

**SAGA  
MAGAZINE  
HIMALAYAN  
EXPEDITION  
1989**

To Jaonli (21,760ft; 6632m),  
Garhwal Himalayas,  
India

# Contents

List of Expedition Members	3
The Mountain and the Men	4
Expedition Narrative	5
The Beginning and The End	14
Acknowledgments	15
Diary of Events	16
Biographical Notes on Climbers	17

# EXPEDITION MEMBERS

## BRITAIN

Mike Banks  
Alan Blackshaw

## IRELAND

Joss Lynam  
Paddy O'Leary  
Don Roberts (Base Camp Manager)

## INDIA

Hashmat Singh (1988 reconnaissance only)  
C. P. Ravichandra (Liaison Officer)  
Chewang Thundup (Cook/Porter)  
Karan Singh (Camp Guard)

The following members of the Saga Magazine staff accompanied the expedition as far as the roadhead at Ghuttu:

Rosalynde Cossey, Deputy Editor, writer  
Geoffrey Axbey, Art Director, photographer

# THE MOUNTAIN AND THE MEN



*The Mountain and the Men. Top: Jaonli (6632m) from the Khatling Glacier. The South Ridge is the left hand skyline. Bottom: the expedition members (L to R) Alan Blackshaw, C. P. Ravichandra, Mike Banks, Don Roberts, Chewang Thundup, Joss Lynam, Karan Singh, and Paddy O'Leary.*



# EXPEDITION NARRATIVE

## The Pensioners' Himalayan Expedition

When Mike Banks attained senior citizenship, he was clearly disinclined to settle down and grow roses. Instead, he wrote as follows to Joss Lynam, the patriarch of Irish climbing:

"I am planning to climb a decent peak in the Himalayas, pre-monsoon 1989. I will then be 66 with time not exactly on my side. I am looking for a peak of about 22,000ft which is technically interesting. Any suggestions? And if you are over 60, think about joining me!"

He had taken a shot in the dark and hit a bullseye.

Joss Lynam accepted the invitation even though the two had never met. He even had a ready-made objective to suggest. While serving in the Indian Army he had planned to climb Jaonli (6632m, 21,760ft) in the Garhwal Himalaya in 1947. However, he was demobilised before he could make the attempt. In the meantime Jaonli had been climbed from the west but never even looked at from the east. Here was an ideal objective spiced with a measure of exploratory mountaineering. Joss confessed to having had recent triple heart bypass surgery but he considered this to be mere renovation of his plumbing system which would not affect his climbing! They were in business. Mike Banks referred to the project as G.O.L.F. or Golden Oldies Last Fling.

There was, of course, a lurking doubt that the east side might be totally unclimbable so they fell back on the good old military maxim that "Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted."

## The Reconnaissance

Mike Banks arrived in Delhi in late October 1988 to make a recce. The trekking agency, Mountain Travel (India), not only arranged for a mature and weather-beaten Ladakhi Tibetan, Chewang Thundup, to accompany him as porter and cook but also asked if a Sikh mountaineer called Hashmat Singh, who was a member of their staff, might join him. He would assess the little known area they would be visiting for its trekking possibilities. The offer was gladly accepted.

In the course of a two-day taxi drive, they crossed the Ganges and drove into the foothills along a dirt road which threaded its way through steep gorges and across pine-covered mountainsides until it finally petered out at a village called Ghuttu. Here they hired a couple of horses with their drivers, good natured rustic

characters clad in thick homespun tweeds despite the considerable heat of the day.

For three days they followed the tumbling waters of the Bhilangana River, gaining height steadily. It was a lovely valley, wooded with chestnut, rhododendron, maple and pine. Lizards scampered across the paths, langur monkeys swung through the trees and Himalayan Griffon vultures soared overhead. The picturesque villages of the upper valley were particularly unspoilt and seldom visited by Westerners. The recce party was the subject only of polite curiosity, in sharp contrast to the begging children and pilfering which over-trekking has caused in Nepal.

