

SWAT AND INDUS KOHISTAN

BY TREVOR BRAHAM

(Two illustrations: nos. 37-38)

AN expedition seldom works out as intended. A two-year-old scheme to visit the Batura group in Hunza during the summer of 1962 having finally fallen through, I found myself left to my own devices, without plans, party or permission. In February, 1962, having acquired the first, I began to take steps to set in motion the other two. My original scheme, to cross from Swat to Chitral and then over the Shandur pass to Yasin and Gilgit, was firmly turned down; and I fell back on the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Karachi suggesting that the lofty term 'mountaineering expedition' be dropped, and requesting their blessing for a climbing holiday in Swat and Indus Kohistan.

The issue was still in the balance, when by a piece of good fortune I chanced to meet the Waliahd of Swat State during a week-end visit to Saidu Sharif in May. From then on my path was miraculously smoothed out, and I was shown nothing but the utmost co-operation and hospitality by every State official, from Saidu Sharif down to the smallest and most isolated Tehsil.

Getting together a party at short notice proved to be difficult. A surveyor, whom I hoped would come, could not be spared by his department; an Army officer, who had climbed in the Ushu area, was attending a course during the only period that fitted my plans; so I decided, not for the first time, to go alone.

My choice of area had been influenced by the late Major Jimmy Mills' account of his two brief visits to Swat Kohistan in 1960. From the top of a peak above Matiltan he had glimpsed an impressive and unsuspected peak to the east in Indus Kohistan,¹ hinting that it was a good deal taller than any of the mountains so far known to exist in the area. His description of a people and a way of life that belonged to a former age had also attracted me. It was evident that much of the country, particularly in Indus Kohistan, was still very little known.

Swat and Buner, together with Kohistan to the north, comprise an independent administrative area of approximately 2,500 sq. miles situated in what was formerly known as the North-west Frontier Province. The Gilgit Agency lies along its north-east border, with Chitral to its west. The State, which is ruled by the Mianguls, is

¹ *A. J.* 67. 52.

affiliated to West Pakistan in matters of common interest such as defence and foreign affairs. Swat is easily reached from Peshawar, and its frontiers actually begin in the Malakand Agency, the main approach road leading through places famous in Frontier history such as Dargai, Malakand, Chakdarra, each with well-manned forts. At Chakdarra, the road divides, the western branch leading to Dir and Chitral and the eastern to Saidu Sharif. A little beyond is the town of Barikot where Alexander's army halted on its way through Buner and across the Ambela pass to the Peshawar plains.

Travelling by road north-west from Rawalpindi over the Margalla pass, the approach to Attock makes a deep impression. The plains recede, and the great fort dominates the crest of the hill in the foreground. Built by Akbar in 1581, the fort commands the Indus gorge and the main approach to Frontier territory. It is occupied today by a modern Infantry Regiment. Here, at the confluence of the Kabul and Indus rivers, stands the Attock Bridge guarded at either end by armed sentries. Across the bridge is Pathan country.

