

**BHUTAN - A Summary of Climbing and the
ANGLO-INDIAN ASCENT OF JITCHU DRAKE**

A visit to Bhutan had been on the agenda since the mid 60's when that great Himalayan explorer Augusto Gansser published photographs of unclimbed 7,000 metre peaks in Mountain World (1964/65). The seed sown then lay dormant for 20 years, until news percolated through in 1983 of Japanese and Austrian visits to the mountains of Bhutan. My interest grew further as a result of a chance visit to the Darjeeling trekking conference in 1985. Nedup Dorje, representing the Bhutanese Tourism Corporation (B.T.C.) gave a memorable discourse upon the underlying philosophy governing the future of tourism and mountaineering in Bhutan - the message was controlled development.

The Bhutanese government were in the advantageous position of being able to scrutinise closely the mass tourism that had taken place in Nepal, where the cultural heritage had been seriously eroded by an estimated 200,000 tourists visiting that country each year.

Bhutan had been virtually barred to foreigners until the Coronation of the present King, Jigme Singye Wangchuk in 1974. During that year 287 foreign visitors were allowed into the country. That allocation has increased to 2,500 per annum, but not all the places are taken due to the high costs imposed by B.T.C. - between \$85 and \$200 a day, depending upon whether the visitor is on a mountaineering expedition or a "cultural" visit to the towns and temples.

The temptation to increase the gross national product was being resisted, for as the King once told the world bank experts, he is not so interested in the G.N.P. as the Gross National Happiness of his people. Nedup Dorje managed to rekindle my interest in his country, but at the same time it seemed even less likely that I could ever raise the funds to become one of the fortunate two and a half thousand.

After the conference Mike Westmacott, the other Alpine Club representative at the conference and myself went on a short visit into Sikkim. Also on that visit was Maggie Payne, a Canadian, who was running the Tiger Tops trekking operation in the Middle East. She too had been fired with curiosity to visit Bhutan. We discussed the idea of her arranging "a support trek" to help fund an expedition to the highest mountain in Bhutan - Kankar Punzum - and one of the highest unclimbed mountains in the world. In fact I was already scheduled to go to that mountain with a group from Bristol. In the end Maggie took her support trekkers but unfortunately I was not able to go on that expedition. She continued to visit the country, either in the capacity of Trek Leader or a guest of the Government. During her sixth visit to Bhutan she came back to the Summer of 1987 and told me that she had secured permission for me to climb on Jitchu Drake and also to take in a trek (subsequently the Royal Geographical Society trek) and that she herself could also take in a support trek on the actual expedition.

A month before my departure in March, our expedition had received generous donations of food and equipment necessary for the climb, but very little in the way of funds and nowhere near the £15,000 required to pay the B.T.C. I was on the point of cancelling the proposed expedition, when the Guardian newspaper let it be known that they would like to follow-up part sponsorship of our attempt on the N.E. Ridge of Everest the previous Autumn with a full sponsorship of another climb. I suggested they came in as sponsors of our expedition to Bhutan. Two weeks before my departure to lead the R.G.S. trip we had all the financial support we needed for Jitchu Drake.

In the meantime I had been collecting information from the journals, and in particular from the American Alpine Journal on all the climbing that had been achieved in Bhutan.

Chomolhari (7,315 metres) was thought to be the highest peak in Bhutan at the time of its first ascent in 1937. The Himalayan chain East of Chomolhari was left a blank on the map. Penetration of this area had, however, been achieved by Claude White, the Political Officer for Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan during 1905-06-07. (See Claude White "Sikkim and Bhutan: twenty one years on the N.W. Frontier"). In 1933 the Political Officer for Sikkim at the time, Mr. F. Williamson journeyed from Paro east to Bumtang, before striking north to cross the main Himalaya Divide near Kunla Kangri by way of the difficult glacier pass, Monlakarchung La, into Tibet. The naturalists, Frank Ludlow, George Sherriff and Kingdom Ward added further to our knowledge of the area as a result of their various journeys in the 1930's.

It was not until Gansser's geological explorations in 1963 and the publication of his notes and topographical map that any accurate, all-embracing information was available as far as I can see. His visit was followed by those of the Doctors Michael Ward and Frank Jackson and then in the 1970's by school teacher John Tyson. There is still great confusion of names for the peaks some of them having as many as five alternatives depending on what map or text you happen to read. Jitchu Drake has been variously named Tsherim Kang, Shumkang, Jichu Dakketh or Tseringegang. There is also a great variation between official and actual heights of the peaks as each expedition realises from altimeter readings.

There is no confusion surrounding the name nor the height of Chomolhari. On the Eastern Border of Bhutan with Tibet, the West side of the mountain drops down to the Chumbi Valley - a tongue of land jutting south from the Great Plateau of Tibet. Until the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese in the 1950's, this was the traditional route from India to Lhasa. Many travellers, missionaries, traders, surveyors, military personnel and climbing expeditions have passed through the Valley during the last 250 years and all of them passing by the spectacular 3,000 metre snow, ice and rock cliffs descending from the summit of Chomolhari. As a result of Younghusbands Tibet Mission of 1903-04 the surveyors Capts. Ryder, Wood and Cowie who were attached to this expeditionary force, surveyed the approaches to Lhasa from Sikkim including the Chumbi Valley.