On the fourth day they turned up a side valley which led westwards towards the snout of the Khatling Glacier and towards Jaonli itself. That evening they camped beside the glacier at the foot of the Khatling Icefall which would clearly be a major obstacle in the approach to the peak. Deeply crevassed, it rose above the little tent for some 600m in a series of ice cliffs.

That night Mike Banks heard some strange, sharp, two-syllable cries which seemed to come from just outside the tent. At breakfast he told Chewang that they had been visited by a Yeti during the night.

Chewang replied:

"I think it must have been me sneezing."

Next day, Mike Banks and Hashmat Singh, equipped with rope, axes and crampons, attempted to climb the chaotic ice and rubble of the icefall. They threaded their way around yawning crevasses, climbed some interconnected ice slopes and in all ascended some 600m to about 4,700m. They persevered until eventually they had a clear view across the glacier to the east face of Jaonli. Mission accomplished! It was a moment of mixed satisfaction and relief.

The bold and steep East Ridge ran down towards them and seemed to be the key to the ascent. Mike Banks studied it carefully through his binoculars. Would it make a suitable OAP route? In its lower part it was a complicated ridge of mixed snow and rock. About half-way up there was a prominent rock band which might prove a serious problem. And then, higher up, where the dazzling white snow cut against the deep blue of the Himalayan sky, an ice cliff reared up offering a final problem before the summit might be claimed. It looked climbable, but only just. Certainly it would be no push-over.

On the way down they were surprised to see a line of footprints in the snow of this deserted glacier. There were four distinct toe marks but they seemed smaller than the traditional Yeti print.

"Look," Mike Banks called to Hashmat Singh. "These were made by the Yeti who visited our camp last night!"

"They're just bear tracks, I expect," he replied.

True there are bears in these valleys but why on earth would they be climbing up this icefall leading from nowhere to nowhere? And anyway, would not bear tracks show claw marks as opposed to toe marks? Another explanation could lie in the fact that there is rumoured to be a pilgrim trail from the Khatling valley to holy Gangotri. Could the marks have been left by a barefoot pilgrim? The mystery remains, as all good mysteries should.

Mike Banks returned home with his report that the route was a worthy one and planning for the main expedition started.

## Preparations

A party of four was considered adequate so two “youngsters” were recruited. Mike Banks invited his friend, Alan Blackshaw (56), and Joss Lynam was joined by Paddy O’Leary (54). Hearing about the project, a Dublin bookseller, Don Roberts (45), volunteered for the role of Base Camp Manager. On him was foisted the unenviable job of procuring the food, a chore which the quartet of veteran climbers had studiously avoided.

At this point the expedition was sponsored by the large circulation Saga Magazine, part of the Saga Group who specialise in holidays and other services for the over-60s. This was a joyous moment when all the financial problems, which are the major headache of any expedition, were at a stroke reduced to the most manageable proportions. It became officially known as “The Saga Magazine Himalayan Expedition 1989”.

In the ensuing months, a number of firms were most generous in their support of the venture. The very deep gratitude of the expedition members is expressed in a separate section of this report.

At the same time, the Press was clearly amused at the story of a gang of ostensibly deranged old codgers going off to climb in the Himalayas and the wide coverage which was generated was both surprising and welcome.

Joss Lynam arranged for C. P. Ravichandra (“Ravi”) to be appointed by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation as the official Liaison Officer. Ravi and Joss were old friends who had been together on a previous expedition and Ravi was an enthusiastic mountaineer.

The Saga Magazine staff involved themselves enthusiastically with the expedition, and even sent their deputy editor, Rosalynde Cossey, and their art director, Geoffrey Axbey, to accompany the team as far as Ghuttu to report and photograph the expedition for the magazine.

Mountain Travel (India) had been engaged to pre-arrange as far as possible the logistics. Amongst other things they engaged Chewang Thundup as a porter/cook, arranged road transport and hired out base camp tentage. They also engaged porters via Mount Support, a professional porter agency in Uttarkashi. All this cost extra money but it ensured a quick and smooth start to the expedition.

It is the received wisdom that May/June is the favoured period for pre-monsoon expeditions in the Garhwal and departure date was consequently set for May 10, 1989. It was reassuring that the first two ascents of Jaonli, from the west, had both been accomplished in June.

