



74 *Hanuman Tibba from the Taintu Pass* This and next photo: A. Smythe

Excursions to Bara Bangahal and Lahul

Tony Smythe

At the end of May 1972, I joined John Millar in Manali after an exhausting 26-hour journey by train and bus from Delhi. It was rather close to the monsoon to be starting an expedition in this area, but our objective was Lahul, the region to the N of Kulu which we had been assured remains dry and sunny, being in a rain-shadow area. The only problem was political. For two years John had waged a paper war with the Indian authorities, and although we now had official permission to cross the Inner Line we still needed a liaison officer. Accordingly we dispatched a last despairing salvo of letters and telegrams and set off for Bara Bangahal, a region to the W of Kulu and safely S of the restricted area. Here at least we could do something useful while we waited for the outcome on Lahul.

Although fairly close to Manali—25 miles in a straight line—the village of Bara Bangahal gets comparatively few visitors and the surrounding mountains have been almost completely neglected, compared with the more popular Indrasan, Deo Tibba, and other peaks to the E of the Kulu valley. Yet, as we noted from the excellent 1-in map surprisingly available for the Bara Bangahal peaks, there were summits of over 20,000 ft, and almost all were unclimbed. The reason for this soon became apparent. It took ten days to cover those 25 miles!

First there was the 4996-m Taintu Pass. Like hopeless swains we camped underneath this while storm after storm swept in. At last on 7 June we were able to leave the now familiar Beas Kund, a depressing sort of cwm at 3350 m which is frequented by everything from voracious crows to students from Indian outdoor activities centres.

Our six porters carried magnificently up the long tiring snow slopes to the col. At one point we all quitted an unpleasant couloir just before the whole thing slipped away in a large avalanche. On the col two of the porters decided to return, but the remaining four shouldered even larger loads enabling us to continue. I foolishly strained my back while attempting to raise a heavy pack, and this meant that for the time being John and the others had even more to carry. At least it was now downhill, and after a further two days of struggling down the Ravi gorge we were finally able to take the side valley leading northwards towards the Shah and Tapni Laluni glaciers. We opted for the latter, having earlier seen a magnificent snow-peak rising at the head of it, and on 12 June we set up a Base Camp alongside a shepherd's stone hut next to the lower moraines.

These stone shelters, built with slabs on the igloo principle, are extremely

useful and are to be found in most flat, grassy places in the area. The accommodation though cramped, could be superior to that offered by a popular Alpine hut in say, late July.

The next day we pressed on up the Tapni Laluni and finding no good route up the snow-peak, which from this side presented a steep rock and ice wall, decided to attempt a peak further N on the same ridge, almost certainly unclimbed, and marked on the map as 19,777 ft.

From a camp at about 5180 m in an ice-fall John and I and our Sirdar Wangyal and one porter left at 4am on 14 June. Apart from suffering from cold feet we had no problems. The route was straightforward up easy slopes, it was a superb morning, and we gained the ridge by 7am and stood on the summit at 9, with the reward of a memorable view of a large slice of the Western Himalaya.

Unfortunately, the descent was marred by an accident, which luckily was far less serious than it might have been. We had unroped after getting on to the slopes below the summit ridge, but John slipped on balled-up crampons, lost hold of his axe, and slid some 400 ft. He suffered some nasty cuts and grazes but was otherwise all right. To get him proper treatment quickly we decided to head straight back to Manali, rather than attempt any exploration of the Shah glacier.

We reached Manali on 18 June to find a liaison officer had just arrived, and on the 22nd left by lorry for Sumdo on the Bhaga river in Lahul. The plan was to attempt Mulkila (6517 m) the principal peak of the region. This mountain had been climbed by an Anglo-Austrian expedition in 1939, and on 25 June we reached the site of their old Base Camp, where we found the grave of Hilda Richmond who had been killed by stonefall near the camp in 1939.

In continuing good weather a reconnaissance was made up the Mulkila glacier—now very easy, though Wangyal told us that exceptional problems here had turned back an Indian expedition in 1970. We put our Camp 1 at about 4880 m and this unfortunately was the highest our genial liaison officer, Major J. K. Bajaj, could manage. He had been considerably higher on an expedition in the Eastern Himalaya, but found it impossible now to acclimatise and went down to Base Camp. Meanwhile, John and I and three porters continued to 5790 m where we put a second camp.

The weather was tricky on our first day here, but next day, 1 July, we left for the summit at 6am. Six hundred feet of cramponing brought us to the long s ridge, and two hours were spent crossing a large snowy hump before the final rocky rise. This consisted of appallingly loose towers and ribs and we wasted much time on a long traverse to the left trying to find a reasonable route. I have a vivid recollection of steep, soggy snow interspersed with crumbling promontories of an evil slaty rock, and not a shred of a solid belay all day. By 2pm we were still some 120 m and probably two hours from the summit, the weather was closing in again (it had snowed heavily the previous night) and it was clear that if we continued we should certainly be bivouacking, probably above 6100 m, and probably in a storm. Lacking enough in the way



75 *Mulkila from Camp 2*

of survival gear we decided reluctantly that there was only one direction we should now go—down. That evening we reached camp a mere half hour before darkness, almost exhausted after thirteen hours continuous effort. It was sad to realise that had we put one more camp, on the hump, we would probably have reached the summit. But our food was now running short and so we headed down to Base.

We made a reconnaissance to the col N of Mulkila, but had no view of any of the little-known country to the N before a snowstorm forced us to go down again. Then the monsoon really set in, and we spent a damp week heading s and out of the Himalaya. Rains, which were so unusual for Lahul, had washed away roads and bridges, and we finished up by walking about half of the 100 miles back to Manali.

Perhaps my nearest escape came while viewing a blasting operation on the Rohtang Pass. From a distance of several hundred yards a large chunk of rock thudded into the ground just beside me. After surviving all the loose rock and avalanchy snow and stormy weather on Mulkila, what a futile finale that would have been!

SUMMARY British Kulu Expedition 1972. 14 June: Wangyal's Peak (6028 m) Bara Bangahal, first ascent by John Millar, Tony Smythe and Sirdar Wangyal (Sherpa). 1 July: attempt on Mulkila (6517 m) highest peak in Lahul, by John Millar, Tony Smythe, Sirdar Wangyal and Paljol (Sherpa). Highest point reached was about 6400 m on s ridge.