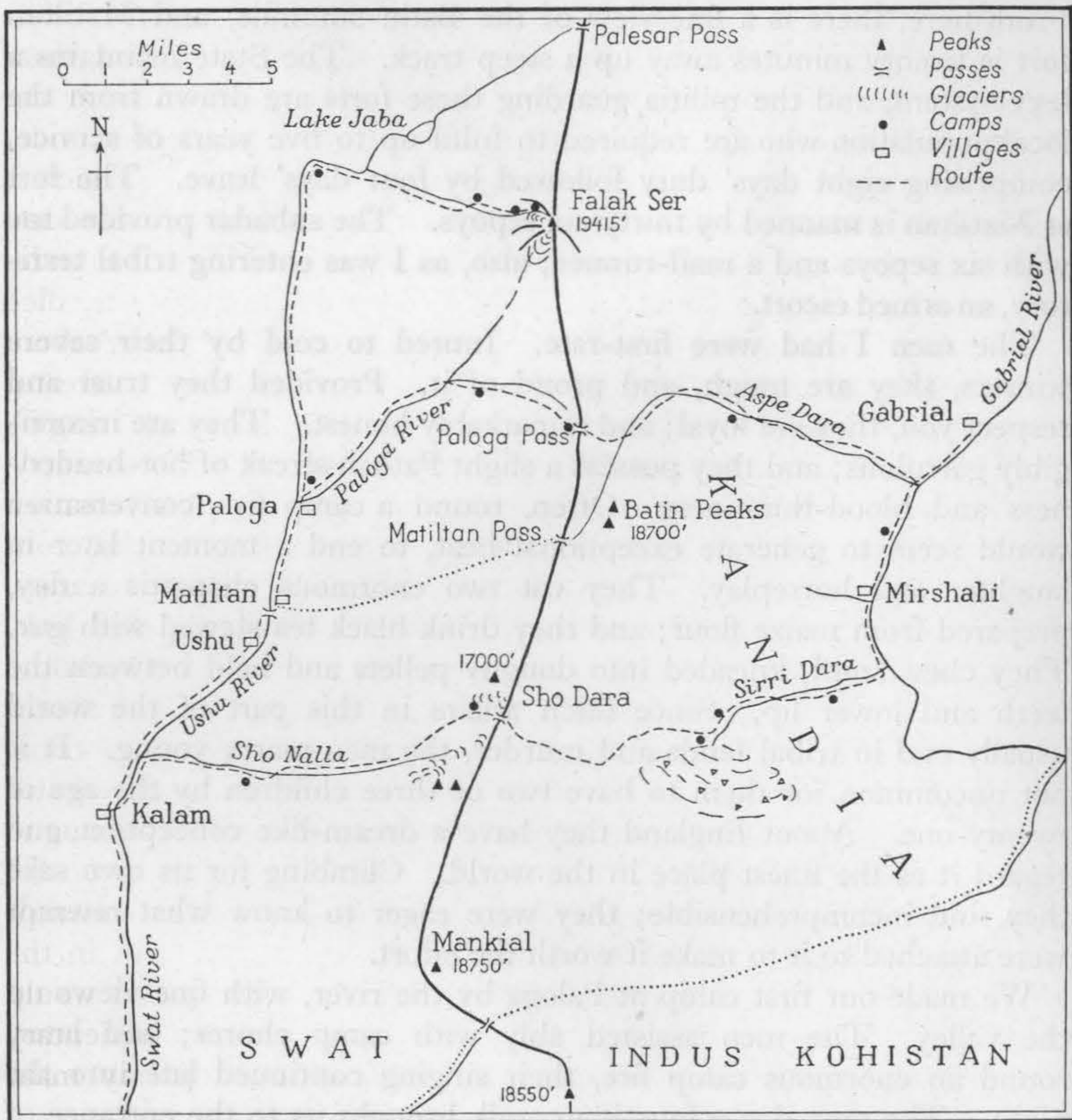
The people of Swat are Pathans of the Yusufzai sect, and these Yusufzais have enjoyed independence since their occupation of the country in 1515. It is their proud boast that never, not even under Akbar, were they the subjects of any empire. Lower Swat, which is remarkably fertile and possesses great natural beauty, has been described as one of the most heavenly valleys in the world. The founder of the present ruling family, the Akhund, or religious teacher, died in 1877. His grandson, Miangul Gulshahzada, by bringing about political cohesion amongst a number of Yusufzai tribes, was the creator of the modern State of Swat. For thirty years he ruled Swat, bringing peace, security and progress and generally opening up the country. In 1948, he transferred administration to his son, Miangul Jehanzeb Khan, himself retiring into seclusion. Years of progress have continued, and development is gradually spreading to the northern areas. Roads are being extended; and a jeep road is to be constructed linking the state with Gilgit. But in the far north the land is unyielding. Winters are long and severe, and the people live a marginal existence in small and isolated settlements, for the most part self-supporting. Here, it is possible to find the odd corner where the white man is still a stranger, and where unsuspected valleys and mountains lie waiting to be explored and climbed.

