Jaonli: A Ridge Too Far

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(*Plates* 28, 29)

Starting to draw the old-age pension is such a landmark that I half expected everything to change. Of course it didn't. The great thing about the ageing process is that the old enthusiasms endure but clearly the pensioner mountaineer has trickier problems than, say, a grower of roses. I wondered about the Himalaya.

A problem shared is a problem halved, so I wrote to Joss Lynam, only a year my junior and the doyen of Irish climbing. One more throw of the dice, I suggested to him, one last big mountain? How about it? To my great joy, Joss readily agreed and we were in business. He even had a ready-made objective to suggest.

In 1947 Joss Lynam was serving in the Indian Army – and there is no room here to explain why a citizen of the Republic of Ireland was doing that! Anyway, from his camp in north India he could see the Garhwal peaks and planned to climb one particularly attractive mountain: Jaonli (6632m). However, before he could make his attempt he was demobilized. My invitation therefore gave him the chance to fulfil a 40-year-old dream.

In the intervening years Jaonli had been climbed from the west; these climbs included the first British ascent in 1988, by Chuck Evans. But the east side via the Khatling glacier was untried and virtually unknown. This would provide a superb challenge.

Following the military axiom that 'time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted', I nipped out to India in the autumn of 1988, trekked for five days towards our mountain and was able to get a clear view of the east side from a distance of some eight kilometres. The impressive E ridge ran down towards me, a mixture of snow and rock; it looked steep and would certainly be no push-over. The S ridge looked an easier proposition but it was an awful long way away.

Imprinted on the snow of a glacier I saw a trail of footprints which I cannot explain. It was a glacier leading from nowhere to nowhere, and I could not work out why a yeti, animal or man would want to pass that way. Anyway, if they turned out to be yetis and I met them the following year, I resolved to comfort them with the reassurance that Bonington, the Yeti Hunter, was no more than a benign English myth!

Back home, we started to plan our Anglo-Irish expedition with the assistance of liberal potions of Jamieson's Irish whiskey. In a moment of inspiration I approached Saga, the travel company for the over-sixties. After all, I reasoned, we were certainly going to travel and we were over 60! Saga, or more

precisely *Saga Magazine*, took pity and most generously agreed to sponsor us. In fact they spoilt us outrageously – a most enjoyable sensation.

Joss and I each recruited a relative 'youngster' to strengthen the team: experienced mountaineers in their mid-fifties. I approached Alan Blackshaw (55), a past editor of this journal. I hope he has forgiven my gaffe in introducing him on one occasion as 'the author of the thickest book on mountaineering technique'! From Ireland came Paddy O'Leary (54), director of the Tiglin Adventure Centre in the Wicklow Hills. In fact all four of us had previous expedition experience. When a non-mountaineering Dublin bookseller, Don Roberts, inexplicably volunteered for the thankless job of Base Camp manager, we immediately foisted on him the chore of procuring our high-altitude rations, a job we had all studiously avoided. Don instantly bombarded us with interminable sheets of computerized food lists which effectively silenced us, until we found ourselves living on a diet consisting of chocolate and toffee bars, when we became more vocal. But by then it was too late and I came home 10kg lighter.

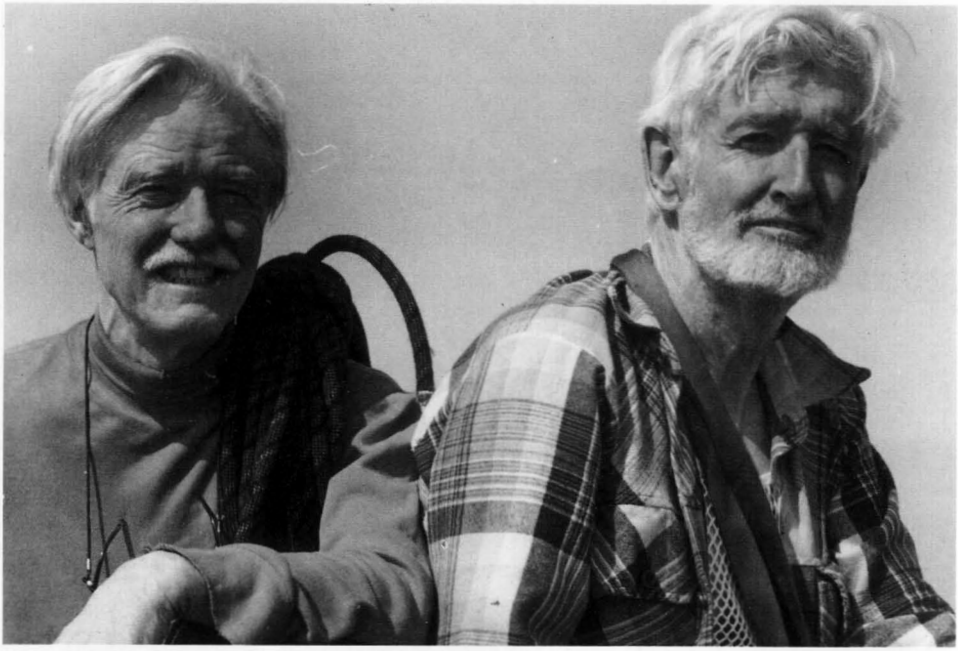
In Delhi we were joined by our Indian liaison officer, Ravichandra, and a Ladakhi-Tibetan cook-porter, Chewang Thundup, a delightful man and a master chapatti maker. Assisted by 25 local porters, we trekked for five days up the lovely and unspoilt valley of the Bhilanganga and reached our Base Camp at about 4100m on 19 May 1989. Winter seemed to be lingering and it was a snowy camp.

