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The Ala Dağ Mystery Peak

In March 1962 I went with the RAF Mountain Rescue Team (MRT) from Cyprus to an aircraft crash in Turkey. It was a Turkish Airline F27 Friendship. We had been flown to the US Air Force base at Incirlik, then taken by truck to a base camp. It did not seem important to know exactly where we had been. The crash site had been seen from the air so, guided by locals, we had no difficulty in finding it in a large snow bowl just above 2500m.

Debris, scattered over a large area, showed the violence of the impact. All twelve occupants had obviously died instantly. I remember looking up at the ridge and thinking that the pilot might have just made it if he had been a little higher. We found eleven bodies and searched for hours to find the remaining one without success. We gathered the completely stiff and frozen bodies together on a mound and covered them with rocks and snow. They were recovered, I believe, at a later date when the snows had gone and it was possible to get pack horses up the valley. It was a sad experience and I had the feeling that we had been of little use.

In January 1963 seven of us from the Cyprus MRT went on a trip to the Taurus mountains. Our choice of season, however, caused some concern when we arrived in Çamardı, the small town near the range. The gendarmerie interviewed us at length and a deputation headed by the schoolmaster tried to dissuade us from the folly of such a trip in winter, so we proceeded very cautiously. But there was a wonderful feeling of remoteness that cloaked a hidden antiquity and we plodded around in soft snow, exploring and looking out for the wolves we had been warned about. The mountains were magnificent in their winter clothing. We were helped by Mehmet Dönmez, who owned the local grocery shop and was already well known to earlier visitors. He organised mules to carry our gear and took us to a good camp site in the Emli valley. As arranged, he came back with the animals ten days later to fetch us.

We returned in July of the same year. The group consisted of Davie Jamieson, Bob Stevenson, Derrick 'Yeni' Harman, Harry McKeag, Joe Underwood and myself. We were soon joined by a young Austrian, Gerhard Neuwirth, whom we met there. We climbed five of the peaks. I remember a good snow climb on Kaldi Dağ and the fine rock at the top of Demirkacik. The map we were using was very basic, so we continued to make up names for everything, as we had done in January.

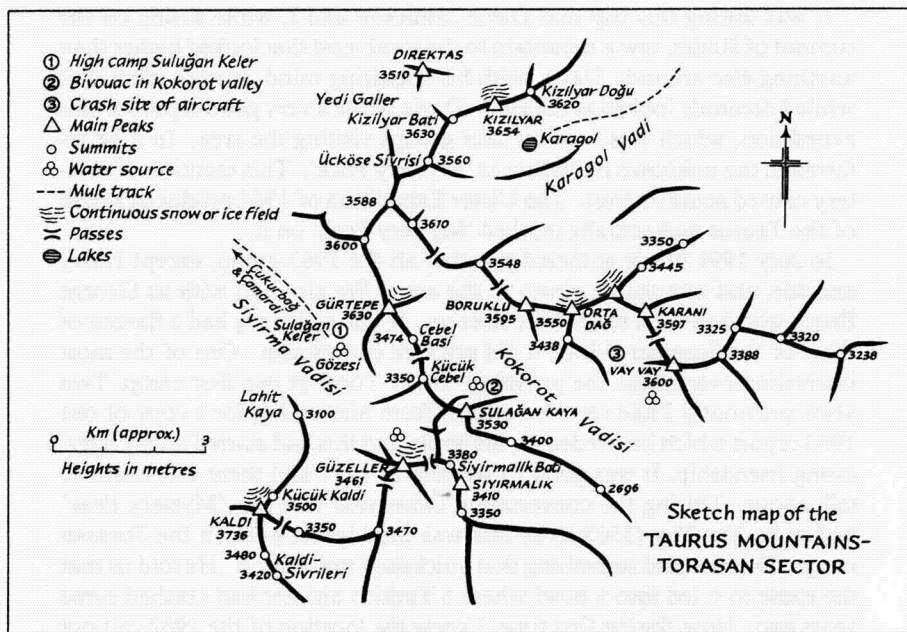
It was during this trip that Davie Jamieson and I, while sitting on the summit of Emler, saw a mountain to the south-east that looked higher than anything else around. Davie, with his enquiring mind, tried to identify it while I dreamily looked at the view. Davie wrote a very good report of this expedition, which was used by later groups visiting the area. In it he referred to the unknown mountain as 'Mystery Peak'. This mention of mystery caused some interest. The Ulster Expedition of 1964 produced a map of the Taurus and actually marked 'Mystery Peak' on it.

