# Assignment in Lahul

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After several summers of climbing in the Alps, it was time for a change of venue. First choice was the Himalaya, but there was a difficulty in timing. I thought I would just be able to squeeze five weeks' holiday out of my job, provided that this fell around August. This, of course, is a time when the whole of Nepal and much of India is wreathed in monsoon mists. It was Bob Pettigrew who, at the Alpine Club symposium on 'Lightweight Expeditions in the Greater Ranges' in March 1984, told me about Lahul in North India. This region, he said, contains an impressive range of mountains that lies behind the monsoon belt and can therefore be expected to have good weather in August.

A search through the *Alpine Journal* revealed an interesting venture by Fritz Kolb and Ludwig Krenek (*AJ* 52, 135–137, 1940; see also *Himalaya Venture* by Fritz Kolb (London, 1959)). They had led a successful Anglo-Austrian expedition to the Mulkila range in the summer of 1939, climbing and exploring amongst an impressive display of rock and ice peaks of up to 6500m. The North London Lahul Expedition had found its destination. Its members, Bert Simmonds, Henry Todd, Maggie Urmston and myself, had pursued a variety of training methods from alpine climbs to weekend ascents of Scottish ice gullies and brick climbing on the wall of the Regent's Canal, Islington.

From Delhi we careered north for three days by bus. First we crossed the humid plains into a rain-drenched Kulu valley. Then, with engines screaming, we penetrated the mists of the Rohtang Pass until suddenly, at the crest of the col, we breathed the clear dry air of Lahul. It was like emerging, blinking, from a tunnel into the sunshine. The journey gave us time to marvel at the Indians' talent for paperwork: for the trip from Simla to Manali by luxury videobus, our tickets each comprised no less than 27 pieces of paper.

In the evening we reached the hamlet of Darcha, just east of Keylong. It was here that the walk-in began. Looking up the valley to the south, we could just see the distant snows of the Mulkila massif reflecting the warm evening light. The noise and clatter and dust of the journey by road were now over, and I became aware of that silence and solitude which is the unique feature of the high mountains. In a field just outside the hamlet we found accommodation in some large canvas tents that were apparently provided by the Indian Tourist Board. The camp organizer was a friendly and helpful Indian from the plains, who described himself to us as 'master of economics, fluent in English'.

The next morning we were introduced by the economist to a Lahuli called Prem, who agreed to transport our equipment to Base Camp with the assistance of four horses. Just before setting off into the hills, I suddenly remembered that I had some letters to post. I was directed to the Darcha post box, an impressive-looking structure, perhaps the size of a small packet of Shreddies. Having

committed the letters to the box, I enquired of some locals as to the frequency of the service. There was much laughter and discussion until one of the men dredged from their collective English vocabulary a single word: 'month'.

Two days of trekking up a wide, arid valley led us to what our guide considered an ideal location for our Base Camp. It was immediately apparent that his opinion did not coincide with ours. This spot of his was nowhere near the conventional notion of a Base Camp: the mountains were still miles away – in fact, they could not even be seen. And we were no more than 3500m above sea-level. But Prem had a trump card up his sleeve which he played with consummate skill: beside a rather unhappy-looking patch of turf there stood a large boulder, about 2 m high. Prem made a grand gesture in the direction of its north side, on which I saw a series of carvings left by earlier expeditions. Here was clear evidence that others before us had deemed this site to be suitable, and we were forced to concede that what was suitable for others was suitable for us. And so, with some relief, Prem and his horses departed.

Over the next three days, as we humped large loads up the crumbling moraine of the Mulkila glacier, we lived to regret Prem's departure. The moraine was not ideal terrain for horses, but the discovery of large quantities of manure on the way made it clear that such animals could make the journey. The load-carrying, if dull and monotonous, at any rate increased our fitness, and by 8 August we had established an Advanced Base Camp in an ideal location. I felt relieved and happy in the knowledge that we had at last arrived. We were situated about 6km up the Mulkila glacier, itself about 14km long and leading like a magician's wand into the very heart of the Mulkila massif. This consisted of 10 peaks of between 5800 and 6500m, named with great imagination on our map M1 to M10.

