

A Sortie on Broad Peak

Kurt Diemberger

Translated by John Fairley

Photographs 27-28

A Piton Stirs Memories

What was it that brought me back to climb Broad Peak after half a life-time? Did I want to reawaken memories of my first Himalayan summit experience? Was it simply so that I could see the places before me again where I had climbed with my team-mates — the ridge, the face with the seracs, the notch with the view deep into China, the summit with its cornices — to see if they were still now as they were once? Or whether Broad Peak had changed over the years? Was it that I wished to know whether I, as a 52-year old, could climb my eight-thousanders as well now as I could then at 25. . . ?

Or was it an entirely new challenge: to climb the mountain with Julie as a team of two in Alpine style, in a surprise attack, and to conquer it anew, in a different way?

Truly, it was all of that together.

Whilst now I slowly slurp my tea with my partner at 7500m below a gigantic ice-tower, and bit by bit our senses return after being shaken up by our avalanche misadventure, pictures of the climb in 1957 mix in my thoughts with the present. As Julie and I arrived at 7000m during our first attempt, suddenly I found something. . . .

This misshapen, rusty piton . . . this is a piton I know! A heavy ring piton of solid iron, one such as was equally good in rock as in ice, from the 1950's and which today no-one uses. I remember still how Hermann Buhl had knocked it in, then, 27 years ago, in order to anchor our tent for Camp 3. He had sworn, because the piton would not hold in the brittle, crumbly limestone of this small rock island at 7000m, which we had called the Eagle's Nest. But at last, in the evening of 28 May 1957, our assault camp had stood ready for the summit attempt! Ready for that foolhardy undertaking; Broad Peak, the first eight thousander in alpine style, without high porters, without oxygen. Only four, we were: Hermann Buhl, Markus Schmuck, Fritz Wintersteller and I, the Benjamin of the expedition. My first Himalayan trip — a dream! With the great Hermann Buhl, idol of an entire generation of mountaineers — this man who had conquered the ice-giant Nanga Parbat solo — that 8125m naked mountain which had already claimed 14 lives. After reaching the summit he had had to stand all night leaning on the rock on a small ledge at 8000m on the wall, a bivouac such as no other had survived, and returned.

But to return to the W spur of Broad Peak: what had followed after we had established our assault camp at 7000m? The next day, 29 May 1957, we had set out for the summit, a sortie which had been predestined to fail. Because of the great distance still left to climb, over 1000m, we had set out from our camp during

the night . . . and into the fearsome cold of the W flank, -30°C , which lasts for hours on end even when, all around, the other peaks like K2 are already being warmed by the morning sun. In those days, there were no double boots and both Hermann Buhl's and Markus Schmuck's toes had frozen (I had had to treat them later in base camp; Hermann Buhl had nominated me as 'doctor' one month before the expedition left — I had done a crash course and had brought 27kg of medical supplies with me, together with directions for use). Nevertheless we had reached the northern turret of the mountain's long summit ridge, a sort of false summit at c. 8030m. There we had seen that the southern end, quite a whole hour away, was some 20m higher. . . . There, unreachable because it was so late, rose above us the true summit of Broad Peak! Disappointed, discontented, we had given up and descended right down to base camp in order to recover for a renewed attempt.

Because of 20m we had climbed the 8047 Broad Peak, as it were, a second time — on 9 June 1957. That was the first ascent, for only then, were we on the highest point of the mountain.

It was about 7pm that Hermann Buhl and I had stepped on to the summit, and the sun was very low. . . .

Now was the moment of ineffable truth — the silence of space around us, ourselves silent. This was utter fulfilment. The sun bent trembling to the horizon. Down there it was night, and under it the world. Only up here, and for us, was there light. Close over yonder the Gasherbrum summits glittered in all their magic; a little further away, Chogolisa's heavenly roof-tree. Straight ahead, against the last light, K2 reared its dark and massive head. Soft as velvet, all colours merging into a single dark gleam. The snow was suffused with deep orange tint, while the sky was a remarkable azure. As I looked out, an enormous pyramid of darkness projected itself over the limitless wastes of Tibet, to lose itself in the haze of impalpable distance — the shadow of Broad Peak. . . .

