Looking Back

JOHN HUNT

The Red Sentinel

This article first appeared in an anthology, published in the United States, to celebrate Jan Morris's 70th birthday. The collection was aimed primarily at a non-mountaineering readership.

Titles are sometimes misleading. This is not another tale from behind the erstwhile Iron Curtain. The Red Sentinel I have in mind is a sheer, 200ft-high tower of red granite, barring access to a tenuous rib of rocks which trace a line for the eye of the aspiring climber, straight up the tremendous eastern precipice of Mont Blanc.

To give you an idea of the magnitude of the task, let me explain that the Italian face of the mountain rises 5000ft from the glaciers at its base, and is set at an angle of 60 degrees. The face is deeply grooved with ice-clad gullies which act as funnels for avalanches falling from the impending ice cliffs above. The Italian face is no place to loiter upon. Yet some halting place there must be, and here the Sentinel can help as well as hinder the climber. At the foot of the great pillar there are a few small ledges where you can rest in safety and, if need be, spend the night. This haven was used by the two British alpinists who, in 1927, first forced a way up that route in the centre of the face.

Like most other climbers, I had long desired to reach the summit of the highest mountain in Western Europe, but Mont Blanc commands notoriously bad weather. On two occasions – once with my wife and later on skis, with a French Airforce officer as my companion – I had been obliged to turn back from the Grands Mulets refuge above Chamonix. In 1955, when our party of four came up from Courmayeur in Italy to attempt the Red Sentinel route, two of us – Wilfrid Noyce and myself – were making our fourth attempt on this side of the mountain. On two of these sorties we had started from a little six-man cabin, wired to rocks at 11,500ft on the Col de la Fourche. This time, we were determined to establish a foothold on the face itself; we would bivouac beneath the protective Sentinel. We would start 1000ft higher than the cabin; the saving of height and distance would shorten the odds in any race with the weather.

Noyce and I, with David Cox and Michael Ward, set out from Courmayeur on a Sunday afternoon, uncomfortably burdened for so great an undertaking, but reflecting that part of our loads of rope, crampons, windproofs and warm clothing, we should be wearing next day. Food and fuel would be reduced by cooking and eating. We chose to ignore any omen implicit in the date: 13th August.

We stopped at the Torino Hut, now served, alas, by a rope railway from the valley, to enjoy a square meal which would reinforce our meagre, lightweight rations. The place was seething with Italian skiers and sightseers on their Sunday outings and it was not long before we were exposed to the familiar horrors of excited public attention. Autograph hunters importuned us at every mouthful; amateur photographers recorded the repast from all angles. In the circumstances it was difficult to enjoy the excellent food. Bitter experience after Everest had hardened me to this, but such hysteria matches ill the normal *ambiance* of a mountain refuge. Murmuring against the steepness of the bill, we departed hastily towards the stern but saner task ahead.

Two hours later we were sitting in the Cabane de la Fourche, the whole great flank of Mont Blanc displayed in profile through the missing door of the refuge. We rested, brewed tea and invoked the lenience of the Furies, our eyes tracing those famed routes up the precipice, whose shadows were just now adding emphasis to its height and sheer lines. We were waiting for the sun to slip behind the summit crest, leaving the chill shadows to harden the snow and make it safe to cross to the bivouac site beneath the Red Sentinel. As we sat thus, peace and hope in our hearts, we looked down to the upper Brenva glacier 400ft directly below our perch. There, dug snugly into the snow, was a sight reminiscent of the Himalaya but oddly unfamiliar in the Alps: a little group of tents. This we knew to be a camp of six Bavarian climbers, for we had met two of them on the previous, abortive attempt. They had already been there a fortnight and intended to remain for some ten days longer. Later, chatting with them over a welcome cup (or jam jar, to be more precise) of Ovo-Malt, we agreed that in these days of téléfériques and overcrowded huts, theirs was an example which might well be emulated by other mountaineers.

