

Avalanche on Sisne – 1977

R. A. L. Anderson

If you are posted to Nepal for 2 years it seems stupid not to try to do some climbing. Andrew Russell seemed interested and 2 is enough to form the basis of any expedition. Our early ideas had to be modified in accordance with what was on the list of mountains recognized as open for climbing by the Nepalese authorities. Finally after talking to Col Jimmy Roberts we settled on Sisne Himal shown on 1:250,000 maps as being 22,510ft.

Sisne lies in the Kanjiroba in the 'Far West' region of Nepal (Karnali Zone). This area has been visited several times (see Bibliography) but, compared with other parts of Nepal, it is still comparatively unknown. We discovered from more accurate maps that Sisne was really a complex of 4 peaks: a triangle of 3 peaks at 6620m, 6471m and 6450m; and about 2 miles along a ridge to the W, a fourth peak at 6627m. It was this peak that we chose as our objective; apart from being the highest, it also looked easiest of access lying on the outside (W) edge of the range.

We then discovered that Pt 6627m had already been climbed in 1972 by a Japanese team from the Tokyo Tamatabi Club (see Bibliography); they named this mountain 'Kande Hiunchuli'. Therefore we switched our plan to the triangle of peaks further E (called from here on 'Sisne') but this immediately posed a problem; how to get to them? There seemed to be 3 possibilities: to approach from the S via the Jagdula Khola (see p 38); to get into the top of the Jagdula Basin (at the top of the Jagdula Khola) from the W by a hitherto undiscovered col; or to approach from the N via the Changda Khola. We knew that the Jagdula Khola was notoriously difficult and talking to Dick Isherwood—who used it to make the second ascent of Kanjiroba in Autumn 1976, and who, to the best of my knowledge, was a member of the only party ever to have succeeded in traversing it—convinced me that it was out, particularly in the Spring when winter snow could well make it impassable. At least the other 2 possibilities shared a common approach up the Chaudabise Khola and from there we could establish a Base Camp and reconnoitre.

11 March saw me in Kathmandu waiting for the rest of the expedition to arrive. A frantic telegram from Andrew said that John Steele our firm third member had dropped out; also there was no sign of Andrew Gray our elusive fourth member last heard of in Ankara heading E. I decided that it was feasible for us to proceed as a 2-man party and wired Andrew accordingly. The next week or so was spent frustratingly waiting in Kathmandu, going repeatedly to the airport to meet incoming planes. However all was not wasted; I made contact with our Liaison Officer, Sub-Inspector Shambahadur Sahi; with our one Nepalese, Manprasad Gurung, whom Andrew had been with on Hiunchuli Pathan in 1972, and with the help of the Sherpa Cooperative in the shape of Mike Cheney, I bought most of our food and equipment. Eventually Andrew turned up and we prepared to fly to Jumla, the air head for the approach march to Base Camp.

We had chartered a Pilatus Porter single engined plane to fly us and all our kit to Jumla, but it turned out, when we arrived at the airport ready to take off that because of the distance of Jumla from Kathmandu and its height (7700ft) the plane could not take all of us and our kit. We left the rice behind and arranged for Andrew to fly on an 'unscheduled schedule' flight via Nepalganj to Jumla arriving the next day. I wondered rather when we should next see Andrew: Jumla is rather a

long way from anywhere, road or airport.

The flight to Jumla, flying past Annapurna and Dhaulagiri, was impressive and I could see by Manprasad's rather peculiar colour that he thought so too. On landing we were besieged by coolies and with their help we pitched our tents by the side of the airstrip. After the bustle of Kathmandu, Jumla seemed pleasantly slow moving; we wandered into the town to report ourselves and try to get some porters. The latter proved surprisingly easy and we arranged with a casual 'passer by' to bring 15 porters to the airstrip in 2 days time. This arrangement turned out well as the 'passer by' became our 'Naik' or porter leader. Jumla was quickly inspected and we sauntered back to the airstrip to try and make some order out of the chaos of our gear. We also inherited an excellent cook—Angyala Sherpa—from a Frenchman who was going back to Kathmandu. Andrew turned up next morning as I was still in the tent. He was somewhat put out that no one had gone to meet him, but soon succumbed to the Jumla lassitude and spent most of the day asleep, for he had not had much in Nepal.

A few days later, after a wet night when we discovered that, though snow-proof, our tents were absolutely useless in the rain, we set off. It was good to be on the move. The walking was superb, along irrigation ditches above the river, up and down through pine forests; the bridges were solidly constructed too—so much better than those in other parts of Nepal! That night we stayed in a school-house and pressed on to above the last village the next day. Although we were making reasonable progress it seemed that the porters could go much faster. Therefore either Andrew or I went ahead to choose stopping places, while the other stayed with the porters and kept them going. This system worked well and after a spectacular climb through the Chaudabise Khola gorge we reached a site for Base Camp at 3850m at midday on 30 March.

