ANNAPURNA II, 1960

By J. O. M. ROBERTS

I DISLIKE pretentious expedition titles, or indeed any other than the name of the mountain to be attempted, and all I can say for 'The British Indian Nepalese Services Himalyan Expedition' (to Annapurna II) is that it saved a lot of tedious explanation.

Field Marshal Templer and General Thimayya were the godfathers of this joint enterprise which was still in an embryonic form when I was asked to take charge towards the end of 1958. I specified an objective in Nepal and Nepalese participation followed naturally.

If anyone thinks that our rather grandiose title implied a like source of ready cash, let him think again. I do not for a moment underestimate the value of the Services' assistance that we received; leave, travel and accommodation in India and Katmandu, the loan of some equipment (above all the oxygen sets and cylinders supplied by the Royal Air Force), and the hard preparatory work put in by those who had no expedition to which to look forward, Major-General Moulton, Mr Pirie Gordon, Group Captain Smythe, Captain Jimmy Mills and many others. Without these things the expedition would have been impossible, but when it came to raising the necessary funds, we were in the same boat as anyone else, and financial uncertainty dogged and hindered preparations up to the last moment. In descending order of munificence, the Mount Everest Foundation, the British members of the expedition, a national Sunday newspaper and the Nuffield Trust contributed each their generous quota and at last, early in 1960, the way ahead became reasonably clear.

In an attempt to whip up some financial enthusiasm for our enterprise, I had described Annapurna II, 26,041 ft., as the third highest unclimbed mountain in the world, the other two at that time being Dhaulagiri and Gosainthan. This innocent claim produced letters to the press. Gasherbrum III (26,090 ft.), and various lesser Lhotses and Kangchenjungas raised craggy competitive heads and a writer in *Die Alpen* was so put out by a report (in a Swiss newspaper) that Annapurna II was 8,700 m. high, that he embarked on a lengthy and not very accurate history of 8,000 m. mountaineering.

Frankly, I had forgotten Gasherbrum III, but I would still stick to

my guns, as the higher Baltoro peaks seem, according to published accounts, to vary in height a good deal from expedition to expedition. As for the Numbers II of Lhotse and Kangchenjunga, I would question their claim to legitimacy, unlike the very respectable numerical families of the Annapurnas and the Gasherbrums. The numerical system has its uses where no local names exist, but becomes muddling if applied to lower features or spurs of a great mountain, not in themselves separate mountains in their own right.

The mountain massive carrying the peaks of Annapurna II and IV (24,630 ft.) lies behind and to the north of the town and plain of Pokhara in Central Nepal. Various people have at various times peered at these southern approaches. High up, below the summit of IV and the almost horizontal connecting ridge running for over two miles eastwards to II, the open ice and *névé* slopes look not unpromising. But lower these plunge and disintegrate into a jumble of decaying ice-falls, emptying down into the upper gorges of the Modi River. No, the way lies round to the north, from the Manangbhot Valley, and from here in 1950 H. W. Tilman[1] traced the line up the flanks of Annapurna IV which pointed the onward way to II.

Climbing under monsoon conditions that first year, our best efforts fell 500 ft. short of the summit of A IV. In 1952 and 1953 Japanese parties did not get as high. In 1955 a German party[2] made the first ascent of Annapurna IV, but made no effort to continue towards II. In 1957 Evans and Davis had as their objective A II. They repeated the ascent of IV but for various reasons could make little progress along the ridge towards the higher peak. So, despite all this activity, when we came on the scene in 1960 the last two miles of the ridge between the two mountains and the upper 2,400 ft. of the final pyramid were still untouched.

When we collected together in Katmandu towards the end of February 1960, half the party were complete strangers to the other half, and very few of us had ever climbed together. It is one of the weaknesses of an expedition of this sort that there are too many cooks concerned in the production of the broth. Each Service must be given fair representation, numbers are forced up, and the final product tends to be a collection of individuals of very varying experience rather than a balanced team.