I had planned initially to travel up the Ushu valley and attempt Falak Sar,² 19,415 ft., considered to be the highest mountain in the state. The fact that it had been twice climbed suggested that it would provide a suitable ten-day expedition following years of sedentary living. The remaining 2½ weeks were to be devoted to my main

² The name means 'The Road to Heaven'.

objective, the discovery and exploration of Mills' elusive peak in Indus Kohistan. The only information I could obtain was that no such mountain higher than Falak Sar existed anywhere, least of all in Indus Kohistan. Some went so far as to say that Falak Sar had never been climbed; nor, indeed, was such a giant ever likely to be. C. H. Tyndale-Biscoe, who made the first ascent in 1957 with A. Berry, also climbed the higher of the twin Batin peaks, 18,700 ft., about ten miles to the south (*N.Z.A.J.*, 1958). In 1958, Tyndale-Biscoe returned to search unsuccessfully for a peak in that area, which he believed to be higher than Falak Sar. At about the same time the Survey of Pakistan carried out some work in the region, as a result of which they plotted a peak due east of Kalam and fixed its height at 20,528 ft. This peak, so far as I know, has not been approached or climbed.

There is a good motor road leading north from Saidu Sharif, metalled for the first fifty miles to Bahrain. Here I stopped to meet the Bara



Hakim, a pleasant man who gave me tea in his Swiss-like chalet, and apples freshly picked from his trees. There was a fine view of Mankial Peak, 18,750 ft., first climbed (by Holdsworth) in 1940; and again in 1960. The road from here to Kalam, thirty miles to the north is often closed to traffic in the winter. From Kalam, Falak Sar is an impressive sight, a solitary peak filling the head of the Ushu valley. A fort, two rest-houses, and the Tehsildar's offices lie scattered about on an exposed and windy plain 300 ft. above the village. Surrounded by rock peaks, green alps and fir-clad slopes, Kalam has an atmosphere typical of an Alpine climbing centre. It is the starting point for all expeditions to Upper Swat.

With the assistance of the Tehsildar six porters were engaged to carry my baggage to Matiltan about seven miles away. They set off early on August 15, and I followed later by car travelling in company with the subadar of Matiltan fort. The road winds through magnificent deodar forests and ends at a narrow bridge over the Ushu river. From here, there is a fine view of the Batin summits, and Matiltan fort is twenty minutes away up a steep track. The State maintains a levy system, and the militia guarding these forts are drawn from the local population who are required to fulfil up to five years of service, comprising eight days' duty followed by four days' leave. The fort at Matiltan is manned by thirty-six sepoy. The subadar provided me with six sepoy and a mail-runner; also, as I was entering tribal territory, an armed escort.

The men I had were first-rate. Inured to cold by their severe winters, they are tough, and proud of it. Provided they trust and respect you, they are loyal; and remarkably honest. They are incorrigibly garrulous; and they possess a slight Pathan streak of hot-headedness and blood-thirstiness. Often, round a camp fire, conversation would seem to generate exceptional heat, to end a moment later in laughter and horseplay. They eat two enormous chapattis a day, prepared from maize flour; and they drink black tea stewed with gur. They chew snuff, kneaded into doughy pellets and held between the teeth and lower lip. Since illicit affairs in this part of the world usually end in tribal feuds and murder, the men marry young. It is not uncommon for them to have two or three children by the age of twenty-one. About England they have a dream-like conception, and regard it as the finest place in the world. Climbing for its own sake they find incomprehensible; they were eager to know what rewards were attached to it to make it worth the effort.

We made our first camp at Paloga by the river, with fine views up the valley. The men assisted ably with camp chores; and later, round an enormous camp fire, their singing continued late into the night. The next day a four-hour walk brought us to the entrance of

the Falak Sar nullah, where we pitched camp in a clearing amidst tall pine trees. My escort, Mohmand Sadiq, and I arriving early proceeded a mile up the valley and obtained our first glimpse of Falak Sar eight miles to the east.