## The March-In

After two pleasant days in a very comfortable Delhi hotel, the preliminaries were completed and the expedition departed on May 13. There was a delay at Rishikesh because the driver was not

carrying the correct documents and they arrived at Ghuttu after dark on May 14.

The professional porters from Mount Support were waiting for the expedition and it is pleasant to report that they fulfilled their task well and with little of the hassle often encountered. They were each presented with a bright yellow T-shirt emblazoned with the Saga logo. Everyone set off for the hills in a blaze of colour, waving goodbye to Rosi Cossey and Geoff Axbey who thought they were going straight home. However, not far below Ghuttu they encountered on the single track road a vehicle with a broken axle. It took 36 hours to clear the road but that is another story.

On the march-in it was observed that the lovely and unspoilt Bhilangana Valley was being penetrated in its lower reaches by a new road as far as the charming village of Gangi. Hotels for tourists and pilgrims were being built. On the fifth and last day of the approach march, May 19, snow was encountered but the porters were quite undeterred, fairly skipping over hard, compacted snow runnels in their floppy rubber shoes. They safely delivered all the loads to a wintry looking base camp at Kachotra (4100m).

If the heavily snow-covered landscape, where in October there had been pasture, was a disappointment, there were further unpleasant surprises ahead. The weather now showed its hand: almost every day clouds rolled in, by mid-day usually with a snow storm. The theoretical calm period before the onset of the monsoon simply failed to materialise. Is the Greenhouse Effect to be blamed?

## Establishing the Route

Base camp was a worrying 8kms distant from the foot of the peak. Clearly the first problem was to recce a route either up or round the 650m Khatling Icefall. An attempt was made to climb the icefall, puzzling a way through its maze of crevasses. By mid-morning the summer heat turned the crevasse bridges into decaying slush. The glacier route was a write-off. Mike Banks made the prophetic statement: "Getting to this mountain is going to be more hassle than climbing it."

Attention was then focused on the true right bank of the glacier and after two days a route was prospected which successfully bypassed the lower reaches of the icefall and Camp 1 was established. Further progress along a convenient snow corridor beside the glacier was blocked by a rock step. Mike Banks made the somewhat rash prediction that it looked climbable. Ravi quickly proved him wrong by falling off it! Ravi tried to climb it in the late afternoon by which time melt water was gushing down. Paddy O'Leary wisely gave him some metal chocks or wedges before he started up a steep crack which led to a wet, slippery overhang. Ravi jammed a chock in a small crack below the overhang and clipped it into the climbing rope by means of a snap link. He pulled onto a sloping ledge and reached into a dirt-filled crack for a vital and urgent hold. Unluckily it was loose and broke. He shot backwards and plummeted down. Fortunately the chock held, the rope twanged tight and he was saved a serious fall. No-one else fancied a try.



An alternative route was found past the rock step but only at the most unwelcome cost of climbing up and then down a 400m hillside which was christened The Hump. Camp 2 was placed beside the glacier beyond The Hump.

Unwilling entirely to abandon the rock step, Alan Blackshaw, Paddy O'Leary and Mike Banks investigated it as a decent route by rope. Another mistake! With a top rope, Mike began to climb down to find an abseil point. True to form, it was more difficult than it looked; it was polished by glacial action, covered with grit and the cracks filled with crud. They had started in blazing sunshine but were caught by the afternoon snow storm. It ended up that Mike was nearly three hours in the storm in a sodden cotton shirt, treated to sundry involuntary shower baths and fairly juddering with cold.

Beyond The Hump the upper Khatling Glacier was easily crossed and Camp 3 pitched on the far side below an impressive cliff at the foot of Peak 5450m. From this camp Alan Blackshaw and Mike then groped their way upwards through cloud without seeing much but gained the impression that they had broken through the outer defences. A return the next day in clear weather gave them a close but foreshortened view of the preferred route, the East Ridge. The rock band, which they had been unable to assess from a distance, looked to be a near-vertical snow-plastered wall with very nasty looking mixed ground above it. They hastily turned their attention to the nearby unclimbed South Ridge which, allowing for foreshortening, looked a more reasonable snow climb.