We were ten (at one time twelve was the score) and this was much too many. But too many and strangers as we were, we made the final product work. In contrast to our heterogeneous selves, our nine Sherpas were a solid band of brothers, with the exception of Ang Nyima (now a soldier of the Queen) drawn from the same village in Khombu.

[1] Tilman, Emlyn Jones, Evans, Packard, Roberts.
[2] Steinmetz, Lobbichler, Biller, Wellenkamp.

Hardly one of them had not carried a load to 26,000 ft. or higher. They were the linch-pin of our assault plan.[3]

The uncertainty of the last few months, and the journey across India by train, had reduced the British contingent to a state of near hysteria. When I saw the quantities of food and somewhat unnecessary items of equipment that they had brought with them, I too became slightly hysterical. It was important that no feelings should be hurt at this early stage, and in any case there was no time to reorganise. Some of the more obviously useless items were jettisoned, but none the less our coolie train was 156 strong when we marched out of Katmandu on that morning of February 29, 1960.

We were nearly a month earlier in the field than is traditional, and a very dry and snowless winter seemed to point the soundness of this move. However, winter caught up with us in the spring, and climbing in chilling continuous rain up the Marsyandi Gorge, our bare-footed, ill-clad Tamang porters looked apprehensively at the shroud of white slowly descending on the pine woods, two or three thousand feet higher. Fortunately the crucial day, along the slippery wooden plank galleries and ladders of the upper gorge, was brilliantly fine, but a day later, at about 8,000 ft., it was no longer possible to disregard the snow lying banked by the path. About half our porters returned from this point, but we were within two days of Manang, and the abandoned loads were relayed forward during the next few days.

Sixteen days out from Katmandu we pitched an acclimatisation Base Camp at 11,000 ft. near the mouth of the Sabcho Valley (also called Sabji by former expeditions). That was on March 15, and it was not until April 13 that we were able to push on up the valley onto the flanks of our mountain. Meanwhile, we sorted food and equipment, dug collapsing tents and shelters out of the snow and, during fine spells, slithered in slush on the surrounding heights in search of acclimatisation.

Morale now demanded an early move towards Annapurna itself, and we set off with a motley collection of local coolies, mostly women and 'teenage children, with a sprinkling of infants-in-arms, dogs, lamas and Tibetan refugees. Above 11,000 ft., it was snow, and deep snow, all the way, and progress was slow and noisy, with the crying of children, screeching of women and universal complaint. Our objective was a Base Camp at about 15,500 ft. at the base of Annapurna IV, but quite

[3]*Party*.—British Army: Lieut.-Col. J. O. M. Roberts, Major G. Lorimer, Capt. W. A. Crawshaw, Lieut. C. J. S. Bonington. Indian Army: Capt. Jagjit Singh, Capt. M. A. Soares (M.O.). Royal Nepalese Army: Capt. Prabakhar Shamsher Rana, Lieut. Gadul Shamsher Rana. Royal Marines: Capt. R. H. Grant. Royal Air Force: Flight-Lieut. S. Ward. Sherpas: Dawa Tenzing, Urkien, Annalu, Ang Nyima, Angtemba, Pemba Nurbu, Mingma Tsering, Tashi, Angtsering.

early-on the second day, I was annoyed to find the advance guard of a few Sahibs and Sherpas snugly encamped about 1,000 ft. lower.

He who travels with Sherpas who have been over the ground before must be prepared to take second place behind their leaders of yore and progress is punctuated by cries of 'Here Smith Sahib camped' or 'Here Jones Sahib always lunched'. Later we learnt to resist these appeals to conform with the past, but on this occasion Urkien had won the day. Once our coolies had seen the pitched tents and Sahibs peacefully drinking tea in the sun, there was no question of cajoling them any higher up the mountain.

