Ten Days in the Ruwenzori

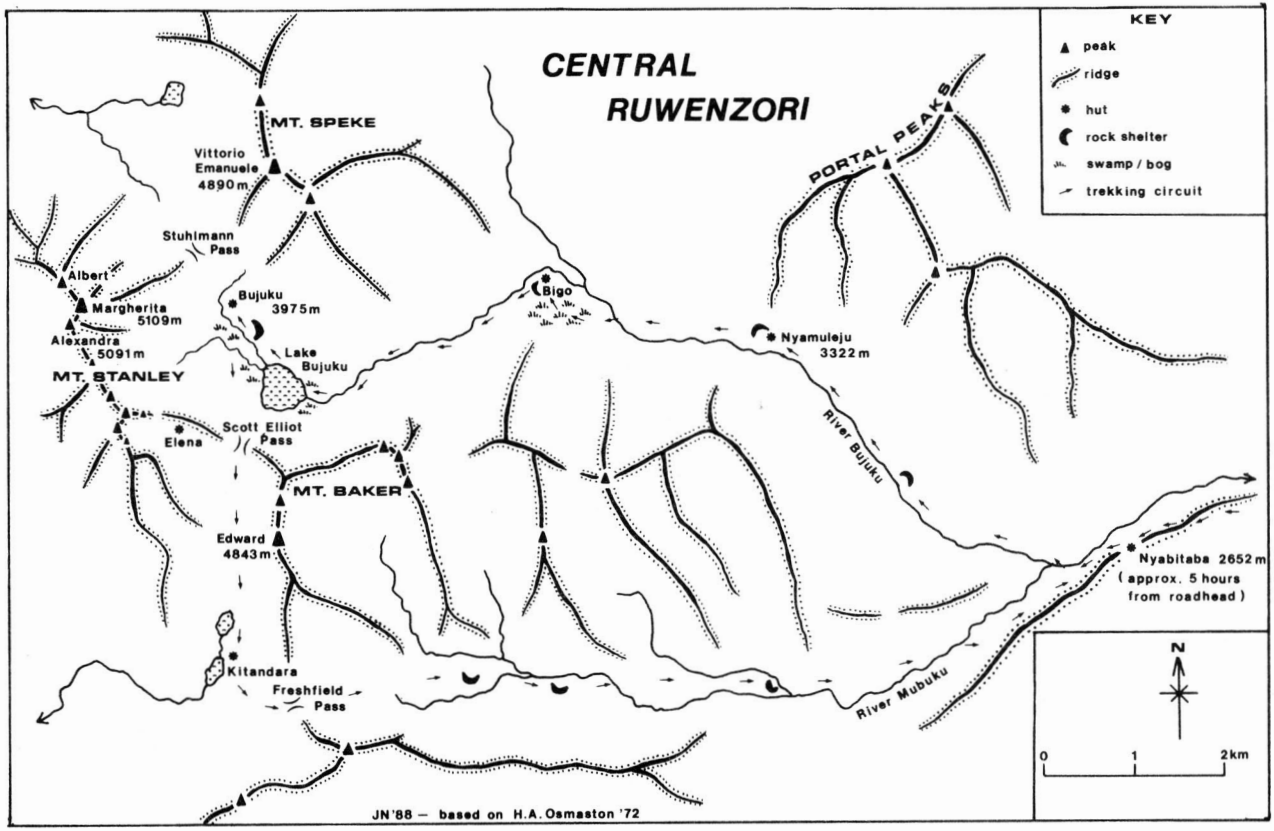
JOHN NIXON

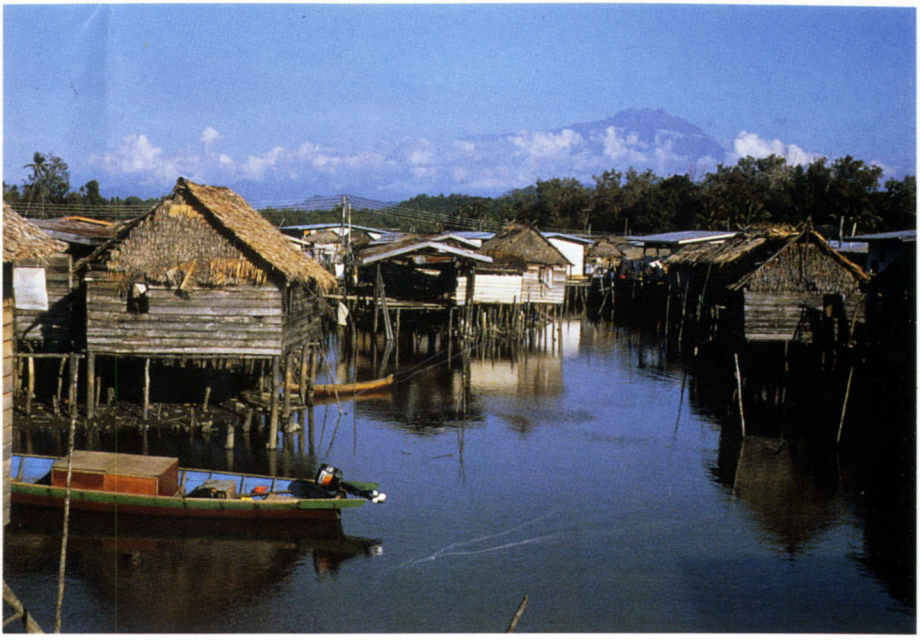
(*Plates* 66, 79–81)

Entebbe presented an eerie and surreal scene in the early hours of 22 December 1987, as Bob and I disembarked from the long-overdue Ugandan airliner. Dark shapes were waving from the balcony of the airport terminal in the distance, across the dimly-lit tarmac, and I could hear Jeff's welcoming cheers carrying clearly in the still, humid night air. We struggled towards Customs and Immigration, dreading the impending interrogation as to why we were each carrying 15 kilograms of climbing gear in our cabin luggage, as well as monstrous rucksacks stuffed full of strange and incomprehensible items of equipment. Inside the building, the drab arrival hall was buzzing with the sound of anxious passengers negotiating their path through numerous desks controlled by surly officials who would stamp papers grudgingly and only after superfluous questioning. The noise of human activity was accompanied by a resident insect chorus which seemed to build to a crescendo as if anticipating the apprehension and nervousness of the travellers in the last stages of their bureaucratic journey. There were tense moments as Bob and I were separated from the main group of arrivals and ushered sinisterly into an office where we were questioned about our medical documentation. After discussion and threats of new injections, we were released, but only when a few dollars had been paid for 'administrative costs'.

When we finally emerged from Customs, a little shaken from the experience, Jeff greeted us with a broad grin and 'Welcome to Uganda!' After much back-slapping and vigorous shaking of hands we were ushered to his company car where his driver, Moses, comically awoke with a start when Jeff rapped sharply on the roof of the vehicle. 'There are a couple of roadblocks on the way into Kampala,' said Jeff cheerfully, 'so we'll drive back in convoy.' Not far from the airport we were stopped at the first roadblock and ordered out of the car. Young, over-zealous soldiers carried out a thorough search of our vehicle and the equipment which we had to explain patiently, particularly the ice-axes. Their enthusiastic examination was no doubt encouraged by the proximity of the President's residence. There was a commotion at the car in front when a resident tea-planter refused to allow the soldiers to extricate his elderly parents from his vehicle, pointing out that they were both in their eighties, and that the father was blind. The European used an impressive, authoritative manner, carefully measured in order to convince the soldiers that it would be more trouble than it was worth to upset the *wzungu*. It was a fine balance and events could easily have turned very nasty, but the tea-planter and his family were reluctantly waved through. Our small procession of cars rolled on to the next checkpoint where there was less obstruction.

