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MICK FOWLER

## The One That Nearly Got Away

*(Plates 15-18)*

**F**ood at Base Camp was becoming boringly repetitive. Rice and dahl. The only things that varied were the proportions. Day 1: 40% dahl, 60% rice. Day 2: 60% dahl, 40% rice. And so on.

Dolardrum, our second cook (the first clearly couldn't stand the prospect of three weeks with us and ran away!), suggested he introduce some variety into our diet by returning to the nearest village and buying greens, potatoes, chickens, etc. And so we ended up with two chickens strutting boldly around Base Camp pecking purposefully and generally looking remarkably healthy. But Dolardrum was a Buddhist. He would not kill them. Mike Morrison and Mike O'Brien were equally firm in their stand. Eating yes – killing no. I was the one most keen for a varied diet but was new to the techniques required. Steve Sustad was a vegetarian who in one of his previous (American) lives had chicken-killing experience. It was, he assured us, simply a matter of swinging the poor creature round by the neck until it broke. I looked uncertain. The vegetarian offered to demonstrate. The two Mikes made friends with the chickens and suggested they might make good pets. Dolardrum caught one and presented it to Steve. The other ran off into the mist, not to be seen again until the following morning.

Some vigorous swinging had a sudden and surprising result. The head came off. An effective if not entirely expected result.

The resultant meat provided one or two mouthfuls of variation from the normal diet, but it was clear that for food that was actually enjoyable to eat we would have to get onto the mountain and justify breaking into our closely guarded supply of chocolate bars and baby food.

We had been in India for three weeks now: one week arguing with bureaucrats in Delhi, one walking in via Manali, Udiapor and Atholi (rather than the direct route via Kishtwar which was classed by the Home Affairs Ministry as out of bounds to mountaineering trips – although, ironically, the area was open to unsupervised trekkers) and one week struggling to acclimatise in more or less torrential rain.

The weather was appalling. I had been here before, in 1989. Then I remembered the weather as being continually good. Now it rained – and rained, and rained. Deepak, our liaison officer, was the Indian bouldering champion, but the boulders were mist-shrouded and dripping with water – much like his tent and sleeping-bag. He looked miserable. Eventually the Mikes decided to cut their losses and head for home. Deepak