We paid off the porters under a sullen sky from which intermittent snow flakes fell and set up Base Camp. We also took stock of our surroundings. It was, as Andrew said, rather like Scotland. We were in a small copse of juniper at the entrance to a flat valley. The un-Scottish aspect began at the far end of the valley where the impressive West face of Kande Hiunchuli, dominating the cirque, rose some 2750m above us.

So far our progress had been fairly impressive, 6 days from Kathmandu to Base Camp is good going and I think that Andrew was still suffering from jet lag. Now we had reached the reconnaissance stage; it was necessary to get fit and to discover a reasonable approach to our mountain. To start with we went up to the ridge bounding the S side of our valley. Progress was incredibly slow, the snow turning to porridge as the sun came. It was an almighty effort to put one foot in front of the other, but, for once, the weather was fine and we both agreed we would be nowhere else. What we saw to the S, when we eventually dragged ourselves to the top of a small pinnacle at about 4875m was not encouraging. There did not seem to be an obvious col giving access from the W into the Jagdula Basin. We picked out the route which the Japanese had used in making the first ascent of Kanjiroba in 1970; we remembered that they had reported using 45 pitons and 7 expansion bolts plus a vast quantity of fixed rope in their descent to the Jagdula. It did not seem the route for us.

Next we tried to the N to get into the Changda Khola. The carry round was delightful and we camped at the valley junction then climbed up the snow some of

the way to leave steps for the following day. In the morning the sky looked threatening but we managed to reach a col just in time to see that it led down easily into the Changda Khola before the cloud and snow swirled over. We returned after an awkward descent across snow covered boulders, to find the tent half buried. We dug it out and made a rapid retreat to Base Camp in a blizzard. We had not yet seen our mountain.

The bad weather continued for 3 days but we were acclimatizing well and at that stage there seemed to be no hurry. We resolved next to try and get on the N bounding ridge and climb Pt 5505m, from which we reckoned we would at least see Sisne and would have a good view of the upper Changda Valley. To do this we chose a rather unfortunate route which looked to be a fairly easy ridge leading up from a scree slope. We took Manprasad with us and set off on a fine morning. The ridge turned out to be much more difficult, containing several awkward steps, and took much longer than anticipated. We dug out a place for the tent in falling snow. Manprasad was not going well and so we left him in the tent while we went on to the end of the ridge the next day, then traversed across to pick a suitable site for a further camp. We returned to the tent in worsening weather, to find Manprasad had not recovered. We felt he ought to go down, but the alternatives were not particularly attractive: either go backwards or forwards along the ridge—difficult with a weak Manprasad in fresh snow—or go straight down from the ridge. We chose the latter and made a fairly chaotic descent, continuing down until we came across a cave which, with a bit of excavation, was large enough for the tent; we were soon safely ensconced in it. The following morning was clear and Andrew and I set off to find a way down to the valley floor. Everywhere appeared barred by cliffs and we had finally to traverse across on to our ascent ridge before going down.

We were determined to find an easier way up to the base of Pt 5505m and concluded after a careful inspection through binoculars that it should be possible to get up to our cave threading a way through the cliffs from below. Our conclusion turned out to be correct, after a tricky ascent on steep earth and grass. We continued up past the cave, picked up a load we had dumped on our way down, and pitched the tent at the mouth of another ice-cave. That night a marvellous sunset ended a day of perfect weather. We slept happy.

In the morning Andrew's confidence did not seem warranted. The weather was at first fine but there was a strong wind and the tell-tale clouds which always seemed to presage bad weather soon appeared. Nevertheless we made an early start for Pt 5505m, the ascent being accomplished easily on good firm snow. The view from the top was rewarding: we could see clearly into the Changda Khola Valley and to the summit of Sisne; the top of the Changda Khola was glaciated and the upper part of the N shoulder of Sisne appeared steep. We decided that nothing would be gained by going round to the N; rather we would climb the col at the end of the Base Camp valley, try to make a second ascent of Kande following the Japanese route, then try to get down to the Jagdula Basin and attempt Sisne from there. Rather than go down the way we had come, we would traverse, more or less horizontally across the wide but crevassed sloping glacier shelf beneath the W face of Kande to establish a dump at the foot of the slope up to the col.