As we approached the capital my first impressions of the night-time city


CENTRAL
RUWENZORI
KEY
peak
ridge
hut
rock shelter
swamp / bog
trekking circuit
MT. SPEKE
Vittorio
Emanuele
4890m
Stuhlmann
Pass
Albert
Margherita
5109m
Alexandra
5091m
MT. STANLEY
Bujuku
3975m
Lake
Bujuku
Elena
Scott Elliot
Pass
MT. BAKER
Edward
4843m
Kitandara
Freshfield
Pass
Bigo
PORTAL PEAKS
Nyamuleju
3322m
River Bujuku
River Mubuku
Nyabitaba 2652m
(approx. 5 hours
from roadhead)
N
0
1
2km
JN'88 — based on H.A. Osmaston '72



65. *Typical village on stilts in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.* (p 185)



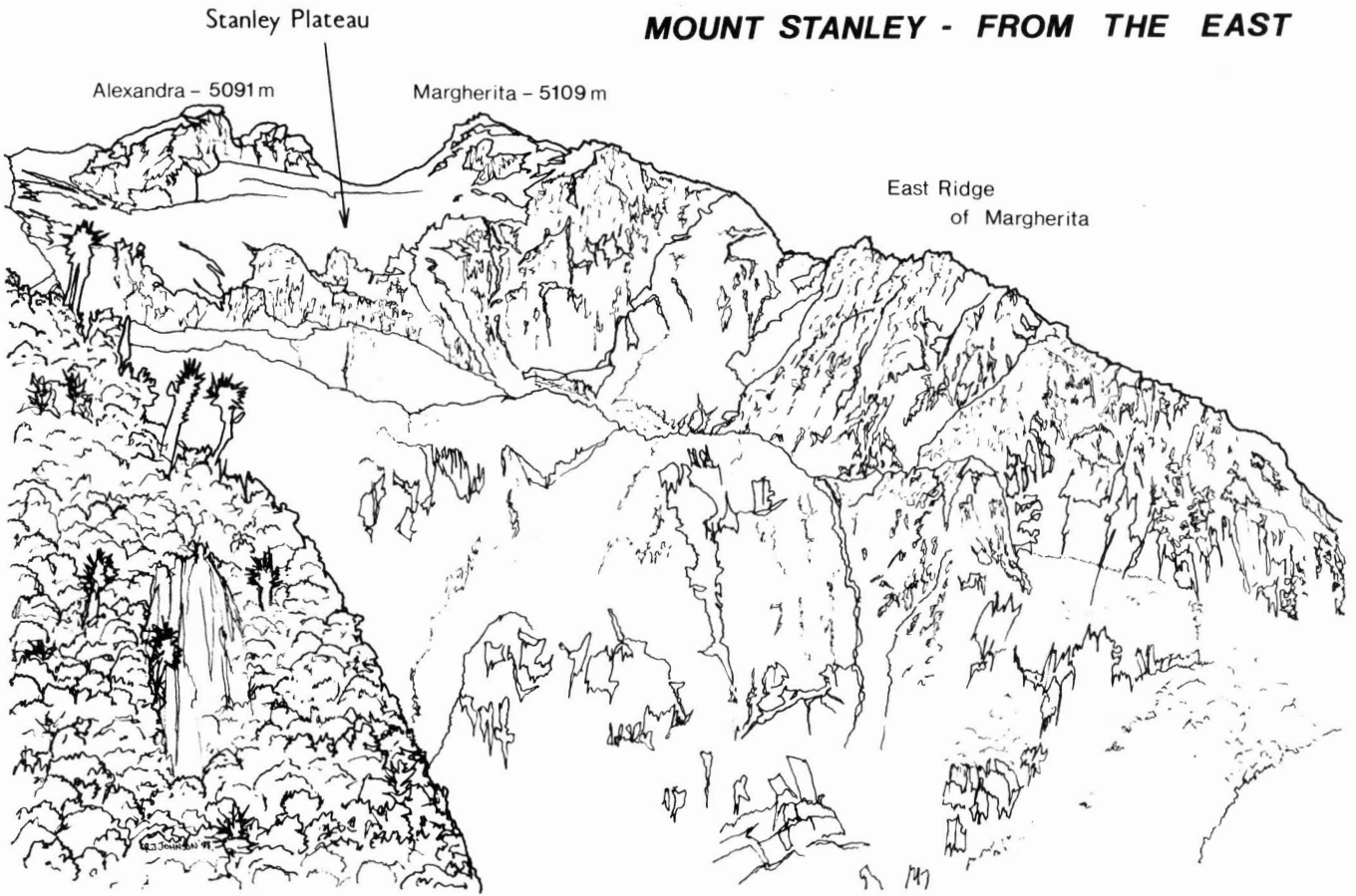
66. *Above the Bigo Bog, amongst giant heather and lobelia.* (p 177)

