



BRITISH TIEN SHAN EXPEDITION 1995

2 July to 4 August 1995

REPORT

Expedition Members

Rob Collister
John Cousins
Lisa Holliday
Alun Hughes

INTRODUCTION

The objective of our expedition to the Tien Shan mountains of Kyrghizstan in Central Asia, was the first ascent of Kirov Peak 6073m. This was one of only three peaks over 6000m still unclimbed in the range. It is a remote peak lying on the watershed of the South Inilchek and Terekti glaciers, with its South face falling into China. This remoteness could have been rendered meaningless by the use of helicopters, used as a matter of course by the Russians in the past and by many visiting parties today. However, by starting our expedition early in July, two to three weeks before the start of the helicopter season, we were able to preserve an element of genuine mountain exploration.

The South Inilchek glacier, the approach to Pic Pobeda 7439m, the highest peak in the range, has been much visited for many years; but it seemed that the Terekti valley to the South might never have been visited by climbers. It was to the Terekti, therefore, that we chose to go.

Two events conspired to turn a relatively orthodox four-person expedition to an unclimbed peak into an extremely strenuous, serious and committing journey by two people. The first was information from Vladimir Komissarov of Tien Shan Travel, our agent, that the Kayindy glacier, between the South Inilchek and the Terekti, was the only feasible route for us to take.

From hunters and from the border police he had learned that the old road to China which we might have used for some of the way, was now impassable; and that further on, a deep, fast-flowing river in a narrow gorge made it difficult, if not impossible, to progress up the Terekti valley in Summer, when glacial melt is at its height. A subsequent reading of Merzbecher's account of exploration in the region at the turn of the century confirms this. He tried, and failed, to gain access to the Terekti and was told by the locals that they only took their flocks up into the upper valley in winter when the river was frozen. However, Vladimir assured us that there were passes from the Kayindy over to the Terekti, straightforward enough for porters without axes or crampons. This belief was based on a "hunting trip" by helicopter over the area a few years before, and unfortunately it proved to be untrue. There are no easy passes from the upper Kayindy and we were not given the option of exploring passes at the lower end (not that any of the side valleys we saw looked obvious or inviting routes).

The other event that transformed the nature of our expedition was the decision of Al and Lisa to go home early. In fact, the two events were linked since it was the reality of crossing from Kayindy to Terekti without porters - breaking trail in deep snow with heavy packs - that so discouraged them. As a result, when John and I eventually reached Kirov Peak, having found a way over the divide, we felt very much out on a limb, many days travel from any sort of help.

In the end, bad weather at a crucial time prevented us from climbing Kirov Peak, though we did our utmost. We did, however, climb P5784, the highest peak in the Kayindy basin, which we are calling Pik Moelwyn (White Hill, in Welsh) - a name Vladimir seems to like.

Although disappointing for Al and Lisa, for John and I it was a memorable and satisfying mountain adventure. When we finally returned to our starting point on the Kayindy glacier nearly three weeks after leaving it, healthy and in good spirits, it was with feelings far removed from failure.

DIARY

July 2

Leave Wales 5am by minibus with the Celestial Virgins - four friends from North Wales who accompany us to Base Camp. Depart Heathrow 12.30pm

July 3

Arrive Almaty 9am. Met by Vladimir Komissarov and helpers with large, six-wheel drive truck fitted with seats in the back. 12 hour drive to Alpine Centre in Karakol.

July 4

Day in Karakol, shopping for food and fuel. Vladimir negotiating for permits.

July 5

Up at 4am, eight porters plus ourselves crammed in the back of the truck. Drive to Inilchek, unspeakably dreary abandoned mining town, then on increasingly rough track up the Kayindi valley. Drink koomis with local horse-herder. Camp when track finally peters out.

July 6

A delightful morning's walk over flowery meadows to the glacier snout, then on over ice-cored moraine. Vladimir steams on ahead, the porters lag far behind, we straggle along in between. Inevitable cock-up ensues when Vladimir stops in one place and we stop in another. Discover that the porters have taken the biscuits out of cardboard boxes to cram them more easily into their rucsacks - an excellent idea if one prefers crumbs to biscuits - and that half our chocolate ration is missing (eventually it reappears from numerous pockets)

July 7

On up the glacier - ice-cored, stony hummocks, initially near true left bank then towards the centre, till finally reach a smooth dry ice-highway. Base Camp established on medial moraine at 3600m

July 8

Porters do a final carry up to Base Camp. Vladimir goes down with them. Recces up main glacier and up two side glaciers looking for a route over to Terekti valley.