In July 1991 Davie gathered together all the 1963 group, except Harry and Joe, and arranged a return to the area. We also had with us George Bruce who had led a team there later on. If this gathering had a flavour of 'Last of the Summer Wine', it did not lack enthusiasm. One of the most interesting events was the arrival of Ömer Tüzel at our first camp. Two years previously I had received a letter from him asking for a copy of our 1963 report which he needed for his book, and this had started a very interesting friendship. It was good to see him in 1991 and there was much to talk about. During the conversation Ömer said that our 'Mystery Peak' had to be Vay Vay (3563m) as this was the highest peak in the Torasan range. Then he said something that quickened my interest. He told us that the route to it led into a bowl where a Turkish airliner had crashed some years ago. Now, for the first time, I knew the location of the 1962 call-out and for some strange reason I felt I wanted to go back. So Vay Vay itself was only a secondary reason, as far as I was concerned, for going to the Torasan area.

It was planned that the 'old' party would take bivouac gear over to the Kokorot valley and position for an attempt on Vay Vay. The next day Ömer went off to rock climb on Sulağan Kaya, while us 'explorers' set off laden with gear. Gerhard, Stevie and Yeni pressed on ahead. The rest of us followed at a slower pace – in the wrong direction! Having failed to meet up, both parties returned to camp. The advance party, who had gone the correct way, were quite forgiving as they had managed to climb Gürtepe and two smaller peaks from the ridge before returning.

We continued to enjoy ourselves by climbing a number of mountains that were accessible from our high camp and thoughts of trailing over to the Kokorot valley were finally abandoned when the weather became unusually cloudy. We retreated to the warmth of Çukurbağ and the hospitality of the Dönmez family. Davie wrote a good account of this trip entitled 'The Class of '63 – Ala Dağ Reunion' which was published in the *RAF Mountaineering Association Journal*.

Ömer's excellent book *The Ala Dağ*, published in 1993, was probably the spur that made me go back. In August the following year I flew to Antalya, took an all-night bus, and met a surprised Bekir, Mehmet Dönmez's grandson, in Nigde. Then on to Camardi, which still looks like Dodge City, to buy supplies. After a night's sleep in Mehmet's house in Çukurbağ, I went



with Bekir and a pack horse carrying food and gear up to Sulagan Keler, where we could find water. So within just over two days of leaving home I was back at the high camp.

To Bekir, aged 19, I must have seemed like some sort of great-uncle, since I had known his father (Abdullah) as a small boy in 1963. He offered to go to Vay Vay with me, but the horse could not get over the pass. The next day he reluctantly went down with the horse as I set off for the Kokorot valley with bivouac gear and about two litres of water. By August, with nearly all the snow gone, water would be hard to find.

I started up, going east, over loose rocks until I reached a huge amphitheatre. Choosing what appeared to be the easiest route out, I found myself on a massive scree slope so loose I feared getting caught in a great slide. Eventually I got onto the west ridge of Gürtepe. The way ahead looked steep, so I traversed right, across more scree, boulder fields and rocks. As I scrambled at last onto the south ridge of Gürtepe, a Turk suddenly appeared and greeted me. Conversation was basic.

'Vay Vay?' I asked, pointing towards the three big mountains on the far side of the valley.

The man indicated the farthest peak. It was exciting to get a look at it at last. I took off my rucksack and offered him a fruit bon-bon.

'Su (water)?' I asked.

He pointed downwards and then, shouldering my rucksack, he beckoned me to follow. Only mildly protesting, I plunged after him as he dropped down a seemingly impossible slope. He was very considerate and kept waiting for me; as well as being tired I was afraid of sending rocks down on him. Lower down we met another man who looked like a shepherd and all three of us pressed on down, aiming for a long tongue of snow at the foot of the east wall of Sulağan Kaya. Then at last we heard the gurgle of running water pouring from the base of the snow. The sound was pure magic. After a good drink, we sat down and rested. Then I made tea, and offered round my biscuits which were all the food I had with me. We managed to communicate despite language difficulties. Then we shook hands and they departed; friends indeed, but I never saw them again nor discovered what they were doing there.

