

AND NO BIRDS FLY

BY RALPH JONES

This Plain, whose name is Pamir, extends fully twelve days journey. There is no habitation or shelter, but travellers must take their provisions with them. No birds fly here because of the height and cold, and I assure you that because of the great cold fire is not so bright here not of the same colour as elsewhere, and food does not cook as well—MARCO POLO.

The Pamir mountains, the highest range in the Soviet Union, are in one of the most remote areas in the world, at any rate to anyone in the West. The chain lies to the east of the Tadjik republic and Peak Communism, 24,590 ft, (formerly called Peak Stalin) is the highest point.

The Pamirs—the word means a certain type of flat-bottomed valley—were visited by the celebrated traveller and mountaineer, W. W. Rickmer-Rickmers, in 1913 and 1928. He saw Peak Garmo and for a long time this was thought to be the highest point in the range. Then the Russians began extensive climbing and exploring operations and in 1931 discovered the true summit of the Pamirs, which they called Peak Stalin. It was climbed in 1933 and since then all the higher peaks in the Pamirs have been ascended.

In 1961 the Alpine Club and Scottish Mountaineering Club both applied to the Russian Mountaineering Federation for permission to visit and climb in the Pamirs, and this was granted for a joint expedition (with six Soviet mountaineers) with Sir John Hunt as leader. I was lucky enough to be chosen to join the expedition and after considerable planning and preparation we left London Airport for Moscow on 29th June 1962. In the party were also Malcolm Slessor, lecturer, Graham Nicol, doctor, Kenny Bryan, salesman, George Lowe, schoolmaster, Robin Smith, student, Derek Bull, insurance executive, Ted Wrangham, farmer, Ian McNaught-Davis, sales executive, Joe Brown, mountaineering instructor, and Wilfrid Noyce, author and free-lance journalist.

We had discussed, tentatively, our plans before leaving and decided on three climbing objectives. Peak Communism, if possible by a new route, was to be our primary one, but first there would be a period of acclimatisation and during this time we had in mind attempts on Peak Garmo and Peak Moscow, both about 22,000 ft, if possible by new routes.

After a few days in Moscow, we flew to Dushanbe, the capital city of Tajikstan. This is a well laid-out new town of about 250,000 inhabitants, which has one of the largest concrete-making plants in the world as one of its main industries ; the other is farming. Again there was a few days' delay and after the checking and sorting of all equipment the expedition really started. We caught a local plane to a small village called Jurgitali and there we were met by helicopters. They took us on a most exciting flight through the mountains. We passed towering peaks, looked down on grazing herds and circled a thunderstorm. A surprised vulture soared by a few yards away, and after a heart-stopping glide above the rocks we were down at Base Camp with a bump.

Almost at once, in fact as soon as we had tents to sit in, we discussed our plans. During the first period the main objective was to be Peak Garmo and Wilfrid Noyce would lead this party. With him would be Robin Smith, Derek Bull, Ted Wrangham and two of the Russians who had joined us—Anatoli Obchenikov and Anatoli Sebastianov. Because of the distances involved, this undertaking proved to be larger than we had first expected and so the remainder of the party, in two groups, were to co-operate closely. We then set about moving our stores and equipment up the glacier. Garmo was probably twenty-five miles away and we had a considerable logistical problem on our hands. Fortunately the helicopter pilot, a well known and widely respected mountain flyer, agreed to drop our supplies on two of our projected camps, thereby saving us many days acting as pack animals. This exciting project was carried out and some of us flew with him. It was a remarkable sensation flying up the glacier with huge snow-capped peaks close at either side ; one could almost reach out of the helicopter and touch them as they went by. The pilot, almost at maximum height, flew 50 ft above the ground circling round ridges and up the glacier. Every one of our containers was on target although some were badly damaged.

