Orina

The Aldenham School 1989 Expedition to the Chinese Pamir

DAVID MACGREGOR

(Plates 30–35)

He took the [road] to the mountains.
He ran through the Vale of Cashmere,
He ran through the rhododendrons
Till he came to the land of Pamir.
And there in a precipice valley . . .

Robert Frost: *The Bearer of Evil Tidings*

Camels can be oddly attractive creatures, evoking happy memories of childhood trips to the zoo. If you were standing, however, as I was in July 1989, on the sandy fringes of the Karakol lakes, lying at 3600m on the Karakoram Highway between Kongur (7719m) and Muztagh Ata (7546m), and were watching these ill-tempered, spitting, braying, smelly brutes being loaded by their Kirghiz masters and if, as I did two days later, you were watching these same animals and drivers, now about 24km up the Konsiver river valley, dump our 1743kg of food and equipment on the rocky ground before deserting without a backward look or word of regret – having been hired for 20 days more than they stayed – then your good opinion might have been severely tested. The fickleness of camel and Kirghiz, indeed, forced a radical change in our expedition plans, much, as it turned out, for the better: 14 days later, almost everyone in our party had achieved the first ascent of one or two 5500m peaks, as well as having completed a quite extensive exploration of this obscure corner in China's 'Wild West'.

That hot afternoon's crisis brought the inevitable disruption to two years of hard, yet relatively smooth-flowing preparations. A characteristically crisp remark by colleague Sally Westmacott – subsequently our official 'adviser' – along the lines of 'I've always wanted to look at the Kashgar area', led to the initial research. It was followed by my wife's more calculated observation, 'Well, if anyone can get us to Xinjiang, you can', intoned in a way which suggested wholehearted scepticism about the likelihood of getting much further than Ben Nevis: not exactly an encouragement, but at least a stimulus. The Alpine Club's China Symposium at Plas y Brenin in November 1987 confirmed for me that this expedition could really happen. Ten young stalwarts, aged then between 16 and 18, who had demonstrated their mountaineering abilities on school expeditions, as well as their capacity for getting on with each other, were

chosen; anxious parents were persuaded that the venture was genuinely 'educational' and not wholly lunatic; Chris Bonington kindly agreed to be our Patron; by February 1988 we were ready to start training.

July 1988 saw us prussiking up the seracs of the Glacier Blanc in the Dauphiné, under the baleful gaze of John ('Some day, mountain will win') Brailsford. Technical exercises were followed by a brisk ascent of the Pic du Glacier d'Arsine (3383m) and a mass excursion up the straightforward snow-trail to the Dôme de Neige des Ecrins, in order to prove that everyone could breathe above 4000m. Success brought its own problems. John's programme opened up a fundamental split in the party: do we learn through further technical exercises, or simply go for more summits? The party divided: one group followed John and Nick Parks (soon to become Climbing Leader, and instrumental to our final successes) up the Coolidge couloir to Pointe Puiseux (3946m), the highest point of Mont Pelvoux; the others benefited from the vast experience of Mike Westmacott in reaching the Col du Sélé (3278m) from the Sélé glacier, learning a good deal about how to 'read' a glacier on the way, before tackling the rotting arête of the Boeufs Rouges N ridge. A similar division surfaced in China over mealtime discussions at Advance Base Camp: were we there primarily to get to summits, or should we be concentrating more on exploration and field-work? Fortunately the split never became acrimonious.