A beam of light reached out above and across the darkness towards us, just caressing the last few feet of our summit. We looked down at the snow underfoot, and to our amazement it seemed aglow.

Then the light went out.^{1,2}

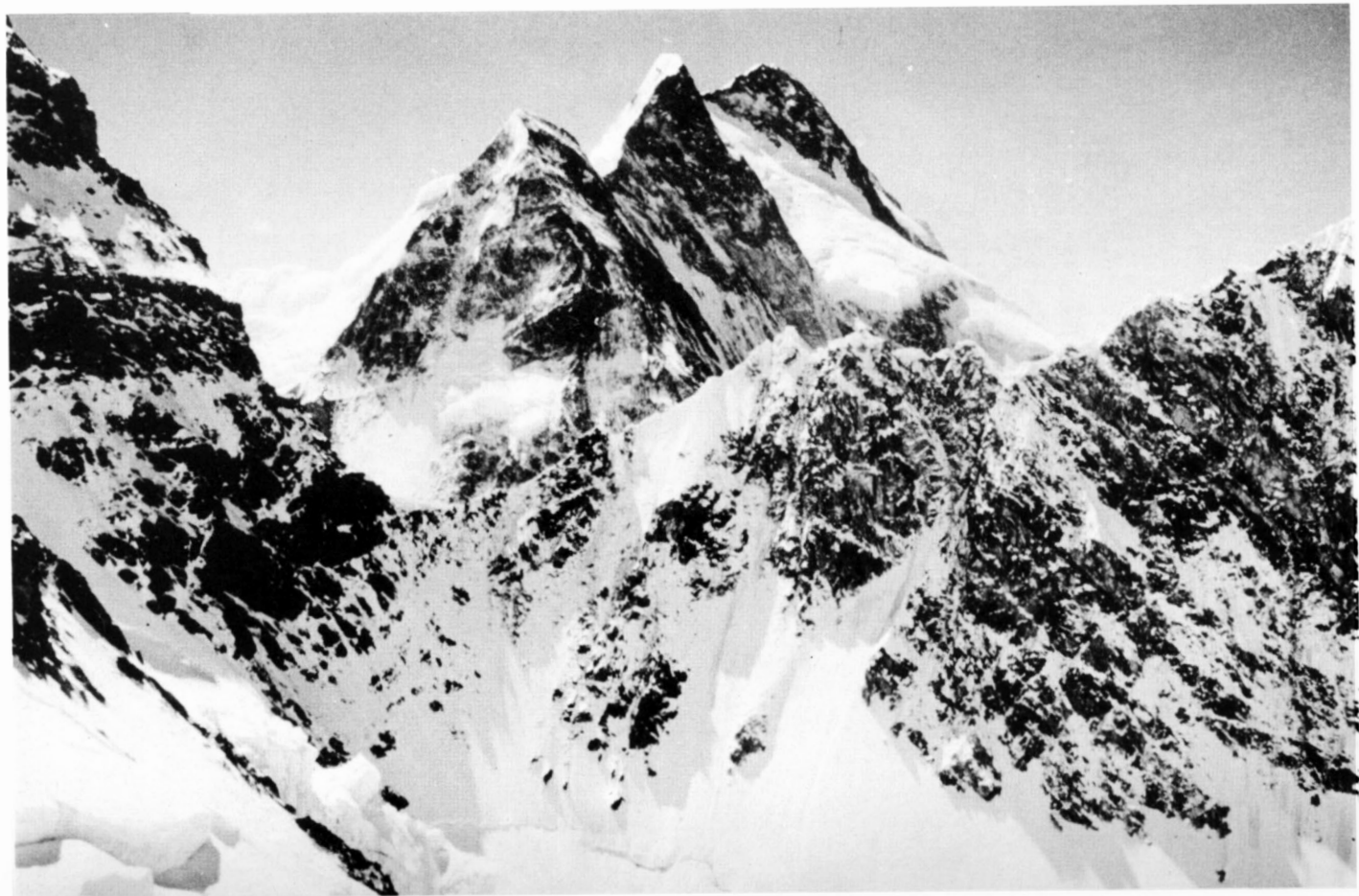
Once we were below again, the team had split up: Markus Schmuck and Fritz Wintersteller had set out to attempt a lightweight alpine style sortie on a seven thousander in the Savoia Group nearby; Hermann and I had wanted to climb with just one tent which we would carry with us, day by day higher, up the 'heavenly roof-tree' of the 7654m Chogolisa.

