THE GERMAN HIMALAYAN EXPEDITION, 1965

BY GÜNTER HAUSER

(Translated by Hugh Merrick)

(Five illustrations: nos. 26–30)

This expedition succeeded in twice climbing Gangapurna (24,443 ft.) in the Annapurna Range by its southern flank, two parties reaching the summit, on May 6 and 8, 1965, after an extremely difficult ascent. All eight members of the party and three Sherpas were thus able to stand on the summit. Gangapurna was one of the unclimbed Himalayan seven-thousanders, repeatedly mentioned in alpine literature as one of the most interesting objectives left. In spite of having lost some of our tents and pitons and the fact that some of the party were slightly frostbitten, we succeeded, on May 29, just before the monsoon broke, in making the second ascent of Glacier Dome (c. 23,459 ft.) and the first3 of Tent Peak (c. 18,200 ft.). We enjoyed the active support of the German Alpine Club, and Günter Hauser led the expedition.

Gangapurna: a first ascent in spite of obstacles

The gods have erected two fearsome barriers to the mountains of Nepal: the customs formalities in Bombay and the problem of transport for an expedition's seven tons of all-embracing equipment across India. Two members of the party, Erich Reismüller and Otto Seibold, dealt with the first unexpectedly quickly; but the powers that rule India's railways made it abundantly clear to them that, to avoid overloading their freight resources, our forty cases could not be carried in one wagon; they would have to be divided up among several trains.

The result was that when the rest of the party arrived in Kathmandu on March 17, only eight cases had put in an appearance. After waiting ten days, we decided to move off with our 115 porters, although only about half of our stuff had arrived. It goes without saying that three more porter-trains of fifty, twenty-three and five respectively, had to be

---

1 I should like to thank Mr. Merrick for his generous help with the translation of German articles for the A.J. over a number of years.—EDITOR.

2 Professor G. O. Dyhrenfurth; Col. J. O. M. Roberts.

3 The Japanese ascent of Tent Peak, briefly mentioned in A.J. 70. 217., received no publicity, and Herr Hauser was unaware of it at the time this article was written.—EDITOR.
employed later. As they only reached Base Camp over a period of weeks, we had to resort to much improvisation over clothing and provisions.

The route from the airfield at Pokhara, where we had flown in, ran up into the hills, passing for four days through clean hamlets and wonderfully constructed terraces of fields. Two laborious days followed, up the sacred gorge of the Modi Khola, thickly overgrown by jungle-like forests of dripping bamboo and rhododendron; this took us past Machapuchare (on which Col. J. O. M. Roberts’ British expedition turned back close under the summit in 1957, but since pronounced holy ground and therefore out of bounds to climbers); and finally, a long day’s march, through the narrow valley of the upper Modi Khola. Our seven female porters had to be left behind before we entered the gorge, for women are not allowed there on religious grounds.

Exceptionally heavy falls of spring snow by which other parties operating in Nepal at the time were also seriously hampered—indeed, the Japanese Dhaulagiri expedition suffered two fatal avalanche disasters—resulted in our barefooted porters refusing, once and for all, to tackle the last day’s stage up to Base Camp; it was only with the greatest difficulty, by persuasive talk and the distribution of cigarettes, that we had managed to coax them through the gorge, while snow fell with almost thunderstorm fury. So we ourselves, our eight Sherpas and five low altitude porters were forced to fight our way to Base Camp by the institution of an exhausting shuttle service, which necessitated the continual breaking of a fresh trail in heavy new snow. This, of course, meant further loss of time, and in the end our Base, which we established only on April 6, was sited as low as 12,300 ft., and therefore still more than 12,000 ft. below our summit. This gives some idea of the huge height differentials and the steepness of the Annapurna group’s southern side; indeed, this ranks as the highest vertical face in the world in relation to the horizontal distance between its foot and its summit. It was immediately clear that we would have to reckon with relatively long distances between camps and continual exposure to avalanche perils.

