

THE R.A.F. MOUNTAINEERING ASSOCIATION EXPEDITION TO LAHOUL

By A. J. M. SMYTH

WAS it fortunate or unfortunate that the excellent article of Nicholas Wollaston should have appeared in the *ALPINE JOURNAL* last May? His name and that of Platts hung this year like a legend over Kulu and Lahoul,¹ with all the uncertainty and exaggeration of a legend. It is with relief, therefore, that we learned that our footsteps did not overlap his, and with some thankfulness that we had not heard of his difficulties.

To understand the rather complex expedition organised by the Royal Air Force Mountaineering Association which this year visited Lahoul, it is necessary to understand R.A.F.M.A. An association in the R.A.F. consists of a federation of station clubs, but because most airfields and stations are for geographical reasons far from hills, the number of mountaineering clubs is few. Although Mountain Rescue units provide many of the best climbers in the R.A.F., these units cannot be included in R.A.F.M.A. since they are run on public money, and between public and non-public funds there is a great gulf fixed. Being, therefore, unable to satisfy its members as a true association, R.A.F.M.A. has been forced to act as a club and has run many meets in U.K. and Europe during its seven years of life. This expedition was merely an extension of this policy. In order to interest the maximum number of members a scientific aim was included and the climbing objective strictly limited. We have returned satisfied that in the climbing field, at least, any future expedition run by R.A.F.M.A. will have a reasonable chance of success on any mountain.

Our aim was the exploration of the Spiti-Lahoul watershed where it runs north-east from the Kulu border toward the Kanzam La. The upper waters of the Gyurdi and Ratung rivers, or rather their glaciers, have never been seen and may remain a mystery yet unless the Cambridge party of August this year succeed in treading them. We chose the northern approach via the Rohtang La, Chandra Valley and Bara Shigri Glacier. Although this was slightly longer than the Parbati Valley route, it offered better transport, easier country and, especially, a better weather factor. With this aim in mind we arrived at Manali on May 20, 1955, eleven climbers strong plus four Sherpas and two tons of stores. It is necessary to emphasise that although we had the active support of our President, Air Chief Marshal Sir Ronald Ivelaw-Chapman, and every member of the R.A.F., we were, in fact, a private

¹ Hitherto spelt Lahul in A.J.; Lahoul is now used by the Government of India. Pronunciation is rather "La-whole" than "La-hool".

expedition and were not backed by public funds except for the free air passage and certain loans of equipment. We were pleased to have with us Flight Lieutenant Nalni Jayal of the Indian Air Force and Mr. Dev Datta of the Indian Government. I would be first to acknowledge, however, that we were conscious of enormous goodwill in India, both civil and service, from the Chief of Air Staff of the Indian Air Force to the United Kingdom High Commissioner. We claim a record of one and a half hours for passage of the Indian customs, although it did not save the full duty on our films and rations.

Even during my pre-expeditionary visit to Delhi in early May, I had heard gloomy reports of snow conditions in the western Himalayas. Eight inches of snow had fallen at Manali (6,500 ft.) at the end of April. The snowline was down to 8,000 ft. on May 10 when it should have been 8,000 ft. higher. Once at roadhead (Manali) we could no longer overlook the fact there might be no ponies for a fortnight and to make sure Stewart and Lees walked 32 miles and climbed 7,000 ft. to the Rohtang Pass and back in one day. They reported that the pass was, indeed, closed to pack animals and would remain so for at least a week; yet to assemble the hundred or so coolies we would need, would have taken nearly as long, so we followed a third plan. We formed two reconnaissance parties, one consisting of Sims, Stewart and Lees, the other one being Bennet, Jayal and myself, backed by our four Sherpas and the five Ladakhis who became a permanent feature of the expedition. Leaving the others to train around Manali, we pushed off across the Hamtah Pass (14,000 ft.) on May 22/23. We chose this pass although it was 1,000 ft. higher than the Rohtang, because it offered a more direct route to the upper Chandra, for there was no indication of any difficulty. The first day's march was pleasant, rising 4,000 ft. through sweetly smelling conifer forest. The few of us who had come ahead enjoyed a pleasant day up to 14,000 ft., while the others with fourteen local Manali coolies caught up.

The crossing of the Hamtah, Dan Stewart has described as 'one of the most unpleasant day's mountaineering he had ever enjoyed.' At this time of year one would expect little snow on the ground at 14,000 ft., clear skies especially north of the pass, and superb views of Indrasau and Deo Tibba. Instead, we had heavy snow-fall and, worse still, our greatest enemy on this expedition, bad snow conditions underfoot. After the early winter snow-fall about Christmas time there had been a drought, to such an extent that the Rohtang Pass had been open to ponies in February and March. By April the mountains were covered with compacted firn snow, and on to this fell many feet of new precipitation. There must have then followed a rapid rise of temperature, for the wet-snow avalanches which followed were of incredible size and number. In nearly every valley giant tongues of debris remained every quarter of a mile or so. These were usually 100 yards across and often much more. With *séracs* up to 30 ft. high they blocked the path far across the level floor and sometimes up the farther side of the valley. Progress by heavily laden men was rendered much more difficult.

