Talung Peak

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Translated by H. Adams Carter

WHAT went on before the German Himalayan Expedition 1964 was the same as with other expeditions: high hopes, intense expectations, obstacles, disappointments. It finally seemed in the summer of 1963 that our objective, route of approach and personnel had become settled. The field of operations would be the mountain chain that rises south of Kanchenjunga along the frontier between Nepal and Sikkim to heights of more than 23,000 feet. The most rewarding goals were 24,115-foot Talung Peak and Kabru IV of approximately the same altitude. Both peaks had been the scene of previous attempts—Talung four times and Kabru IV twice—but they still remained unclimbed.

Our personnel at that time included Erhard Erdmann, deputy leader, and his wife, Ruth, of Stuttgart-Untertürkheim; Dr. Klaus Ekkerlein, expedition doctor from Munich; Dieter Mardiecke of Ludwigsburg; Franz Lindner of Krems, Austria; Lee Donaghey of Menlo Park, California; and the writer of Redwood City, California who at fifty years of age was a little old for the Himalaya but would serve as leader. A preliminary permission to climb Talung Peak and Kabru IV was obtained from the Nepalese government and it appeared that time would take care of the rest of the arrangements.

A series of obstacles began with a severe mountain accident to Dr. Ekkerlein, which made his participation in the expedition impossible. Then we were surprised by news from the Indian government that our route starting from Darjeeling lay within the "Inner Line" and so could not be used. After a short period of confusion, we began to work out a new line of approach which left from Jogbani, and simultaneously made an appeal to the Indian government for an exception. Though Jogbani lay much further from our objective than Darjeeling, there was no other choice.

Departure day approached. We managed to gain the services of Dr. Bernhard Kubanek of Freiburg i. B. as doctor, but we still lacked permission from Nepal and India. Literally at the last hour we were granted

approval by Nepal (we are still waiting for an answer from India) and the bulk of the expedition was set in motion. For various reasons my departure was delayed for a week. When I finally arrived in Dharan, the last fairly big town at the foot of the mountains, the expedition had already left three days before. I had expected this, and indeed hoped for it since time was precious. Alone it should not be hard to catch up. When I asked for the gear left behind for me on the approach march, I was shown a tent and a packframe. I could hardly walk the 150 miles to Base Camp in a business suit and street shoes. Had my companions played me a joke or did they want to try out my inventiveness? Or was it a survival test? I was still contemplating when help came in the person of an American helicopter pilot, Jerry McEntee. He offered to ferry me gratis to a spot near which the expedition might possibly be at that moment. It was problematical that I should find my companions, but I had little choice. I bought four days' food and crawled under my mosquito netting to try to sleep.

In the first uncertain light of a new day I stepped into the waiting helicopter. Moments later the sleeping lowlands of Nepal sank below us. I felt like a paratrooper about to jump behind enemy lines. In just a few moments my last bridge to civilization would collapse.

Jerry took off right after landing me. I stood alone in a harvested field with my luggage, suitcase and pack—and felt so alone. This feeling of solitude quickly vanished as I was surrounded by the entire population of the nearest village. They hemmed me in so tight that I could not move. With difficulty I got them to understand my need for a porter. Finally a creature of undefined sex agreed to carry my suitcase for five rupees and took off with incredible speed. It was hard to follow but the direction seemed correct.

After several hours on the heels of my porteress (I had meanwhile decided she was female), we suddenly bumped into a foot path on which the expedition must be. My quick elation did not last long. Would I find them on the second or third day? Recognizing my distress, the porteress demanded more pay. I had no choice but to give her another five rupees. All at once I saw figures before me carrying boxes on their backs. Running as fast as I could after them, I deciphered: DHE 1964 (Deutsche Himalaya Expedition 1964). It sounds ridiculous and banal but this was certainly the happiest moment of my life. Minutes later I greeted my astonished friends.

