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# Past Times

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Maj J B Corry (1874-1914), Royal Engineers,  
the first member of the Alpine Club to die in the First World War,  
from a shell-burst near Neuve Chapelle.



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DENNIS GRAY

## Falak Ser: The Road To Heaven



Falak Ser (5918m), also Falak Sar, in Pakistan's Swat valley, from the south.

In life sometimes, one comes to realise, years after what was a signal event, both how lucky and also unaware you were that you were close to the edge of an adventure that might have led to a premature death. For me this is true of a solo journey I made to Pakistan in the early 1990s, an experience that remains the stuff of nightmares. By then I had visited the Himalaya several times, taking part in climbs and treks, and felt confident I could take off on my own to explore a relatively unpopular region, in terms of climbing history, on my own. I decided to travel to the Swat valley and explore the environs of its highest peak Falak Ser (5918m).

Before I explain what happened during that journey, some history and an explanation of Swat's place in Himalayan geography. It lies west of the Indus valley and east of Chitral, and its mountains are an extension of the Hindu Kush. It is widely known as the Switzerland of Pakistan. Historically it was a centre of Buddhism before the Muslim conquests, and in the Swat valley there are many reminders of this, including a large second century Buddha figure, subsequently badly damaged by the Taliban. The eighth-century tantric master Padmasambhava, whose influence on the development of Tibetan Buddhism is central, was born in Swat; he was the founder of the first monastery in Tibet, where he is also known as Guru Rinpoche,

at Samye. He also founded the first of the four great schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the Nyingma-pa, or 'old ones', known for their red hats. Swat has also been visited by many other historical figures, including Alexander in 327BCE and before him Persian conquerors.

In terms of its modern story, the arrival of the fearsome Yusufzais, Pathans from Afghanistan who occupied Swat in 1515, is crucial. During the Raj, Swat was a Princely State, ruled by a wali, or leader, and remained so until 1969. (The Queen and Prince Philip stayed with the last Wali of Swat, Jahan Zeb, at his white marble palace at Merghazar in 1961.) During the Raj, the Yusufzais challenged British Raj forces on several occasions, including the Malakand uprising of 1897, an action made famous by Winston Churchill, then a second lieutenant in the cavalry writing despatches about the campaign for the *Daily Telegraph*. In events that mirrored the rise of the Taliban, a charismatic leader, Saidullah, drove the Pathans to a religious fervour and declared jihad against the British for imposing on them the Durand Line in 1893.

The Swat valley is wide and open at its southern end, but as you travel northward it slowly climbs from 1,000m to 2,900m and narrows as it does so. The valley is approached from the south by the Malakand pass and arriving at its base you realise why the 1897 campaign was so challenging and bloody. However once into the valley it is a fertile green sward to travel through, and in its lower reaches are orchards of apple and apricot; it was known in Buddhist times as Uddyana, meaning garden.

One reason I had chosen to visit Swat was because of pictures I had seen of its two highest mountains, Falak Ser (5918m) and Mankial (5726m) which showed them to be impressive peaks, despite their modest heights in Himalayan terms. Falak Ser was first climbed by New Zealanders W K A Berry and Cecil Tyndale-Biscoe in 1957; R L Holdsworth climbed Mankial as early as 1940.

My journey to Swat began in Rawalpindi where I caught a bus to Mingora. I spent a night there before travelling on to Kalam situated near the head of the valley. En route I had been surprised to encounter men dressed in Greek-style clothing, some of whom had blue eyes and light hair. Conjecture is that their antecedents arrived with Alexander, but once at Kalam I quickly realised I was in Pathan country, dominated by the fearsome Yusufzai. The Swat valley was as beautiful as I had expected, and in late summer its startling green hillsides and orchards were full of fruit. I stayed the night in Kalam in a cheap doss house and then set off laden with a heavy rucksack to climb the steep track that led up towards the Ushu valley. As I climbed the Falak Ser came into view. I could see that its huge south face would be beyond me on my own, but I entertained a crazy notion of attempting the bounding south-west ridge. The German climber and development aid worker Hermann Warth and the Sherpa Ang Choppal climbed the south face in 1990, overcoming 25 pitches of steep ice to reach the summit.

Ushu, situated on the Swat river with stunning views all around, appeared a restful place when I finally arrived there. Yet I began to feel

uneasy moving around the village; its denizens did not appear to be too friendly. I could only surmise from their sullen looks that a lone climber was not only an unusual sight but also an unwelcome one. After a rest I shouldered my pack once more and walked on. I spent the night higher up the valley near Matiltan, sleeping in a rough shelter and cooking on a fire of wood taken from the plentiful supply left by its previous inhabitants. Early next morning, I was away swiftly to avoid the heat of the day, and for a few hours made good progress. Coming from a recent climb in the Karakoram I found no difficulty in the increasing altitude.

