

Panch Chuli

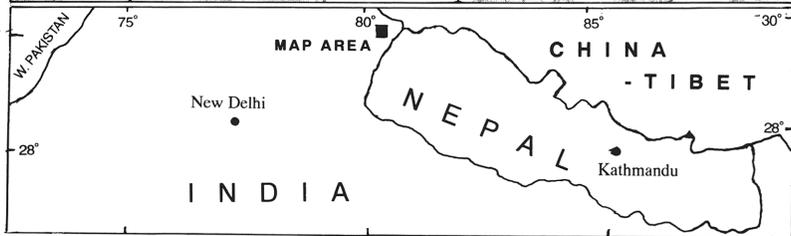
CHRISTIAN BONINGTON

THE BLOB OF LIGHT was a reassuring gleam, the head torch of one of the team, slowly descending the dark and craggy buttress to the tent where I had elected to stay that morning. I had been tired, worried about the distance we still had to go to reach the summit and anyway a team of five would have been cumbersome and slow. It had been a long wait from 3:30 A.M. the previous morning, through the day, till eleven o'clock that night, when at last I caught a glimpse of a light far above at the top of the buttress.

It was now three o'clock. They had been on the go for 24 hours and were very nearly down. I had lit the gas stove to heat some water for tea. I could actually hear them, though I couldn't make out the words. I had the tent door open to watch their progress more easily, when a flicker of light caught my attention. The blob of light was tumbling crazily down the buttress and then went out. I think I heard the scraping of crampons on rock. It could only be a fall and whoever had fallen surely was dead. I couldn't stop myself from crying, the climax to 24 hours of growing anxiety.

Everything had gone so well—up to that point. Six of us had left Britain early in May to join six Indian climbers for climbing in the Panch Chuli range in the Indian Himalaya. A two-day bus journey from Delhi across the plains and up into the foothills had taken us to the small town of Munsiriya, nestling on a hill slope immediately opposite the Panch Chuli Peaks. Panch Chuli II, a stately cone of snow and ice towering above the other four peaks, at 6904 meters (22,650 feet) is the highest in the range. (The peaks are numbered from northwest to southeast and not by their height.)

Panch Chuli has always been worshipped and admired by local people, pilgrims and traders on their way to Tibet. Its name signifies the five hearths of the legendary Pandavas who, according to the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, are supposed to have cooked their last meal on the five peaks on their way to Nirvana. The first mountaineer to reconnoiter the approaches to the range from the east was Hugh Ruttledge in 1929. W.H. Murray's Scottish expedition and K.E. Snelson and J. de V. Graaf attempted the mountain from the east by the Sona and Meola Glaciers respectively in 1950, but they made little progress. In 1951, Heinrich Harrer and F. Thomas made an attempt from the west up the Uttari Balati Glacier, reaching the foot of the west ridge at 6000 meters, a very impressive achievement by a two-man team. In 1952, P.N. Nikore of India



claimed the solo ascent of Panch Chuli II, but this has been discounted. Another attempt was made in 1964 by an expedition led by Squadron Leader A.K. Chaudhury. They failed on Panch Chuli II, but they claimed ascents of Panch Chuli III, IV and V, the latter two on the same day. There is little doubt that they mistook the three small peaks running down from the southwest ridge of Panch Chuli II for these three difficult peaks. It is obvious that Panch Chuli III (6312 meters, 20,708 feet), Panch Chuli IV (6334 meters, 20,780 feet) and Panch Chuli V (6437 meters, 21,120 feet) were unclimbed.

Panch Chuli I (6355 meters, 20,850 feet) was the first peak of the range to be climbed when it was ascended by an Indo-Tibetan Border Police expedition led by Hukam Singh in 1972. The southwest ridge of Panch Chuli II was climbed the following year by another large ITBP expedition led by Mahendra Singh when 18 climbers reached the top after almost the entire route had been fixed with rope. (*AAJ*, 1974, pages 210-211.) In 1991, two Indian Army expeditions climbed the northwest ridge and the east ridge. (*AAJ*, 1992, page 229.) Another peak in the area, Rajrambha (6537 meters, 21,447 feet), was first climbed from the north by another ITBP team in 1976.

