DICK ISHERWOOD

A Year Off Work

I hope and believe that one day it [Everest] will be climbed. Then when no higher 'altitude record' is possible, mountaineers can turn to the true enjoyment of the Himalaya, most likely to be found at about 20,000 feet or less.

Tom Longstaff, *This My Voyage*



124. Dorje Lakpa, Jugal Himal, from the south, showing our two camps on the west ridge. (*Dick Isherwood*)

In mid 1979, after 10 years of varied work in several countries of the Far East, I found myself at age 35, still single, unburdened by employment or other responsibilities, with a bit of money in the bank, and a desire to climb a few more Himalayan peaks before I got too old. Geoff Cohen had a sabbatical year coming up at Edinburgh University. Sabbaticals are meant for mind-enlarging study at other academic institutions but Geoff had just discovered that there was in fact no rule to that effect, and reckoned he could expand his mind in the mountains as well as anywhere.

When we met in Manchester I had a brand new copy of John Cleare's *Collins Guide to Mountains*, autographed by the man himself, with whom I had just led a Baltoro glacier trek. The cover had a photo which had got my attention. Dorje Lakpa is in the Jugal Himal, almost directly north of Kathmandu, and is one of the most striking mountains you see from

the plane window as you fly in. It was reportedly unclimbed, apparently not too hard, and at 6966m about the right height for a small light party. Tilman had been almost all the way around it in 1950, but he was there in the monsoon and never even saw it. The approach from the south went via Panch Pokhari, a pilgrimage site and occasional trekking destination, so we had a cover story in case anyone wanted to see our permit. With good luck we could cross the col Tilman had used and come home down the Langtang valley. It seemed the perfect objective for a discreet trip. Dave Broadhead and Ann McIntyre were taking a year off from teaching in Scotland so we had a team.

We met in the Kathmandu Guest House in early October, bought our food locally, including an enormous round cheese, arranged 15 porters through Mike Cheney, and caught the bus to Chautara, east of the Kathmandu valley and at the end of the road. The monsoon ended obligingly a day after we set out. The porters took us, over several days, to a group of summer grazing shelters at around 4500m, close to the moraines of the glacier descending from Dorje Lakpa, and right below where John had taken his cover photo. Ann guarded the camp while Dave, Geoff and I looked for a way up the mountain.

We first explored up the main glacier but it was a mess of moraines and melting ice. The ablation valley on the left was much better, but we had to leave it where a side glacier came in, and descend some steep moraine. On the other side we re-ascended to a hollow with a pair of tridents by a pool – the holy men even got up here. We now had access to the branch glacier leading to the west ridge of Dorje Lakpa.

We found a way through an area of crevasses and made a camp right below the ridge at around 6000m. After a bit of acclimatisation time we started up the ridge that was initially easy snow. We found an ancient fixed rope on terrain we were wandering up solo. It steepened and narrowed, and we made a dump on a high point, beyond which things got a bit more serious. A couple of days later we came back with all the gear and camped in a spectacular spot. There was barely enough room for the tent, and only then because we had piled rocks under one corner. We were sleeping three in a two-man tent – it was a bit cramped, but very cosy if you got the middle berth.

The ridge now became corniced and rather steep on its flanks. We roped up for a while, then went back to soloing on the southern side, on excellent névé. There was an area of bare green ice which came rather close to the cornice at one point, but the corridor between was wide enough, and we found ourselves on a flat snow platform, below a large bergschrund, at just the right time to stop for the night. It was a perfect campsite as it got all the evening sun. Next morning we were off in the dark, leaving the tent, and Geoff led a steepish ice pitch above the 'schrund. I led us into some rather rickety snow – three dimensional lattices of icicles, very close to the cornice at times – and we reached a basin of deep soft snow, up which we ploughed slowly to the summit.

A layer of cloud had come in during the day, and we were at the very top of it. The sun was on us and we could look over the cloud layer, but it didn't clear enough for a view. As it was after 4pm we couldn't wait longer. We got back to the tent in the very last light. An extremely slow descent over the next two days took us back to the base camp.

Geoff and I climbed Bauddha (6151m) with some exciting soloing near the top. We got separated on a fluted snow face and chose separate flutes. As mine steepened I wished I had a rope, but too late. Each little flute was hard ice on one side and loose powder on the other, and the layer of hard stuff was disturbingly thin. We reunited for one steep pitch to the summit and came down more conventionally.