We followed a slender track up the valley the next morning. Crossing over to the right bank, we crossed open slopes interspersed with birch-woods and reached a small shepherd's settlement at about noon. This proved to be the only habitation in the valley. Sadiq was strict about his duties, and he would not let me out of his sight for an instant, as I had discovered the previous day when I thought I had escaped for a bathe. Beyond the settlement, the valley broadens and progress continues over boulders and old moraine beds. At about 11,000 ft. below a steep fall in the river, we pitched our tents, overlooked by intervening rock ridges which obscured Falak Sar.

As Boulder Camp was intended to be a base, I took Sadiq up the next morning to study the approaches to Falak Sar. A tiresome climb up loose boulders by the stream brought us in two hours to the glacier snout. From here we gained the clean ice and névé of the West Falak Sar glacier, and were soon threading our way through a badly crevassed area. We were on the left bank and, by gradually extricating ourselves towards the centre, reached easier ground. We continued upwards towards the North-north-west spur of Falak Sar, for it was plain now that this was the best line of approach. We halted at 1 p.m. in a sheltered snow hollow about 400 yds. from the foot of the spur. This seemed an ideal camp site at about 15,500 ft. The spur appeared to be quite straightforward and it provided access to the North-west ridge, which led direct to the summit. The length of the climb, which was entirely upon snow and ice, would depend upon the conditions; but I estimated that it could be done in a fourteen-hour day from the snow hollow and back. Sadiq, who was wearing chappals with heavy moulded rubber soles, turned out to be one of those natural climbers. We found an easier way back avoiding many of the crevasses before we came off the ice on to a moraine ridge. We spied a green lake in the ablation valley, and found our way down by a long traverse of the right hand slopes covered with a profusion of primulas, gentians, potentillas and anemones.

Taking Sadiq and two porters with me the following day, August 19, we set up camp by the green lake intending to place another in the snow hollow on the morrow. The site had evidently been used before. In the afternoon I climbed to a pass leading north over into Kandia. It was disappointing to find that the last 1,000 ft. of Falak Sar were persistently clouded over. In the morning, we moved up the glacier; by about 11 a.m. the weather showed signs of change; at 1 p.m., when we reached the snow hollow, it had closed in.

As soon as we got the tent up, snow began to fall. After a brew of tea, the two porters departed for Lake Camp with instructions to follow strictly in our upward tracks. A two-man tent is always crowded when a kitchen occupies one end. On this occasion space became further restricted by the gradual decline in the roof level. Twice during the evening the snow had to be swept away and the guy ropes refixed. At 6 p.m. Sadiq, with a hang-dog look, suggested retreat. Although I was almost certain by now that the climb was off, I thought it wiser to wait. A large brew of soup, served piping hot, filled Sadiq with warmth and contentment and he dropped off to sleep at once. How I envied him. In the morning we were completely snowed up with only the ridge poles showing; visibility was five yards and snow was still falling. Packing up was painfully slow, everything being twice as heavy. Eighteen inches of snow had fallen in eighteen hours. The descent through the crevasses in white-out conditions was unpleasant. Relief over coming off the glacier within sight of a familiar cairn was acknowledged by Sadiq in full voice, singing praises to Allah the all-merciful. The porters met us above Lake Camp and we descended to Base. The next day, as it was obviously still snowing higher up, I decided that I would have to forego Falak Sar, and we made tracks for Paloga and the next part of my journey.

After a day's wait in Paloga for a fresh group of porters from Matiltan, we started up the Paloga valley on August 25. My new escort was Mam Seth, who had come as a porter to Falak Sar; but none amongst the new porters were sepoy from the fort, and I was soon to learn what a difference this meant in our daily marches and at camp. The first day was a series of prolonged rests and demands for an early halt. None of the men claimed first-hand knowledge of the Paloga pass, but I had judged from Mills' account that it was about a day and a half away from the village. There was a good track for the first six miles. Here on a grassy plain we forded a stream fed by the glacier issuing from Falak Sar's South face, and followed shepherds' tracks which ascended fairly steeply beside a subsidiary stream issuing from the east. The further we climbed, the more elusive became the tracks. Impatient over the porters' slow progress I was determined to push on towards the pass before nightfall. But after an eight-hour day, I was obliged to call a halt in a sheltered hollow situated, as I thought then, about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles and 750 ft. below the pass. The country was wild and devoid of any sign of human habitation. We were visited late in the evening by a shepherd with an offering of fresh milk.

