

# The Dugundugoo

Dick Isherwood

I had only been in Hong Kong three days, and I had met all the active climbers. This was not so remarkable as it sounds—there were only four of them. On a Sunday afternoon, climbing on a small crag above the city and watching the traffic jams below us, we talked about expeditions. Three of us wanted to go somewhere in 1972. The Himalaya seemed a bit difficult to organise from Hong Kong, and in any case we wanted to go somewhere unusual. Someone suggested New Guinea; we all knew there were glaciated mountains there but we knew very little more. So an expedition was born, and surprisingly enough it survived from this abrupt beginning and took place with the original three members to the original objective at more or less the originally intended date.

Leo Murray had been in Hong Kong eight years and had learnt to climb there. Jack Baines had spent four years there altogether with the RAF, mainly in mountain rescue—collecting stranded picnic parties from steep hillsides. They knew one another, but neither knew me. Our first combined expedition was to the City Library to find out about New Guinea.

We soon put together most of the climbing history of the Carstensz range. First seen from the sea by Jan Carstensz in 1623, the mountains were approached unsuccessfully by two British expeditions in 1910 and 1912. They were visited by foreigners for the first time in 1936 when a Dutch party, led by Dr A. H. Colijn, and assisted by an aerial reconnaissance, came in from the s coast and climbed Ngga Poloe (5029 m) and the East Carstensz Top (c 5000 m). Colijn's attempts to climb the Carstensz Pyramide were unsuccessful and only later did his observations show that this was marginally the highest peak.

After the war missionary groups began to open up the highland valleys N of the Carstensz and subsequent mountaineering parties have approached from this side, where the airstrips at Ilaga and Beoga allow one to fly over the worst of the West Irian jungle. The New Zealand expedition of 1961 and Heinrich Harrer's visit to the area in 1962 have been recorded by Philip Temple.<sup>1</sup> The New Zealand party suffered many misfortunes and were forced to retreat, half-starved, from the foot of the Carstensz Noordwand when an airdrop failed. Harrer, with Temple's experience, made a successful airdrop and in three weeks climbed all the major summits and a multitude of minor ones. The Carstensz Pyramide was climbed by a rather indirect route on its N face, giving pitches of IV and providing excitement for one member of the party, a Dutch district officer who had never climbed before.

In 1963 Dutch New Guinea became a part of the Republic of Indonesia. The Carstensz summits have been renamed once or twice since then, mainly in

<sup>1</sup> *Nawok!* London, 1962 and *AJ* 68 78.

relation to the political fortunes of Sukarno. A Japanese-Indonesian mountaineering party in 1964 repeated the ascent of Ngga Poloe, then known as Puntjak Sukarno, but the second ascent of the Pyramide was not made until late 1971 when Reinhold Messner visited the area with an Italian 'client'.

Permission was our first problem. Fortunately I was able to visit Djakarta, where the British Embassy put me in touch with an important gentleman in the Ministry of Home Affairs. He promised to do what was necessary and said it would take two weeks. Four months later we realised he was useless. Another trip to Djakarta enabled me to find the right people, the security police, and everything became simple.

We received a generous grant from the Mount Everest Foundation and support from a number of companies in Hong Kong, where begging mountaineers are still a novelty. Jack Tucker, our patron, wrote a splendid open letter in support of our cause, which made us feel like clean-living young men again, and the RAF were so impressed by our prospectus that they sent Jack Baines on a paid holiday to Kinabalu as training. The manager of a local supermarket told us, one Saturday afternoon, that we could take what we needed from his shelves, and fifteen memorable minutes later we had our food. The markets of Kowloon were scoured for beads, axe-heads and other barter goods and an emissary was despatched to Guam for twenty dollars worth of cowrie shells. Excess baggage was mounting fast when Cathay Pacific Airways gave us all free tickets for the greater part of our journey.

We left Hong Kong on 31 August 1972 and flew via Djakarta to Biak, a modest island off the N coast of New Guinea which achieved some importance in the Pacific war and boasts an 11,000-ft concrete runway, once the second longest in the world, and very little else. We had heard much about the operations of Merpati Nusantara Airways, the only commercial air-line serving the interior of West Irian, and thus it was a surprise to be taking off the next day in a chartered Twin Otter for the missionary airstrip at Ilaga.

The Ilaga is one of only three valleys in the highlands of West Irian which is sufficiently open to support a substantial population. Its inhabitants, the Western Dani and Uhunduni tribes, number around 6000 people. They wear no clothes but are more 'advanced' in some respects than their neighbours. Unlike the Danis of the Grand Baliem valley to the E, and the people living S of the Carstensz range, the inhabitants of the Ilaga have no recent history of cannibalism. They cultivate sweet potatoes, their staple food, and smaller areas of corn, beans and taro, in a way which appals Western agricultural experts but which supports populations up to 500 to the square mile. Their first Western visitors were American missionaries in the 1950s, and the majority of the people are now practising Christians.