THE KULTI BASIN CENTRAL LAHOUL

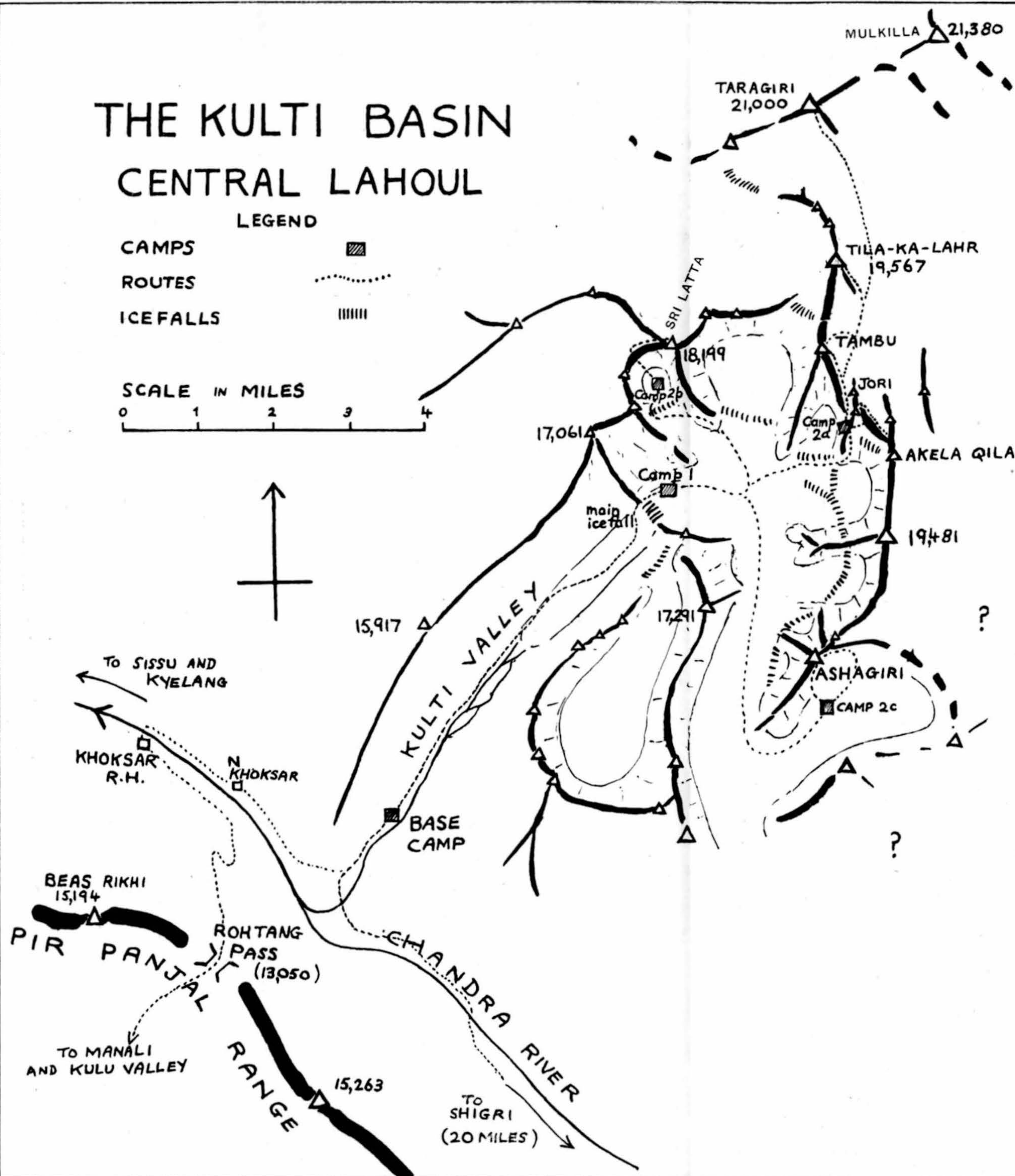
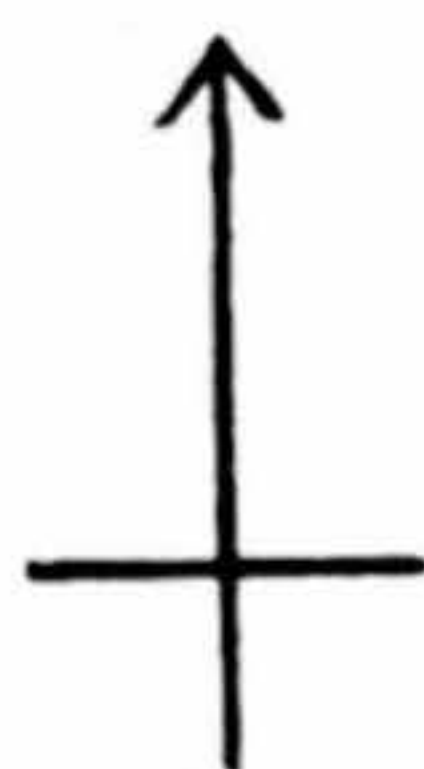
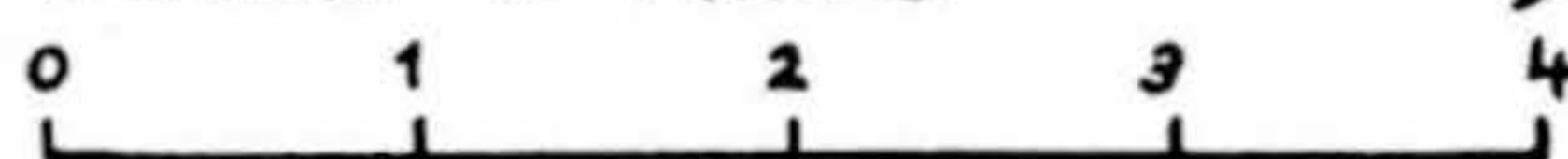
LEGEND