At this point the expedition looked like a stately army procession of more than a hundred men. Aside from the six sahibs and "Memsahib," there was the Nepalese liaison officer, Khem Bahadur Karki, and the six

Sherpas, Nima Dorje, Tenzing Nindra, Pemba Sundar, Tsering Tarkay, Lakpa Tsering and Jabyang Tensing with their sirdar, Ang Tsering. Nima Dorje, who had climbed Dhaulagiri with the Swiss, was cook. Tenzing Nindra, who at twenty-three was the youngest of the Sherpas, had been outstanding the year before on the American Everest Expedition and was to play an important role with us. Fifteen Sherpa porters from central Nepal had been hired to carry loads up the ill-reputed Yalung Glacier. Barefoot, in rags and without any need for normal comforts, 70 Dharan coolies had the job of carrying more than two tons of equipment to Base Camp. They were under the charge of a lama, who as such exerted great influence over them.

The next days went uneventfully if you discount the usual discomforts of a Himalayan expedition such as blistered feet and diarrhea. The routine became established. At five in the morning a Sherpa came to the tent to serve the sahibs tea. Then you had to get out of the sleeping bag to be underway not later than seven. At first the column stayed well closed up, but during the course of the day spread out more and more. By early afternoon, when the head was several hours in front of the tail, it was time to pick the campsite; it would be dark before the last stragglers arrived. Camp fires were kindled, the coolies cooked their rice and devoured it with their hands. If there was a brook nearby, the sahibs bathed. A porter cut a flute out of a bamboo cane (it took him less than a quarter of an hour) and played. Day had ended.

On the tenth day, in Hellok, the Dharan porters had had enough and wanted to return home. They were paid off and the head man inquired in the surrounding villages for new porters. The newly hired crowd made quite a contrast to the old. At least half were of Tibetan origin and wore clothing suitable to the highland climate. Three days later we reached Ghunsa, 11,000 feet, in a driving snowstorm. The town, about ten miles below the border, was of definite Tibetan character. Everywhere prayer flags fluttered; prayer wheels and chortens raised their unrealistic, barbaric forms on the outskirts. By now the porters had had enough and were paid off. It was harder and harder to get a sufficient number.

In order to reach Base Camp on the Yalung Glacier, we had to cross a 17,500-foot pass, the Lapsong La, which lay deep under snow. In several days' travel with camps at 13,300 feet and right below the pass, we crossed the height, with sahibs, Sherpas and porters carrying equally heavy loads. The weather pattern had changed in the past days. Each morning the sun shone for a couple of hours. Regularly at noon it began to snow; old tracks completely disappeared by morning. Thus it would continue with few exceptions for the rest of the expedition. On April 24

the last load arrived at our preliminary base camp, "Lapsong Camp," which lay beside the Yalung Glacier at 14,100 feet.

Lapsong Camp lay below our peak, which, some ten miles away, was still a considerable distance in this difficult terrain. Several days of the approach were left. We should still doubtless have to establish a number of camps before our summit assault could even begin. On April 24 our advance reconnaissance found an ideal spot for our real Base Camp, which was marked on our maps as Oktang. If we had imagined that this was to be a hamlet, we were grossly disappointed. All we found there were a few rusty cans from previous expeditions. Oktang lies on the true right side of the Yalung while Talung and Kabru are on the left. Our next problem was to traverse the glacier, about which the English had written, "Not to be driven wild by the Yalung Glacier, you have to be a superman." Along its whole length, scree of every size, from the smallest pebble to house-sized boulders, lay unconsolidated thanks to the constant fast motion of the glacier. Wherever you set foot, everything was loose and you never knew whether there were feet or inches of scree between your boots and the ice of the glacier. Moreover, the surface of the glacier was not smooth but divided into a labyrinth of hundred-foot-deep valleys and trenches, often separated by knife-edged ridges.

