

Joe Tasker

1948-82

by Dick Renshaw

Joe was born in Hull in 1948 and five years later moved to Teeside where his father worked as a school caretaker until his retirement. Joe was one of ten children in a very close-knit family from which a strong sense of consideration and thoughtfulness for others seemed to develop. Several members of his family were usually at the airport when Joe left on expedition or returned. Just before leaving on his last expedition to Everest Pete wondered whether Joe, noted for turning up at the last minute, would be on time to meet the press. 'He will be,' said someone else. 'Joe might keep the press of the world waiting but never his family.'

As the eldest of a strong Catholic family, Joe was sent to Ushaw College, a Jesuit seminary, at the age of thirteen. His seven years there were to have a lasting effect on him in many ways. It was there that he started climbing when he was fifteen, in a quarry behind the college, with the encouragement of Father Barker, one of the priests, and in a well-stocked library his imagination was fired by epic adventures in the mountains. He was always grateful for the excellent education he had received and his amazing will power and stoicism may perhaps have been partly due to the somewhat spartan way of life and to the Jesuit ideals of spiritual development through self-denial. He started his training as a priest but at twenty he realised that he did not have the vocation and decided to leave – the hardest decision of his life.

In complete contrast to his life at Ushaw was his first job – as a dustman. He enjoyed the hard physical labour and the friendly banter with his workmates and his forthright nature and ability to communicate with people from all walks of life broke down any barriers. He then went on to work in a quarry in the Lake District, where he was near the crags, for by now climbing had become a major part of his life. Feeling the lack of intellectual stimulation to which he had become accustomed at Ushaw, he decided to go to Manchester University to take a degree in Sociology. The thin, fresh-faced youth looked the most unlikely of climbers but he soon made a big impression in the University Climbing Club with his keenness and drive, doing long hard routes and often climbing solo. His climbing career almost came to an early end while he was soloing Three Pebble Slabs at Froggatt. His ancient pair of worn Kletterschuhe were not up to the thin friction and he fell, breaking his wrist so seriously that the specialists said that the flexibility would be permanently impaired, curtailing his climbing. Never one to accept the hallowed words of experts without testing their veracity, Joe regarded this as a challenge and within a year was back climbing again with renewed enthusiasm and a brand new pair of EBs.

Whilst at university he was still finding his feet after so many years at the seminary and, although he was conscientious and absorbed by his studies, it was a time of experimentation and exploration. He was fascinated by the people living in their various ways, on the fringes of society, such as down-and-outs, alcoholics and gypsies. He had deep concern for others and his understanding and genuine warm nature made him a very good friend. However, this side of him was not easily discernible as it was often hidden by an abrasive, hard shell. Despite his gregariousness and his ability as a raconteur he was also in many ways a private person, sometimes appearing quite secretive and even enjoying creating a sense of mystery making partial disclosures. During decision making, whether personal or at a group level, he would not air his thoughts until he had fully mulled over the problem often preferring to do so in solitude.

Although we were at the same university, we never climbed together during that period. Our first real encounter was in Chamonix in 1970 when, on a wet, dreary day, Joe's curly red hair appeared through the door of my tent and he asked if I fancied doing the North Face of the Dru. Having overcome his initial awe of the Alps, it being his second season, he seemed

ready to tackle anything. It being my first, I was not and I demurred. The ice had been broken and we spent our first Alpine season together the following summer, climbing classic routes. The following year we again teamed up and developed a taste for North Faces. Joe really took to the mixed Alpine routes, relishing the insecure, delicate climbing. We were very different in personality and two seasons seemed but enough, nonetheless, we ended up climbing together again in 1973 after a chance meeting in Chamonix. We were both very ambitious and for that reason we climbed the Walker Spur, the Bonatti-Gobi Route on the Eckpfeiler Butress, the North Face of the Nesthorn, the North Face of the Dent Blanche and the North Face of the Eiger.

Joe had got a good degree earlier that year but decided not to settle into a career in order to be free to climb. At the end of the season all his money had gone and he decided to stay in the Alps and find work in the Swiss vineyards in the autumn. He said that the penniless period between the end of the climbing season and starting work was the happiest times of his life. He survived on the refunds of the empty wine bottles and on tins and packets of food left by departing climbers. He was able to relax and enjoy the mountains totally free from any cares of work, study or even climbing. After working on the vineyards he joined a group of young people at an archeological site at Beaume in Switzerland and later on we had an abortive attempt at winter climbing in the Alps.

In the summer of 1974 we met in Chamonix or, as Joe put it, 'There was an unplanned but inevitable encounter with Dick, alone and looking for a partner. It doesn't do to fight one's fate and we arranged to climb together.' We did what Joe thought was one of the most memorable Alpine Climbs – the east Face of the Grandes Jorasses, an intricate and demanding route. Joe had been stretched intellectually by academic life but the mountains provided the chance to stretch the mind and body to the full although I was continually amazed that someone who was so attached to his creature comforts should be involved with a sport which initiated so much physical hardship. At home he loved warmth and comfort: it was as though in times of plenty he was storing up excess to help him through leaner times on the mountains. Frequently it seemed as though only his will power and determination drove his body on and it was not usual to see him, at altitude, bent double over his ice axe racked by fits of coughing and spitting blood. The vast physical effort needed for mountaineering did not come easily but here, as in all his other activities, he had a powerful drive and restless energy.