CAMPS

ROUTES

ICEFALLS

SCALE IN MILES



The second effect of the late fall was in the quality of the snow itself. Instead of the surface having had two months or more to consolidate, it had had less than three weeks when we came along. Hardly had the sun touched the snow when it became so soft that we sank to our waists; during our entire time above the snowline we were rarely able to move about in the afternoon.

The crossing of the Hamtah, then, gave everyone a very bad first impression of the Himalayas. Delayed by the snow we did not arrive at the pass until early afternoon, by which time it was snowing heavily and visibility was reduced to 200 yards. All tracks were obliterated, and we were left to navigate on a quarter-inch map and the doubtful memory of our coolies. We wisely ignored local advice in favour of a route chosen by Stewart and Bennet on to the glacier below, safely out of range of the new snow avalanches which were beginning to fall all around us. Even on the semi-level glacier, the nightmare continued in the soft powder, so that the trail-breaker had to be changed after about 50 yards. When dusk fell we had little alternative but to bivouac, for we were all exhausted, but this we did with some misgivings, as we could not choose an avalanche-free site in the mist, and tents had to be provided for fourteen extra bodies. The next morning the weather was better and we reached Chatru after four hours, where we occupied the empty P.W.D. bungalow.

Here Pannu, our chief coolie, came to us in a rather shame-faced manner! His men had not expected such weather. They had never known snow in the Chandra Valley at this time of year. They wanted to go home the next day. This really put us in a difficult position, for we only had food for six days, and nothing of any kind existed in the Chandra Valley above Khoksar. We therefore split again, Sims, Stewart and Lees going on towards Shigri, while the rest of us went back to Manali via Khoksar taking all the other mouths and a minimum of food with us. By now Emmerson had caught up with us after a hair-raising journey over the Hamtah with medical supplies. At Chatru we had heard avalanches every few seconds from 10 A.M. to 2 P.M. and we were very relieved when he appeared safe and sound.

The journey from Chatru to Khoksar was almost as unpleasant as the Hamtah. In a normal year it would take three hours. In grilling heat at 10,000 ft. we struggled over an interminable series of avalanche tips where we never knew whether the next footsteps would bear or disappear so that we wallowed chin deep in slush. The first six miles to the Kulti took us ten hours and left us infuriated and exhausted once again. At the Kulti valley we crossed onto the northern bank and enjoyed a clear track to Khoksar. The next day from the top of the Rohtang we surveyed the Kulti Himal stretched out before us and considered our situation. For the next three weeks the snow would have its effect on us; firstly, ponies would not get up the Chandra Valley above the Kulti even when they got over the Rohtang; secondly, ponies would not get over the Hamtah; thirdly, even if sufficient coolies could be assembled, they refused to operate in the upper Chandra

Valley. Therefore, a full-scale expedition in Spiti was out. All the rest of the expedition would be required to support two or three climbers up the Bara Shigri, which seemed undesirable. Was it not better to re-deploy in the Kulti Valley which we knew to be accessible, and believed to be virgin? This was the step we took.