were of a beautiful location nestling amongst low hills. Daytime Kampala, however, turned out to be a reflection of the country's troubled past and present, with a dowdy, run-down atmosphere amongst the bustling, dusty streets full of empty shops. We finally arrived at Jeff's apartment at 4am, three days after having left our homes in England, and after a catalogue of frustrating delays. I was beginning to question the wisdom of a climbing expedition to the Ruwenzori mountains of Central Africa. My doubts were further fuelled by Jeff's announcement of an acute petrol shortage due to the border conflict with Kenya, and news of rebel insurgency in the north-west of Uganda, suspiciously close to where we were planning to climb. Jeff, who had become known as 'Our Man in Kampala', is an irrepressible, danger-loving character, and his vibrant enthusiasm had played a vital role in all our previous expeditions. On this occasion, though, I was starting to feel that he was living up to his Graham Greene counterpart by having been a little economical with the truth in his letters about the prevailing political stability. It had been, he solemnly assured us, far worse when he first arrived, and our minor inconveniences so far – and any recent trouble we might have read about – were insignificant in comparison with the excesses of previous regimes. The thought of roadblocks and searches by soldiers under Amin or Obote was indeed frightening.

The decision to climb in the Ruwenzori mountains was prompted partly by Jeff's residence in Uganda, and also by the appeal of a remote area with a difficult approach and its own unique mystical charm. The 'Mountains of the Moon', as they are romantically called, rise in a number of glaciated massifs from steamy rain-forests on the Uganda/Zaire border. For most of the year the peaks are shrouded in mist, and there are heavy rains which collect and feed the headwaters of the River Nile. During late December and early January, however, there is usually a short respite in the downpour and we were hoping for a couple of weeks of dry weather. It was with some surprise that Stanley sighted these snow-capped mountains, so close to the equator, in 1876. 30 years later, in 1906, the Duke of the Abruzzi led a large expedition to the range and managed to climb all the major summits. The region has been popular for exploration, trekking and climbing, but there have been fewer visitors since the political troubles of the early 1970s.

Two days after our arrival in Uganda we were at the roadhead of Nyakalengija, preparing for our trek into the mountains. I was pleasantly surprised to find how easily things had gone. In Kampala, Jeff was able to obtain enough fuel for our trip, despite the shortage, by mysterious means which he referred to as *magendo*. He even had a letter of permission from the Minister of Energy to carry extra fuel so as to avoid arrest at roadblocks, should the soldiers find our jerrycans. A Kampala-based friend of Jeff's, who owned a suitable short-wheelbased vehicle and was also a keen climber, had been recruited to join our team, so that we were four in number. The friend was also called Bob and, as he was nearing the grand old age of 40 (although he turned out to be the fittest member of the group), we decided to call him 'Musee Bob' (or 'Old Man Bob').