Everything had seemed to go well, our 'wandering high camp' had functioned well. At 6700m, we had left our tent on the ridge behind us, and had set off summit-wards. It was 27 June. Hermann was in tremendous form and joyful: to climb such a huge peak in only three days instead of three months — that was for him like a dream!

But it should have ended otherwise. . . .

Presently a little cloud came climbing up the slope below us. It grew larger, enveloping us, enveloping the peak. Without any warning, all hell broke loose. Grey veils of mist scurried across the ridge. . . . We fought our way forward through clouds of blown snow, bending double to meet the fury of the gale. . . .^{1,2}

A turn in the weather, it had seemed unbelievable after that beautiful morning with which the day had begun. But let us follow my diary. . . .



27 *Broad Peak seen from W ridge of K2*

Photo: Doug Scott

'We must go back immediately! The storm's filling in our tracks, then we'll walk out over the cornices' said Hermann, and he was right. . . . His last words, at 7500m on Chogolisa's ridge, for moments later it happened. . . . 'Whumm! — it shot through me like a spear, the ground shook, the surface of the snow seemed to sink in the twinkling of an eye. Horrified, I sprang out to the right. . . .

It was the cornice and it had broken directly under Hermann. But I had discovered that only later, for as I did not see him any more, I had waited, and he did not come. It must have happened just behind me — he had lost the tracks at a bend and had walked out on to the cornice. . . .

Would I have been able to hold him if we had been roped up, or would he have dragged me with him into the depths? Even today I do not know the answer — and I have pondered on the question often.

Hermann had tumbled far down Chogolisa's N face, perhaps as far as 500m and had been hidden from view by the following avalanche. The subsequent rescue attempt had been unsuccessful. I thank my lucky star that I was able to descend all the way alone — and my own efforts, for I never gave up.

I am holding a piton in my hand at 7000m on Broad Peak. It has stirred memories of Hermann Buhl. . . .

The picture dissolves: above me is the giant ice tower, the sky is still blue, but the clouds close over again. I am holding the tin mug in my hand and know now that we both will have need of our lucky stars if we are to win through to where I found that old piton. At least 400m descent through avalanche slopes. . . .

Julie is smiling again, the shock is wiped from her face, the dark eyes under the helmet look calm again, and I can see that she has regained the concentration we will be needing for the descent. She, also, is one who never gives up. Otherwise we would not be here, would never have reached the summit yesterday, would never have survived the last dreadful hours. . . .

The Avalanche

The descent from an eight thousander is always a flight, down, back to life, to mankind — although one has only just been seeking that life up above, where the summits touch the sky — and for an unforgettable moment, found it.

The steep snow and ice-wall below the notch (at 7800m) demanded our very last reserves; rope-length after rope-length, belaying down towards an invisible bivouac tent lost in the gloom, that stood somewhere or other, pinned to the steep wall, on the lower edge of a crevasse. It was only 200m lower than the notch, but we were tired and in the night it seemed to be half an eternity away. What a search it was, metre for metre, often doubting over the 'where to now?' between cliffs and snow-gullies, in the weak light of our head-torches, the only ones we had! Then we found it, our desert island in the steepness, appearing like a long black fleck out of the darkness, clinging to the rocks of the sharp ridge above a drop of 3000m, where one could still just make out the outlines of the glaciers in China. The end of our fight for survival — so we thought!

