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A SERIES OF ARTICLES COVERING

THE NORWEGIAN/BRITISH TIBET EXPEDITION

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Menlungtse, an unconquered neighbour

vision of all." Peter Gillman reports

The peak

Chris Bonington embarks today on his latest and perhaps most enticing venture. Last night Britain's foremost mountaineer arrived in Oslo to renew an intriguing alliance with some of Norway's leading climbers. This morning he and his colleagues fly on to China, and within two weeks will be gazing at Menlungtse, an unclimbed peak close to Everest which is regarded as one of mountaineering's most glittering prizes. It is, says Bonington, "a magnificent mountain."

The impish adventurer Eric Shipton first revealed Menlungtse's delights in 1951, while making the reconnaissance of Everest that led to its triumphal ascent two years later. Shipton made an illicit foray across the Himalayan watershed from Nepal into Tibet, then closed to Western mountaineers. He came across an isolated peak rising almost sheer from a glacier, "its colossal granite walls pale and smooth as polished marble—every evening they glowed as coral."

The British climber Peter Boardman obtained an even better vantage point from the neighbouring summit of Gauri Sankar in 1979. He saw "a mighty white obelisk of snow and pale pink granite, whose shape matched that of the Matterhorn." Of all the peaks around, Menlungtse "was the nearest and loveliest vision of all."

In the quest for virgin peaks, no mountaineer could want a better recommendation. In 1984 Bonington, who had glimpsed Menlungtse during his successive attempts on Everest in the 1970s, sent a somewhat speculative letter to the Chinese Government, seeking permission to mount an expedition.

The first reply was hardly encouraging: the Chinese said they had never heard of Menlungtse. In fact, Bonington had offended the Chinese preference for local names rather than those bestowed by Westerners. Shipton had christened the peak Menlungtse, after the nearby Menlung pass, whereas the Chinese knew it as Qiao Ge Ru. Bonington thereupon made a second application to climb Qiao Ge Ru and, with the diplomatic niceties restored, the Chinese agreed.

"I love climbing so much I couldn't give it up"

Bonington's surprise was matched only by his delight. "I am as excited about this as I have been for any previous expedition," he says.

For Bonington, 52, the Menlungtse expedition comes at a juncture when most mere earthbound mortals are considering how to bring their careers to a close in the most comfortable manner. He looks rudely fit, with bright eyes and a sporting beard, and has been at the forefront of British mountaineering for 25 years.

In his twenties, Bonington helped set new rock-climbing standards in Snowdonia and Lakeland in partnership with the legendary Don Whillans. He next turned to the Alps and made the first British ascent of the North face of the Eiger, a mountain made notorious by a series of gruesome accidents in full view of the media watching through the telescopes of the Kleine Scheidegg Hotel.

Bonington then looked to the Himalayas, and has now led three expeditions to Everest and others to K2 and Annapurna. His parties forged audacious new routes on the mountains' most intimidating faces, such as the South-west face of Everest and the South face of Annapurna. Yet his duties as leader meant that he was never able to join the final assault teams, and the world's highest summit eluded him until he climbed

Everest by the traditional South Col route in 1985—at that time the oldest person ever to do so.

Bonington has been a pioneer for British mountaineers in other ways, setting an example through his skill at financing what is hardly a profit-based activity. After a spell as an army officer, Bonington worked for a time as a margarine-salesman, but found that when the mountains beckoned his sales quotas suffered.

He resolved to become a full-time mountaineer, gleaning a living from whatever spin-offs he could devise. Since then he has become an accomplished and fluent author with nine books to his name, including several best-sellers; his lectures are invariably packed; and he has made rewarding forays in television and films. "I've been fairly successful," he says discreetly, "and I earn a reasonable amount of money."

Bonington's entrepreneurial activities at first aroused the enmity of other climbers, who found him defensive and edgy where money was concerned and wondered if it was distorting his goals. He has become visibly more relaxed and is today universally respected by his peers, both for his achievements and the image of the sport that he portrays.