The next day, five hours of pretty steady ascent, spurred on by one false pass after another, brought us to a dividing ridge at about 14,500 ft. Mam Seth and I, racing to the top of steep scree-slopes, were greeted

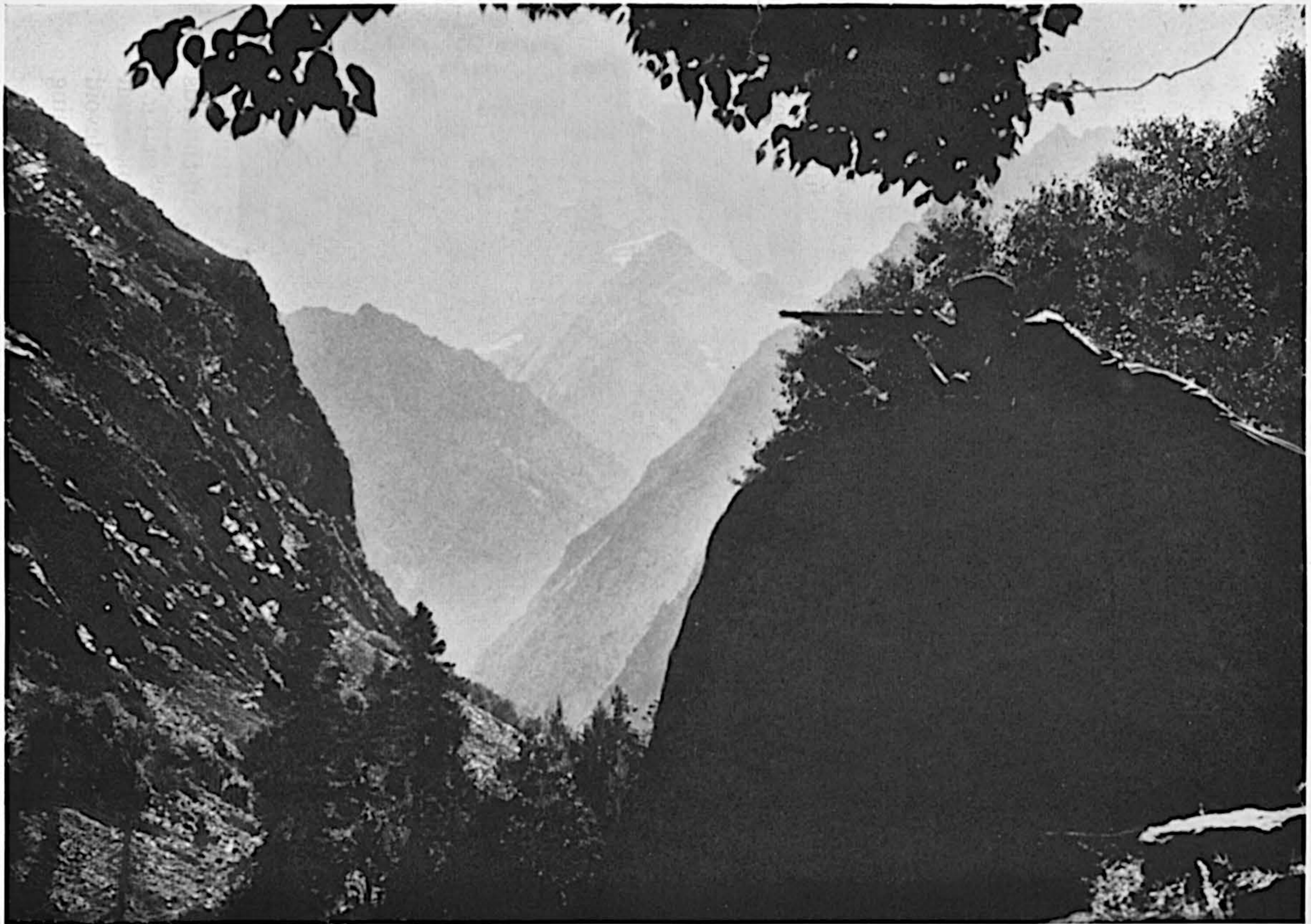


Photo: Trevor Braham]

FALAK SAR (19,415 FT.) SEEN FROM THE WEST.

(No. 37)

by an awe-inspiring view. The twin Batin peaks, visible almost from base to summit, filled the immediate foreground. Behind intervening ridges about fifteen miles away was a cluster of ice-capped mountains rising from what looked, even at this distance, like a major ice-fall. The group seemed to lie roughly behind Mirshahi; and I suspected that here was the object of my search. Far from finding a single mountain, I was able to pick out three summits, and others obviously lay hidden behind the Batins. Towards the north, above Gabriel, were minor glaciers and mountains. Behind, to the left, stood Falak Sar, a solitary snow-capped peak, its South face harsh and challenging. The watershed ridge, about a quarter of a mile long running roughly from north to south, fell steeply about 2,500 ft. down into Kandia. Of tracks there was no sign. The silvery thread of the Aspe Dara, issuing almost from the Matiltan pass, disappeared round a corner to the left. A shepherd, striding along the rocky crest with his flock, approached and offered some advice about the route; but he was not aware of any travellers having come this way before. It was late by the time the main party reached the foot of the ridge, where in falling snow we decided to pitch camp.

We moved off early the next morning and on reaching the top of the ridge we found heavy cloud filling the valley. Only the icy tips of the distant group were visible. Here mutiny threatened; one of the porters, on viewing our proposed descent route, decided that this was not what he had bargained for, and was ordered home before he could unsettle the others. We made our way slowly down for two hours over rocky gullies, steep grass and scree, reaching easier ground when we struck the main track from Gabriel to the Matiltan pass. But our difficulties were not over; there was a 60 ft. cliff descent, a tricky fording of the river, and a difficult ledge traverse in the upper gorge. After a long day, with the main difficulties behind, we camped beside some old sheep-pens about eight miles from Gabriel.