When we got back to Manali, just a week after leaving there, Davies, Holton, Jones and Dev Datta welcomed this decision. The various reports they had received and the observations they had made while on training climbs in the local mountains had led them to the conclusion that we had reached—namely, that Spiti was not for us. On the other hand Davies knew the Kulti, and he thought it looked promising.

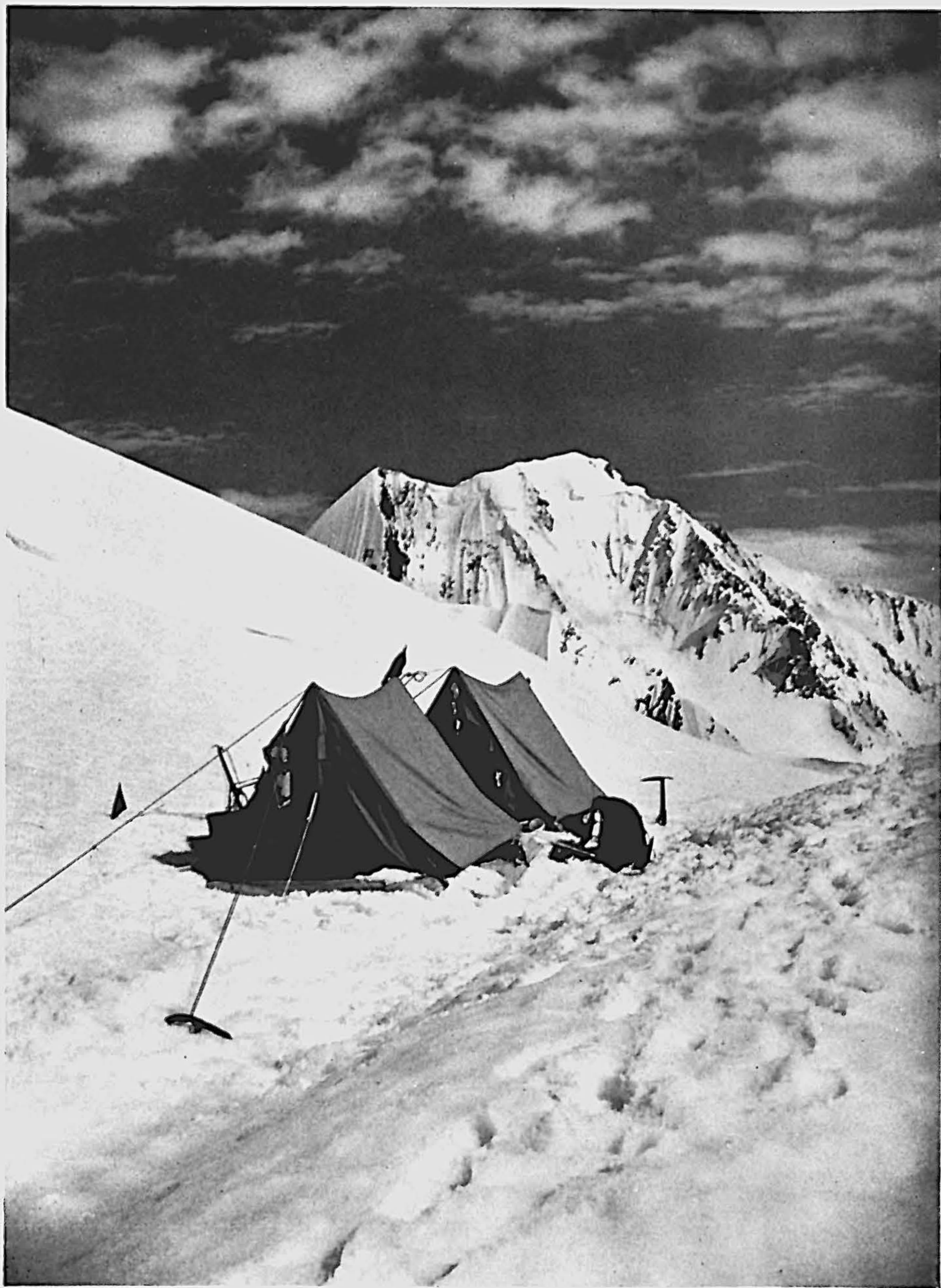
Therefore we sent Holton, Jones and Dev Datta over the Hamtah to recall the Shigri party and to recover the stores we had left in the Chandra Valley with instructions to rendezvous in the Kulti. Since the Rohtang was not yet open to ponies, but likely to be so any day, Bennet, Jayal and myself left Manali on May 31 with ten coolies and two Sherpas to set up the Kulti Base Camp, which we did on June 2. Davies and Emmerson were to follow with all our provisions and stores as soon as the Rohtang was fully open. In fact they arrived on June 5 having overtaken an entomological expedition from the University of Agra on the Rohtang. This party was hoping also to go to Spiti, but had to abandon its attempt for the same reasons as ourselves. Our own Shigri group rejoined us on June 4, somewhat bitter at having to abandon so promising an area and equally exasperated by the Chatru-Kulti track.