The approach was short but dramatic, up the steep, heavily forested Balati valley to the foot of the Uttari Balati Glacier. It was refreshing to walk up such an unspoilt valley. Dense fir forests gave way to rhododendron, birch and bamboo. There were hot springs halfway and everywhere, a profusion of wild flowers. There was no sign of our predecessors. It was so very different from the popular areas in the Himalaya, which are strewn with rubbish and where trekkers and climbers outnumber the local people.

Base Camp was below the snout of the glacier at the extraordinarily low altitude of 3270 meters. We reached it on May 18 and immediately started finding a route to Advance Base within striking distance of the peaks around the glacier. At this stage, the entire team worked together, making a route past three precipitous and very dangerous icefalls. We placed Advance Base below a little rock buttress on the north side of the glacier at 4840 meters on May 26 and were at last ready to go climbing.

We were more a climbing meet than an expedition in the traditional sense. I had invited my five partners from Britain as three climbing pairs who could tackle freely any of the many peaks as the whim took them. We would climb alpine-style, carrying tents and food to try to reach objectives in a single push. The Indians, led by Harish Kapadia, had Panch Chuli II as their goal and planned to climb it in traditional style with a small team of high-altitude porters and a limited amount of fixed rope.

Graham Little from Scotland and I were the first to move up to Advance Base and were immediately attracted to the peak that soared up on the southeast side of the valley. We later named the double-summitted mountain Sahadev for the second-youngest brother of the Pandavas. Sahadev West is marked on the map as P 5782. We set out at 1:45 A.M. on May 28, reaching the foot of the steep northwest snow arête at dawn. We pulled over a terrifying bergschrund and reached the 5750-meter summit of Sahadev East by eight in the morning to be

rewarded with magnificent views of Panch Chuli II in the immediate foreground and Nanda Devi, one of the most beautiful mountains in the world, in the background.

The other four members of the British team, Stephen Venables, Dick Renshaw, Victor Saunders and American transplant Stephen Sustad decided to traverse Rajrambha, the second highest peak in the area. They spent five days climbing its long east ridge, taking in an unclimbed 6000-meter peak on the way. Venables and Saunders managed to fall though cornices, Saunders also became a mobile lightning conductor when they were hit by a violent thunder storm, but they succeeded in crossing the peak and getting back down the south face to return to Advance Base.

Meanwhile, the Indian team had found a route up a shelf leading from the upper Uttari Balati Glacier to the Balati Plateau and established Camp I on a shoulder at the start of the plateau at 5760 meters. On June 5, Muslim Contractor, Monesh Devjani and sirdar Pasang Bodh moved up to Camp II SW at 6120 meters on the southwest col, supported by Harish Kapadia, Bhupesh Ashar and porter Yograj. The summit team fixed 100 meters of rope on the lower rock step that day. On June 6, they established Camp III SW on the southwest ridge at 6400 meters. June 7 dawned cloudy and windy, but they set out at 4:45 A.M. and in two hours reached the foot of the upper rock band at 6600 meters. Above the band, they climbed steep ice to the junction of the southwest and west ridges at 6800 meters. The route to the summit from there had stretches of hard ice and huge cornices overhanging the Meola Glacier to the east. Using protection, they climbed slowly, reaching the summit at 10:15 A.M. in heavy cloud. On the descent they had difficulty locating their tent in a white-out with strong winds. Because of the unsettled weather, no second summit bid was made.

Little and I accompanied the Indian team to Camp I to try a new route on the only unclimbed ridge on Panch Chuli II. On June 5, we branched left onto the upper Balati Plateau through a complex crevasse system to establish Camp II W at 6120 meters at the foot of the west ridge. On the 6th, we pressed on up unrelenting hard ice in an exhausting 14-hour day, trying to find somewhere flat enough to pitch our tent. We had to belay the whole arête and at 6400 meters were forced onto the west face to avoid a sérac barrier. Progress was often slow on unstable snow. It wasn't until 3:30 P.M. that we found a possible tent site below a sérac wall. On June 7, we worked our way below a series of sérac walls and crevasses on the upper west ridge to camp early in the afternoon at the bergschrund below the summit cone at 6730 meters. It had been a short day, but we wanted to be in position to reach the summit early with a good chance of a view and to be able to leave our sacks behind. It snowed heavily all night but dawned fine, cold and windy. We set out at six A.M., joined the southwest ridge 150 meters below the top and reached the summit at seven A.M. on June 8 to enjoy a magnificent view of Gurla Mandhata in Tibet and Api and Nampa in Nepal to the east. We returned to the tent and crossed to the southwest ridge to descend to the southwest col, where we received a wonderful reception from the