Kandia will appeal to lovers of wild and rugged country. The valleys are stark and gorge-like with bouldery bottoms. They are in sharp contrast to the gentle grassy landscapes of Swat. Paths there are, but only just; and they are meant for mountaineers. The Kandias are regarded by their neighbours with slight disdain as being not very bright and inclined to shoot a line. They are, in fact, a very poor people; isolated, backward, and speaking their own dialect. Cultivation is very scarce; maize being the only crop. There is no fruit to be seen, but walnut trees grow in abundance everywhere. We reached Gabriel by mid-morning on August 28 in company with a party of traders returning home laden with rock salt after trading their wool and ghee in Kalam. I visited the fort and, seated cross-legged inside, was hospitably entertained to lunch by the Tehsildar, answering

a volley of questions and retaliating with some of my own. A new porter was provided, also some maize flour, freshly-ground at a nearby water-mill. There is a motor road under construction which will eventually link this valley with Saidu. In 1960, an Italian scientific party (Prof. Tucci?) had camped in the hills above Gabriel; but no other foreigners had come this way before.

We camped that evening five miles beyond Gabriel towards Mirshahi, with the ice-capped group now in closer view. Although viewed from a different angle, the peaks were easily recognisable as those I had seen from the Paloga Divide. Early the next morning, a dignified old man approached our camp and enquired where I was going. I pointed in the direction of the snow peaks. 'They are called', he said, 'the Siri Dara³; and if you can wait until I return from the Tehsil office in Gabriel, I will show you the way there'. We could not, of course, wait. But I was grateful to him for having given me my first real clue.

