

## JANGI TAU

BY A. BLACKSHAW

WHEN moving to our Bezingi base camp John Hunt, Chris Brasher, Ralph Jones and I had been particularly taken by the sight of a magnificent line<sup>1</sup> on the 7,000 ft. Bezingi wall of Katuin Tau, which was obviously attractive as a first climb in the area. We knew there was also, just out of sight to the east, a similar direct route on Jangi Tau (16,572 ft.), with possibly an even finer line, called the Schwarzgruber Rib ; it had been climbed in 1935 by W. Marin, F. Poringer, H. Thaler and R. Schwarzgruber, and, strange to say, still awaited a second ascent (*A. J.* 48. 111). In discussing these two routes with Boris Garff and his fellow Russian Masters of Sport we decided the ideal combination would be to climb Jangi Tau by the Schwarzgruber route, traverse along the high summit ridge to Katuin Tau and then descend the Bezingi wall by the route we had seen.

The weather was glorious for the six-hour approach to our first bivouac on the elbow of the Bezingi glacier, close to and opposite the foot of this huge wall of Jangi Tau. It was a big moment for us as, nearing this elbow, our route came dramatically into sight, soaring upwards through the white rising mist. It was all we had expected ; with its successive ice arêtes and rock buttresses it looked rather like the routes on the Brenva face of Mont Blanc but much bigger and, therefore, by so much the more serious. From our bivouac in the chill of that evening we had a good look at it. The first quarter of the route was a striking pear-shaped rock buttress, about 2,000 ft. in height, which could evidently be turned on the right by *séracs* and snow slopes, threatened unfortunately by a series of ice-cliffs. Then came a long, mixed snow and rock ridge which, although it would obviously have its share of difficulties, appeared to be of average Alpine standard. This led to an ice arête longer and steeper than that on the old Brenva route, which debouched upon a slope of ice-cliffs and crevasses topped by the summit ridge of Jangi Tau itself. With good luck and good conditions we thought we might reach the bottom of this slope for our second bivouac. Avalanches were a great danger on this wall but our route for the most part appeared mercifully free from them.

After crossing the wide but level Bezingi glacier we reached the foot of the face next morning at 5 a.m. Our route for avoiding the rock

<sup>1</sup> Climbed by H. W. Holder, H. Woolley, Ulrich Almer and Christian Roth, August 24th, 1888. *A. J.* 14. 177.





*Photo, G. Band]*

JANGI TAU FROM NORTH-EAST. BUTTRESS IN MIDDLE IS SCHWARZGRUBER RIB.



buttress was a tortuous one taking the easiest line to the right, through a mass of tangled crevasses and *séracs*, and then back left up a steep snow slope which, though only a small part of the climb, was itself comparable with the North face of the Pain de Sucre. We managed to get it in good condition so early in the morning but, had we been half an hour later, the upper parts would have been extremely dangerous, with layers of powder snow lying on steep ice, awaiting the merest touch to avalanche away. We reached the ridge above the buttress at 8 a.m., several hours ahead of the Austrians on the first ascent, who had taken to the rocks. We followed mixed rock and ice without serious difficulty for the next 1,000 ft. or so, with John Hunt and Ralph Jones in front. However, the ridge then steepened sharply and after avoiding a gendarme on the right, we were forced to cross very steep ice to get back to the crest. When we arrived there John was already attacking a steep ice-wall above, on the left side of the arête, and about 70 ft. high. The best way was an ascending traverse starting at a slightly easier arête low down on the wall, but it was a formidable proposition, made all the worse by the poor quality of the snow on the ice and the excessive exposure due to a very steep rock wall immediately below. The ice pegs left in by our companions gave us little security and it was with relief that we surmounted this difficulty. It was already after 2 o'clock and this last section had set us behind time. From then on we were pressing ourselves to reach the top of the ice arête, the objective we had set ourselves for that night. Two hours later we were at its foot. By this time altitude and fatigue were telling heavily but the ice arête was so foreshortened that its top seemed a mere couple of rope lengths away, and we set off again with the others once more in the lead.