We had done what we'd come for and the food was running out – even the cheese. We packed everything up and set out, with loads of 30kg or so, for the obvious col west of Bauddha. Just below the col we had to cross a gully in the snow down which some stones were falling. The plan was to choose a quiet moment, drop into the bed of the gully, and run across and up the other side. It wasn't very far but at 5800m with big packs it was easier to plan than to execute. Three of us made it safely but Ann got a blow on her upper arm from a brick-sized rock. We thought she might have broken a bone, but it was just badly bruised. The rest of us took her load and we continued over the col and down into the upper Langtang above Langsisa. We waded the Langtang Khola and finished our last scraps of food before descending to Kyangjin Gompa the next morning. The route we had taken has become widely known as Tilman's Col, but if you look at the original edition of *Nepal Himalaya* it's clear that Tilman crossed a different col, further east and right at the foot of the west ridge of Dorje Lakpa. He even has a photo of the tridents by the pool. The way we went was probably easier.

It was mid November and the weather was fine. Geoff and I thought we just had time to get another trip in before the winter snow came. We bought three weeks' food and set out with three of Mike Cheney's finest to carry it all, bound for the Rolwaling valley. We had some wonderful views of Gaurishankar from the approach, and some exciting moments on the trail – in those days the main footpath to Beding used three bendy tree branches to negotiate a rock wall above the river. The boys got us up to a base camp above Nar and overlooking the Rolwaling lake, took their pay and scampered off. There were a few thin high clouds around.

We'd decided to try a peak called Tsoboje (6689m) which is right above the north side of the lake, by now very frozen. We had no idea whether it had been climbed but it had an attractive ridge dropping down from its eastern end toward the lake. We were camped in a tiny hollow right below this ridge and thought we were well set. Unfortunately it then snowed.

It snowed for two days and we dug the tent out more than once. Then it cleared, the sun came out, and – guess what next – it all started to thaw. I emerged in the morning sun, looked up and saw a huge icicle, dripping water, right over the tent. Time to move, fast. We dragged everything



125. Dave Broadhead at the first ridge camp on Dorje Lakpa. (*Dick Isherwood*)

down the slope and found a safer place.

Off up the hill, through various rock bands, to another campsite on an area of scree before the real ridge. This was very steep on our side but we found a neat way out to the sharp ridge crest and round on the other side things looked a bit better. Geoff led one of the more impressive pitches in my memory, up a steep rock groove with very little protection, in double boots and with a 15kg sack. We ended the day in a reasonably good position, in a little saddle on the ridge with maybe 500m to go to the top.

We'd brought the inner tent as a bivvi bag, and work was needed to make a ledge big enough for it. Unfortunately the snow we stood on rapidly gave way to ice as we dug. The ice was mixed with rock and I broke the pick of my axe. We dug on, but by the time we had a platform big enough to use there was light in the eastern sky. We got in anyway, and slept, after a fashion, still roped up.

It may have been the short night, but in the morning I was not feeling at all brave. There were lenticular clouds coming from the north-west, which is where the snow comes from in Nepal in the winter. Geoff wanted to finish the job but I am ashamed to say that I chickened out. He was very good about it but we missed a great opportunity, as we were almost certainly above all the difficulties and the weather in fact did nothing much for days.

We descended and camped above the lake. It was a calm night but suddenly the tent was rocked by a series of wind gusts. Then it all calmed down again and we slept well. When we got out in the morning we saw that a huge icefall had come down, within a hundred metres of the tent, and made a mighty hole in the ice on the lake, which was a couple of feet thick. There but for fortune… We attempted to cross the Tesi Lapcha, with

rather large loads, but it snowed some more. Winter had come. We gave up and went to India, where we bought traditional single speed bicycles and toured Rajasthan – but that is another story.

Eventually, after a short trip to the Valley of Flowers, it was time to do some real climbing in the Karakoram. In early July we travelled by train from Delhi to Lahore, enduring a wait of four hours at the Wagha border while the Indian customs checked the baggage of travellers *leaving* India. In Rawalpindi we met Des Rubens who had just flown from the UK.