I was into rugged terrain by then, following an exposed rocky path along the steep sides of a gorge containing the Paloga river. Balancing along, I looked up ahead of me and noticed two tiny human figures a long distance away, but distinctly framed in the clear mountain air. Initially I guessed they were shepherds, but the closer they descended towards me, the more uneasy I became. They were losing altitude at such a pace that I realised they could not be with any animals. They must be chasing after something. Within a few moments, I realised that something was me. Panic set in. As they came closer I saw they were both armed with Kalashnikovs, so even if I dropped my pack and tried to run off downhill I would not escape them. Though scared witless I decided to keep walking towards them, trying to remember some Pashto. When they did reach me they were the two most frightening-looking characters I have ever met. Tall and bearded, they were dressed like the mujahideen I had met on the Afghan border the year before, except they were more ragged, being unwashed with rips in both their shalwar and kameez.

'Salaam aleikum,' I greeted them. Though surprised, they did not give way, and I realised I was now their prisoner. 'Hello,' I continued in English, gasping in fright whilst trying to smile at them. The two did not seem appeased. I froze with fear as one of the Pathans slung off his rifle, slipped its catch and pointed it at me. '*Ghar*,' I gasped, pointing at the mountains. 'I am going up into the mountains,' pointing up to where I thought Falak Ser must be. '*Ghar*,' I repeated. This brought the most unexpected response, for my two guards began to laugh loudly. Then one of them cried out '*Wonrrai!*' I nodded my head guessing they must think I was a hunter of some kind, but then I realised that this is what they were. They were not shepherds. They had been out looking for game to shoot.

I began to laugh hysterically in relief at this, and my mood carried over to the Pathans, who joined in with great shouts of mirth. The rifle that had been pointing at me was lowered and a hand extended. I have never been so relieved to grasp a hand in my life. Having shared some naan bread, we parted in good spirits, they to continue their descent down into the valley, I to climb up towards the base of Falak Ser. Some hours later, when I had reached high enough to see more clearly, I realised the approach to reach the peak's base and the face above were not challenges to attempt alone, at least not by me. Just before darkness I found shelter, below the snow level, and prepared for a long cold night.

I rose just before dawn to watch the rising sun strike the peak's southern aspect, which was impressive and challenging, an impression made all the more acute by being in such a remote place on my own. After cooking breakfast on some wood I had carried up with me from the valley, I repacked my rucksack and made ready to start back down the route to Ushu. I was worried what my reception might be on my return, for recent events had rather unnerved me. If I had known more about the tension in the whole Swat valley at that time and its future takeover by the Taliban I might have been even more disturbed.

Descending back down to Ushu I managed to cover in a day what had taken two on the way up, but apart from the two hunters I met no one else and with autumn setting in the mountains seemed deserted. Arriving in the valley, I was surprised to be met by a small group of local people. On this occasion they were friendly, unlike my last visit. Partly by sign language, partly because he could speak a little Urdu and English, I realised that the headman was inviting me to drink chai with him. Sitting in his hut he laughed long and hard about the fact that his nephews had nearly shot me. They had fought in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion, as had many Swat Pathans, and some of their relations had died in the conflict. They had thought me to be connected to one of the Soviet supporting nations, some of whom had looked like me, and if I had not spoken to them in English they would have shot me. I realised how stupid I had been in not letting family and friends know about my plans to visit Swat, I could so easily have disappeared without trace, my body buried up in the mountains under a pile of rocks.

The Soviet-Afghan war changed everything not only in Afghanistan but also in Pakistan's North West Frontier. The involvement of the Americans and the Pakistan secret service in supporting and arming the mujahideen as a part of the wider Cold War conflict is still killing people in great numbers. It explains why in these areas so many of the denizens are armed; the year before my visit to Swat I was in Waziristan, and every male there seemed to be armed with an AK47.

In the 1990s Swat began a nightmarish descent into fundamentalism. A cleric called Sufi Muhammad split from mainstream politics and began to impose Sharia law on the peoples of the valley. His influence extended to Dir, close to Nanga Parbat, as well. He took his followers to Afghanistan to fight the Americans and was arrested on his return, but by then the Swat was in Taliban hands. One of their targets was a ski development in the lower Swat valley at Malam Jabba, a joint project with Austria. The Taliban declared skiing as un-Islamic, and decided to destroy it. Thanks to the Pakistan army's move into Swat to deal with the Pakistani Taliban it re-opened in the winter 2017.

There are approximately two million people living in the Swat valley, and in Mingora, its largest city, the Taliban committed their worst atrocities, with public hangings in its main square. This was the home town of a young schoolgirl called Malala Yousafzai, who the Taliban shot in the head for



The Shingardar stupa in the Swat valley, one of thousands of Buddhist remains, indicating the strength of the dharma in former times. The Tibetan saint Guru Rinpoche came from Swat. (*Shahid Khan/Alamy*)

advocating female education. The rest, as they say, is history. It's worth remembering that the Taliban was formed by Afghan Pashtuns who had studied in conservative Pakistan madrassas, like Mullah Omar and with the support of the Pakistani intelligence service ISI.

