STEWART HAWKINS

Pamirs Pilgrimage

This article describes a journey to Central Asia to pay homage to Wilfrid Noyce (1917-62), one of the outstanding mountaineers of his age, a man who inspired in many a love of the mountains and a desire for mountain exploration.

Wilfrid Noyce, after many first ascents in Britain and the Alps in the 1930s and 40s, made a major contribution to the successful 1953 Everest expedition led by John Hunt. He was the one who broke through to the South Col with one Sherpa after several attempts by others, thus preparing the way for the summit assault. In 1962 he accompanied Hunt on the joint British-Soviet expedition to the Pamirs; there, while descending Pik Garmo (6601m), Wilfrid and the young Scot Robin Smith fell to their deaths. As it was too dangerous to bring the bodies down they were buried in a crevasse on the mountain. By the time the British group returned to base the Russians had already built a memorial cairn to Wilfrid and Robin overlooking the Garmo glacier, not far from their first base camp.

Wilfrid Noyce taught me French at school and introduced me to the mountains. He was also my senior scoutmaster. Having travelled in Central Asia I had the desire to visit the Garmo memorial partly as an adventure but also to express my debt to Wilfrid. After discussions with Graeme Nicol and Ian McNaught-Davis, members of the 1962 expedition, I established where the memorial was. The Garmo valley is one of the more remote and inaccessible of the western Pamirs and several miles from the nearest road or habitation. I discussed the idea with Rosemary Ballard, Wilfrid's widow, and with Jeremy, their younger son, who agreed to go with me.

Through the website **Pamirs.org** I made contact with various people who had worked and trekked in Tajikistan, but there was only one Tajik organisation responded to my emails requesting assistance. This was Pamir Adventure, run by Surat Toimastov, a biologist by training and an expert photographer. He knew the area and had tried several times to get into the Garmo valley.

I had planned to go in June 2008 but detailed research indicated the Kyrgyz Ob river, which flows across the entrance to the Garmo valley, might be impassable at this time as the glacier melt would be rising. The memorial is some 12-13 miles up the valley from the Kyrgyz Ob. Jeremy and I decided to delay the trip until the glacier melt would be at its lowest and before the snows arrived. The window was the last two weeks in September and first week in October. We decided to go in 2009.

However, I felt that a reconnaissance might be useful and continued



202. At the memorial to Wilfrid Noyce and Robin Smith, Garmo Valley, Pamirs, 27 September 2009. Left to right: Barry Cooper, Peter Norton, Jeremy Noyce, Stewart Hawkins. *(Hawkins Coll.)*

with the original idea: in June 2008, with Surat, his son and a local guide, I went over the route as far as the Kyrgyz Ob. Surat has a number of local contacts and our requirements for horses and assistance for 2009 were discussed with the Tajik farmers.

In 2009 the party was completed with another pupil of Wilfrid, Peter Norton, and a friend of Jeremy, Barry Cooper. Wilfrid, with Peter and me, had founded the Mallory Group, for mountain and outdoor activities, at Charterhouse.

We arrived in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, on 21 September and the following day left with Surat and Zaffar, an ex-wrestler, the cook/chauffeur, in a big Mitsubishi 4x4, travelling the main road which leads via Gharm and Jirgatal through Kyrgyzstan to Kashgar in Xinjiang, western China. The vehicle bowled along for first 60 miles or so through Kafarnihan to Abigarm on good tarmac; thereafter the main road was spasmodically tarred until Darband. Shortly afterwards we turned off on to the Pamir Highway, a grand term for a mountain track, albeit marked in red on the maps. There was a terrific storm and after half-an-hour on the Highway – about 20 miles – we were diverted into a ravine. The bridge over the river had been washed away and two torrents had cut the road as well. Tortuous, steep, muddy bends led us to the bottom of the ravine and across the river and up in similar manner on the other side. The latter was complicated by a Chinese 18-wheeler that was stuck and even with chains

could not make more than a slither to give just enough room to pass. We spent the night a little further along at a farm at Khur. The Tajik farmers are very hospitable and provide simple accommodation.