Our ascent of the North Face of the Eiger in the winter of 1974-5 was a landmark in Joe's mountaineering career. It was an exhilarating climb and provided a stepping-stone to the Himalaya, giving us the necessary confidence to tackle the Himalayan peak as a two-man team. In 1975 we left Manchester in an overloaded Ford Escort van, our destination Dunagiri, a 7,000 metre peak in Northern India. It was an adventure from the start, fraught with problems and difficulties, but Joe seemed very much in control and methodically overcame one obstacle after another. He had an uncommon knack of going straight to the heart of the problem and solving it in the most expedient way. By September we were at 6,400 metres on the South Ridge but were insufficiently acclimatised, tired and with few supplies and little fuel left, should have retreated. We both suppressed our doubts and fears, however, and this almost cost us our lives. We struggled onto the summit leaving no resources for the downward decent which involved a four-day epic and left me with badly frost bitten fingers. Joe was becoming more at ease and more appreciative of the mountain environment and, having a natural eye for photography, was rapidly developing this talent and was able to record the mountain's changing moods. He was later able to give a vivid description of the whole trip in his book, *Savage Arena*. In it he also describes the impression made on him by Changabang.

He 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 rivalry between them was often evident, both of them setting very high standards in their goals which the other felt he had to attain or better. There was continual banter between them in which each tried to open up the chink's in each

other's armor. Pete's presence seemed to induce in Joe a show of hardness and outrageous behavior. They sometimes seemed like an old married couple but their banter would not have existed without a deep mutual respect and a strong affection.

In 1977 he attempted, without success, the North Ridge of Nuptse with Mike Covington and Doug Scott. That summer he went to the Alps but found that their allure was no more and thereafter he applied himself wholeheartedly to Himalayan expeditions. In 1978 he went with Chris Bonington's team to attempt the West Ridge of K2 and he witnessed the huge avalanche which swept his friend, Nick Escourt, to his death, after which the expedition was abandoned. The following year, 1979, he went to Nepal with Doug Scott, Pete Boardman and George Bettembourg to attempt the North Ridge of Kangchenjunga (8598 metres) without oxygen. Until then Joe's highest climb had been 7000 metres and to try and climb the third highest mountain in the world aroused in him many doubts about his ability to perform at altitude. Beneath Joe's appearance of confidence was a vulnerability which was very rarely expressed and which was counteracted by his ability to detach himself from his emotions. He proved himself capable of coping with the altitude and this exciting and successful ascent was, for Joe, an important personal achievement.

Frequent expeditions were taking their toll on his private life and his long absences and total involvement with mountaineering were too much for his personal relationships to withstand. In 1979 he began to organise an expedition to attempt, once again, the West Ridge of K2. At about this time he met Maria Coffey, who was to become a constant companion and a great source of strength to him. I had not climbed with Joe since 1975 but we had kept in touch and he had always been ready with his kind support. Valuing his friendships highly, he made great efforts to keep in touch with his many friends. Joe, Pete and I reached a height of 7975 meters on the Abruzzi Spur of K2 in very unsettled weather. It was one day's climbing to the summit from our tent, perched in a precarious position on a small ledge hacked out from a steep snow slope. During the night, after many hours of snowfall, an avalanche thundered down the slope, engulfing the tent, but miraculously not knocking it off the ledge. Joe was completely buried, Pete managed to extricate himself, dragged me out and we both dug out Joe. We escaped death from the avalanche but there were a further three days of harrowing descent down slopes which after continual snowfall had become extremely avalanche-prone, with annihilation seeming imminent at each step. Back at Base Camp each of us individually decided to go back up for another try, and it was this decision that made Joe realise the depth of his commitment to mountaineering. It was an experience that had a profound effect on him.

Shortly after coming back off K2, Joe went off on an expedition to attempt a winter ascent of the West Ridge of Everest. Still being very weak and not having fully regained his weight, it was an example of his incredible will power that he was able to find the strength to apply himself fully to the task ahead. Conditions on the mountain were brutal and the cold more intense than he had ever experienced. They did not get to the top but it was an innovative step and showed the feasibility of winter climbing on the world's highest peaks. This expedition was the theme for Joe's first book, *Everest the Cruel Way*. It was an exciting account and revealed Joe's talent for writing. He wrote it in a very short time and under great pressure as he was also running a climbing shop and preparing for yet another expedition. He was also becoming more involved in filming and this was probably more suited to his gregarious nature.

In 1981, Pete and Joe were again together, with Chris Bonington and Alan Rouse, on the expedition to Mount Kongur.

The North East Ridge of Everest offered a double challenge to Joe – not only to climb it, but also to film the entire expedition. He seemed to be living life at a cracking pace and sometimes felt frustration that there was not enough time to do all the things he wanted. He had just finished *Savage Arena* before leaving for Everest, and he completed his equipment appendix for the Kongur book just before we flew to Lhasa. There didn't seem enough hours in the day to pack everything in but it was evident that he was totally happy in what he was doing. At Base Camp there was more time and space to relax more fully and Joe amused us by funny stories and by appearing in the most bizarre clothes we had ever seen on

expedition. Life was never dull with him around and the constant jibes between him and Pete kept them on their toes and us entertained. I was very happy climbing with Joe: he had fine judgement and I felt totally safe with him. He impressed us all with his professional attitude towards filming and with his dedication, preserving in the foulest conditions. It was a bitter blow to me to have to leave the expedition after suffering a mild stroke and the night before I left everyone went off into their own tents to write letters for me to take the following day. Joe had a heavy work-load to get through, completing his film reports as well as writing letters, but he must have sensed my desolation and, although it meant him working through the night, he stayed chatting with me and keeping me company for a couple of hours.

This thoughtfulness was typical of Joe and throughout his sometimes frenetic lifestyle there shone a very special warmth and vitality. He was an outstanding mountaineer and a very good friend.