Without going into details about our crossing, let me merely say that we finished the transport to an advanced base camp at 16,750 feet on May 1. The new camp was just below the snow line. We had snow meltwater for our cooking and a few dry grassy spots for our tents. What more could one wish?

Since the route was not obvious, the next day three independent ropes set out on separate reconnaissance. The information gathered was conclusive and cleared up all doubts as to route. One of the reconnaissance parties had moreover found, at 18,375 feet, a suitable site for Camp I, a small rock island which split the glacier and thus was *relatively* avalanche-safe. Was it really safe? Certainly not! But is anywhere really avalanche-safe on a big Himalayan peak? We made a fixed rule, namely that only a certain number of sahibs and Sherpas should be together in the same camp, never the whole expedition.

During the next five days while we were setting up Camp I, our Sherpa coolies showed again their incalculable worth. We had never expected to to be able to use them at this height. Their equipment, which they had supplied themselves, was primitive and the weather most of the time was very inclement. It is hard to say what is the most remarkable attribute of these people: their unbelievable stamina and toughness, their reliability or their never-failing good humor. Though from our point of view they were

insufficiently clad, they carried heavy loads all day and slept at night on the bare ground at temperatures well below freezing. A European or an American who goes on an expedition to the Himalaya is considered by his compatriots as a paragon of toughness. I must admit that compared to our Sherpa coolies we are soft and degenerate.

While Camp I was being stocked, four sahibs, Lindner, Dr. Kubanek, Donaghey, Mardiecke, and four Sherpas made a new advance to find a suitable spot for Camp II. The first obstacle was the 1500-foot ice fall right above Camp I, but this was easier than expected and required only a single fixed rope for future parties. The eight men found a good site for Camp II at 20,350 feet on a small snow terrace. They pitched the tent and started to excavate an ice cave, in this rarefied air a lengthy and energetic undertaking. Once finished, a cave has advantages over a tent: it is warmer and offers better protection from the wind, and fluttering of the tent wall cannot rob the climber of his sleep.

The next days were filled with load-carrying to new Camp II. Food, stoves, fuel, another tent, foam-rubber mattresses, oxygen in case of sickness; all arrived on the backs of Sherpas and sahibs until the supply was adequate. Almost all, including the Sherpas, showed symptoms of the lack of acclimatization: loss of appetite, sleeplessness, headaches, lassitude and breathlessness.

The next step forward was the establishment of Camp III at 22,150 feet on May 11 by Lindner, Dr. Kubanek and four Sherpas. The weather was, as usual, bad. The camp consisted of a four-man tent, for which a platform had to be dug on the 40° slope. It was some 650 feet below the Talung Saddle, the lowest col between Talung Peak and Kabru IV. We thought of this as the high camp for attempts on both peaks. As it turned out, is was ill-suited for attempts on either peak.

The first attempt on Talung Peak by Lindner and Dr. Kubanek came two days later. Conditions were anything but favorable. New snow lay on the heights and the weather was as unsettled as ever. The attempt came within a hair's breadth of catastrophe. By late afternoon the pair had almost reached a point just below the nearly 23,000-foot south summit of Talung. Donaghey, who was watching the scene with field glasses tells that the second on the rope, Dr. Kubanek, suddenly stopped and remained stock still for ten minutes. Then both turned to descend. They advanced slowly and by dark were still far distant from Camp III. Could they reach it in the dark?

The situation in Camp II was also critical. On May 13 those in Camp I heard Ruth Erdmann radio for help. Her husband had been lying in the tent for several days with an oozing, infected toe. His leg discol-

ored and began to swell. Both Tenzing Nindra and Jabyang Tensing lay sick in the same camp. I decided to climb to Camp II with the three available Sherpas. Although Mardiecke had not felt particularly well of late, he insisted on coming along.

Preparations took until noon. Halfway up, we caught sight of figures in the mist. It was Ruth Erdmann with the sick Sherpas. While we all rested together, Ang Tsering rubbed his numb feet and decided to turn back, fearing frostbite. Mardiecke, who was exhausted, accompanied him. After a new division of loads, I continued on with the two remaining Sherpas and arrived at dusk dead tired at Camp II. That was the day of the summit attempt.