He and his family—his wife Wendy, and their two teenage sons—live in a converted shepherd's cottage on the northern edge of the Lake District. Wendy has grown as accustomed as she will ever be to his absences, which he calculates at four or five months each year.

Bonington's greatest unease comes from the guilt he feels at exposing his family to the undeniable risks of his profession. All too often Bonington has had to convey the news of the death



of a companion: Ian Clough on Annapurna; Mick Burke, Joe Tasker, Peter Boardman on Everest. "It's a risk game. And in that sense I can't justify putting Wendy at risk. Yet I love climbing so much I couldn't give it up."

Those reservations apart, Bonington professes to be as keen on climbing as ever. "I used to worry whether my stamina would go, but it hasn't. I'm climbing as well as I have ever done. I've learned from what's happened in the past, I enjoy doing what I'm doing now and I'm excited by what is in prospect for the future."

The Menlungtse expedition illustrates Bonington's attractive ability to find friends in the competitive world of elite international mountaineers. The friend-

of Mt Everest, is described as "the loveliest
on Chris Bonington's latest expedition

of a career



Michael Frith

ships in question were struck during the Norwegian bid to climb Everest in 1985.

Since the Norwegians had never attempted Everest before, they invited Bonington for the experience he would contribute. Bonington hesitated, for his own previous attempt in 1982 had seen the deaths of Boardman and Tasker, who vanished high on the North-east Ridge in circumstances chillingly reminiscent of the disappearance of Mallory and Irvine in 1924.

But Bonington's natural and deep-seated desire to reach the ultimate summit won and in the end he had much to thank the Norwegians for. He was at least 10 years older than most of his companions and found himself lagging behind on the final summit approach, and at one point collapsed in the snow.

The Norwegian Odd Ellassen, a carpenter encouraged Bonington to his feet and promised to stay with him for the rest of the way. Bonington retains the warmest feeling for Ellassen: "He is one of the kindest, nicest people I've ever climbed with."

When Bonington received permission to attempt Menlungtse, it was natural for him to reciprocate. He invited two Norwegians to join him: Ellassen, and Bjorn Myhrer-Lund, a nurse from Oslo, who is probably Norway's best all-round mountaineer and, Bonington says, "a very modest and self-deprecating man."

The fourth climber in what is a comparatively small team is Jim Fotheringham, a dentist who lives near Bonington in the Lake District and has climbed with him in the Alps and Himalayas. Two other Norwegians have been enlisted as support climbers: Torgeir Fosse and Helge Ringdal, both businessmen who joined a trek to the Everest base

camp during the Norwegians' 1985 ascent and leapt at the chance of returning to the region.

The Norwegian alliance has also helped to solve the problem of how to finance the £45,000 expedition. Bonington has been adept in the past at attracting top-flight British companies to sponsor his ventures but even his name proves less seductive for a lesser peak such as Menlungtse — 23,564ft high, against Everest's 29,028ft.

For a time Bonington contemplated selling places on the expedition for trekkers who could accompany them to base camp and might even be prevailed upon to help carry their loads. In the end Helge Ringdal found the neatest solution. He canvassed his business contacts until he had enlisted a consortium of Norwegian companies with interests or ambitions in China to underwrite the expedition. They include the Bergen Bank, which has an office in Beijing; the China-Geco Geophysical Company, a joint Norwegian and Chinese seismic company; Norsk Hydro Power; and the "17 Group" which sells ships' gear to China.

Ringdal also wooed a variety of marine, export and exploration companies, among them Fjellstrand, Osco Shipping, the Skeie group, Stord Bartz, and the Ulstein group; banks and finance groups, such as the Christiana Bank and Eksportfinans; and the airline SAS. He even persuaded Europe's Business Newspaper to become involved, and Bonington's reports on the expedition will appear exclusively in the Financial Times.

