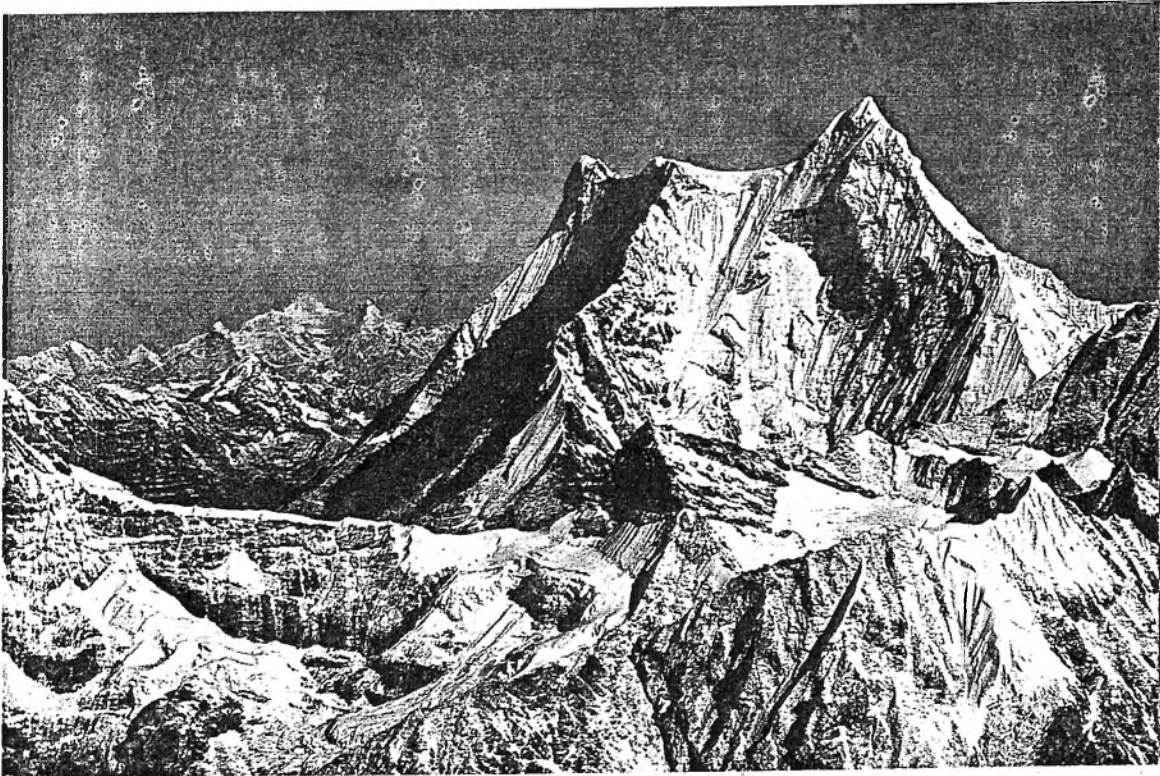


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MENLUNGTSE
AND THE SEARCH FOR THE YETI
EXPEDITION REPORT



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MENLUNGTSE AND THE SEARCH FOR THE YETI

EXPEDITION REPORT

Andy Fanshawe and Alan Hinkes reached the West Summit of Menlungtse (7,023 metres) at 10.30 p.m. on 23rd May after a bold and very determined push for the summit. We had also made a series of observations which, although they didn't prove the existence of the yeti, certainly deepened the mystery and raised some questions that are difficult to answer.

Background

Menlungtse (7,161 metres) must be one of the most beautiful and difficult peaks in the Himalayas and its main summit remains unclimbed. The local Tibetan name is Jobo Garu, but Eric Shipton, the well known mountain explorer, named it Menlungtse when he and Michael Ward were the first Europeans to enter the Menlung valley in 1951. They had just completed the reconnaissance of the Khumbu Ice Fall on Mount Everest, and on their way back to Kathmandu could not resist the opportunity of poaching into Tibet and exploring the Menlung valley. At the head of the valley they photographed the footprints that have since become famous as the clearest pictures of footprints ascribed to the yeti.

In 1954 a Swiss expedition led by Raymond Lambert and Claude Kogan also explored the valley with an eye to attempting Menlungtse but decided that it looked too difficult. I first saw Menlungtse in 1961 on my way to Nuptse, the third peak of Everest, but by then the border was firmly closed and the mountain was unattainable.

I applied to the Chinese Mountaineering Association in 1984 for permission and made my first attempt with a four man Norwegian/British climbing team in 1987. We attempted the south buttress of Menlungtse, reaching a height of 6300 metres, but were stopped by high winds and consistently bad weather.

