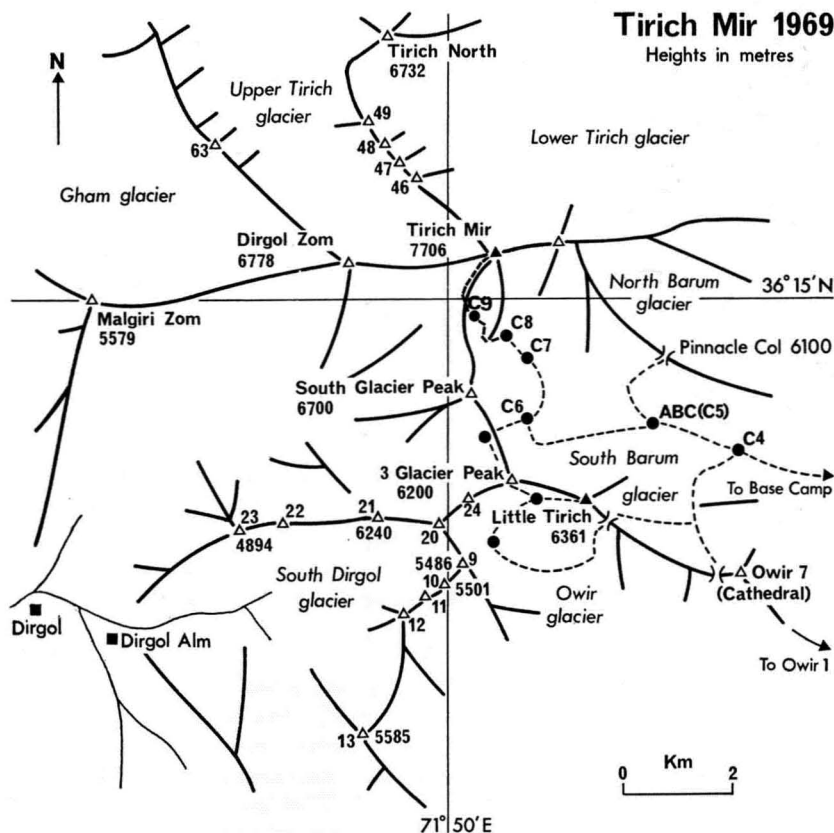


Tirich Mir, 1969

Henry Day

For its 1969 expedition, the Army Mountaineering Association selected Tirich Mir (25,263 ft) as a high Himalayan peak which, although climbed three times previously (see *A.J.* 73 262), would nevertheless provide valuable high-altitude experience as a foundation for the future. The success of the expedition has encouraged the Association to organise for 1970 a further party, to Annapurna I (26,545 ft) by the North face, using the French 1950 route (*A.J.* 58 155).



55 *Tirich Mir 1969* The activities of the A.M.A. expedition. Heights of camps: C4 16,300 ft (4970 m), C5 17,430 ft (5312 m), C6 19,200 ft (5852 m), C7 21,400 ft (6523 m), C8 22,600 ft (6888 m) and C9 23,500 ft (7163 m). Map based on that in *O.A.Z.* 1363 by kind permission

Build-up and acclimatisation

After the march-in from Chitral via the Owir An, the party split into two groups of four and six respectively, with the four pioneering the route to Advance Base at 17,200 ft on the South Barum glacier. They stayed one camp ahead, moving on as soon as they had enough kit to do so. Their acclimatisation appeared to keep pace with their progress, but they were noticeably more tired than the main party, possibly because the latter did not pack loads with such dedication. During this period, the main party supervised the seven Chitralis who carried to Advanced Base, and made frequent explorations to the North and South ridges of the mountain, often on skis.

Subsequently, members of the main party climbed Ausher and Little Tirich, and gained the South-east ridge of Tirich Mir, while the advance party pushed on up the Norwegian route.