The road westwards from Kampala had long, straight sections cut through the rain-forest, and we made reasonable time. The further we travelled


MOUNT STANLEY - FROM THE EAST
Stanley Plateau
Alexandra – 5091 m
Margherita – 5109 m
East Ridge
of Margherita



79. *Mount Speke from the W.* (p 177)



80. *S face of Alexandra from the Stanley Plateau.* (p 177)

from the capital, however, the more the road deteriorated. A combination of neglect, heavy lorry traffic and seasonal rains had resulted in stretches of road with large potholes and craters which drastically reduced the speed of travel. There was much activity along the road, and the ubiquitous banana crop was being transported either by creaking, ancient bicycles, or in perfect balance on the tops of peoples' heads, or by heavily laden, listing trucks with gangs of grinning men perched precariously on top. Occasionally a brightly-coloured *matatu*, or minibus taxi, would impatiently overtake us and speed past, full of bouncing, worried passengers. At each village we passed through, groups of naked, cheering children with swollen bellies would run to the roadside and shout their friendly greeting, 'Jambo, Wzungu!' After eight hours we reached Fort Portal, a moderately-sized town, and sought refuge in the only apparent hotel. Inside we rested in low chairs under the cooling draught of whirling fans, beneath the smiling, benign picture of the current President which would doubtless be hastily replaced should there be a *coup*. From the courtyard came the distinctive guitar sounds and rhythm of Central African music.

At Ibanda we were able to hire seven porters at favourable fixed rates with the help of John Matte, guardian of the once-active Mountain Club of Uganda. He is a friendly man, with dark features softened by greying hair and a wide toothless grin. We were able to leave our vehicle with him, parked behind his ramshackle office.

We set off with our porters and sacks of equipment just after midday and foolishly, perhaps through pride, we elected to carry heavy rucksacks weighing about 25kg. In the open fields close to the village the sun's rays beat down mercilessly, but even in the shade of the tall elephant grass and then in the *Podocarpus* forest there was no relief, as the transpiration from the vegetation produced a high, stifling humidity. It felt as if I was walking in a sauna, and after a few hours I could feel my strength ebbing fast. The final section of the first day's trek is a long, uniformly steep slope along a ridge crest to the Nyabitaba hut. Both Jeff and I found this section to be purgatory and we finally dragged ourselves up to the hut at 6.30pm, long after the others, and very exhausted. We were revived with mugs of coffee which we thankfully sipped as we gazed at the magnificent evening view of the Portal Peaks opposite our ridge.

The next day was Christmas Day and we gaped with incredulity as Bob ceremoniously produced a smartly-wrapped package from his rucksack and proceeded to open a number of small presents. A half-bottle of whisky received an appreciative response from the rest of us, although we hoped that we would have no need for the next present, a tube of ointment for piles!

After a hurried breakfast, Jeff and I set off first, descending through tall bamboo to the confluence of the Bujuku and Mubuku rivers. There is no longer a bridge at this point and, when the rest of the team arrived, we carefully waded across the rapids to the N bank. Not far from here Musee Bob was struck down with a bout of nausea and we waited for a couple of hours until he was able to continue. Our rest enabled us to talk and joke with the porters and to get to know them better. They were a friendly, cheerful bunch, dressed in ragged, patched clothing; most of them spoke a little English. A character called Cornelius, however, assumed the role of interpreter and also established himself

