

In the steps of Shipton

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In June 1978 the Royal Engineers sent a small expedition, under the leadership of Major Henry Day, to climb the W face of Trisul II. Most of the expedition travelled overland in a modified Bedford truck and a Land Rover ensuring that both climbers and equipment were assembled at the roadhead, Ghat, together, albeit not without delay at some customs posts en route. Major Day had invited me to join the expedition as medical officer, an offer I was delighted to accept, so I made my way from Muscat to Base Camp in the Nanda Kini valley in 6 days. Apart from the pleasure of climbing with cheerful and enthusiastic young soldiers it was the chance for a reunion with Captain Pat Gunson REME TAVR and Major Day. We had last all met on the joint British/Nepalese Army Expedition to Everest in 1976. It was also to be an opportunity to add this fascinating postscript to the successful ascent of the W ridge of Trisul.

For many years I had set my heart on seeing Nanda Devi, an ambition dating from 1963, when I had purchased a painting of the mountain from the late Dr T. Howard Somervell, shown at the AC that summer. He had painted it in 1931 when he and his wife were on holiday in Garhwal with Mr & Mrs Hugh Rutledge. I also knew that the late Eric Shipton had made a photographic survey in the Nanda Devi district in 1936¹ toward the end of which he had ascended the Ronti Glacier from the Rishi Ganga subsequently crossing an unnamed col and descending into the Nanda Kini valley. What I did not know, until my return to England in July 1978, was how he had reached the Ronti Glacier from the Rishi Ganga. Had I done so we would have missed a fine mountain journey.

At the head of the Nanda Kini valley is an elegant col. Mr Rutledge and Dr Tom Longstaff reported seeing this in 1927² when they were searching for a route into the Nanda Devi sanctuary, but had not crossed it due to bad weather. They had correctly surmised that it would lead them in to the lower Rishi Ganga and not into the Nanda Devi basin. However, our journey this year showed that there exists an alternative route from the Ronti Glacier. This led us much nearer the entrance to the Nanda Devi basin than we had expected.

At Base Camp I found another article describing a pilgrimage, rather than an expedition, by an Indian party to the Nanda Kini valley in the autumn of 1975, which added to my enthusiasm. This valley arises from the Nanda Ghanti, Trisul (W) and Silasamuddar glaciers and lies to the E of the great Trisul ridge with its 3 peaks. It descends quite steeply from N to S. High ridges surround it save to the SW where the Nanda Kini river carves a deep gorge as it tumbles to join the Alaknanda river at Nanda Prayag, a few hours drive S of Joshimath. The N end of the valley is closed, below the E ridge of Nanda Ghanti, by the elegant col I have already mentioned. This became the first focus of our attention. Shipton identified it as the saddle reached by Rutledge and Longstaff from the Nanda Kini side in 1927.¹

The leader of the 1975 Indian party,³ who quotes Dr Longstaff as naming it 'Ronti Saddle', and gives its height as 17,170ft, also called it Homkund Gali. Homkund, a nearby lake, is the destination of the Barinandajat pilgrimage. This lake, unusual in a glacier, was also examined in 1927 by Dr Longstaff, who thought it was due to local subsidence. According to our reckoning it lies at 14,800ft and was about 2km up the glacier from our Base Camp. We found it is only a few feet deep and surprisingly warm considering how close it lay to the snout of the ice

glacier in summer. Eastwards lies the outer flank of Trisul, which merges into the Ronti saddle. An ice-fall and 5 gullies, each smaller than the last, fall from this flank to the rising floor of the Nanda Kini valley.

The first, and longest, of the gullies became the route to our expedition's Camp 1 at the head of the Ronti Glacier. I think this must be the 'Shipton Gali' described by the writer³ down which Shipton descended to the Nanda Kini valley from the Ronti Glacier in 1936. Some mystery surrounds it—no one has apparently descended it since and it is suggested that the Ronti Saddle and Shipton Gali are the same.³ But Shipton himself clearly stated that he ascended the Ronti Glacier in 1936¹ and there is no other route from there into the Nanda Kini save by this gully which we used to establish Camp 1. He described his route as presenting 'no difficulties whatsoever . . .'. Either a typical understatement or perhaps snow conditions later in the year were better than when we used it as a porter route. By late June, we needed several hundred m of fixed rope to protect us in what had become a wet and slippery stone chute!