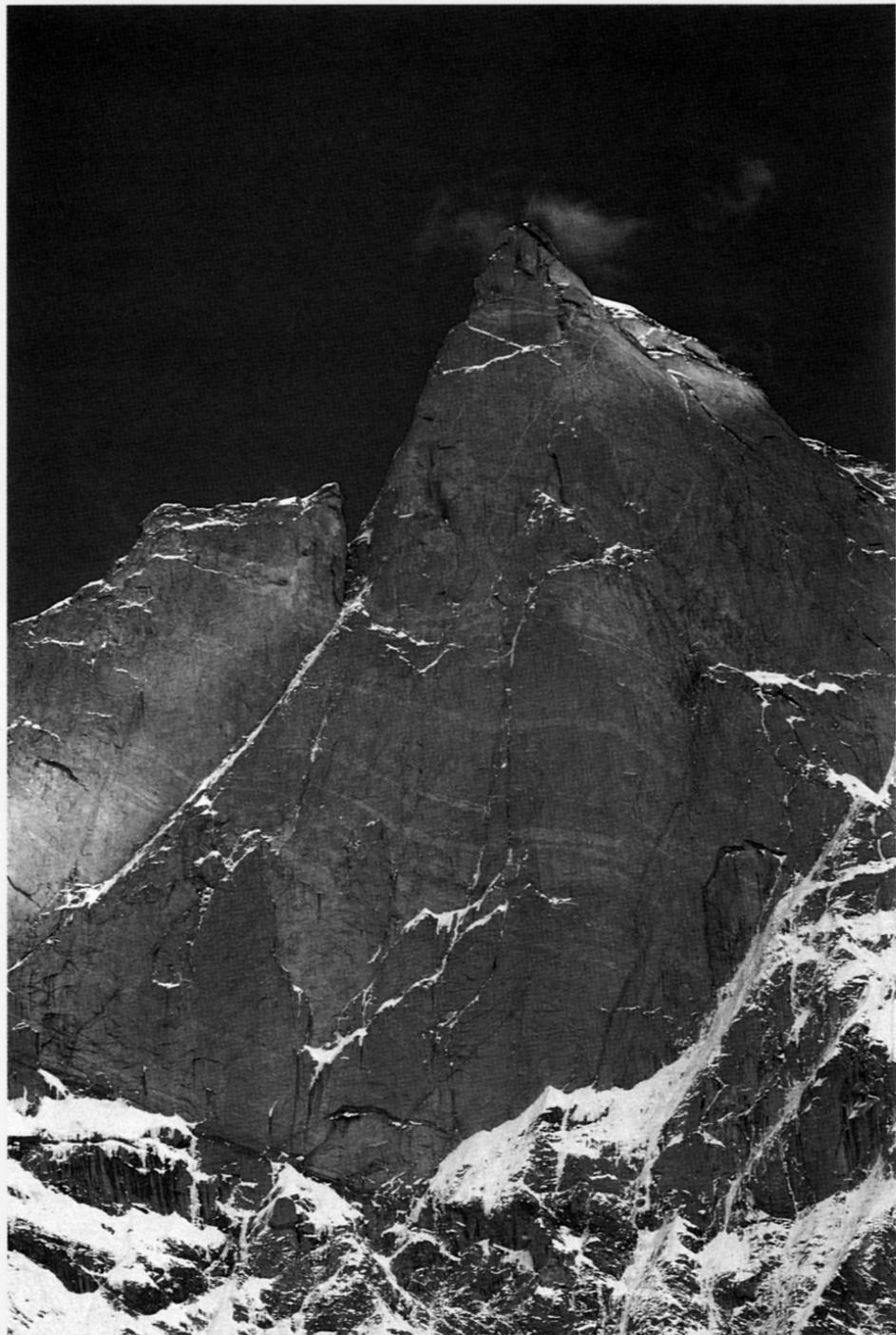
professed himself keen to head down to meet Dolardrum's family, and Steve and I began to get that uncomfortable feeling of being on our own. On the bright side, though, the departure of the other two meant that there were considerably more chocolate bars available between Steve and me. The delays had cost us time and, with our days at or above Base Camp strictly limited by my return to work, some urgent activity was indicated.

A slight clearing in the weather provided the necessary impetus and soon we were weaving our way up the moraine-covered glacier, stumbling under the weight of our sacks. Although it was only about seven hours' walk to the foot of the face, the soft upper glacier necessitated either a very early start or a two-day approach. Neither of us liked the prospect of a sufficiently early start, and so two days it was – one across the glacier and up steep boulders and grass to avoid an icefall and the second mainly plodding up soft snow to the flat bowl at the foot of the face. In 1989, on Cerro Kishtwar, illness in the team had prevented us from even crossing the bergschrund. It was not too difficult, therefore, to beat our previous high point. Crisp front-pointing up impressively deep and narrow avalanche runnels allowed us to keep clear of the time-consuming powder snow out on the slopes.

Thirty minutes after we had crossed the bergschrund, a series of expletives from above suggested that something was wrong and my fears were confirmed when Steve waved an ice axe devoid of a pick. To go down now would risk missing what promised to be a good weather-break, but to go on would mean making do with only three tools between us. The decision was immediate; we could pass an axe between us as required. Using an adze to climb steep ice did present problems though. It was necessary to flick the corner in – a motion which almost inevitably resulted in a chip of ice finding its way down the climber's neck. Noticing Steve's discomfort, I refrained from mentioning the subject hoping (successfully) that no suggestion of sharing the tool on this relatively easy ground would be made. We were aiming for a diagonal ramp cutting prominently across the face which could now be seen not far above us. Powder snow clung stubbornly at an amazingly steep angle, effectively keeping us guessing as to whether it would be relatively straightforward or involve desperately insecure scrabbling on powder-covered rock. At one point we could see that it narrowed so much that some pure rock-climbing would be necessary, and high up it clearly steepened into an horrific overhanging section to reach a col high on the N spur.