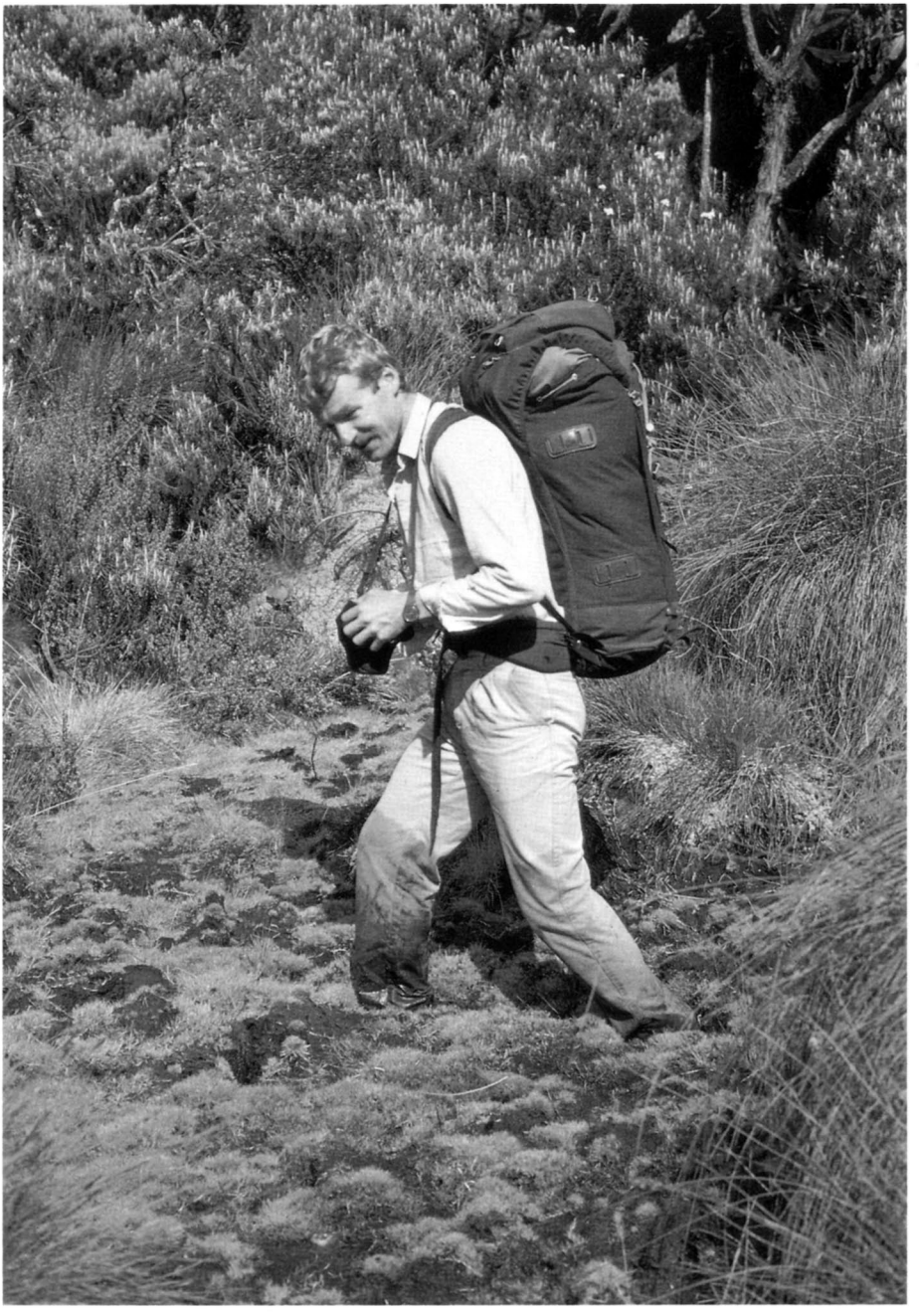
as shop steward. He described the poverty that they all lived in and was clearly pushing for higher wages. Although Cornelius was perhaps the most educated of the porters, he was certainly also the most gullible. The others – and particularly the headman, Baluku George – quickly realized that we were forever pulling Cornelius's leg. Jeff imaginatively announced that he would be dining with the President of Uganda when he returned from the mountains and would be reporting on the efficiency of the porters in the Ruwenzori. At this, Cornelius swiftly shouldered his load and set off at quite a pace to show how keen he was, amid giggles from the rest of the porters.

