

THE ASCENT OF RAKAPOSHI

BY LIEUT.-COMMANDER F. R. BROOKE, R.N.

HERE comes a time in the history of most big mountains when most of the problems of ascent have been solved but the summit is yet unclimbed; a fresh expedition planning anew on the experience of its predecessors has every chance of success. This stage had been reached on Rakaposhi by the late summer of 1956. Thanks to the reconnaissances of Secord and Tilman, pressed progressively further by Band and Banks and their parties, the best route up the difficult lower part of the mountain was known, its difficulties and dangers appreciated; and the mountain had been climbed to within 2,000 ft. of the summit. Rakaposhi was ripe for picking and we were privileged to pluck the fruit.

The climbing members of the British-Pakistani Forces Himalayan Expedition, 1958, had been judiciously selected in equal numbers from the three fighting services (the Royal Marines making a fourth) and the Pakistan Army, numbering nine all told. This is a lot, but experience had shown that the porters might have to be left quite low down when it would be a case of coolie-sahib all the way. The members of the expedition were: Captain M. E. B. Banks, R.M. (leader); Surgeon Lieutenant T. Patey, R.N.; Captain E. J. E. Mills, R.A.S.C.; Captain W. M. M. Deacock, The Middlesex Regt. (Att. 1st Para. Regt.); Flight Lieutenant J. R. Sims, R.A.F.; Captain R. H. Grant, R.M.; Captain Shah Khan, Northern Scouts; Captain Raja Aslam, Punjab Regiment; and myself. Between us we had climbed in many ranges; the Alps, Himalayas, New Zealand, Alaska, Greenland, Antarctic, Ruwenzori, and rock climbing in many other parts of the world. Captain Shah Khan was a most important member of the expedition. He had personally selected our six Hunza porters, and being a Hunza man himself, in fact uncle of the Mir, we hoped for great things from them. We were not disappointed. In addition we welcomed to our ranks Sahib Shah, a Pakistan surveyor and an old expedition hand.

The main body of the expedition flew out from Britain in late April in an R.A.F. Comet. I joined them later in Pakistan having come via New Zealand more or less direct from the colder parts of the southern hemisphere. In Pakistan we were given most valuable assistance in the form of free flights by the Pakistan Air Force and accommodation in their messes.