Picking our way on upwards, the ground became increasingly awkward. The ropes came out and, after a total of seven weeks trying to climb this mountain, my first roped pitches were done. The difficulty at this stage consisted of short steps of Grade IV, but even on this ground it was easiest to swap a broken axe at every stance, so that at least the leader had two good tools.

The powder snow accumulation did a remarkably good job at disguising the difficulty of the ground ahead. What looked to be straightforward snow/ice invariably turned out to be hard ice or rock covered in twelve



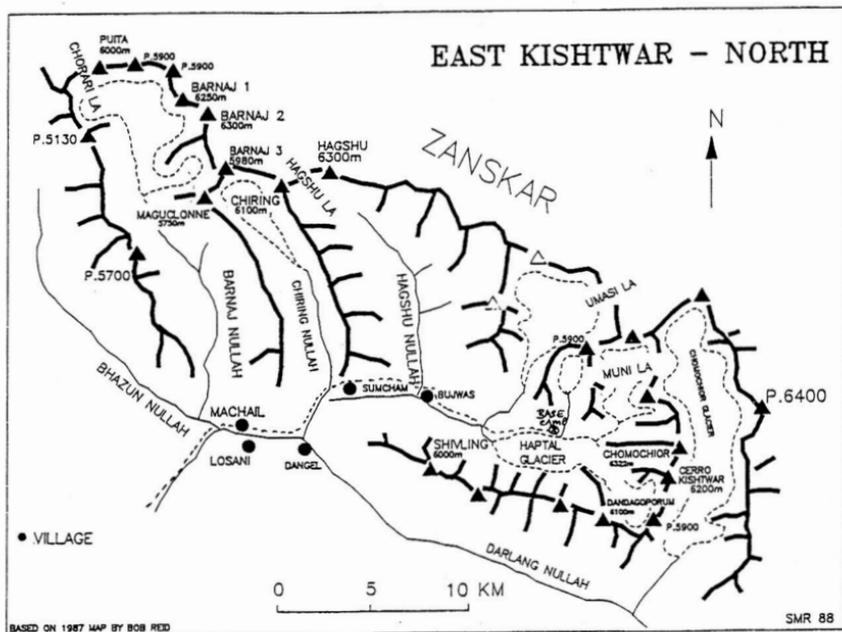
15. Cerro Kishtwar, 6200m. The climb took the L to R slanting ramp to the notch on the L skyline, and continued out of sight round the corner on the NE face. (Mike O'Brien) (p48)

inches of powder. The whole ramp was set at least at 65 degrees and it was a source of continual amazement that so much powder had built up on it. This ground, though, appeared to be Steve's forte. Scraping the snow away with his adze and teetering gently up the precarious ground beneath, he left a clear trail like a giant slug. A pendulum pitch to cross a particularly blank section led to a convenient projecting flake where our progress ended for the night. We had brought a small two-man Gore-Tex tent with us but we didn't manage to find even one site above the bergschrund on which to pitch it. Instead, I always slept wrapped in the tent fabric, whilst Steve made use of a bivvy-bag that he had fortuitously brought along.

Steadily more challenging ground led to the overhanging section at the top of the ramp. Arriving at 3pm there were only three hours or so of daylight left. Benightment was looking a definite possibility. After an initial effort on my part saw my sack becoming inextricably stuck in the main fault line, Steve led a fine mixed pitch, impressing me enormously by braving the cold temperatures without gloves, whilst I froze in the back of the fault line. The warming powers of adrenalin-surgng activity never cease to amaze.