Although many Everest climbers had considered an ascent of Chomolhari, the first climber to take up the challenge was Frank Spencer Chapman, who with Charles Crawford and three sherpas arrived in 1937. Chapman had secured permission from the King of Bhutan to tackle the mountain from the South. After the expedition had crossed into Bhutanese territory from the Chumbi Valley, Chapman and Pasang Dawa Lama reached the summit by the S.W. Ridge on the 21st May. They had an epic four-day descent through cloud, blizzard, over difficult snow and broken glacier ice. Pasang slipped, pulling Chapman down with him for 400 ft. until Chapman managed to arrest the fall. Unfortunately his camera was damaged in the fall and half his film ruined which presumably accounts for the fact that he was unable to produce any photographs from the summit area, looking North East onto such nearby peaks as Jitchu Drake. They were in a very exhausted state, by the time they reached the shelter of a Yak herder's hut.

This had been an amazing effort by Chapman and Pasang Dawa Lama, considering Pasang's limited mountaineering experience. They had reached the summit only eight days out of Phari and in Alpine style and then without much prior reconnaissance of this 24,000 ft. peak.

Chapman, of course, became well-known to the public as an extraordinary adventurer, mainly through the books he wrote, one of them being required reading by every schoolboy of my generation "The Jungle is Neutral" - an account of his three years fighting in Burma during the last War.

The joint Indo-Bhutan expedition of 1970 to Chomolhari, was only the second officially sponsored expedition to the country (apart from the officially sanctioned trek and climbs achieved by Ward and Jackson). Prem Chand, Dorje Lhatoo, Santosh Arora and Sherpa Thondup reached the summit on 23rd April. Sadly, on the following day, the Captain's S L Kang and Dharam Pal disappeared whilst making the second attempt on the summit. Despite a determined effort by the leader, Colonel Narinder Kumar, to find the missing climbers, a search by helicopter on the Bhutanese side and after search parties had been despatched by the Chinese from Tibet, no trace of the missing climbers could be found. This expedition had climbed by way of the 1937 route.

The Indo-Bhutan expedition actually stopped a few feet short of the summit in deference to the religious feelings and sensibilities of the local inhabitants.

Chomolhari (goddess of the holy mountain) is one of the most sacred mountains in this part of the world. After this tragedy and because of pressure from the local villages, who had complained to the authorities that their cattle had suffered as a result of the climb, a complete ban has been imposed upon climbing Chomolhari ever since.

Five miles North East from Chomolhari, along the main Himalaya Divide, beyond Chomolhari East peak, lies Jitchu Drake (6,790 m) a name which means either the angry bird or more specifically the angry swallow, depending which local you consult. In 1983 the Bhutanese decided to systematically open up their mountains, albeit in a very limited way to all comers and Jitchu Drake was the first peak put out for tender. It was the Japanese as usual who had their ears closest to the ground and the Japanese ladies expedition, under the leadership of Everest summiter Junko Tabei, was the first in. They tackled the mountain by the East Ridge integrale. After ten days they had established three camps but abandoned the route at just over 17,000 ft. on 14th May, finding the climbing just too difficult and time consuming by the way they had chosen. They left the area and trekked around to Shoda from where they climbed Sepchu Kang (5,200 m). On the 20th and 21st May, nine Japanese and four Bhutanese reached the summit.

An Austrian expedition followed closely on the heels of the Japanese ladies. They decided to attempt Jitchu Drake by the South West Ridge. After difficult rock and ice climbing and after eight days above 6,000 metres, Werner Sucher, Albert Egger, Alois Stuckler, Sepp Mayerl and Toni Ponholzer reached the South summit on 17th May. A shortage of time and incessant bad weather, especially in the afternoons, forced the Austrians to abandon an attempt at the higher North summit, but they had achieved a fine varied climb, in fact one of the best lines on the mountain.

The following year an Himalayan Association of Japan expedition arrived at the foot of the South East ridge and followed that to the South summit. They bypassed the lower gendarmes of the ridge, which had given the Japanese ladies so much trouble, by traversing around from the South to a Col on the East Ridge at 5,300 metres. As with most expeditions from Japan to the Himalaya, this expedition fixed ropes, in this case from the scree to the actual south summit, possibly some 3,000 metres of rope were employed before the summiters, Sudo, Hara, Deguchi, Shinmasu and Yagihara, arrived on the south summit on 20th May, three weeks after establishing Base Camp.

During the Autumn of 1984 an Italian expedition attempted to repeat this elegant line. They established Base Camp on 30th August at 14,000 ft. According to their report American A.J. 1985, they fixed rope from Base Camp to 19,350 ft. On 15th September the crest of the ridge broke away as Giorgio Corradini and Tiziano Nannuzzi were breaking camp. They were hurled down the East face, their bodies were never found despite an extensive search by the Italians, Bhutanese soldiers and a helicopter. There were no further attempts to climb Jitchu Drake.