PLATE 2

Photo by Graham Little

**View from Summit of Panch Chuli II.
Rajramba is in the right middle and
Nanda Devi in the background.**

Indian team. We descended to Base Camp in deteriorating weather. This marked the end of the Uttari Balati Glacier phase of the expedition.

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After only three days' rest, we set out for the Pyunshani valley, crossing the shoulder of the lower part of the southwest ridge of Panch Chuli II, through dense pathless forest, to drop down into a hidden valley. The weather, by this time, seemed to be breaking down into a monsoon pattern, with wet, cloudy days and warm nights. We were very nearly out of food. We had already experienced one accident when Vijay Kothari, one of the Indian members, had slipped on his way up to Advance Base and had broken his ankle. He had to be evacuated by helicopter. Two others, Graham Little and Bhupesh Ashar, had to return home because of work commitments.

We reached the foot of the Panch Chuli Glacier and camped beside a stream in a birch forest at 3320 meters on June 16. We had just six days before we had to be back down at the camp to be met by three porters promised by Harish Kapadia. He and the three remaining Indians were to explore the Panchali Glacier and climb some minor peaks before going back to pay of the porters and finish up the expedition in Munsiri. The timing was tight but we had just enough time to tackle one of the unclimbed Panch Chuli peaks. We set out up the Panch Chuli Glacier on the 17th, carrying four days' food. We camped near the head of the lower part of the glacier, immediately below Panch Chuli IV, and picked out a line up its south ridge. We couldn't see Panch Chuli V, which was hidden around the corner, and so, late in the afternoon, we walked up the glacier to where it came into sight. The second highest of the Panch Chuli peaks looked challenging and alluring. Its south ridge seemed to offer a feasible route to the summit, though there was some dead ground between the top of the icefall immediately in front of us and the ridge itself. There was little discussion. It was a unanimous decision. We planned to set out at two A.M. the next morning, but as we melted snow for breakfast tea, distant thunder heralded a storm, which reached us a few minutes later. Rain pattered on the roofs of our two tents and we went back to sleep, to be woken by Renshaw three hours later with the news that the weather had cleared.

By 4:30, in the early light of dawn, we set out for the first icefall. Bypassing it on its left bank, we plodded up a long snow corridor to its top. Climbing unroped, the others quickly pulled ahead of me. They were younger than I. I had had a shorter period of rest after my ascent of Panch Chuli II. At the top of this first icefall, the glacier opened out and easy slopes led to the next barrier, a tumbling icefall fed by glaciers coming down from the south of Panch Chuli V. We were beginning to realize that the dead ground, which we had dismissed so lightly the previous afternoon, was both more extensive and more difficult than we had expected.

A snow gully leading up to the south retaining wall of the icefall gave the possibility of bypassing the icefall itself. The start was guarded by a waterfall pouring over rock. Saunders, reknowned for his ability in wet and horrid places, was volunteered to try it. Plunging into the waterfall, he swam up over the initial

overhang and then teetered across water-swept rocks to reach the snow. The rest of us followed up the rope he fixed, able to stay comparatively dry. Another snow slope seemed endless but we reached the top of the gully on a little shoulder at 5000 meters. The view was not encouraging. We had to cross a heavily crevassed glacier, bristling with sérac walls, to reach another fearsome icefall, which in turn led up to the high basin below Panch Chuli V. It was becoming a complex and potentially dangerous approach.

