

Lamjung Himal

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Permits for virgin peaks in Nepal have become rather scarce in recent years, as most of the peaks on the Nepalese Government's permitted list have been climbed. Mike Burgess, fortunate in being on the spot in Kathmandu, got one for Lamjung Himal, at the E end of the Annapurna range, for the 1974 pre-monsoon season, and thus another expedition started. This one, like many others, nearly died several times—lack of a leader, lack of climbers, and lack of money all presented problems at different times. Eventually, Mike was elected leader (at a meeting held in his absence), people were recruited from England to swell the inadequate ranks of Hong Kong climbers, and fund raising in Hong Kong enabled us to stay solvent.

We were, nominally, an Army expedition mounted from Hong Kong. We even had a military code name. However, as the number of experienced Army climbers in Hong Kong in 1974 was scarcely sufficient to mount an expedition to Llanberis, the original plan had to be modified along the way. The team finally included three Army climbers based in England (Mike, John Scott and Derrick Chamberlain), Frank Fonfe from Brunei, Phil Neame from the RAF, and even a civilian (me). The original Hong Kong Army criteria were filled only by Jeff Barker (just about to be posted away) and our two Gurkhas, Angphurba Sherpa and Sange Tamang. Angphurba's father had been on Everest in 1921, which seemed a good start. When we assembled in Pokhara in March 1974 only Mike knew everyone else in the party.

We were a large expedition for the size of our mountain, but an underestimate of its difficulty made us a fairly lightweight one, and force of circumstances made us a low-budget one. We took no Sherpas, thus saving much money and probably some trouble, and confounding the newspaper correspondents in Kathmandu, who told us improbably, that we were the first expedition ever to leave without them. I convinced myself, from one or two distant photographs, that 1500 ft of fixed rope would be the most we would need, and in fact it was just enough, though I suspect we would have used twice as much if we had had it. Frank, temporarily in Nepal paying Gurkha pensions, struck a very good deal with the 1973 Dhaulagiri IV expedition for their surplus food, which saved us time and customs duty. Mike and Jeff obtained most of our tents and climbing gear on loan from various Army units. My simple belief that Army climbing expeditions were all paid for by the British tax-payer was shattered at an early stage, but we received a grant from the Mount Everest Foundation, and we managed to raise some cash in Hong Kong which kept our personal contributions down to £100 each plus personal gear. Our total expenditure was £4000.

Jimmy Roberts had suggested the E ridge of Lamjung, approached from its S



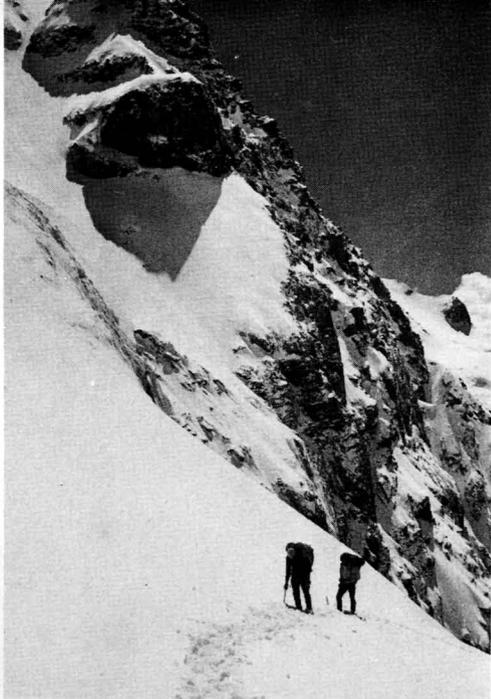
9 The route of ascent. This and next three photos: Joint Services Expedition to Lamjung Himal

side, as the best route. This was the route taken by the only previous party (AJ 73 249). An exciting aerial reconnaissance confirmed this as our choice.

After Mike and I had been up on foot to choose the base camp site, we set out from Pokhara on 23 March with 60 porters and just under 2 tons of baggage, including 7 weeks food for 10 people. Our approach was short, not more than 30 miles, and we thought we were safe in allowing 4 days to base. A heavy snowstorm on the third day out confounded us by causing two-thirds of our porters to quit, half way there, and the 2 ft of new snow on the rest of the route slowed us down very much. We even had to fix a rope in one place.

Before our base was set up on the snow at around 4100 m, we were out of porters altogether, and I for one had done as much load carrying as I had expected to do on the whole trip. However, we had stuck to our resolve not to touch the climbing food before we reached base, and the tubes of cheese and other tit-bits in the climbing rations provided a welcome boost. We also managed to get the beer all the way. Soon after our base was set up, a diversion occurred. Our head porter-cum-cook was sent back from base to bring up a load and never returned. There were several avalanches across the trail that day. Much discussion ensued as to whether he had run away or been killed. The climbing was almost postponed in favour of a search but reason finally prevailed, and Jeff went down to Pokhara to find him sunbathing. He was not much loss as he had been unable either to control the porters or to light a primus effectively. In contrast, our mail runner, one Baktabahadur, was a small human dynamo with unlimited energy, a permanent grin from ear to ear, and a great ability to produce mugs of tea at crucial moments.

10 Carrying loads to the E col



The route to the E col (5404 m) between Lamjung and the 'Lamjungspitzen' lay up the flank of a rather nasty glacier, into a snow bowl, then up a 1500 ft ramp on the flank of the W Lamjungspitze to a point just above the col. A large transverse sérac wall, colourfully banded like Neapolitan ice-cream, threatened the lower part of the route but in fact caused no mishaps. The snow bowl, which could have been full of appalling crevasses was in fact very easy, and the ramp was straight forward steep snow, albeit sometimes in foul condition, and with the odd ice patch near the top. When Phil and I abseiled down to the col with the first batch of loads on 11 April, we felt we had been fairly lucky so far. The next day, we took a rest—fortunately again, as 3 substantial avalanches cleared the soft snow off the ramp exactly 24 hours after our descent.