July 9

John and I recce Col 4900, a long day mostly in deep snow. Col easy on the North side, but a non-starter on the South. Terekti looks a long way below. What was Vladimir playing at when he insisted that we come up the Kayindi?

July 10

Say goodbye to the Celestial Virgins and head up the glacier with Sergei and Ernst, two porters who have been retained for a few extra days. Camp in a snow storm amongst ice-hummocks, crevasses and little lakes.

July 11

Up the glacier to mouth of glacier branch leading to Col 5000m, snow deep and wet, hard work. All return for a second load. Say goodbye to Sergei and Ernst. Al and Lisa decide that they will stay on the Kayindi rather than try to cross to the Terekti glacier. (Subsequently they attempt a satellite of P5315, turn back near the top, and Lisa solos a satellite of P5171. They walk out a few days later with the Celestial Virgins.)

July 12

Recce up to 5000m col, steep at the top. Desperately hard work, deep soft snow all the way, six hours up, two down. Inconclusive on the feasibility of a crossing but not out of the question, and we spot a good line on P.5784, the highest peak in the Kayindy basin. Seems worth putting a camp on the col. And, at last, we can see Kirov Peak. First impression is daunting, to say the least.

July 13

Set out for the col with monster loads but slow progress thanks to exhausting heat and collapsing steps. Camp at 4500m, but later, in the cool of the evening, carry a load of food and fuel to the top.

July 14

Old steps snowed-in overnight but still just visible, thank goodness! Up to the col and pitch the tent a little way to the West. Climb a small top to the East, P.5315. Feeling tired and camp early. Play Scrabble. JC is as interesting and entertaining in the tent as he is competent and reliable on the hill! He is also Cheyne-Stokes breathing when asleep - three deep breaths, sometimes a fourth, shallower one, over a period of ten seconds, followed by absolute silence for fifteen seconds.

July 15

Along the ridge until we can find a way through giant cornices. Then downclimbing and traversing on ice through seracs and round bergschrunds, into a bowl beneath P.5784. Crossing the bowl we reach a spur coming down from the East ridge of the peak. It looks a safe and attractive route. Even better, below the spur a 40 snow/ice slope leads to a rock ridge and scree slopes dropping into the Terekti valley - for the first time, we know that a crossing is feasible. An enjoyable and rewarding day!

July 16

A change in the weather. Up till now we have experienced afternoon cloud and snow showers nearly every evening, but nothing serious and no wind. Last night was windy and heavy snow obliterated all our hard-won tracks. Back down to the Kayindy to pick up food and fuel sufficient for the next twelve days. Decide to make do with a single

8mm rope and leave behind helmets and most of the rock gear. Hard slog back up to the col.

July 17

Along the ridge and into the bowl with single mega loads (30kg at least), lowering them down the steep, icy bits. Camp at the foot of the South spur of P.5784.

July 18

Climb the peak by way of the spur and along the East ridge. About alpine AD, with some mixed ground half-way up and a short but exciting ice-pitch through some seracs. Otherwise, a lot of deep, loose snow lying on ice and some weaving in and out of double cornices on the final ridge. Sadly, it was cloudy all day with wind and some snowfall, so little visibility and no views at all. Moelwyn - white hill in Welsh - seems a suitable name.

July 19

Ten pitches downclimbing the big snowslope into the Terekti valley. The snow was the usual Tien Shan combination of a thin, breakable crust over 2 foot of huge, totally unconsolidated melt-freeze grains. With heavy, unwieldy packs we pitch it all, digging deep to find ice-screw belays. Then horrible loose rock on or near the ridge crest and easier scree leading down to a complicated dry glacier. After much weaving about among crevasses, we finally camp at 3800m, our first night off ice for a fortnight. An exhausting day, thanks to the big packs, but at least we are now in the right valley!

July 20

We treat ourselves to a rest day before the big effort that will be needed on Kirov Peak. We cannot see the col immediately North of Kirov and do not have the time or food for a recce in that direction. Instead, we are opting for the West spur which leads to the South-west ridge, which will be an immensely long route but appears reasonably straightforward. Success will depend on favourable snow conditions and weather, and on moving fast; but we are fit and acclimatized now and, touch wood, the weather around here never seems to become really bad.