Our Dauphiné experiences, useful as they were, had to be reinforced: some typically shin-barking, mud-enveloped night-navigation exercises on Kinder Scout, and crevasse-rescue practice off Froggatt Edge therefore followed in November 1988. This weekend came a month after signing the Protocol with the Chinese Mountaineering Association in Beijing – an educative experience in itself through our subsequent discovery that, instead of paying for a couple of returns on a 747 and a hotel room, we could have negotiated directly with the Xinjiang Mountaineering Association using only letters and telex! On our second major training expedition in February 1989 we were decanted from the Euston–Fort William sleeper at Tulloch, on the northern fringes of Rannoch Moor, for a test of morale and the integrity of our equipment under the appropriate atrocities of Scottish winter conditions. The intention was successfully realized in that a particularly spiteful hurricane blew our tents apart and thereby proved their uselessness for the Pamir! This obliged us in May to carry out a profitable tent-replacing sponsored 24-hour traverse of the Welsh 'Munros'. Other, more informal training events took place: four boggy days across the Cairngorms; a painful introduction to Koflach 'Ultras' on Ben Alder; a brisk winter round of the Snowdon Horseshoe; an exhilarating traverse of The Saddle in Glen Shiel; extensive use of Harrow School's climbing wall, and so on. By the time we were ready to leave for Islamabad we had a fair idea of each other's mental and physical strengths and weaknesses, and could be said to be generally technically proficient, except for river-crossings . . .

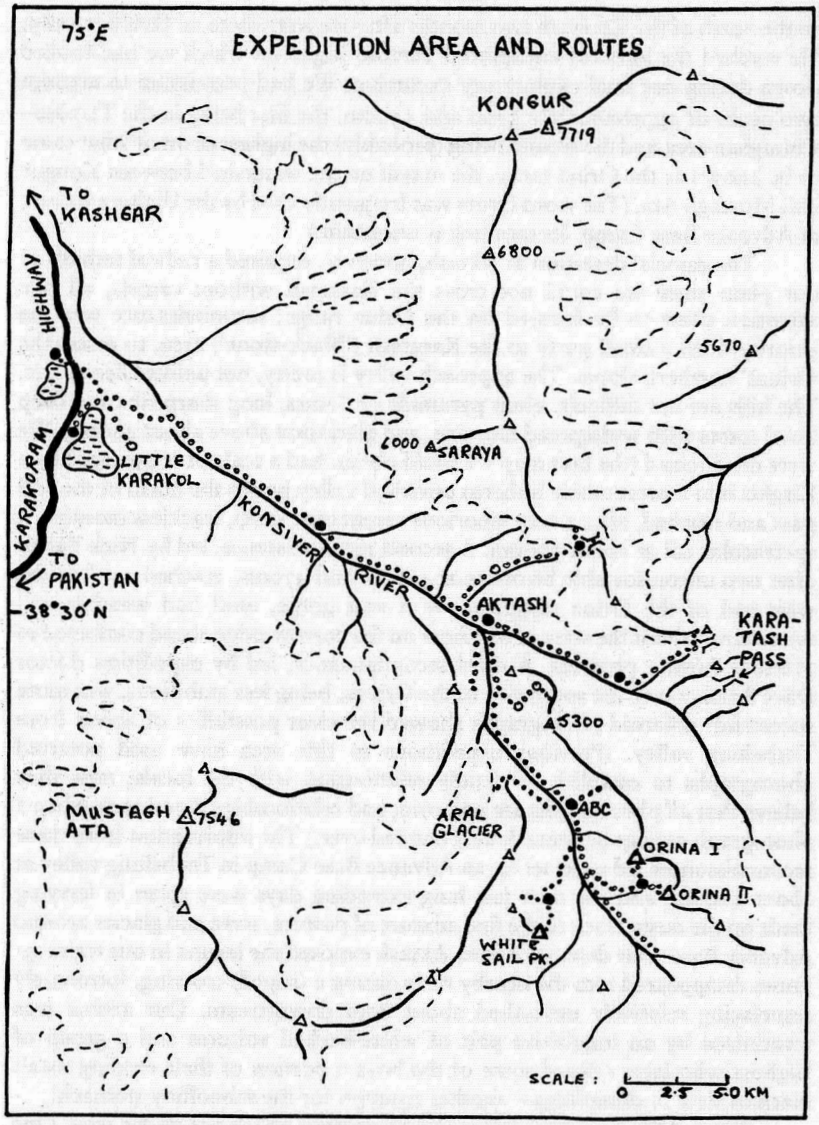
On 13 July the Advance Party, having completed the joyous business of customs' clearance for our 49 barrels in 45° heat, via nine dingy government offices and as many power-cuts, met the Main Party at Islamabad airport, with the smell of blood heavy on the streets: it was the time of the 'Id Festival', an occasion for ritual slaughter, great dinners and mighty gatherings of buzzards

above the wayside carcasses. In true monsoon conditions we left Rawalpindi for the Karakoram Highway – a part of the expedition which in the intensity of the experience surprised us all.