Our reconnaissance work was hampered by fresh snowfalls and trail-breaking in knee-deep snow; the skis we had intended to use for this stage had not yet arrived. Strangely enough, we now discovered that the highest point in the eastern Annapurna glacier, which flows down from Gangapurna, was not, as normally, at a bergschrund, but far down the glacier; as a result of shrinkage due to simultaneous movements in its flow, an enormous hole had been formed in the glacier’s upper course, with an ice-lake in its depths, hemmed in on the mountain side by rock cliffs and rubble. This completely barred a direct approach to Gangapurna. However, the left hand lateral moraine offered the possibility of circumventing the glacier-slide at a higher level. We were able to site Camp I at about 14,100 ft., some 350 ft. up on the side of the moraine
Gangapurna from the South, showing the 1965 route.
away from the glacier, in the only spot which seemed to us safe from the actual snow of an avalanche, though not from the air pressure of what we feared might fall down the 7,000 ft. precipice above.

From there we succeeded in traversing across steep slopes—we only ventured onto them before 11 a.m. during those early days of heavy accumulated snow masses—to a great rock buttress in the midst of the ice-fall, whose stupendously shattered surface covers the southern faces of Gangapurna and Annapurna III. Camp II was established on the eastern side of the lowest rocks, at the ice-fall's edge and at about 16,400 ft. The ice-fall above was of typical Himalayan formation; great blocks of ice like enormous groups of buildings hung crookedly against the sky, menacing the ascent. Erich Reismüller and Hermann Köllensperger, in a piece of inspired route-finding, managed to circumvent the danger sectors at a safe distance, to reach the roof of the rock buttress—projecting from the enormous face like a great snow-covered balcony—by way of a couloir, and there, at about 18,700 ft., to site Camp III. This eagle's eyrie yields a fantastic panoramic view of the whole southern aspect of the Annapurna group—to the west Annapurna I (26,504 ft.) and to the south the incomparably elegantly shaped giant's tooth of 22,958 ft. Machapuchare, by whose side the Matterhorn itself would certainly take on a modest appearance.

We were, however, unable to occupy Camp III, for further heavy falls of snow compelled us to wait at II. In such weather conditions hardly anyone ventured outside the tent, and this will perhaps explain why next day we failed to notice the distress signals being made from Camp I by laying out red bivouac sacks and sending up flares. It was not till the pre-arranged time for a radio talk that we learned what had happened down there during the early hours of April 21.

We now heard the following details: at about 5.30 a.m., when five Sherpas were asleep in three small tents, and the Liaison Officer, Prem Lama, and the expedition's medico, Dr. Klaus Ekkerlein, in a large one specially designed for steep slopes, the metal struts of all the small tents suddenly gave way, their fabric was torn to ribbons, and the big tent literally took to the air; after an uphill flight of at least fifty yards, tent-poles and all, it cleared the crest of the moraine and landed hundreds of yards away on the eastern Annapurna glacier. Later on, it took the Sherpas an hour to reach its remains. Held down by the weight of the inmates' bodies, the inner tent tore away and collapsed on them in a shower of very fine snow-dust, awakening them most rudely. Part of the provisions were whirled away equally explosively, but these were easily spotted and retrieved because the ravens, unable to resist such a generous gift, followed them. Among other damage, the strong aerial-cable was broken in three places; luckily the short-wave set on which we received the special weather reports of the German weather service relayed to us
by the ‘Deutsche Welle’, who collected the data first from Indian, Pakistani and even one Chinese station, remained undamaged. Nobody had been hurt, and the severe shock suffered by our sleeping comrades presently took on the character of a joke among them all, including our plucky Liaison Officer. The powder avalanche, they could now see, had, as we had always thought possible, started 7,000 ft. higher up, had finally penetrated a hollow and rushed steeply uphill for more than 300 ft., where its wind-blast destroyed the camp in spite of its protected position behind an intervening crest.

We now occupied Camp III and, although this was a nice, safe camp site, the nightly gales blew unfettered across the exposed ‘balcony’. We had to stay awake half the night to hold the tent-stays firm; but we had to abandon that practice too, when the almost daily thunderstorms at dusk came so close that lightning flash and thunderclap were virtually instantaneous.