However, an eight thousander belongs to you first when you are right down — for until then you belong to it.

As Julie and I sank into a deathly deep sleep in our bivouac tent, we had no idea what the morning had prepared for us.

Dawn, 5.30am, somewhere outside there was a sound of sliding snow — an avalanche? Strange, for when we had arrived at 10 o'clock the night before, the stars were shining in the sky and the doubtful weather had taken a turn for the better. There it is again, that noise. It cannot possibly be an avalanche yet. Unless . . . as if given an electric shock, I shot bolt upright, for at that moment the snow drummed on the tent door, roaring past it, past into the depths, drumming and drumming. Desperately I hold the awning tight, pressing myself against the mountain . . . 'Julie!!' But she does not hear me, deep in her sleeping bag; God . . . that we thought to anchor the tent with the rope to the iceaxes last night, otherwise we would have been gone . . . The drumming becomes weaker, I can hardly breathe for adrenaline; the tent has held. With shaking fingers I open the zip, hastily, as quickly as I can: a wall of snow in front of the door, deep snow everywhere. It snows silently. . . . The weather has broken during the night and we have not noticed it! The situation is so disastrous, the danger so immense — 200m of snow in the slope above us which could slide down on us at any moment — that for a moment I can find nothing to say, as if my thoughts are frozen solid, solidified in the discovery of our hopelessness, aware that I am staring death in the face, with no escape. Perhaps there are only minutes to go . . . I am afraid to tell Julie this, afraid to admit it to her, but it is the truth: 'Julie — avalanches everywhere!! We must get going at once! In a couple of minutes we must be out of here! Perhaps it is too late already, but perhaps there is still a way out, if we are quick!' I see from her eyes that she has understood, but even as she gets up the next torrent arrives, like a waterfall from above. I rush up and panting with flailing arms, succeed in splitting the flood piling and pressing against the tent, one half down the slope and the other into the depths of the crevasse beside the tent. For some minutes it is our salvation, then the white torrent hits our tightly stretched, firmly anchored nylon home directly, but the tiny, metal-reinforced hoop-tent, intended really for only one person, offers so little frontal area that the snow slides down immediately into the crevasse to the side, most of it even before it can press against the tent, that we survive even this avalanche.

However, at the entrance, where there is no crevasse, it is a catastrophe. Despite all my efforts some of the snow has forced its way into the tent, where Julie, as hastily as she can is trying to pack the essentials together or, I cannot tell, first trying to drag her boots on — it is chaos, everything is swimming in snow, we dig feverishly for the all-important stove, call out a sort of count-down of everything we absolutely must have with us in order to escape alive from this mountain, given that we do not end up in an avalanche. God knows! There comes the next torrent!! I have just got my first boot on — throw myself against the snow masses, paddle like mad against the current flowing down against the tent. 'Julie, watch out that our boots don't vanish; without boots we are finished!' There is nothing for it, we must get away from here, we will not survive here much longer! Over — it is over again, that waterfall of snow. I wrestle for air. Where is the boot? The second boot! Lost in the depths? The tent is half full of snow. Julie frees herself, panting and coughing, she has her boots on now — I am relieved. Then; Panic. 'Julie, where is my second boot, I can't find it anywhere!' — 'It was here a moment ago; no, here!' She ransacks the snow inside the tent, I dig in the entrance. Without boots — on an eight thousander; that spells death. For several minutes



28 *Broad Peak seen from the Godwin Austin glacier*

Photo: Tulse Tullis

we forget our horror of the avalanche danger. 'Kurt — I've got it!' And she hands it across to me.

This desperate departure at 7600m made even the simple finding of a mountaineering boot appear like a miracle. It made us realise, just as much as on the following days, that either we would only succeed together in the descent, or we would perish together.