By this time Ravi had retired hurt to base camp defeated, not by the forces of nature, but by our high altitude rations which he found unpalatable! Indeed these rations were a problem. They must have been deficient in protein because most people lost an unusual amount of weight, Mike Banks ending up a skeletal 20lbs lighter! Ravi was joined by Joss Lynam. This left Mike Banks, Paddy O'Leary and Alan Blackshaw to climb the mountain in what little time was left.

## The Summit Bid

The plan now was to establish a camp on the crest of the South Ridge about 700m below the summit. If the snow was in reasonable condition it might be possible to complete the climb from here in one further day, two at the most. At this point Alan Blackshaw had to return alone to base camp to obtain medicines needed to treat some intensely irritating insect bites which became unbearable in the warmth of his sleeping bag. He took the uncomfortable measure of sleeping with a warm torso and half-freezing lower limbs.

With Chewang Thundup to help, loads were carried to the projected site of Camp 4 below the South Ridge. Alan Blackshaw rejoined the team and Camp 4 was finally established on June 6. Here Chewang became ill and was unable to go above this camp.

To reach the crest of the ridge, a 650m snow face — steeper than anything so far encountered — had to be climbed. A day was spent in reconnaissance and the next day a load was carried to the ridge, the “carry high sleep low” axiom. The three veteran

climbers all made it in good shape and felt that things at last seemed to be going their way.

The following day the climb was repeated with heavier loads. This would establish the trio in a camp on the ridge with three day's food. It is eloquent of the formidable outer defences of Jaonli that it had taken no less than 20 days from base camp to get a party into a position to make the final assault.

On this climb, Paddy O'Leary proved himself to be the expedition strong man. Alan Blackshaw was weakened by a bout of diarrhoea, later diagnosed as dysentery, and Mike Banks, who had not taken a single rest day, began to feel the strain. They selected a route which would take them higher up the ridge than the day before and duly reached the crest. The bad news was that there was no flat area for the tent. Eventually it was decided to descend below the crest and hack a tent platform into the snow and ice slope. Alan set about this while Mike and Paddy made a two-hour traverse to collect the loads which had been placed further down the ridge the day before.

Alan had been smiting the ice effectively with his axe and a small, flat tent platform was beginning to take shape. Then, as usual, the weather began to change. Tendrils of cloud crept up the mountainside, snow began to fall and there was a sharper edge to the wind. A blizzard developed and the expedition members found themselves in a dour race against time.

As they were unfolding the tent one of the metal poles slipped and rattled down the mountainside. Eventually they pitched a somewhat misshapen tent on its cramped platform. Unbeknown to them, they were going to have to survive for the next four nights in the flapping, semi-collapsed envelope of the tent which was Camp 5.

Their situation was precarious. The tent was pitched in a notch above a 650m snow face. Fresh snow from above was piling up and pressing against the upper side of the tent. There was an obvious danger of the tent and its occupants being swept all the way down to the *bergschrund*. They managed to hammer a number of ice pitons into the underlying ice and to these they attached some tent guys and vital items of equipment. They also led a safety rope into the tent which they clipped in to their climbing harness which they kept on at night. A separate safety rope was rigged for the short journey below the tent to the toilet — a function performed suspended over a stimulating 650m drop!

When everything was made safe they crawled out of the drifting snow into the cramped but welcome haven of the tent. Alan Blackshaw offered to do the cooking and took the place nearest the door. This also proved convenient when his Delhi Belly demanded a rapid exit. The others did not envy these frequent and urgent trips outside the tent to dangle on the end of the loo rope!

The next three nights and two days were spent in discomfort and squalor. The floor space was too cramped to permit anyone to stretch out or even to lie flat on his back. Pools of water began to collect on the floor. Cooking was a particularly unpleasant chore and this was undertaken uncomplainingly throughout by Alan Blackshaw although he was able to eat very little himself. He proved himself the most unselfish of companions.