July 21

Set off with five days food. A perfect morning, but the weather deteriorates from midday onwards. Descend onto the Kuyan-Kep glacier at 3600m and cross it; then up loose scree and a big open ice slope to the crest of the West spur. Purple saxifrage in flower on the scree seems a good omen but higher up a rock, dislodged by John's dangling ice-axe loop on a short pitch, hits me at the bottom of my back. Painful - my involuntary gasps and groans cause John to climb rapidly back down - but no serious injury. Food for thought, nevertheless!

Over a satellite summit at the junction of North and West spurs, and bivi not far beyond, using the Quasar flysheet and ski poles very effectively to make a lightweight tent.

July 22

Fresh snow overnight and much rumbling of thunder in the distance. Up to the junction with the main South-west ridge via a couple of ice pitches and a lot of exhausting, unconsolidated snow. Brief view of enormous cornices leading to Kirov and wide easy-angled glaciers on the Chinese side before the weather closes in. Along the ridge in wind, snow and poor visibility; at first on hard ice for several ropelengths on the Chinese side, moving together with ice-screw runners; then on the West, or Kyrghiz side, to stay on top of the cornices. Pitch the fly on a flat section at about 5300m.

July 23

A stormy night. Despite snow blocks all round the fly, everything at each end is buried under inches of spindrift and there is a continuous shower of hoar frost as the wind shakes the walls. Thank goodness for goretex bivvy bags! At 5am a start is out of the question. At 8am there is a lull and a slight clearing so we brew up and get dressed, only for the weather to clamp down again. Moving along such a heavily corniced ridge in zero visibility is not an option, so we dig a snow cave to make ourselves more comfortable, at least, and move in. Brew up, sleep and play desert island discs. We cannot afford this lost day. Tomorrow will have to be exceptional in terms of both weather and effort

July 24

Weather still poor but some visibility. We set out with one light sack between us, conscious that this will be our only chance of reaching the summit. A trying day long traverses on steep slopes over huge drops down the North west face, pockets of soft slab alternating with the usual bottomless melt-freeze crystals. Visibility comes and goes but we never see the summit. We give cornice edges a wide berth, or so we think, until on one flat section, a place where we would confidently have pitched a tent, a huge segment ten metres deep and fifty metres long suddenly breaks away. John has just taken over breaking trail and, relaxing after mental as well as physical strain, I am plodding along in his footsteps, brain in neutral when it happens. The fracture line is between my feet, though John is on terra firma with the rope tight. I dangle for a moment from my ice-axe, thrust instinctively into the snow; then, amazingly, a small section of the cornice which has failed to break off swings back like a rat-trap to imprison me from the waist down. It all happens too quickly to be frightening and, but for the pressure on my legs, it would be almost comic. I am carrying the shovel in the sack on my back so, while John anchors the rope downslope, I start digging. It takes ten minutes, with cautious help from John, to release myself.

The mountain seems to be telling us something, but we don't want to give up yet and continue, albeit in chastened mood. However, after six hours climbing the weather is becoming steadily worse and we are still on the horizontal section of the ridge. We have a brief glimpse of more vicious cornices ahead and know that beyond there is 600 metres vertical height, of unknown technical difficulty, to be gained. Suddenly it seems too far and too much. We have done our utmost but yesterday's wasted day has stymied us. Reluctantly, but with a strong sense that we are not welcome on this mountain, we turn back.

July 25

Retreat in a storm - snow, wind and swirling spindrift, very cold, very Scottish, but no Red Burn to make for With little food left and slab avalanche conditions developing, we cannot afford to sit it out. Dangerous and exhausting climbing along the ridge, clearing away the slab before taking each sideways step, belaying all the way. Then down the spur, setting off a big slab near the top. Downclimb the first little ice-pitch where a serac wall abuts the ridge crest, but sacrifice an ice-screw to abseil the start of the next one. Intrigued to find well-developed depth hoar crystals at the bottom of the snow-pack while excavating for a belay. Late in the day we reach the site of our first bivi, the worst now behind us.