It was a long carry to Camp I at 17,600 ft. Just now the weather was fine, but underfoot snow conditions were trying and Grant and others had a hard tussle getting up, the following days. Meanwhile, Bonington, Ward and I climbed a small peak of about 17,000 ft. immediately to the north of our mountain. I wished to show Bonington the main features of the route as far as the top of the Dome, a large snow shoulder hunched on the North-west ridge of A IV. Here would be Camp III at 21,000 ft. The Dome is reached by its steep northern glaciated buttress, and we were relieved to see that the crux, an ice cliff between Camps I and II, appeared this year to be in an amenable condition.

Grant and Bonington I selected as advance party, and together with the Sherpas Tashi and Ang Nyima they carved and ploughed their upward way for the next two weeks, and fixed ropes. The rest of us divided into two carrying parties and also ploughed our upward way. The mornings were fine, but every afternoon it snowed and each morning the weary furrow had to be remade. The ice cliff was climbed and roped and a rather intricate route unravelled towards the Dome.

At last, on April 26, Grant and Bonington established Camp III at about 21,000 ft., and soon the crocodiles of the carrying parties were nearing the end of the first phase of their labours. But now the weather began to worsen. The afternoon snowfall had become a daily and monotonous feature of life and with it came high winds and low temperatures. Our upwards momentum had begun to slow and it seemed the time had come to descend for a period of rest in a more pleasant clime. On April 29 and 30, Grant and Bonington advanced as far as Camp IV at 22,600 ft. while the remaining loads were brought up to the Dome. On May 1, we all went down to the grass and pine trees, descending 10,000 ft. in a day.

We went right down to some stone huts near our first base at 11,000 ft. They had made a convenient dump for our surplus stores and now, most of the tents having been left on the mountain, they provided shelter. Apart from this, it was not much of a place. A chilling dust-laden wind which blew most of the day, discouraged sun-bathing, and inside the huts it was cold enough for duvet jackets or sleeping bags.

But for the first day or two all was bliss. There were letters and newspapers to be read, and some members even washed. The horrors of our high-altitude ration could temporarily be forgotten, and in particular a large and succulent ham received much devoted attention. I was relieved to watch the quantities of food disappearing down the mouths of some who had a few days ago been feeling sick and sorry for themselves. I only wished I could emulate their example. I too had eaten very little during the last week on the mountain. Now not even the ham could tempt my appetite. It seemed that about my only Himalayan asset, a strong stomach, had at last revolted after twenty-two years of maltreatment.

For the final phase I decided to streamline our rather large party and to keep Lorimer, Soares, our M.O., and Gadul in a supporting role. Everyone had worked so hard during the first and crucial phase of the climb and I had to avoid the blank, hurt looks which greeted this announcement. The decision was the easier to take as I had begun to realise that I would almost certainly be keeping them company myself. Based on present form and past record Grant and Bonington were the natural summit pair and I gave them seven out of our nine Sherpas to help them do the job. Jagjit, Crawshaw, Prabakhar and Ward with Dawa Tenzing would assist the assault group to carry as far as Camp IV at 22,600 ft., and thereafter make an attempt on Annapurna IV.

These rather boring days of rest were enlivened towards the end by the men of Manangbhot. Never a very friendly folk, these Tibetan-like creatures had so far caused us little trouble. However on the day that Dawa was due to go up to move our mountain base camp to a higher and more suitable position, the coolies that had been promised failed to materialise. Instead came a summons from the Town Council that we had better come and explain ourselves. I despatched Prabakhar as an emissary and he later returned with a somewhat incoherent story. It seemed that we were accused of shooting bharal and of smoking: the fine for these offences was 3,000 rupees, but if we promised to behave in future they would settle for 50. We had a licensed shot-gun, but it would have been courteous, I had to admit, to have enquired about the local game laws. The truth is that I did not think that these normally wily sheep would be stupid enough to stray within range of Prabakhar's gun. Two of them had, and their meat was excellent. As for smoking, this was forbidden by a self-denying ordinance of two or three years' standing. We settled the affair amicably enough the following day, paid an advance of 30 rupees, showed them the shot-gun, now in several pieces (Gadul having descended a cliff in over quick time with it the day before) and submitted to a token confiscation of cigarettes. Later we discovered that during these parleys a raiding party had looted Base

Camp of two tents, two pairs of H.A. boots, a quantity of food and Annalu's trousers. One up to Manang.