The sun disappeared and a cold wind blew up from time to time. I looked at the steep wall at my side which was dotted with caves. The feeling that people had dwelt here long ago was very strong. After another brew of tea and some more biscuits, I wriggled into my sleeping-bag, with a passing thought for ancient ghosts, which I found quite comforting.

Saturday 13 August dawned bright and clear. The weather had been so consistently good that I was beginning to take it for granted; but I did have a nagging worry about route-finding. Looking across the valley I saw three big mountains in a line running east. First there was Boruklu, then Orta Dağ and finally Vay Vay. I needed to reach the bowl between the last two depressions. As I went down the first dusty scree slope I at once lost sight of my objective. Climbing up again, I tried to keep to the same general direction, hoping to get another glimpse of the peaks as I did so. After about two hours of ups and downs I got a good view of what I hoped was Orta Dağ. The opening to the east seemed promising, so I turned up into it. Two wild goats gazed curiously at me as I left the valley.

The going was much better than the murderous scree of yesterday and, after gaining some height, I became aware of a big mountain on my right. Soon, coming over a steep incline, I arrived at the edge of a large rocky bowl. The first rusty bar I found filled me with mixed emotions, including some relief that I was in the right place. The MRT in 1962 must have used an easier route in from the south instead of my own rather awkward approach from the west. I went on to find lines of struts and spars. How strange and lonely it was to be in this place, silent and hot in the sun, with this sad pile of rusty wreckage.

The noble thing to have done, at this stage, might have been to leave Mystery Peak alone. But after taking a few photos, I slowly plodded towards the rim ahead. As usual it was not quite the right way, but my recent encounters with loose scree made the easy rock look more attractive. High up above the crash site I found scattered glass and, looking back, I could see a distinct line of debris running up towards me. I wondered if the crash investigators had ever seen this; but it had all happened so long ago ... On

the ridge my way was barred by a big step and to avoid it I moved right, across easy ledges. When I looked back later I was surprised to see that I had crossed what looked like a steep rock face. My aversion to uphill scree was leading me astray! But at last I was on Vay Vay's north ridge.

Ömer states in his guide, quite correctly, that this route does not involve any technical difficulty, but he adds a warning that route-finding, amidst the many gullies and towers, is a bit tricky. For instance once, to avoid crossing a gully, I got involved in a rock pitch I had no wish to reverse and caught one or two exciting glimpses down the sheer east face. Mainly it was very moderate climbing except when thirst made me go off course in pursuit of a strip of snow the other side of a steep gully. I finished up jammed between two rocks in an effort to get under the drips falling from the patch. Without a cup it was a futile effort, so I gathered some snow and just let it melt in my mouth. I had always believed that quenching one's thirst in this way would have all kinds of dire consequences, but it seemed to do me good.

From the valley, Vay Vay looked as if it had two tops separated by a deep cleft, so I anticipated some sort of a problem. However, I continued using gullies, sometimes scrambling up moderate rock and becoming more hopeful when the ridge seemed to be leading upwards without any difficulty. At last I came to what seemed to be the higher of the twin summits. From under the cairn I pulled out a shiny parcel – the summit book, started in 1983, wrapped in six plastic bags.

'Vay Vay' was written on the first page in large letters, but I was distracted by the view and photography and did not study it too well to establish who the other summiters had been. (Was David Williams's name there?) Instead, I wrote in the book a rambling paragraph about 'Mystery Peak' that will baffle the next visitor. I added my address and telephone number and have been expecting a call from a climber with a mobile 'phone ever since!

I went down slowly, passing towers and steep gullies, until I found a reasonable slope that would have been hell to climb up but was easy to slither down. I passed the wreckage and went on down to the valley. From there it was a huge slog with no sign of a track. I had given up all hope of continuing over the pass that day and I thought wistfully of the two bottles of wine in my tent at Sulağan Keler. My route was as chaotic as the scenery. At one time I found myself in a huge boulder field, which I had not seen on the way out. In true Ala Dağ fashion upward slopes appeared one after another. I was homing in on the Sulağan Kaya buttress, but I was getting worried, since evening was approaching. Then suddenly I saw my sleeping bag, the stove, the kettle, my mug ... I picked up the mug and gratefully went to the bubbling snow water.

When I got home, I looked at Ömer's book again and discovered that J Harris and P Newby had climbed Vay Vay in 1965 and that the Queen's University Ulster Expedition had done so in 1969.

'Vay Vay' is a Turkish expression – it means 'My! My!'