On the third day there was a clearing but by now their food was virtually expended. Despite this they decided to climb. This

could be regarded as a reconnaissance of the route up the ridge allied to a remote chance that the summit might just be attainable if the wind had stripped away the new snow giving good conditions on the upper mountain. However, from the look of the deep snow all around, this was a forlorn hope. The climb may, in retrospect, be deemed an empty gesture but it was probably a necessary one in order to prove to themselves that the route was indeed impossible in the prevailing conditions. They would then avoid any remorse that perhaps they had missed their one and only chance.

New snow up to a foot deep lay everywhere and the avalanche danger was obvious. Very soon after the start Alan decided that he would only delay the other two and he returned to the tent. Paddy and Mike roped up and pitch climbed cautiously, making painfully slow progress. They passed a rock outcrop, climbed an impressively steep face of mixed snow and rock which felt positively Scottish and edged along a crinkly, corniced ridge. Just beyond, a sinuous ridge curved towards the upper mountain.

Paddy, the stronger of the two, had been doing all the leading. He ground to a halt, turned to Mike and called: "I'm coming back." With the heat of the day building up and the dangerous snow conditions, it was a wise decision. They had reached about 5850m.

They climbed back, leaving a track kicked in the snow and a rope dangling down the steep face to save time and energy should they decide to try again. To complicate the issue it was observed that Chewang had disappeared with his tent from Camp 4, which was in clear view from the ridge. Presumably he also had run out of food or fuel and had undertaken alone a serious glacier descent. This was a worry.

Back at the tent the inevitable decision was made that, because of the now almost total lack of food, the dangerous snow and Chewang's disappearance, there was no choice other than to retreat. Paddy went back to the hanging rope and hauled it down effectively ending their long drawn out struggle with Jaonli. It was a sad and poignant moment when all the dreams of the last year were turned to ashes.

## The Return

The snow was too unstable for them to risk any further descent that day. It was now June 12 and the porters were due at base camp for the carry out in four day's time. This left absolutely no possibility of returning to base, collecting more food and making a second summit attempt. It was all over. There could be no second bite at this particular cherry.

After another uncomfortable night they broke camp, roped up and started down. In the hope that lightning does not strike twice, they followed avalanche tracks which now seamed the face. In these troughs the new snow had been stripped off and it seemed to be marginally safer. The descent took a long drawn out, nerve-racking three hours — the worst of the whole expedition.

When they reached the foot of the slope it was clear that they would not reach base camp until the following day so Alan Blackshaw asked to stay at Camp 4 for the remainder of the day to try to regain his strength. This they did, enjoying such relative

luxuries as a safe campsite, level ground, enough space to sleep on, and ample rations. Next day all three descended the glacier and snow slopes to Camp 3 and then across the glacier to Camp 2.

At this point Paddy went on ahead to get to base camp as soon as possible. Mike Banks and Alan Blackshaw were worried that The Hump still lay between them and safety. Alan, tired as he was, agreed readily to tackle this final major obstacle. Once beyond The Hump it would be all downhill.

Steadily if wearily they climbed back over The Hump and down rocks on the far side which had been snow-covered on the ascent. As Mike Banks caught sight of the tent at Camp 1 he saw a gust of wind slowly carry it towards the edge of the drop down to the Khatling Glacier. He dumped his rucksack and, moving as fast as his tired legs would permit, caught the tent and anchored it. He found a tin of mackerel in the tent and celebrated by gulping it down to the last horrible, globby, oily lump. He noticed an empty tuna tin to which Paddy had recently given the same treatment! Alan arrived and instantly turned in, still unable to eat.

Not long afterwards they were surprised by the cheery voices of Chewang Thundup and the porter, Karan Singh, who had been retained as base camp *chowkidar*. Paddy had sent them up. They easily hoisted Mike and Alan's rucksacks and that evening the whole team was reunited in base camp. It was June 14, which left just one clear day to pack before the arrival of the porters.

## The Ascent of Saga Parbat

Having supported the assault team as far as Camp 3, Joss Lynam and Ravichandra had no intention of sitting idle so, after a rest at base, they persuaded Don Roberts, the base camp manager, on the specious excuse that he ought to see what a glacier was like, to help them carry food and gear up to Camp 3. Their intention was to attempt the unclimbed 5450m peak which rose up immediately behind this camp.