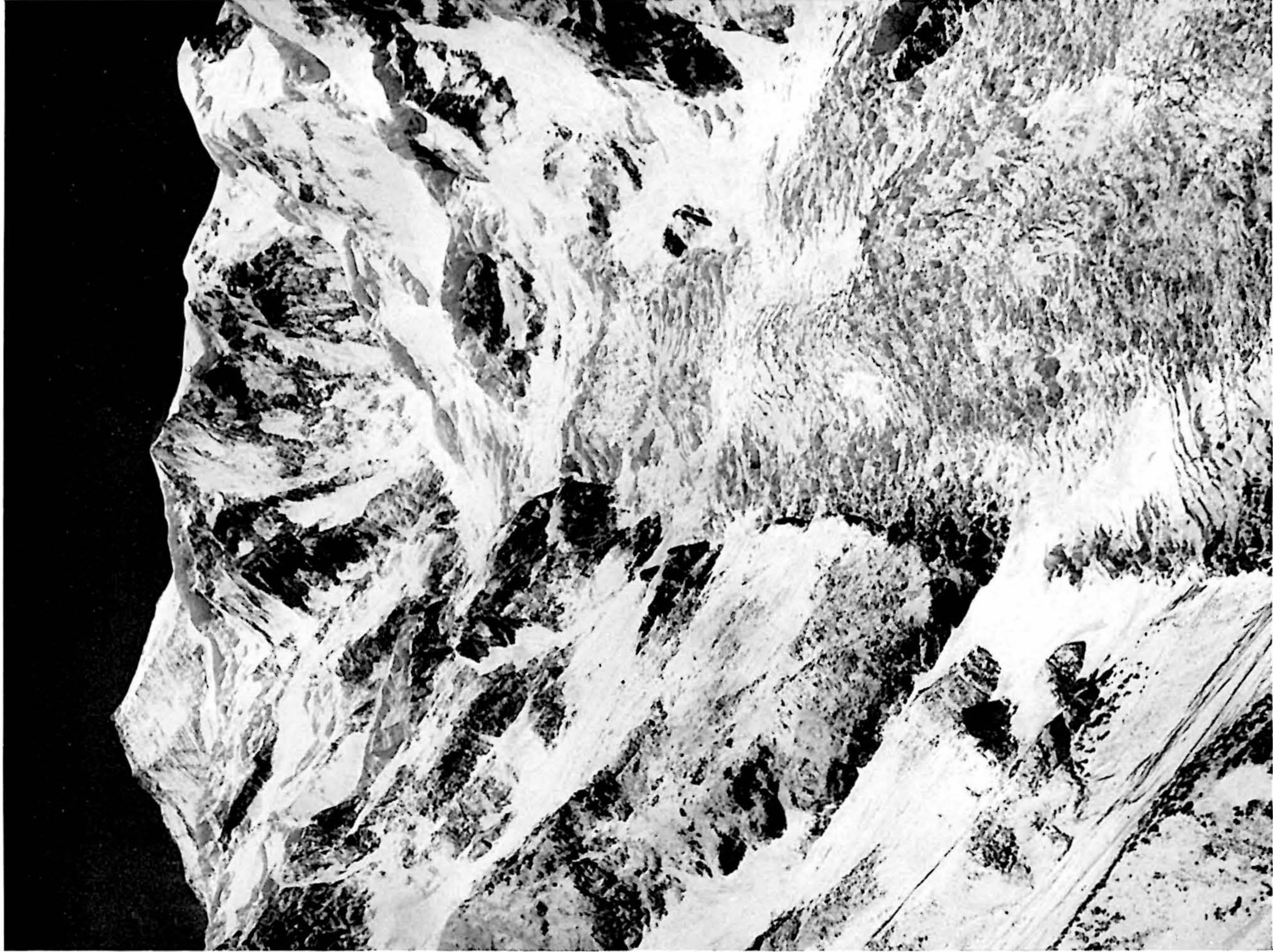
We left Gilgit on May 12 for the three-day approach march to base. Such a short approach march is by no means a blessing. It gives no

time to get fit, or to shake off the dire effects of the heat in Karachi and Rawalpindi, or even to acclimatise to a modest 14,000 ft. In this, however, we were lucky. We had been told in Gilgit that there had been an unusual amount of snow that winter and this was only too apparent from the low snowline as we plodded up to Jaglot Nullah the second day out. Snowfall that night decided us to send the porters down for a few days while we enjoyed ourselves getting fit climbing the neighbouring hillsides from Darbar, a delightful clearing in a pine forest at about 10,000 ft. Base Camp was established on May 20 at about 14,000 ft. by the side of the Kunti Glacier. Previous expeditions have camped here on grass amidst flowers and running water, but we had to clear away the snow to make tent platforms. Throughout the expedition it was very seldom that we had an entirely fine day. Most afternoons clouds built up and snow fell.

A word about the mountain¹ and our plans. As far back as 1892 Sir Martin Conway reported that the S.W. ridge looked a feasible route on the upper part of the mountain. But to reach these upper slopes it is necessary to climb along the S.W. spur which gives mountaineering of alpine standard almost from beginning to end. It involves the traverse of a 19,470-ft. peak. The ridge, narrow and with huge cornices overhanging its eastern side then drops two or three hundred feet and then gradually rises and narrows to a peak of about 20,000 ft. known as 'the Gendarme'. Beyond, it drops steeply and then broadens into a complex snow basin before rising steeply in a broad snow-and-ice face of over 1,000 ft. known as the Monk's Head (21,000 ft.). Each of these obstacles has a considerable dip (or in the case of the Monk's Head a long rolling whale-back ridge) beyond it so that not only are they difficult to climb but to descend from the mountain is both difficult and laborious. If caught by storm, beyond the Gendarme in particular, it might not be possible to descend until the storm had ceased. In 1956, Banks had been storm-bound for ten days running. We planned to put fixed ropes at all the difficult places to make the route safe for porters, to stock each of our camps fully with an ample reserve before going on to the next and to have an advanced base below the Monk's Head. From there we would rush the mountain. We did not take oxygen.