We used another gully to bypass the third icefall, but it was four P.M. before we reached the upper basin and camped by a huge crevasse at 5400 meters. We had been on the go for twelve hours and were tired. It snowed that night and we had another delayed start. We discussed whether to go on or not. I was in favor of retreat. The weather was unsettled. We had only two days' food left and still a long way to go. The others were of sterner stuff and we finally decided to move up that day to the crest of the ridge just above the south col of Panch Chuli V. If the weather improved, we would be close enough to the top to make a bid for the summit and if it was bad, we still had time to retreat.

The snow in the basin was appallingly soft, but we plodded slowly up to where we could strike up the steep slope to the ridge crest. Here we dug a most spectacular campsite, cutting away a cornice so that the tents were perched on the crest, with a 2000-meter sheer drop on the east side and 500 meters of very steep snow down the other side to the basin on the west. That afternoon, with a huge rumble, a massive avalanche crashed down the west side of Panch Chuli V and swept the lower part of the basin we had walked up that morning. It was a dangerous place indeed.

I took on the chore of preparing breakfast each morning. We set the alarm for 1:45 A.M. There was still cloud around, but we at least got a glimpse of the stars. As I waited for the water to boil, I made my decision. The buttress above the camp was 200 meters high, of steep rock broken by snow-and-ice slopes. The map showed a kilometer from the top of the buttress to the summit. It was a long way to cover in a day. I was slower than the others and a team of five was much more cumbersome than a foursome. I decided to wait for them in the tent.

I snuggled back into my sleeping bag with a sense of relief as they set off, leaving the tents at 3:30. I looked out from time to time to see that their progress was very slow. They went around a corner, out of sight, at ten A.M. and were still some way from the top of the buttress. Sustad described the climbing as some of the best and hardest mixed climbing he had ever experienced in the Himalaya.

They reached the top of the buttress at midday. By that time, the weather had closed in and it was snowing and blowing. The climbing was much harder than they had anticipated, with ice for most of the way. It became obvious that they would be benighted. Despite talk of retreat, they kept on and reached the summit at three P.M. With no view, they started back down immediately, but downward progress was desperately slow. It was eight o'clock when they reached the top of the buttress. The iced-up ropes, stiff as hawsers, frequently jammed when they pulled down the doubled ropes. But the weather began to clear and it was at

PLATE 3

Photo by Graham Little

Behind Panch Chuli IV on the left rises PANCH CHULI V. The ridge climbed is on the right skyline.



eleven, when I first saw them from camp, that they also saw my welcoming head torch signal.

They worked slowly and methodically. Sustad later told me, "It was bloody cold, but in a strange kind of way, quite enjoyable. We took it slowly, backing up anchors all the way down, trying to make sure we didn't make a mistake."

It was 3:30 in the morning. They had been on the go for 24 hours and on their next-to-last abseil. In another half hour they would have been in the comparative safety of the camp, gulping down tea. Sustad, Renshaw and Saunders had all abseiled down. Venables removed the back-up anchors, which might be needed later on, and so he was now totally dependent on the angle piton driven into a horizontal crack in the rock. It seemed totally solid and had withstood the strain of the previous three abseils.

He started and had slid down the rope about 20 feet when the piton pulled out. He hurtled down, sparks flying from where his crampons struck the rock. He was sure that it was his end. As he flashed past the others, they also were convinced he'd be killed. Even so, Saunders lunged for the loose rope, which burned though his clothes and gloves as it came tight. What saved Venables from a further 300-meter fall to the glacier below, however, was the way the rope, which Renshaw had been feeding through the next anchor, coiled itself around Renshaw's leg.

Venables was hanging at the end of the rope, on the snow, after a fall of nearly 100 meters. There was complete silence for two minutes. Renshaw shouted down. No reply! He shouted again and heard a weak call. "I've broken my legs." It seemed a miracle that Venables was alive at all.

With his weight on the rope, they couldn't abseil. Saunders volunteered to climb down the rope, using prusik knots—a slow but safe method. Once he reached Venables, he tried to assess the injuries. His right leg was bleeding from a compound fracture and his left ankle was sprained or broken. There was no question of getting him across to the tents. We could only lower him straight down the slope and were lucky that there was a straight run-out to the glacier basin below.