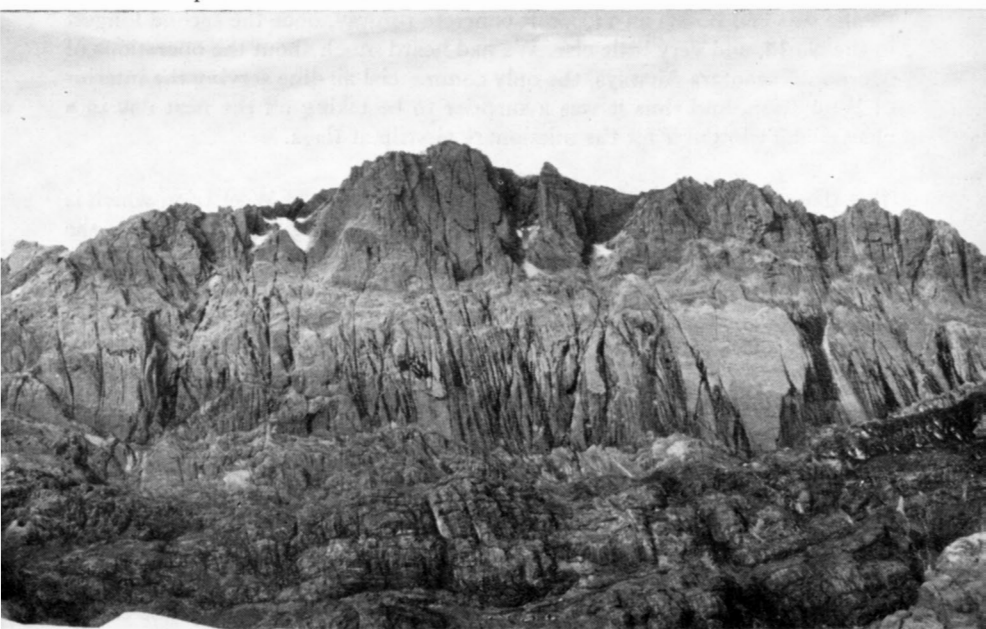
Ilaga is about 50 miles, in a straight line, from the Carstensz. The intervening country, though uninhabited, is fairly well frequented by the Danis who visit the Dugundugoo (high mountains) in search of birds and spiny ant-eaters.

With the help of the missionaries and the Indonesian Government representatives, and our own rudimentary knowledge of the Indonesian national language (now spoken fairly widely in the Iraga), we were able to recruit porters without difficulty. Our cowrie shells were nearly all the wrong kind—the shell currency is remarkably complicated—but beads, shirts, and above all, bright-coloured nylon anoraks, were very satisfactory as payment. Only five days after leaving Hong Kong we were on our way to the mountains with thirty men and a vast quantity of sweet potatoes.

For a day and a half we climbed steeply up the valley side, through thick forest where tree trunks had been felled to make a footpath of sorts. The Danis ran along these with loads on their heads while we, the mountaineers, tiptoed unsteadily or gave up altogether and struggled through the undergrowth. On the second day we came out on to an uneven plateau of limestone karst, tussocky grassland and occasional thickets, which led us in another three days to the foot of the Carstensz Noordwand. Already our ultra-light Japanese tent was showing signs of strain and we were glad to use Harrer and Temple's advance base, a huge erratic block which provided ample shelter. Here the porters left us, promising to return two weeks later.

The following day Jack and I set out with loads to cross the New Zealand Pass to the foot of the Meren glacier, where we planned to put a second camp. The pass is conspicuous from the N side as a deep cleft in the Noordwand, but approaches to it are less obvious. I made an unpleasant direct approach up steep, decomposed limestone and knife-edge ridges of earth, while Jack ex-

76 *The face of Carstensz Pyramide from the Meren glacier*  
This and next photo: R. Isherwood



plored a bit further and found the footpath, hidden behind a spur. From the top of the pass we caught our first glimpses of the Pyramide, but it was largely hidden in cloud, and we groped our way down into the Meren valley through mist and rain.