We had timed our arrival for mid-May to benefit from the theoretical calm before the onset of the monsoon. The theory didn't work. Almost every day we had snow by noon. Do we blame the Greenhouse Effect?

The 600m Khatling icefall barred our approach to Jaonli. We tried to puzzle a way through its maze of crevasses, but by mid-morning the snow of the crevasse bridges was turning to slush. The route was a write-off. I made the prophetic remark: 'Getting to this mountain is going to be more hassle than climbing it.'

After a good deal of searching we found a route which bypassed the icefall on the land side, but our further progress was blocked by a rock-step which, from a distance, I rashly predicted to be climbable. Ravichandra almost instantly proved me wrong by trying to climb it and falling off. He started up a steep crack which led to a wet and slippery overhang, then pulled up on to a sloping ledge and, teetering on the edge of balance, reached above the overhang for a vital and urgent hold. Unluckily it was loose and broke. He shot backwards into the air and plummeted down. Luckily he had placed a chock in a crack just below the overhang – the first one he had ever used! When he had fallen about three metres the rope twanged tight, the chock held and he was spared a very nasty fall all the way down to the glacier. No one else fancied a try.

To get past the rock-step we had to make an unwelcome climb over a 400m hill and down the other side. We then crossed the glacier with little difficulty. Alan and I made a reconnaissance of the E ridge and were particularly deterred by a beetling, snow-spattered rock-band half-way up. Time was now running short, so we decided on a quick attempt on the snowy S ridge. A further day's climb landed us at the foot of a steep 600m snow-face leading up to the



28. L Mike Banks (aged 66) and R Joss Lynam (aged 65). (p 46)



29. Members of the Saga Magazine Himalayan Expedition 1989 to Jaonli (6632m). L to R: Alan Blackshaw, C P Ravichandra, Mike Banks, Don Roberts, Chewang Thundup, Karan, Joss Lynam, Paddy O'Leary. (p 46)

crest of the ridge. It seemed to us that, if we could get a camp established on the ridge, the route to the summit would be open.

First Alan, Paddy and I made a depot of three days' food and some equipment in a notch on the ridge. The climb was steep and took us well above 5800m. Despite our ages we coped with the altitude with little difficulty. From here we enjoyed a clear view of the SW fork of the Khatling glacier, the Samgli Bamak. It was ringed with attractive peaks, unnamed and unclimbed, of just under 6000m.

Next day we climbed the snow slope again, with heavier rucksacks, and attained the crest of the ridge higher up. It was too narrow for a campsite, so we descended some way and set about clearing away the surface snow and hacking a tent platform in the ice beneath. As we were walloping away with our ice-axes, tendrils of cloud crept up the mountainside, snow began to fall and there was a sharper edge to the wind. A blizzard developed and we found ourselves in a dour race against time.

As we were unfolding the tent one of the poles rattled down the mountainside. Eventually we pitched the misshapen tent on its cramped platform. Unbeknown to us, we were going to have to survive the next four nights in the wildly flapping, semi-collapsed tent.

Our situation was precarious. A snow slide from above could sweep us 600m down the face into the bergschrund. We therefore hammered in ice pitons from which we led safety ropes into the tent which we kept connected to our safety harness day and night. We even dangled on a safety rope over the drop when we went to the toilet. To make matters worse, Alan developed dysentery, poor chap. To facilitate his frequent and urgent exits, he slept next to the door and was therefore lumbered with the cooking.

The storm went on for three days and by the time the weather cleared our food was expended, Despite this, Paddy and I decided to grasp our only opportunity of snatching the summit. It was a forlorn bid but, if we had not tried, we would for ever have reproached ourselves. Alan was far too weakened by his dysentery to join us. He had not uttered a word of complaint about all the cooking and had supported us stoically throughout. We had found the most unselfish of companions.

Deep new snow lay everywhere and the avalanche danger was obvious. We roped up and climbed cautiously, making painfully slow progress. We passed a rock outcrop, clawed our way up a steep wall of mixed snow and rock and edged along a crinkly, corniced ridge. Paddy, who had emerged as the expedition strong man, ground to a halt. He turned back to me and called: 'I'm coming back.' We had attained a height of just under 6000m. With the heat of the day building up and the avalanche hazard increasing, it was a wise decision. Even so, it was a poignant moment when all our dreams of the last year turned to ashes.

By the time we got back to the tent the snow was too dangerous to descend any further. We continued down next dawn, in a fair state of anxiety. Hoping that lightning does not strike twice, we followed old avalanche tracks where a swathe of new snow had been stripped off. It was the most nerve-racking three hours of the whole expedition.

Back at base good news awaited us. Joss Lynam and Ravichandra had climbed a mixed snow and rock peak of 5450m. Starting at dawn on 10 June, they had followed a series of steep snow gullies to the upper snow-fields. At 10.30 they trod the summit snow and, as a gesture of gratitude to our sponsors, called the peak 'Saga Parbat'. It was a sterling effort by the 65-year-old Joss, who had recently undergone triple heart bypass surgery!

There was now no time left for a second summit attempt, so it all ended with one failure and one consolation prize. At least we could comfort ourselves with the thought that our failure on Jaonli could be blamed on the weather rather than the burden of age. There was one less obvious bonus: it had been one of the most harmonious expeditions I have ever been on. Perhaps in our mature years we are more tolerant and less hell-bent on proving something.