Whilst Renshaw and Saunders organized a means of lowering Stephen down the snow slope, Sustad traversed the steep snow to the camp where I was waiting, desperately worried, to learn what had happened. Sustad and I dismantled the camp and carrying very heavy rucksacks, also started down the slope. We were unroped, since Renshaw and Saunders needed both ropes to lower Venables. Sustad and I were going to go ahead, find a safe campsite in the basin and pitch camp.

I was out in front, about 100 meters above the bergschrund. I was peering around to try to find a safe way past it when my foothold in the soft snow collapsed. Instinctively I grabbed my ice tools, which were planted in the snow, but they pulled straight out. I then got hold of my ice axe in both hands for a self-arrest, but the pick just cut through the snow. As I gathered speed, my crampons caught in the snow and I flipped over. Suddenly, I was cart-wheeling down the slope. I was vaguely conscious of being in mid air. I had shot over the

bergschrund and was bouncing and rolling again. I tried to adopt a fetal position, hugging my arms and drawing up my legs, to avoid damaging my limbs. The motion became slower. And then it was still. Winded, frightened, pinned down by my heavy rucksack, I think I lay there for three or four minutes. Sustad, looking down at me, expected the worst. I flexed my arms and legs. They seemed OK, but I became aware of something wet on my face and of blood on the snow in front of me. I felt my face, which was sore over my left cheek, but the bone seemed solid. I shouted, "I'm OK," and struggled to escape from my rucksack and stand up.

I directed Sustad to a safe course over the bergschrund and continued down to find a safe site for a camp. It wasn't easy. The basin was quite narrow and surrounded by steep snow slopes with big avalanche cones at their bottom where fresh snow had sloughed off. We picked a spot almost in line with Venables's descent in a place where there was no avalanche debris. Having pitched the tent, we climbed back up to help the others lower Venables over the bergschrund. He was amazingly brave. The slightest tug or push on his damaged leg was agonizing, and yet he never complained. He was also wet and cold from being lowered down the snow.

As the angle eased, it became more difficult. We used one of the tents as a makeshift stretcher and hauled him down slowly. It was about midday when at last we reached the tent, were able to put Venables into a warm sleeping bag, feed him with hot drinks and inspect his wounds. There was a gaping hole just below his right knee and the knee itself was swollen and badly damaged. His left ankle seemed less severely damaged, but his chest was painful.

We assessed the situation. We now had practically no food and had been going for 36 hours with very little to eat. We could never get Venables back down the route of ascent and his only hope of rescue was by helicopter. Could a helicopter get in because of the altitude and the enclosed nature of the basin? We decided that Sustad and I would descend the next day to Base Camp and I would go all the way to Munsiairy to start coordinating the rescue. Sustad would open a supply line from Base Camp for Renshaw and Saunders, who would stay to look after Stephen.