July 26

The mountain lets us off the hook! Good weather at last. No breakfast, but we find an easy alternative descent on the South side of the spur, then an improbable but straightforward route beside the glacier all the way down to a moraine shelf where we can brew up and dry out in sunshine. Easily down to the valley, revelling in warmth and familiar alpine flowers - purple and orange asters, yellow rock-rose and creamy rock-jasmine. On the lateral moraine of the valley glacier, to our astonishment, we stumbled across a solitary cairn; no more than one stone on top of another, on a boulder, but an unmistakable sign that someone has been here before us. Not really surprising, and in our situation it is poignant rather than disappointing, for we are still a very long way from our Base Camp, let alone other people. Wearily - and hungrily - we plod back up to our food-dump.

July 27

Heavy snow all night but clears during the morning and we are away just after midday, feeling sluggish and lethargic. The glacier is scary, with crevasses masked by several inches of new snow. Carelessly, I drop a ski pole while probing and it disappears with a tinkling sound of breaking icicles. Slowly, we toil up steep, unstable scree which becomes slightly easier as the new snow deepens towards the top. We pitch the tent right on the crest of the sharp ridge dropping from Moelwyn Peak, at the foot of the big snow slope. Memorable views across to Kirov and the icy serac-ridden faces of peaks to the West, but not a place for sleep-walking!

July 28

Back up the snow slope, the ubiquitous crust bearing our weight for some of the time, at least, otherwise we might never have escaped the Terekti valley. Once in the bowl beneath Moelwyn, however, the snow is soft and deep and the heat enervating. After covering three hundred yards in an hour we abandon the packs and put in a set of tracks up onto the ridge, unladen. That done, we pitch the inner tent and spend the afternoon brewing and sleeping. At 4pm we pack up and climb easily onto the ridge in cooler conditions. Along the ridge, still in deep powder but feeling strong again now, invigorated by glorious evening sunlight and valedictory views of Kirov and the Terekti valley. Even the cornices, icicles dripping like fangs from their jaws, seem almost friendly now we are saying farewell. A bitter little wind substitutes freezing fingers for such sentiment as we don crampons and the rope to negotiate an ice-step and some nasty-feeling slab at the top of the Kayindy slope. Down, labouring through a crust that is breakable but only just, into the reds and oranges of sunset. Finally camp as light fades at 9pm and cook by torchlight.

July 29

Out of food now, but we quickly descend the side glacier on a crust that is breakable at first (oh no! not again!) but miraculously improves as we lose height. Coffee and biscuits in the sun at the kit-bag of food where we said goodbye to our friends all that time ago, in another lifetime it seems. Then we add the contents of the cache to our rucsacks to bring them back to the regulation 30kg and head down the glacier.

For the first time in days I have time to reflect. Although we have not climbed Kirov, I feel utterly content. Our names will not go down in the record books but I shall remember these three weeks as one of the best of times with one of the best of companions. One of Tilman's wise sayings springs to mind:

"A man ought to rate his achievements only by the satisfaction they give him, for they will soon be outdone, outshone and speedily forgotten by everyone but himself."

I rate our Tien Shan sojourn very highly indeed.

A circling helicopter is the first indication that civilization may not be far away, now. Soon afterwards we meet two British climbers, just arrived, and hear about the double tragedy on P.5445 in which first Mick Davie and then two Russian guides died in cornice accidents. Mindful of our own experience, I can only reflect that "There but for the Grace of God go I."

Although no part of our plans, or desires, we find ourselves being flown out a few hours later, along with the two porters who had come to meet us and the Russian rescue team who have been on the mountain. The helicopter struggles to get off the ground, initially because the chocks have not been removed from the wheels, but mainly because it is overladen for that altitude (eighteen people on board, plus a great deal of equipment). I find it the most alarming moment of the trip when the pilot finally gains enough height to accelerate forward, skimming only inches from the ground for at least two hundred yards.

It is a sombre ride in that roaring, vibrating machine. The Russians are subdued, eyes downcast. I have my feet on the bundles of rope and tarpaulin on the floor of the helicopter until John nudges me. Aghast, I realise that the bundles are actually the bodies of the two Russian guides. A hand is sticking out of one of them. It is a strange, sad end to our journey.

