The Scottish Gasherbrum III Expedition

Desmond Rubens

Plates 11–14

The first obstacle to setting out on a Karakoram trip is to decide upon a suitable objective. Geoff Cohen and I spent many long hours in the SMC library, combing back numbers of journals. An 8000m peak? — attractive, undoubtedly, but in Pakistan as mobbed as the Buchaille at the Glasgow Fair. Under 8000? — definitely quieter and also cheaper. Indeed, our eventual choice, Gasherbrum III, at 7952m was probably the best value peak in terms of £/metre of mountain — and compare the crowds! 1985 saw eleven expeditions to Gasherbrum II and five to Gasherbrum I. In contrast, our expedition was only the second ever to Gasherbrum III.

Gasherbrum III is a retiring, rather ugly mountain, hidden from the Baltoro Glacier by Gasherbrum IV and placed well up the Gasherbrum cirque when viewed from the Abruzzi glacier. Its first ascent was made in 1975 by a Polish party which included Alison Chadwick and Wanda Rutkiewicz. Their route ascended much of Gasherbrum II, traversed beneath its summit pyramid to the snowy saddle between the two peaks and climbed a difficult summit gully.

During the 1958 Gasherbrum IV expedition, Cassin[1] made a brief solo excursion from a high camp which terminated at 7300m. We were uncertain where Cassin actually went but it seemed he retreated before getting to grips with the real difficulties which lie in the last 700–800m.

Thus, Gasherbrum III was virtually untouched, its secret faces and ridges well hidden from prying eyes. We were unable to obtain many useful photographs before we departed, though a picture from GIV in Moraini's book[1] showed a dolomitic-looking craggy aspect. Our plan was to go for the N ridge from a high col between Gasherbrum III and a 7300m peak on the coire rim. This would satisfy our exploratory urges and keep us well away from the crowds. Finally, we decided to go 'in good style'; lightweight, two-man, with no high altitude porters, fixed ropes *etc.*

The popular climbing term 'commitment' is best applied when the Pakistan Embassy cashes your royalty cheque. Only then are you truly 'committed'. The Pakistanis also required us to increase our two-man expedition to four. Paul Nunn and Clive Rowland made up the party. We arrived at Islamabad on 23 June and at Base Camp on the Abruzzi glacier (5100m) 18 days later.

Base Camp was a crowded 800m of medial moraine shared with the Gasherbrum I and II teams. Any lingering pretence of solitude was shattered by the helicopters supplying the army camp an hour further up the Abruzzi whence an occasional shell was lobbed over the Conway Saddle in the direction of the Siachen Glacier. Baltoro Kangri did its best to compete in the nuisance stakes but only its very loudest avalanches could compare to the human assaults on our