First, one crosses lush, rolling hills before reaching the Indus gorges at Thakot Bridge. From the coach window, the angle between observer and river – a waterway of mythological proportions, even 900 miles from its mouth – approached the apparently vertical, down 1000 feet of vertiginous and unstable-looking cliff. Our PTDC guide, the nonchalant Anwar, informed me as we ground on towards Gilgit that the section ahead was 'rather bad'; I noted the driver's loyalty to the notion of 'Insh'Allah' rather than any belief in the causal relationship between good driving and long life. On the return journey, Anwar's words took on a greater irony: from Gilgit, the driver and his gearbox had enjoyed a relationship normally reserved for sumo-wrestlers; below Chilas, the gearbox gave up. As it lay on the roadside, like an old and much-despised armadillo, a passing cattle-truck was stopped and politely commandeered. The bemused Pathan drivers, their own perception of the gorge's dangers blurred by the inhalation of exotic substances, carried us over pot-hole and under overhang for eight bone-shaking hours, much of it in the dark – an odyssey of terror which will live with me for ever. On the Chinese side of the Kunjerab pass, however, the Highway descends from 4703m across a desert plateau, passing the Karakol lakes at about 3600m before tumbling through the Gez Defile to the oases of Kashgaria at only about 1200m – a much more agreeable experience on countryside distinctly less susceptible to upheavals in the Earth's crust.

Two final stages of our preparations remained. At Gulmit, north of Hunza, we organized a test match against a local XI, with the Indus for a boundary, and the typical Karakoram ant-hill spikiness of Tupopdan (6125m) rising behind long-off. A day's walking above the mulberry bushes and apricot trees in Karimabad was followed by a trot up the true right of the Passu glacier at about 3000m; we had a fine view of the 'penitents' before the rain came. Three days later, on the purple and brown dustbowl surrounding the Karakol lakes, we tested our radios, went on overnight bivouac in the desert, and tried a square search, all to get our lungs working – as well as to avoid the increasingly uninhibited prying of the Kirghiz. Our camel-train was then assembled, and we struck off up and across the Konsiver – thigh-deep but safely 'braided' – *en route* for Aktash.

The plan was to cross the Karatash pass (*c*5000m), about 10km east of Aktash, and explore the country around the Chimghan Jilgha (valley) which drains the unvisited glaciers to the east of Kongur. This pass was first crossed by a Westerner – Ney Elias – in 1885, although it is just possible that Alexander Gardiner may have done so some time in the late 1820s. Sir Aurel Stein reached it from the Karakol side in 1900. Tilman crossed it ('an easy pass for animals') on his way to meet Shipton for their 1947 attempt on Muztagh Ata. Some members of the SMC 1988 Shiwakte expedition made the first return crossing, and in the same year a single Frenchman crossed it with Zhang Xongwen, our Liaison Officer, *en route* for Chat before returning to Karakol via the old trade route and Torbelung valley. Trekking specialist David Hamilton crossed a path


75°E
EXPEDITION AREA AND ROUTES
KONGUR
7719
TO KASHGAR
HIGHWAY
KARAKORAM
6800
5670
6000
SARAYA
LITTLE KARAKOL
KONSIVER
RIVER
TO PAKISTAN
38°30'N
AKTASH
KARA-TASH PASS
5300
MUSTAGH ATA
7546
ARAL GLACIER
ABC
ORINA I
ORINA II
WHITE SAIL PK.
SCALE :
0 2.5 5.0 KM

to the north of the Karatash two months after we were there, in October 1989. He reached the hitherto unexplored Terzöse Jilgha on which we had looked down during our final exploratory excursion. We had permission to attempt two peaks of approximately 5700 and 5500m, the first being in the Terzöse–Chimghan area and the second being (probably) the highest point of what came to be known as the Orina range, the massif on the watershed between Kongur and Muztagh Ata. (The word Orina was frequently used by the Uighurs we met at Advance Base Camp. Its meaning is uncertain.)