Of those which were visible from our camp, perhaps the most impressive was M8. At 6100m exactly, M8 had been described by Fritz Kolb as formidable. We looked up at the wide N face of the mountain. This indeed seemed formidable, since there were few lines which would not be threatened by hanging glaciers and stonefall. But the north-east end of the long, horizontal summit ridge descended steeply to the Mulkila glacier in an elegant snow ridge with a prominent ice tower at half height. It reminded Bert, who had climbed the Peuterey *integrale* the previous summer, of the upper half of that fabulous ridge. The prospect of climbing up those beautiful white towers proved irresistible, and we decided to make the ascent in two independent teams.

Bert and I set off first, and pitched an eyrie tent at the foot of a bergschrund, which marked the start of the climbing difficulties. From here, we estimated that two days would be required to complete the climb, and we decided to rely for shelter on Goretex bivouac sacks. That night some snow fell; in the morning the mists were slow to clear and we were not ready to start until 9am. We avoided the bergschrund by a short, vertical ice pitch, and threaded our way through further crevasses before climbing a steep snow/ice headwall to reach a col at the foot of the ice tower.

It was 1pm and the heat of the sun was intense. Although plenty of daylight remained, we were reluctant to embark on the tower in this heat. It looked as though there would be some steep and delicate work ahead, which would be easier and more enjoyable in the cool of the morning. All this provided

a welcome excuse to bivouac at the col, and we spent a relaxing afternoon preparing endless brews from snow-melt and speculating about the difficulty of the task that lay ahead.

Day 2 of the climb started with an evil concoction of muesli and Build-up (vanilla flavour) at 5am. That provided fuel for six pitches up the tapering arête of the ice tower, where the angle reached 60 degrees. On top of the tower, a knife-edged descent led to a narrow col from which we could contemplate the next feature of the ridge. This looked like another ice arête, slightly less steep than the first, but it had one undesirable aspect which had appeared insignificant from below: a massive, overhung bergschrund which split the ridge on the left-hand side. The previous year, I had encountered a similar feature – measured in centimetres rather than metres – on the ice ridge of the Frendo Spur. We had climbed the French equivalent by a big stride and one hard pull on the ice tools. But this we would have to turn.

With a certain lack of enthusiasm, I tried the right-hand option. This brought me on to the N face of the mountain which was composed of very steep snow of a revolting consistency. I was soon back at the col, congratulating myself on how the mere mention of avalanche risk is one of the many keys to the 'art of climbing down gracefully'. Bert then poked his nose towards the left-hand option and soon disappeared from sight. About 40 minutes later there came a triumphant shout from somewhere above the 'schrund. The rope went tight, and I followed up what was the crux pitch of the climb. A rising traverse left across an ice wall of 70 degrees led to the left edge of the 'schrund, where the ice formed a bulge with a curious hollow structure like a honeycomb. Here, I let my axe and hammer dangle and climbed by pulling on some icicles which formed convenient jug-holds. It was an exhilarating pitch, and one that proved the key to reaching the top of the second ice arête.

Two further pitches up steep snow led to a narrow, almost horizontal terrace on the crest of the ridge. Immediately above was yet another crevasse which spanned the arête. Here was the last significant obstacle that stood in the way of the summit ridge.

It was 2pm and all around us the snow and ice were melting in the wilting heat of the afternoon sun. We were also beginning to feel the altitude. A strong urge to rest and bivouac here overcame us, so we excavated a shelf of about two by two metres. Once we were installed, my imagination began to work overtime on the big upper lip of the crevasse. This was directly above our nest and it seemed to be substantially overhung, like the nose of the proboscis monkey. I questioned Bert as to the consequences of a collapse of the nose. He stated with a degree of relish: 'Well, that will solve the problems of the descent that you've been worrying about.' It was hard to disagree, but I was unable to share his enthusiasm.