Then the party had to begin to move forward from Base Camp. We had to become accustomed to the height and carried increasingly large loads to train for our future operations. We realised at this point the great difference in approach to mountaineering between the Russians and ourselves : competition is the basis of all sporting activities in the U.S.S.R. and climbing follows in this mould. Training is done with rigid discipline and there is almost total abstention

from smoking and drinking. Objectives are stated in advance and must be achieved. A different philosophy in mountain strategy is used. In the high-altitude climbing competition most points are awarded to teams with the largest number of people who complete the objective, perhaps a single summit by a new route, or a long-distance high traverse. Therefore the whole party moves from camp to camp, carrying all its equipment and food. It is a method that works well on peaks up to 7,000 metres ; whether it is as good in the highest mountains of the Himalayas is doubtful. It has two obvious disadvantages. The first is that, having planned for food for a given period, the party may meet with prolonged bad weather at the furthest point out, and should this occur it would have no fixed camps to retreat to and there could be a shortage of food and fuel. Secondly, if any of the party fell sick they would have to be evacuated to the nearest camp, which might be some days' journey away with the dangers that this would involve.

Our method, based on Himalayan experience, of operating from fixed camps with the objective of getting a pair of climbers to the summit, tends to be slower but surer, and parties acclimatise and train as they advance. However, we decided to adopt the methods of the Soviet mountaineers while we were in the Pamirs.

After five days we had moved from Base Camp to Camp III and here we finally decided on our objectives for the next two weeks. Wilf Noyce and his party would climb Garmo. Malcolm Slessor with Ken Bryan, Joe Brown, Ian McNaught-Davis and two Russians, Nicolai Shelaev and Eugene Gippenreuter, would have two objectives. While at Camp III, I had seen a very attractive-looking peak about halfway up the Vavilova glacier. It had appeared to be fairly difficult and 18,000-19,000 ft high. We decided to make this unclimbed peak our first goal and afterwards to support Wilf Noyce on his mountain, perhaps to help with load carrying or climbing, or just to be on hand in case of trouble, for it was a formidable proposition.

Our routes coincided for some way up the glacier and we last saw their party in camp some way down the glacier as we set up our next camp. The climb went very nicely. There were two difficult sections on the ridge which took time, but finally after five days we reached the summit. Thick mist weaved round the tower on which we stood taking photographs of each other holding flags.

It was a happy if exhausting day. We called our peak Concord and guessed its height as being just under 19,000 ft.

After the descent to the glacier, which took two days, we followed the route previously taken by Wilf's party. As we trudged up the thick snow overlying the ice, one of the Russians crashed through the snow-bridge of a crevasse. We heard the crunch as the snow broke and, more surprisingly, a splash as he hit a sub-glacial river. After we had rescued him the only thing to do was to pitch the tent and put him in his sleeping-bag while his clothes and kit were drying. He had been totally submerged with his rucksack but after a few minutes in his warm sleeping-bag he was fast asleep.

It was at this time that the objective dangers of these mountains were brought home to us. We pitched our tents in a most unpleasant position. Above us, for 5,000 ft, rose the enormous Vavilova wall, its cliffs hung with gigantic masses of ice. On every side of our tents were snow-covered crevasses whose situation could only be guessed. We could not move to the centre of the glacier for there it became more disturbed and broken, and yet if a really large avalanche had launched itself from the wall it would have overwhelmed us.

As the sunlight climbed up the wall and finally disappeared, the mountains came to life. The newly-formed ice broke off large ice-cliffs, which thundered down towards us. Fortunately, none came nearer than a hundred yards, but it was unpleasant lying in the tents listening and expecting. It may have been this that induced in us a premonition of disaster. All of us felt that Wilf's party had met with some mishap. So strong was this sensation that we set off without breakfast the next day, before the sun was up. We walked briskly up the still-silent glacier towards an icefall at its head.

We climbed as quickly as we were able up a stone-swept corridor between a rock wall and the icefall, and reached finally the upper basin of the glacier. Tremendous walls overshadowed this little plateau and towards the far side we saw a tent, but no one was about. We had breakfast and began to put up our tents. Then on the top of the lowest point of the ridge encircling this amphitheatre we saw two minute dots. We waved and shouted, but they did not reply.