As usual the flights to Skardu, on little propeller planes which had to fly around Nanga Parbat, were chaotic. We kept showing up at the airport very early and got on a plane on only our third day. We had managed to hit the start of Ramadan, but it proved to be a bonus – double breakfasts for us on the plane as the Moslems weren't eating. Having no permits of any sort, we kept a low profile and got out of town as fast as possible in a rented jeep to Khapalu, and the roadhead below Hushe.

We had various loose ideas for climbing. One was an attempt on Masherbrum by the original southern route, but when we saw it from the Hushe valley we thought it was a bit big for us.

It seemed a better idea to go up the Charakusa Glacier, to the east. With five porters we headed up the valley, past flowering roses and small cypress trees – this bit of the Karakoram is quite well vegetated. The trail led to summer grazing settlements to which people were just beginning to bring their cattle. Beyond, big lateral moraines flanked the glacier and granite walls appeared out of the mist – the weather was not great. We paid off the porters, with the usual difficulties, and were glad to be alone in great scenery. The whole valley was one of the most beautiful I have ever seen. We camped among yellow poppies and looked at the enormous and very steep north face of K6. This was obviously too much for us, though it was fun sketching theoretical lines up it. More realistic was a peak on the north side, 21,700 feet on our map, and apparently close to K7, which we had difficulty identifying.

A side glacier led up to a face on Pt 21,700 which didn't look too steep, at least from well below, so we decided to give it a try. We put a camp in a snow basin at around 5000m and plotted a route up a series of snowfields and rock bands. It didn't look hard at all, but we got a series of shocks. The granite here is very monolithic, with few cracks, and the rock steps were deceptively steep and uncompromising. We found ourselves repeatedly climbing runnels of ice between big bald chunks of rock. Geoff did some impressive leads on the first day that took us to a tiny snow ledge, just big enough for the Vango tent.

We had gained about 700m and decided to leave the tent here, as there was unlikely to be a place for it any higher up. Des was feeling the altitude, having just come out from the UK, and this may be why he left his sleeping bag in the tent the next morning. Not a great idea.

On the second day we took ages to climb the next (fourth) rock band, first up a very steep chimney full of ice, then a traverse across some steep



126. K7 West, showing the high point reached. (*Dick Isherwood*)

ice with bits of rock sticking out of it – almost a hand traverse. We got out onto a steep snowfield which led to a notch in the west ridge of the mountain, but by now Des was very slow – falling asleep on the stances – and the weather was not looking good at all. Geoff found a ledge on the rocky ridge crest just big enough for three to sit on. The view down to the Kaberi glacier on the other side was enough to give me nightmares. We organised ourselves in the twilight and were lucky to drop no more than Des's mug. We put him in the middle, since he had no sleeping bag, and huddled together. The boots got passed to me at one end and I hung them all by their laces from a big chock placed in a crack – at least I thought I did. We had a surprisingly warm night, though it was all a bit cramped. In the morning I carefully passed the boots back and discovered that I'd failed to clip in one of Des's – it had spent the night merely wedged between two others. I didn't dare confess to this and sat in silence as Geoff said speculatively:

'I wonder what would happen if you dropped your boots from here?'

Des replied:

'I doubt if you'd get down.'

I spent the rest of the climb wondering just what we would have done.

Above here it was steep – like overhanging – for the next 20m or so. Geoff tried manfully to climb it directly, then we decided to traverse around the steep bit. We went down and across for a couple of rope lengths, then back up left in some icy cracks and onto a rock ramp. Seven hours of effort saw



127. Des Rubens on Drifika, Karakoram. (*Dick Isherwood*)

us 30m directly above our bivouac. It might have been quicker just to peg up the overhang, even at this height.

At this point Des very nobly decided to opt out. He was still going very slowly, so he abseiled down directly back to the bivvi ledge. We let him take one of the two sleeping bags and the stove and pot. Geoff and I continued, initially up straightforward snow, but then onto rather hard green ice with a cover of loose powder. By the time it eased off again, below a sérac wall, it was sunset – the clearest evening we'd had so far – and I had trouble dividing my attention between the climbing and the tremendous views – north to K2 and the other Baltoro peaks, east to the Golden and Silver Thrones, and west to the huge mass of Masherbrum.

We found a snow hollow under the séracs and shared the one sleeping

bag and one Karrimat. Supper without a stove didn't take long. Above us was a huge hanging disc of ice which might have wiped us out if it had decided to fall, but we were too tired to care. Amazingly I slept fairly well.