Approximately 15 miles due East of Jitchu Drake and well south of the Himalayan divide, lies Kang Bum (6,500m c.a.). This was climbed in 1984 by eight Japanese and Bhutanese climbers on 23rd and 25th October. They approached the mountain from the South. A peak to the North in the Lunana region, called Namshila (5,710m) was climbed by another large Japanese party. The summit was reached on 18th August by six Japanese and two Bhutanese and on the 19th by seven Japanese (including three women) and on the 20th by six more Japanese.

In 1985 there were two attempts, both in the Autumn, to climb Kankar Punzum (7,541m) the highest mountain in Bhutan. The Japanese Himalayan Association of Japan expedition of ten arrived at Base Camp on 31st August. They attempted the Central (South) Ridge of Kankar Punzum. They gave up temporarily because of the difficulties, and turned their attentions to the West Ridge, which proved no easier and so they returned to the South and reached a height of 6,880m on the 30th October. The next day one of the members succumbed to pulmonary oedema. All the members were needed to evacuate the sick climber, which they managed to do, but then they decided to give up as they considered the climb too dangerous.

During this period the Explorers Club of America launched an expedition to the mountain. They had great difficulty in actually reaching the base of Kankar Punzum. In fact they found it impossible to cross over from the Chamkar Chu approach valley designated by the B.T.C. This expedition consisted of some of America's most experienced high altitude climbers, such as John Roskelley, Rick Ridgeway, and Phil Trimble, but they had to satisfy themselves with climbing a number of peaks below 6,000m east of the Chamkar Chu glacier between the 30th September and 5th October. It was a very disappointed and disgruntled team which arrived back in Thimpu.

A sixteen man Japanese expedition was more successful further west on Massa Kang (7,200m c.a.). On 13th October, Yokoyama, Hitomi, Nakayama, Tsukihara, climbed to the summit via the north east spur 4½ weeks after arriving at Base Camp (4,900m). On the 14th October, four more climbers reached the summit and another four on the 15th. Their altimeter put the summit at 6,800m.

Sepp Mayerl returned to Bhutan in 1986 to lead an Austrian expedition, this time to try Kankar Punzum. They too attempted the south ridge but failed 200 metres below the Japanese high point. They reported only 2 days out of 21 on the mountain when the weather was at all reasonable. Snowfall was at times 50 cms. They retreated because of danger from avalanche on 26th August.

A British (Bristol) expedition to Kankar Punzum established Base Camp on 25th September. They found the climbing technically far more difficult than expected. Steve Findlay and Lydia Bradey (N.Z.) did most of the lead climbing with the help of old Japanese and Austrian fixed ropes. Steve Monks and Geoff Jackson put in a fine final effort but by then (20th October), although the skies were clear, the incessant winds which had plagued the expedition, were now causing frostbite, and so the attempt was abandoned by the leader Stephen Berry some 50 metres below the Japanese highpoint. Since 1986 this mountain has been taken off the list of peaks available for climbing due to the problems of Yak transport and communications in bad weather. This British Expedition was evacuated from Base Camp by helicopter.

Last year, 1987, Kunla Kangri over in Tibet was climbed by the Japanese and in Bhutan, Reinhold Messner with one companion arrived with permission to climb on Jitchu Drake. After a ten day reconnaissance and an attempt at a peak to the east Kung Phu (6,532m), he retired. According to our Bhutanese trekking staff, he said climbing further in the area with the prevailing snow conditions would have been suicidal.

The Bhutanese policy vacillates towards climbing and tourism in general. They certainly are not allowing an increase in climbing activity. In fact for 1988, as far as we know, our expedition to Jitchu Drake was the only one allowed. The fees for 1989 are due for an upward hike at a time when the level of tourism appears to be dropping.

I was fortunate enough to enter Bhutan two and a half weeks ahead of the rest of our expedition and to come in from the Indian Airport at Bagdogra, as leader of the R.G.S. trek. We were met off the 'plane by Kandu Dorje, a guide from the B.T.C., who had arrived that morning with a Toyota bus and driver. They took us through the undulating Dooars, tea growing areas, east to Bhutan. We spent our first night in the country at the frontier town of Phuntsholing before continuing by good road, well surfaced, taking a fine line through the dense jungle and teak forests up to the conifers around Paro. It was not hard to imagine why Bhutan had remained so isolated all these years. Before the Indian Government began its road projects here and elsewhere in Bhutan, it would have been a very hard slog up to the central area of Bhutan where most of the inhabitants live, some 5,000 ft. or more above the plains of India.

Accommodation at Paro was in comfortable chalets scattered around our Government hotel, in surroundings not unlike Uttakashi in the Garwhal, an area similarly placed at about 7,000 ft, above the dense rain forest, but below the highland mountainous area to the north. The food at the hotel was excellent, as was the local whisky, Bhutanese Mist, produced by the Army Welfare Project. After visiting Paro Dzong and the national museum housed in a watchtower, standing sentinel over the paddy fields below, we left for the capital, Thimpu, only an hour away by bus. More sightseeing, archery competitions, the Sunday vegetable market, visits to the Tashichho Dzong, the seat of power in Bhutan, both temple and secular, and after visiting the shops and purchasing beautiful home-spun

fabrics, we took off for Gortey Gomba on the first of two fairly easy treks in the central part of Bhutan.

