



19 *West face of Annapurna I from Thulobugin. Photo: B. Niven*

Annapurna—North face route

Henry Day

Soon after the unfortunate loss of two climbers on the Army Mountaineering Association Expedition to Khinyang Chhish in 1962, political difficulties prohibited climbing on the higher peaks anywhere in the Himalaya. However, the idea of an attempt on Annapurna I (8091 m), which had been mooted in the early 60s, was revived when the Government of Nepal released its new Rules Governing Mountaineering Expeditions 1969; the file was pulled off a shelf and dusted down. By now there was a dearth of active climbers with high-altitude experience, so Lt-Col Charles Wylie and his Committee of the A.M.A. planned an expedition which reached the summit of Tirich Mir (7708 m) in July 1969. Of the members of this expedition who formed the nucleus of this year's Annapurna team, M. W. H. Day, G. F. Owens and R. A. Summerton had climbed Tirich Mir and J. Anderson Little Tirich (see *A. J.* 75 79). Bruce Niven, a non-climber, was co-opted as commander and he carried out all the traditional functions of transport officer, as well as the more modern administrative problems of permits, radios and air-drops. The climbing leader was extremely glad to shed most responsibilities between leaving Britain and arriving at Base Camp. The climbing team was completed by G. D. B. Keelan, D. P. M. Jones and T. E. F. Taylor, none of whom had had previous Himalayan experience, and by Y. B. Shah and B. N. Rana of the Royal Nepalese Army.

The Approach

Trooping to the Far East is now done entirely by Air Support Command of the Royal Air Force, and expedition freight was first flown to Singapore on a fill-up basis. Some vital last-minute stores for the South Face Expedition also travelled in this way. From Singapore we joined a training flight to Kathmandu, thence to Pokhara which was reached on 20 March. We shared our base at the Gurkha Pension Paying Post with the South Face Expedition and soon found we were both competing with the Japanese Ladies Expedition to Annapurna III for porters. Niven eventually hired Tibetan refugees and mules when his two soldiers were unable to raise enough carriers from their villages.

The story of the French expedition that first climbed Annapurna in 1950 is superbly told in Herzog's book (see also *A. J.* 58 155) and we unashamedly wrung it dry of any information that would make our passage easier to Advance Base. We considered that the climb proper began there at 6100 m and there was no merit in a 'new' approach. We were a month ahead of them to Ichac's 'Passage du 27 Avril'—properly Thulobugin—but this proved a disadvantage since the particularly heavy winter snows lay deep and late. Only forty coolies were prepared to carry off the trade route from Choya so loads had to be ferried, every man doing every stage at least five times. There were four stages to Base Camp and the last load did not arrive until late April. During



20 North face of Annapurna I
—Advance Base was placed on
the plateau dead centre. This
and next two photos:
Henry Day

21 Fixed ropes on the North-
east buttress

this stage Taylor suffered a recurrence of pneumonia and was evacuated by helicopter.

Our six Sherpas under Sonam Girmi varied in experience. Sonam himself had reached the summit of Annapurna III with Lt-Com. Kohli's Indian expedition in 1961. For two of them it was their first expedition. Only two days out of Pokhara the Sherpas stated that they did not want to continue with us, later they demonstrated more strongly when we reached the Miristi Khola camp. Their reasons were trivial and we could only surmise the causes. In the event all except for the cook carried above Advance Base, and Sonam and Pertemba reached the top camp at 7400 m.

Future expeditions would be well advised to choose their Sherpas carefully, or even to consider the possibility of managing without them so as to avoid these sorts of difficulties.

Advance Base (Camp 2) was reached first on 16 April, swept away by an avalanche on 24 April and re-established in a safer spot two days later. The route to it was almost exactly the same as that of the French in 1950, once the winter snow had melted.