The first ascent of Little Tirich, 20,869 ft

Brig. J. R. G. Finch had recommended climbing Little Tirich from the Owir glacier or from the north-west (*A.J.* 73 110). His memory of the former route from his visit in 1938 was fairly accurate, and that was the approach successfully followed. The latter recommendation was made from study of Gruber's photograph (*A.J.* 72 [1]) taken from Buni Zom nearly twenty miles away. His 'level ridge' turned out to be a steep ridge treacherously corniced on the South Barum side.

The party consisting of Anderson, Summerton and Day launched an Alpine-style push from beneath the upper ice-fall of the South Barum glacier (16,100 ft), setting off on 3 July with all they needed for four days. Finch's 'easy notch' to the Owir glacier had not been found, in spite of gaining the watershed in five different places during June, so they settled for an 18,000 ft gap between Little Tirich and Owir VI.

They suffered an early setback when Anderson glissaded off the end of the abseil rope into a bergschrund several hundred feet beneath. However, he gamely continued that day to where they camped at the head of the Owir glacier, and the next when they climbed a steep couloir beneath 3-Glacier Peak in the north-west corner of the headwall. They excavated an icy platform on the ridge at just under 20,000 ft and spent a second uncomfortable night. By seven o'clock next morning, 5 July, they had traversed easy ground to be the first men to stand on the bitterly cold summit of Little Tirich, quite overawed by the vast South face of Tirich Mir.



56 Little Tirich from 21,000 ft on Tirich Mir showing the route of the first ascent. Photo: Noel Dilly

It took the rest of the day to traverse to the head of the Dir Gol. 3-Glacier Peak was traversed, the descent on hard, blue ice proving difficult. They were anxious about the huge cornices known to overhang the Barum side. The west side was as steep but more rocky. They had to abseil into the Dir Gol.

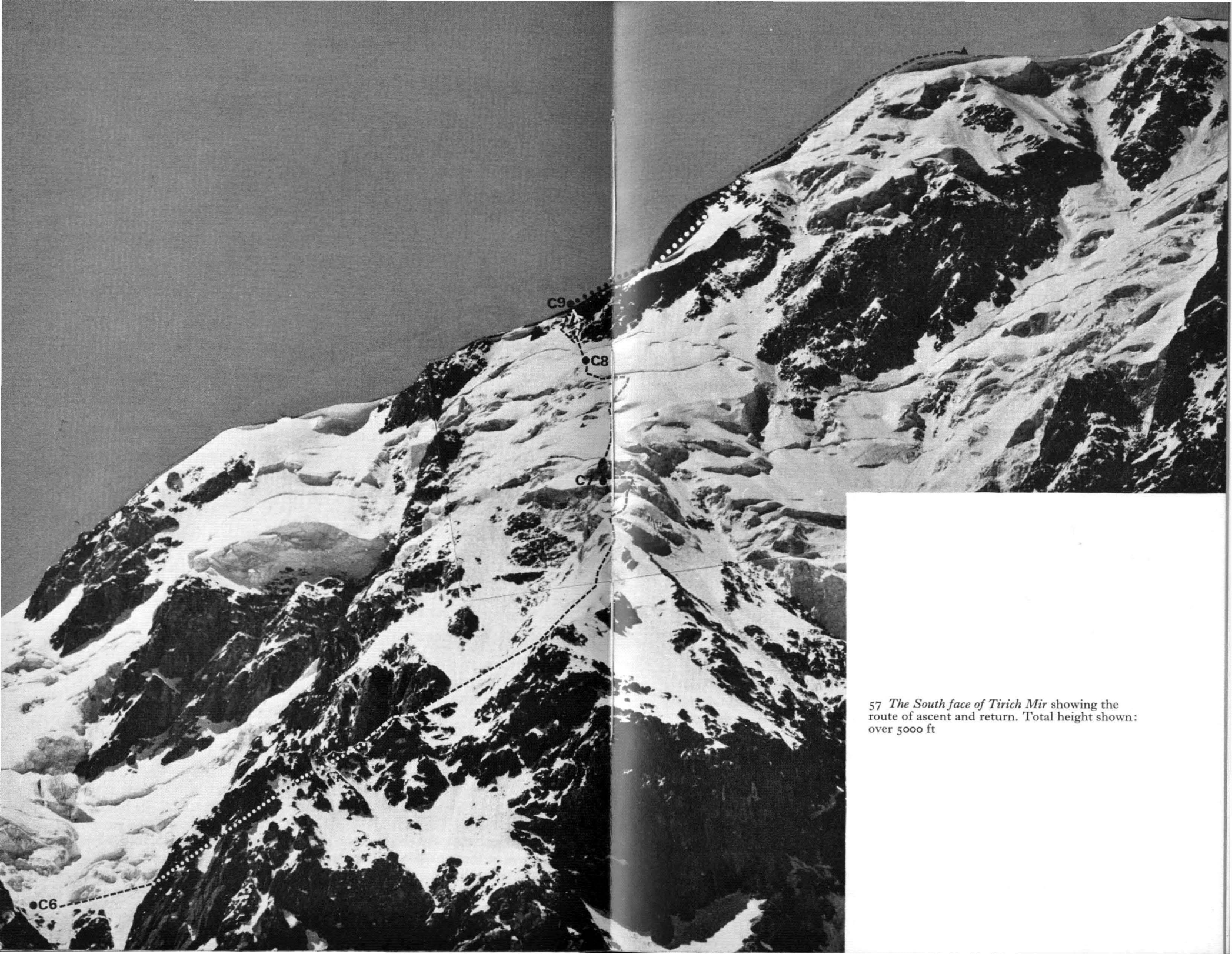
Luck was on their side when they chose the correct place to cut through the cornice over the lower South glacier on the morning of the fourth day. Securely belayed well back from the edge by two ropes, it was a thrilling experience to cut away the snow and find space beneath.