In 1956 Banks had noticed a possible line up the flanks of the S.W. spur which would avoid the traverse of the 19,470-ft. peak, thereby shortening the route considerably. On May 18, Banks and Patey with two porters set off from Darbar to investigate this. They slept that night at the Base Camp site. Next day they had a long, tiring and difficult climb up a rock rib beside a hanging glacier that comes down from the ridge to the south of the Gendarme. They established their camp with difficulty under a small rock overhang at about 17,000 ft.

¹ See also *A.J.* 51. 231: 56. 329: 60. 48: 61. 449.



GENERAL VIEW OF RAKAPOSHI FROM THE WEST. THE S.W. SPUR IS THE RIGHT SKY LINE.
IT IS FAR FROM BEING AS LEVEL AS IT APPEARS.

The route was too difficult to send the porters down by themselves, so instead they sent them down a prominent snow gully on the south side of the rib which led steeply down to a large snow basin up which previous expeditions had come. On their way up from Base Camp this gully had been seen but rejected as a possible line of ascent as it might be dangerous from avalanches. That night there was a foot of new snow and at breakfast next morning they had severe headaches from carbon monoxide poisoning. They came down the gully to Base.

The route above Camp I had looked promising, but it was important to know for certain that it would go before the lift to Camp I started. We expected five Jaglot porters to come up in a few days to assist with this and the route had to be proved before then.

To avoid the labour of carrying sleeping gear to Camp I and another probably painful night there, Patey, the fittest and fastest man in the party, preferred to do the recce direct from Base. I went with him. We left Base on the 22nd soon after six and climbed quickly over hard frozen snow up the gully to Camp I which we reached in $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours. We rested there and then went on. We did a long rising traverse to the right in deep snow along the top edge of a large snowfield until close to the hanging glacier and then climbed steeply up over snow, bearing left to a prominent shark's-fin rock on a rib leading to the ridge. Patey led all the way while I followed very slowly—two steps then a rest!—far behind. We reached a height of about 18,600 ft., 400 or 500 ft. from the ridge, but the way was clear ahead. It was a good route for porters. Apart from the long traverse, it was continuously steep and exposed but not excessively so and it could quite easily be safeguarded with fixed ropes. We eventually fixed about 1,000 ft. of rope in this section.

Four days later we came up again in another long day from Base to fix the ropes. This time we both felt very much fitter and were dead set on reaching the ridge. Above the Shark's Fin we both became a bit suspicious of the snow which emitted strange sounds, but foolishly we paid scant attention. If we could reach the ridge we could secure the fixed ropes to a rock and so have a safe line of retreat. About 300 ft. above the Shark's Fin Patey, who was 50 ft. above me, became really worried. I advised him to move left a few feet onto the very crest of the rib. He had hardly done so when with startling suddenness the snow broke away to a depth of a foot or more along the crest of the rib 100 ft. above him in a windslab avalanche. At least, in its clear-cut break-away line I would have said it was a windslab, but luckily for us the snow came down as crystalline snow and not in large compacted blocks. We were both well placed with axes driven in. Instinctively I put all my weight on my axe, forcing it right home, and pressed my head and shoulders against the slope. I felt the weight of snow pile

up and waited to be pushed off the mountain. To my surprise I was still there when it was all over—and so was Patey. It was very fortunate for us that we were on a rib as most of the avalanche had gone down either side sweeping the snow off the slopes over a very considerable area. The snow on the rib at our level had started to move and had almost pushed us off in doing so, but our two stationary bodies had been just sufficient to halt the movement. The snow where we stood still looked ready to go at a touch. For a moment or two we were too frightened to speak. We just stood. To move seemed to be to invite disaster. Then we collected ourselves and decided to get down. Patey secured the rope to the shaft of his axe and slid down to me. We then made a cautious descent of the ropes we had left on the way up.