The night was clear and there was a sharp frost. My excitement at the prospect of reaching the top was such that I slept little and persuaded Bert to be out of his bag and ready to climb by 3.30am. This was our first pre-dawn start in the Himalaya, and it was not a success. In the darkness, we were unable to find a way round the crevasse. Having wasted valuable calories, we decided to wait for dawn. We then traversed right, on to the N face, where we found crisp névé

of 50 degrees which led to the summit ridge. It was about 9am, and the technical climbing, we considered, was over. What lay ahead was a narrow, heavily corniced snow ridge which abutted on the final summit pyramid of rock.

On reaching the rock on Day 3 of our climb, our enthusiasm for the summit reached its nadir. We were both suffering from the effects of altitude, food was scarce, and Bert had developed a sharp cough which was producing phlegm of a lurid and alarming colour. The quality of the rock was disgusting: steep and very shattered, like lumps of sultanas and raisins stuck together. Bert went on strike: 'The best part of the climb is over, and this pile of rubble just doesn't interest me.'

I had a more traditional viewpoint.

'It just happens to be the summit, Bert.'

'You can keep it.'

Nevertheless, he was good enough to indicate that if I wished to proceed, then that was my problem and he would be delighted to wait for me. I made a half-hearted attempt at the sultanas, then slithered back down to rejoin him. Had I tried to go any further, and had Bert been true to his word, he would be waiting still.

We decided to turn our minds to the descent. Hitherto my energy had been sustained by thoughts of the summit. Now, with that out of reach, I slumped into a heap of exhaustion. It was only our last rations – some dried figs – which revived me sufficiently to concentrate on what was a complicated descent: back across the summit ridge, down the melting snows of the N face to our second bivouac, then a slanting abseil over the hard ice pitch, and so on. By mid afternoon we were back on top of the ice tower, where we saw Henry and Maggie, just below us, completing the last pitch.

Not only had they been badly affected by altitude, but it now emerged that there had been serious misunderstanding about the rations which they had expected us to leave them. What little we had left had been contaminated by paraffin. My conversation with Henry soon erupted into a highly charged high-volume high-altitude slanging match. The silence of the Himalaya was shattered. Bert blinked, and immediately turned his attention to finding an abseil anchor. The row was soon over and the four of us, happy to be reunited, abseiled down to the eyrie tent in the gathering gloom of nightfall.

Next day we descended thousands of feet to Base Camp, where we nourished our empty frames with rice rissoles, chupatties and custard. Over dinner we discussed our future. There was time for another ascent. Having, as it were, fizzled out so close to the top of M8, I felt a strong desire to try something else. From the ridge of M8, we had a good view of another peak which rose from higher up the Mulkila glacier. This I identified as M6: at 6280m, its N face supported ridges that had been compared by Fritz Kolb to that of the Liskamm in the Pennine Alps. Here was a handsome objective.

First we had to obtain further provisions from Darcha. Bert and Henry drew the short straws and descended to the village. They were clearly very fit and returned two days later with sumptuous supplies, having met a delightful Lahuli whom we called Ram (despite tuition, we were unable to pronounce his real name). Ram had loaded their rucksacks groaning with provisions on to his

two horses, and that night he joined us for dinner, bringing mutton sausages, liver, and quantities of chang. It was a feast. What was more, Ram agreed to accompany us to Advanced Base Camp with his horses. The back-breaking load-carrying of the earlier days was over.

M6 lies at the head of the Mulkila glacier. We intended to climb its E ridge, a long, wavy ice-crest, heavily corniced and with two rock steps. A steep ice-slope guards entry on to the ridge. We estimated that by bivouacking at the foot of the ice-slope, we would be able to climb to the summit and descend in a day. To reach the bivouac involved a long glacier approach which included an ice-fall. We started from Advanced Base Camp at 7am. Bert and I reached the foot of the ice-fall at 3pm and decided to bivouac. That morning, Maggie had felt that she had not recovered enough of her energy to join us, and so had reluctantly decided to remain at Advanced Base. Henry, however, was brimming with energy, and had decided to come with us.

Our one problem now, as we erected the tent at the foot of the ice-fall, was Henry: he was nowhere to be seen. At first I thought he must just have been taking it steadily. But by 5pm I began to doubt whether he would arrive at all. What worried us was why: had he decided to turn back, had he had an accident, or what? We thought the chances of an accident were extremely remote since the terrain we had covered was a dry ice glacier, partly crevassed but not at all steep.

