

# The Army Mountaineering Association Himachal Pradesh Expedition 1973

Jon Fleming

As we made the summit plateau and looked towards the summit cone of snow, not very far away in distance or in height, a slight feeling of anti-climax overcame me. The actual apex of the mountain seemed disappointingly accessible. Up till now the mountain had provided something of interest at every stage. The steep flog in mushy snow to Camp 1; the steep climb up and over the snow boss to Camp 2; the very exposed corniced arêtes to Camp 3; finally the route through the séracs to the plateau. Now as we crunched through the crisp snow surface at 6400 m the summit was in our grasp. It was a beautiful late afternoon. The whole world was still, save for the swish of the rope on the snow, the measured tread, and our lungs clawing for more air. In twenty minutes we were on the top of Menthosa, 6444 m, gazing out across a profusion of peaks sticking up like teeth at grotesque angles—a veritable dentists' nightmare. One of the objectives on our side of the expedition had been realised. But to go back to the beginning . . .

Just after midnight on 6 May 1973, 25 dusty, tired and thirsty travellers tumbled out of a hot bus into the cool, fresh and fragrant air of Johnson's Orchards in Raisan in the Kulu valley of North India. The AMA Himachal Pradesh Expedition 1973 had arrived. The purpose of the expedition was to climb a number of peaks in the Kulu valley and in the Chamba Lahul areas of the Himalaya with a view to selecting a competent, well equipped team to climb Mount Everest during the pre-monsoon period of 1976. We had already experienced a forced stay in New Delhi, where we had spent a week negotiating our pile of stores and food through the Customs authorities. We were now anxious to be on our way. Months and months of planning nearly came to nought when the DC in Kulu refused to recognise the permit which I had been issued with in Delhi to cross the Rohtang Pass, 3978 m. It took a day to win him round and nearly that to cash a cheque in the last bank up the valley. But at last, with the permit in my hand and sufficient cash to last us the next ten weeks, we were off.

## **Indrasan party**

On 9 May, having advanced our watches by two hours (to Expedition Time) so as to make the maximum use of sunlight, the expedition split into two parties. Ten members and an Indian LO left Raisan for their allocated mountains of Indrasan (6221 m) and Deo Tibba (6001 m). Their leader was Major Gerry Owens WFR. Indrasan had been climbed three times before, but only once by a British party. This was in 1971 by the w ridge (*AJ* 77 34). Bob Pettigrew had described it to me at the MEF Screening Committee as 'an Eiger-type problem'. His description of Deo Tibba was very different: 'a Sunday afternoon walk for ladies!' Having engaged some 60 porters the party went up and over the Chandrakhani Pass (3200 m) to their Base Camp established in deep snow on 13 May

at 3810 m. Sheep ticks were troublesome on this part of the journey, sometimes attacking even the most sensitive parts of the anatomy. The painful remedy proved to be oil of citronella!! Having arrived at Base Camp the porters were dismissed and there then began the familiar, soul-destroying flog of back-packing the stores and food to the higher camps. The normal form was to get up very early, while it was still dark, and in temperatures of  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  carry loads up to the next camp while the surface of the snow was still crisp and firm. Once there the loads would be thankfully dropped and a hasty return was made to the former camp before the snow conditions deteriorated too much. The route between Camp 2 (4720 m) and Camp 3 (5580 m) was barred by the formidable de Graaff couloir, 2500 ft high. This was finally scaled on 22 May owing to fine work put in by Owens and Anderson amid atrociously dangerous snow conditions. On the descent Owens himself was caught in a powder snow avalanche and survived, fortunately without injury. Having put in fixed ropes up the couloir Advance Base Camp (ABC) was established on 27 May at 5580 m across a wide plateau from the couloir and underneath the towering 2000-ft rock mass of Indrasan. However, it was not possible to start stocking this camp until 1 June because of a five-day spell of bad weather. Following this, on 2 June a steep rock wall was scaled to gain a col on the E ridge of the mountain. From here a 900-ft buttress, involving some VS pitches of rock climbing, was scaled by Day and Gunson while Anderson and Hardie followed up putting in fixed rope. All the while ABC was being stocked by the remainder of the team, which included two Gurkha soldiers, one of whom has already been on the South Col of Everest. By 5 June a summit bid was deemed to be possible. However, on this attempt some falling rock and ice hit Hardie, who sustained a deep gash underneath his left eye and had to withdraw to ABC. On 7 June a further summit bid was made but because of the difficulties involved they were much slower than was anticipated and had to put in a bivouac Camp 5 at 6035 m. This was established on a minute ledge. The next day Owens, Anderson and Eskell set off up the crest of the ridge at 6am. After crossing a rock gully they came to a crevassed section which led to a bergschrund and on to the summit slope. This consisted of powder snow on hard ice which made the going so tricky that it had to be climbed pitch by pitch. The summit of Indrasan was reached at 9.10am and from it they gazed out over a sea of peaks in the crisp bright dawn of a new day. It was an exhilarating way to start a new day, it being only just after 7am Indian Time. All too soon they had to descend, well satisfied that they had claimed their peak by a new route. The same route was repeated by Day, Gunson and Hardie two days later. In the three weeks that remained before returning to Raisan this team climbed Deo Tibba (6001 m) from the N—everyone got to the top; Ali Ratni Tibba (5490 m) by Moss's route on the S face; Ramchukor (5304 m); Jagatsukh Peak (5243 m); Consolation Peak (5227 m) and Wangyal Peak (4999 m). They returned to Raisan via the Malana nullah on 22 June.