North-east buttress

The French route lay up a funnel frequently swept by ice avalanches off the Sickle, a prominent rock feature higher up the mountain. Summerton and Owens had looked at this the day before Camp 2 had been swept away around their ears, so now we looked very hard for a way to bypass the whole thing. An ice-buttress starting beneath the East Summit that led to a broad gangway and so on to the summit slopes seemed to offer a chance. On 27 April, therefore, Keelan and Day started to carve a route up it and gained 300 ft. Owens and Anderson joined them the next day, securing the way with non-stretch rope. In the meantime the others ascended a further 300 ft. After three more days of similar progress, alternating pairs of climbers in the lead, a vertical cleft tower was reached which had always appeared as an obstacle. Summerton, our fifth and last climber, was also expedition quartermaster and had been kept back sorting out the stores. He now came up to replace Anderson who returned to Base for a rest. Summerton helped to set up an intermediate camp (2A) on the buttress, whence a determined assault on the cleft tower could be made. On one occasion the top half of the fixed ropes had been torn out by an avalanche and had to be replaced. On 4 May Owens again attained the foot of the tower, which he had reached via a superb ice-wall; he found it made of unconsolidated snow and ice. He somehow swam up through the cornice using two axes driven in at arm's length. Day followed up to find that



22 *Owens on the summit of Annapurna I*

they were isolated from the face by a wide crevasse; the attempt was abandoned and they all returned to Advance Base.

The Sickle

Disappointed by defeat on the North-east buttress, but well acclimatised to the altitude, they decided now to have another look at the Sickle which had not avalanched for ten days. Keelan and Summerton set out to stay out of the central chute as much as possible and look for a route over to the right. It was not possible to gain the flank at once and the first few hundred feet were harrowing. However, they reached 6700 m and reported a camp site

beneath an ice-cliff. More important they saw that there appeared to be a gangway through the ice-cliffs above.

Eight inches of snow fell that night, rendering the route unsafe. Day decided that it would be safe on the North-east buttress because the ice there was too steep to accumulate snow, so all the climbers, plus Sonam Girmi, set off to recover the stores left at Camp 2A. Everyone had prusiking devices and opportunity was to be taken of showing Sonam how to use them on the fixed ropes. Snow had accumulated on a ledge only 10 ft from the foot of the buttress and this avalanched beneath the feet of two of the climbers. One was attached to the fixed rope but Summerton had moved away to film the others climbing up; he was swept over the edge into soft snow further down and, jack-knifing over the camera box, cracked some ribs. The doctor, David Jones, who had not acclimatised well, struggled up to Advance Base to tend him, and a few days later he was able to walk down to Base escorted by three others. Owens, Anderson and the doctor decided to wait for better conditions where they were while everyone else rested at Base Camp. They also made it clear that they needed convincing that there was still a chance of climbing Annapurna with only four climbers.

A problem of logistics

A detailed list of stores required at every camp was made out, every single item being weighed. When Owens reported the mountain ready again, Day and Keelan retraced the 3800 ft to Camp 2 in $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours and presented the bill—fourteen loads each of more than 30 lb to be carried to varying heights above 6000 m. The only possible carriers were four climbers (Day, Owens, Keelan and Anderson) and five Sherpas, but with them it was theoretically possible to achieve the summit in five days. This estimate assumed good weather, a viable route above Camp 3 (still unreconnoitred) and complete fitness of the climbers. It was in fact achieved in nine days by cutting reserves of oxygen and food to an absolute minimum.

Following experience on Tirich Mir, where oxygen was not used, and advice from Charles Wylie, the decision to provide oxygen-breathing sets was taken before leaving home and four sets of apparatus weighing 8 lb were borrowed from R.A.F. sources. Twenty-four cylinders each containing 1200 litres and weighing 20 lb when full were taken to Base Camp. Half reached Advance Base but only four beyond there, since they could not be carried. The summit pair used a bottle each on 20 May, having shared another the previous night. The plan allowed a further two bottles for the follow-up pair, but one was pruned. They had been filled to 3000 psi, which meant five hours endurance at 4 litres per minute (climbing rate) or twenty hours at 1 litre per minute

(sleeping rate, shared between two). Of six loads carried to Camp 5, two and a half consisted of oxygen-breathing apparatus.