Sir John and the doctor, Graham Nicol, decided to go up towards them and see how things were. The rest of us remained to put up tents, cook a large meal and make plenty of drinks. Shortly after

midday the whole group returned, but somehow the party seemed smaller than it should have been. Sir John then told us dreadful news : Wilf and Robin, having reached the summit of Peak Garmo, had fallen and must be considered dead. The two Russians, who had been with them, said that they had suddenly disappeared from in front, while descending a steep snow-slope. Derek Bull and Ted Wrangham, who had not been able to ascend higher than the col, had seen them fall, first down the upper slope and then down the enormous, sheer ice-wall below it.

We decided that the most we could do was to climb up the face and if possible locate and bury our friends. Although we would have preferred to recover the bodies and inter them in more accessible and pleasant surroundings, reason showed that this was not practicable : during the day the whole face was swept by ice, snow and boulders, and the time between earliest dawn and the first rays of the sun touching the summit of the peak was only about four hours. The morning after the news of the accident, we set out at 4.30, climbed the face, and after three hours found the bodies of our companions. We buried them where they were lying and descended quickly. When we were nearly off the face, the first stones started to whirr past us.

We now returned to our Base Camp ; on the way we met the rest of our party and told them what had occurred. They had been successful on their peak and two of their party, both Russians, had reached the summit. We agreed that no decisions on the future should be taken until we had had time to think about the recent events in relation to the expedition as a whole. Their experiences had been similar to ours : appalling rock and snow conditions made even the easiest of routes hazardous ; it was like climbing up a book-case with no shelves in it ; the margin between safety and danger was narrow in these mountains.

Sir John Hunt had only one course open to him—to return to London to give to the press and relatives details of the disaster. Three other members also decided to return with him, either because of their closeness with the two or of the effect of the accident on their wish to continue. Six of us thought that by staying and climbing Peak Communism we would do a great deal of good towards present and future relations with Russian mountaineers, and also it

is what they and the general public in Russia would have expected us to do.

After two days the helicopter arrived and took Sir John down to the lower valleys, and the day after this we began to move up towards the peak. Food, fuel and equipment had to be rearranged. We relayed loads to Camp IIIa then moved over new ground to Camp IVa. The passage between the two was frightening ; the way was in a narrow channel, sometimes only a few feet wide, between the twisted ice-towers of the Belaev icefall and a mountain whose cliffs in some places overhung the route. As we turned the corner of the glacier we entered one of the most inspiring mountain cirques in the world. On either side sheer walls of rock, snow and ice soared upward ; peaks that recently had seemed huge now shrank into insignificance as more massive summits came in view ; ice-cliffs clung almost unsupported to the flanks of the ridges and faces, and avalanche tracks were everywhere. We were now in the region of the giants of the Pamirs. We made two journeys between IIIa and IVa and two more between IVa and Va until we were in position to begin operations on the peak proper. The last camp was in a small hollow formed by a crevasse and here fresh decisions had to be made. Kenny Bryan had not been feeling too good and now the doctor decided that he should not continue. Both McNaught-Davis and Brown were moving very well, and they had both climbed very high mountains before. Malcolm Slesser had become leader when Sir John left and should be with the main party, which included four Russians, and it was essential that our doctor remained with the climbing party ; therefore it was agreed that I should return to Base Camp with Ken. We waited one day at Camp Va because the doctor was not too well and then we parted company. As the two of us descended we saw our four friends climbing up a long, steep snow gully towards the summit.

Three days later we were back at Base Camp ; here we were met by two Russians from our party and another Russian group who now shared Base Camp with us. They were some 29 strong and led by one of the most famous of Russian mountaineers, Vitaly Abalakov. Their objectives were twofold, first, to make a traverse from Peak Moscow to Peak Communism—eleven miles in length and rarely dropping below 20,000 ft—and second, to climb the South wall of Peak Communism. The latter was a really formidable

underraking, perhaps 7,000 ft high ; it is as steep as the North wall of the Eiger, and appeared to be about as dangerous. They had made extensive preparations and trained methodically. Unfortunately bad weather intervened and they completed neither expedition. Our sympathy was with them because of their hard luck and because it meant that Spartak, their party, would not be eligible for any of the climbing competition prizes that they usually win.