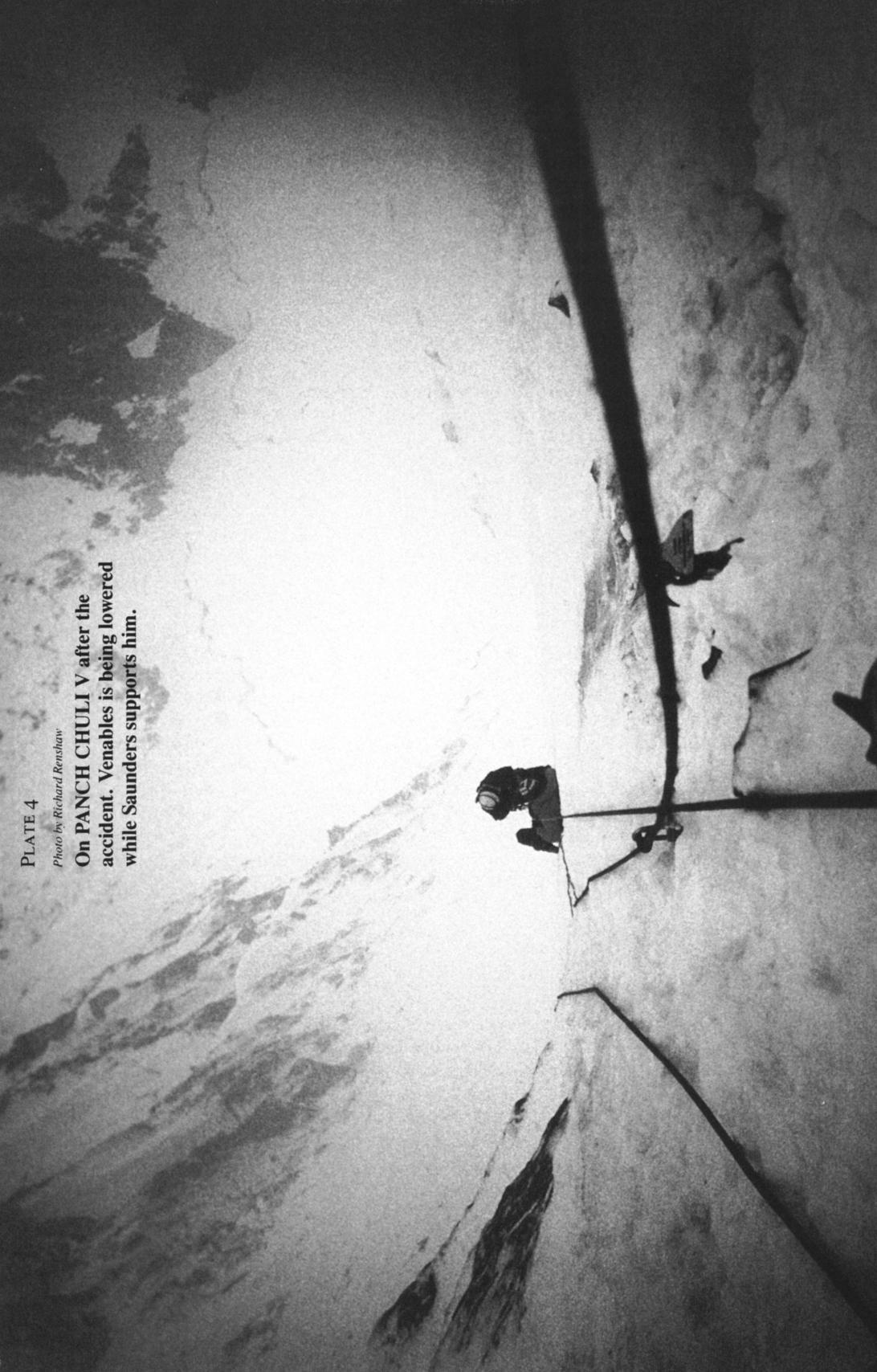
The next day, June 22, Sustad and I staggered exhausted into Base Camp at two P.M. to find the three porters Harish had promised to leave behind. They fed us huge quantities of rice, potato and tea. It started raining at four o'clock that afternoon and continued all night and into the next morning. I couldn't help worrying about the others high on the mountain. They were all at high risk of being swept by avalanche in the event of a heavy snowfall.

I set out in torrential rain at 5:30 on the morning of June 23, accompanied by Harsingh Sr., one of our porters. Initially there was no path and the route was like an assault course through steep water-logged jungle. We kept going through the day and made it down to the roadhead in nine hours to raise the alarm through the police radio net that same afternoon.

PLATE 4

Photo by Richard Renshaw

On PANCH CHULI V after the accident. Venables is being lowered while Saunders supports him.



The response of the Indian Air Force was magnificent. The following morning, they sent a helicopter up from the nearest air base some hundred miles away, but there was too much cloud and they could not reach the campsite.

Meanwhile, Sustad went back up the mountain with only a half-day's rest. He took with him one of the porters, who had little snow experience and was not acclimatized. As a result, Sustad climbed the first gully alone, carrying a heavy load to leave the food and gas cylinders on the shoulder at its top as they had arranged. "I don't think I've ever felt so tired," he commented.