The weather was now set fine and there seemed to be little wind on the mountain. I was tormented by thoughts that we ought at this time to be ready poised for the final assault. However the move up, which began on May 9, went quickly forward. By the 11th, Camp III at 21,000 ft. had been fully reoccupied and I was left by myself in the huts in solitary dyspeptic state.

On the 12th Lorimer came down to the huts and on the 14th, feeling a little better, I set off to join Soares and Gadul at Base now moved up to nearly 16,000 ft. My feeling of well-being was short lived and I reached camp in the late afternoon after a severe struggle. On the way up I watched small specks moving along the ridge beyond Camp IV and up the slopes below Annapurna IV. The carry to Camp V was on. I also passed Jagjit Singh who was descending escorted by Dawa. After having carried strongly to Camp IV he had become ill and wisely decided to come down. It was bad luck. I would have sympathised more if I had been feeling better myself. He reported all well on the mountain.

There followed two dreary days at Base. The very fine spell of weather had ended and snow fell in the afternoons. I had talked glibly about going on up to Camp III, but it soon became evident that I had shot my bolt and a half-hour stroll on the moraine was about my limit. Soares went down to the huts and Gadul, Angtsering and I spent our time searching the cloud-decked mountain. Up there Dick Grant was in charge and there was nothing for me to do but wait.

On the 15th we saw figures moving up on the second carry and occupation of V. On the 16th we could see nothing. This was the day planned for the occupation of Camp VI and May 17 for the first summit attempt.

From the Dome at 21,000 ft. a broken ridge, broad in places, runs north-east for about three miles to the base of Annapurna IV. Camp IV was rather more than half-way along this ridge. Beyond Camp IV there is a steep climb up the shoulder of A IV to about 23,000 ft.—A IV is by-passed to the north and the final ridge stretching along eastwards to Annapurna II appears. This is about three miles long and at the south-west of the ridge the final pyramid of A II rears up like the bows of a battleship. The ridge is narrow and corniced and the slope falling away to the south is at an angle of about 45°. Camp V was at 23,850 ft., over the A IV shoulder and down to the take-off point of the ridge. Along the ridge there are at least two formidable notches to negotiate. The first of these was just beyond V and Evans' furthest east in 1957.

In our planning we had put Camp VI at the base of the final pyramid and reckoned its height might be 25,000 ft. We were far out. When they reached the site of Camp VI with their seven Sherpas on May 16

Grant and Bonington found that they had in fact descended slightly from V and judged (by altimeter) the height to be only 23,650 ft. There were still 2,400 ft. to climb.

The weather on May 16 was unsettled—at Base it snowed the whole afternoon. Grant therefore decided to make a dump of oxygen bottles and stores at VI and to return to V for the night. We had no second assault group as planning was based on giving the summit party food and fuel enough to sit out a period of bad weather. Our carrying strength did not permit placing a second group at Camp VI. Above Camp IV Grant and Bonington used oxygen for both climbing and sleeping. On May 16 four Sherpas were sent down to Camp IV, leaving Ang Nyima, Urkien and Mingma at V.

Grant had not committed himself to a night at VI as he preferred to sit out the threatened spell of bad weather at Camp V. However the morning of May 17 was fine and he boldly decided to make an attempt on the summit that day. I had told him I wanted him to take one Sherpa to the summit and said that if possible this should be Ang Nyima. So the three set off, followed by Urkien and Mingma with the remaining equipment for Camp VI.