This arête, however, turned out to be over 1,000 ft. in length and it required a tremendous effort to complete it in the remaining three hours of daylight. Despite frequent changes of the lead it felt as though it would never end; then Chris Brasher and I continued to the top, cutting and kicking steps as we were all so tired that it was hardly worth the trouble of changing round in that exposed and delicate position. Our bivouac just over the top was most magnificently situated looking out to Gestola on our left, where John Neill, Dave Thomas and Eugene Gippenreiter were, and to Shkara over on the right, where George Band, Derek Bull, Mike Harris and Anatoli Kustovski were engaged on the third ascent of the North face. Directly opposite was Dych Tau, large and imposing in the frosty moonlight.

We were now less than 1,000 ft. from our summit, but the only way was a circuitous one through the mass of *séracs* to reach the summit arête over on the left. We soon discovered that, unfortunately, the slope was thigh deep in powder snow: fifty steps was the maximum



in the lead and the two ropes had also to switch around. After  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours of struggle we came to realise that it would not be practical, in the time available, to continue over Jangi Tau to Katuin Tau, as we had originally planned. If, as was likely, the arête to Katuin Tau were in these conditions, it might take two days, and there were already indications of bad weather coming, though whether these small clouds were merely the harbingers of the regular Caucasus afternoon storm or of more permanent bad weather we could not know. We accordingly decided to return, after climbing Jangi Tau, down the route of ascent, so we left a cache of all our spare kit, and set off with renewed vigour for the summit.

Almost immediately ahead was a large bergschrund which could not be turned. At its lowest point the upper wall was about 30 ft. high and there was a deep though narrow crevasse below. This wall proved to be of soft snow and it was necessary to use all three ice-axes successively, hammered horizontally into the snow, for the lead. The others came up on a fixed rope. Once on top there was no further technical obstacle but the avalanche danger was serious on the deep snow below the ice-cliffs over to the left, where we must pass. Half an hour later came a crisis—John Hunt was in a crevasse. The 100 yards uphill to him and Chris were for us a nightmare—like running in deep-sea diving boots—but when we arrived we found there was fortunately no serious hurt. John was standing 15 ft. below the lip on the wall of a very large crevasse, looking like nothing so much as a snow-covered Father Christmas. He was soon up on top again. This seemed to be one of those occasions when the mountain had given us an indication that we were not welcome and in view of the considerable dangers of avalanche we decided that we should not press for the summit but should retreat there and then.

In descending the bergschrund, John had another tumble when an ice-axe he was standing on gave way, but again luck was with us, for he was completely unhurt. At our second bivouac site we saw an avalanche go down just about where we would have been had we continued, so our disappointment at giving up the route was mitigated. In the cool of the late afternoon we retraced our steps down the top ice arête, taking much the same time as on the way up. Our third bivouac was really quite a comfortable affair, but the evident deterioration in the weather was disturbing; the following day it was a race to get off the mountain. Abseil followed abseil. When we reached the ice-wall John had led, it was already snowing, but once this difficult abseil was over we felt our descent was assured. Little did we realise then how difficult the last part would be in descent. The snow we had climbed to the right on the way up had by now avalanched away and there was nothing left there but extremely steep slopes of hard ice



subjected to falling stones. Further over, the merest trickle of snow was sufficient to snowball and set off an avalanche. In this threatening situation the only alternative was to descend by the rocks, and this we did with some very long and exposed abseils arriving on the glacier at nightfall. We eventually reached our bivouac on the moraine, and at dawn the following morning Chris Brasher ran down to base in Olympic style to let the Russians know that the party was safe, though an hour or two outside its control time. On looking back it is astonishing that we had allowed such a short time for this expedition, but then we were still in process of learning about these great and very serious mountains.

*(The climb described took place on July 15-19, 1958.)*