Those 900 ft took nine hours to descend. Anderson was a sick man, but the others were tired too. After one abseil from an isolated boulder when the axe-driven peg nearly popped out, they committed themselves to the 60° porridge with resignation.

As soon as they reached Camp 6 (19,200 ft) the doctor examined Anderson and diagnosed four broken ribs and a deflated lung. It will be interesting to see how he goes on Annapurna I in 1970 with both lungs.

The fourth ascent of Tirich Mir, 25,263 ft

Six climbers spent the night of 18 July in two tents beneath a sphinx-shaped sérac at about 21,400 ft. They were on a shallow rib that began by containing the left wall of South glacier and soon faded into the flanks of the South-west ridge of Tirich Mir.



57 *The South face of Tirich Mir showing the route of ascent and return. Total height shown: over 5000 ft*

The doctor had returned to Base Camp to attend Anderson, who was still out of action following his accident on Little Tirich, and Cranmer, who had suffered a heart attack. Azhar Hussein had become sick from the altitude and had been sent down.

A thousand feet above lay a small dump of stores weighing about 60 lbs. Due to the poor weather and resulting treacherous snow it had taken all six of them and the doctor a week of repeated efforts to get the stores there.

All six were to pack loads up to what would be Camp 8 next day. Fleming and Porter would return, leaving Day and Mumtaz Khan up there. They would spend the night with the proposed summit pair of Owens and Summerton before carrying a final camp well up on the South-west ridge.

Shortly after starting next day, 19 July, Mumtaz Khan dropped out, to everyone's disappointment. One load had to be abandoned, and it turned out effectively to be the assault tent.

This left Owens, Summerton and Day at 22,600 ft that night and on 20 July they pushed on to a planned bivouac on the South-west ridge. They made slow progress due to the deep, steep snow until gaining a safe gully that led to the broad flank at about 23,500 ft. They were so overcome by the lack of oxygen that their lunch-break became an overnight stop.

Spindrift buried them as they lay exposed on a rocky platform that night. Day was particularly frozen and felt unable to start with the others until the sun reached him next morning. He followed Owens' flawless footholds until he found him, with Summerton, resting on rocks half way up a steep gully behind the prominent rock castle clearly visible from Advanced Base. The head of the gully was surmounted on near vertical snow before the right rib was gained. This was followed, mostly on rock, until a steep and broad snow-slope led to a long cornice. Here they roped up and turned the cornice on the left, leading them to a broad, rock-strewn shoulder. They turned right and soon could find nowhere higher. They could have played football on the summit.

