

## **“It doesn’t look like a married man’s route!”**

Changabang stands in the Garhwal Himalaya of India. It is part of a group of peaks that form the North East wall of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. It was first climbed by a party led by Chris Bonington in 1974 climbing the South East Ridge. October 2016 marks 40 years since Joe Tasker and Peter Boardman travelled to the West Wall of Changabang. The story is told by Peter Boardman in his book ‘The Shining Mountain’ and Joe Tasker records his experiences on Changabang in the book ‘Savage Arena’. Joe and Peter were recognised as two of the finest climbers of their generation but in 1976 they had never tackled a major climb together. In her book, ‘Fragile Edge’, Maria Coffey describes them as inside out versions of each other. Maria reflects that Peter presented a gentle personality that hid toughness in the mountains. Joe was perceived as a hard man but that certainly hid his vulnerability. The two climbers were ordinary guys but they were united by a prodigious natural talent, extraordinary vision and remarkable ambition. Joe had watched Changabang during his expedition to Dunagiri with Dick Renshaw. Joe writes, “Changabang had wormed its way into my subconscious ... For days it had hovered on the edge of my vision and when I returned home it re-emerged on the periphery of my imagination.” Joe thought Changabang would be just a lonely dream but when he met Peter Boardman he quickly realised that Peter was an obvious partner and that the dream could become reality.

They were climbing during a time that witnessed significant changes in mountaineering. It was the beginning of the end of expensive full scale expeditions laying siege to the highest and mightiest mountains of the Himalayas and the beginning of a new lightweight approach to climbing which involved travelling in small groups with the minimum of equipment. This was a new generation who climbed for themselves. There was very little sponsorship and nearly all climbers worked to finance their ventures to foreign lands. These young men considered their approach as a purer form of adventure. Reaching the summit remained the goal but how they reached the summit became more important. Joe and Peter’s objective was incredibly ambitious and few of the climbing community gave them any chance of success. “It doesn’t look like a married man’s route!” said Ken Wilson. By the 20th of September the two climbers had reached the fierce wall and had moved up to Camp One (Ridge Camp) at about 18,000 feet. They decided to use fixed rope to allow them to climb for long hours and then retreat each evening to recover. By the end of three days of climbing they had reached the feature they named the Balcony. Peter and Joe teased out each other’s weaknesses and really began to understand and complement each other’s strengths. They did still get annoyed. Joe seemed to photograph Peter every time he appeared exhausted and Peter would visualise a Tasker lecture back in the UK describing ‘... How I took Boardman up Changabang.’ Peter would shout at Joe who mostly brushed it off as Peter being childish!

The climbers rested back at Base Camp, moved up to Ridge Camp again and then packed for six days of climbing. They reached the Balcony and climbed what they called the Toni Kurz pitch. It was hard going to regain their high point. As they climbed on it started to hail. Joe and Peter retreated and took to their hammocks. Cold was seeping into their bones, seemingly gnawing at them from every direction. This was the loneliest of places where two private men were inevitably exposed and vulnerable. They endured fretful and sleepless nights and reluctantly retreated to Camp One and then continued down to Base Camp. Joe and Peter were disappointed but not defeated. By the 9th October they were back again at their high point where they found a site for Camp Two at around 20,000 feet, hacking out a platform for the tent they had improvised and taken with them to try and improve their discussions and planning during the

long nights. It was so cramped that only one of them could organise and settle at a time. They were in a place in some ways so familiar, climbing on the edge. It was desperately hard, brutal and unforgiving, in an equally brutal environment but it was the challenge they had hoped for, and by now their wonderfully instinctive relationship of mutual trust and understanding had become finely tuned. Peter writes, "We had generated such unified intensity of purpose that whatever Joe said I had been thinking at the same time." Joe and Peter studied the route to reach the Ramp; a thin line of snow from the summit snowfield down through steep rock to the top of the Upper Tower. Two more days of climbing and during the evening of the second day they prepared for an alpine style attempt at the summit.

They enjoyed a rest day. Changabang did not worry them anymore. The following morning they were off early leaving the safety of the fixed rope behind. Peter climbed the block crowning the Groove. He squirmed and wriggled and heaved until he popped through a tight squeeze and out onto snow. He had unlocked the menacing door of the climb. Peter and Joe were on the Ramp and on their way to the summit. They reckoned they were at 22,000ft. They bivouacked for the night and the next morning, the 15th October 1976, reached the summit. Peter thought they should shake hands but Joe was already thinking of the problems of the route down. Joe writes, "The top was simply an end to the struggle upwards." Peter took photos of Joe on the ridge with Nanda Devi in the background. Peter writes, "For a moment I felt omniscient above the world. But this feeling of invincibility was an illusion of pride, for we had yet to descend." On returning to Base Camp they met another expedition and quickly shared news. Pete and Joe did not know it but while they were retreating from Changabang four American climbers had been killed on Dunagiri. Joe swept into action, and despite his own terrible fatigue, organised a party to find the bodies. They set off the next morning and found the climbers still roped in pairs at 20,000 ft. The bodies were lowered into a crevasse.

Peter and Joe wanted to be home. They endured a long bus journey to Delhi and five days later arrived at Heathrow. Joe concludes in 'Savage Arena', "Pete and I were united as one person ... with a friendship which needed no words." Dick Renshaw wrote of the expedition, "He (Joe) conceived the audacious idea of climbing the awesome West Wall as a two man team. In Pete Boardman, Joe sensed a kindred spirit, and the two of them combined to make a formidable driving force. Their success was a source of great delight to Joe, particularly as a number of established climbers had deemed the climb impossible, and it was the start of a brilliant partnership and a firm friendship." The success on Changabang was borne out of a remarkable partnership, an ability to understand and complement the strengths and weaknesses Joe and Peter observed in each other. Maria Coffey remembers that they were kind of rivals but that it was a rivalry '... that rested on the security of friendship bonded by experience.' The climb was, as Chris Bonington observed '... probably technically the hardest that had been completed in the Himalayas at that time ...' The climb represented what could realistically be achieved by two climbers alone on the mountain. It reflected a rare ability to endure and suffer and a relentless determination to succeed. It was simply the sort of adventure that was the envy of so many of the climbers of what was certainly a golden age of mountaineering. 'The Shining Mountain' by Peter Boardman and 'Savage Arena' by Joe Tasker still sit as two of the finest pieces of mountaineering literature, and forty years on, the climb of the West Wall of Changabang remains an inspiring ascent and surely one of the finest climbs ever by two British climbers.

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