

to Bout du Monde beyond the Cirque du Fer à Cheval? The Col des Paresseux and the Col des Pauvres seem appropriate halting places for such as I. But names can be misleading. I thought that Bellalué meant beautiful site but most likely it really means only rocky mountain and Bel Oiseau has no connection with any bird of bright plumage but probably signifies a high rocky passage.

Having had so much enjoyment from this delightful part of the borders of the Alps I feel I understand the sentiments of C. F. Ramuz who wrote 'Pays à moi, il faut mieux te connaître.'

Brammah—1978

Anthony Wheaton

Brammah I is a beautiful, classically shaped mountain, 6416m high, in South Kashmir, India, which the City University–Brunel University Kishtwar Himalaya Expedition 1978 had chosen as its prime objective. The expedition was merely 4 friends who had climbed together for some years, deciding to go away together again, but this time somewhere further afield.

So the Himalaya it was, and we chose a mountain that would not be badly affected by the monsoon (as we had to go in July and August during the height of the monsoon), did not necessitate oxygen, but would give some challenging rock and ice climbing. We picked Brammah because we thought it would offer these things, but I had not even seen a photograph of the mountain before we left, and from the scanty reports of previous expeditions, we believed all previous attempts had failed due to technical difficulties; it was not until a few days before leaving England that we found Chris Bonington and Nick Estcourt had climbed it. But their description spurred us on with more enthusiasm, to quote: 'as hard as anything we had encountered on the South West face of Everest'. We were soon to agree!

The members of the expedition were Anthony Wheaton, Paul Belcher, Duncan Nicholson (from the City University) and Jon Scott from Brunel. Both Universities are in London, and the Mountaineering clubs have been going away together for some years. We had all been climbing for many years in the UK and had had very successful visits to the Alps and Africa the previous year. We decided to join forces again this summer in order to make full use of our experience, both climbing and organizing, especially in finding sponsors. We only wanted a small expedition, as we planned to be an ultra-lightweight party, climbing Alpine-style; the smaller we kept it, the more cohesive the party would be. We wanted to avoid the encumbering problems of a large expedition and to enjoy the close companionship that develops through a limited number only.

We left London in early July, and began the 4-day walk-in from Kishtwar to the Base Camp after a fortnight in India. We had some trouble in arranging mules for the walk, due to a Japanese expedition having paid very high rates 2 years before. However, our Liaison officer was related to a high official in Kashmir, and his influence was such that the Tehsildar (mayor) of Kishtwar threatened the muleteers with jail! Subsequently, we had no more trouble.

We walked on a good path beside the Munab river, and then branched off up the Nanth Nullar, and positioned the Base Camp at the snout of the Brammah

Glacier. We established an Advance Base Camp with some difficulty at the head of the glacier, due to the tortured, rock strewn surface making progress almost impossible. We found the last piece of level ground in the S Cwm underneath the NE face of Brammah at 3950m and set up 2 tents; this was to be the starting point of the climb, 1500m to the S Col between Brammah I and Flat Top, and then 1000m and 2 miles up the SE ridge to the summit. We had looked at the alternative NW ridge, but rejected it as the approach was up steep avalanching gullies. (We also may have been influenced by the SE ridge being the only successfully climbed route to the top!)

The initial problem was to climb through the ice-fall spilling down from Brammah in order to gain the SE ridge. We split into pairs, and while Duncan and Jon lost themselves in the centre, Paul and I gained the S Col by a series of steep ice-gullies and loose rock-ridges on the left side of the ice-fall. Unfortunately due to a recurring stomach problem, Paul felt unable to go on, and so we had to retreat after leaving a large dump of equipment on the S Col.

A few days later, after a spell of bad weather, we all set off at 3.00am on our previous route, stumbling up the initial slopes in darkness to be greeted by a spectacular dawn as the clouds cleared to leave a beautiful sunny day; this was to set the pattern for the next 5 days. Paul and I gained the S Col by noon, having pushed on ahead of Jon and Duncan as we had agreed to climb at our own pace separately. As we had already been climbing for 9 hours in hot sunshine, we felt a cup of tea was in order. Refreshed by that and a brief rest, we started up the ridge which at first was merely broad easy angled snow. We bivouacked after about 150m before the slopes steepened.

The route consisted of 150m of steep hard snow, followed by 300m of sharp



rock-ridge, punctuated by 4 gendarmes of vertical rock, the last and most fierce being 90m high. Beyond, the 450m summit snow-field led to the top.

Paul and I quickly soloed up the snow to the start of the rock, and the difficulties. We found a couple of fixed ropes on relatively easy sections, but we moved together the whole time, solely protecting ourselves by throwing the rope over small pinnacles. We turned the first 2 towers without encountering great difficulty, but the third required some careful climbing over steep mixed ground with a lot of loose rock leading to the last impressive tower. It was late in the afternoon when the weather deteriorated and the snow started, and we could see Duncan and Jon who had already bivouacked at the start of the rock section.