Meanwhile, 21 July, the astronauts were sleeping in the Sea of Tranquility on the moon, and a huge avalanche down the South glacier was blasting Camp 6 to oblivion.

On turning about, Owens, who had led the way up Tirich Mir for more than a month, showing an inhuman energy, visibly weakened and would have fallen but for Summerton's skilled belay. Day, who had been the weakest member of



58 *View from South-east ridge of Tirich Mir towards Buni Zom (in middle background). Peaks in front are Ausher (Owir I), on the left, and Owir III, on the right. Photo: Henry Day*

the summit team, recovered enough to assist both down. He wished to press on past the bivouac site but was prevailed upon to spend another night there.

On 22 July they made Camp 7 with difficulty, due to the critical fixed rope having come adrift, and the equipment member insisting on adding to his load a tent that he could not bear to abandon.

Mumtaz Khan met them amongst the few remains of Camp 6 next morning. They made Base Camp the same day, where the doctor yet again proved himself by reviving the circulation in Day's frozen foot.

Conclusions and future prospects

The party had approached the South face of Tirich Mir with an open mind on the route to be taken. To climb the mountain was the prime consideration, although the embellishments of a new route and a traverse were much discussed and, indeed, reconnoitred.

The three main sources of avalanches on the South face are the slopes of Little Tirich, the upper half of the South glacier, and the central couloir between the two summits. The South-east ridge is nowhere threatened by falling ice.

The South glacier route to the South-west ridge is the most obvious line, but a few days observing the avalanches counts that out.

The Norwegian 'middle way' did not seem to us as objectively dangerous as it had to Arne Naess. However, it is difficult to distinguish even from above the upper ice-fall, so huge is the face.

The South-east ridge is still awaiting an ascent. It was found plastered with new snow at the beginning of July (as had been found by Arne Naess in 1950 and 1964) and a month later it looked much the same. However, in 1949 Naess had pronounced it feasible. The ridge is best approached from the South Barum glacier. The North Barum is reputedly very broken.

The East ridge looked extremely fine (and long) from Base Camp. It is probably best approached from the Lower Tirich glacier on the north side.¹

The western aspect of the mountain as revealed from the Owir Pass ten miles away, is more complex than expected and a polaroid camera carried on the march in would have been valuable. The South-west ridge almost merges with the West ridge above 22,000 ft to form a huge flank, now attracting the interest of the Austrians.

The traverse of both summits is still waiting to be attempted. Whether the approach is from north or south of Tirich Mir, the traverse will probably be from east to west, so that an easier route is descended. The convenience of mounting the attempt from the South Barum can be seen from the map [55].

SUMMARY Hindu Kush, Tirich Mir. Army Mountaineering Association Expedition, 1969. J. Anderson, J. H. Cranmer, M. W. H. Day, P. N. Dilly, J. W. Fleming (leader), A. Hussain, G. F. Owens, B. K. Porter, R. A. Summerton, M. Khan (liaison officer).

Ascents:

- 22 June Ausher (Owir I), 17,333 ft. J. Anderson, J. H. Cranmer.
- 5 July Little Tirich, 20,869 ft, first ascent. J. Anderson, M. W. H. Day, R. A. Summerton.
- 21 July Tirich Mir, 25,263 ft, fourth ascent, M. W. H. Day, G. F. Owens, R. A. Summerton.

¹ Brig. Finch writes: 'When I did my recce of Tirich Mir, I had a look at the South Barum glacier, but did not like it on account of avalanche risk, and went on to consider the possibilities of the East ridge. I agree with Day that this ridge does not look very hopeful from the North Barum. It is not only the difficulty of crossing a very confused ice-field, but access to the ridge is limited: one small spur looked as if it might go, but was far from attractive. As to whether the East ridge is easier to get on to from the north side is speculation, as I don't think anyone has really looked at it.'