Bonington, meanwhile, was lobbying his own business acquaintances, and the British companies who have agreed to supply goods and services range from

Dan Air and the Newcastle equipment company. Berghaus, to the Lake District manufacturers of Calthwaite fudge and the local farmhouse which makes its own Cheddar cheese.

Even for a man of Bonington's experience, the days before departing on an expedition are invariably hectic. Bonington was in London last week to complete a last-minute deal with ITN, and his time was further circumscribed by taking part in a lecture-tour to help raise money for an Alpine climbing hut that will serve as a memorial to Don Whillans, who died in 1985. But once the team arrives beneath the mountain it will be able to concentrate on the task in hand.

Since no one has attempted Menlungtse before, it remains something of an unknown proposition. The first goal will be to establish base camp in a yak pasture at the foot of Menlungtse's west ridge. The team will spend 10 days acclimatising to the altitude and conducting a reconnaissance of the mountain's southern and northern flanks. From poring over photographs taken by expeditions to neighbouring peaks, Bonington believes that the most promising route could lie up a slender arete or ridge in the centre of the mountain's south face.

The arete looks formidably steep. But Bonington recalls the climber's adage that "you can never tell how difficult a route is until you are rubbing your nose against it." It is likely to present around 5,000ft of climbing on both rock and ice and will require a high degree of technical expertise. But it has one overwhelming advantage. It is, says Bonington, "reasonably safe."

What climbers and non-climbers imply by "safe" are of course two different things. In this context it means that the climbers should not be in danger of avalanches, since the arete stands clear of the snow-slopes and there are no overhanging ice-pinnacles above. As Bonington concedes, no Himalayan expedition is ever risk-free. "But in this case," he says, "the risks seem reasonable and acceptable."

The main obstacle may lie in the strong, cold winds that could greet them at this early stage in the pre-monsoon season. Bonington draws consolation

**Success, especially in
the Himalayas, is
never guaranteed**

from the fact that they will not be venturing into the so-called "death zone" that supposedly lies above 28,000ft, where the lack of oxygen causes an inexorable physiological decline. With due caution, however, Bonington points out that while their chances must be rated as fair-to-good, "success, especially in the Himalayas, is never guaranteed."

The expedition has one further objective to give it spice. The glacier close to Menlungtse was where Eric Shipton took his celebrated photograph of a Yeti footprint in 1951. Since it remains the single most important item of evidence for the existence of the Yeti, supposedly half-man, half-beast. Recently, some authorities have expressed doubts over the footprint, wondering whether it could have been a combination of several paws or feet, or even—in view of Shipton's puckish sense of humour—a fake.

Bonington is not among the sceptics. "I am sure there is something there," he says, and he and his colleagues will be keeping an eye open for further evidence. But Bonington admits that if he did see a Yeti he would be presented with a "terrible ethical dilemma."

Should you broadcast the fact to the world, he asks? "Or should you leave the poor old Yeti to live in peace?"

Chris Bonington, who is leading an Anglo-Norwegian expedition to climb Menlungtse, close to the China-Nepal border, describes the "adventure" of getting to Base Camp, and his first impressions of what is a magnificent mountain. The expedition is partly sponsored by the Financial Times. "We are as remote as we could be almost anywhere in the world," reports Bonington, who has been at the forefront of British mountaineering for 25 years.

JUST GETTING to Base Camp has been an adventure. We had originally planned on taking five days to reach there from the roadhead, but it has taken us over a fortnight. We had seriously underestimated the problems of penetrating a region of Tibet where no foreigner had ever been before.

It started well enough. We had arranged with the Chinese Mountaineering Association to meet our liaison officer Wang Ja Ren and our interpreter Li Zhen He at the Friendship Bridge, the border crossing at Kodari between Nepal and China.