The camels' desertion at Aktash, however, required a radical rethink of our plan: since we could not cross the Karatash without camels, all our attention came to be focused on the Orina range; reconnaissance was the priority. I led a small party to the Karatash ('Black-stone') area, to assess the Orinas' northern slopes. The approach valley is pretty, not unlike Glen Affric. The hills are not difficult: blunt pyramids or domes, long sharp ribs and deep bowl coires with widespread moraine, and glaciation above about 4600m. We were misdirected (the best map we could obtain had a scale of 1:250,000) by a Kirghiz into a presumably hitherto unvisited valley just to the north of the real pass and reached, after a very laborious ascent over steep, trackless moraine, a spectacular col at about 5000m. A second reconnaissance, led by Nick Parks, after two uncomfortable bivouacs at 4200m and 4700m, reached a col on the west end of the Orina range, above a vast gorge, until bad weather and uncertainty about the state of the snow on the narrow ridge ahead combined to preclude further progress. A third reconnaissance, led by expedition doctor Dave Arathoon to the south side of the Orinas, being less ambitious, was more successful: polaroid photographs showed the clear possibility of access from Torbelung valley. (Previous expeditions to this area have used polaroid photographs to establish a friendly relationship with the locals; now they believe that *all* photographs are polaroid, and relationships deteriorate when a photograph cannot be immediately handed over.) The information from these reconnaissances led us to set up an Advance Base Camp in Torbelung valley at about 4200m, and the next few lung-extending days were spent in ferrying loads up the dusty track to the fine mixture of pasture, scree and glacier around Advance Base. Our departure from Aktash exposed the lacuna in our training: James disappeared into the nearby river during a (roped) crossing, fortunately resurfacing relatively unscathed about 80m downstream. Our arrival was scrutinized by an inquisitive pair of white-backed vultures and a group of Uighurs who later offered some of the boys a portion of their evening meal: marmot stew in dumplings – another triumph for the schoolboy stomach!

From ABC a second, lesser reconnaissance phase got under way. One party reached the head of a coire at about 4800m above ABC and reported poor snow and loose rock – no summit route there. Another party continued up Torbelung valley and ascended the valley wall to a delightful area of perfect turf subsequently nicknamed Twickenham. Looking across the valley to no fewer than seven tributary valleys, a route was discerned up to the glacier within the cirque containing the apparently highest peaks in the range.

More digesting of information led to a plan for the summits. A climbing party reached 'Glacier Camp' at about 4800m on 6 August, and next day they

followed a typical mountaineering route for this area: a laborious clamber over moraine on to a steepening mixed rock and snow ridge, leading to a long, heavily-corniced summit snow ridge at an easier angle. This party of 12 reached the summit of Orina 1 (5450m) after four hours from Glacier Camp, on a route which merited a PD-grade. After a long, elegant descent of the shapely W ridge most of the party carried on down to ABC. The summit panorama, in perhaps uncharacteristically clear weather, embraced the 3000m E face of Kongur and much of the Karakoram. During this climb my wife and I had remained with one invalid at ABC, retaining radio contact with the climbers through the day. We also had time to make a botanical excursion up Torbelung valley for about 10km and were able to see the steep-sided Chichilik pass which leads contortedly to the unexciting town of Tashkurghan ('Stone Fort') between Karakol and the Kunjerab. Lammergeyers of vast wingspan surveyed us as they lounged on their air-currents.

On 8 August our turn came, and an ankle-straining few hours brought us to Glacier Camp, pitched on the very tongue at a height similar to Mont Blanc. Even more satisfying was our perfect degree of acclimatization. In the night, our Phreedome 3000s were put to the test in a gusty gale which blew about 10cm of fresh snow off the rather stubby glacier at the base of the Orina amphitheatre. Some suspicious cracking and booming underfoot next day (the gale had abated about 4am) did not impede quick progress up Orina II, opposite Orina I and nicknamed Moby Dick: a beautiful snow peak with a long, undulating and, as we soon discovered, sensationally exposed summit ridge. Deep cornices hung on the right, while a suspiciously convex lee slope descended steeply on the left for about 600m to the glacier. Swirling mist prevented a view comparable to that from Orina I, but Kongur and the western outliers of the Kun Lun Shan figured prominently for a while, as did the magnificent W face of Chakragil (6727m). The rare and wonderful excitement of making a first ascent – a respectable 5360m – was to some degree compromised when one member of the party discoursed at length on how quiet it was!

