

## THE ASCENT OF CHOMOLHARI

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**T**HE first (and only) ascent of Chomolhari, 23,997 ft., is described in *A. J.* 49. 203, and in *H. J.* 10. 126; it also forms a considerable section in F. Spencer Chapman's *Helvellyn to Himalaya*. For nearly thirty years the ascent, on May 21, 1937, by Spencer Chapman and Pasang Dawa has been accepted unchallenged; then in 1966 two journals proceeded to express doubts.

In *The Mountain World*, 1964-65 (published 1966), p. 94, August Gansser writes:

'Chomolhari was climbed in 1937 from the Tibetan side, via its south ridge, by Spencer Chapman, in circumstances so hazardous as to throw doubt on the successful ascent of its summit.'

In *Les Alpes*, 1966, p. 162, Rudolf Hännly remarks:

'L'ascension réussit par le flanc SE, mais il reste un doute à son sujet.'

It will be seen that the only grounds given for doubting the ascent are that the climb was 'hazardous'. Actually, as anyone can see for themselves, by reading any one of the three narratives by Spencer Chapman, the latter does not claim the ascent as being especially difficult or dangerous. Once the route had been found via the Giant's Fang Col (c. 18,500 ft., May 16) and the Great Divide (c. 19,300 ft., May 17), the angle of ascent was not particularly trying, though on May 18 the snow was very soft and they had 'a most exhausting day' (leaving Nima, the oldest of the porters, behind with the two larger tents, and only attaining approximately 20,000 ft. before camping). On May 19, leaving another porter behind, three of them (Spencer Chapman, C. E. J. Crawford, and Pasang) reached a point about 1000 ft. higher 'without having to cut a single step', though, again, soft snow made it laborious. They had all felt the effects of height that day, but it is expressly said that the climbing 'was not difficult'. At about 21,000 ft. they were faced by a precipitous ice-wall, and retreated to their camp.

Next day, Crawford and Kikuli, the other porter, went down; both had suffered from lack of acclimatisation, and the first-named had to be back in Calcutta before the end of May. They picked up Nima on their way down.

Spencer Chapman and Pasang that day, May 20, made up as light packs

as possible and returned on their upward tracks of the day before. The ice-wall was forced after two hours of step-cutting, and above it Spencer Chapman was hopeful that the main obstacles were behind them. A snowstorm, however, compelled a camp at 21,500 ft. May 21 opened with a fine morning and they got away at 4.30 a.m.; 'there was no wind and the going was perfect'. To reach the crest of the western ridge they had a 2000 ft. snow slope to climb; Spencer Chapman's descriptions of this all agree that the going was ideal, that Pasang went splendidly (they took it in turns to lead), and there was none of the exhausting work in soft snow experienced lower down. Their pace had not been fast (about 300 ft. per hour), but at that altitude (22-23,000 ft.) that was not unreasonable for men not fully acclimatised.

The top of the slope is indicated by the end of the dotted line on the illustration in *A. J.* 49. 204 (*H. J.* 10. 133). Pasang, says Spencer Chapman, was disappointed that this was not the top of the mountain—doubtless they both were! This little touch is one that should carry conviction to any mountaineer, for which of us has not experienced the same thing some time or another? The true summit lay 500 ft. higher, along a sharp, undulating ridge. 'The snow was fairly rotten up here and we could kick away the top of the ridge and travel fast . . . . The last 300 feet up a snow slope which **only** became steep at the very end, was the easiest part of the whole climb'. Visibility was good and there could be no question about mistaking the actual highest point, which indeed Spencer Chapman describes convincingly.

There is nothing in all this to justify Herr Gansser's term, 'hazardous'; the hazards were to come on the *descent*, not on the ascent. Presumably, Herren Hanny and Gansser are not questioning the fact that Crawford and Kikuli had also been on the mountain, one of them up to 21,000 ft., so one must **think** that their doubts are directed to the last day of the ascent, that is, to the day of 'ideal' conditions, where the two climbers could move 'in perfect rhythm'. Common sense suggests that if one is going to cast doubts on the feasibility of a climb, one might at least choose the **more** difficult occasions for one's misgivings rather than the best day of all.

The actual **d**escent, though exhausting and formidable from the weather, was **i**n fact carried through successfully; the two got off the mountain **w**ithout serious mishap, though Pasang had caused a slip at one point, and **s**hortage of food was a debilitating factor.