The summit trio passed the site of Camp VI at about noon and changed their oxygen bottles. The climbing had not been easy and now they embarked on the crux of the climb. Bonington led, followed by Grant and Ang Nyima. Grant's oxygen set was faulty and giving him little assistance; Urkien and Mingma returned to Camp V.

Down at Base the sun shone and the mountain was clear all the morning. In the afternoon the summit pyramid was shadowed by passing clouds. We searched the mountain with binoculars all day. It was about 3.30 p.m. that I saw them. A rock that I had been watching about 300 ft. below the summit moved—and then I saw two other small dark shapes below. The three, looking like small black grubs, moved steadily up. Nothing could stop them now—Annapurna II was climbed. In various ways we had all climbed it, but our summit delegates that evening of Tuesday, May 17, 1960, were Captain Richard Grant of the Royal Marines, Lieutenant Christopher Bonington of the Royal Tank Regiment and Lance-Corporal Ang Nyima, Sherpa of the 10th Princess Mary's Own Gurkha Rifles. They reached Camp VI at nightfall.

The next morning I sent Gadul down with the good news. He had been languishing at Base for eight days and his cigarettes and favourite chutney were long finished. I have seldom seen anyone move quicker when given the word to go. On this day Urkien and Mingma made an unauthorised third ascent of Annapurna IV before fulfilling their proper Sherpa duties of helping the summit party evacuate Camp V. On the top tied to a bamboo wand they left a very dirty pocket handkerchief. On May 19 this relic was discovered by Crawshaw, Prabakhar and

Ward who with Tashi repeated the ascent from Camp IV. Considering the experience of this party their effort ranks almost equal with the ascent of Annapurna II.

We cleared the mountain in double-quick time and, extracting our celebrating Sherpas from the alleyways of Manangbhot, marched on Pokhara by way of Mukhtinath and the Kali River. At Pokhara on June 3 we boarded an aeroplanc for Katmandu.

For so many months we had been moving, walking and climbing. We were tired. But now other forces were at work. Away to the north coming through the cloud castles of the monsoon rose our mountains, now remote from reality, as we rode the air so easily past the scene of our struggles. Those that had climbed them could feel the pride of achievement and for the rest of us there could be no bitterness, neither regret nor pain.

As the clouds closed in we passed over the grey flood of the Marsyandi River, by which we had marched and lived so long. Peak 26,041 gives birth to this great river and watches over its wandering course until it breaks through the foothills into the southern plains. We had long sought an alternative name to the anonymity of the numerical title of our mountain. It comes to me now as I write that Marsyandi Himal should be this name.

Footnote by R. H. Grant

From Camp V, situated in a shallow basin, the route led along a ridge. The ridge fell vertically on the north side and was topped with a cornice. On the south it fell away at an angle of 45° for at least 3,000 ft. The general trend of the gradient was downwards until the ridge ran into the abrupt rise of the triangular summit mass of rock and snow. Camp VI was lower than V.

In the traverse a series of small bumps had to be negotiated. Each bump increasing the steepness of the angle to 50–55°. Two bumps dropped on the summit side in vertical steps. Both were of ice with an overlay of soft snow. Ropes were fixed and steps cut to negotiate these.

During the summit attempt an area of possible wind-slab was crossed. The danger was avoided by going to the safe limit on the cornice. At the lowest point of traverse soft snow causing legs to sink to the calves was encountered.

The summit triangle rose up abruptly in comparison to the gentle rise of the ridge. A rib of rock at an angle of 45–50° ran all the way to the top offering the only likely line. The rib was stepped in places by boulders and perched slabs which presented severe rock climbing difficulties. Some snow with underlying ice over the rock was attached to the rib. It had a hollow sound when being climbed over. At times difficulties on the rib were avoided by moving out to the right into a shallow snow gully. The summit was of snow.