Appetites were now thoroughly whetted: the gourmets celebrated on the Glorious Twelfth with vegetable soup, Baxter's delicious Grouse in Port Wine with new potatoes, and Scottish raspberries; a passing Kazakh donated some pungent goat's cheese to go with the oatcakes. The climbers, more importantly, returned to 'Twickenham' for a few days. At the foot of the hanging glaciers on the beautiful White Sail Peak (5436m) they practised a variety of skills and extended their understanding of avalanche awareness before making the ascent of several small 5000m tops, above as delightful an alpine playground as one could hope to find.

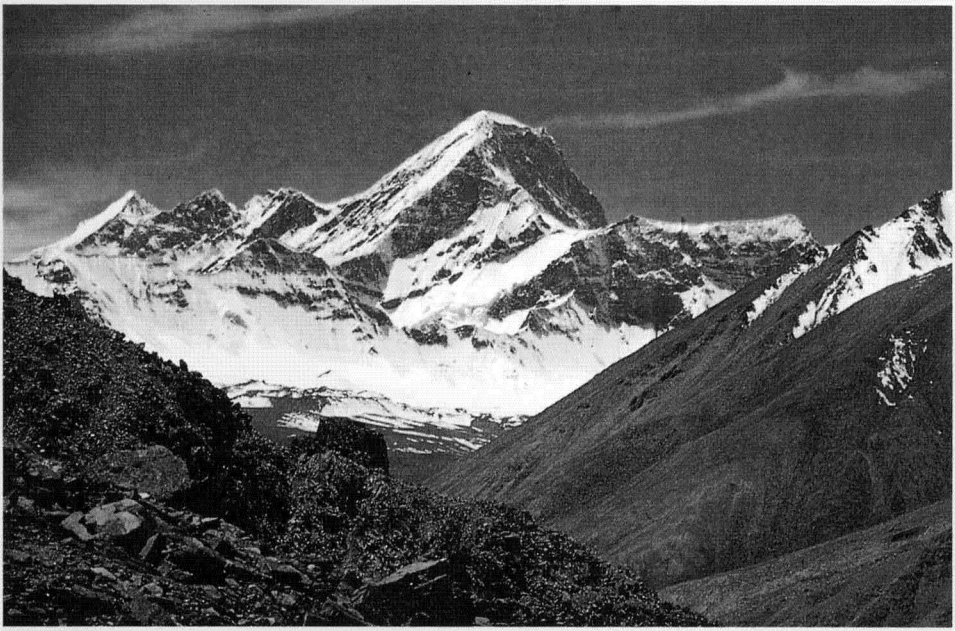
Two camp stools, 50m of old rope and a vacuum flask gained us the hire of two Uighur donkeys for the day; on a snowy morning, we struck ABC and regretfully descended to Aktash to be met by Meng and Gu (the Beijing University postgraduates who had joined the expedition to help with the geology field-work; they eventually gave us a poignant insight into the horrors of the Tienanmen Square events). This highly likeable pair had had the foresight to roast a whole sheep before our arrival, to celebrate our summit successes. Over this dinner, accompanied by shredded potato, onion and peppers, and

followed by luscious water-melons, some members felt that a bit of tourism was now called for. For this group, a hefty one-day walk-out to Karakol ensued; they then hitch-hiked down to Kashgar in the back of a horse-truck with two sheep, a goat and five Hungarians. Sightseeing in this turbulent city was much enjoyed, but the quantity of polyester among the bales of 'silk' in the fabled Sunday bazaar testified to the way in which industrialization has encroached on the Uighurs' otherwise horse-drawn society.