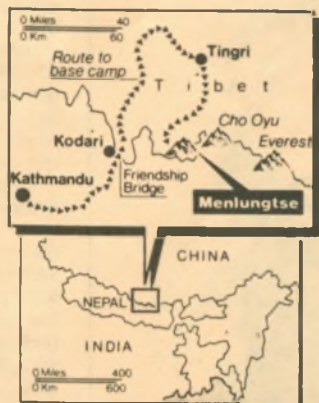
We had arrived the previous night in a bus and a sealed lorry containing all the equipment and food we had imported through Kathmandu airport. Jim Fotheringham, a dentist from Brampton, in Cumbria, and my fellow Briton on this six-man Norwegian-British expedition, had spent a frustrating day arguing with the Nepalese customs, for we were breaking new ground as the first mountaineering expedition to go through Nepal into Tibet with all its gear.

Jim is a good and patient negotiator and finally got us through without paying any duty. This meant, however, that we reached the frontier after dark when it was closed. We slept under the stars, to be woken the next morning by the jabber of Nepali porters.

The road beyond the border had been swept away by landslides and we had to walk to the Chinese frontier village of Zhangmu (also known as Khasa), 1,000 feet above.

There was no sign of our liaison officer. We set about checking the loads and clearing Chinese customs with a group of officials none of whom spoke English. It was a great relief when our interpreter Li turned up. A round-faced young man of 22 wearing glasses, a smart jacket and jeans, he quickly talked us through customs and booked us into the hotel next door.

We were warned that just getting out of Zhangmu was doubtful, because of land slips.



That very afternoon a torrent of rocks and mud had poured down a huge scarred landslip at one end of the village, piled on top of itself on a precarious hillside.

We set out the following morning on a lorry crammed with all our stores. A rock the size of a car bounced down the steep slope above just as we crossed the danger area. The road zigzagged back through the village, ruined buildings at its edge clearly marking the threat to the entire community.

Then we were beyond the danger area, crawling in low gear into the precipitous gorge that even the traders call the Gate of Hell. The road wound through rocky walls and pine-forested slopes, at times tunnelling through snow drifts 15 feet deep. The gorge carves through the main Himalayan chain to the high arid hills of Tibet, across the 17,500-foot Lalung Leh pass. From there we gained a superb view of Shishapangma to the west, Everest far to the east, and, among the jumble of peaks between, our objective — Menlungtse.

We dropped to the Tibetan plateau in a cloud of dust. It's bleak and bitterly cold, even under a bright sun, giving an impression of endless space, of brown rolling hills, frozen streams and brown wind-blasted grass.

Our journey ended at the small village of Tingri, set at 14,700 feet. The height gain had been altogether too fast,

Where no foreigner has been

and Odd Eliassen, Helge Ringdal and Torgeir Fosse all experienced altitude sickness. At Tingri we met our liaison officer, Wang. Solidly built, with a weather-beaten face — an ex-footballer now working for the Chinese Mountaineering Association.

He told us that the pass that led back south through the Himalayan chain to Menlungtse was still blocked by snow, but that he had ordered yaks to carry our gear over it. We had to drive to the roadhead the following day to meet up with the yak drivers. But Bjorn Myhrer-Lund, a nurse in Oslo's main hospital and one of Norway's outstanding mountaineers, was not prepared to let any of the other Norwegians move until they felt better. We therefore decided that Jim and myself should travel to the roadhead with Wang and hold the yaks for three days.

The road was little more than a line of stones in the desert. It was frequently blocked by snow drifts and the driver either powered through them or took precarious diversions, the rugged lorry tilting over at a crazy angle. We were stuck in the snow several times and had to dig ourselves out, until finally we were stopped by a frozen stream with a huge drift on the other side. We were just short of the village of Japula, but could go no further. The yaks arrived that afternoon, the yak drivers erecting their smoke-grimed tents nearby.