I felt uneasy, however, and so, while Bert brewed, I descended to search the crevassed section of our route. No sign of Henry. Back at the bivouac, we debated what to do. We were faced with two alternatives: one was to descend to Advanced Base Camp so as to see with our own eyes that Henry was safe, in which event the time would be such that we would not be able to return to M6. The other was simply to make an assumption, based on the various bits of evidence at our disposal, that Henry was safe, and to proceed on our climb. In stating now that we chose the latter option, I attempt no justification of our decision. What it shows is the extraordinary hold that the mountains had over our minds.

The next day, Bert and I climbed up the ice-fall and established a tent at the foot of the E ridge. We watched a glorious sunset spread over the distant peaks. Nearer at hand, the stove roared and the pot bubbled. Such was my optimism that I imagined us, the following morning, soloing up the ice-slope to the col in an hour or so.

The reality, at 5.30am the next morning, was rather different. First, there was an awkward bergschrund to cross, which made me grasp for the security of the rope. Above, the ice-slopes steepened to 60 degrees, and it took seven pitches, and two and a half hours, to reach the col at the foot of the ridge. The slope at the other side of the col was overhung by vast cornices, and we had to traverse to our right in order to reach the crest of the ridge at some rock gendarmes.

It was 8am. I looked down the N side, still in shadow, and marvelled at the isolation of our position: the only sign of life, our tent, now appeared as a tiny raft in an ocean of white. We turned our attention to the ridge. At first, we tiptoed along a narrow ice crest. We then encountered a series of double

cornices and our hitherto rapid progress became a crawl. Higher up, the ridge steepened into rock steps which provided easy climbing on sound, dry rock. Then we saw a thin white triangle above us, which looked like the summit. At 3pm we broke through a small cornice to reach the top.

The air was quite still and there was room to sit down and relax over some chocolate and dried figs. It was at least half an hour before we summoned the discipline and energy to tear ourselves away. There were exactly three and a half hours of daylight left. We reached the col as the last glimmer faded from the snows. Meanwhile, a firework display was in progress on the southern horizon as tall monsoon clouds struggled to surmount the Rohtang Pass. We clipped headtorches to our helmets to illuminate our progress as we abseiled down the ice-slope. I was tired, and fumbled with the clip. Suddenly, the torch sprung off the helmet and I watched, fascinated, as it cartwheeled hundreds of metres down the slope, soon to disappear into the mouth of the bergschrund. I was almost too exhausted to mind, although the absence of the torch made our descent considerably more difficult. In due course, we arrived at the upper lip of the 'schrund. As I jumped across the yawning gap I detected – far below me – a lonely beam of light.

By 10pm we were back at the tent, swallowing soup and reliving some of the great moments of the day. When sleep came, the body was utterly still but the mind was still up on the ridge, dancing across its cornices and crests and rocks.

When morning came, we raced back to Advanced Base Camp. Now that the climb was over, I felt more than a stab of anxiety about Henry. It was with the greatest relief that, four hours later, we found a note at camp from Henry and Maggie informing us that they had set off to climb M10.

The next day we watched two small dots move towards us across the glacier. We prepared pints of tea for our friends' return from what had been a successful and enjoyable ascent. We immediately enquired what had befallen Henry on the approach to M6. He had stopped for a long rest, and lost sight of us. Then, unable to see our footsteps on the dry ice of the glacier, he had followed a tributary of the main glacier which turned out to be a dead end. Understandably angry at our conduct in failing to wait for him, he had then descended to Base Camp.

That night we built a fire and, over steaming bowls of rice and lentils, we debated into the early hours the rights and wrongs of our course of action. Despite mistakes and misunderstandings, however, we agreed that we had all immensely enjoyed the past three weeks. We had all taken part in two ascents, one unsuccessful and the other successful. We had been lucky enough to have excellent weather, and we had found the Mulkila range to contain endless challenges and opportunities. As we sat around and watched the last embers die, I felt that each of us was as committed to our sport now as we had been in the initial enthusiasm of our arrival in Lahul.