The Carstenz glaciers are retreating rapidly and both the Meren and the Yellow valleys are desolate places, dominated by black, glaciated slabs and fresh moraines, with virtually no vegetation. Our tent seemed more inadequate than ever, but fortunately it was not put to the test as we found, close to the foot of the Meren glacier, the half-derelict base camp of an Australian scientific expedition. Their enormous tent must have weighed 100 lb, and even half-collapsed it provided plenty of space and protection. The weather in the West Irian Highlands is very wet, all the year round. Ilaga has a rainfall of over 200 inches a year, and the mountains get even more. We thought we were lucky as we had had rain every afternoon but none in the mornings, so to make the most of this 'dry spell' we wasted no time in getting on to the N face of the Pyramide, which up to now we had scarcely seen.

Starting in the dark we crossed a low ridge into the Yellow valley and traversed the moraine to the foot of the face. We picked out a line leading fairly directly to the left hand of the two summits, and after a few scrambling pitches were soon moving singly. The limestone bedding on the Pyramide is steeply tilted and the N face is made up of large monolithic slabs, broken by rather discontinuous cracks and chimneys, and scored by shallow water-worn channels. The rock is generally excellent, though very rough and spiky in the chimneys, and disturbingly smooth on the open slabs.

None of us had been climbing regularly in the Hong Kong summer, and we were glad that the early pitches were easy. Several pitches of III and IV led to a big terrace from which we had a choice of routes. The continuation of our line led more steeply on to the upper tier of the face, while the terrace disappeared round a corner, suggesting an easy escape. As it was only lunch-time we chose the direct route and immediately wasted an hour exploring a cave and chimney which promised a route through the steep section. We were forced to do some real climbing, and I soon found myself at the top of a water-channel, facing a blank slab, with no rope left. Fortunately we had a continuous 300-ft rope, and by untying from the middle and pulling a lot more through, I was able to go on. Freak pockets provided two peg runners and after about 220 ft I found a belay ledge.

A big black hole in the face a little higher revealed itself as a natural arch, 200 ft across. We entered the bowels of the mountain just in time to dodge the first hail-storm, and Leo took the lead up some loose dark grooves. Back in the open some pleasant climbing up shallow chimneys took us quickly to the last steep section of the face. Here, with two hours of daylight left, the hail came again. I struggled with a small overhang, too tired to make a big move over it and too slow to spot the obvious place for a peg. Annoyed at wasting time, I rushed on up the pitch, wriggled into a narrow chimney and stuck tight. More time wasted. I finally crawled out, half undressed, on to a ledge and with cramped arms hauled up the sack, which stuck just as I had done. Leo climbed

a gripping arête on a tight rope to avoid the narrows, and we had only one pitch to do. Again I became jammed in a hole, and when we were all up we had just ten minutes of daylight left.

We had brought little bivouac equipment, expecting to be down in one day, and we got into the bivouac sack, conscious of our duvets in the tent below. We shivered through the night and emerged to a fine morning and an easy climb up the ridge to the top. We found a tin left by Harrer's party and a new Stubai peg, which we took to be Messner's signature. Not having a pencil we scratched our names laboriously on the lid of Harrer's tin, took photos of various donated goodies and headed down.

We did not choose the best way down. The narrow E ridge took us down 500 ft or so, then continued on the level toward some unattractive gendarmes, while a scree gully led invitingly in the direction of the valley. We ran down the scree, by-passed a steep and very soggy snow-field, and got into a deep gully, invisible from above. One abseil led to another, culminating in three long and spectacular free descents through a series of caves. We reached the bottom shattered, slightly burnt, and short of pegs, trudged back to camp in the rain and slept for a day and a half.

The next part of our plan was to traverse the snow summits of East Carstenz Top, Sunday Peak and Ngga Poloe, and to this end we rose very early and set out in crampons over the crisp snow of the Carstenz glacier. Trying to do a thorough job, we climbed a small rock peak on the way up to the main watershed, and by nine o'clock we were floundering in thigh-deep snow on top of an undistinguished hump, named by someone the Middenspitze. We gave up for the day and waded down. Next day we rose really early and reached the summit of Sunday Peak by starlight in very good conditions. A pleasant walk over the glacier took us to Ngga Poloe, where a narrow corniced ridge, with a creaking crust, led out to the summit, a snow-cone on the very edge of the Noordwand. From a rock ledge just below I collected another high-quality Austrian peg; from this we presumed that Messner had climbed the N face of Ngga Poloe, a conspicuous slabby ridge with steep steps. We continued, over several lower summits, to leave the glacier close to the New Zealand Pass.