By midday, when we had returned to the tent, it was snowing; next morning it was still snowing or cloudy. We needed clear weather for our traverse, as navigation through the seracs and crevasses would be difficult. In the afternoon the weather had cleared enough to move down and across the moraine to the start of the glacier



29 On the descent from Pt 5505—Kande Hiunchuli is just out of picture on the left (Photo: R. A. L. Anderson)

shelf. The next morning was dull but clear and we made reasonable but tiring progress, mostly through thigh-deep snow to a dump site (the 'Depot') where we would later establish a camp. The problem was then to descend to Base Camp. It was getting rather late and snowing hard when we decided, after casting round unsuccessfully for other routes, to abseil into a gully bounding the S side of the glacier shelf. Another couple of abseils brought us to easier ground and we made a wide swing to descend the S side of the Base Camp valley. We had had a long but ultimately successful day.

During the night Andrew complained that his eyes were hurting and by the next day he had developed full scale snow-blindness; he had not worn his goggles the day before because it had not been very bright. Eye drops relieved the pain and in 3 days he was cured. Meanwhile we rested and made plans. Time was running out so we decided on a 2-week push to climb the col and Kande, descend into the Jagdula and, if possible, climb Sisne.

While Andrew was still recovering, I carried all the loads for our push up the valley with the help of some yaks from a herd grazing nearby; fractious creatures, they used every opportunity to hurl off their loads. From the end of the valley I took a load up the grassy spur (much of the time, in fact, snow covered), left it at the site of a previous Japanese camp and descended. Next day Andrew and I carried up another load and began to attack the 200ft rock and ice-wall that formed the edge of the glacier shelf. The rock went easily but the ice above was both steep and hard. Andrew led out about 50ft, left a rope in place and we returned to Base Camp.

Our 2-week push began the following day. We lifted ourselves plus the last of our kit to the Japanese camp-site where we spent the night, packed up everything the next day and started on the ice-wall. It went more slowly than expected, the climbing being hard and sustained. There was too much resistance to haul the heavier loads successfully and I found following Andrew up, jumaring with loads

extremely shattering. But eventually we pulled up the rope behind us with a certain feeling of finality and pressed on to camp about 400ft higher in some seracs.

It was hard hot work the next day as we weaved our way round seracs and over crevasses. With loads we could not manage to break trail in the deep snow very far at a time. We reached the Depot as the afternoon snow began; I put up the tent while Andrew dug out the dump and we relaxed with many brews. It snowed heavily in the night and the following morning was the first of many spent digging ourselves out. Then we staggered down through new snow to the previous site where we had left our tunnel tent; heavy snow drifted by the wind had broken one of the fibre glass hoops—luckily we had a spare. We spent the rest of the day carrying most of the remaining food and equipment to the Depot; exhausting, but we were satisfied that we were well placed for the next stage which was to get on to the col. A rather unintentional rest day followed; it was fine and our kit was soaked. We had a good chance to dry out everything, even my boots, which seemed to absorb water like a sponge. We also rested, or rested as well as one can in a small tent at 5200m in the middle of a glacier.

The following morning we made 1000ft towards the col in fine weather fairly rapidly, only one or 2 places needing the rope, before arriving at a short unpleasant looking serac wall which barred the way: this was unfortunate as we hoped that we might be able to wind a way between the seracs but there was no choice other than to climb it. Andrew moved out to the right lip where there was a curious hole into which he climbed successfully but then could get no further. I tried straight up, but was defeated by the angle and the softness of the snow which refused to take any form of anchor. Andrew tried the hole again and by an extraordinary manoeuvre with his axe and a couple of snow-stakes managed to crawl out of the hole, over the lip, and on to the slope above. I followed on up on a fixed rope and led up past Andrew who was belayed securely on to a stake. This was fortuitous as about 30ft further up I slipped while trying to negotiate a patch of snow overlying ice. I sailed gracefully down the slope, over the wall which had taken so long to overcome and landed in a pile of snow and ironmongery, more or less in the same position I had been in 3 or 4 hours before—this was depressing! By now it was getting late so we descended to the tent after dumping loads.

We were back again the next day and made rapid time in our old steps which for once had not been covered over. We made a further 500ft to reach the next serac barrier consisting of huge ice-blocks jumbled crazily together, the gaps between covered in deep soft snow. As we were about two-thirds of the way through the barrier, only 500ft below the col, the weather deteriorated. There seemed to be a way diagonally up to the right across an open slope but we were soon buffeted with wind and snow and enveloped in cloud. It would be difficult to keep the right line in such conditions; besides the high open slope seemed a rather frightening place. It was time once again to descend and dumping loads we rushed down, fixing ropes in the difficult places. The weather at the Depot, though overcast was still calm, a strange contrast to the maelstrom from which we had emerged only 1500ft above.

Heavy snow prevented activity for the next few days, apart from periodically digging out the tent and making a final carry of equipment up to the Depot. The following day was rather better, but we delayed until midday to dry out. Previous steps had completely vanished but we carried a load up about 800ft before descending. Lack of time was now beginning to press: it looked as though we might

only have time to make an attempt on Kande. Much would depend on the weather; continuing heavy snow might defeat us completely.