Jim and I had three pleasant days, walking over the hills immediately around the camp, which was situated at 15,000 ft, in the process becoming acclimatised to the altitude. The truck returned with the four Norwegians and food for the yaks and their drivers. All but Torgier had fully recovered, but

he was still desperately weak and could barely walk.

We knew that once we had crossed the pass we would drop to below 10,000 feet, an altitude at which he could recover, so we decided to have him carried on the back of a yak. We set out the following day up the wide empty valley that led towards the great barrier of the Himalayas, towards a mountain the Tibetans called Cho Rapsam.

On its left was Cho Oyu, one of the 14 peaks over the magic height of 8,000 metres (26,000 feet). Between the two peaks was the Nangpa La, the classic route into Sola Khumbu in Nepal, home of the Sherpas. We camped at the foot of the Nangpa La.

Torgeir seemed no worse, but neither was he any better, and now we had in front of us a 17,500-foot pass. Bjorn gave him another thorough examination and diagnosed pneumonia, putting him on a course of antibiotics. We resolved to get him over the pass, knowing how much it meant to him.

Swinging right from the Nangpa La, immediately below the ice falls of Cho Rapsam, we climbed a steep ridge, the Tibetans softly whistling and clucking to their yaks, never showing any impatience, never using any kind of force. We reached the crest of the pass in the late afternoon.

We stopped just the other side of the pass, at 17,000 feet. Jim Fotheringham had pressed on ahead and had a night by himself, though he met up with some yak herders carrying timber back north across the pass, and shared their meal of *tsampa* and tea.

Our yak drivers believed in a leisured routine, not moving out of their woollen, hand-woven tents, which they heat with a yak dung stove, until



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the sun reached them. They then had a leisured breakfast before collecting the yaks, feeding them with *tsampa* cakes to supplement the winter grazing. It was usually two o'clock in the afternoon before the yaks were loaded and moving. One day it started snowing at midday and they only kept going for a couple of hours before stopping for the night. We couldn't understand why they had stopped so early, particularly as it seemed the grazing lower down was much better. Wang, on the other hand, was having the greatest difficulty keeping them going at all.

They wanted to return to Tingri, since they were getting into unknown ground, but Wang persuaded them to take us down to Chang Bu Jian, the district headquarters, where we would be able to get fresh yaks. We walked for two days down a narrow gorge flanked by huge granite walls, steadily losing height, through the brush line, then the tree line, the air get-

ting warmer the lower we got.

Torgeir was showing signs of recovery and was now able to walk. We were now on the southern side of the Himalayan chain where the monsoon rains would penetrate a narrow valley, bringing the lush green vegetation more familiar in Nepal.

The district headquarters comprised a single-storeyed compound. The leader, as far as I could gather, was Chinese, as seemed quite a few of the occupants. The village, a few minutes below, was pure Tibetan. We were the first foreigners ever to visit it.

A day was spent bargaining with the villagers. They told us the way was too difficult for yaks, and at first demanded an extortionate sum, but eventually settled on a more reasonable fee.

We set out on March 22, walking down an incredibly beautiful gorge with frozen cataracts suspended down the northern side and dense shrubbery. An

hour's walk took us to the confluence with the Menlung valley, where we found the ruins of what must have been an exquisitely beautiful gumpa, or monastery. The walls were still standing and it was partly roofed. Inside the inner sanctuary, the floor was littered with sheets of torn parchment, and small gilt-covered Buddhas, flanking what had obviously been a large Buddha, were disfigured.

The plaster covering had been torn away as if they had been disembowelled. I was immensely saddened at the sight. The setting of the monastery was so idyllic, placed on a promontory between the two rivers, with blossoming trees round a little sunken garden, where, no doubt, the monks had meditated.

We now started climbing steeply up the side of the forested Menlung valley, to stop for the night by some overhanging rocks where our porters could gain shelter. They were

immensely friendly, offering us cups of tea laced with salt and butter, as well as the staple food of *tsampa*, a finely-milled barley flour, which can be mixed into tea, made into dumplings, or even eaten plain. Their other staple is the potato, which we were also offered.