The campsite on the col was a windy spot with gales blowing from N and S variously. Two Arctic Guinea tents pitched face to face made life reasonably comfortable, and we had fine views, in the mornings, of the mountains N of the Marsyandi Khola toward the Tibetan border. The high winds generally prevented the regular afternoon snow building up here, as we waited in vain hope for the two-week spell of clear weather which we had been told to expect sometime in April. It turned out that this was just one of those bad seasons—but it was at least always clear in the mornings, and higher up the mountain we did not get much heavy snow. From the col our foreshortened view of the E ridge gave rise to some optimism. A series of snow couloirs led to the ridge which, it seemed, gave access via a short sérac wall to the upper, glacier-capped ridge. This, as we knew, or thought we knew, from the plane trip, led in easy snow



11 Load carrying on the E ridge, Lamjungspitze behind

slopes to the top. Phil stirred up the rearguard by asking on the radio for the summit flags, and we set out for a look the next day, full of hope that the job would soon be done.

We found we had been somewhat premature. Six hours up the couloirs and along a narrow and not too stable snow crest took us to a junction of ridges, and a superb view to Manaslu and Himalchuli away to the E. From here a kink in the ridge line, hidden from below, revealed a thousand feet of particularly nasty narrow, rotten, steep-sided, cornice-topped snow ridge leading to a suddenly impressive wall of séracs. We clearly needed fixed ropes, not summit flags, for the time being. We also needed a campsite, for which there was no obvious location. After some thought, we scratched out the beginnings of an ice cave in a very exposed position and retired to bring up the gear and let our minds digest the thought of the forthcoming bivouac.

At this point, the Expedition's secret weapons came into play. These were monumental stakes, made by the Royal Engineers to my somewhat extravagant design out of one of the world's more expensive alloys. They weighed about 3 pounds each and were strong enough to hold a falling tank. They had been conceived, over a few beers in Hong Kong, as ice stakes, but when someone pointed out that you would need a piledriver to get them into ice we started calling them snow stakes. It turned out that in steep soggy snow they were ideal. This meant, incidentally, that my equally extravagant home-made dead-men could continue to support the kitchen floor in base camp. We gathered the snow stakes from their positions on the main guys of the base camp tents and humped them up the hill with all the rope we had.

Phil and I were relieved of our soul-searching about the ice cave when Mike decided we had been in the lead long enough, and went up himself with John to fix the ropes. John had been looking forward to this and they turned our scratchy hollow in the ice into a presentable bed-sitter—just as well, as they spent 3 nights in it, rather than the one which had been anticipated. Even in soggy snow the big stakes needed a lot of driving. After 2 days and 1200 ft of rope-fixing, John and Mike reached the sérac wall. It was around 200 ft high, not 30 ft as I had thought from below, but they found an almost miraculous route through it by a big crevasse, big enough to locate a temporary camp. Derrick, Phil and I joined them—3 in a two-man tent to save weight—and at 6030 m on the altimeter we began to feel we were getting close.

We still had some food in a dump at the ice cave, so on the next day John and I carried this up, while Phil and Derrick set off, self-contained, for the top, hoping to make it with just one more camp. The sérac wall was followed by an exciting snow-bridge and another 200 ft of fairly steep ice, after which they were on the broad glacier-capped ridge leading toward the summit. This had one catch in it, a small overhanging ice wall which made them get out the ice pegs and étriers, and caused some hard breathing. They pitched their top camp, on 24 April, at around 6520 m on the saddle above the conspicuous snow dome.

LAMJUNG HIMAL

Above this camp, the broad ridge continued easily at first—then it steepened into a turret-like summit crest, rather more distinct than it appeared from below, and a good deal steeper. An easy snow ramp ran to the E around the base of this, and may have led to a relatively easy route to the top, but this could not be seen, so Derrick and Phil took a direct route. Three hundred feet of steepish ice took them to a sharp crest, which ended in a short vertical snow-wall below the summit. They needed pegs again, for what proved to be the last pitch. The summit plateau was long and narrow, but otherwise remarkably like the top of the Cairngorms in winter. Despite a late finish they got a view of Annapurna II rising 3 miles away beyond a very large snow saddle. They just got back to their camp in daylight.

John and I repeated the climb 2 days later, following the original route exactly despite my preference for exploring round the corners and avoiding the ice climbing. We had electricity buzzing around our heads on the summit and saw about as much as one usually sees from the Cairngorms. We had a thrill on the descent when we abseiled down the top wall from an ice channel in the snow; the peg held me adequately but pulled out just as John finished his abseil. It meant we saved a peg. Mike, who had earlier descended to the col with a heavy cold, now persuaded Phil to repeat the climb with him, again following the same route.

By this time, several people had been continually above the snowline for a month or more, and we had had enough, so after some heart-searching we left the fixed ropes and headed for home. The main party returned by the approach route, marvelling at the difference in speed of the same porters going up and coming down. Frank, John and I for a change went down the N side of the col, sliding for miles on our trousers seats in the snow, and incidentally discovering that access to the col was much easier from this side. After a few passages of grade 6 pine forest, we reached the beautiful and impressive Marsyandi Khola at Chame, and followed it down in 5 days to Khudi, Dumre and the road to Pokhara.



12 John Scott on the final section

13 Schwaegalp with Saentis, Switzerland. Limestones, formed in clear shallow warm water, have here been elevated far above sea level. The well bedded nature and the slight folding is well displayed by the deposits, which have not been overturned. Debris eroded from the mountains accumulates at their foot as screes. This and next two photos: Swiss National Tourist Office