At one time, a few weeks before, it seemed that David and I were doomed to make a habit of this. It was undesirable not only on the grounds of hygiene but also because it invariably sent David into hysterics and I had to clean up the mess.

We left at 0445 under a promising sky but the weakness of the night's frost was soon apparent as I sank through the snow crust more than once as we descended to by-pass the rocks. Past them we bore up to the left approaching, but not too closely, the treacherous crest of the ridge. This we paralleled, rising slowly over a few steep little walls of snow until, an hour after leaving the camp, we reached the foot of the broken rocks of the face itself. Our closer inspection showed the general angle of the face above to be about 50 degrees and, though this may not sound much to those who have not climbed, it is in fact pretty steep when measured in thousands of feet. The rocks were clearly rotten, as we had expected, but threading them an ill-defined and shallow gully held enough snow of the right consistency for kicking reliable steps. At the top of the rocks we paused, not overjoyed to find that the hoped for easing of the angle had not materialized. If anything the slopes above steepened slightly. The ridge was close on our left, curving over and levelling out about three hundred feet above our heads. We set off diagonally upwards to the right. The footing was ice, overlain with about four inches of snow, curiously ravaged by the sun into a sort of filigree that was enough for our immediate needs but would clearly not withstand the heat of day. If it failed us, the descent would be a protracted affair involving much step-cutting in the ice beneath. We made what haste seemed advisable. Gaining height fairly rapidly we soon found ourselves crossing the extreme head of the couloir. This steepened out of sight below and the eye had no rest until the edge of the lower terrace, three thousand feet below. Aware of and impressed by the exposure I was more interested to see that the ridge, now very close above us, crept in behind the belt of heavy cornices that frowned above the couloir and had threatened to bar access to the summit. A few moments later the morning sunlight flooded over the crest on to my face, a ten-foot wall of firm snow and we were up.

The expedition still had three weeks to run but, for me, its climax was there, at 20,000 ft, in the warm glow of early morning and the full flush of achievement.

Aftermath

During the ensuing weeks we failed to find any feasible route on a higher and much more exacting peak while the other half of the party reached a 23,000-ft summit at the head of the Chogolungma glacier. A continuation of the same rich experience, this period was anticlimactic from the moment we knew that we could not hope to succeed.

I am conscious that there is much else that I have not recorded ; the hot springs at Bisil and Chu Tran where our toilets attracted audiences which would have done well to follow our example but, mercifully, did not ; John Clegg taking blood samples from reluctant Baltis, dispensing aspirin and sticking plaster with charming impartiality and anathematizing them all as hypochondriacs, especially the character who got a headache whenever clouds came over the sun ; primulas at 14,000 ft and acres of burgeoning apricot trees on our march back ; the voyage down the Shigar on zakhs, three days' march in one, when the White Ensign fluttered bravely from shoal and sandbar and Jim contrived a most un-nautical appearance having shaved his beard but retained his moustache ; the U.N. Observer at Skardu, a New Zealander on his way up to the Cease-Fire Line, who gave us beer on our return.

These and many other memories will remain to remind me that once I was that supremely happy being, 'the dreamer whose dreams come true'.