This looked like real Yeti country—steep forested rich valleys which even the local people rarely penetrate. We asked them about the Yeti and they said that someone had seen one five years ago. They certainly believe in its existence.

We now had our first glimpse of Menlungtse, a soaring pyramid of ice at the head of the valley. Climbing through dense rhododendron forests, which should be ablaze with flower in a few weeks' time, we reached a perfect site for our base camp at 13,400 feet on a grassy shelf flanked by slopes clad in juniper and with a couple of useful caves underneath.

But our problems were not over, for Wang had run out of money. The porters were beginning to get angry, even threatening to carry all our gear back down to the village. Wang finally solved the problem by rushing back himself to the district headquarters to borrow some money, finally arriving back to pay off our yaks and porters.

Now we can concentrate on the mountain that is standing tall and proud immediately opposite our camp. Over the next 10 days we shall make a series of sorties up the two glaciers on either side to find a feasible route.

Our prolonged approach has acclimatised us well and our recce will enable us to reach heights of up to 20,000 feet, which will enable us to attempt the route of our choice in about a fortnight's time. We can see one possible route up the right hand sky-line of the peak. One thing that is certain is that there is no easy way up this mountain; it is both steep and complex, with a series of knife-edge ridges leading up to its twin summits.

We are as remote as we could be almost anywhere in the world, with a 17,500 foot pass between us and the nearest road and no prospect of a helicopter rescue, though the Nepalese border is just a few miles away.

We have certainly experienced the most unique approach march I have ever undertaken. I have a feeling that the climb is going to be equally challenging.

IT WAS like being in a tin drum with a hundred navvies hammering it from the outside. There was no question of sleep as the spindrift, an icy white film, forced its way through the zip entrance and spread over our sleeping bags. The walls of the tent, compressed by the build-up of snow outside, slowly pushed in on us until we could no longer turn, jammed together like a pair of sardines, nose to tail in the tiny confines of our tent. I wondered whether it would last the night and, if it was ripped apart, what the hell we'd do.

But it did survive and by dawn the sky above was clear although banks of cloud were lying in ambush around the peaks opposite. The sky and mountains had a cold, metallic quality, warning of the storm to come. There was no longer any question in the minds of either Jim Fotheringham or myself. We had to get back down while we could.

We had reached base camp below the North Face of Menlungtse on March 25, 10 days behind schedule, because of the difficulty of the approach, but at least we were fairly well acclimatised to the altitude since we had already spent so much time between 4,000 and 5,000 metres. We set out on our first recon on March 27 to look at the north side of the mountain, walking up a long moraine slope towering above the glacier to the north of Menlungtse but there was no hope on that side.

The following day we set out to explore the southern aspect. We knew from photographs taken from Nepal that the southern aspect looked more promising.

The four ridges dropping down from the high ramparts of the southern aspect all appeared steep and difficult but the route that gave the greatest chance of success was more a buttress than a ridge.

Three days later, on April 2, we were at 17,200 feet at the foot of the buttress. We had decided to use some fixed rope, both to make it safer for the descent and to give us a higher jumping-off point, before committing ourselves to an Alpine-style push for the summit.

The approach to the foot of the buttress was frightening. Bjorn Myrer-Lund, our best rock climber, surged into the front, leading across steep granite slabs, trailing the fixing rope behind him. I brought up the rear, anchoring the rope to the pitons so that we could use it as a hand rail as we passed back and forth.

Storms raged. One team member was struck by lightning. And the yeti remained elusive.

Chris Bonington describes the hazards and heroics of an Anglo-Norwegian climb in Tibet

Menlungtse remains unconquered

This led to a stretch that was little more than walk but we left a rope in place since it seemed particularly threatened by the hanging glacier above. We moved on up to a snow bay at the side of the ridge and that afternoon were able to run out three rope lengths before dropping back down to our advance base in the valley.