We knew we were close to the top, but in the morning it was snowing and we could see very little. I led a pitch up the ridge above and was surprised when the mountain hit me in the face – the visibility was so poor I couldn't see that it had suddenly steepened. Time to reconsider. It was extremely frustrating, as through gaps in the cloud I glimpsed the edge of a big snowfield, crevassed but basically easy, that seemed to lead to the summit. However with no stove or food, and only one sleeping bag we couldn't wait it out, so we went down.

We picked up Des and descended very slowly to the tent, doing some impressive abseils over the rock bands. Our uneaten shrimp curry from three days ago tasted great, even with bits of ice in it. The descent the next day should have been efficient but somehow wasn't. The rope got stuck after one big steep abseil and Geoff did some desperate rock climbing back up a very steep groove to free it. On the next abseil it happened again and Geoff was again the hero – both Des and I were far too shattered for this. Somehow I had lost both front points off one of my crampons by now. We shambled down across the bergschrund and into the lower gully, which we got out of just ahead of a large avalanche.

We had been five days on this climb and we were all very tired. I had slightly numb and tingling fingers and toes, and lay in the grass feeling as if I was in a shell. My body didn't want to do anything but my mind was very active, thinking of all the things I could do in the future provided I continued to survive experiences like this.

We went down to our dump for more food, taking two days over what should have been a four hour round trip, then considered our options. We really had to get to the top of something. The only peak of respectable height in this valley system which looked any easier than the one we had just failed on was marked on our map as 21,150 feet. It was a sharp pyramid, looking a bit like the Obergabelhorn, and was up the southern branch of the glacier, to the south-west of K6. After a couple more days' rest we set out, working through a messy icefall, and taking two days to a camp at around 5700m below the north-west ridge of the peak. We found we were following a trail of Japanese debris – someone had been here before. They had left the label from a quart of Suntory whisky, but no sign of the contents. From this camp we could look back at Pt 21,700 and realise just how close we had been to the top.

Next morning was fine and clear, and we soon reached a col on the west ridge, from which we had a magnificent view of a large part of the Karakoram. Good snow continued to within 300m of the top, then it got steep. We climbed a rock chimney, initially trying to ignore bits of Japanese fixed rope but eventually using them. Des led a very scary pitch across steep rock slabs with a thin and fragile ice cover, and we reached a narrow and very corniced summit ridge. It was almost horizontal but of course



128. Geoff Cohen on K7 West. (*Dick Isherwood*)

the real summit was at the far end. Sections of fixed rope peeked out of the snow and we clipped our rope into them, having no idea what they were attached to.

Somehow it was 5pm when we got to the top. We had probably the best long distance mountain view I have ever had – most of the Pakistan Karakoram, dominated by K2, Chogolisa and Masherbrum, a huge extent of the Indian Karakoram, and some very steep granite pillars closer to hand, south of K6. We could see Nanga Parbat to the west and distant peaks in Sinkiang beyond K2. We took a few photos and wondered what to do as we were clearly not going to get down to our camp. I must have been very tired as I wanted to dig a deep snow hole right there on the summit ridge, but I was rightly overruled. We began abseiling down, rather diagonally. I was last off the ridge and I eyeballed the piece of line looped around a granite spike sticking out of the snow, willing both of them not to fail. Crossing the rock slabs was very skittery, especially with front points on only one crampon.

Then it got dark. We had very limited headtorch batteries and Geoff proposed that only the first man down should use his – the other two could just follow the rope down in the dark. This worked for a bit, then all the torches failed when we were still on steep ground. We cut three modest thrones in the ice, belayed to bits of rock and an ice peg, and made the best of it. We had very little bivouac gear and it was too exposed to take off your boots or anything, so we all had a miserable night. We had only one more serious diagonal abseil to do in the morning, for which Geoff again pulled out amazing reserves of energy. By 11am we were asleep in the tent.

This peak now goes by the name of Drifika (6447m). We probably did the second ascent and by now it has had several more. Pt 21,700, now known as K7 West (6858m), had its first ascent by Steve House and party, taking a different route, only in 2007.

It was a very memorable year. I can hardly believe it was 30 years ago. We may have gone a bit over 20,000 feet, but I think we were doing very much what Tom Longstaff had in mind.



129. Geoff Cohen on the south-east ridge of Tsoboje, Rolwaling, Nepal. (*Dick Isherwood*)