For the next five days Ken and I amused ourselves in various ways and tidied the camp and sorted out our remaining food supplies. We could now live comparatively well, for we had a smaller party than was originally catered for. We went out hunting but saw no bears and very little in the way of game, although there were a few mountain hens (birds rather like a large partridge), ibex and mountain goats, none of which we even got a shot at.

On the evening of the sixth day after our return to Base Camp, two of the Russians who had been with our party on Communism returned and told us that all the group had reached the summit. Next morning Ken and I walked up to Camp I. It took us two hours instead of the five it had taken the first time we did it. We found our friends still in their sleeping-bags and gave them some tinned fruit we had brought up and listened to their story. They gave a very gripping account of their adventure. The snow gully up which they had been climbing when we last saw them had proved steeper and more difficult than anticipated. They had reached the summit after a further three camps and the flags of both countries (which had been carried up by the Russians) were unfurled and photographs taken ; after an hour they began the descent. This was even more exciting than the way up. Joe Brown fell into a crevasse very high up the mountain and had difficulty in extricating himself. The descent of the gully was an epic, mainly because McNaught-Davis had trouble with his crampons, and twice the rope saved him from a very long fall. After talking for some time we all returned to Base Camp.

Because of a misunderstanding, arrangements had not been made for the helicopter to meet us. Now the weather began to deteriorate very badly ; we had snow and frost at Base Camp at an altitude of only 10,000 ft and to the pessimists it began to seem as if autumn had already come. After six days there was an improvement and the day after, at eight o'clock in the morning, the

helicopter arrived. We made one stop on the way back and then landed at Jurgitali. A plane was sent for and at last, after an interval of six weeks, we were back at Dushanbe.

Instead of waiting for two days for a plane to Moscow, we decided to go to Samarkand, spend a night there, and then travel on via Tashkent to Moscow. I suppose most people with an urge to travel would put high on their list of places to visit the cities of what used to be Turkestan : Bukhara and Samarkand. We thought it a pity to miss this chance of visiting them, so we became tourists, nor were we disappointed by the mosques, mausoleums and colleges of Samarkand. We visited the observatory of Ulugh Beg, who is famous throughout the East as one of the first astronomers to compile an almanac, then the mosque of Bibi Hanim, one of the wives of Tamir Lame. This was probably one of the largest buildings in the old East. Unfortunately earthquakes have taken toll of its domes and arches, and now a great skeleton remains of the former glory, but it is still a very beautiful and impressive sight. After this we went to the mausoleum of Tamir Lame's family. It has a beautiful entrance-arch and some small domes of glazed brick which glint wonderfully in the sun ; it caused us great problems in photography, for the passages between the tombs are dark and narrow and the buildings light and high.

Perhaps the most extensive of the old buildings in Samarkand is the Registan or place of sand. Formerly this was used primarily as a college for aspiring members of the Mohammedan religion, and it is rumoured that its counterpart in Bukhara is still functioning. Considerable work is being carried out by the Russian authorities on all the old buildings in restoring them and keeping them in good condition. Finally as the light began to go we saw the tomb of Tamir. This must rank as one of the most exactly proportioned buildings anywhere ; the dome, its drum beneath and their supporting square are each precisely the same height and in the warm light of the declining sun it was difficult to assess the true scale.

As we left Tashkent for Moscow next evening, our plane developed engine trouble and then had to be diverted to Tiflis because of electrical storms. We had to stop there and the air hostess made sure that we were looked after in the restaurant, even though it was one o'clock in the morning. We caught a glimpse of the Caucasus snows as we flew on to Moscow and so now, as we

had had a view of Tien Shen from the air when we were between Samarkand and Tashkent, we had seen most of the Russian ranges.

In retrospect it was a gruelling expedition, with very little light relief or variety. Although we managed to achieve our fairly ambitious plans the tragic loss of Wilf Noyce and Robin Smith and the subsequent return of our other friends outweighed any feelings of success that we might have had. We gained a sincere respect for our Russian colleagues both as men and mountaineers, while they perhaps were perplexed by the problem of our dilettante approach to mountaineering, which to them did not seem compatible with the considerable achievements of British mountaineers since the war. We learnt a great deal from them and we hope they profited a little from our visit ; moreover we had shared very difficult experiences with hardly any disagreements, despite our different points of view.