It was during this trip that we saw and photographed a set of footprints that seemed to have been made by a two legged creature, though the size of the print was smaller and less distinct than those photographed by Eric Shipton.

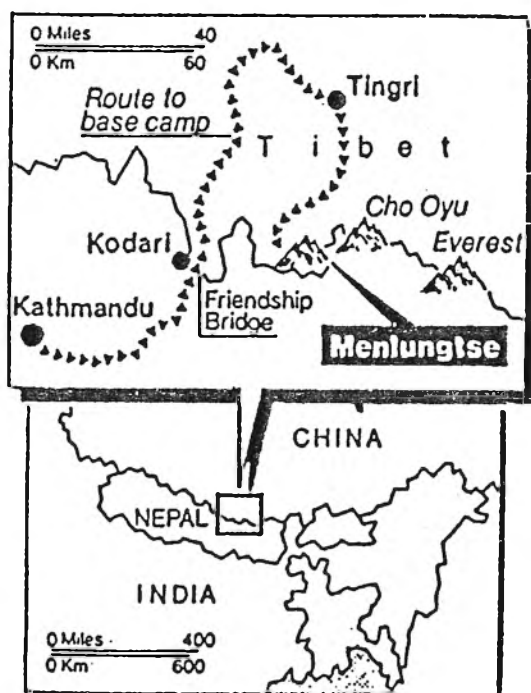
The '88 Expedition

In 1988 we had two objectives, to attempt Menlungtse and to search for further evidence of the yeti. Our six man climbing team was joined by a BBC Natural History Unit Film crew and 'Mail on Sunday' writer and photographer. William Hill the bookmakers were so intrigued by our search that they placed odds of 150:1 against us finding conclusive evidence of the existence of the yeti. Subsequently these odds were reduced to 66:1.

Troubles on the Border

The entire team assembled in Kathmandu on 31st March planning to cross the border at the Friendship Bridge 5th April, only to receive a telex from the Chinese Mountaineering Association, on the eve of departure, that it was not convenient for us to climb Menlungtse. After a week of frantic telexes to Beijing and with help from Colonel Bill Clements, the military attache and William Hanbury-Tenison of Jardine Matheson, we at last received the summons to cross the border. We had discovered that we were pawns in a wrangle between the Chinese Mountaineering Association and the Tibetan authorities over who had the right to give permission for Menlungtse.

We finally crossed the border on 12th April to be met by Fan Xiachan, our very competent and friendly interpreter who told us that our Tibetan liaison officer had been forbidden to join us.



The Approach

We reached the roadhead a few miles short of the Tibetan side of the Nangpa La on 16th April and set out on the 18th with 89 yaks for the Fushi La, the pass leading into the Rongshar valley. We reached the village and district headquarters of Chang bu Jiang on 21st April, changed yaks there, to reach base camp at 4585 metres at the yak herders' camp of Palbugthang, on 27th April. This was close to the site of our advance base of 1987 and had the advantage of being higher than our previous base camp, on a flat grassy valley bottom, surrounded by superb peaks.

Reconnaissance

The most attractive route up the mountain seemed the East Ridge which leads straight to the main summit. On 28th April, David Breashears, Steve Shea and I walked up the valley to a view point where we could examine the East Ridge. It looked formidable, being very long, bristling with cornices and obviously steep on either side. We therefore decided to attempt the West Ridge, which seemed more straightforward though it did entail crossing the west summit and making a high, but seemingly easy traverse of a mile to the main top.

On 1st May David Breashears, Andy Fanshawe, Steve Shea and I climbed Point 5753 metres to the immediate south of base camp to acclimatise and get good views of the West Ridge.

The First Attempt

After fixing 180 metres of rope on mixed ground on the lower part of the ridge, we set out on 7th May to make our first attempt on the mountain. That day we reached 5800 metres, after climbing up a steep open ice gully, with a covering of snow that barely gave support, to the crest of the West Ridge. We found a good camp site and, although very tired, had a good relaxed night.

The following morning a long easy traverse across the hanging glacier that covers the centre of the west face, took us to a wide scoop leading into the centre of the face. There was a pitch of good grade 3, first led by Andy Fanshawe, and then some hard green ice leading into a wide, filled crevasse below a huge bergschrund that stretched across the face. This gave another good secure camp site at 6250 metres.

That night I led out a single rope length up 50 degree green ice and the following morning we set off, hoping to reach and climb the head wall. It was bitterly cold with a biting wind and, as the morning wore on, clouds built up over Nepal threatening to engulf us. It looked like a storm coming and since we had reached another bergschrund with a perfect camp site we decided to stop there at a height of 6600 metres. The threatening clouds stopped like a huge tide on the south retaining wall of the Menlung valley, but we enjoyed the afternoon's rest and David Breashears ran out our two ropes across towards the gully we had seen from below that appeared to lead through the head wall.