The second morning was still wet. Shortly after Tavildara, 112 miles from Dushanbe, we turned off the Pamir Highway, continuing up the Khingow valley. Coaxing the car over a ford that we had to reconstruct, we travelled on broad cultivated terraces above the river. Beyond the terraces the mountains rose to 4000m and higher. We ourselves were already at nearly 2000m. However we had not expected the mudslide that formed a 2m-high barrier across the road. On one side was the mountain and on the other was a steep drop to the river – no way round. Fortunately some other travellers were behind us and we set to with stones and bare hands to make the lump safe to drive over with caution. We spent that night in Russian ex-army caravans at an abandoned mining camp at Sangvor. This was now used as a rest-camp looked after by the village headman, Hairat-ullah, a friend of Surat's whom I had met last year. He accompanied us for the rest of the trip. It had taken two days to do what we had done in one the previous year.

Day three was more agreeable, although the road deteriorated. The scenery was impressive: at the top of the valley, where we could see into the Garmo valley, we could see fleetingly Pik Ismail Somoni (formerly Pik Kommunizma 7495m), and Pik Garmo. Shortly after midday we arrived at Arzing the highest habitation in the Khingow valley at 2500m, some 180 miles from Dushanbe. Two stallions and another horseman and a guide were provided and the four of us, Jeremy, Peter, Barry and I set off to walk to the deserted village of Pashimghar, five miles further on, where we camped with a splendid view into the Garmo valley. In 2008 I had seen bears just above the village.

Although there were just four of us, we now had, in addition to the two Tajiks who had come with us from Dushanbe, two local guides, their sons as horsemen, four horses, one filly who followed her mother all the way, and three dogs. It was quite a caravan. We crossed the fast-flowing Kyrgyz Ob on horseback behind the horsemen and then we walked. There were no paths as only the occasional hunter ventured there. The primary forest was impenetrable. At one stage it took two hours to cover 1.75km. There was a little open parkland but we made best progress in the wide riverbed. We saw plenty of wildlife, including a bear, a golden eagle, a snake, ibex, hare and many traces of wild boar.

After two days we reached the lower base camp of the 1962 expedition. Our Tajik friends recognised the camp from the pictures in *Red Peak*, Malcolm Slesser's account of the expedition. There we spent two nights: on the first we had another terrific storm and wondered how long we would have to wait before the weather allowed us to complete our pilgrimage.

However the morning of Sunday 27 September dawned fair, and after breakfast our guide from Arzing, Abdul Sha'id, who had been up there once hunting, led us some 200m above the camp to the five memorials to



203. The memorial to Wilfrid Noyce and Robin Smith with the new commemorative plaque, Garmo valley, Pamirs, 27 September 2009. *(Stewart Hawkins)*

Russian climbers who had died in the 1970s, and then some 600m further to the Noyce-Smith cairn at 2976m. It was in the same good state as in the 1962 photographs. Jeremy arrived first and spent a little while on his own in front of the memorial – a final closure with a father who had died when he was eight years old. It was a moving moment.

Jeremy and his mother had arranged for a commemorative plaque to be made and we affixed this to the stone on which the two names had been engraved in 1962. Jeremy said a few words and Peter gave a short eulogy. Abdul Sha'id knelt and recited verses from the Qu'ran. Having taken all the necessary photographs we returned to the camp. The glacier that the memorial had overlooked 47 years ago has receded some two to three miles and all that remains are the slagheaps of the moraine – 'the foulest ground imaginable', according to Slesser.

On our return, understanding the country a bit better, we stayed as much as possible in the Garmo riverbed, leaping the small streams and using a horse to cross the main torrent when necessary. The weather was exceptionally kind to us and we had the towering mass of Pik Garmo as our backdrop all the way to the Kyrgyz Ob. We reached Arzing in two days, having walked more than 40 miles in the five days in trackless country. We returned to Dushanbe with very similar experiences as on the way out, but the weather was better!