This was the first trek I had ever led. It proved to be a very pleasant and interesting experience, especially with this group, with ages ranging from 24 to 78, all of them travellers, but not all of them used to camping under canvass, nor trekking over rough terrain. I certainly enjoyed their company at any rate and it got me fit, for I had arrived in Bhutan somewhat underpar having completed seventy odd lecture series in an attempt to catch up on paying for my mountaineering pleasures over the years.

At the end of April our team began to assemble just as the R.G.S. group were preparing to depart. They came in with Maggie Payne and three of her support trekkers, Neil Lindsay, John Rile and Harry Jenson. Maggie had met our team in Calcutta and boarded the Drukair 'plane from Calcutta to Paro and then they had gone by road to Thimpu, Paro being the only airport in the country.

It was good to see again Sharu Prabhu, who I had first met in Darjeeling in 1985 and with whom I had since climbed in Jordan South India. She had climbed on our Everest N.E. Ridge expedition the year before up to 25,000 ft. She had also been to 24,000 ft on the Indian Womens expedition in 1984 and had climbed half a dozen peaks in India. It was also good to see Lindsey Griffin, loping around our Thimpu hotel, 6' 5" with one leg shorter than the other from a severe accident some 10 years ago. Although I had never climbed with Lindsey, I knew of his numerous explorations into remote Himalayan and Karakoram valleys. David Rose had been sent along by the Guardian to cover the story. David started climbing four years ago and last year had climbed seventeen routes in the Alps, obviously keen and strong, 6' 4" and big with it and very enthusiastic. At the very last minute Robert Schauer from Austria had to turn down his chance to visit Bhutan as his second child had arrived a few months before expected and now Lindsey told me that Jim Fotheringham's arrival was uncertain as his locum had had a heart attack and Jim may have to remain in his dental surgery. Confirmation of this would arrive with Victor Saunders in a few days time.

In the meantime we talked of Bhutan. The new arrivals were full of enthusiasm, having arrived on a clear early morning into Paro. From the flight they had fine views of the snow capped mountains to the north. I bored them with my impressions of the country, which were basically that this country really works, it's bureaucratic, like every other country, but not so bureaucratic as Britain, India or Pakistan. Here it's small enough to work to have a human face to it. You can usually trace the line of decision making and meet the people who will make the decisions. They are flexible, which they would need to be now and in the future, especially if Jim did not arrive. Each expedition (with the odd exception), is obliged to have a minimum number of seven members. We would also need flexibility as to which route to climb. In Nepal it is a problem, where you have to state your route and stick to it no matter what the snow conditions, avalanche danger, rock fall danger, but here already, Jigme Tshultim, the Managing Director of the B.T.C. had indicated that we could attempt any route on the mountain as no other expedition was expected. We would also have some leeway in our numbers of actual climbers as we had Maggie's support trekkers to add on which would count towards the required total. It is this sort of give and take which helps gets expeditions off to a good start.

Although I had now spent some two weeks in the country between 8,000ft and 12,000 ft., I felt, as did some of the others, such a flying visit would have been more appropriate struggling in the heat as we did and then through torrential rain on the way back down 3,000 metres to the valley floor. It was well worth the visit - one of the most spectacular sights I have seen in the Himalaya that monastery perched on that precipice, actually the only good rock I had seen fit for climbing in the country, but here obviously out of bounds. We could not go into the monastery, because sensibly after pressure from the Buddhist monks and lamas, all the occupied monasteries were put out of bounds to tourists earlier this year.

At the roadhead village, by the ruined Drugei Dzong which had been set ablaze after an earthquake occurred in the early 1950's, we offloaded the gear from our bus and left it for Karma and his staff to arrange for the pony men who were already waiting on us. In fact they had arrived the day before and were now claiming extra pay for waiting time. We took no part in the ensuing negotiations here or anywhere in Bhutan. The B.T.C. staff expect to deal with all such problems. Just below the old monastery there were stone baths a feature of many a Bhutanese village. They are filled with water and hot rocks are thrown in sizzling and the locals follow them into the hot water.

We were honoured to have Palden Dorje join us for this part of the trek. Palden is the son of Leni Dorje, who for a time was acting Prime Minister of Bhutan. Palden was armed with a pistol at his hip, to shoot Marmots he said. He was basically on the lookout for blue sheep with the longest horn span he could find, with a view to hunting them down later. It rained heavily all afternoon and night. It rained most of the next day as we walked 22 kilometres in seven hours. We were rewarded in the evening by a view of Chomolhari. We spent the night at Thangthanka at a Yak herders hut, occupied by a Japanese trekking group, with one lady groaning with mild oedema.