Here we were, sixteen days after arrival in India, with a fully stocked Base Camp—not a very high Base Camp, since it was only 11,700 ft., but at least it was on the snowline and could be reached by ponies. The next obstacle was the ice-fall. Like all the best areas, ours had an ice-fall problem which caused us some misgivings. Bennet and Jayal first reconnoitred it and avoided it by means of a steep rock-and-ice couloir on one side some 800 ft. high. This 'stone shoot' was obviously an unpleasant place and, in fact, became highly dangerous when the sun reached it at 9.30 A.M. The ice-fall itself, though steep, was comparatively simple in crampons; but we did not have crampons for our Ladakhis. This was another reason for starting early. It is interesting to note that Davies, who came this way in 1941, does not remember there being an ice-fall. If the present rate of retreat of the Kulti Glacier is maintained, it is probable that there will be a rock wall and hanging glacier in this position in another twenty years time.

We set up Camp I a little above the ice-fall at a guessed 14,700 ft., the highest level where natural water could be obtained. Our aim now was to reach the central Lahoul plateau, the edge of which we thought we saw between the peaks above us. These peaks had a particular significance in that they represented the edge of the map, and beyond them the contour lines became dotted indicating a greater degree of guesswork than elsewhere. Right at the head of the valley as seen from the Rohtang, lay two peaks which we immediately named the 'Twins'



TRIDENT PEAK, OPPOSITE CAMP I, ON THE KULTI GLACIER.



CAMP IIA, ABOVE KULTI GLACIER.

and later translated into Hindi as 'Jori'—delicately rounded summits of approximately equal height. To their north-west or left was an obvious 'Tent Peak' or 'Tambu' and on the other side a mountain of definitely greater stature but no peculiarity, which after many tries became 'Akela Qila'—'the Lone Fort.' Once on the plateau, none of these presented much difficulty, but the way to the plateau was far from clear.

Led by Dan Stewart, Bennet, Lees and myself left Camp I on June 7, supported by Dev Datta and Sherpas Ourkien and Nambe. The moon was full as we traversed the upper glacier at 4 A.M., rising gently on crisp snow for about one and a half miles. Then the glacier split into at least five ice-falls, and from here the complexity of the Kulti became apparent—a complexity of which the map gave little indication. Moreover, it was very difficult to know just where one was supposed to be, since there was no means of identifying a particular peak with a spot height. From the Twins, a crescent ridge fell delicately towards us, ending in an ice-fall which offered no foreseeable difficulty. Dan led up this in crampons, and we followed, gasping under heavy loads, for the altitude was now becoming noticeable in our unacclimatised state. In a gentle figure S, we skirted the bottom of the ridge, joining it again about a quarter of the way up where a narrow corridor led off to cross the face of Jori above hanging glaciers. Here we placed our Camp IIa at a guessed 17,500 ft., sheltered from wind and avalanche but with a wonderful view. At last our spirits were beginning to recover from the miserable start of the expedition.

From Camp IIa there were three obvious routes to be explored. The first of these we took on the next day, traversing right on steep snow across a face, down which several small avalanches had fallen. Leaving camp at first light (4.30 A.M.) we quickly crossed the slope, our crampons gripping deeply. We were glad of our *duvets* for the temperature must have been about zero Fahrenheit, but in spite of this the snow was not fully frozen. Upon the surface stretched a thin layer of level ice which shattered over a wide area like ice on a pond, but below this, dimpled pockets of air insulated the snow from the night's frost. Once across the slope we came to a fairly steep ridge which ran parallel with the crescent ridge until it reached the Silbersattel—that portion of the plateau which lay between Jori and Akela Qila. With Dan Stewart and Don Bennet in front we soon climbed the 1,000 ft. to this feature and decided to split up. Dan and Don, being the stronger party, tackled Akela Qila by frontal assault—a procedure which involved 1,000 ft. of step-cutting in very steep but good quality snow. Two hours of this and they reached the summit ridge about 9 A.M. Meanwhile Lees, who was feeling the altitude, and I tackled the S.E. Twin, the higher of the two. The final ridge of this was very pleasant, being but 3 ft. wide, most of it corniced. We flew our flag from the summit at about 8.30 A.M. while each subjected the other to every variation of black and white, colour, movie and still photography. We reckoned Jori to be about or just below 19,000 ft., while Akela Qila would be 19,700 ft.