It was 6pm when we had crossed the level glacier and climbed a short ice slope to reach the knife-edge of snow on the Col Moore, at the lowest point on the Brenva Ridge. This is the true point of departure for the great climbs up the so-called Brenva Face of the Italian side of the mountain, contained between this ridge and the next, greater one, the Arête de Peuterey. To put it mildly, the view of this face is impressive at close range; I was struck afresh by the failure of mind and eye to appreciate contrasting scales of altitude between the biggest mountains and the lesser ones. For this East Face of Mont Blanc is but little higher and steeper than the West Face of Lhotse, rising to the South Col of Everest. Yet the Lhotse Face, dwarfed by the first and fourth highest mountains in the world set above it, seemed a trifling thing beside the problem now confronting us.

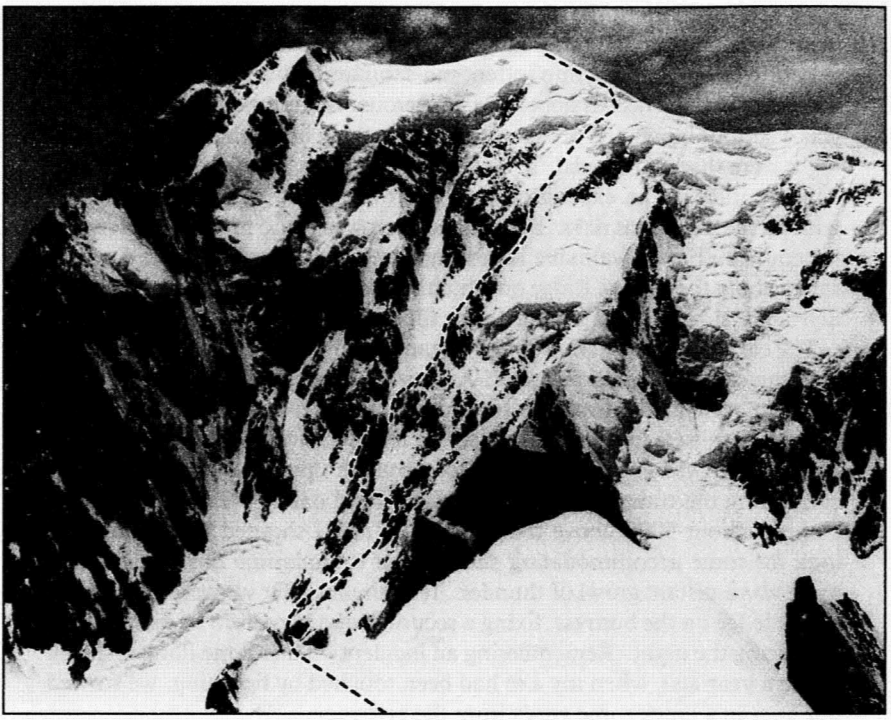
It was here that we had our first setback. From the Col starts the long, steep traverse across a series of minor ridges and intervening couloirs, to reach the centre of the face and climb thence to the Sentinel. But a condition of reaching it, in time or at all, is that the snow should have hardened enough for safety after many hours' exposure to the sun. Although the shadows

were now deep upon the slopes, the air was warm; we noted that clouds were forming over the mountain. We had not gone 100 yards across the very tilted slope, sinking into rotten, sun-saturated snow at every step, before we recognised the task as hopelessly dangerous. We returned to the Col. This was a serious blow; the prospects of bivouacking beneath the Sentinel that night were sharply reduced; if we failed to get there, the timing of the whole climb, critical on an expedition as big as this, would be greatly increased, with all the attendant risks. But the situation was by no means hopeless, for we could still make valuable height by climbing upwards for some way in safety along the Brenva Ridge on which we stood. So up we went, balancing delicately along its sharp blade to the foot of a rock buttress 200ft above.

The clouds thickened now and it began to snow: it seemed as though our persistence was to be ill-rewarded. At short intervals, three avalanches broke from the ice cliffs beneath the summit and thundered down the gullies on our left – those same gullies which we should have crossed to reach the Sentinel. It was comfort, if cold, to speculate upon the consequences of continuing the traverse. By 8pm it was getting dark. We must now have climbed about 500ft above the Col Moore and I shouted up to Noyce to look for some accommodating shelf. As if to underline the need to halt, there was a distant growl of thunder. Ten minutes later we were gathered at a rock ledge on the buttress, fixing a security rope to prevent us from rolling off during the night. Remembering an incident on this same flank of Mont Blanc a year ago, when my axe had been touched by lightning, we stowed our axes in a crack some yards from the bivouac.