Banks and Sims with three porters were at Camp I hoping to establish Camp II next day but obviously that would have to be delayed. Meanwhile with the help of the Jaglot porters the lift to Camp I was nearly complete. The top 100 ft. of the gully below Camp I was steeper than any other portion of the route on the mountain. A fixed rope dangled down but even so the Jaglot men did well to get up.

Bad weather then intervened. Camp I was now stocked and it was apparent that we must start moving up the mountain. On June 1, Patey, Grant, Sims and I went up to sleep at Camp I, and next day we completed roping to the ridge. We approached the task with due caution and above the Shark's Fin we roped up with 100 ft. between each of us. Patey and I began to feel unsafe when Sims as last man had to leave his rock anchorage. The demarcation line of the old avalanche was still clearly visible and the snow, once more, was a doubtful quantity. Working on the principle that the sooner it was over the better, Patey climbed the last 100 ft. at frantic speed. I could hardly pay the rope out fast enough.

We had reached the ridge about 100 ft. from its lowest point. After we were all up Patey, held by me, started making steps down along the ridge. After only a step or two, the snow above the old avalanche demarcation line only a few feet to the side of our steps hissed away into the depths. We avalanched as much snow as we could, but no other big ones fell. After securing the fixed rope, Patey and I went along the ridge to the rock island which we thought would make a suitable site for Camp II. Back at Camp I we found all the remaining expedition members with the porters ready for the assault. Patey and I went down to Base for a rest. It had been an unpleasantly nervy day's mountaineering for us.

On June 3, Camp II was established. Banks, Sims, Mills and Deacock slept there intending to make the route over the Gendarme. But it snowed on the 4th and 5th. The porters, under Shah Khan's leadership, started out early on the 5th before the weather got bad and

managed to do a lift. The Camp II party came right down to Base. The porters stayed at Camp I.

At Base Camp there was snow everywhere and nothing to do but sit and read in the unpleasantly draughty mess tent. Wet snow fell all night (5th/6th) and was still falling next morning. We were finishing a leisurely and gloomy breakfast when the tent was shaken—and so were we—by a mighty gust of wind-blown snow which penetrated every chink in the tent. A sizeable avalanche had fallen down one of the gullies in the cliffs behind Base and come to rest 15 yards from the mess tent. Later that morning a voluble Shah Khan and Aslam arrived down with the porters. They had been caught in an avalanche near the top of the gully below Camp I and had been carried down a good 1,500 ft. to the level of Tilman's Camp I. By a miracle no one was seriously hurt. We were pleased to see that the morale of the porters was still high. Next day when the weather cleared and we went up to look for some of the lost gear, it was to find that a giant avalanche, starting from near the crest of the ridge, had swept the whole basin and come to rest on the Kunti Glacier. The debris was 4-6 ft. deep and the blocks of frozen snow as big as an armchair. Had they been caught in this one there would have been no escape.

Acting on the assumption that the dangerous avalanches had already fallen, Banks, Sims, Mills, and Deacock went up to Camp I next day, June 8. The porters needed another day's rest and followed with Patey, Grant, Shah Khan and myself on the 9th, when Banks' party reoccupied Camp II. Unfortunately Captain Aslam was not fit and had to remain at Base. Sahib Shah, the surveyor, who worked independently of the expedition most of the time, also came up with his plane-table and instruments. Two days later he did a station from Camp II—a stout effort and his own altitude record.