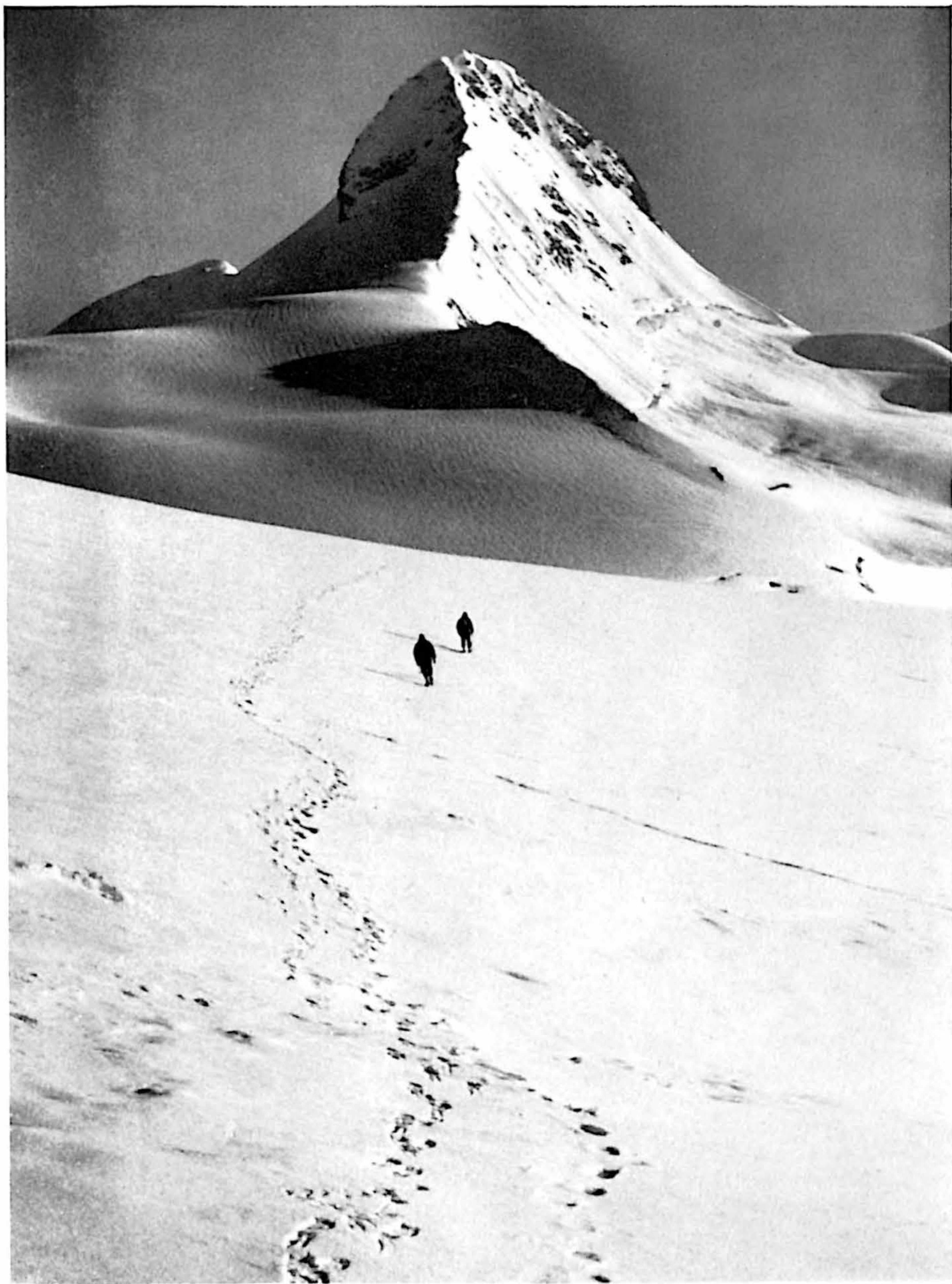
We both agreed that this was one of the most pleasant climbs we could remember. On the way down we had a close look at the top of the crescent ridge as a possible route. It finished in a traverse 200 yards long across ice at 70 degrees. We both agreed that the possible dangers of the avalanche slope lower down were preferable. The general opinion when both parties were back in camp, was that the slopes were safer than we first thought, and would probably hold up to midday. Nevertheless, an afternoon route was still required if a bivouac was not to be made on the plateau. After an hour in Camp IIa, I pushed on alone to Camp I, carefully watched by binoculars in case I disappeared into a crevasse. Even though I was in camp before one o'clock the last portion was a nightmare. The next day the remainder followed the third possible route from IIa—across the Jori face, and up a long but gentle ridge to a bulge they called 'the Belvedere.' This was directly connected both with 'Tambu' and the plateau, and was the desired afternoon route. Tambu (about 19,000 ft.) was ascended and traversed this day, providing no especial excitement.

