Descending Peak Lenin

DAVID HOPKINS

(Plates 36–39)

David Hopkins and Marloes Hopkins de Groot made a high camp at 6500m on the NW ridge of Peak Lenin (7134m) on 22 July 1986. Their ascent to this point had been achieved alpine-style in very poor weather. In the face of worsening conditions and lack of food and fuel, they descended 2000m to the Lenin glacier on 24 July. Theirs was the highest point reached by any of the international climbing teams, involving some 60 climbers, who were attending one of the two International Mountaineering Camps arranged annually by the USSR Sports Committee in the Pamir range. This is the story of their descent . . .

It was a peculiar dream. I was trapped in a dungeon; it was claustrophobic; it kept moving; and I was suffocating. There were a few people milling around but I only recognized Kafka. I asked him why I was there – he did not know. I thought that I should know, but I could not remember; if only I could remember, then everything would be all right. I gradually woke up; it was almost dawn. We spoke a few words, and one of us looked out of the tent; it was still snowing, and the horizon remained invisible. 'Let's go down,' she said. 'OK,' I replied, and we dozed a little more. When we reawoke, we confirmed the decision and made the radio call.

We were trapped in a small tent at 6500m on the Radelzny ridge of Peak Lenin. It was the third day, and we were beginning to feel the strain. Although the storm had been with us for the past week, the weather had not been so bad as to preclude our moving slowly upwards to Camp IV. We arrived in a gathering storm which eventually stabilized but effectively prohibited any further progress. In good weather the summit would have been a mere three to four hours away, but in these conditions it could have been on the other side of the world. We had virtually run out of food; our alpine-style tactics limited the amount we could carry. We had been sharing a packet of freeze-dried food containing 500 calories between us for the past few days. Consequently we were beginning to lose strength and, although we felt strong enough to descend that day, we wondered how long that feeling would last.

I emerged into the blast of wind, orientated myself to the stinging opaque greyness of our world, and made my way across to the Russian tents. We had been befriended during our ascent by six Russian guides who were also attempting to climb Lenin. They represented the cream of Russian mountain-

eers and knew the mountain well. We were all that remained of the 60 or so climbers who, with their eyes fixed on the summit, had arrived at the Achik-Tash Base Camp some weeks before. I told them of our decision to descend. They asked if we would make it, and I shrugged equivocally. Two of them volunteered to descend to Camp III with us.

We froze our fingers and faces while breaking camp and then moved tentatively towards the buttress edge. Our friends, whose decision to accompany us was based more on Marloes' charm than concern for our safety or their need to exercise, plunged down into the gloom. We followed on a short rope, balancing our loads against the spiteful wind.

As we descended the buttress we marvelled at the contrast with our ascent some days before when, in brief but glorious sunshine, we enjoyed our most euphoric day on the mountain. We had been moving well, felt strong, revelled in the climbing, and knew that we had the summit in our grasp. We were magnificent, we told each other, and so we were – but that was nothing compared with the descent.

When we reached the col, our friends took us to their colleague's igloo in the lee of an enormous cornice. They gave us our only food of the day (smoked salmon and toast), toasted Marloes' courage and tenderly left us. Their congratulations on our attempt were flattering but irrelevant as we continued downwards.

We struggled up towards Radelzny Peak. Fancy having to climb over a 6200m summit on our descent! This proved to be one of the most testing experiences of my mountaineering career. There were no maps or landmarks and it was a complete whiteout. I thought we could always retreat to Camp III by following our footsteps. When we were totally committed, however, Marloes shouted that my steps were obliterated after 10 metres, and because of the storm she could not even see me some 15 metres ahead.

Our joy at finding the slope which eventually led to Camp II was heightened by meeting the two Bavarian brothers whose bold exploits on the Lipkin ridge of Lenin, although eventually unsuccessful because of the storm, had held us in awe. We hugged each other and, with profound respect, wished each other well. A silly mistake prevented them from going much higher, but our relative successes convinced us that, in climbing as well as in many other things, commitment is everything.

The international contingent at Camp II plied us with hot drinks, took our photographs and encouraged us to continue down. It was here, I remembered, that, with the arrival of the storm, I made my last diary entry: 'I cannot let myself think or write too much. I prefer to be in suspended animation until it is all over – one way or the other.'

It was now almost over. Tired as we were, we thought we could descend the remaining and comparatively easy 1000 metres in a couple of hours. But, as we pressed on in the encroaching darkness, our composure was badly shaken. We came across massive avalanche debris. The avalanche had been triggered a few days before. It was colossal, easily the most extensive I had experienced during a half-life spent in the mountains. We traversed it for at least a kilometre. It was after nine that evening when we staggered, in the dark, on to the glacier. I

radioed our friends at Camp II and told them we were safely down.

The resident doctor and Master of Sport at Camp I gave us fruit and vodka. We were very wet, cold, and beyond exhaustion. On finding the tent we piled wet clothes into a corner, and crawled into damp sleeping bags. As we tried to sleep, we held each other close and, as our coughs racked our bodies, their sound penetrated the storm outside.

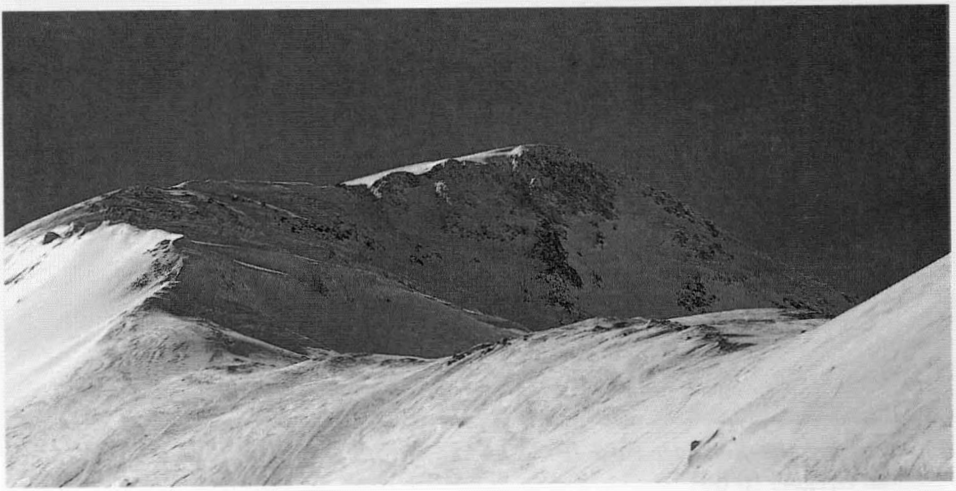


36. *Marloes Hopkins de Groot approaching the 'Pass of the Travellers'.* (David Hopkins) (p 87)



37. *David Hopkins on the Radelzny ridge: the buttress above the Radelzny-Lenin col.* (M H de Groot) (p 87)

38. *The summit of Peak Lenin.* (David Hopkins) (p 87)





39. Peak Lenin: ascent from Camp 1 to Camp 2. (David Hopkins) (p 87)

40. Southern Alps: looking N from Elie de Beaumont. (John Harding) (p 98)

