

THE BATURA MUZTAGH EXPEDITION, 1959

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THE AIMS of this expedition were mountaineering exploration in the Batura Muztagh region of the North-west Karakoram Himalaya including the first ascent of the 25,540 ft. principal peak of the Batura group, together with a certain amount of scientific research on the glaciology and geology of the area.

The six European members of the expedition sailed from Liverpool for Karachi on April 11. They were: Dr. Keith Warburton, aged 31, leader and expedition doctor; Martin Guennel, 28, mountaineer and geologist; Albert Hirschbichler, 27, mountaineer; myself, John Edwards, 26, surveyor and glaciologist; Richard Knight, 25, and Harry Stephenson, 23, mountaineers. Martin and Albert were the two German members of the party. During the voyage out we met Jamil Sherjan, aged 21, son of a Pakistani General. Jamil was on his way home after a period of service as an officer in the Parachute Regiment of the British Army. He was anxious to join the party and we agreed that he should come along as assistant surveyor and glaciologist.

Although we had secured permission to visit the Batura area before we left England, we had some further difficulties when we reached Karachi as our peak lies in a very sensitive area near the Chinese and Tibetan frontiers. Our troubles with the security department were soon resolved, however, and the whole party moved to Rawalpindi by train.

We had hoped to fly immediately to Gilgit, our next stage, but bad flying weather kept us in Rawalpindi for 17 days. We occupied the time repacking our equipment into 60 lb. porter loads and dealing with the many officials who had to be seen before we could proceed.

Eventually the weather lifted and the expedition left for Gilgit in Dakotas of Pakistan Airways.

The flight over the foothills of the Himalayas was most spectacular and we enjoyed views of Nanga Parbat, Haramosh, Rakaposhi, and many of the nameless peaks of the Karakoram.

In Gilgit we were held up for a further four days as the bad weather had damaged the jeep road up the Hunza valley to Baltit, the capital of Hunza state.

In Gilgit we stayed in the Mir of Hunza's guest house and spent our time exercising in the local peaks, or among the interesting cosmopolitan

traders of Gilgit bazaar. Eventually the road was repaired and the expedition left Gilgit in nine jeeps for the five-hour trip to Baltit. The road to Baltit is a seven-foot-wide track with no parapet, built on to the cliff face along the Hunza gorge. From our seats we could look down into the foaming brown waters of the Hunza river boiling over the rocks, three or four hundred feet below. On arrival in Baltit we were welcomed by the Mir, the ruler of the small state of Hunza, who entertained us lavishly during our short stay.

In Baltit we transferred our baggage to a caravan of horses which we accompanied on foot and went on for a further three days to Pasu, a village lying near the junction of the Batura melt stream and the Hunza river. At Pasu we exchanged our horses for forty yaks who would be able to carry our three tons of stores over the moraine and ice of the Batura glacier, the fourth largest glacier in the world outside the polar regions.

The march from Pasu to the Base Camp site at the foot of the Batura icefall took us six days as we were slightly delayed by a coolie strike. At Base Camp we dismissed the coolies, retaining only our three high altitude porters who were intended to stay with us throughout the expedition.

Base Camp was set up on June 4, some eighteen days late on the expedition programme. The delays were due to our wait in Rawalpindi and the brief hold up in Gilgit. We could be reasonably sure of good weather for the next two months, however, and in fact the 1954 German expedition which had climbed one of the lesser Batura peaks, had not started climbing until August.

The principal obstacle to the ascent of the Batura Muztagh peak is a massive icefall which extends from Base Camp (11,000 ft.) to a height of 18,000 ft. The icefall is heavily crevassed and has many lines of séracs which are difficult to negotiate. The ice is moving at about 12 ft. per day, which causes the surface to change rapidly and means that a new route must be found nearly every day.

In the week following our arrival at Base Camp the climbing party reconnoitred the lower part of the icefall and set up the first two climbing camps at 13,000 ft. and 16,000 ft. Meanwhile Jamil Sherjan and I were starting to lay out a network of markers which would enable us to measure the speed of the glacier and lower icefall.

In the middle of June we had a slight lapse in the weather during which it rained intermittently for a few days. The porters, always anxious to acquire more equipment which they can subsequently sell, demanded more clothing which we did not give them as they were already lavishly equipped for the heights they were expected to reach. One of the porters became most troublesome and as he was the only one who spoke fluent Urdu and was thus the channel for instructions,

the situation became impossible and we were obliged to sack all the porters.

Because of this trouble, Jamil Sherjan and I abandoned the glaciological work to assist the climbing party. As the members of the expedition had always carried heavier loads than the porters, this meant that the strength of the climbing party was not significantly reduced. Intensive ferrying began about June 16 and by June 23 the five members of the climbing party were safely established in Camp III at 18,000 ft. with 28 days' rations and fuel, and adequate equipment for the final assault on the peak. It was estimated that a further three camps would be required at 20,000 ft., 22,000 ft., and 24,000 ft., and that with reasonable weather the climbers should return to Base Camp in about 15 days. The changing nature of the icefall meant that it was impossible to maintain camps on it so that the climbers would have to use Camp III as an advanced base camp and would be quite independent of the lower base camp.