We continued through a dense jungle of *Mimulopsis*, where the porters would occasionally resort to hacking a better passage with a large machete, or *panga*. Towering over us were the umbrella-crowns of large trees, and we were greeted by the wild chattering of a troupe of monkeys. There were also giant tree-heathers, some over 10 metres high and draped in curtains of lichen. Nyamuleju, our overnight accommodation, in fact means 'Place of Beards' and consists of a rather dilapidated hut and a remarkable natural rock shelter, one of many which abound in the area.

Our third and final day's march to a base at Bujuku led us through more open terrain towards the infamous Bigo Bog. I was secretly dreading this part of the trek as I had read stories of waist-deep glutinous slime with squirming giant earthworms over half a metre long. However, the bog was a little drier than usual and, although unpleasant, was only knee-deep. There are two levels to the Bigo Bog before a final marshy area beside Lake Bujuku leads to the Bujuku hut. Throughout this zone there are fantastic giant varieties of vegetation, such as groundsel and lobelia, with tall hollow spikes up to eight metres high. The reason for such colossal plant forms is a combination of high rainfall and humidity, moderate temperatures and rich, peaty soils. There are in fact two huts at Bujuku, one usually used by the porters, guarded by an army of silent tree groundsel like grotesque triffids on parade, some up to five metres high. From here there is a spendid view of Mount Stanley and Mount Baker. Upon arrival, we paid four of the porters and handed them a good bonus; they seemed well-pleased, warmly shook our hands and wished us luck with our climbing. We decided to keep George, Cornelius and a porter called Alfred at Bujuku so that they could help carry gear over to Kitandara in a few days' time.

Stirrings in the hut at 5am, 28 December, awoke me from pleasant dreams. Dark figures were shambling about in the gloom attempting to pack rucksacks and prepare breakfast. A candle was lit and ghostly shadows danced across the walls and roof of our temporary home, accompanied by primeval grunts as my companions struggled with boots and gaiters. I closed my eyes, hoping that it was all a bad dream, but to no avail. Chances of breakfast in bed were extremely slim and the mental struggle to convince my body to leave the warmth and security of my sleeping-bag had to begin. A petrol stove was happily purring away, its sound remarkably resembling a 'doodlebug' bomb. If, for any reason, the noise had ceased, I'm sure we would have dived for cover.

I wearily went through the motions of preparation like an automaton, declining conversation and brooding over the merits of an early start. A steaming mug of tea was thrust into my hand and I was awarded a brief release



81. Ruwenzori: Bob Knapp in the Bigo Bog. (p 177)

from reality as the fluid warmed my inner self and the condensation produced a localized fog which obscured my immediate surroundings.

We emerged from the hut just before 6am into the pre-dawn darkness, and eased our rucksacks on to aching and bruised shoulders. Limbs were stiff from the previous day when all four of us had ascended the Shipton/Tilman route of 1932 to the summit of Vittorio Emanuele (4890m), the highest point of Mount Speke. The climb was relatively easy, consisting of scrambling and a short ice-field which led to the summit ridge, and the exertions had provided an opportunity to begin to acclimatize to the higher altitude. Now, however, we were stumbling down a rough path, past Cooking Pot Cave sheltering snoring porters, on our way to attempt the E ridge of Margherita (5109m), the highest summit of Mount Stanley and the Ruwenzori range.

As we crossed the Bujuku stream and headed westwards towards the bulky massif of Mount Stanley, we encountered a very boggy area which required an exhausting series of leaps from one tussock of dry coarse grass to another. The ground became drier as the gradient sharply increased on the mountain flank, and our route became less obvious as we threaded our way through a vast stand of giant groundsel. The two Bobs forged ahead while Jeff and I struggled and staggered through the increasingly tangled vegetation, pulling ourselves up the steep slope by using branches from the thicket of helichrysum and heather, and easing carefully past the top-heavy, swaying groundsel.

