Schoolboys on Kolahoi

A brief account of the climbing exploits of a group from Glenalmond College, Scotland, in Kashmir in 1987

DAVE COMINS

(Plates 30, 31)

Everything was fine until the goat's-liver curry at Lidderwat. From then on we all moved up the valley keeping an eye open for likely spots just in case we needed to dash for cover. But this did not detract from the delightful walk up the Lidder valley right to the snout of the Kolahoi glacier. Here we joined Neil MacDonald, who had walked up the day before to select a suitable site for our Base Camp. This was to be on the last level bit of grass before the snout, and about 40 minutes' walk below it.

Instead of unpacking our kit and establishing base we sat on the mound of donkey-bags gazing at our intended peak, Kolahoi, which protruded menacingly above the ridge to the south. How on earth could a party of schoolboys scale this 5000m peak? The answer, as we knew from our researches in the Alpine Club Library, lay in the south side, which we could not see from our Base Camp. Still, the view engendered a sense of commitment to our purpose.

Kolahoi, at 5425m, was first climbed by Dr E F Neve in 1912, up a snow couloir to the E ridge. John Hunt climbed the S face in 1935, as a 'warm down' from a trip to the Karakoram. However, we had a more personal link with the mountain: a recently retired chemistry master from our school had climbed a route on it during the closing stages of the Second World War. Arnott Russell, who seconded Kellett on the first (summer) ascent of Route Two on Carn Dearg, Ben Nevis, was able to encourage us, though Richard Gilbert warned us off the mountain; he thought it dangerously loose when he climbed it with a small party of boys from Ampleforth. We hoped to climb Kolahoi before the snow became soft and the loose rocks began hurling down the face.

We had a recce up the 'Twin Rocky Peaks' at the corner of the valley. From this vantage point we selected a route bypassing the horrendous icefall and gaining the plateau, across which we would need to travel to reach the hidden S face. Our original plans were thoroughly wrecked by the after-effects of the liver curry and, when one group set off with kit and food to establish an ice camp high up on the plateau, they took a wrong turning and returned to Base Camp tired and a lot wiser.

Meanwhile, as the expedition leader, I was confined to Base Camp with the local equivalent of the 'Delhi belly', living off Rehydrat and reading up about all the gastro-intestinal nasties in Wilkerson's *Medicine for Mountaineering*. Needless to say, this light reading did nothing to hasten my recovery! However, within a few days there was nothing left inside to come out, so I

gathered what strength I had and set off with Patrick and Simon up on to the ice plateau to establish our high camp on 27 July. My High School French suggested that 'plateau' would indicate an element of flatness. However, it was definitely uphill the way we were going, and I might have turned back if it hadn't seemed to be uphill that way too!

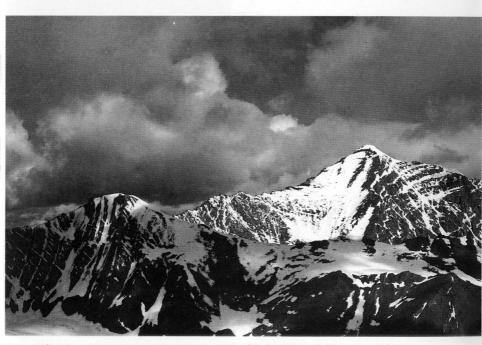
After a lot of trail-breaking from Simon and even more encouragement from Patrick, we slumped down in the snow, staring up at the 1000m S face we hoped to climb the next day. Neve's couloir looked unsafe, with a heavy accumulation of unconsolidated snow at mid-height. The face had much more snow on it than we remembered from the pictures we had pored over in Scotland. Just to the right (east) of Hunt's route was a snow couloir which led directly to the top. This looked a likely bet for us, as we were accustomed to steep snow and it seemed preferable to loose rock. First we had to hack out a flat ledge for our tent and cook a meal before snatching a few hours' rest. We aimed to leave the tent by 1am, and we weren't far out. The cold air initially sharpened our minds, then almost numbed them as we trudged across the glacier to the snow cone beneath the face. Front-pointing up the bottom third of the face was done on rock-hard snow, causing our calf muscles to make their presence felt. We zig-zagged a little to relieve the strain on our legs. I was definitely flagging; my lack of energy was an obvious consequence of having no significant food intake for several days. Patrick and Simon provided sustenance in a way that non-climbers find hard to understand and, as the sun's rays slowly worked down the mountain towards us, so we climbed even more slowly up to meet them. Despite the extra weight I was glad to be carrying a camera, as this gave me reason to stop and capture the fantastic views of Nun Kun being revealed behind us. We had hoped to be on our way down by now, and here we were still plodding up. A major effort was needed to finish off the climb. Just after 10am an elated and desperately tired trio flopped into the snow which caps the summit pyramid. Across in Pakistan we could see Nanga Parbat and, looking back across the S face, we picked out K2 and the Karakoram mountains in the far distance.