We left the tent behind, the sleeping-bags and all the essentials we brought with us. Fortunately, we roped up. Twenty minutes after the first snow-slide we were on our way, prodding in the deep, steep snow above the blue serac walls of Broad Peak at 7500m. We did not get far. Just about 6.15am a huge avalanche released itself directly above us in a couloir in the rock walls of the ridge. . . .

. . . everything is spinning; below is above, above is below; terrifying forces; resistance is senseless; you accelerate, carried away, turn, try to take breath . . . mouth full of snow, spit it out, for a moment you get air, at once the mouth is full of snow . . . there, again air . . . then back again . . . now we are being swept down Broad Peak . . . this is probably it, the end . . . but not yet . . . air, don't give up . . . there, for a moment we stop! . . . I feel the rope . . . further, in a mad whirlpool . . . oh, Julie, you too . . . somewhere, helplessly trapped in the whirlpool, without ending . . . don't give up . . . we mustn't give up, even at the end . . . air . . . terrifying twisting . . . somersaults . . . blows . . . air . . . no-one can end it, this whirlwind . . . only itself . . . I don't want . . . must fight to stop . . . and air . . . a blow . . . the rope pulls . . . no, I won't let it . . . hold tight . . . stillness! . . . Stillness! . . .

Stillness. I am jammed between blocks of ice. The avalanche has vanished.

The sky is there, above, blue. I can move, sit up: blocks of ice, the rope goes tightly down . . . Where is Julie? . . . The shape, motionless on its back, arms spread out, head downhill, on the slope below me; I can't see its face. . . .

It's Julie!

Dear God, don't let her be dead. . . .

'Are you hurt, bist du verletzt?' I shout.

Seconds in eternity . . . Answer me!

'I'm all right, but I can't move. Please help me to get up!'

Her voice. She's alive!

Soon I have her out of her position. When I came to a stop between the blocks of ice, the avalanche had thrown her headlong down the slope and she had come to a stop on her back in this position. We can hardly believe it, both of us uninjured; looking upwards we see a vertical wall of ice as big as a house, over which the avalanche had come before we landed in this steep rubble-tip of ice-blocks. The snow-flood had swept us some 150m over the seracs . . . We have had unbelievable luck.

Protected by a gigantic tower of ice, we squat in the snow. The last minutes are still written in our eyes; we are spiritually wrung dry, even though nothing serious has happened to us. We cook tea and slowly become calmer. Julie can feel the results of a blow to the upper part of her thigh and I have a black mark above an eye. Nothing. I have lost my snow goggles and the avalanche has taken off one of Julie's gloves . . . We find replacements in the rucksack except for the goggles, but all of this hardly bothers us at present. Again and again we look at each other: that

both of us are here indeed! Without the rope, now one of us could be anywhere, alone, without help or the possibility of help, without knowing whether the other even lived — we would probably never have found each other again.

Thus it was that I lost Hermann Buhl on Chogolisa.

Yes, we are infinitely thankful that we are now sitting side by side in the snow, even when we do not know what we will do next. 'As I lay on the steep slope, all I could see was the sky — then you asked if I was injured — and at that moment I knew that you too were alive'.

A week after the start of our ascent, we were standing again among the ice-towers of the Godwin Austen Glacier at the foot of the mountain. Before we returned to our mini-base camp below K2 which we had shared with only two porters since the departure of the International Swiss K2 Expedition, to which we belonged, we wanted to visit our friends and acquaintances in the other Broad Peak base camps. We stayed there two days.

Why?

Adventure does not count the years and has no age. Twice the same peak?