On 5th May we arrived at Thangothang, after a lovely walk through conifers, and juniper forest. We saw the tip of Jitchu Drake above the clouds, shining white. We spent the evening bouldering and putting up camp by a stream below a ruined Dzong. Our camp obviously made a good base for exploring the western side of Jitchu Drake. ~~Even though our mountain was only about 22,500 ft. we would still have to acclimatise during the next two weeks and that's what we did, first on the West, then on the East and finally on the South sides of the mountain.~~

Our explorations of the western side were hampered by almost continuous cloud cover. The weather was usually clear in the mornings, but by the time we had reached any height the cloud was down and only got thicker towards the evening. On one long day on the 7th May, we walked along the true right hand ablation valley and moraine of the south Jitchu Drake glacier, right up to where it merged with ice fields coming down from the western side. We could only see two thirds of the western ribs reaching up into the cloud. Although this reconnaissance had been inconclusive we decided to move camp and check out the east side.

The day before departure, Victor managed to strain severely a tendon in his ankle. We were out bouldering, he jumped off only two feet, but landed awkwardly, his ankle went over with a resounding snap. He hobbled to his tent with our help and despite hot and cold water treatment the ankle blew up like a balloon.

My overwhelming impression of this country was already one of space. There are only 1.3m people living in Bhutan, a country the size of Switzerland. I had dropped down through forested slopes to broad, wide valleys with only a few scattered chalets and hamlets dotted about. In Nepal, every square inch would have been terraced and heavily populated with the forest cut back and the soil eroding. I certainly felt privileged already to be in this country. We had not seen any other trekkers on our trails and only a few tourists in the hotels. It felt like we had this wonderful land to ourselves.

The only children who had come up to us had come to walk along with us for a while, out of curiosity and occasionally to practice their English it being the second language in all Bhutanese schools. None of them had asked for anything more. Ninety percent of the people work on the land - work with nature. They had not lost their integrity as individuals in nature and it showed in their smiling faces and general contentment with their lot. The only cloud on the horizon for us was the fact that in two weeks of trekking I had hardly seen the Himalaya. All through late March they had been covered in cloud. Every evening and most nights we had rain or snow falling. At least the weather could only get better for it could hardly be worse. I was just content to have had the chance to come to this country, to walk through its dense pine forests and thickets of rhododendron in full Spring colour, to have spent time with the local people, sipping Tibetan tea sitting on the floor of their homes.

With two thirds of the country heavily forested, Bhutan is not short of timber and they certainly use it to good effect in their homes, which resemble as everyone else had noticed, Swiss chalets, but I would say the level of carpentry was far higher and more interesting than in Switzerland.

On 2nd May I saw my R.G.S. group through Customs and into the departure lounge and met Victor Saunders alighting from the Drukair 'plane, fresh from Britain and Calcutta. There he stood on the hot tarmac in double boots and yeti gaiters, video cameras slung across his chest and heavy hand bags in both hands. It was good to see him, but sad to hear that Jim, unable to find another dentist to cover his absence, had made the decision to stay home. Victor, an architect by trade, had several fine Himalayan climbs under his belt - Ogre II, ascents in the Rimo area and last year Spantik, via the impressive Golden Pillar with Mick Fowler. All his climbs had been accomplished in Alpine Style.

That afternoon we packed our loads for the ponies and yaks to take us up to Base Camp, four days due north of our Paro hotel. David was rushing round between typewriter and toilet as he had his first article to despatch on impressions of the country so far, but he had also picked up a stomach bug en route from England.

On 3rd May we motored up the Paro Chu valley to the roadhead, passing under the Taktseng (Tigers Nest) Monastery clinging to the granite hillside above us. We had made the visit the day before Victor's arrival, a mandatory visit for anyone visiting Bhutan. We had gone up with our guide for the expedition, Karma Tenzing. Karma told us that he expected, some time in the future, to spend three years, three months, three weeks, three days in a little cabin stuck in a gully just below the main monastery. He explained that the self interned were only visited by relatives once a day to push food through a trap door. Taktseng is really a shrine to the Guru Rimpoche (Padma Sambhava) who first brought Buddhism to Bhutan and Tibet in the 8th Century, reputedly he arrived here at the monastery on the back of a flying tiger.

This was serious business, we were already very depleted on high altitude climbing experience with the demise of Robert and Jim. Next day we set off following Victor riding a horse. Unfortunately Victor has a severe allergy to horses, so he rode with his Gortex salopette and anorak, balaclava, scarf wrapped round his face, yeti gaiters and boots and dosed himself with anti-histamine. Unfortunately the horse was more allergic to Victor than he to the horse which kept shying away with fits of sneezing.

We marched off and up through the hills, north of the usual track from here to Lingshi taking a more direct route to a lake close to the east side of our mountain. We eventually set up camp that evening, by this beautiful oval lake about half a mile long and a little less across. We camped amongst willow thickets on the grassy alp and just across from Yak herders in two cabins, surrounded by the Yaks and guarded by two angry and forever barking dogs. Back in England we had been inspired by the photographs supplied to us by Sir Edward Peck to check out this East side. There seemed to be a rib of steep ice and snow heavily fluted in parts like some Andean peak. Now our chances of climbing that route with our depleted party seemed very remote.

However, during the next week we went up and camped on the rocky ridge, separating the two glaciers that come down from the east face of Jitchu Drake. During this period it snowed every afternoon, but from various vantage points on the rocks we could see the face. It did look steep seeing it head on, it also looked highly dangerous with huge mushrooms of snow barring the way at several places. Unless we went back to check out the west side more thoroughly, the only possibility seemed to be up the south face. After some debate we decided to go for that from our lake side Base Camp down at 14,000 ft.