Late in June then, as the Trisul climbers returned to Base Camp, 4 of us prepared to retrace what we hoped was Shipton's route from the Rishi Ganga. We were: Capt Pat Gunson, Cpls Tony Swerzy and Len Atkinson and myself. We chose Nirman and Worr Singh, cousins and high altitude porters from Sutul, to accompany us. One bright morning near the end of June we set out on an easy but enjoyable climb to Homkund Gali. We wore crampons but our porters, unfortunately—in view of the next few days—boots only. Henry Day came to see us safely 'over the top' and certainly the N side of the col was impressively steep. But we were able to kick step the first 30m easily and then glissaded to the glacier another 300m below in about 20 minutes. A brisk walk brought us to the junction with the Ronti Glacier. Here the fusion of 3 glaciers—Nanda Ghanti, Homkund and Ronti—produced the customary chaotic rock piles in the central moraine and it was a painful struggle to the true right of the Ronti Glacier before we could scramble on to the lateral moraine beneath the SW cliffs of Berthaholi Himal.

Observations from map and the W ridge of Trisul had shown us a re-entrant leading W just beyond these cliffs, a likely route for Shipton to have taken, we considered. We reached its foot in mid-afternoon where a terrace made a welcome camp site watered from a nearby stream. High above us 3 goats gazed down then trotted briskly over the sky-line. We also saw alpine accentors and a rose finch. Unfortunately, the prevailing weather pattern persisted and afternoon cloud soon enshrouded us. It was not until the following morning that we could study the extraordinary rock wall that rose 900m to 1200m from the opposite side of the glacier. An astounding sight.

Before dawn the next day we rose and were soon climbing the steep grassy spur on the E side of the re-entrant. Soon the glacier was 300m below us. The re-entrant levelled off into the floor of a small glacier which we crossed to reach the W wall. The glacier curved N, arising from a wall that extends from the W ridge of Berthaholi Himal. Just to the left of this curtain is a shallow col on the W wall of the glacier. To reach this we had to struggle up a stone filled gully in the full heat of the morning sun. It took nearly 1½ hr but we were encouraged by the hope that we might see Nanda Devi from the top. We didn't. Instead, an enormous snow basin lay beneath us and directly in front of its far wall was yet another ridge running down from Berthaholi Himal. Near the root of this ridge a small col beckoned us on, only about 2km away as the chough flies. We estimated our height was again

just above 5200m. Far to the W we could see the distinctive peak of Kamet. Behind us, Homkund Gali looked like a tiny white banner hanging below the E ridge of Nanda Ghanti.

We ate and drank sparingly. There was little choice as the fog up the gully had encouraged us to empty our water bottles. Then we started to descend, first traversing across the W face of Berthaholi Himal. Alas the morning sun had done its damage. Soon we were wallowing thigh deep in snow, hacking out a perforated strip across the steep face. We gazed up apprehensively and decided we must rope up and descend vertically before starting the avalanche we deserved. Our 2 porters crashed cheerfully down, and through, the carefully trodden steps of the lead climber, leaving the rest of us to flounder after them. Mist settled as the face began to ease and we were relieved to trot out onto the floor of the basin. We made our way N to the foot of the gully leading to our next col. Discouraged by the snow conditions, our slow descent, and the mist that now filled the basin, we decided to camp for the night and tackle the next slope at first light. Avalanches were now coming off Berthaholi Himal behind us, whilst westward the constant rumble of stone and mud falling from the ridge was disturbing. But the snow-gully to the col itself maintained a reassuring silence.

It was a cold and uncomfortable night. We were travelling comparatively light and had not bargained for spending a night on ice: but fully dressed and with insulating mats beneath us, the night eventually passed. (I confess that I did not share the discomfort of the others having packed my high altitude bag and an inflatable mattress; and was soon inured to the uncomplimentary remarks of my companions.) Our porters, even more inadequately clad than ourselves, painstakingly prepared their tiny tent platform on a jagged spine of rock. That night I found there is an amazing amount of oil in a tin of mackerel heedlessly opened at 4875m: the tin erupted like an aerosol spray and my clothes gave off a healthy tang of the sea thereafter.