A slight improvement in the weather was sufficient to spur us away on 1 May. I cached what gear we would not need, including 200ft of rope, while Andrew packed up the tent; we moved off finally about 10.30am. The going was laborious in the extreme; it was warmer, the snow seemed to be deeper and softer than ever before and we changed the lead every 50ft. We had made about 400ft when without any warning my steps collapsed; I was knocked down on to Andrew and we were both swept down together. I tried to remember to swim but that became rather pointless when I realized I was in free fall over the massive bergschrund at the foot of the face. The light turned green under tons of falling snow and I landed with an almighty crash on the lower lip. Tremendous!—I was still alive, but what about Andrew? Calling produced no answer and I struggled to free myself. This took some time as my left leg was twisted and buried quite deeply. Then I staggered to the top of the avalanche mound to look for Andrew; I saw at once his legs sticking up—he must have fallen in head first. I tried to pull him out but it was hopeless, the snow held him like a vice. I went back to where I had fallen, recovered my axe which had been tied to me, and an aluminium plate from my rucksack which though ripped off me in the fall had landed close by, and returned to dig him out, which I succeeded in doing after about 45 minutes. I gave him artificial respiration but there was no pulse or other sign of life. He must have suffocated, I hope quickly.

My main thought then was to try to get him down. I retrieved the 200ft rope which I had cached and stuffed that and as much other gear as I could carry into my sack, abandoning what was not strictly necessary. I tried dragging him on a rope but it was not possible in the deep snow, so I left him at the top of the avalanche mound and tied one of my dayglow overboots to him for future recognition. Before descending I searched for Andrew's sack but could see no sign of it. The descent was an experience I would not care to repeat: down through the crevasses and seracs of the glacier trying very hard not to lose the way; then abseiling down the final rock and ice wall that had taken so long to climb (the 200ft rope just reached the bottom); down the snow covered grassy spur, now by the light of the moon, and along the valley going more and more slowly till I finally reached Base Camp about midnight. Next day I discovered that my hands had mild frostbite and my knee, which had been twisted in the avalanche, made walking difficult. When I thought about it there was no question of being able to recover Andrew: the others were neither equipped nor had the experience to climb above Base Camp, moreover it did not seem justifiable to expose them to the sort of risk that had killed Andrew. Reluctantly I concluded—unless it were possible to get a helicopter from Kathmandu (it turned out that this was not possible as the Nepalese have formed the sensible policy of not hazarding helicopters to recover dead bodies) he would have to remain where he was.

Six weeks later Robin Hodgkin summed it up aptly: it is not undertaking the journey that is sad, rather that it is cut short. Andrew's journey certainly had been.

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The feminine share in mountain adventure Pt III

Cicely Williams

(In this paper there are many extracts from my book *Women on the Rope*, George Allen and Unwin 1973)

In 1946 foreign travel, which for 7 years had virtually been at a standstill all over the world, was at last possible again. The nations were exhausted, their cities lay in ruins and vast areas of Europe were devastated; the Alps, however, remained untouched and eternal. War-weary climbers came flooding back; but Jean Morin, husband of Nea, Roeli Roelfsema, brother of Anna, Graham Jackson, brother of Eileen, Hugues Paillon, nephew of the famous Mary Paillon, and countless others were all gone. For many women mountaineers climbing could never be quite the same again; perhaps this had something to do with the rapid development of mother-and-daughter, mother-and-son ropes; this proved to be one of the important new movements of the post-war climbing world.

Climbing *en famille* became very popular; Second World War British parents, who had served their apprenticeship in the Alps in the 1930s, saw to it that their teenagers were introduced to this rewarding way of life. Well-known climbing personalities like the Chorleys, the Bicknells and the Longlands arrived with ropeloads of youngsters; prominent among these pioneers were Nea Morin, Miriam Underhill and Janet Roberts (née Adam Smith and later Carleton).

Nea provided a baptism of fire for her daughter Denise and her son Ian in Austria; they had a mini-mountaineering season on the Kaisergebirge, in the Oetztal and on the easier routes of the Totenkirchl. This set the feet of Denise and Ian firmly on the mountains.

In 1947 Nea and her sister-in-law Micheline Morin, just to prove that their pre-war powers were unabated, made the first *cordée féminine* of the Chapeau à Cornes and the Requin and followed this with a similar achievement on the SW ridge of the Aiguille du Moine. Nea took Denise up Mont Tondou and subsequently Denise led a family rope on the Aiguille de l'M.

1950 was a great year for this family; they did the traverse of the Cinéastes and, more exciting, the traverse of Les Écrins. Denise Morin was by now a thoroughly dedicated mountaineer and followed up her earlier successes by ascents of the Mönch and the Jungfrau with her mother and the traverse of the Meije with some French friends.