The others, however – the self-styled 'Cream Team' – had decided that they were ready for more exploration. They ascended the gorge next to Aktash called Uzun Jilgha on Sir Aurel Stein's map, bivouacked at a cottage-sized boulder at about 4700m, then continued to a camp on a col astride the main South Kongur ridge, at about 5200m. The view of the little-known E face of Kongur was particularly striking in the sunrise, as was the first sight of the unexplored area around the Terzöse Jilgha, leading the eye to the glittering spires of the Shiwakte range (*c*6000m). A number of minor tops above this col were reached, and a route connecting the Terzöse and Konsiver valleys (referred to by Sir Clarmont Skrine in *Chinese Central Asia*, p275) was ascertained before further exploration was cut short at 5am on the second morning by a slab avalanche coming off the party's tracks.

Despite the camels' late arrival for the return trip from Aktash to Karakol, both the Uzun Jilgha and Kashgar parties were successfully reunited at the CMA bothy on Little Karakol. A party of Homeric dimensions followed before we set out on our disrupted journey to Rawalpindi. Some enterprising members even managed to take in a 24-hour trip to Peshawar, near the mouth of the Khyber Pass, in order to make purchases at Pakistan's finest carpet bazaars, while I languished in an Islamabad customs shed. British Airways then brought us home.

Maurice Herzog's observation, *Il y a d'autres Annapurna dans la vie des hommes*, has always seemed rather metaphysical for my tastes, but reflections on the expedition should consider its consequences. The effect on the boys has been profound: they have gained a deeply memorable experience to build on, and the way they have extended their knowledge and understanding of their world and its people would gladden any teacher's heart. I have been equally moved by the disinterested help given by so many members of the Alpine Club in encouraging these young people to go out and face challenges of this sort. But the proof of the successful outcome of this expedition, if any were needed, is that plans are already under way for an attempt in 1992 on a 6500m range in a particularly remote corner of north-west Tibet.



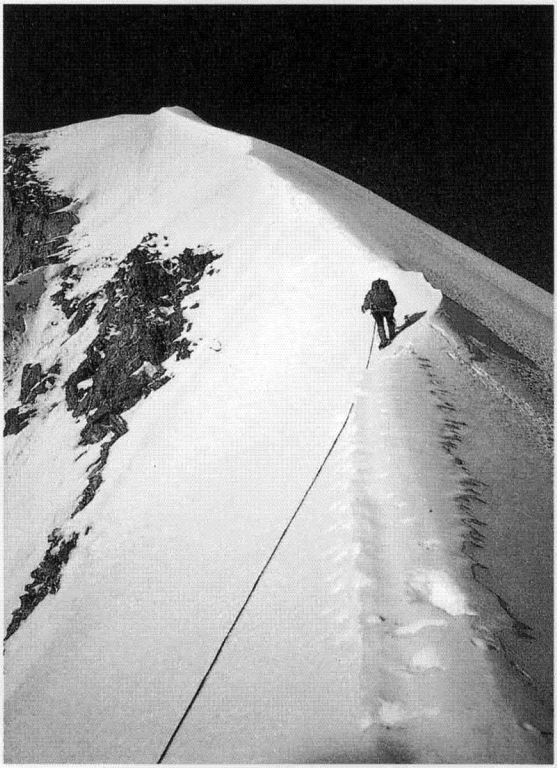
30. Wedge Peak, c6410m, an eastern outlier of Muztagh Ata. (Matthew Cobham) (p 80)