The next few days gave us our best weather. The assault was on. Each day there was a lift to Camp II, the sahibs carrying loads of 30-40 lb. as they had done from the start. Time for the lift was reduced from 3 hours to $1\frac{3}{4}$ hours. Banks' party roped the Gendarme on the 10th and then started carrying loads over. There was deep snow on the ridge and the top of the fixed ropes was buried in three feet of new snow.

On June 14, Patey, Grant and I went direct from Camp I to sleep at Camp III in a long hard day of exhausting heat. Sims also came over to sleep at Camp III. It was interesting to follow the route over the much talked of Gendarme. A four foot deep L-shaped groove with a firm floor ran up the eastern flank of the Gendarme a few feet below the crest. Any difficulty was removed by a fixed rope at a convenient height for a handrail to which we clipped on with karabiner and waist sling for additional security. (When the porters came over

they used the same precautions and were quite happy after the first time. We did not rope them up.) It was a very exposed traverse above the almost sheer drop to the Kunti Glacier 4,000 ft. or more below, and it was easy to realise that the original lead by Sims in deep floury snow with no secure axe belay anywhere was a very fine performance. On the far side the Gendarme drops in two steep but straight-forward steps. The lower one is the steeper and longer of the two and usually loads were lowered down on a rope to be collected by the residents of Camp III. This saved a tiring re-ascent on the return journey to Camp II.

The following day we roped the lower two-thirds of the Monk's Head before we ran out of rope. Our route, like those of our predecessors, followed more or less the left hand edge. It is of unrelenting steepness (40-50 degrees) increasing slightly near the top. As far as we went the snow was quite good though as usual Patey and I had initial doubts. Since our avalanche encounter we had regarded all steep snow with suspicion.

The same day the porters came up to Camp II to sleep and went straight on to take light loads over the Gendarme where we collected them next day—a fine effort. There was snow in the night and next morning, but in the afternoon Banks' party came over from Camp II to sleep, bringing with them more fixed rope. Patey and I, followed by Mills and Deacock carrying some of the rope, completed the roping of the Monk's Head next day. Sims and Grant went back to Camp II to collect the porters. They had a tough struggle over the Gendarme in masses of new snow and farther on had the unpleasant experience of four separate windslab avalanches coming away from under their feet.

The 19th, a day of poor weather and snowfall, was spent in rest and preparations for the final assault. Next day we started out. We had only five porters available, each carrying 40 lb., but this was just sufficient for our needs provided each sahib carried four man-day's food in addition to his personal gear. Unfortunately Shah Khan was not feeling well and remained in camp, thus reducing our strength above the Monk's Head from the planned eight to seven.

Deep snow obscured all previous tracks. Grant and I, starting out before the others, plugged round to the foot of the fixed ropes. When we were within a few yards of the start, wading thigh deep in the snow a small windslab avalanche of heavy blocks broke away from beneath the bergschrund just above us and slid down the slope for 200 ft. nearly taking us with it. This gave rise to doubts as to the safety of the slopes above. We sat down to wait for Banks and Patey who were not far behind. We needed a rest anyway. Patey, energetic as usual, tied on and went to investigate. He managed to dislodge some more snow, but found that there was virtually no accumulation of snow on the route



TOM PATEY AT THE BOTTOM OF THE FIXED ROPES ON THE MONK'S HEAD. A SMALL WIND-SLAB AVALANCHE HAS JUST FALLEN IN THE FOREGROUND.



CAMP IV, 19,000 FT. THE SNOW FACE OF THE MONK'S HEAD IS SEEN IN THE RIGHT BACKGROUND.

itself. All the steps had been wiped out, however, and it was a weary business re-kicking them for the third time, especially carrying a heavy sack.

Despite the avalanche danger I think we were fortunate to have soft snow conditions. This makes hard work for the leader, but easy for those who follow. Whether we could have got our Hunza porters so far if conditions had been hard and icy is an open question. Probably we could, because fixed ropes are such a tremendous help and confidence-builder to them. (All told we used about 3,000 ft. of fixed rope.) Under Captain Shah Khan's influence our Hunza porters were very good indeed and had we planned to do so we could have taken them much higher up the mountain.