We spent anxious moments the next morning before four tiny figures appeared, moving slowly down the ice slopes above Camp II. Thank God! Our friends and their two Sherpas were still alive and descending. Dr. Kubanek without a pack came with slow and difficult steps, leaning on a ski pole. He announced that the day before he had suddenly felt a strong sharp pain in his lung. Going on was out of the question. Return to Camp III became a struggle for life. Luckily the Sherpas had lit a guiding light in the tent. Lindner was also completely exhausted and discouraged. He told of belly-deep new snow, avalanche danger, wind-slabs that had broken away under his feet. He wanted to descend to a low camp and await there the end of the expedition. He was convinced that the summit was unattainable this year.

Though sick himself, Dr. Kubanek examined Erhard Erdmann and ordered his immediate evacuation to Base Camp. A rescue sled was improvised from foam-rubber mattresses and a bivouac sack. The Sherpas dragged the patient down the glacier, but below the snow-line the work became much more difficult. The unpleasant terrain varied between steep scree, slabs, grass slopes and sheer ice, the worst possible nightmare for a rescue. The only possible means of transportation were the backs of the Sherpa coolies, who again performed miracles. They took twenty-minute turns before setting the patient down, a remarkable achievement at this altitude and on this terrain.

The next day was the first with good weather lasting for more than a few hours, which gave us new hope for success. In the afternoon Mardiecke, Ang Tsering, Jabyang Tensing and Lakpa Tsering arrived at Camp II with supplies. Lee Donaghey and I would push through the next day to Camp III.

It was late, nine-thirty, the next morning before we were ready to leave. The old tracks were covered and the slopes lay under knee-deep snow. Since the Sherpas' loads were heavier than ours, Donaghey and I

broke trail. An inhuman exertion, every step was torture. Even before we reached Camp III, it was time for Tsering Tharkay and Lapka Tsering to turn back, as only four could sleep there. A hundred yards below the camp they both threw down their loads and descended. We two fought our way upwards with lagging energy and finally reached the blue Jamet tent just before six. Ang Tsering and Jabyang Tensing completed their heroic achievements by returning to retrieve the loads left by the other two Sherpas.

The next day, May 17, dawned inauspiciously. Donaghey had a high fever. Ang Tsering had vomited in the night. (What annoyed me most was that he had used one of our cook pots!) Jabyang Tensing lay apathetically in his sleeping bag with a headache and sore throat. A Sherpa who does not eat when something is available is really sick! Outside the wind howled and snowflakes, driven nearly horizontally out of the low, leaden sky, beat at the thin nylon tent. Despite the weather the Sherpas decided to descend that same day. Lee Donaghey was doubtless risking his life to stay here, but it struck me that the risk was even greater to take him down to a lower camp. Towards evening the storm increased in violence. The drifting snow pressing on the tent walls reduced our already cramped space. Half unconscious Donaghey lay in his sleeping bag, breathing oxygen and now and again sipping tea. Attempts to free the tent of snow were doomed to failure.

One of the worst nights I had ever experienced began. How long could the sheltering tent withstand the blast of the wind? What if the film of nylon broke? We should stand no chance. Now and again the howling gale rose to hurricane strength. Was that an avalanche which would end it all? No, it was only the storm sweeping over the ridge. No avalanche fell and the tent stood! A new day dawned. The storm abated and I started to dig a second tent platform. In a lull I climbed a little distance towards Talung Peak to test snow conditions. The snow had packed and breaking trail was much easier.

Though Donaghey was still sick, his fever had dropped somewhat. In the afternoon we were surprised by the arrival of Lindner, Mardiecke and the Sherpas, Lakpa Tsering and Tenzing Nindra. Lakpa descended immediately with Donaghey. A new problem arose. With only a single Sherpa left, we could not establish another higher camp. Our only chance for the summit was a lightning attack from Camp III.