This section had been one of the uncertain areas of the route. From beneath the face the problem looked to be a deep vertical gash with a couple of large chockstones. Ever hopeful, we had convinced ourselves that it would be possible to squeeze behind these obstacles and get easily up to the col. Now that we were actually here it was clear that our thoughts were perhaps a little over-optimistic. The bulk of the fault line consisted of impressively crumbly material which was distinctly not conducive to good protection placements. There were two chockstones neither of which had a through route. Steve had effectively outflanked the first one but the second still loomed above us through the evening mist. A challenging pitch followed, with sky-hooks and ice axe clips allowing progress bolstered by protection from dubious rock pegs. It was my turn to warm up, whilst Steve could do little but shiver and watch my faltering progress in the failing light. A final difficult traverse and a swim through bottomless powder saw me arrive at the col at 7pm in the last rays of the light.

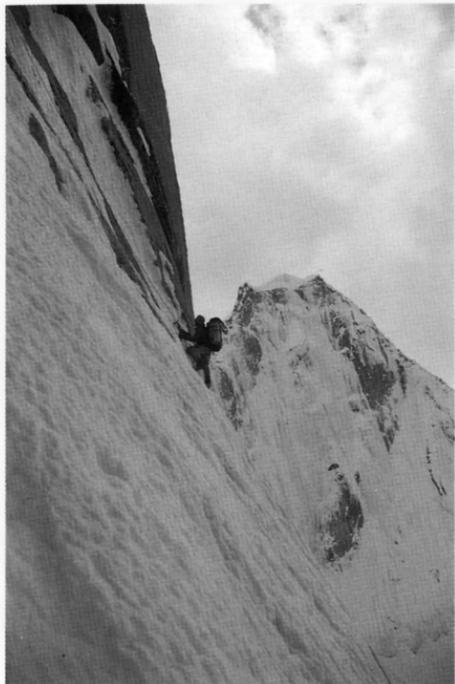
We had hoped that the col would provide a reasonable site for the tent, but the reality was disappointing; not only was the col only 15ft wide but it consisted of a knife-edge of bottomless powder overhanging at the far side. Fortunately I had managed to place a sound belay peg before the light faded completely. I had left my sack hanging midway up the pitch and, being unable to haul it up in one go, I now stood in gently falling snow, cooling down rapidly and waiting for Steve's assistance in manhandling it round the overhangs. Every time he freed it I could pull it up for a few feet until failing strength or another snag prevented further progress. Tying it off to the belay each time became increasingly challenging as the light faded completely. The problem was that my head torch was in my sack and I dare not unclip any knot whose function was not



one hundred per cent clear. The result was an impressive tangle of knots and a very cold Fowler by the time Steve hauled himself up onto the col.

A precarious night on separate ledges, with a pulley system ferrying food and drink back and forth, gave way to another cloudless morning and the sight of more horrors ahead. Our proposed line now moved round onto the NE face which we hoped would allow rapid progress. Closer inspection, however, confirmed our worst fears: very steep smooth granite slabs smothered in powder snow. The day passed slowly, with long hot precarious pitches in the morning sun and a series of cold grovels in the afternoon. A final mixed rock and snow aid pitch of the most memorable sort led out to a patch of powder snow on the N spur. Placing the last belay peg of the day (in the dark again!), my hammer head broke. Only one axe and one hammer between two. Such is life. We tried to look on it as providing 'additional interest'.

Across to one side of our two sleeping 'ledges' was ... a sling. It could only have been left by one team. In 1991 Andy Perkins and Brendan Murphy had made a spirited attempt on a line climbing the centre of the NW face and exiting onto the N spur at this point. After 17 days of capsule-style climbing they climbed away from the end of their fixed ropes, doubtless hoping for easier ground around the corner on the NE face. They were, of course, disappointed and ground to a halt a mere 150m from the summit.



16. Day 1. Steven Sustad climbing after the tension traverse. (*Mick Fowler*) (p48)



17. Day 3. Mick Fowler belaying from the bivy ledge above the difficult pitch to the col. (*Steven Sustad*) (p48)



18. Day 4. Mick Fowler on the summit of Cerro Kishtwar. (*Steven Sustad*) (p48)

Our situation was different. Being five days up from Base Camp and three days from the bergschrund we were feeling relatively strong. Before the light faded completely, I saw enough to be thankful that this was the case and sympathised with Andy Perkins and Brendan Murphy for failing when they were so close.