Huddled in our down jackets in the mist-filled dark, with two sleeping-bags shared to wrap around our legs, we settled down to wait through the night. The little petrol cooker, balanced on a slab of rock between Cox's knees, was glowing and spluttering comfortingly as our soup heated. We drank it gratefully, chewed some ham, dried fruit and chocolate, shivered, dozed and wondered. Would it clear? Would it freeze? On these two questions rested all our hopes; no other cares in the whole world – domestic, political or strategic – mattered so much just then.

For a long time it did neither. We knew that the moon stood at three-quarters full on the wane, and shining on that slope we should by midnight have been able to start climbing. But the blanket of mist hugged us close; at 2am it actually started to snow once more. In my mind was hopeless resignation. In 1950, 1954 and twice this year I had tried for this venture, and soon the years would place it beyond my strength ... quite suddenly something caught my eye. Something was lightening the woolly mantle of fog. A jagged line of ridge, far above, was etched black even against the dark night sky. Stars were blinking in the gaps in the clouds. Below, in the inky well of the valley, other lights were winking up at us from Courmayeur,asleep 6000ft beneath us. The vision vanished; but at 3am the curtain was again lifted, this time for good. It became bitingly cold. So much for my lack of faith.



The Brenva Face of Mont Blanc showing the route named 'La Sentinelle Rouge'. The Sentinel is the large, lozenge-shaped mass of rock behind which the route passes. The gendarme itself sits at the top of this buttress. The Côte Tortueuse is the long ribbon of rocks above the gendarme. The Col Moore is bottom left of the picture. (*Georges Tairraz of Chamoniz*)

We stirred ourselves to action, for there was little time to waste. The cooker purred, while we reluctantly rolled up our sleeping-bags and duvets; at 3.40 we were off, stiff and clumsy, climbing to the top of the rock buttress in clear moonlight. Over the way, perhaps a half-mile distant, the Sentinel challenged us to balance across those icy gullies, now rock hard, sweeping remorselessly downwards. We strapped on crampons, wobbly in our steps on a narrow thread of snow crest, roped up in pairs, and moved off. The sky was already paling with the new day.

It took us over an hour to reach the Sentinel. We did not stop, for we had to pass quickly beyond it and cross the wide central couloir which falls, awesomely steep, in the direct line from the summit, and attain the safety of a narrow, twisting rib of rock in its middle; all this before the sun should touch the impending ice cliffs above. To delay would mean running the gauntlet of ice avalanches, whose forerunners had ground and polished grooves, some as deep as six feet, in the tilted snow ...

Hours afterwards, the sun now hot upon our backs, we were still crawling slowly, weary with long tension, directly upwards now, sometimes on snow softening dangerously, sometimes on hard blue ice where the snow had already peeled away. Above, over the crest of the summit ridge seemingly so close above us, clouds were racing, borne on the west wind; we knew that soon, and long before we reached the top, the weather would have closed in again. But we knew, too, that this time we would win our race, just make it, and gain the easy slopes above the cliff before the storm broke. Below, as I waited for Noyce to chip and kick upwards in the lead, I looked beneath my legs straight onto the heads of Cox and Ward, following up our tiny staircase; beyond and beneath them, nothing, no excrescence of rock or bulge of ice, just a clean, smooth sweep of snow for over 4000ft to the crevasses of the distant glacier.

As I stood and waited to move up, balanced between snow and sky, secured to that immense flank precisely by two crampon points and the pick of my axe, the nylon thread attaching me to Noyce was no more and no less than a symbol of our comradeship and mutual trust; for if either faltered, both must fall together. And the thought came to me, as so often in the past: only here, on the borderline between life and eternity, is my escape. Here lies security from false values. This is fulfilment. This is why men climb.