By now Maggie had returned home with Harry and John. Neil had decided to stay and help us establish an Advance Base Camp beneath the South Face. With the help of Neil, Karma and his three staff, Sonam Dorje (trekking assistant) and the two cooks Tshering Dorje and Pasang Gayta, we moved our tents, food, fuel and equipment up to a lovely lake nestling in the rocks at 16,000 ft. Whilst the rest of us were bringing up more supplies Neil and Lindsey carried out a superb recce of the approaches to the south face and reached a point just below the plateau, and most of the way through the icefall which comes tumbling down towards the south Jitchu Drake glacier.

A few days later we established our Camp One at 18,000 ft. on the great snow shelf. We retreated back down to Base Camp for a good rest before launching off on the actual climb.

On the 24th May, we left Base Camp for Advance Base Camp. I had awoken that morning in the small hours thinking of the south face collapsing, ice cascading down from 2,500 ft. I thought of the strength of the party or rather the lack of it, Victor hobbling about with his ankle, Lindsey with a torn shoulder muscle, Sharu with stomach troubles, myself trying to combat old-age, only David was fit, but he was on his first Himalayan expedition. Then there was the weather, the wind, deep snow, what to do about clothing, food, fuel, we were running out of time, children back home. Definitely the darkest hour is just before the dawn. Anyway I got up at five, to write a few more postcards to accompany David's Guardian article going down to Thimpu with Karma. Coffee and breakfast over and away around the Lake now with Rhododendron in full bloom up here and bright patches of Azalea and Primrose amongst the grass.

Actually Sharu was now going much better as was Victor, although he continued to carry a very light load, he seemed much more confident about his ankle. Neil left for home after leaving a huge load at A.B.C. We missed his obvious delight at being up there with us as much as his capacity to load carry. After a good night at A.B.C. we set off next morning with Sharu breaking trail first then myself, followed by David.

On the 26th we awoke to an amazing morning of white mist-filled valleys. The rising sun, filling the sky with orange beyond Masang Kang and all the other Kangs to Kankar Punzum. We were very late getting off, Lindsey had had a bad night with headaches, he had hardly slept, maybe from kerosene fumes. At eleven, just as the mist was rising, we broke trail in the sweltering heat, up to the base of the South face. From there David took over the awful work and traversed for about a mile in dense mist until we were lost - all of us with a different opinion as to which way to go, so we sat there and brewed up. As some of us were carrying huge sacks, of 70lbs, we were not into making a false move at this point. We were determined that from here on we would have enough food and equipment to climb the mountain. After this attempt there would not be time for another.

As the mist did not clear we decided to find a camp site nearby. After a brief recce we picked a site below an ice cliff with a chasm behind, which we reckoned would collect any debris falling off the south face. In the middle of the night I was awakened by Victor discussing the starry sky. The moon was out and I went out in the perfect stillness, plodding about to see exactly where we were. In fact we were right on course and it seemed that we could easily go straight up from where we were through the bergschrund and onto the actual face. We got up at 3 a.m. but it was four hours before we had had breakfast and packed our gear. David had a bad stomach, all the excitement he said and Lindsey again had had little sleep.

Victor and myself broke trail up to the bergschrund. The important thing he said at this stage is to take it easy so I slowed down and he rushed on by! He was definitely on the mend. I climbed around the bergschrund with some difficulty, mainly on account of the very heavy sack. Sharu followed, then the others - Victor, Lindsey, nursing an injured shoulder and David with a mammoth sack. It was soon obvious to all of us that despite promising weather we had left it far too late and had no hope of reaching the only likely bivouac sites some 2,000 ft. higher, so we settled for leading out and leaving our four ropes for the morrow. Lindsey, Victor and myself taking turns at leading. Sure enough at 1 o'clock, back in the tents, we were hammered by the afternoon storm.

Clearly in Bhutan you have to reckon that 1 o'clock means the end of story, just as surely as if night had fallen. Then the only way to accommodate the ever present afternoon storm is to go off very, very early in the morning, which we could now do by the light of the moon, get up at midnight and hopefully away by 2.30 a.m. and up to a bivvy site by early afternoon. So we spent the afternoon eating sardines, cheese, biscuits, tomato soup, etc. and drinking, trying to rehydrate. Victor had already discovered that he had left the tapes for the video camera back at the Base Camp and now David's tape recorder had failed, so no film for the tele and no tapes for Radio Four. Someone was telling us to keep it simple and travel light. We spent the rest of the day whittling away at our food and gear, discarding everything superfluous.

We were able to sort out, take stock and contemplate the next day's 2,500 ft. ice climb. This would be the first time Sharu had been on anything so continuously steep and icy. We discussed ways to conserve energy, not to hammer picks in too deep, to get into a rhythm of fast movement between natural ice ledges and sort out how best the five of us could move up this face.