The summit of Kolahoi at 5425m set a new 'record' for our school mountaineers. In 1981 we had made the first ascent of Quipucamayoc, at just over 5000m, in the Peruvian Andes, but Kolahoi was not only higher, it was also infinitely more spectacular. Our thoughts were more on a safe descent than on making inconsequential record books as we headed briefly down the E ridge to a point from which we could abseil in six or seven rope-lengths on to more reasonably-angled snow on the S face. The consistency of this snow was reminiscent of Scotland at its worst, though we felt the life draining back into our tired frames as we lost height. Our tiny tent, hundreds of metres below, looked inviting if a little sad as it sagged in the soft snow. We finished our descent by down-climbing the bottom section of Hunt's route to regain our starting point, and were soon priming the stove to melt snow for a longed-for drink.

We left the tent for use on a second attempt by Donald, Charlie and Neil. Rajinder, our liaison officer, with one or two friends, tried a line further west on the S face, and both parties moved parallel up the face to the summit on 30 July



30. The N face of Kolahoi and the ice fall from near the snout of the Kolahoi glacier. (Dave Comins) (p $50)\,$



31. The E face of Stok Kangri from the summit of Gulap Kangri. (Dave Comins) $(p\ 50)$

1987. Rajinder's group suffered a terrible shock when they saw a light cartwheeling down the full length of the S face, right where our second summit party was climbing. This was fortunately no more than Donald's head-torch, which pinged off his helmet. (He collected the torch from the bottom of the face some eight hours later, still working, and proceeded to use it with the same battery throughout the rest of our seven weeks in India!)

All had been successful in reaching the summit and we now had a day or two to bask in the Kashmiri sun before striking camp and returning to Srinagar, where we reprovisioned. Our next objective lay in Ladakh, and this necessitated the two-day journey via the Zoji La and Kargil to Leh. A group of trekkers had walked from Pahalgam to Pannicker, then hopefully on to Leh, and we were due to meet them there before stage two of our enterprise commenced.

For us this meant an attempt on Stok Kangri (6121m), which presented a completely different challenge. Base Camp was to be at about 5000m; we found this was too high. Minor cuts did not heal, and we just deteriorated throughout our stay there. Simon, Donald and I scaled Gulap Kangri (6000m) on 9 August, to give further acclimatization, while Charlie and Neil carried a tent up to the foot of the huge E face of Stok Kangri, returning to Base Camp the same day. The first group to try for the summit comprised Rajinder, Neil and Charlie; they intended to climb all the way from Base Camp to the top and back in a day. Donald, Simon and I decided to move up and try the face after a night in the tent. We arrived in time to see Rajinder, Neil and Charlie picking their way laboriously down the lower snow slopes. Rajinder was dog-tired when he reached the tent, but all three continued on to Base Camp, completing the round trip in 19½ hours. Charlie had thus reached his second Himalayan peak before his 16th birthday!

Rajinder's group had been tempted by the E ridge and they advised us against it, so we took the direct route straight up the 1000m snow-field, across a short rocky band and on up the last snows to reach the summit in under 5½ hours from the tent. The controlled descent took 35 minutes! Back at the tent I waited for Patrick, who had been ill and hoped to recover in time to have a shot at Stok Kangri the next day. He came up to join me and we departed at midnight in poor conditions to put our last climbing member on the top. Unfortunately the snowfall became heavier and, a mere 200m below the summit, we retreated down to the tent which was by now buried in soft snow.

As we walked out through the incredible moon-like scenery, we felt happy that our modest school trip had been so successful. We felt we had chosen our peaks well, as both had given us considerable challenge and much enjoyment. Back in Srinagar we beat Rajinder's school at water-polo and drew a torrid football match in front of a very partisan crowd. We finished our trip with a couple of days on the Dal Lake, a trip to Jaipur and then on to the Taj Mahal – none of this spoilt by the continuing effects of that goat's-liver curry.

Members of the Expedition

Dave Comins

Donald Ballance ('old boy' of Glenalmond College)

Neil MacDonald

Simon Mills

Patrick Robinson

(boys at Glenalmond College)

Charlie Russell
Rajinder Kaul (liaison officer, and teacher at the Tyndale Biscoe School, Srinagar)

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