By the time we reached the top of the fixed ropes the clouds had gathered and it was trying to snow. There was a chill wind. It was a long, long trudge in knee-deep snow to the top of the Monk's Head. We were reduced to taking turns in the lead, porters included, for twenty steps at a time and then stand aside to let the next man take over. We reached the true summit of the Monk's Head at 16.00. We had hoped to camp much further on at the foot of the first big step leading up to Rakaposhi but there was not time to go further. There was ample room for our tents here even if the site was rather exposed to the elements. We sent the porters down straight away. They had done a great job.

The weather next morning was poor and got steadily worse. After dithering away most of the morning we decided to shift camp. We had too much gear to shift in one load so the first trip we took personal gear and one tent which we pitched at the foot of the first step. We then hurried back in rapidly worsening weather and loaded up for the second trip. By this time it was blowing hard and the visibility was almost zero. Tracks were filled in by drift snow almost as soon as they were made. Patey, in the lead, found the way back by the feel of the harder snow of our old tracks beneath the uniform surface. It was a relief to see the solitary tent reappear through the murk. We camped in a rising gale which continued all night.

Next morning it was still blowing too hard to move, but it eased after a few hours and the afternoon was calm. On a short excursion above camp, Patey had seen some black objects on the top of the Monk's Head. In the afternoon while Patey and Grant kicked steps up the slopes above camp, the others went back to the Monk's Head. They found a tent and a little food. We heard later that Shah Khan had recovered and come up the previous day with these stores only to find a deserted camp site. He can only have missed us by an hour at the most. I stayed in camp to make a final sort-out of loads.

Next day, the 23rd, we established Camp V in a nick in the ridge at about 23,000 ft. The route was straightforward, though steep in

places, up the gradually narrowing rounded snow ridge, the final 500 ft. being quite exposed on good, hard, wind-compacted snow. The climb took about $5\frac{1}{2}$ hours. Banks, Patey, Grant and I stayed there, while Sims, Mills and Deacock, who had carried for us, went down. Next day we established Camp VI at about 24,000 ft. at the edge of the large glacier terrace below the summit pyramid. We followed a rib of easy broken rocks, which made a welcome change from snow. Although it was a fine morning there was a bitter wind. Patey had trouble with his hands and Grant and I had to take our boots off to rub numbed feet. We avoided the steeper upper buttress of rock up steep snow on the left. I happened to be in the lead when we took to the snow. Step cutting was necessary in the lower part. Although I had been going very badly that day and much more slowly than the others I could still find energy to cut steps and actually enjoyed doing so. Boredom has much to do with tiredness in the Himalayas and I nearly always found I went better when in the lead, especially if there was a little technical difficulty. There is satisfaction and stimulus to be gained even from plugging steps up deep snow, which is denied those who follow, although you may feel you are fighting the mountain rather than climbing it. I think the others felt the same.

Above the rocks, 60 ft. of steep snow up which we could kick steps, led by Banks and Patey, brought us to the edge of the great glacial shelf. We pitched camp. The summit looked very close and we earnestly discussed whether we should not all go straight on to the top. Even I felt that with the stimulus of the summit just ahead—and possibly a dexedrin—I could get there. How wrong we were! In fact the final peak was a long way away across a shallow snow basin. At the start of the expedition in our excursions from Darbar, we had all seen a view of the peak which showed this and had even talked of placing Camp VI on the final pyramid itself, but now we seemed to have forgotten it. In fact we could not take Camp VI any further across the featureless snow as we had no route flags left and without them it might be impossible to find the route down in bad weather.

Luckily wisdom prevailed and we decided to stick to our original plan. Grant and I descended to Camp V in storm. We hoped to make the ascent of the peak direct from Camp V next day and so profit by the tracks of the first pair. But next day it was blowing hard with great plumes of drift snow blowing off the ridge. We started out but soon came back. We would only have exhausted ourselves battling against the wind.