The summit snowfield was buttressed by a high wall of rock which overlooked Camp 3. However, by traversing north along the edge of the glacier they were able to reach a series of tenuous strips of snow which led them diagonally across the rock wall to the snow slopes above. In the early morning the snow of these slopes was well frozen and their crampons bit in firmly and only the effects of altitude slowed them down. They attained a shoulder and climbed on to gain the South East Ridge. Here the route steepened again, skirting difficult rocks. At last, to their delight they gained the snowy summit. It was 10.30 a.m. on June 10. As a gesture of gratitude to the sponsors, they called the peak Saga Parbat (*parbat* means mountain in Hindi). As they lazed on the summit Joss could see through his monocular three dots, the three members of the summit party, moving up towards the crest of the South Ridge.

They started the descent at about noon. By now the surface layer of snow had softened in the sun and it was essential to dig their crampons into the harder layer beneath. They moved care-



fully, one at a time, for a slip would have taken them straight over the rock wall back to Camp 3 a lot more quickly than they intended! Fortunately the customary afternoon snowfall and low cloud held off which would have made it very difficult to follow the strips of snow which led across the rock wall. They arrived safely back at Camp 3 with the great satisfaction of having trodden a virgin summit.

The storm which caught Paddy, Alan and Mike on the South Ridge hit Joss and Ravi on their descent to Base Camp but they were on fairly easy ground and it was unpleasant rather than dangerous. Those at Base Camp then spent a few anxious days wondering how the others were faring. Chewang's arrival by himself did little to reassure them though he could at least report that he had seen them on the ridge after the storm.

## **The March Out**

The porters arrived on schedule on June 16 and the roadhead at Ghuttu was reached in four marches. Once again the porters from the Mount Support Agency at Uttarkashi performed well. After a pleasant rest in Delhi, the expedition flew home on June 23.

## THE BEGINNING AND THE END



Above: *Saga Magazine* staff members at Ghuttu — Rosalynde Cossey and Geoffrey Axbey. Bottom: Paddy O'Leary turning back at 5850m, the highest point reached

## Acknowledgments

### Sponsorship

The members of the expedition particularly wish to convey their very special thanks to Paul Bach, Editor of Saga Magazine, and his staff, for their generous sponsorship of the expedition. Their unstinted assistance with flights, air cargo, equipment and hotel accommodation, amongst many other things was deeply appreciated, as was their personal friendship and encouragement.

The members also wish to express their very sincere gratitude and indebtedness to the following organisations and individuals for the generous help they gave the expedition:

#### IRELAND

Adventure Sports, Kilkenny;

Aer Lingus;

Association of Irish Banks, Terenure Branch —Mr Charlie Weakliam, Branch Manager; Carroll & Kinsella Motor Group; Mr Pat Flood, Goldsmith; Memory Computer PLC; J.P. & P. Kennedy, Spawell Leisure Centre;

Bach Rucksacks;

Braycot Foods (Export);

Cascade Designs Ltd;

Erin Foods Ltd;

Federation of Mountain Clubs of Ireland;

Knorr Soups;

Lowe Alpine Systems Ltd;

Mars (Ireland) Ltd;

Premier Dairies;

Snowdon Mouldings;

The Great Outdoors, Dublin;

Ultimate Tents.

#### BRITAIN —

Air India;

Alpine Club;

British Mountaineering Council;

Damart Thermawear Ltd;

Dr Elspeth Blackshaw;

Dr Rodney Franklin;  
Dr Mark Jackson;  
Mount Everest Foundation;  
Pindisports Ltd;  
RN&RM Mountaineering Club.

### **Expedition Postcards**

Many people, mostly from Ireland, contributed to the enterprise by buying special expedition postcards which were to be posted at the last available Post Office in India. Postcards were also, of course, sent to all the people who helped the expedition. Most unfortunately, in spite of careful precautions, all 380 postcards seem to have been stolen. Certainly not a single one seems to have reached its destination. The only record of those who bought the postcards was their name and address on the postcard itself so that all that can be done is to express the apologies of the expedition members to anyone who reads this Report.