

CORRESPONDENCE

13 February, 1980

Gentlemen,

As a member of the Himalayan Club and its Eastern United States' Honorary Secretary, it was with the utmost pleasure that I opened the Golden Jubilee issue of the Himalayan Journal, which reached me two days ago. Upon its arrival I read with great interest the excellent and fascinating history of the Club so carefully prepared and so interestingly presented by John Martyn. As an incorrigible critic, I would like to make some comments that stem from personal experience with the Club and in the Himalaya. These remarks, which I fear will be somewhat lengthy, are in no way intended to stir up controversy, but are submitted in the interests of truth, be it in the absolute, or as God gives me the power to see the truth. Let me be quick to add that no research work ever seems to be free of some error, and that in my own work I have more than once been attracted to mistakes which shocked my intellect.

My one broad criticism of Mr Martyn's article is the failure to include all the names of persons who ascended each of the fourteen mountains over 8000 meters high during the year in which they were first climbed. By my count, there are 48 such persons, give or take the size of the team that first climbed Gosainthan about which I have no records. Rightly or wrongly, 8000 meters represents a magic number in mountaineering circles, or certainly did during the golden age of Himalayan mountaineering which ended with the 1960s. Yet such names as Lacedelli, Compagnoni, Kato, Higeta, Vaucher, Luchsinger, Reiss, Weber and Schoening, among others, are strangely missing from a list that includes Hillary, Tensing, Band, Brown, Streather, Hardie, Buhl, etc.

There are misspellings, inevitable of course, but unfortunate. On page 12 the name of the renowned Austrian climber, Erwin Schneider is given as Erwin Schemneider; and on page 23 the world-famous climber, Fritz Wiessner, is described as one Meissner and dismissed rather bluntly as a 'German-American climber'. Fritz, a close friend, whose attributes I applaud and whose shortcomings I deplore, is far, far more than that. Today, at the age of eighty he commands the respect and awe of the world climbing community from Japan to Europe via the USSR. He is, moreover, a distinguished and honorary member of the American Alpine Club, whose presence in our midst is treasured by us all.

On page 15 it might have been appropriate to identify the American climber killed on the Great Pyramid outside Cairo as

Rand Herron. He was, I believe, one of the first two Americans to participate in a major Himalayan expedition.

A subjective remark owing to my association with the mountain, but would it not have been desirable on page 19 and elsewhere to refer to Gasherbrum I by its other name, Hidden Peak, as well?

On the same page reference is made to Siniolchu as 'the most beautiful mountain in the Himalaya'. I have seen it only in pictures, but Paul Bauer's description of that peak as 'the most beautiful mountain in the world' (close seconded perhaps by Peru's Alpamayo) would seem justified and few would disagree. May I add that the views I once enjoyed around Gangtok, with white summits soaring from lush green forests into crystal blue skies, rival any scenery on earth, including that of the gorgeous Cordillera Blanca.

I come now to page 23 and the section dealing with the 1939 K2 Expedition, a subject dear to my heart, and here I must elaborate. The expedition's aftermath witnessed bitter controversy which in a few quarters has never been entirely extinguished. Over the passage of years the matter has, however, been exhaustively reviewed and its leader completely exonerated. I have myself repeatedly studied the evidence, and am satisfied that Fritz Wiessner, human like the rest of us, while he may have made mistakes, committed no major wrong. Else there, but for the Grace of God, go I, along with many another mountaineer.

To go back to that unfortunate event, one must look at it in the context of the times, at the world events which were immediately to follow, at the composition of the expedition, and at the traits of its leader.

The world was about to go to war with Germany or, more properly, its Nazi masters, rightly cast in the role of 'bad guys'. It was quite natural, though wrong, that the wrath of citizens of Allied nations should descend upon anyone of German origin, however much expatriated, who attracted publicity for causing any form of adverse commotion. Fritz Wiessner was, unfortunately and unwittingly, one of these.

Aside from its leader, the expedition was a relatively weak one. One of its strongest members became desperately ill on arrival at base camp and required lengthy nursing during the expedition before he recovered; another strong climber, at least on this occasion, proved incapable of adjusting to altitude, while still another, though competent, was at the upper age limit for high mountain ascents and probably lacked enthusiasm as well.