July 30

Camp on a windy, dusty plain at Maidadayr and wait patiently for something to happen since no-one speaks English. Truck arrives in mid-afternoon and we are driven to Karakol, together with some Russian climbers and the rest of the Davie team who have flown in at lunch-time. A four hour drive through a landscape of lovely alpine meadows and stands of fir trees, dotted with the occasional yurt and flocks of sheep or herds of horses.

July 31

Day at the Alpine Centre at Karakol along with Jo, Andy and Neil from the bereaved British team and Swiss, Dutch and German groups waiting to depart for the mountains. John is suffering from Giardia. Rest of us enjoy a picnic at Lake Issykull with Russian friends of Jo.

August 1

Hanging around waiting for Vladimir to arrive so that we can settle our bill and make arrangements for transport to Almaty.

August 2

Vladimir arrives and everything sorted out amicably.

August 3

Drive to Almaty - only a seven hour drive this time, in a car. Roads dramatically better once in Kazakhstan, and temperatures much hotter.

August 4

Fly direct to Istanbul, thence to London which feels even hotter than Almaty. Hire a car and reach home 11pm.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that Kirov Peak can be climbed from the Terekti valley - the main problem is access. The route we attempted is perfectly feasible but would be much safer with three or four climbers spaced well apart in case of cornice collapses, which are clearly a feature of climbing in this region.

Another option would be to attempt the mountain from one of the two cols to the North. That furthest north, eg furthest away from the mountain, looks the most straightforward if slightly higher. This route would mean first negotiating a complex ice-fall on the Kuyon-Kep glacier at the head of the Terekti valley (probably best taken on its true left side, close to a rock buttress). Once either col has been reached, a small bump which does not look totally straightforward must be traversed to reach the Northern slopes of Kirov. Here there appears to be a choice of route. That on the North West flank would entail a long traverse on snow beneath a rock band to reach a snowy line of weakness cutting through it. On the North East slope there are a number of seracs and from our viewpoint it was impossible to tell whether there is a route that would be unthreatened.

Either of these routes could be reached, possibly more easily, from the Komsomol glacier on the North, or Inylchek, side. If helicopter transport was to be used, this would certainly be a cheaper approach than the Terekti. However, Vladimir mentioned that two previous attempts on the mountain from this side failed mainly due to deep snow with steps being regularly filled in by overnight snowfall. Another party was attempting the mountain from the Komsomol this summer.

NOTES

Weather

Totally unpredictable. The one perfect day coincided with our one rest day. Afternoon showers even in good weather, but there seemed no way of telling when genuinely bad weather was on the way (not even an altimeter!)

Snow Conditions

Everything except good nevé. The most characteristic was a thin crust over 'bottomless' incohesive melt-freeze grains. After a clear, cold night, the crust would be weight-bearing until 10am, so early starts were worthwhile. After a warm, cloudy night, however, the crust was breakable from the word go. More often than not, steps would be filled in overnight. Mountaineering in the Tien Shan is hard work!

Bivi Tent

In reasonable weather the Quasar fly-sheet rigged with ski-poles worked very well, but when the weather turned bad on Kirov we were glad that we had brought a shovel and could dig a snow-cave.

Food

Food bought locally was limited - fruit, veg, sugar, flour, biscuits, jam, chocolate were all OK. However, pasta of all sorts was a disaster, almost inedible. Millet was a bit like semolina and not very popular. Gretchka, a form of buckwheat, was more successful as a staple, being fairly quick to cook as well as edible.

Bring as much as possible from UK.

Fuel

The MSR Whisperlite worked well on leaded petrol but the spare jet was useful to prevent a major cleaning operation when desperate for a brew!

Medical Kit

Not needed, except from Flagyl (which we had neglected to bring) for John's giardia at the end - fortunately we were given some by friends in Karakol.

Travel

The great advantage of travelling Turkish Airlines was a 30kg per person baggage allowance as a matter of course on the outward journey (though only 20kg for the return). We could have taken more food than we actually did - and wished we had!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our grateful thanks to:

The Mount Everest Foundation
The Welsh Sports Council
Lowe Alpine (clothing and rucsacks)
Terra Nova (tents)

ACCOUNTS

Expenditure	£
Travel within the UK	260
Flights to Almaty	2264
Visas	80
Insurance	160
Food bought in UK	70
Equipment - 4 x 8mm ropes	160
Production of report	16
Bank charges and commission	25
Expenses in Kyrghizstan, paid to Tien Shan Travel (food, accommodation, transport, permits, porters)	1595