After the steep ascent through the ice-fall between Camps II and III, we had hoped to be able to traverse without undue difficulty to the ice-cliff, about 1,300 ft. high, below the saddle connecting Gangapurna to Annapurna III, which was the key to the whole climb. In the event, the summit party, Greissl, Reismüller, Wünsche and Ehlers, had to wade across the immense, steep, inhospitable slope, above which blueish ice-cliffs hung from Annapurna III’s West ridge and hanging glaciers fell away below. It was obvious that after heavy falls of fresh snow the danger of avalanches was so great that it would be impossible to venture on the slopes again, so that Camp IV would have to be stocked with food for at least a week. But where, on terrain consisting entirely of steep slopes, could a safe place be found for Camp IV at all? Eventually, the only possible site for a camp was found at about 20,350 ft. under a protecting ice-cliff; but the very first night the high altitude gale blew the snow from the face above over the cliff, so that it poured down like sand in an hour-glass, covering the tents. All in vain our friends beat and pressed themselves against the walls of the tents, which threatened to close in on them entirely; nobody slept a wink. Next day the snow drifted over the tent-ridges. There was no question of moving on; they were far too busy digging themselves out of the masses of snow which had engulfed them. Another sleepless night ensued. On the third day they found it possible to re-pitch the tents, and so minimised the drifting; but that did not by any means turn the camp into a safe shelter or afford the team the chance of the rest and recuperation they needed for tackling the key problem, which now lay just ahead of them.

The ice-wall was fully 1,300 ft. high. After crossing the bergschrund, the first party climbed initially on hard firm, fixing ropes to safeguard this stage of their ascent. The ice-cliff below the col glittered blue, and it was hard to decide where its weakest point lay, if indeed there was a
Annapurna I (8,078 m.) from Camp III on Gangapurna. Left of it is the Fang and (extreme left) Modi Peak. Below and left of Annapurna I is Fluted Peak.

(No. 27)

Machapuchare (6,997 m.) from Camp III on Gangapurna.

(No. 28)
weakness. A prominent rib of hard snow turned out too friable, and the *firn* adjoining it, which had looked good enough to go on, proved to be only a thin crust overlaying smooth slabs of rock. An alternative route up a rocky gully to the left of the col was provided with pitons, but eventually abandoned because on the same day a successful attempt was made to climb in an almost direct line to the rocks roughly in the middle of the ice-wall and over them out onto the upper ice-field. Morale improved at once, and we felt that we would defeat the key problem and reach the col next day. But the next day yielded only a short distance upwards before a blizzard set in. The following day was even less fruitful; we took twelve hours to work our laborious way up the 55° ice-slope to reach the point where we had turned back the previous day, and then another blizzard drove us down. We had now spent seven days on the ice-face. Cutting steps and banging in pitons for the fixed ropes, which were essential safety measures, was terribly exhausting at such a height.

We planned to attack the summit in two parties, the second one to support the first and then taking over while the first remained in turn to support it; in this way every member had a chance to get to the top. But the tough resistance of the ice-wall had temporarily exhausted the strength of our first party, consisting of five climbers and two Sherpas. It also became clear that the oxygen bottles were being used up at this altitude much more quickly than we had bargained for, and the Sherpas were not being any too economical in their use of them. At this critical stage, with the summit still looking a long way off, we sent Kippa Sherpa down to Base Camp to bring up more oxygen bottles, withdrew some of the party on security grounds to Camp III and redistributed the two summit groups to give the exhausted members time for recovery. The final stage from the col to the summit was not likely to give us any serious trouble, so we looked forward to a successful climb by one or other of the parties, it did not matter which.

On May 5 the first group left the tents of Camp IV in a temperature of −25°C. and forced its way up to the bergschrund through more than knee-deep snow. We had to free the ropes from the frozen snow and break a completely new trail. Almost every solid hold slid away from the hard surface below before a stable hold could be won for our crampons, and we were continually gasping for breath as a result of these exertions. It took several hours to reach our earlier point of return, and our feet had long ago lost all sensation. We were, however, able to climb the last two rope's lengths to the col comparatively quickly, without having to cut steps; and there, at about 22,300 ft., we placed Camp V. It turned out later that Greissl and Reismüller had suffered frost-bite of the first degree to their toes, while mine was of the second; fortunately for our toes, our doctor had graduated in frost-bite damage, so that there were no permanent effects, thanks to his expert treatment.
Gangapurna: between Camps II and III in the ice-fall.

(No. 29)

East ridge of Gangapurna from Camp V.