Above us, the crest of the N buttress reared up as a smooth bulbous nose of granite. The obvious way lay to the left up a distressingly steep groove system capped by an overhang of dripping icicles. Forty metres of awkward powder snow scraping and a short desperate wall led to a belay at the foot of the groove proper. Here, an abseil sling suggested arrival at the Perkins/Murphy high point.

The groove was just off vertical with an eggshell layer of ice one inch away from the rock. It was one of those difficult areas where it was not clear which way would be the best – smashing the ice away and climbing the rock or hooking up the ice hoping that it wouldn't come away. Working on the basis that I could always fall back on the former technique if the latter failed (but not vice versa) I proceeded to cross my fingers and head off up the ice. A section coming away in the first 20ft almost ended this technique but instead revealed a fine nut placement. And so it went on ... one of those fantastic pitches where everything went right for a change. Every time I bashed away a piece of ice protection, possibilities appeared; every time I climbed the ice, it stayed in place. Perfect. A short aid section led to a small bay beneath a particularly nasty overhanging crack. Time to belay. Steve came up and professed himself unhappy with the way ahead. I could see the problem. Blank granite on either side of the crack offered no protection and the crack itself was completely ice-choked with a very large Himalayan icicle formation hanging dangerously down on the lip.

The great thing about climbing with Steve is that, happy or not, once he has convinced himself that there is no alternative route, he can be relied upon to do everything he possibly can to get up. Here he was true to form. Demolishing the icicle with care (only bruises for me, as opposed to breakages or death) he proceeded to aid on screws, an upside down knife-blade, Friends between ice and rock, and finally étriers on the picks of axes. None of the gear was much good and I watched with a not inconsiderable adrenalin flow myself – especially when a placement pulled at a crucial moment and the Sustad body fell a full 10ft onto the tied-off pick of an axe. Not to worry, the system worked and a second try produced the desired result. Steve floundered onto relatively easy ground, consisting of his favourite combination of 75 degree ice and 18 inches of powder.

Seconding was a fiasco with the ice in the crack splitting and me dangling spider-like inspecting the line from six feet away. An ignominious series of awkward heaves and pulls (fortunately without anyone looking!) saw contact with the mountain re-established and a very heavy-breathing Fowler being landed on the stance and directed at the (probable) top pitch. The most challenging powder yet. Three feet of it just plastered onto rocky slabs, with a jutting cornice 50ft above. Feeling somewhat like an insecure

mole, progress was tedious and slow. Protection was uncomfortably sparse but the sun could be seen sparkling on the edge of the cornice and success seemed close.

A lot more effort was required but with almost surprising suddenness my carefully excavated channel through the cornice was complete and a blinding panorama of magnificent mountains was on display. The other peaks of the Cerro Kishtwar massif could be seen below us, whilst Sickle Moon, Hagshu and the Brammah peaks dominated a cloudless horizon. Never had I been on a Himalayan summit in such flawless weather. The frustrations of Delhi, the incessant rain earlier on ... all the masochism of a Himalayan trip suddenly seemed worthwhile.

Having soaked up the splendour of a perfect summit scene, we turned to descend. One blow to the first abseil peg from the remaining hammer and the whole atmosphere changed – the entire head unit snapped off. One adze was left between us for a 1200m abseil descent. An adrenalin pumping prospect.

To quote a well-known proverb 'You can't count your chickens before they are hatched', or – put another way – 'You can't tick your Himalayan peaks before you get back down'.

We had to delay our tick for two days. By this time we were back at Base Camp and the alloy head on my vaguely functional hammer was not looking its best. But then life is good after a Himalayan success and this was not the time to worry about what might have been.

**Summary:** In September 1993 Mick Fowler and Steven Sustad made the first ascent, in four days, of the 1000m NW face of Cerro Kishtwar (c6200m) in the Haptal Nullah of the Kishtwar Himalaya.