We set out at seven, just after dawn, the next morning - 10th May. A diagonal traverse of five rope lengths, at first on neve and then on green ice, took us to the foot of the headwall. We reached it at mid-day, but it looked very much more formidable than it had from base camp. We were already short of rations and weighed down by our loads which included filming gear. It certainly didn't look as if we could get through that day and so we decided to retreat, getting back to base camp on the 11th.

A Further Look

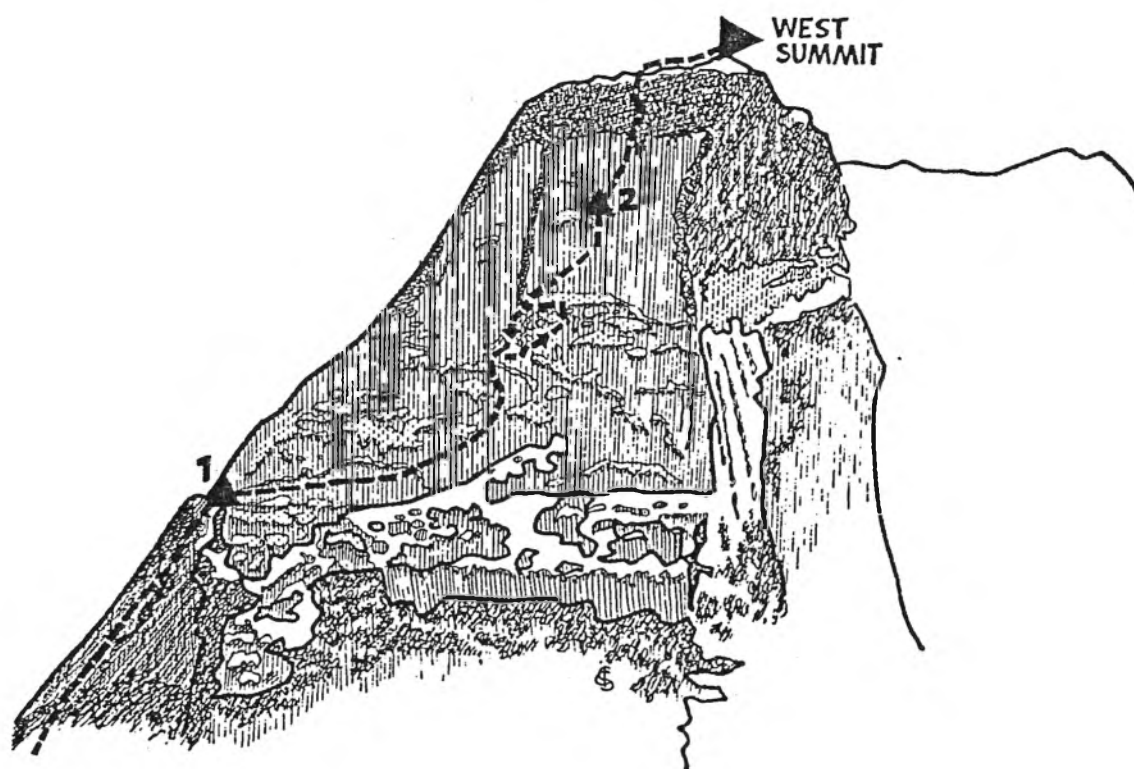
After four days rest we had another look at the East Ridge, this time going round onto the glacier on its east flank, but this aspect appeared even worse than the view we had already seen. At this point, David and Steve felt they didn't want to return to the West Ridge. I was very tired still and so suggested to Andy, who was keen to have another go at the West Ridge, that he ask Alan Hinkes, who had just got back from taking the 'Mail on Sunday's' story and film back to Kathmandu. Although he hadn't been over 5400 metres on this expedition he was certainly extremely fit and had a very good track record, having made a new route on Xixabangma the previous year.

Alan had just been preparing to attempt, with Jess Stock, an unclimbed peak of 6301 metres on the south retaining wall of the Menlung La, so I agreed to take his place. This climb, in fact, proved to be a lot harder than it looked and Jess and I were forced to turn back about a hundred metres below the summit. Nonetheless we had a great day's climbing lasting twenty hours and got some good views of Menlungtse.

The Final Ascent

Dave and Steve very gallantly carried gear for Andy and Alan up our fixed ropes on the West Ridge on 18th May and at 2.00 a.m. on the 19th, Andy and Alan set out from Base to reach our first camp at 5800 metres that afternoon. They were very tired, however, and so decided to have a rest day. On the 21st they had a very long day moving through to our third camp at 6500 metres. That night they were caught by a severe thunderstorm. Their tent was tucked into a wide crevasse, but during the night was nearly covered and they were forced, not only to dig it out, but shift it to a safer place. Next morning they discovered that their ropes had been buried and it took them four hours to dig them out. By that time it was too late to set out and so they had another rest day.