(No. 30)
We left camp after a cramped night—six of us, Greissl, Köllensperger, Reismüller, Ang Temba, Phudorje II and myself in the single tent—at about 8 a.m. The East ridge of Gangapurna unfolded its great length up to the summit, matching Annapurna III's West ridge at the other end of the col. (It would have been quite easy for a party to have taken that peak too, but we had no permit for it; it had already been climbed by an Indian expedition from its easier, northern side.) The East ridge of Gangapurna rises quite gently at first, but breaking a trail frequently meant wallowing to the hips. Eventually the ridge steepened to the subsidiary summit, and we made slow progress up to it. Greissl, Reismüller and the Sherpas took turns in breaking the trail, while Köllensperger and I followed slowly. Away to the south, the afternoon thunderstorms were boiling up high into the sky. A strange race was on our hands to beat them to the summit. Suddenly, Phudorje threw himself down and intoned a Buddhist prayer. 'We'll be on top in a moment', Ang Temba, the Sirdar, assured us in spite of our doubts, and tied us all on one rope in a symbolic gesture; then he and Phudorje led the way to the summit, mistakenly as it turned out. The summit lay further on, beyond a connecting ridge. So we buckled to again and stamped our way to where the ridge really ended. At 2.35 p.m. we were at last on Gangapurna's 24,443 ft. summit.

Phudorje cheered and waved the pennants of Nepal and the Federal Republic on the shaft of his ice-axe. Reismüller took a 16 mm. film with the 25 lb. camera and tripod he had carried up, over and above the normal equipment. Greissl, who in 1960 while on K2 had originally thought up this expedition, and Köllensperger, a veteran of many expeditions and now standing for the first time on a seven-thousander's summit, beamed all over their faces. The pride of Ang Temba and Phudorje, who only a year ago had lived through a successful climb and a disaster on Cho Oyu, knew no bounds.

The weather had meanwhile caught up with us and the snow was being blown horizontally across our summit, obliterating our tracks. Ang Temba led down and, in spite of completely iced-up goggles, found the way unerringly by some sixth sense. The descent was a long and slow business, while the gale shook us to the core. Presently Reismüller took over the lead, and it was dusk before we reached Camp V.

During the next two days Greissl and I went down to Base Camp, there to meet the German Ambassador, Dr. W. Löer. We were thrilled at this visit and the interest it evinced in our activities—surely this was the first time an ambassador had paid a visit, involving an approach march of considerable difficulty, to the Base Camp of an expedition? From a point at about 13,000 ft., above the camp, we showed him, through binoculars, the route up the mountain and Camp V, where at that very moment the second summit party (Wünsche, Seibold, Dr. Ekkerlein, Ehlers and
Pemba Norbu, as well as Phurbar Kitar and Phurbar Tenzing, neither of whom got to the top, were in position.

Starting from Camp V at 7 a.m. on May 8 Wünsche, Seibold and Pemba Norbu had reached the summit in record time at 10.20 a.m., Dr. Ekkerlein and Ehlers arriving somewhat later. So we succeeded in doing what so far as we know only a French expedition (on Makalu in 1955) had done before, namely in placing all the European members of an expedition on a high and difficult Himalayan summit.

The descent from Camp V next day down the ice-wall, in very bad weather and with two exhausted Sherpas, was another difficult job for the second summit-group. Five of them spent a last night at Camp IV, while the other two came down to III. Fresh snow had meanwhile fallen to a depth of nearly a foot and the avalanche menace was dire. A small snow-slide at Camp IV compelled all except Ehlers to leave the tents and dig them out. At that very moment huge masses of snow, released by an avalanche high up on the ridge, swept valleywards across the whole breadth of the face: diverted by the ice-cliff above Camp IV, they turned away almost at right angles over the crest to its east, burying the tents to a depth of some ten feet with a lateral offshoot. Dr. Ekkerlein was carried down about fifty yards where he remained held just above the abyss, while Wünsche and Phurbar Tenzing managed to work their way out by swimming motions, but Ehlers and Phurbar Kitar were buried. Ehlers was only freed after half an hour’s digging by his three companions, using their hands. By sheer luck Kitar was close to the collapsed tent, so that he soon got clear; a small hole had left him just enough air to breathe.

After a bitterly cold bivouac—the tents being unusable—they continued their descent. We evacuated the mountain during the following days.

*Circuitous routes to Glacier Dome’s summit*

Glacier Dome was first climbed on October 16, 1964, by a member of an expedition of the ‘All Japan Mountaineering Union’, whose sole objective it was, and a Sherpa. The Japanese required five camps and a bivouac, and found the main obstacle lay in forcing a passage up an ice-fall between 18,000 and 19,150 ft. Our party had a secondary permit for a second ascent of Annapurna I from the south. A reconnaissance had shown the possibility of such an ascent over Glacier Dome and thence by the long and lofty East ridge. However, the monsoon was hard at hand, so that we were only able to consider Glacier Dome itself as a serious proposition; even then, we had only twelve days at the most in which to tackle the mountain.