If Fritz Wiessner is to be blamed at all, it is for his failure to take into consideration the situation of his party and to turn the expedition's efforts towards a less ambitious goal. The counter-argument, one which I am incapable of refuting, and which has repeatedly been cited to me by Fritz and others, is that despite its shortcomings the expedition came within a hair's breadth of spectacular success and that the catastrophe that occurred on the descent was none of its leader's doing, with the one reservation

that, at the next highest camp, he might have acted more energetically to urge Dudley Wolfe to accompany him and Pasang Lama to the lower camps. This last may be excused because of the effects of high altitude on one's judgement, the continuing good weather, the erroneous belief that there were adequate provisions available lower down, and that the two men descending (Lama and Wiessner) would in short order return with supplies to renew their assault on the summit.

Let it be added here that there are a myriad of modern-day expeditions which, faced with somewhat similar circumstances, have pushed forward and achieved success or disaster, and no one has been blamed in the latter event. One can cite Messner on the Rupal face of Nanga Parbat and again on Manaslu and the Americans on K2 in 1978 among many examples. But then, for better or for worse, the climbing philosophy of the late Seventies is somewhat more liberal than it was in 1939.

There is also the matter of Wiessner himself, into whose shoes one should step before making judgement. As a dedicated mountaineer, the prize of K2 was an almost irresistible temptation. Fritz is obstinate, his Dresden upbringing gave him the traits of an artist, and artists do not necessarily make the best expedition leaders (I could cite another friend, Norman Dyrenfurth on Everest in 1971 as another example). He spoke very poor English (he has a 'tin' ear and has never overcome his heavy accent), and there was no doubt a language—and perhaps a cultural—barrier, not easily overcome. As one of the world's most powerful climbers, Fritz probably also overestimated the strength of his companions—Bonatti and Messner, to name two, have been guilty of same, but there is little controversy about them. Finally, as a purely subjective observation, I have to admit that while I have spent some of my most profitable and enjoyable days in the mountains in Fritz's company, I would feel a bit uncomfortable were I on an expedition of which he was the leader. Accordingly, I can well understand why there should have been misunderstandings between Fritz on the one hand and his team-mates on the other, and I have sympathy for all.

When all is said and done, I fear the blame for any failure properly falls on the person in charge—to cite Harry Truman's phrase 'the buck stops here'. But in Fritz's case there are many mitigating circumstances, many of which it would be tedious to mention. Not least of these is the certainty that, had he acted with slightly more vigor to urge on Pasang Lama during the first attempt on the summit, there is every likelihood the expedition would have returned triumphant, with Fritz Wiessner as a national American hero.

But enough of this.

If not mistaken, I believe Tiger Badges (p. 24) were first awarded to Sherpas who had climbed not just high, but above 8000 meters. This could have been specified, for again 8000 meters is the magic figure.

Mention might have been made on page 37 of the name of West Bengal's Chief Minister. He was Dr. B. C. Roy, a delightful personage, whom I got to know when I served as American Consul in Calcutta.

I believe it is an error to state (p. 38) that 'artificial climbing' was developed by German climbers on the Eiger. Whether one likes this sport, or not, it was, in fact, developed by Italians, Austrians and Germans in the Dolomites, by the French in the Western Alps, and brought to perfection by the Americans in Yosemite. Later, the British, with their chocks, did much to refine the art further.

On page 40 the Mustagh Tower is referred to as a 'formidable-looking peak' which, indeed, it is. Guido Magnone told me, however, that its ascent, while difficult, was less than formidable.

Did Brigadier (not, I believe, Colonel) Gyan Singh die of pneumonia (p. 42) or was it actually pulmonary edema?

Trivor (p. 44) is more than just 'a mountain called Trivor'. It is a fine peak in its own right in the Distagil massif of the Hispar (I believe I'm right on this), and Don Willans did a good job despite the beer bottles he presumably left behind.

I have not the slightest recollection of having addressed the Club in November 1960 on the Masherbrum expedition (p. 45) but if you say so, I'll accept it, for as one grows older one's memory fails. Out of vanity, I suppose, I would have preferred credit, with Pete Schoening, for Gasherbrum I.

On page 55 there is the statement that the Himalayan Club 'remains the only international body in India interested in mountaineering in the Himalaya'. If I am not mistaken, the Himalayan Club is the only international body *in the world* interested in such mountaineering. It also happens to be one of the few climbing clubs, if not the only one, which has a truly international membership, and for this it deserves the highest praise. Thus the description in the text is both an understatement and over-modest.