A stony road led us to Mirshahi. The mountains had long since disappeared behind the walls of the valley, and I was plagued by doubts about the route. If Mills' guess was right, I ought to search for a valley entering Mirshahi from the east. I was not at all sure that we were on the right bank of the river. Three miles past Mirshahi, we reached a tidy little village, an oasis of rich cornfields. Turning a corner, I saw a valley entering from the west. The village and the valley bore the same name, Siri Dara. Crossing a crude wooden bridge, we followed a path on the true right bank and within a short while I recognised a familiar tall feature and saw the edge of an ice-fall ahead. My doubts were set at rest.

The valley with its thick undergrowth and dark, narrow walls reminded me of nothing so much as the Zemu glen in Sikkim. There is a good track, and we saw a few small settlements each surrounded by cornfields and walnut groves. We met a party of traders descending; they had left Kalam the day before, travelling along a high-level route. This was encouraging news for our return journey. We camped that afternoon out of sight of the main group and got under way the next morning in a Scotch mist. We had come less than three miles up the valley. At brief intervals, we obtained glimpses of the ice-fall, still about six miles ahead. After passing the last settlement, the path began to climb very steeply through pine-woods and at the top a dramatic view of the ice-fall was revealed. It was now only four miles away, and was much vaster than I had expected.

An hour later, we pitched our tents in a stony valley, two miles north of the snout of the Siri Dara glacier. I felt like Moses when he led the children of Israel into the wilderness. The porters were visibly disgruntled, having been misled by the Kandiwals into expecting

³ Literally translated, 'The Head of the Pass'.



Photo: Trevor Braham]

SIRI DARA ICE-FALL.

(No. 38)

grassy flats covered with scrubwood. The ice-fall, one of the most impressive I had seen, was four miles wide, roughly from east to west, and about 4,500 ft. high. Above it lay a great ice plateau, as yet only partly visible, from which rose several peaks. Avalanches were frequently breaking way from the lower séracs, and it was evident that the glacier was in a state of retreat. I was attracted by a Central Peak, about 19,500 ft., whose upper part seemed to offer a straightforward ascent route, though its lower approaches were obscured. Obviously the first problem was to find a way through or around the ice-fall. In order to do justice to an objective this size, I felt that a small team of climbers together with a surveyor would need to devote four to six weeks to the job. Central Peak was not identifiable as the possible climbing objective I had singled out from the Paloga watershed, but its ascent would provide an ideal viewpoint over the whole area.

It was very unlikely that a safe route could be found directly up the ice-fall, and with my limited resources this was out of the question anyway. The true right bank seemed to offer a hopeful start above a steep moraine ridge; but later, at the junction of a subsidiary glacier from the east, the passage degenerated into a confusion of boulders and séracs, dominated by a perfect avalanche chute. The left bank certainly seemed the more obvious choice; and the next morning, with the porter Rahim-Atulla, we made a detour above the glacier snout (an ice-cave 60 ft. high) and headed for the steep grassy slopes above. Progress on the first day came to an abrupt halt when the prevailing low clouds culminated in a sharp thunder-storm and snow.

On the second day we made better progress, and after a steep 4½-hour climb up boulder slopes and rock ribs we reached the left edge of the séracs. Moving diagonally across the smooth upper névé, we arrived at a broad platform situated at the foot of a 400 ft. ice-slope; this, apparently, gave direct access to the plateau. Here, beside a large table-topped slab, was an ideal camp site, about one mile in a direct line north-west of Central Peak. The round journey back to Base took nine hours.