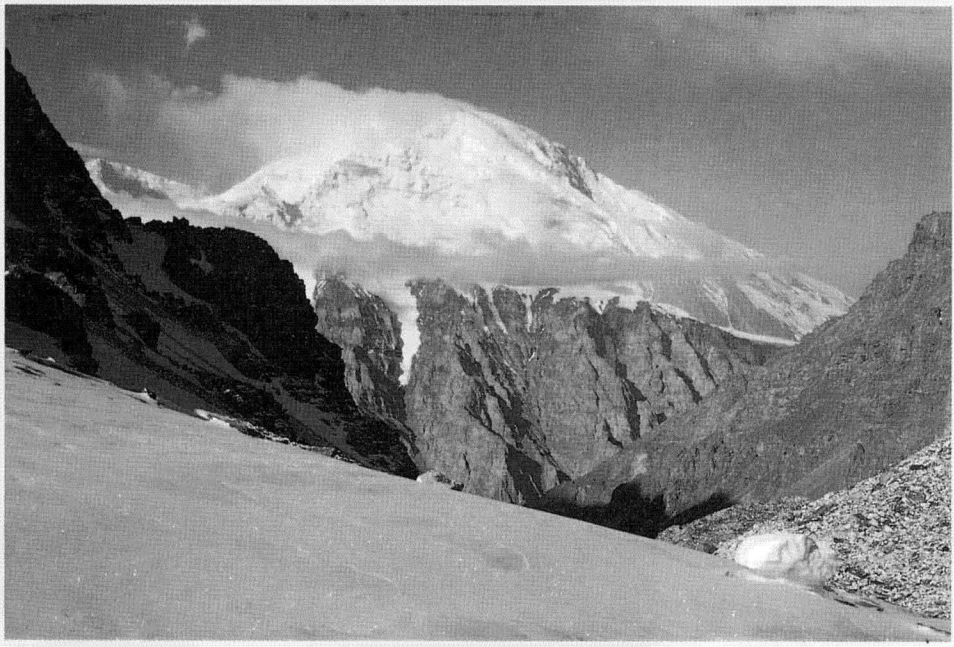


31. Orina I, 5450m, from Orina II. The ascent followed the spine left of centre. (Matthew Cobham) (p 80)

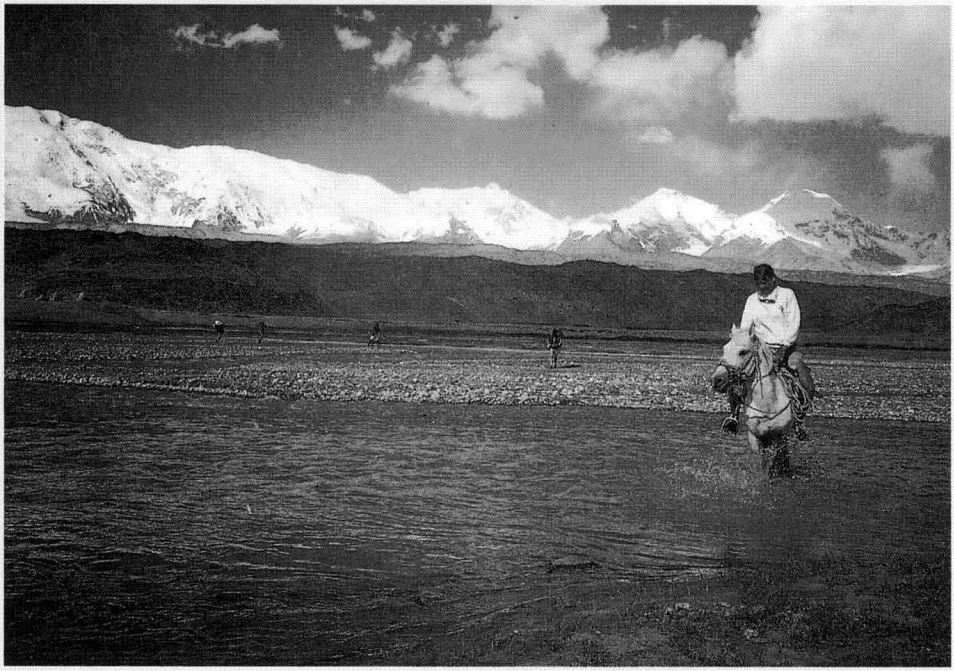
32. *White Sail Peak, 5436m, from Torbelung valley. The ascent was via the snow ridge on the left.* (Stephen Edwards) (p 80)

33. *Nick Parks approaching the summit of White Sail Peak.* (David Arathoon) (p 80)





34. The N face of Muztagh Ata, 7546m, from the Uzun Jilgha valley. (Stephen Edwards) (p 80)



35. Crossing the Konsiver river between Aktash and Karakol. (David MacGregor) (p 80)