In the morning I started to cook at four o'clock. Melting snow, cooking, dressing, putting on boots and crampons, roping up, were so time-consuming that we were not off before eight. As was normal at that hour, the weather was good, but the cold wind blew strongly from the south-

west. Tenzing Nindra decided to join the summit assault and roped to Lindner. Mardiecke and I made up the second rope. Before I gave up attempts to use my frozen movie camera and set out, the other two, moving well, had a considerable headstart. As we climbed upward, the gap increased. This time Lindner, unlike the first attempt, kept to the side of the ridge, where it was possible to climb at an even angle and without technical difficulties.

At noon the usual bad weather set in. It began to snow, mist gathered and it was hard to see the tracks of the first rope. For a while I followed the crampon holes in the very hard snow, but finally lost these, too. We were standing somewhat undecided as to what to do not far from the spot where the slope began to flatten when two figures loomed out of the fog. It was the first rope descending from the top! Lindner told us that they had reached the 24,115-foot summit moments before the clouds had closed in. It was three P.M. at the time of our meeting and Lindner's altimeter showed us to be still 400 feet below the summit. Was there any sense in going on exhausted through the storm and clouds? Luckily reason pointed out that it would doubtless be a one-way trip, and we decided to give up and descend with our companions to Camp III.

Hopes of attempting Kabru IV came to nothing. Lindner was sick the next morning with the same symptoms as Dr. Kubanek, and Mardiecke had had enough of life in a cramped tent filled with drifting snow, a wet sleeping bag and a monotonous diet. For days he had been dreaming of the fleshpots, good beer and pretty girls aboard the homeward-bound ship. We had no choice but to descend. Leaving our precious oxygen, used only for illness, we descended without a halt to Camp I. Camp II had already been evacuated and in Camp I we found just Lee Donaghey. When on May 21 we reached Advanced Base, we were greeted by card-playing Sherpas, but no tents or food; reason enough to keep on going to Base Camp at Oktang.

Dr. Kubanek and Erdmann had meanwhile completely recovered and Lindner's illness was less serious than it had at first appeared. Only the lesser problems remained, for example where to get porters and food. The food boxes from Germany were nearly empty and buying anything in Ghunsa seemed a vain hope. The porters who were to return to us did not arrive on schedule. What is "time" in Nepal?

The expedition waited and starved. Finally someone got the idea of loading the expedition supplies on yaks. Yaks were at hand, by the hundreds, and their owners were delighted at the prospect of 18 rupees per yak per day. On May 28 the expedition ground into motion with its

members somewhat weak but determined to reach the edge of civilization within two weeks.

Finally the promised porters arrived. They caught up with the expedition in forced marches, despite exuberant, many-day celebrations. Meanwhile the sahibs had become accustomed to coolie food. Rice in the morning, rice in the evening and little in between. Now and again a chick, a couple of eggs or a potato. Several of us swore never to eat rice ever again in our whole lives. On June 10 we arrived at Dharan. We tasted the first foaming beer in the officers' mess of the British Gurkha Camp. Where was Dieter Mardiecke? He had waited for weeks for this moment, but now he had not yet arrived. Nevertheless we could not wait for him. We toasted our hosts, the victorious rope, everyone who had contributed to the expedition's success. Dieter Mardiecke, poor fellow, was still thirsty, but he will catch up.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Nepal-Sikkim frontier, south of Kangchenjunga.

ASCENT: First ascent of Talung Peak, 24,115 feet, May 19, 1964 (Lindner, Tenzing Nindra).

PERSONNEL: Richard Hechtel, *leader;* Erhard and Ruth Erdmann, Dr. Bernhard Kubanek, Dieter Mardiecke, *Germans;* Franz Lindner, *Austrian;* Lee Donaghey, *American.*