The only **g**rounds that can exist for doubting the ascent, therefore, must relate to **t**he *bona fides* of the participants, for one may assume that no responsible **w**riter today is going to echo the view Spencer Chapman met in Phari, **t**hat Chomolhari was quite unclimbable, a point of view that M. P. **W**ard has more recently found among Bhutan porters. (Perhaps this **o**utlook has been responsible, in the first instance, for the

reports of failure that have now found their way into print.) How many mountains have been dubbed 'unclimbable', particularly by local inhabitants who assume unclimbableness as a matter of course?

What then of the reliability of the claims to have made the climb? One might think that Spencer Chapman's personal standing in the world, whether in relation to his war services or to his record as a headmaster and a member of a university staff, was sufficient warrant for believing him, unless express grounds for disbelieving him can be advanced. Not only have Herren Hännny and Gansser advanced no grounds, except for the latter's incorrect attribution of hazardousness, but in response to enquiries Professor Dyhrenfurth states that neither he nor the late M. Marcel Kurz have ever had any reason to doubt the ascent, and Dr. Tichy says that in the course of many conversations with Pasang, he had heard nothing to lead him to suppose the party had not reached the top of Chomolhari. It is surprising that the editors of such responsible journals as *Les Alpes* and *The Mountain World* should have admitted the statements complained of, when no supporting evidence is provided.

We have been permitted to see Spencer Chapman's diary that he kept on the expedition, and it fully bears out his narratives already mentioned. The diary is not just a notebook with a few day-to-day data—times of starting and the like—but a small journal that records his impressions and thoughts, as well as the purely factual matter one would expect. The diary has been considerably used in recording the climb, in the *A. J.* and *H. J.* and more extensively in *Helvellyn to Himalaya*: whole sentences and phrases are unchanged, and the reader of the published narratives has something like a contemporary record before him.

In short, Spencer Chapman's diary, and the printed accounts based upon it, must be regarded as fully authentic records of a mountain adventure, and if anyone is disposed to doubt it, they should give adequate reasons.

As regards Pasang, if it is intended to discredit the expedition through him, one dominating fact must be overcome, namely that his climbing career has been outstanding and it may fairly be claimed that no Sherpa has a finer mountaineering record. His success on Chomolhari in 1937 simply foreshadowed a remarkable list of successes:

1938: Masherbrum expedition (*A. J.* 50. 211 and J. Waller, *The Everlasting Hills*). Robin Hodgkin, in a recent letter, recalls Pasang as 'certainly one of our best men', and he remembers him talking of Spencer Chapman and Chomolhari.

1939: Pasang went high on K2 with Fritz Wiessner; possibly he achieved a Sherpa height record for the time on that occasion, for if Wiessner's estimate of 27,450 ft. reached on K2 is correct, this is higher than Camp VI on Everest in 1933 (*H. J.* 12. 123, 142).

- 1941: With J. O. M. Roberts in Kulu: first ascent of White Sail Peak, 21,148 ft. (*A. J.* 53. 329).
- 1943: With Roberts again, in Sikkim: reached Nepal Gap, 20,243 ft.
- 1944: With B. R. Goodfellow on Nandakna (*A. J.* 55. 202), when he earned particularly high praise (*A. J.* 55. 380, 383).
- 1946: Again with Roberts, on the Saser Kangri expedition (*A. J.* 56. 149).
- 1951: With New Zealand party, made first ascent of Mukut Parbat, 23,760 ft. (*H. J.* 17. 49).
- 1954: With Dr. Tichy, made first ascent of Cho Oyu, 26,750 ft. (*A. J.* 60. 239).
- 1958: Second ascent of Cho Oyu, with the Indian expedition.
- 1959: With Indian expedition, made second ascent of Chaukhamba, 23,420 ft.

In addition, Pasang played a prominent part in some of the Swiss and Austrian attempts on Dhaulagiri prior to 1960; when he visited Austria some years ago, he was fêted.

Mr. and Mrs. Norman Odling, who saw Spencer Chapman and Pasang immediately after their return to Kalimpong in 1937, and discussed the Chomolhari climb with them both, had no doubts at all about the genuineness of the climb, nor have any doubts today. They recall some of Pasang's quaint remarks at the time, such as 'I lost all love for my body, but the sahib made me bring it down from the mountain to safety'.

Thanks to the good offices of Colonel Roberts, Pasang was interviewed recently by Mr. Michael Cheney. He was most indignant at the suggestion that the summit was not attained and he promptly volunteered his recollection of how they had reached a false summit (at first hoped to be the real one) and had to go along the ridge to the true top—which is just what Spencer Chapman says. Pasang was very incensed at the notion that anyone like Spencer Chapman should make a false claim, and added that he himself (he is now a lama) would not tell such an untruth—though he thought there were climbers going about today who would do so!

It may reasonably be required, now, that the authors of these suggestions should show on what grounds they have put them forward.