On the 28th May, I heard Victor's voice announcing the fact that we had overslept. We had meant to wake at midnight, but it was now already 2 a.m. Nevermind we would just have to cope with the inevitable storm. We packed up in double time and were away for 4.30 a.m. and moved rapidly up to the bergschrund. Sharu pulled up the rope hanging free over it. This took her some time with a heavy sack. Victor went up to offer advice and a foot sling. She was soon up and over and off we went in a rhythm of sorts up the four pitches we had completed the day before. The next pitch was steep and had me gasping and feeling a little sick in the stomach, picking my way over a vertical step of hard green glacier ice. Victor, the smallest member, was carrying the lightest sack, mainly because of his ankle. It did not matter whether he was seconding or leading, his ankle still hurt the same, so he went into the lead and led off just as the afternoon storm came in. I placed myself in the centre to encourage the rear guard and to keep Victor supplied with rope and gear. He chose a good line in dense mist and swirling snow, pitch followed pitch as the storm gathered momentum and strength.

At one o'clock, Victor expressed his doubts about continuing. I told him we should take a diagonal line rightwards towards the south east ridge for at least there we would more likely find a bivvy site. I suggested to Victor that we take stock at 2.30 p.m., in a couple of hours time, which would be the last chance to abseil off in the light. I knew that if we did that we would lose most of our ice screws and the means to make another attempt. For once I felt remarkably confident that we should actually continue. I don't know where the feeling came from, but I had no hesitation in countering David's concern at continuing, when he came up to me later. I pointed out to him that in the gear we had, our outer shell clothing, our warm inner pile clothing, that so cocooned against the weather we could if necessary climb well into the night. He said he was feeling the altitude, but agreed to continue. By the eighth pitch the storm was very violent and snow was pouring down the face in waves. It was hard for us to communicate or see each other 150 ft. away. Tiny ice ledges soon filled with soft snow and piled up on the hanging ruck sacks attached to the ice screws.

The situation was getting serious and I asked Sharu what she thought of continuing. She had no hesitation in saying that having come so far we should keep going. She too could see that this was our last chance.

Lindsey, at the rear was moving very slowly on account of his shoulder. He and David were a long time passing up the ropes, the light was fading, we were still two pitches before the S.E. ridge and the storm was at its height. Even here, with only some 300 ft or 400ft of face above us, the snow was cascading down. We thanked our lucky stars we were not in the middle of the face, when in such conditions we might well have suffocated. Just as the sun was setting, Victor reached the ridge, there were brief gaps in the cloud and we could look across to Chung Kang, covered in fresh snow.

I led off up the heavily corniced ridge for about 100 metres and stopped at a flat part of the cornice. I tied the rope off and began to hack the top off, hoping to produce a site for our two bivvy tents. First Sharu then Victor came up to help and much later, David and Lindsey. By then we had one tent erected.

Sharu, somewhat exhausted was inside warming up and brewing cups of tea. We were all set to carry on hacking at the snow and now ice to provide a platform for the second tent when Lindsey, typically, went poking about above and found a huge grotto, under the cornice ten foot above our tent. He, David and Victor settled down for the night in that icy grotto. Next morning the sun shone wanly through the thin grey clouds. I woke Victor at 6 a.m., but he hadn't had a very good night's sleep for the wind had been blowing through the cracks and crevices of the cave. At 8 a.m. we both set off to find a better camp site. We went up some 500 ft. and found a snow slope, protected by a steep bulge in the ridge above. Later that day we all moved up occupying what was probably the site of the final Japanese camp.

On the 30th May, I woke Victor for a time check at 12.30a.m. Both tents were creaking under the weight of spindrift. He came down to my tent at 1 a.m., the other two were not very well he said and definitely did not want to go up that day. He himself had not slept so well in the storm because of the angle of their platform. We had brews and noodles and eventually Sharu and myself set off at 6 a.m. to fix two ropes. It was a glorious morning with a sprinkling of light snow like icing sugar on all the lower hills. Rivers were shining silver threads, small lakes glinted in the sun, not a bad place to be! May as well be here as anywhere I thought.

Eventually Victor arrived with a third rope. After fixing that we descended back to the camp, which we re-arranged hoping to provide for a better night's sleep. Lindsey was flat out in his tent, a 6 ft. 5 incher trying to fit in a 6 ft tent hadn't helped, and he was very groggy. He said he had no other symptoms, than sleeplessness, but why sleeplessness? I think that it was probably due to the fact that he had suffered a severe accident the year before when his partner had pulled him off a pitch in the Alps and he had damaged again his injured side of ten years before, perhaps his body was still recovering from that.

We sat by the tents in the calm afternoon, such a pity that we were not able to make the best of this weather. A huge black and yellow butterfly fluttered around Sharu's yellow javlin salopette - I wonder if that meant anything.

Later that evening, David signalled his dilemma. All day he had been thinking about his role from now on. Basically, if he goes, he reasoned, we will have less chance of getting up as four will be slower than three - Lindsey, it being assumed, would not be going. I told him it was obvious that two would be faster than three and four faster than five. He said from a journalistic point of view it was important that we reach the summit and he would be satisfied with that even if he did not himself make it. After all, we had accomplished a new route up the south side of the mountain, as far as the ridge, although he added he knew he was basically being guided. He found it much more satisfying when he was out leading with his friends in the Alps, learning from his own mistakes.