On June 10 the same party started out from IIa and, climbing by way of the Belvedere and behind Tambu, reached the broad South-west ridge of a peak which formed the end of a long wavy arête which we called Tila Ka Lahr (Ridge of the Wave). The broad snow shoulder gave way to a crest of snow leading to a summit of shale, also guessed at 19,700 ft. When they reached camp they found that relief food had come up to them together with Emmerson and Jayal. Emmerson remained while Lees went down to Base Camp to recover from slight altitude sickness. Let us, therefore, leave Stewart and his assistants furiously climbing every mountain within reach and see what has happened to the others.

Within a day or two of their arrival at Base Camp, Sims, Holton and Henry Jones had carried the phototheodolite up to one of the two trig. points which should have existed round about. One of these was, in fact, found, but preliminary bearings from this showed that the map was very queer. In fact, it showed that the survey of the Kulti basin would have to be started afresh, and a base line would have to be laid out on which to hang the new observations. This could conveniently be done on the Sara flats, and was completed at the end of the expedition. Meanwhile, on June 10, Sims, Dev Datta, Jones and Holton moved up to Camp I to join Jayal, supported by Ourkien who had been trained as special theodolite assistant. They went on the next day to establish Camp IIb on one of the subsidiary arms of the basin, an easy but laborious trudge up about 3,000 ft. of a 30-degree snow-covered glacier. Although it served its purpose, Camp IIb had none of the thrill of Camp IIa; IIb nestled snugly in a sheltered cwm, while IIa perched like an eagle's nest among the summits. The whole party ascended the peak above the camp which we believe is that shown on the map as 18,199 ft. and this gave them a good idea of their surroundings. The ascent was made up a long snow ridge, but the descent appears to have been one long and glorious glissade of about 1,000 ft.



CAMP I ON KULTI GLACIER. TWINS ON LEFT, AKELA QILA IN CENTRE, ASHAGIRI ON RIGHT.



LOOKING WEST TOWARDS SUMMIT OF TILA KA LAHR, KULTI HIMAL.

[To face p. 50.]

The previous night Jayal had been persuaded to take one (or two) of Doc. Jones' sleeping pills. At three o'clock the next morning he could not be woken; he had to be led up the mountain as a somnambulist and he named the peak Sri Latta (Mountain of Oblivion). The rest of the time at IIb was spent on a survey site balanced precariously on a few rocks sticking out of a fine snow ridge. It was the general experience that however firmly trampled or beaten, a snow surface would never hold the theodolite steady enough to enable a series of bearings to be taken.

On June 11, Lees and I set out from Base Camp to visit and photograph the surveyors. About half an hour out of camp we came upon some extraordinary footsteps, the like of which we had never seen before. They were broader than human feet but otherwise extraordinarily like them—so much so that we did, in fact, wonder whether they were human. We recollected that Lester Davies had come that way twelve hours before and had made no comment. With Yetis in mind we took a lot of photographs and sent for Lester, since we could not delay too much in case we missed the safe time of the stone shoot. He followed footprints for some two miles and was able to make detailed observations and measurements. This incident received a certain amount of publicity. When we were back in Base Camp two days later, a big brown bear rushed by pursued by two sheep-dogs, for flocks were beginning to appear. From comparison of the tracks, I personally became convinced that the original footprints we had seen were those of this same brown bear.

After the Yeti incident, Lees and I went on up to Camp IIb. We arrived there carrying packs of some 60 lb. each, for we wished to take cine photos of the surveyors at work, although the small magazine camera was with Bennet. We were forced, therefore, to carry the big Bell and Howell with all its heavy accessories. Some days afterwards, IIb was closed down, Sims and Dev Datta moving across the basin to form Camp IIc. From there they made a magnificent ascent of Ashagiri, abandoning the South ridge for the West face about 500 ft. from the summit. Conditions were probably harder on this than on the previous ascents, for Ashagiri stands by itself and does not form a part of the raised lip of a big plateau. From it a large new area was seen and it is unfortunate that neither had a camera.