Such events often seem unrelated to our mountain ambitions. We just want to go about our activities peacefully, whilst respecting local peoples and their cultures appropriately. But events on Nanga Parbat (8125m) in June 2013 made us aware that we are not now immune to events taking place outside our own bubble. The area around Nanga Parbat has always been politically complex. Because of the depth and scale of the four access valleys set around the peak, people living there were isolated from one another. They each speak a different language, and seem distrustful of one another and outsiders.

This was brought into focus for me whilst leading a trip to the northern, Rakhiot side of the mountain, attempting to climb Julipar Peak (5500m) on the eastern flank of this huge face. Retreating in bad weather we crossed a pass by that name into the upper reaches of the Diamir to descend via the Patro valley, when we were halted on the screes below the summit of the pass by gun-toting locals. They wouldn't let us descend further unless we paid off our porters from Tato in the Rakhiot, employed them instead and paid a fee to camp in their valley. They were very aggressive, and it was obvious our Tato men were frightened. Fortunately, our sirdar Hussein

could speak their language, Shina. In the end we had no choice: the weather was awful and the idea of retreating back over the Julipar pass was a no-no for our tired and dispirited trekkers. We did as we were told, paid off our Tato porters, and then handed over an amount of rupees in order to continue our descent.

Others can recount similar stories from the 1990s, including friends on the Rupal side of the mountain, but the events of the night of 22 June 2013 were unprecedented in the history of Karakoram mountaineering. Fortunately this notorious attack happened in a period of good weather. Most of the parties attempting the *Kinshofer* route were above base camp in the Diamir valley, when 16 militants dressed in the uniform of the Gilgit Scouts, guided there by a local, stormed the camp, and gathered the 11 climbers and two workers still in camp before them. They forced the climbers to hand over their valuables, money and mobile phones, which they smashed. They then made their prisoners kneel and began shooting them one by one in the head. One extraordinarily brave Chinese climber Zhang Jing Chuan broke free and ran into the night, followed by a hail of bullets, one of which grazed his skull, so that as he ran he was being blinded by blood running into his eyes. Fortunately, below camp is a ravine and he dived into this to escape. Ten climbers died that night, from five different countries, and one base-camp worker, who managed to convince the militants he was a good Muslim.

The militants left early next morning and the Chinese climber gingerly returned to base camp where he had hidden a mobile phone in his tent. He then climbed up towards camp one to alert climbers there as to what had happened. They managed to contact the Pakistani authorities, and shortly afterwards military helicopters arrived. Meanwhile climbers high on the *Kinshofer* decided to descend, and eventually all assembled safely in that place. Plans were made to walk out, but fears grew that the militants might still be in the area, and eventually everyone was airlifted to safety.

The massacre did predictably serious damage to Pakistan's trekking and climbing industry and begged serious questions in the Pakistani legislature. An official enquiry was established, and a three-man team made up of an army colonel, a captain and a police officer were sent to the area, but they met a gruesome fate, gunned down by the Taliban in Chilas on the Karakoram Highway, below Nanga Parbat. The climbers had erroneously claimed that they understood the attack was in retaliation for the killing of Osama Bin Laden, but the Taliban claimed responsibility, blaming a USA drone strike that had killed a local Taliban leader called Waliur Rehman. Before the enquiry team were killed they had managed to establish that the killers were local, 10 from Diamer district, three from Manshera, north of Islamabad, and three from Kohistan. Some of these were eventually tracked down and arrested under anti-terrorist legislation.

But questions remain. How could it be that the militants were dressed in Gilgit Scout uniforms? The British formed this irregular unit in the latter part of the 19th century from the Shia Hunzas of Gilgit, who were suited for that kind of soldiering. After Pakistan's independence the Scouts were



Pakistani soldiers on patrol in the Swat valley. The region has been a hotbed of Islamist insurgency. (*Shutterstock*)

melded into its new army and eventually became designated as the Gilgit Baltistan Scouts with the task of keeping the peace in the whole of that province, which includes the Karakoram. It seems to me that the attackers might really have been members of that outfit, for Kohistan is quite some way from the Chilas region, and how else would they know each other? And what of the local guides who helped the attackers reach base camp? Some reports said there were two of them, others one. Much remains obscure.

In climbing and trekking centres like Hushe, Skardu, Gilgit and Askole the locals were very critical of the Taliban action, for so many families had come to rely on this as their source of income. It has helped to raise standards of living and improved infrastructure throughout the whole region. More recently, climbers and now trekkers are returning with security bolstered by a special mountain unit of the Gilgit Baltistan Scouts. For areas like the southern flanks of Nanga Parbat they now accompany expeditions and remain in base camp.

The Karakoram has been a compelling destination for explorers and mountaineers for more than a century, a magical wonderland of peaks almost without parallel as challenges for climbers who won't readily stop going there. But all of us should remain aware of the terrorist threat because it isn't going away soon. Clashes between Sunni and Shia, attacks on Christians and renewed tension between India and Pakistan in Kashmir are all threats. We should keep a weather eye on these happenings before selecting an objective.