Sharu's position came into the discussion. Although she was going to be slower than Victor or myself, I pointed out to David that it was thanks to Sharu's determination lower down that we were up here now. In the end it was decided that Victor, Sharu and myself would head off early next morning with a light day sack for the summit. So ended my dream of all five of us reaching the summit. I knew David was disappointed with this turn of events. He had set his heart on reaching his first Himalayan summit on this trip, but he could take comfort in the knowledge that he had contributed greatly so much to the expedition, taking on the burden of writing articles at high altitude, usually carrying the heaviest sack and doing a great deal of trail breaking through the lower ice falls. His wit and repartee were always light-hearted and amusing, but the bottom line was really Lindsey. None of us wanted to leave him on his own and so David offered to stay and supply him with cups of tea whilst we climbed.

Sharu and Victor at 12.30 a.m. set about making breakfast, it was miserable at 12.30 a.m. up there with the wind shaking the tent and blowing powder snow over frosty gear every time we opened the entrance. After three brews and a pan full of noodles, we were off by 2.30 a.m., pulling the hanging ropes as we went and on off up the ridge, in the bitter cold. Gradually the dawn colours appeared on the eastern horizon, but it was still very, very cold. We moved fast as if there were only two with the second and third climbers climbing together as the leader took in both ropes. By the time the sun was up it was time to stop. Occasionally our ice axes poked through the actual cornice and we could look right down the east face. Beyond the east face between that and Chung Kang, we could look across and down on to the Tibetan plateau in complete contrast, brown and mauve, stretching north as far as the eye could see. From time to time we came across Japanese rope. It would have been churlish to ignore it and occasionally we clipped on for protection or as an additional belay to our ice axes and deadmen. There was very little chance of getting ice screws in as the snow and ice were of a lacy texture, for some two feet down towards more solid ice.

The 12th pitch, Victor's took us to the south summit and right on the summit we found the end of the Japanese fixed rope. It was good to be there, to sit on our sacks and look around on that wonderful morning. Victor had done well to lead half the climb considering his ankle, and so had Sharu. She had pulled out all the stops and had moved as fast as any of us. In our discussion with David we had agreed that if Sharu had been tired she would have waited here at the south summit whilst Victor and I made the crossing down and up to the higher north summit about 1,000 ft. away, but there was no question of her waiting, she was raring to go and off we went down 100 ft. along the intervening cornice ridge and up the steep but easy snow slopes on the west side of Jitchu Drake's main summit.

By mid-day we were on the summit, we stayed there an hour or rather a couple of feet below the actual crest, not wanting completely to upset the gods that may reside up there. There can be few pastimes more satisfying than climbing mountains and seeing it through to the end. The summit not only marks the end of the route and the effort in getting there but is also the place for immense satisfaction and elation. We all know its the journey and not arriving that matters, but from the summit of Jitchu Drake we had that 360 degree panorama which I for one always look forward to.

We could see all the Tibetan plateau in this part of the world, a high altitude desert stretching out northwards from the main Himalaya Divide. What a dramatic division of countries it is here. The whole of the Tibetan plateau is higher than the forests of Bhutan.

Below us we could see the remarkable triangular peak of Chung Kang and the even more remarkable south face and beyond that Kang Cheda, Massang Kang, Tsendakang, Table Mountain, Kankar Punzum and Kunlar Kangri and even the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, about 200 miles away.

In the opposite direction we could clearly see Kangchenjunga, Janu and Kabru on the borders of Nepal and Sikkim. We could see Pauhunri and many smaller peaks on which Kellas had been active in the early part of the century. To the south west, immediately below us was Chomolhari II and Chomolhari itself. We could make out the long easy angled S.W. ridge which Spencer Chapman and Pasang had taken in 1937 - easy angled, but a long way and taking them to a point about 500 metres higher than ourselves - what an effort that must have been.

Not all the mountains of Bhutan lie on the edges. There are considerable peaks to the south and in the central part of Bhutan, poking up into the clouds which were now gathering. These clouds never looked threatening, they didn't strike fear into our hearts and so we were in no rush to leave the summit. Time for a panorama of photographs and photographs of ourselves and then off back down to share the good news with the others, but we knew we had to take care for this is when most accidents seem to happen. We had to concentrate all our thoughts on this tricky descent, making one awkward, often diagonal abseil after another to arrive in Camp (4) just before dark.

The next day after down climbing two pitches and abseiling twelve full rope lengths, we were back on the glacier to pack up our tent and supplies left there and then to carry our huge sacks down through the ice to the grass and flowers. The climb was over and we had survived it.

In my tent at Advance Base Camp, there was a message from Karma, which told us that he had come up on the day of the storm and had prayed for better weather. The message read "I pray for the victory I want to see in your smiling faces. May God be victorious. Love and regards. Karma".

After another beautiful morning the winds came in with vengeance and from then on there was always a mist and snow plume blowing off our mountain as we walked out via Lingshi Dzong. We had climbed the mountain on the only day there was not snow and cloud hanging over it. That is not to say any of us seem deterred from making another visit to the mountain and people of Bhutan. Whether or not we ever get that chance again we are grateful to have been there in 1963.