Four hours after our start we reached the Irene Lakes hut, situated on a flat rocky area above the dense vegetation zone. Musee Bob had already pushed on higher and was sending rocks clattering down a stony gully leading to the crest of the long rocky E ridge which descends from the icy summit of Margherita. Jeff and Bob, however, were suffering from headaches and nausea caused by the altitude and decided to return to base, hoping to attempt the mountain at a more leisurely pace over the next few days. I had no choice but to continue and made a lung-bursting effort in order to catch up with Musee Bob.

At first the ridge presented long sections of pleasant, airy scrambling until a steeper rock step was reached. After a few rope-lengths of good climbing on sound rock, the angle eased once more and mixed ground led up to the summit cornice. Crampons were fitted and we moved awkwardly with our clumsy footwear screeching on icy rock. The cornice was fearsome, a gigantic frozen wave draped with rime, and we had to climb through massive hanging icicles like the jaws of a monstrous Venus Flytrap. We managed to exit to the right and a short steep ice pitch brought us close to the summit. At the top we ceremoniously shook hands and Musee Bob attempted to cure his rasping cough with a couple of cigarettes. The wind was blowing mist across the summit, but as we rested there were clearings which gave us tremendous views of the whole range. We were slightly higher than the neighbouring peaks Albert and Alexandra, and to the east and south-east were the majestic Mount Speke and Mount Baker. Down to the west we could see the startling emerald-green colour of Lac Vert at the foot of the face of Margherita, and beyond were the forests of Zaire.

After half an hour on the top we descended the ice wall on the S side of our

mountain, carefully threading our way through a couple of crevasses and down on to the extensive Stanley Plateau. Although the ground is reasonably flat, the walk across the plateau was tiring as there was fresh snow on the glacier. Eventually we climbed down the steep glacier margin to reach the small Elena huts where we were greeted by Clive Ward, a visiting Briton, who handed us a welcome mug of tea. With some advice on the descent from Clive, we decided to push on down to Bujuku rather than spend an uncomfortable night at Elena. I began to regret this decision as I was desperately tired and forever slipping and falling over on the boggy path in the base of Groundsel Gully. In the fading light Musee Bob went on ahead, while I sat down to rest a little. 30 minutes later I awoke with the ominous feeling that I was being watched by the sinister groundsel and I quickly continued my journey, spurred on by my imaginary observers. I finally stumbled into the Bujuku hut at about 8pm, much to the relief of the others who were about to set out to search for me – or so they said! Despite my fatigue, however, I was elated at having traversed the highest peak of the Ruwenzori with Musee Bob in one day, and I certainly slept well that night.

After a well-deserved rest day, Musee Bob and I returned to the Stanley Plateau and made an ascent of Margherita's slightly lower sister peak, Alexandra (5091m), by the SE ridge. Meanwhile, Bob and Jeff successfully completed the E ridge of Margherita, and we all met that evening at the Elena hut. A day later, on 31 December, we followed a rocky path down to the Scott Elliot Pass from where a delightful track led down, under the impressive rock-wall on the W face of Mount Baker, to the beautifully sited Kitandara hut. Although it was New Year's Eve we all retired early in anticipation of an early start for our final objective, the S ridge of Edward (4843m), the highest point of Mount Baker.

Next morning we were away by 7am and found it hard going up the steep muddy track to the Freshfield Pass. From the col our route followed an extensive broken rock ridge which led up into mist and cloud. The climbing was absorbing but easy enough to solo, and, after crossing an ice-field, we picked our way along rubble-littered ledges and short rock walls to the windswept summit. Our team had now climbed the four highest summits in the Ruwenzori, mainly thanks to a spell of good weather, but as we descended from Mount Baker and prepared for our two-day return trek, it was obvious that the weather had broken and that true Ruwenzori conditions of mist, sleet and rain were returning.

We celebrated Musee Bob's 40th birthday on the veranda of Mweya Lodge in the Queen Elizabeth National Park. A hippo was grazing the lawn 10 feet away, and a herd of elephants had come down to the lake edge. Despite the political upheavals, Uganda is a beautiful and unique place in which to trek and climb.