The following day it was blowing even harder and we resigned ourselves to another day of inactivity. About mid-morning the back tent-peg pulled out in a violent gust and the tent flopped down and flapped about our heads. Grant went outside to replace the peg with an

ice-axe. As he tightened the guy another great gust hit the tent which split across the ridge. (The tent was an old one and should never have been brought up—but it was light!) In the prevailing conditions we could only do the most makeshift repairs. The tent was obviously not reliable and the prospect of it ripping completely in the middle of the night was not pleasant. We decided to go down and bring another tent up next day.

We were surprised to find how weak we were. A day and a half's inactivity at this height had taken a lot out of us. Our appetites were still good, but there was little in our meagre H.A. rations, on which we had been living for nearly a week, with which to satisfy them.

The steep exposed snow slope below camp had been polished to an iron hardness by the wind. As I cut steps down I sadly regretted our lack of crampons which had foolishly been left at Camp VI. Grant, who, when it was his turn to lead, preferred to kick steps, damaged his toes through bruising and frostbite.² By mid afternoon we reached Camp IV, where Sims, Mills and Deacock were waiting. There was no wind down there and later a blanket of mist descended on the mountain.

It was late evening when Banks and Patey came down with the wonderful news that they had reached the summit the previous day (June 25) in terrible conditions of wind and drift. There had been no difficulties, but it had been a long way across the snow basin and up the long snow slopes to the final rocks. They took to the rocks as soon as they could, being warmer on the feet. 300 ft. of scrambling brought them to the summit ridge about 200 ft. from the top. Part of the ridge proved to be a veritable razorback with an apparently vertical drop down to Hunza on the far side. They looped an arm over the crest and walked along the easy southern side. The summit was reached at last after an ascent from camp of 5½ hours.

The little flags which prestige demands should be photographed at the summit had very sensibly been left at Base Camp. It was much too cold and windy for photography anyway, though Banks did his best, to record the occasion. Patey found a large slab of rock with a soft surface and scratched on it BPFHE 1958. He placed it on the ridge facing the sun about twelve feet from the summit and perhaps three feet lower. In placing it he bruised the fingers of one hand which were numbed with cold. He had no feeling in them and by the time camp was reached he was surprised to find that they were badly frost-bitten.

² We all used the Haynes and Cannes H.A. boot when above Camp II. In the prevailing soft snow conditions crampons were seldom necessary and I only wore them twice on the whole expedition. Most of us tried out the canvas overboot, but above 20,000 ft. the snow did not wet the boot so we discarded them owing to the extra weight. The H.A. boots were heavy, 6 lb. per pair, and not entirely satisfactory in that nearly every one got slightly frostbitten toes.



MIKE BANKS (LEFT) AND TOM PATEY.

Next day it was blowing worse than ever and, though determined to get down they waited until mid-day hoping for it to ease before starting out. Lower down the wind dropped. For a time they were lost in dense mist above the crevasses above Camp V where they whistled and shouted to attract our attention, but, of course, Grant and I had already left. They won clear in the end and found Camp V and the note I had left. From there it was a straightforward but exhausting descent to Camp IV.

Patey injected himself with Heparin and in the course of the next few weeks his fingers made a spectacular recovery. Banks was worried about his feet, though, in fact, no lasting damage had been done. They had had a tough time and were just about all in. All they wanted was rest and drink, and yet more drink.

We had always hoped that more than one pair would attempt the summit, but we had virtually no food left at Camp IV and in truth none of us was in a fit state to make a serious attempt on the summit.

Next day a spectator might have enjoyed the antics of seven tired heavily-laden sahibs slipping and sliding down the fixed ropes of the Monk's Head. The weather was bad and there was a continuous hiss as hailstones poured down the face. Our cheerful Hunza porters met us at the foot, took our rucksacks and escorted us back to camp where they served tea and massaged our feet. It was good to be back.

Next day, with strength returning at every downward step, we descended to Base Camp.