Before returning to the N side of the mountains we made a detour down the Meren valley to visit the Freeport Indonesia mining camp, about four hours' walk below the foot of the glaciers. The 'copper mountain' of the Ertsberg, a 1200 ft dome of unusually rich iron-copper ore, lies on the side of the valley at a height of about 3650 m, just above an enormous precipice. First described by the geologist J.V. Dozy who accompanied Colijn, its value was confirmed by a vice-president of the American Freeport Sulphur Company, an unusual executive who walked the 75 miles from the S coast. Now enormous men drive enormous bulldozers, gradually demolishing it, and a pipeline is under construction to carry pulverised ore to the coast. Investment, including the cost of a deep-water port, an airstrip, a small town and 80 miles of road, is approaching 200 million dollars. We traversed, unwittingly, across the line of fall of all the ore, waded through knee-deep mud to the foreman's hut and begged a night's



77 *The north face of Sunday Peak*

lodging. Freeport could provide the easiest route to the Carstensz, but understandably are not too keen to have visitors. Our return up the valley the following day was notable mainly for my straying into an enormous bog in which I nearly drowned.

We had scarcely stopped moving since leaving Hong Kong, and once back at our base we spent two days sleeping and washing. Thoughts now turned to the Carstensz Noordwand, and in particular the faces of Ngga Poloe and Sunday Peak, close above our camp. It seemed very probable that Reinhold Messner had climbed Ngga Poloe from this side, but the face of Sunday Peak, so far as we knew, had not been climbed. A shallow groove in its centre made an attractive line between two very steep pillars. For me this had been the most interesting climbing prospect in the area from an early stage, but Jack and Leo were less enthusiastic. I began to work on them. Jack declared right away that he did not want anything to do with it, and Leo eventually decided he was not interested either, so I decided to try it alone, while they climbed a peak to the w of the camp.

I climbed up the central gully, full of old avalanche debris, and as soon as possible got out to the left, up a loose subsidiary gully, to the foot of the main face. Here a false start up steep vegetated rock wasted two hours, and ended in an abseil. I decided to explore further left, more to vary the descent than in a serious effort to find an alternative, but once I was on the left-hand ridge the face took on a more reasonable appearance. I climbed a fairly easy gully, still grassy and full of burrows formed by some creature. Soon I was almost level with a conspicuous light pillar in the centre of the face, and traversing to it

offered no great problems. The climb again seemed possible and I went on up slabs and grooves, occasionally using slings to protect myself on the short difficult sections.

In gathering cloud and spots of rain I reached a pair of parallel chimneys in the upper part of the face. Neither of these seemed difficult, but I had seen from below that the section above them was the steepest part of the route. The left-hand chimney led strenuously to a ledge, just below an overhanging rock band. The pillar separating the chimneys formed a pinnacle, linked to the overhanging face by a rather slender bridge. Peg climbing on my own was not at all what I had intended and I looked around for alternatives, but on either side I had to descend several hundred feet, and then the prospects were uncertain. I dithered up and down the chimney until a heavy hail-storm made the overhang the more attractive route. Sheltered completely from the weather, I uncoiled the rope on top of the rock bridge and tried to remember what I had read about solo artificial climbing. I tied on to both ends of the rope and made a big loop in the middle which I put over the high part of the bridge as a token belay. Somehow I had only brought one *étrier* but I had a few slings to supplement it. I protected myself by tying loops into the two ropes alternately and remaining attached, as far as possible, to three pegs at once. The slanting fault in the overhang was loose and one peg popped out with me on it. Just below the chimney which led out of the overhanging band, I had difficulty placing a good peg, and I used a sling threaded round a flake as extra security. As I moved across I pulled on the sling and the flake fell off, hitting me in the face. Fortunately the peg was adequate and a few more feet of artificial climbing led to a big terrace. I climbed the final steep chimneys, hauling the sack behind me, and groped my way down the Meren glacier in thick cloud. Night fell as I returned over the New Zealand Pass and down to our boulder.

Jack and Leo climbed a small peak on the following day. Then the weather deteriorated and we sat in our pits, waiting for the porters who were due two days later. When they did not come we gave them a day's grace and scoured the horizon with binoculars. We could wait no longer, as our plane was due in Ilaga five days later, so we abandoned everything non-essential and started walking. Definitions of essential varied among the three of us, but after a few miles and some heart-searching decisions we got our loads down to around 40 lb each, leaving gear all over the countryside. We hoped to get back to Ilaga in three days but we found it hard to keep to our schedule, especially as we took several wrong turnings in the maze of hunters' trails on the plateau. Fortunately, on the second day the porters met us. One man and three small boys made light of our loads, while the others went on for the remainder of our gear. We never saw them again—when the plane came for us, one day late, they were still 'very close, coming tomorrow'. As we had run out of food and were living on potatoes, we were content to leave our gear behind. We returned to Hong Kong just five weeks after our departure.

## SUMMARY

R. J. Isherwood; L. Murray; J. Baines—Carstensz Pyramide (New Guinea) by the N face, descending by the E ridge. N face of Sunday Peak—R. J. Isherwood (solo), August–September 1972