TOTAL	£4630
Income	
Grant from Welsh Sports Council	1000
Grant from Mount Everest Foundation	700
Personal contributions	2930

TOTAL	£4630



SCALE 1:150,000

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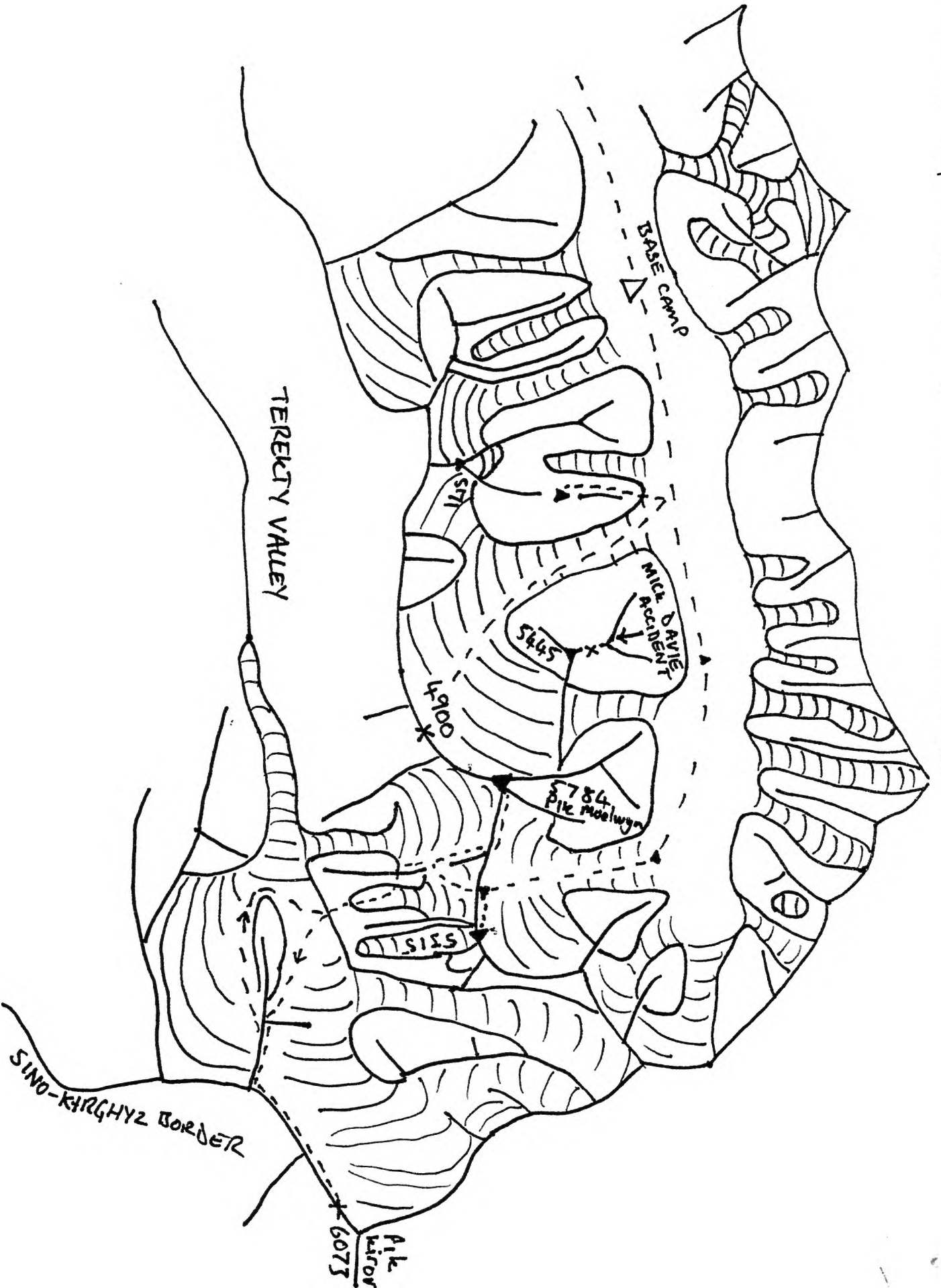
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SKETCH MAP of KANBY + TEREKTY VALLEYS



John Conrains