The following day we returned to the foot of the ridge with our tents and food but we still had some fixed rope to run out. On April 5, carrying just the climbing gear and rope, we started to put the rest of the rope in place. This took us to the rocky crest of the buttress and immediately progress slowed. What had looked like solid rock from a distance, turned out to be a terrifying pile of shattered blocks. Jim led one pitch. It was slow and frightening work, for nothing was secure. There was the constant threat of dislodging one of the huge rocks, all of which weighed several tons. The next rope length was even worse.

Bjorn announced: "If the rock doesn't get any better we can't go on. It's too dangerous." Jim agreed. But I wanted to

push on and felt that we had already put so much into this climb it was worth going further in the hope that conditions would improve. It was about time I led a pitch anyway, so I started up the broken ridge. The difficulties had eased and the rock was marginally more sound. We climbed on for another four or five rope lengths until we had used up both our fixed rope and our four climbing ropes, before dropping back to our camp at the foot of the ridge.

Now it was time for summit attempt. Next morning, heavily laden with food for six days, cooking stoves, gas cylinders, tents, sleeping bags and spare clothes, we set out for the top of our fixed ropes. By late afternoon we had reached the previous day's high point and had picked up the climbing ropes, we needed for the rest of the ascent, thus cutting the "umbilical cord" that linked us with the safety of the ground.

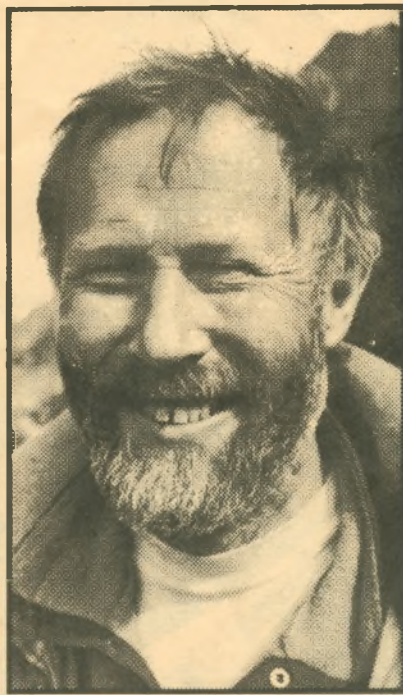
Clouds had piled up during the afternoon but didn't look too dangerous. The weather still appeared settled. Jim and I built a platform for our tent, carving the top off a small crest

of snow and building it out with flat rocks piled one on top of the other. Odd Eliassen and Bjorn were camped several metres above us. They had run out a further rope length and shouted down that the way ahead looked clear. That night we were both full of optimism confident that we would reach the foot of the band barring our way to the easy summit plateau the following day. But our optimism was misplaced.

At last we were ready. It was my turn to lead, and the difficulties had eased. I pulled round an overhang on the ridge, picked my way up the huge granite blocks until Bjorn warned me that I had nearly run out of rope. A short steep pitch and we were on snow.

We were making faster progress now but the clouds, almost unnoticed in our concentration, had come swirling in. It was three in the afternoon and already it was beginning to snow. Bjorn was now another two rope lengths ahead, having by-passed another rock tower and approaching the next. I was beginning to dig out a ledge.

As I did so the wind slowly



similar to, but smaller than the tracks photographed in 1952 by the famous mountain explorer Eric Shipton, who was probably, with Michael Ward, the first European to penetrate the Menlung Valley. Odd and Helge photographed these tracks and described them to Kusang, our Tibetan assistant. He told us that they could be the tracks of the "chuti," which is a small version of the yeti—at least they had discovered something.