Not content with three first ascents in three days, all of about 19,000 ft., Stewart decided, on June 11, to get in a little training, especially for the benefit of Emmerson who was as yet unacclimatised. They therefore attacked the N.W. Twin by way of the Belvedere and carried on to the S.E. Twin already ascended. The complete traverse provided pleasant if harder climbing than they had met on the other peaks and a large amount of film was taken. June 12, however, was the big day. Leaving camp at 2.40 A.M. they reached the plateau by way of the Belvedere and passed behind Tambu and Tila-Ka-Lahr. They were making for the 21,000 ft. peak which we now called Taragiri ("Astral Peak", with reference to 'Per Ardua ad Astra,' the motto of both the

R.A.F. and I.A.F.). The main ridge was separated from them by a difficult gap so they went up the South-west face to the Southern arête, and by this reached the summit at 9.30 A.M. Since the sun was already high when they turned for home, the route back was very tiring and they rested often, getting back to camp after fourteen hours at 4.30 P.M. Taragiri is probably the peak shown on the map as 21,000 ft., but if Mulkilla, claimed by the N.U.S. party in 1939,² is that shown as 21,380 ft., then Taragiri is probably not quite as high as stated.

After their highly rewarding residence in Ila, Stewart and party returned to Base Camp for a well-earned rest. The surveyors and Sims, too, came back, and we began to consider withdrawal. While the rest of us were packing up, we decided to send a strong party across the Chandra to try Shikar Beh; Stewart, Bennet and Lees were available for the job, and away they went with only six days and two Sherpas allotted and with Davies in photographic support. Although only 20,340 ft., Shikar Beh was attractive to us for several reasons. Firstly because it was a beautiful mountain seen with its twin peak, Mukhar Beh, both named and mapped and well known in Kulu; and, then, it had been attempted before, but not climbed, by Fowle in 1953. Stewart and party went down to Sissu on June 17, where they spent a somewhat perilous morning crossing the Chandra on a wire rope. To start things off, Lees had to do a traverse without the pulley. By the evening the three climbers and two Sherpas were camped at 9,700 ft. on the South bank with all their equipment.

The big climb started next day. The vertical rise to the summit was approximately two miles, while the map distance was just four miles, giving a gradient of 1 in 2. For this reason steep ice was expected, and, in fact, the valley contained one water- and three ice-falls. Due to the shortage of carriers, nearly every one except the trail-breaker or step-cutter for the particular stretch double-loaded or double-staged. The first ice-fall was taken direct on the 18th to pitch Camp II at 14,500 ft. The next day was both difficult and exhausting, as the second ice-fall was passed on the right up a steep corridor of hard ice where constant step-cutting was required. Thence the 2,000 ft. over soft midday snow with 50 lb. packs was purgatorial, for the Sherpas had been taken down to Camp II. The original intention was to put Camp III on the ridge at 19,500 ft., but it was found unnecessary to ascend the final ice-fall, which could be avoided by 600 ft. of snow slope on the right. Camp III was placed on this, about 400 ft. below the col.

The weather so far had been perfect, but now some snow fell—perhaps two inches during the night. Was this the beginning of the monsoon? This time it was Bennet who had taken a sleeping tablet and who arose first at 3.30 A.M. but the party did not get under way till 5 A.M. The ridge was attained on poor snow, and thenceforward three distinct steps had to be overcome before the summit ridge of rocks and cornices was reached. The first two of these yielded easily to

² See *A.J.* 52. 135.

zig-zag cutting, but the last was hard ice and very exposed. This was overcome after several attempts, and Lees had to remove his boots for a little while to forestall frostbite. The rest of the ridge was mainly notable for its treacherous and changing snow conditions. The summit cone was reached at 11.05 A.M., but the best of the view was obscured by mist. Luckily, the way down was easier than expected and the chill wind had preserved the crispness of the snow on the difficult portions—enough at least for crampons to be worn. The next day, June 21, the weather had definitely deteriorated, so that falling snow and mist obscured the return.

The junction of the parties at Khoksar was a scene of great rejoicing, but of the general return there is little to be said. At Kothi and Manali much spare time was devoted to cricket with three ice-axes as stumps, and a snow-shovel for a bat. One Ladakhi and Ourkien showed great aptitude for the game but, in general, our supporters had three 'lives' per wicket. A round of parties and great hospitality awaited us in Manali, of which volley-ball with the Forestry School, dinner at Sunshine Orchards and the camp fire at the Forest Rest House were memorable. We got away the very day the monsoon arrived, and the next day the bridges broke! Even the aircraft broke down, to give us a day in Delhi, much to our delight.

In retrospect, therefore, we have no reason to be displeased with our Himalayan season. We never reached the Spiti-Lahoul watershed, but we certainly had a wonderful time in the Kulti Himal, and our survey work may prove to be valuable. As for the climbing, we certainly had above average luck after the bad start; we have no regrets unless it be that we had not aimed higher—but that must come later. We recommend the Kulti to anyone with little time to spare, and the Ladakhi porter to those too poor for Sherpas.