Rahim-Atulla and I were back again the next day with two porters carrying food, tentage and firewood. The journey to Ice-fall Camp took five hours; familiarity with the route seemed to emphasise its steepness and length. In the afternoon, a recce up the ice-slope showed that the way immediately above was barred by séracs and deep crevasses. In failing light, we examined the route further to the left and decided that we must search for a way there. We were away at 5.30 next morning in perfect weather, and moving diagonally to the left across fairly steep ice we were soon engulfed in an area of fantastically shaped séracs. With thousands of tons of ice poised above, and conscious all the while of the threat of annihilation, we cut a way up a rib

only to find a 20 ft. drop below; balanced along a narrow ledge to find an unbridgeable gap beyond; followed a trough strewn with ice debris to come up against a vertical wall. We spent over two hours in this labyrinth, and the whole area was obviously completely unsafe. I did not feel justified in continuing; there must be a safer way elsewhere. We had not even come within sight of the plateau, let alone the foot of Central Peak. Later, from the top of Consolation Peak, I realised that our highest point was about 500 ft. below the plateau.

We returned and packed up the tent. On the descent, I studied the ice-fall carefully, but no easy solution seemed to present itself. A way there must be, of course; but certainly not up the centre. It looked as though a route might be made along the true right-hand edge at the foot of the rock walls, but the danger of avalanches would always be present. Attaining the plateau at this eastern corner would necessitate a fairly long supply line. Within its area of about 15 sq. miles, the plateau contained a group of interesting peaks. There was a fine three-headed mountain resembling the Zermatt Breithorn dominating the left—probably the highest of the group. To its left, partly hidden, was a smaller sharply-pointed summit. Behind it to the right lay a trio of peaks, the most distant of which seemed rather striking. Nearer was a smaller mountain with a rocky summit ridge; then came Central Peak with an apparently higher summit peeping up behind. Further to the right was a mountain whose twin rock summits were joined by a wide snow saddle. At the extreme western edge was a mile-long watershed ridge with a series of rocky summits forming its narrow crest. I estimated the height of the 'Breithorn' conservatively at about 20,000 ft., and I do not think that the lowest of the group could have been much below 18,500 ft. It was tantalising to have come so far and to have failed to enter the plateau; still more so to have to return after obtaining a fleeting glimpse, with so much survey and climbing waiting to be done.

Time was running out; and I could not spare the three days I estimated it would take to attempt the right-hand route up the ice-fall. We packed up and left Base on September 4, heading for the short glacier route over to Kalam. I had always regarded objectively the Kandiawals' assertion that no more than a day's walk along a good path was involved, so I was neither surprised nor disappointed by the journey. Scrambling up steep rock and scree often without any sign of a track, it took $6\frac{1}{2}$ hours of hard going to reach a pass, c. 15,000 ft., locally called the Sho Ho Dara. The descent on the Swat side included a bergschrund, steep névé, and a long stretch of boulder-hopping. Camp was made late in the evening on a magnificent meadow at 14,000 ft., surrounded by large glaciated boulders and overlooked by two ice-peaks of about 18,000 feet.

By this time, casualties had taken a heavy toll of our small group, so I set out alone at 6 a.m. the next morning towards an easy peak of about 17,000 ft. situated along the Swat-Kandia divide running roughly from north to south. It was an enjoyable climb up a 40-degree face composed of firmly packed névé. Reaching the top in 3½ hours, I was treated to a superb view. The summit cornice overhung a sheer drop of 3,000 ft. into the Siri Dara valley. The plateau and its peaks were now visible in perspective. The 'Breithorn' and Central Peak looked the finest of all. From here it seemed that my approach to the plateau had not been far off the mark, and perhaps an attempt slightly farther to the right would have been more rewarding. What a splendid objective the plateau would be for some future party.

Returning from Consolation Peak at 11.30, I found the porters packed and ready to start the descent. We set out in a light fall of snow; the shining summits of the morning had vanished behind a heavy barrier of storm clouds. It was a long descent in mist over moraine. Later, we struck a narrow track, and passed occasional small settlements. This route, taken in the opposite direction from Kalam, though providing quick access to the Siri Dara, would involve a long and relentlessly steep ascent. By 5.30 p.m. it became obvious that Kalam was not within immediate reach, so we placed our last camp on a flower-strewn knoll with the river on one side and birch-woods on the other. After a steep seven-mile descent the next day through magnificent alpine country we reached Kalam before noon, where a warm welcome awaited us.