### **Menthosa party**

Over our radio link which kept the two parties in touch three times a week, we of the Menthosa party heard with great satisfaction of the successes on Indrasan and Deo Tibba. Our party of eighteen, including an Indian LO, had left Raisan on 10 May. Our aims were to climb Menthosa (6444 m) and

Baihali Jot (6280 m). Our approach march was a long one, about 150 miles largely on foot because the roads were still blocked and involved the crossing of the 3978-m Rohtang Pass into the Chandra valley. Base Camp was to be put at Udaipur, at the confluence of the Chandra-Bhage river and the Miyar nullah. Because of porter and mule difficulties, as well as the atrocious condition of the road, it took us nine days to get to Base Camp. However, the scenery as we moved down the valley more than made up for our hardships. Towering snow-clad peaks dwarfed the ribbon-like waterway of the Chandra river, with its luxuriant pastures on either bank. The initial curiosity of the simple yet hardy people soon gave way to smiles and *namastis* as news of our presence spread before us. The doctors were always busy practising their trade at all the halts along the way. On 19 May Base Camp was established amid hosts of excited children on the football pitch of Udaipur. After taking a day to sort ourselves out and to hire more porters the team left for Menthosa by way of the spectacular Miyar nullah. The narrow track was barely discernible at first. It clung precariously to the steep shaley slope some hundreds of feet above the crashing torrent of the river as the latter thundered down to join the Chandra. Sometimes the track would relent and give way to a sandy path winding its way lazily through tall pine trees Alpine in character, then it would fling itself down to the river's edge to cross to the other side by the flimsiest of bridges. After three days of this ABC was established on snow at 4420 m. Here the

5 *Camp 1 on Menthosa, Dagai Jot in the background* This and next photo: Jon Fleming