The morning of the 23rd dawned cloudy and threatening. They delayed setting out until they could see that the weather was settled, leaving at around 9.00 a.m. They had decided to travel light, leaving behind their tent and sleeping bags but taking down jackets and a stove in one rucksack so that the leader could climb unladen. Instead of traversing to the gully we had looked at on our first attempt, they climbed straight up towards the head wall, reaching it around mid-day. The rock on the wall was both loose and difficult giving mixed climbing on thin slabs alternating with icy runnels. Andy described much of the climbing as Scottish Grade V. The top provided the crux up a frighteningly loose over-hanging chimney.



Once on the ridge, their troubles were not over, with powder snow covering smooth slabs for a further 40 metres before they reached firm snow. By this time it was nearly dark, but they kept going by the light of a head torch to reach the summit at 10.30 p.m. Beijing time. Before dark they had superb views of Cho Oyu, Gyachung Kang and the east summit of Menlungtse which was about a mile away across a broad easy saddle that led to the knife edged summit ridge of green ice.

They had already been on the go for thirteen and a half hours and so decided to satisfy themselves with the West Summit. After a precarious descent in the dark they got back to their camp in the bergschrund at two in the morning, to find that their tent had been holed by one of the rocks they had dislodged during their ascent of the rock head wall. They returned to the bottom the following day to join the rest of the team that had already started the return march with their yaks and yak herders.

The Search for the Yeti

We did not find any conclusive evidence of the existence of the yeti but we did make a series of observations that are difficult to explain away.

1. On 28th April, just below base camp, John-Paul Davidson, the BBC director, saw some tracks on the hillside above the valley, climbed up snow to reach them and, as he got there, became conscious of a figure behind a rock above him. It was cloudy with flurries of snow, so he was unable to identify fully the figure but it certainly looked like a large creature. Bears have not been seen in this area, though it could conceivably have been a bear, or something else?? He didn't go closer since the snow was unstable and anyway he was justifiably nervous.

2. On 1st May, Jess Stock was climbing the slopes on the south side of the Menlung valley when he came across two sets of tracks at around 5400 metres that seemed to be those of bipeds. He photographed these.

3. On 19th May Charles Clarke and Iain Walker came across the skins of two bharal, the blue sheep. There were some excreta of what could have been snow leopard by them. The mysterious point was that the skins seemed fairly fresh, yet no Tibetans could have been hunting in the valley so early in the season and anyway they would have removed the skins. If a snow leopard or other predator had killed the sheep one would expect to see some bones or at least the skull and horns. The head of the Mammal Department of the Natural History Museum told us that carnivores often "cat" out a skin that they wouldn't want to try to eat and that the bones could have been scattered by scavengers or birds of prey. Even so one would expect to have seen a few bones scattered nearby.

4. Alan and Andy had left their ski poles at the top of the easy ridge at the site of the camp site we had used on our first attempt. They had weighed the sticks down with rocks to ensure they wouldn't blow away, and yet on their return they were gone. It was most unlikely that any Tibetan would have been in that area, and they were convinced the sticks couldn't have been blown away. For a start there hadn't been any very high winds. I don't think we can blame the yeti for the loss, but it was odd.

Although none of these incidents could possibly be described as proof of the existence of the yeti, some strange things happened in the Menlung valley, for which the explanations are not obvious.

Summary of statistics:

Area: The Menlung Valley on the Nepalese border of Central Tibet in China.

Ascents: First ascent the West Peak of Menlungtse (7023 metres) on 23rd May by Andy Fanshawe and Alan Hinkes.

First ascent Point 5753 on the South Wall of the Menlung Valley on 1st May by Chris Bonington, David Breashears, Andy Fanshawe and Steve Shea.

Attempt on Point 6301 reaching within a hundred metres of the summit on 20th May by Chris Bonington and Jess Stock.

Personnel:

Climbing team: Chris Bonington (leader), David Breashears (U.S.A.), Andy Fanshawe, and Steve Shea (U.S.A.).

In support: Charles Clarke (doctor and catering) and Jess Stock (base manager).

BBC Natural History film unit: John-Paul Davidson (director), Nigel Meakin (cameraman) and Arthur Chesterman (sound).

Mail on Sunday: Iain Walker (journalist), David O'Neil (photographer) and Alan Hinkes (courier).

Cook staff: Krishna Bahardur Rai and Nima Chotor Sherpa.

Chinese. Fan Xiachan (Liaison officer and interpreter).

Acknowledgement

We should like to thank the following who made the expedition possible:

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