We had agreed that Saunders and Renshaw would go down to pick up the supplies on the morning of June 25. "It was one of those occasions when instinct takes over," Saunders told me. "Although it would have been logical to wait till the early morning when the snow was better frozen, we set out at 6:30 P.M. on the 24th. We had had practically nothing to eat for four days and were so weak that if the food hadn't been there, I don't think we would have had the strength to get back up again." They collected the food, had their first real meal in four days and started back up. "Starting so early saved our lives," Saunders continued. "We'd just crossed the dangerous section where all the avalanche debris was, when what was left of the sérac on the west face collapsed. A huge avalanche swept our tracks all the way to the bottom of the basin."

They got back in the early morning, fed Venables and heard the helicopter again, but it could not get through the broken clouds. The helicopter returned in the early afternoon. The clouds had cleared and this time it was able to reach the basin. It was a fine piece of flying by Squadron Leader P. Jaiswal and Flight Lieutenant P.K. Sharma. It took them about a half an hour and several tries before they managed to maneuver the helicopter with one skid on the tent platform and the blades swishing inches away from the snow slope. Renshaw lay on the tent and gear to prevent it from being blown away by the slip-stream, while Saunders handled Venables to the open door of the helicopter.

Saunders said, "It was desperate. I heaved Stephen up onto the skid and pushed his upper body into the helicopter. He was screaming in pain, but I just had to ignore it. I got my arms under his legs and just heaved him in. The crew couldn't do a thing. They were both fully occupied in keeping the thing airborne."

Sharma told me afterwards that it was the most difficult pick-up they had ever completed and that they were nearly forced to turn back. Had they done so, it would have been desperately difficult to have rescued Venables.

I shall never forget the vast relief I felt when we saw the red jacketed figure of Venables as the helicopter flew towards the pad in Munsiri. Harish and I hugged each other in our relief. Three days of hellish worry were nearly over. I was not able to relax, however, for another two days until Sustad, Saunders and Renshaw reached the roadhead.

It had been a close thing. Not just Stephen Venables, but all five of us, were lucky to have come out alive. We had undoubtedly pushed our luck—continuing in worsening weather, running our food down to the minimum,



PLATE 5

Photo by Richard Renshaw

**Helicopter picking up Venables at
5600 meters on Panch Chuli V.**

trying to snatch one more climb at the end of a successful expedition. Yet this is the very nature of climbing. Without that element of boldness, very few Himalayan climbs, certainly ones tackled alpine-style, would be completed. We had got away with our lives, had had a successful expedition in terms of peaks climbed, but even more important, had had a very happy one, with the entire team getting on well together. In spite of everything, it was one of the best trips I have ever had in the mountains.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Panch Chuli Range, Kumaon, India.

ASCENTS: Sahadev East, 5750 meters, 18,865 feet. First Ascent, Northwest Snow Rib, May 28, 1992 (Bonington, Little).

Rajrambha, 6537 meters, 21,447 feet. New Route, Traverse of East Ridge over Menaka Peak (6000 meters) and down West Ridge and South Face, Summit reached on June 5, 1992 (Renshaw, Saunders, Sustad, Venables).

Panch Chuli II, 6904 meters, 22,650 feet. Fourth Ascent of Peak and Second of Route, Southwest Ridge, June 7, 1992 (Contractor, Devjani, Pasang Bodh).

Panch Chuli II. New Route, West Spur, June 8, 1992 (Bonington, Little).

Panchali Chuli, 5220 meters, 17,126 feet and Draupadi, 5250 meters, 17,225 feet. Both First Ascents via Panchali Glacier, June 20, 1992 (Kapadia, Contractor, Devjani, Kubram, Prakash Chand).

Panch Chuli V, 6437 meters, 21,120 feet. First Ascent, South Ridge, June 20, 1992 (Renshaw, Sustad, Saunders, Venables).

PERSONNEL: Harish Kapadia, co-leader, Muslim Contractor, Monesh Devjani, Bhupesh Ashar, Vijay Kothari, Wing Commander Anil Srivastava, liaison officer, *Indians*; Christian Bonington, co-leader, Graham Little, Richard Renshaw, Victor Saunders, Stephen Venables, *British*; Stephen Sustad, *American living in Britain*; porters Pasang Bodh, Yograj, Kubram, Prakash Chand, Suratram, Sundersingh, Revatram, Harsingh, Sr. and Harsingh, Jr.