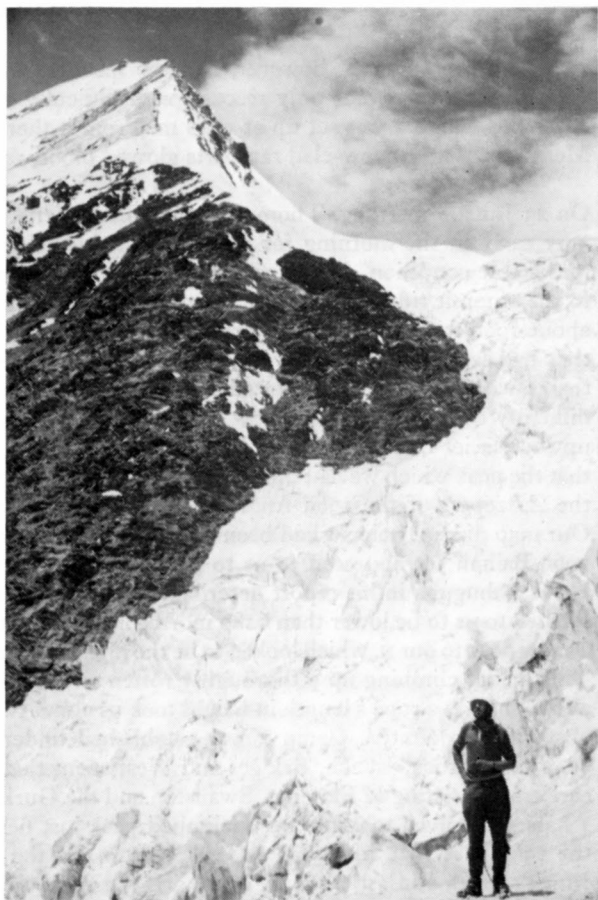


porters struck for more money, so not needing them any further at this stage we dismissed them. From ABC we got the most fabulous view of the mountain, heavily caked with the winter snow yet offering a feasible route up the right-hand skyline (E) ridge. Camp 1 at 5030 m was established on the next day, in a col, following a technically easy but soul-destroying slog through indifferent snow conditions. Later that day a cow destroyed all our hard-earned steps when it was led over the Urgus Pass into the next valley! While Camp 1 was being stocked by the rest of the team, four lead climbers, Dilly, Armstrong, Thompson and Khagendrabahadur Limbu reconnoitred a way to Camp 2 at 5590 m. The route lay along a tricky snow traverse and then up an 800-ft steep snow slope eventually giving out on to a huge plateau some 3000 ft below the summit. The next part of the route to Camp 3 (6185 m) was clearly visible. After the route to Camp 2 had been made safe by the provision of fixed ropes the same storm which had stopped the Indrasan party now hindered us. It was the only period of sustained bad weather that we experienced during the whole of the expedition. The wind howled round the two-man Black's Mountain and Arctic Guinea tents, the temperature dropped dramatically to  $-28^{\circ}\text{C}$  and about 4 ft of new snow fell. After five days it all blew over and by 2 June the route to Camp 3 had been reconnoitred. The final part of the route lay along the most spectacular knife-edge snow arête, with a 5000-ft drop to the ABC glacier on one side and a 2000-ft drop on the other. Camp 3 was established on 3 June by the four lead men and by Fleming, Swanston, Muston and Battu (the LO) acting as porters. Taking advantage of the fine weather on this day Dilly decided to attempt the summit. We, having just returned from our portering task, were thrilled to watch their progress. Four black, minute dots crept across our front, but about 2500-ft above us. They soon disappeared over the 'lip' of a plateau, and then the cloud which had been threatening all afternoon rolled in and obliterated our view. It was not until the evening radio schedule at 7pm that we heard of their success. It was drama all round by courtesy of Bells Ltd and of Swanston who carried it. Over the next six days all members of the party got to the top of Menthosa. On the way we all carried out stringent oxygen tests using the different types of apparatus we had to test. The tests were carried out at Camp 2, high enough to make us appreciate its value provided one moved slowly and deliberately. Once the final party had returned to ABC from its summit bid the entire party withdrew off the mountain in good order, arriving back at Base Camp on 14 June.

The 15th of June was pronounced a rest day, and on the 16th the party, less Battu our LO, who unfortunately had damaged his ankle on Menthosa, left for Baihali Jot. We had also decided to climb Duphao Jot (6099 m) as it was so near. After another three-day walk-in, punctuated by the usual porters' strikes, ABC was established under a 2500-ft ice-fall, which was as noisy as it was chaotic and unpleasant looking, at 4300 m. The ice-fall effectively barred any easy access to Baihali Jot. While Camp 1 on Duphao Jot was being established on a ridge line to the N of ABC the Baihali Jot party forced a route up the left-hand side of the ice-fall in an effort to gain the glacier at the top of it. Much to their dismay, however, they found the way blocked by a huge crevasse running the entire width of the ice-fall. There was no way round it except by taking to the rock on the left-hand side. This they did the next day in deterio-

rating weather. Lynch, however, had the misfortune to fall into a crevasse with all his kit and was only rescued with difficulty after a long, cold hour. After this Camp 1 was set up at 5090 m. From it there was a superb view of Menthosa, whose snow-clad ramparts glowed blood-red in the evening sun.