Our start for the peak was delayed by a strike on the part of the Sherpas, which took us completely by surprise; its settlement, by the
evening of May 16 took a great deal out of us. We were able to occupy Camp I on the West Annapurna glacier at about 14,925 ft. on May 19. It was now simply a question of time whether we could get to the summit and withdraw safely before the arrival of the monsoon. Even then, we were not too well placed; our last ice-pitons had been lost in a flood at Base Camp, some of our tents had gone or were seriously damaged, and our injuries from frost-bite were a severe hindrance. I, for instance, could only wear one pair of socks in my boots and was under strict instructions from the doctor not to risk exposing my feet to high altitude cold any further. After two days of snowfall, the Sherpas were saying the monsoon had set in, and we were getting jittery. The assault party waded knee-deep up to the shattered glacier flowing down from Glacier Dome. At 17,225 ft. they finally sited Camp II between crevasses the size of a house. From there Dr. Ekkerlein and Reismüller picked their dainty way through the network of crevasses and grotesque ice-formations to the ice-fall between 18,000 and 19,150 ft., which had caused the Japanese so much trouble. Could it be climbed without ice-pitons? Reinforced by Wünsche, they tried next day to climb its grooves and hollows by cunningly circumventing the huge bulges of ice which demanded pitons, but without any success. At 18,700 ft. they finally had to give up the attempt for the want of five to ten ice-pitons.

Our difficulties were considerably increased by the wide detour now forced upon us. Below galleries of glittering blue ice-palaces, we turned away on the upper glacier directly below the summit of the Dome and there established Camp III, at 18,700 ft., in an avalanche-protected spot between great crevasses. After a number of attempts, Wünsche, Dr. Ekkerlein, Greissl, Reismüller, Seibold and Sherpa Kippa at last managed to climb a 60° snow-slope and so to reach a secondary rib. Over this they reached the crevasses which surround the foot of the broad summit like the brim of a cap. In the event, they managed to defeat these too and placed Camp IV at 20,670 ft. on the South ridge of the summit.

After an uncomfortable night they started off on May 29 up the broad summit ridge, which was at one point so steep that they had to climb vertically to avoid setting off a slab avalanche. They reached the summit after four hours at about 11 a.m. and found it to be a gigantic plateau. The weather was perfect, so they were able to take film shots and panorama stills for a full hour. Quite close to them the 11,500 ft. South-east face of Annapurna I shot up from the depths, on the other side stood Gangapurna and Manaslu, with Machapuchare, already below eye level, away to the south. They had also an excellent opportunity for studying the possible route to Annapurna I, up its East ridge, which would have needed a few more camps and, more particularly, oxygen. (We had only four emergency masks with us.)
By late afternoon we were congratulating them at Camp III and it
did not take long to evacuate the mountain.

_Tent Peak (18,210 ft.)_

The reasons for the first ascent of Tent Peak on May 24—and so even
before the successful climb of Glacier Dome—were our wish to take
theodolite readings with a view to improving the only available sketch-
map, that of Col. Roberts (and for this purpose Tent Peak, with its
central situation, was ideal), and secondly because I did not want my
feet to keep me sitting idle around the lower camps. From Camp I,
3,300 ft. below the summit, Köllensperger, Phurbar Kitar and I went up
over moraines and then up a glacier, where we had to make a wide detour
around an ice-fall. We then climbed a steep rock-step, above which a
hardly less steep snow-slope took us up about 800 ft. and brought us
to the corniced connecting-ridge; this we followed downwards to a broad
col immediately to the north-west of Tent Peak’s summit structure and
there, at 17,700 ft., we set up our only camp. Next day we climbed the
very steep summit ridge leading to the top; this proved to be a sharp
snow-crest with a drop of several hundred metres on either side, rather
like the Rochefort ridge in the Mont Blanc group. We had excellent
weather for our measurements.

A few days later forty-four porters reached Base Camp from Pokhara
and we were able to go down through the sacred gorge of the Modi Khola
just in time before the monsoon set in.