The assault

On 12 May Anderson, Sonam Girmi and Day helped to carry up Camp 3 while Keelan and Owens looked for a route up into the bowl of the Sickle. The first gully looked steep and had an awkward rock step, so they looked further right. However, a fall of stones down a neighbouring chute decided them and they returned to report that the left-hand gully should go. Anderson and Day joined them and on 15 May Day and Keelan fixed a rope up the gully and gained the edge of the Sickle bowl. They tip-toed across it and began to climb out the other side, but found the ice-glazed rocks that form the steep handle of the Sickle too difficult. Keelan descended to Camp 2 troubled by a stiff back. Next day two Sherpas joined the party that carried four loads across the bowl. Taking a direct line to the rib that forms the handle of the Sickle, Day led a full rope's length up a wonderfully secure 70° slope of snow/ice and drove in a 2-ft-long dural stake. Owens led through and found the snow deteriorating, and if anything steepening. He escaped left on to the handle with the rope stretched taut and brought up the others, decidedly impressed by the exposure. The angle eased and several hundred feet went more easily, even though two icy walls needed step cutting. Finally, the crevassed upper snow-field was reached and stores dumped at the site of Camp 4 (7100 m). The next day was a rest day, but Owens characteristically offered to make another carry to Camp 4. Day had left his load of rations at the foot of the wall and there was a risk that they would be pilfered by a Tibetan raven that was following their progress up the mountain wall with great interest. They called him Reggie and often fed him. Owens, who is a keen ornithologist, had a particularly soft spot for Reggie and threw him biscuits, which the raven collected together in a neat pile before flying off with his beak full. He had lately rather presumed on his special relationship by helping himself to several days' rations from Camp 3 while it was unoccupied. So Owens and two of the Sherpas who carried some oxygen to Camp 4 were relieved to collect these rations intact on the way.

Keelan now returned from the care of the doctor at Camp 2 with Pemba Norbu and Ila Tashi, so that our party of eight was assembled for the summit bid. It was a great thrill for the climbers at Advance Base to see a crocodile of eight dots slowly plod across the Sickle bowl on 18 May. The Sherpas were now in particularly good heart and dug out the site for Camp 4 with great zeal when they arrived. There was only room for six men in the two Meade tents so Pemba Norbu took young Ila Tashi back to Camp 3 soon afterwards. Ila had been very impressed by the steepness of the climb into and out of the bowl, but fixed ropes and a clearly flagged route reduced the hazards.

They penned a message for the South Face expedition and dictated it over the radio to Base Camp. From there it was passed over the H.F. link to the A.S.F.E. Base in the Modi Khola.

'18 May 70. Camp 4. 7300 m. For Bonington from Day. We hope to establish Camp 5 at 7700 metres tomorrow and send pairs of climbers to the summit on 20, 21 and 22 May. The route will be marked with yellow flags and Camps 4 and 5 will be left in place.

Camps consist of tent, mattresses, sleeping bags, stove, fuel, food, etc. sufficient for two men for one night. Nil oxygen. Let me know a.s.a.p. if you are still interested because we will pull out quickly if successful.'

Everyone slept badly. Overnight the Sherpas lost all their fire and refused to carry even one ration in addition to the oxygen sets. The summit pair, therefore, were the most heavily laden when they wound off through a maze of crevasses early next morning, carefully flagging the path. It proved a gruelling day, the climbers becoming increasingly anoxic. The finger of rock, at the foot of which Herzog and Lachenal spent their highest night in great discomfort, was long in view but it was well beyond mid-day before the site of Camp 5 was chosen at 7900 m. Keelan and Anderson unselfishly stayed to help excavate the considerable quantity of very hard snow necessary to make a platform for the tent, in the course of which their rope fell over the edge and disappeared below. When the sirdar arrived he told them that Pertemba had strained his heart, so they quickly hurried down. It had been planned that they would support the summit bid of the other pair but this, to everyone's disappointment, was now ruled out. Keelan and Anderson in Camp 4 spent an even more miserable night than the one before.

Owens and Day now experienced the luxury of a night's sleep breathing oxygen. Unfortunately, it aggravated Owens's badly split lips so he did not sleep well, hearing the wind rise and howl round the flapping canvas. Meanwhile, Day was enjoying a blissful rest, after hearing over the walkie-talkie one of the best weather forecasts of the expedition—windless and cloudless. He woke to find just that—but a temperature of minus 30°C.

Dressing proved a dreadful chore. They had slept in fur suits, quilted trousers and duvet jackets. They now donned double boots, over-boots, wind-proofs, crampons and finally oxygen sets and were off at eight o'clock, the sun having warmed the tent a little. The route began easily, with maybe a mile of ankle-breaking crampon work up an easy slope to beneath the final rampart. Twin gullies split this on the right and they knew the French had used one of these in preference to the icy rocks. They followed suit up the left chute finding it possible to kick good steps in the steepening snow. They turned the oxygen

flow up to six litres a minute. When Day began to dither looking for a stance Owens took over and zig-zagged strongly to the top of the gully until, escaping left, it became necessary to cut a few steps among the rocks. The final slope was of hard ice and they moved separately with good belays. Owens headed for a gap in the cornice and at eleven o'clock cut through it and announced he was there. He cut a step for Day to join him and they both enjoyed the fantastic sight of Machapuchare spearing through a sea of cloud. Day took a round of photographs and Owens posed with the Union Jack and the flag of Nepal. Particularly impressive westwards was Dhaulagiri, separated from them by what is possibly the deepest valley in the world. Sad to relate, their strongest feeling was of anxiety and they soon prepared to retrace their steps, remembering at the last to collect a few stones from the summit cliffs.