With the establishment of this advance base camp the work of the two honorary 'porters' was complete and we returned to Base Camp to continue our glaciological and survey programme.

The weather remained fine until early July and Jamil Sherjan and I made many measurements of the speed of the ice flow. On July 2 an unprecedented period of bad weather set in and lasted for several days. It rained and snowed heavily at Base Camp. We were unable to leave our tent for four days and had to dig our way out when the weather lifted. We heard later that the bad weather had forced the Swiss to withdraw from Disteghil Sar and had obliged the Germans to abandon their attempt on Diran after losing an unoccupied high camp in an avalanche.

After the weather lifted, we continued the survey work which was slightly hampered by the avalanches which swept the lower icefall five or six times every day. We also made short trips along the glacier for survey purposes.

As the condition of the ice flow was rapidly deteriorating we returned to the Camp I site to collect the personal gear of the climbers which had been left there for use during their return journey. We found that the going on the icefall had become very bad and the fresh snow made crevasses difficult to avoid so that we fell in several times.

While we were at Base Camp we were visited by a native hunter who brought fresh meat and told us that on about June 28 he had been hunting on the north side of the Batura valley opposite the peak and early in the morning he had watched with his binoculars for three hours as two figures climbed steadily on the shoulder which lies about 1500 ft. below the summit. We thought that these were probably the summit pair on their way to establish Camp VI and this fitted in well

with the programme which had been envisaged. As they had had a further four days of excellent weather before the blizzard, we thought that they had probably been on their way down after a successful ascent and had reached about Camp IV when the weather deteriorated.

We were not sure how long the bad weather might have delayed the climbers but by July 19 we were getting a little worried at their non-appearance.

It seemed to be snowing in the region of Camp III at this time and so we assumed that they were delaying the descent of the icefall until the weather improved. In addition to their 28 days' basic rations they had many extras which would enable them to last out for several days if necessary. The weather eventually lifted on July 26 and close observation of the top of the icefall showed no signs of movement. We then realised that something must have happened and we decided to go up and investigate. As our Base Camp equipment was not suitable for use at high altitude, I made a forced march to Pasu to get help from the German Karakoram Expedition or any other expedition I was able to contact. After some delay I contacted the Swiss Disteghil Sar Expedition, and Raymond Lambert, their leader very kindly sent me a tent and several items of high altitude equipment. The Pakistani Authorities whom I also contacted were unable to give us any help and indeed refused on political grounds to allow anyone else to come to our assistance. It was with some interest that we later read Press reports put out by this same authority to the effect that we were being helped by Pakistani troops.

I returned to Base Camp with the Swiss equipment and on July 30 Jamil Sherjan and I made an attempt on the icefall. Conditions had become very much worse since our last visit and it was impossible for us to follow our old route which was now a sea of impassable crevasses. We tried to go up on the old avalanche slopes at the side of the icefall. Above 14,000 ft. the going became extremely difficult and at 15,000 ft. we finally came to a halt. There was no way of reaching Camp III without the resources of a major expedition. As there was nothing further we could do, we were reluctantly obliged to return to Base Camp. We packed up the Base Camp equipment and on August 4 we started on the return journey.

As we were on our way down the Hunza valley to Baltit, we met three members of the German Karakoram Expedition who had managed to come to our assistance. They were anxious to make a further attempt to reach Camp III and thought that they would be able to overcome the icefall because of their previous experience of the area. I did not think it likely that they would get further than Jamil and I, but I returned to Base Camp with them to make the attempt. During the return march some foot trouble requiring minor surgery intervened

to prevent me from joining the climbing party. I gave the German climbers explicit directions on the location of the upper camps and the best route but they were unable to get beyond the barrier which had halted Jamil and me. They did however gain a vantage point on the rock wall which enabled them to see that the Camp III site was now nothing but smooth snow. They then returned, and with them I left Base Camp for the last time on August 15 to start the long homeward journey via Gilgit, Rawalpindi, and Karachi, to England.

(This expedition had more than average misfortune. The liaison officer who was forced upon them was not a volunteer and was unwilling to go, though there were other officers who were keen. In the result, he proved useless. The three high-altitude porters who were recommended to the expedition were worse than useless and had to be dismissed; the leader of them was later court-martialled for mutiny and dismissed from the Pakistan Army.

A proper system of porter registration seems to be needed, whilst the Batura party were by no means the first to find that rates of pay quoted to them by the authorities had no relation to the sums in fact demanded on the spot.—T.S.B.)