I think of the sunset with Hermann Buhl on the summit and of the Odyssey of the descent with Julie. But not only that. Why? Because it brings discovery and dimension to mankind, without which we could not even dream. I think of the day on the summit. When Julie and I were in the gap at 7800m and above us the highest edges of Broad Peak appeared out of the racing clouds and disappeared again. It was noon, and we waited two hours for it to get better. It would not. So we wanted to go at least a little higher in order to gain shelter from the storm which raged through the gap. . . . The previous night had been terrible, no space, no sleep, in far too small a bivouac tent — but perhaps we were also simply nervous: it was certainly better to start from such a high bivouac than from camp 3 at 7000m as in 1957, a fact that Hermann Buhl recognised after the descent through the night, but should the weather turn, then of course one was far too high here.

The storm dropped! Fantastic clouds towered on the Pakistani side, and on the Chinese side was a crystal-clear view into the depths. Julie and I would go for the summit! How the ridge had changed since Hermann and I were here . . . where in 1957 we had walked with two ski-sticks, was now an exposed climb along a sharp rock ridge! Everywhere, the ice had become less or even disappeared — the ridge is far more difficult than once it was! And hardly recognisable. Twenty-seven years bring many changes even to mountains. Below, at camp 1 for example, the natural platform by the rock tooth where Hermann and I had set our tent has vanished. Now there is another. The up and down of the teeth of the ridge, saddles, and steps below the false-summit and thereafter, has increased unbelievably!

'Julie, we are on the Vorgipfel. Over there is the summit!' Her face beams. My heart jumps with joy. We are both going well. Over there is the shimmering summit of Broad Peak just as I remember it, just as I last saw it!

An unexpected feeling of happiness takes hold of us. The route across the roof of the gigantic blade of Broad Peak becomes a traverse over the depths — for

which there are no words to describe it. Towers of cloud march past us in slow motion, a delicate glittering of millions of ice crystals, in the sun. It is the magic of the summit, different from before with Hermann Buhl . . . but, he is there, I sense him.

There is the cornice. Quite close, above the last blocks of the ridge the shimmering summit snows have appeared. I am surprised: we have only been three and a half hours under way since the gap. Not that neither of us had not been affected by the thin air! Just now, ever and again one of us would sit on a block, gaze at the sparkling crystals, the slow procession of the clouds . . . and breathe deeply, whilst the other went on to the end of the rope. It was always, look and breathe, climb and look, with millions of sparkling seconds of ice around you.

At 5.45pm, we stepped on to the summit.

Julie — our Broad Peak.

Slanting light. Happiness. The patch of snow. Hermann Buhl. The Gasherbrum summits . . . Then and now. Past and present, which in the tumult of crystals on the other side of time embrace. The magic of the summit!

'Let's climb up to the edge of the cornice and look down into China, first you, then me — we'll belay each other.' The view into the depth is breathtaking. The ribbon of the Gasherbrum Glacier, the Shaksgam furrow, the thousands and thousands of summits in Sinkiang. . . . There below, we had been there last year. 'I can see the place up to where the camels came, at least just about — below the dolomite walls. And where we could not get to, that huge bend in the glacier, here, directly below us . . . it flows differently from what we thought, flows between Broad Peak and that twin-summitted camelhump mountain!' Julie, above me at the cornice's edge pointed below, eyes shining. Why can't we now go exploring further there! This nameless land, uninhabited. Yes, the view below is already a gift.

When we look back where we came from, we see, high over the blade of our mountain, high over the billowing clouds beyond it, the gigantic pyramid of K2 rearing high into the heavens. Our mountain — when? But does it not belong to us already? How many hours, two years; for me it is three. We know it up to its highest heights, it is ours, even should we never tread its summit; peak of peaks, you have us enthralled. Peak of peaks, oh, how you are beautiful! Eternal temptation.

Returning over the clouds, the sun is now very low; now comes the tiredness, the thirst. Near the false-summit up on the summit ridge, I get the stove out and brew us a bowl of Ovo. We sit for a few moments whilst the light of the sun dies and the dusk falls. Then down we go into the night. . . .

1. *Summits and Secrets*, Kurt Diemberger, George Allen & Unwin.
2. *Gipfel und Gefährten*, Kurt Diemberger, Paul Neff Verlag.