The descent

Summerton had followed their progress through binoculars from the Base Camp and had informed both Advance Base and the supporting pair of their success. Keelan and Anderson had returned to Camp 5 and they greeted the descending pair with drink after drink, quite the best welcome they could have had.

Together the four returned to Camp 4 for a final sleepless night, during which the weather turned. The temperature rose dangerously and snow began to fall. The descent to Camp 3 was a nightmare over slopes threatening to avalanche. Visibility was very poor and even the frequent marker flags proved almost insufficient. Here they were greeted by Sherpas who were recovering the more important equipment. Some hours later, extremely weary, they reached Advance Base where the doctor and Niven had been waiting. Neither of these had acclimatised well even to that height and their physical condition was no better than that of the others who had been higher. Shortly afterwards Owens had the great misfortune to disappear down a crevasse near the camp; he knocked himself about quite badly, breaking some ribs. The snow cover was rotting fast and a speedy evacuation was becoming imperative. He bravely climbed down unaided next day, collapsing finally close to Camp 1 to which he was carried by the Sherpas. He continued on to Base Camp the following day to be greeted by live chickens dropped by parachute. Some of the parachutes in this drop failed to open, but these particular loads were, fortunately, not alive.

Conclusions and future prospects

As on Tirich Mir last year avalanches provided the most harrowing experiences of the expedition. They are the unavoidable hazard of big Himalayan peaks. The attempt to bypass the most dangerous section of the face was unsuccessful,

but well worth making. It would have made a very direct route to the East Summit, which has yet to be climbed. The traverse between the three summits would not be technically difficult or unrealistically long from the vicinity of Camp 5. The West face is very striking. A good view of it is obtained from Thulobugin on the march in from Choya.

It may be time to rethink the support required on a large expedition. Light aircraft are available for charter in Nepal and the feasibility of dropping supplies by parachute into secluded base camp locations has been demonstrated. When coolies will not carry to these locations, as they seem increasingly reluctant to do, there may well be a case for dispensing with their services in favour of an air-drop.

Our Sherpas caused us much anxiety in the early stages, indicating that they wished to leave the expedition even before reaching Base Camp. In the event they performed as well as they always have, but by then they had destroyed the integrity of the group by their actions. I would strongly advise future expeditions to consider most carefully how they should select their Sherpas and how many they should employ. A factor that may influence the decision to employ high-altitude porters at all is the high cost of their wages and insurance (now as much as the fare from Europe). Mountaineers nowadays expect to carry loads themselves and equal or exceed the performance of Sherpas, particularly on technically harder sections. It should be remembered, however, that the Sirdar (the senior Sherpa) has a responsibility for organising coolies, and the Government of Nepal may well insist on his employment as a condition for entry.

Oxygen was used for the final night and day on Annapurna (8091 m). We did not use it on Tirich Mir (7708 m) last year. The chances of behaving irrationally or clumsily are so increased without oxygen that the margin of safety is considerably reduced. The apparatus we used was heavy, but effective. The South Face expedition had much lighter sets but reported the masks to be uncomfortable. By combining the best features of both types an excellent equipment should result.

Coloured flags are very good for way-marking on open snow-fields.

The climbers acclimatised well by working hard at progressively higher altitude and ensuring that they drank enough fluid. The food proved suitable in every way, full meals being eaten at the highest camp and one climber putting on weight. The average age of the climbing team was twenty-seven.

References

A.J. 75 79.

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SUMMARY Himalaya, Annapurna I. British/Nepalese Army Annapurna Expedition, 1970. J. Anderson, M. W. H. Day, G. D. B. Keelan, D. P. M. Jones, B. M. Niven, G. F. Owens, R. A. Summerton, T. E. F. Taylor, Y. B. Shah, B. N. Rana.

20 May Annapurna I (8091 m), second ascent by the French 1950 route. M. W. H. Day, G. F. Owens.



23 *Couture on the summit of Kilimanjaro.* This and the next two photos: Bernard Couture