On 23 June Armstrong, Thompson, and Brister left Camp 1 on Duphao Jot very early in the morning for their summit bid. The snow was, at last, in reasonable condition. After a very long and spectacular ridge walk they came to the summit ridge which gave them some entertaining mixed climbing for about 1000 ft. At 11am they were on the top, identifying many of the peaks they had seen from Menthosa but from a different angle. If they had looked to their NW they would have spotted ten small dots making their way with great difficulty through appalling snow conditions to Pegasus Col, some two miles up the glacier from Camp 1 on Baihali Jot. From this col we began to doubt that the peak which we had up until then considered to be Baihali Jot, based on the *AJ* report of the 1969 Anglo-Indian Expedition, was in fact that peak. Our map did not help; it had been made before the days of aerial survey. The 1969 Baihali Jot appeared to us to be a bend in the ridge. Certainly Major H. V. Bahuguna in his report described it as 'a disappointing summit' and it seemed to us to be lower than 6280 m. Accordingly we turned our attention to a snow peak to our N, which looked to be the highest peak in the immediate area. This meant climbing up a thoroughly rotten and nasty rock pyramid, which although only a rope's length in height took us about two hours to climb. This obstacle surmounted, Camp 2 was established under our new objective at 5640 m. Peacock, Lynch, Bridges and West spent that night there. The load carriers, consisting of Fleming, Swanston and the Gurkhas, returned to Camp 1 having resolved to climb an unclimbed peak just behind that camp, which the 1969 party had identified as Peak 5690 m, on the next day. The 24th of June dawned, our last climbing day. Early the Peacock party left their Camp 2 for their peak. The route lay up a long, steep, very exposed snow arête which gave some really exhilarating climbing. It was a beautiful morning and the higher they went the more peaks came into their view. By 11am they were on the top. The 1969 'peak' was by now well below them. They were standing on a small snow cone whose sides fell sharply away to the glaciers all round. At the time this is being written we are still undecided which peak this is. The question should be solved by the end of the year when the photographic evidence becomes available. Nevertheless I am fairly confident that this was a first ascent, in which case the name of Bahuguna Peak has been suggested to the Indian authorities. They have provisionally accepted this. At the same time as Bahuguna Peak/Baihali Jot was being climbed by Peacock and his party Fleming and his party were climbing Peak 5690 m. They started later than the Peacock group and they also had to travel to Pegasus Col from Camp 1 so by the time that they were half way up the cloud had rolled in and they were muffled in dense fog. The route lay along a finely exposed arête, very corniced on the N side and studded with large, hidden crevasses. The way was steep. It was breathless and exacting work, but just after 1pm they were on the top. This consisted of a huge cornice which loomed right over Camp 1. My calculations put the height at nearer 5945 m. Certainly this was a first ascent and the name Gurkha Parbat has been suggested to the Indian authorities, who



6 *The flank of Gurkha Parbat with part of the route up the icefall*

have accepted it. After this exciting day the two parties returned to ABC to join up with the Duphao Jot party and all of us then returned to Base Camp by the same route as that taken on the inward journey. On 29 June the march back to Raisan began. Because the road was now motorable between Thiroth and Koksar we took a bus, which only took four hours instead of the five days which it had taken on the march in. The Rohtang Pass still had not been pronounced fit for buses so we had again to walk over this, arriving at Raisan on 2 July. There we met the Indrasan party and became a reunited expedition once again. Before returning to the UK on 14 July parties went off to Dharmsala, Jaipur, Agra and Fatehpursikri, while Fleming and Peacock visited Kathmandu to discuss the Everest project—our ultimate goal.

**SUMMARY** The Army Mountaineering Association Himachal Pradesh Expedition 1973.

Menthosa 6444 m. 3rd ascent. Dilly, Armstrong, Thompson, Khagendra-bahadur Limbu. 3 June. 4th ascent. Fleming, Swanston, Page, Muston,

Brister, Beckett. 5 June. 5th ascent. Kefford, Basantakumar Rai, Pasang Tamang, Bhattacharyya, Fleming, Swanston. 7 June. 6th ascent. Peacock, Lynch, Bridges, West. 9 June.

Baihali Jot/Bahuguna Peak, 6280 m. 1st ascent. Peacock, Lynch, Bridges, West. 24 July.

Gurkha Parbat, 5945 m. 1st ascent. Fleming, Swanston, Pasang Tamang, Basantakumar Rai, Khagendrabahadur Limbu, Sirdar Rinzing. 24 July.

Indrasan, 6221 m. New route. 1st ascent, E ridge. Anderson, Owens, Eskell. 7 June. 2nd ascent, E ridge. Day, Gunson, Hardie. 9 June.

Duphao Jot, 6099 m. 2nd ascent. Armstrong, Thompson, Brister. 23rd June.

Deo Tibba, 6001 m. Anderson, Eskell, Owens, Chand, Lane. 5 June. Day, Hardie, Gunson, Gyalzen Sherpa, Hellberg. 7 June. Norbu Sherpa, Sirdar Chand. 12 June.

Ali Ratni Tibba, 5490 m. 4th ascent. Gunson, Hellberg, Lane. 14 June.

Ramchukor, 5304 m. Day, Hardie. 18 June.

Jagatsukh, 5243 m. Day, Hardie. 26 May.

Consolation Peak, 5227 m. Day, Sirdar Chand. 16 June.

Wangyal Peak, 4999 m. Eskell, Hellberg, Sirdar Wangyal. 27 May.

*Maps:* Menthosa *AJ* 75 38, 42; Indrasan *AJ* 71 237.