We decided to return to our original route, fixing the remainder of our rope so that we could have a higher jumping off point. We returned to the fray on April 16, spent two days reascending the difficult section and leaving a line of fixed rope behind us. However, at the end of the second day we were hit by another thunder storm and retreated first to advance base and then all the way back to base.

The following morning the weather seemed to improve. We rushed straight back, frightened that we might have lost a window in the weather pattern—went from base at 13,000 feet to Camp 1 at 17,200 feet in a single day and on the following one, April 22, climbed the ropes we had fixed to the previous high point at 20,000 feet.

We got there just before dusk. We now had plenty of food and fuel, dug our tents well in and felt well set up for a push towards the summit. But that evening it began to snow and blow, and kept it up throughout the night. In late afternoon, Odd and Bjorn, who had camped two rope lengths above us, arrived back down. "We've decided to go down. Look, the weather's breaking up again."

Jim and I decided to sit it out one more night, hoping for an improvement. It started snowing again 10 minutes after they had left and by dark the wind had built up into a crescendo of terrifying force.

The following morning, shaken and exhausted, we fled. We got out just in time, for the weather deteriorated still further. We were glad to be alive. We had come through, a close knit and very happy team, had seen a beautiful, wild and unspoiled region and had given our best to one of the steepest and most attractive unclimbed peaks in the world.

I want to go back and want to try to find a way through Menlungtse's defences with that same group of close friends.

The Menlungste expedition was co-sponsored by the Financial Times.

built up. This wasn't just afternoon cloud and snow. It was something much more ominous. Jim and I were digging into the crest of a steep narrow snow ridge, and then suddenly I was aware of a high pitched buzz all around us. Jim collapsed onto his knees, clutching his head.

"I've been hit," he muttered. It was lightning. We couldn't have been more exposed and yet there was nothing we could do about it. We judged the ledge big enough and erected our tiny tent. By this time it was snowing hard. And now the wind began to rise, screaming and hammering out of the west, tearing and clutching at the tent.

The following morning the wind was as fierce as ever. Bjorn and Odd's tent had been torn to shreds and they had dropped their stove. Our tent had survived, but we were battered by the experience and resigned to retreat while we still could.

Retreat was no easy matter. We were now about nine rope lengths above the top of the fixed ropes we had left in place. This meant abseiling down the

double ropes, but first someone had to go out and retrieve our climbing ropes that Bjorn had fixed the previous night. I volunteered. Jim came out to join me and together we recovered the two ropes. By the time we got back to the camp, Bjorn and Odd were packed. We also took down our tent and abandoned our haven.

I was the last to go down, had a few feet to go to reach the abseil rope and decided to make a short abseil from the snow stake we had used to secure our camp. I clipped the double rope through the karabiner, leaned back, and suddenly I was tumbling backwards. "God—I've had it!"

My reflexes took over. As I somersaulted past the main abseil point, I managed to grab the rope, felt it tear through my hands, somehow managed to hang on and my uncontrolled fall stopped. It was only then that I had time to assess what had happened. I'd pulled out the snow anchor. I had a feeling more of shame at my mistake than one of shock or fear. Chastened, I clipped into the abseil ropes and started down

to join the others. I didn't tell them anything until the following day.

It was late afternoon when we reached the foot of the ridge at our first camp. Without discussion, we stripped the site and carried everything back down to the valley, a further three thousand feet below.

We began to plan again. Surely there must be a better route up the mountain? We hadn't really examined the far south east ridge which led straight to the summit. Maybe that could give us a chance. On April 13, Jim, Odd, Torgeir Fosse and Helge Ringdal set out to make a recce. Bjorn and I wanted one more day's rest.

They walked below the south east ridge, gazed up at it and realised that it would be even more difficult and time-consuming than the route we had just completed. But they did see something else. The Menlung valley was rich in wild life. We had already seen herds of small deer, the fresh tracks of a snow leopard, and coveys of Ram Chickaw, a grouse-like bird, but now they came across an even more interesting track.

It seemed that of a biped—



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