We were up and away at 6am anxious to discover if the steep head of the gully, sheathed in ice, would 'go' or not. Our fears were quickly allayed. After a good snow climb, we were able to 'front point' quickly up to a tongue of ice on to broken rocks near the top, to regain a height of 5200m. Our 2 porters, being without crampons, had to toil up the loose rock on the W side of the gully, gaining 3ft and losing 2, but they struggled manfully to reach the ridge not long after us.

The last few m became, inevitably, a race. With middle-aged resignation I watched the 2 young sappers scramble past me and heard a joyous 'Whee!' as they topped the col. How justified it was. There, due E, was the great bulk of Nanda Devi. As I crawled over the lip, my first reaction thought was that Hanuman had become ridiculously enlarged, since the huge W peak and W ridge were superimposed, and the E peak obscured. I suppose Nanda Devi had not been seen from such an angle before. But my companions, rightly, had no such doubts and decided I was hypoxic. I probably was.

We spent an hour on the col, revelling in our good fortune, and deeply grateful for this experience. God seemed very close. The whole E horizon, crowned by Nanda Devi, was a mountain showcase. To the N Dunagiri, Changabang and Rishikot and in front the W rim of the Nanda Devi basin was like a stage curtain. To our right the E ridge of Berthaholi Himal dropped gradually to the gorge beneath. To add to our delight was visible assurance that a clear route lay before us.

We watched the sun brighten the W ridge of Nanda Devi, took our last photo-

graphs, then glissaded joyfully down the snow. Within an hour we were on grass and soon amongst azaleas and dwarf pines. By noon we were lunching at Berthaholi Himal Base Camp site, originally named Juniper Camp by Dr Longstaff on his epic climb of Trisul from the E in 1907. For the first time in 4 days we found litter and knew that our private world was behind us.

Our return to Joshimath was down the well-trodden path of the Rishi Ganga and we camped that night at Deodi. Next day we passed through Dibrugheta meeting some 80 porters en route to carry out the American party on Nanda Devi. They stared in amazed disbelief when they heard we had come from the Nanda Kini valley, but our satisfaction soon evaporated as it began to rain heavily. We climbed the interminable slope to Dharansi and pushed on through dense cloud to Lata Harak, where the weather relented and we pitched our 2 tents in a golden haze. Before we descended to Lata next morning, we looked back across the Rishi Ganga and were amazed to see the route from Trisul to our third col stretched across the skyline, dwarfed by distance and rather deflating after our efforts. These were not yet finished, for the last bus of the day swept past us at Reni without an inch of room—an accurate statement for those who know the capacity of Indian buses. So apart from a short 'hitch' to Tapoban from an Indian Army lorry, we tramped the last 15 miles to Joshimath in the dark. Here we sealed our return to civilization by being sucked into the crowd leaving the late show at the garrison cinema. With a sense of the ridiculous, we exchanged imaginary comments on the film, and were rewarded by stunned silence from the cinema goers: or perhaps it was just our bedraggled appearance.

Postscript

An afternoon spent in the Alpine Club library after my return proved that we had retraced only the last part of Shipton's route out from the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. He had climbed the Ronti Glacier up a side valley direct from Reni, so the latter part of our journey across the W flank of Berthaholi Himal was, presumably, a first crossing to the Rishi Ganga. A fortuitous error on our part.

References

- 1 'Survey in the Nanda Devi District' E. E. Shipton (Read before the AC on 9 March 1937).
- 2 *Ascent of Nanda Devi* H. W. Tilman p 49.
- 3 *Shikar Magazine* India January 1977 issue.

Memories 1

To Silver Turn'd

Francis Keenlyside

Here are no historic deeds, no hair-breadth escapes, but simple emotion recollected in tranquillity; such a tide, you may think, as moving seems asleep. First, I shall recall wartime climbing in Britain; few of us could then be active, fewer are left and memories fade. Then I shall dwell a little on 2 holidays in Italy 20 years ago. At times I may lapse into mere lists of names, for which my excuse must be that companions on a climb are part of the texture of that climb.