Finally, on page 56, there is reference to the idea that 'mountaineers should also try to learn something about the inhabitants of the mountains'. I wish the theme had been elaborated. For the fact is that while all of us are concerned with ecological pollution, all too little attention has been paid to what is equally serious, namely cultural pollution. We Americans have long since ruined the wonderful mores of our native Red Men, and I fear there is no turning back. Our American religious missionaries overseas, despite every noble intention and much valuable work, have on balance done as much harm as good in other parts of the world. But what more than once distressed me during my three-year tour of duty in Eastern India was the impact of industrialized society as a destroyer of long-established tribal habits and customs in the back areas of India, notably in southern Bihar and in Assam. I am well aware of the Government of India's laudable efforts to stem the tide, and for this New Delhi has my gratitude, even

though these efforts may not in the long run prevent the inevitable. But in Nepal, a so much smaller and less powerful nation, the countryside is being swamped with entire armies of outsiders from the world's industrialized nations, most of whom have no understanding of local habits and customs. These invaders look on the local people as quaint and backward, when in reality, based on traditions and customs, they are fully the equals of other men, and have merely chosen to live their lives differently and, however poor, maybe better, within the framework of what nature provided them. Too many outsiders want to convert the local people to western ways without taking into consideration the damage that this might do even if it provides some temporary benefit. I think this is a matter which should give the Himalayan Club pause and towards which it should devote some effort.

I hope that the length of this letter will serve as an indication of the degree to which the article pleased me, and I hope you will excuse the nit-picking. You have done a fine job and Mr Martyn as its author merits the highest praise for a job splendidly done. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely yours,

JOHN KAUFFMAN, 2ND

25th March 1980

Dear Mr Kauffman,

I have noted your observations about Mr Martyn's article and also sent him the copy of your letter. You mention about lack of names of many who had climbed higher. But I think it was the intention of the article to cover the story of the *Club* and not history of mountaineering, and as such many climbs where the Club was not involved were not covered. I agree that all 8000 m peaks are important and therefore in this issue you will find a detailed table of all ascents of such peaks.

I think the misspelling of names as important as Schneider and Wiessner is regrettable. I will print the corrections in the next issue for this and I think one will have to be doubly careful in future.

Your views on K2 expedition and Wiessner are most welcome. Instead of replying to it at all, I think it is best to print in the Journal. This insight into an expedition and man should be most interesting to all readers.

Tiger Badges were not awarded to Sherpas who had climbed above or up to 8000 m only. These were in recognition of outstanding service and climbing abilities and the Club records amply show that many who had not crossed the line were awarded the

badges.

Brigadier Gyan Singh is very much alive and active here. It was Nandu Jayal who died. Gyan Singh (then Col.) was the leader. Major Dayal died of 'a form of pneumonia' as mentioned in the fine obituary written by R. L. Holdsworth in HJ, Vol. XXI, p. 147.

One thing I could not check was that whether you had addressed the club in Nov. 1960 on Masherbrum expedition. I think Mr Martyn may be able to confirm this with source.

The most important point you raise is about 'cultural pollution'. I think this is a very valid and threatening development in Himalaya. From my personal experience I can say that many of our old porter friends in Garhwal have changed—too suddenly—and the effect on them is disastrous. A lot has been written about the ecological pollution and it is high time this factor is also considered. I only hope that these trends can be reversed.

I must thank you for your 'nit-picking'. It is such criticisms that keeps one alert and makes you feel that all the hard work is not in vain. We would always welcome any contribution from yourself and please do consider to write about any topic on Himalaya which is so dear to your heart.

Thank you and best regards,

Yours sincerely,

HARISH KAPADIA

17th November 1979

Dear Harish,

Many thanks for your letter of the 14th and Das's* article. I fear I don't know of Leslie Stephen's *A Byeday in the Alps*, and also I don't know the Chhaian Bamak, all my climbing on Bandarpunch having been on the other side. I have, however, followed Das's description of the climb on my map (don't tell anyone I have it). I enjoyed his article, and it was good of him to mention that my book led him to the Bandarpunch area.

On my (I think the latest) map, the peak 6316 m is named as Bandarpunch while the other, 6387 m (what we called the 'Black Peak') over 3 km away, is just given its height. I hope this may be the result of my writing to the Survey of India, when I found it called Bandarpunch I on an earlier map, to protest. Bandarpunch is the mountain with a monkey's tail that is so prominent from Mussoorie, and the 'Black Peak', so named because when we first saw it (it is not visible from Mussoorie) from Bandarpunch, we saw only its great black precipice of a

* See 'Bandarpunch and Hanuman Climbed' by P. M. Das in this issue.—Ed.

southern face, is quite a different mountain, though in the same range. We gave the name 'Hanuman' to peak 5548 m because the Bin Gad, later called the Hanuman Ganga, rises from its slopes. In those days I did not know that there was a Hanuman Peak elsewhere in the Himalaya.

I do hope this hasn't been too much of a bore to read.

All good wishes,

JACK GIBSON