But there was nowhere we could possibly stop. Another dodgy looking rope led around the tower, which I followed, belayed by an increasingly cold Paul. After about 30m, the rock became impossibly loose and so, trusting my luck to the Gods, I grabbed hold of the rope; it held and so I jumared up to the top; at that stage of the day, ethics fly out of the window with remarkable ease! Paul followed up, and overjoyed at having cracked the crux of the climb we bivouacked at the bottom of the summit snow-field.

We had to be content with a tiny ledge and hot tea only before the light faded and we settled down to sleep in a state of great excitement. The snow stopped falling to leave a clear, cold night—the route to the summit seemed open to us.

The following morning dawned clear, revealing a 450m snow-slope to the summit, gentle to begin with but becoming increasingly steep towards the top. We moved together the whole way for speed, and as the snow was too rotten to take any protection. The final steep wall was not difficult, but just demanded absolute concentration. Even when resting, we dared not relax as the drop was enormous and the soft snow lying on hard ice looked as though it might easily avalanche.

My elation at finding the steep wall in front of me had disappeared, replaced by a panorama of peaks, was only matched by the relief of making the top; after 5 hours of exhausting climbing where the altitude had really begun to affect us, we stayed on the top for an hour before returning. The descent down the dodgy snow was not uneventful—it started to snow, cascading down the surface, making the whole snow-field appear to be on the move. At one point, a deadman pulled out and Paul and I found ourselves sliding down with the loose snow. After about 30m, our ice-axes stopped us; we pondered over the danger we had just successfully overcome, and the worsening weather, and with confidence restored, bounded down the remaining snow.

We arrived back at our bivouac site in the midst of a snow-storm to find Jon and Duncan had completed the rock section and had now moved in on the comfortable flat ledge that we had arranged the previous evening; but they had been kind enough to leave just sufficient room for Paul and I to sit down with our legs hanging over the edge. Surprisingly, we managed to have a good night's sleep in this position.

As darkness fell, the snow stopped and quickly the cloud cleared from around us and we could see isolated peaks poking through the layer of clouds several thousand feet beneath us, and beyond the mountains to the S, an electric storm was lighting the sky in a fantastic firework display—slightly disconcerting if the storm was to move towards us.

Fortunately the following day was fine, and so Jon and Duncan climbed for the summit, while Paul and I started descending. Once again cloud obscured the

summit itself, but I saw them climbing down the snow from the summit and so presumed they had reached the top. Paul and I spent 2 days climbing back down to our camp and waited for the others to arrive, expecting them the following day, as they had been only one day later than us in reaching the summit. That evening, when they had not returned, I became worried, fearing that they might have stayed on the mountain to take sunrise or sunset shots as their view on the summit had been obscured. The weather deteriorated the following day and we knew they must have had an accident. We prepared emergency sacks of food, fuel and clothes in order to mount a rescue.

At dawn, our enthusiasm was dampened by the rain, the thought of having to start up the exhausting climb once again, and the contemplation of what we might find. As we climbed higher, the rain turned to snow and we set up our bivouac on the S Col in a snowstorm worse than we had encountered before and completely surrounded by cloud. The next day, after continuing up for a short way, I decided that Paul and I had to go back down. The mountain had become very unsafe to climb and our return route was in danger of becoming impassable. We were taking a longer time to climb up than we had expected and we would have to use the provisions ourselves, and not be able to leave much with Jon and Duncan. Our rescue attempt had become hopelessly ineffective with visibility down to a few hundred feet, and so rather than risk the possibility of more casualties Paul and I returned back to camp.

How can one make a decision like that? Knowing that I was abandoning 2 friends who had meant so much to me over the previous months, I had to be totally dispassionate in considering the facts; but after turning around, I was left with a feeling of total emptiness and remorse at cutting off the last hopes that I had of seeing Jon and Duncan again.

Because the realization of Jon's and Duncan's deaths came slowly over a few days as the accident and its results became more apparent, and the closeness of death always being with us (albeit in the subconscious, as one never wants to contemplate such a thing openly) we were not too badly shaken by the accident. The moment I felt my greatest unhappiness was after seeing the effect on Jon's and Duncan's parents. Their grief was obviously of incomparable magnitude to ours and I could only try to console them by explaining Jon's and Duncan's enjoyment from being in the mountains to help them over the traumatic event.

The accident cast a dull spell over the remaining fortnight Paul and I spent in India, in which we cleared the mountain of our equipment, reported the matter to the authorities and returned to Delhi. I have been asked whether this ends climbing for me; it doesn't because all that I gained in new experiences and enjoyment from the expedition was not destroyed by the loss of 2 close friends. It is one of the factors of mountaineering that all climbers must accept.