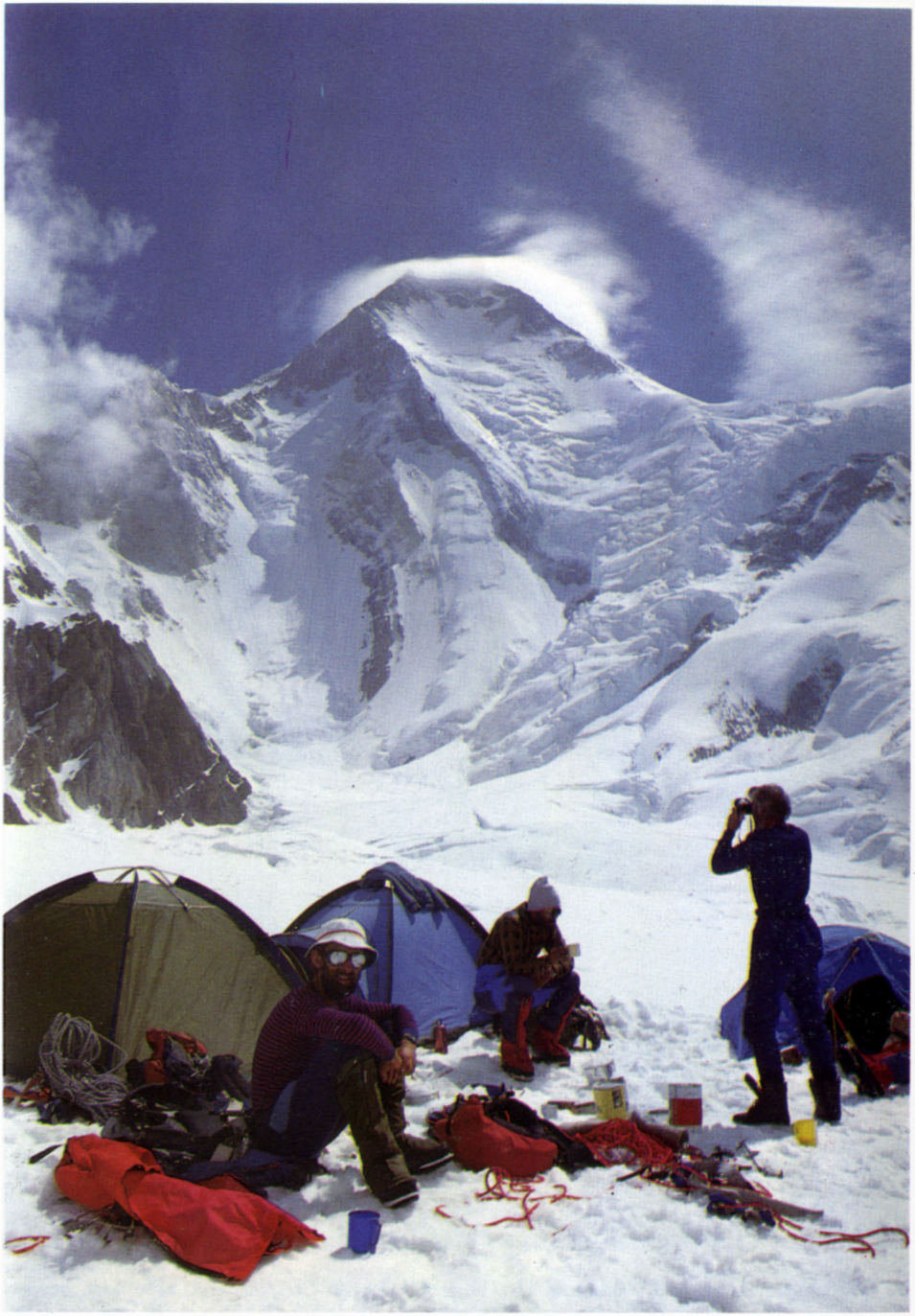


Photo: Desmond Rubens

11 *Geoff Cohen, Paul Nunn and Clive Rowlands at Camp ½ with Gasherbrum I (Hidden Peak) beyond.*

aural senses. At least our visual stimulation was more rewarding. We had fine views of the whole Gasherbrum family, along with Sia Kangri, Baltoro Kangri and Chogolisa.

For the first week, we ferried loads up through the long, lower ice-fall of the S Gasherbrum glacier to Camp 2 at 6000m, initially using a halfway dump (Camp 1). The ice-fall was used by Gasherbrum I and II teams and so was well-marked. Ferrying loads was always very tedious and particularly so after a storm. It always surprised me to see a team coming up as we descended to BC, as the ice-fall became unpleasant as early as 8am. Certainly, as a small team, we always felt more mobile from Islamabad onwards and my only complaint at this stage was the injustice of Clive, a regular smoker who had not spent the preceding months training over the steep hills of Edinburgh, being constantly out in front.

On 21 July, Geoff and I began to push the route beyond Camp I, up the 800m ice-fall between Gasherbrums III and IV. This upper ice-fall was much steeper, heavily crevassed and had some enormous seracs. The upper coire was defended by a final 60m ice palisade which stretched the entire width of the coire. Shortly after beginning the exploration of this thoroughly unpleasant place, I contracted an infected tooth abscess and retired to BC with Geoff. Meanwhile, Clive and Paul explored the ice-fall as far as the ice palisade and dug a halfway snowcave at 6400m. While much of the ice-fall was dangerous, a vague ridge above half height increased the odds in our favour.

By 29 July we were reunited in Camp 1, ready to push on up to the upper coire. On the 30th, we found a way through on the left side of the ice-fall by climbing the steep but safe slopes under Gasherbrum IV to an exit gully between Gasherbrum IV and the ice palisade. By 2 August, we had a stocked ice-cave in the coire at 6900m under the SW ridge of Gasherbrum III. A little exploration also went on. Geoff had spent an afternoon visiting the col on the Italian route below Gasherbrum IV but his efforts were rewarded by fresh cloud. With Clive, he made another sortie far up to the back of the coire. Again, even from their furthermost point, it was impossible to tell if a feasible route existed up the N ridge of Gasherbrum III. The W flank of Gasherbrum III is very precipitous with one enormous vertical rock step below the summit. This step continues round to the north but how much further would require additional investigation. It certainly looked possible to reach the col below the N ridge, though not without difficulty.

I had been resting during these sorties, hoping that whatever ailment was affecting me would go away. I was beginning to discover that resting at 7000m was not a very effective cure. Now the weather, so far fairly benign bar one 24 hour storm, took a hand. On the morning of the 3rd, strong winds swept the coire and cloud blotted out the Gasherbrum basin as we made our way slowly over to the top of the ice-fall. Once in the ice-fall, we were sheltered but great care was required descending the steep slopes below Gasherbrum IV. By the following day we were back at BC, I for one particularly thankful to be back at a lower altitude. Our decision to descend was vindicated. Other parties were trapped on the hill (fortunately without serious consequences) while 1.5m of snow fell. Our main difficulty during the ensuing five days, apart from digging

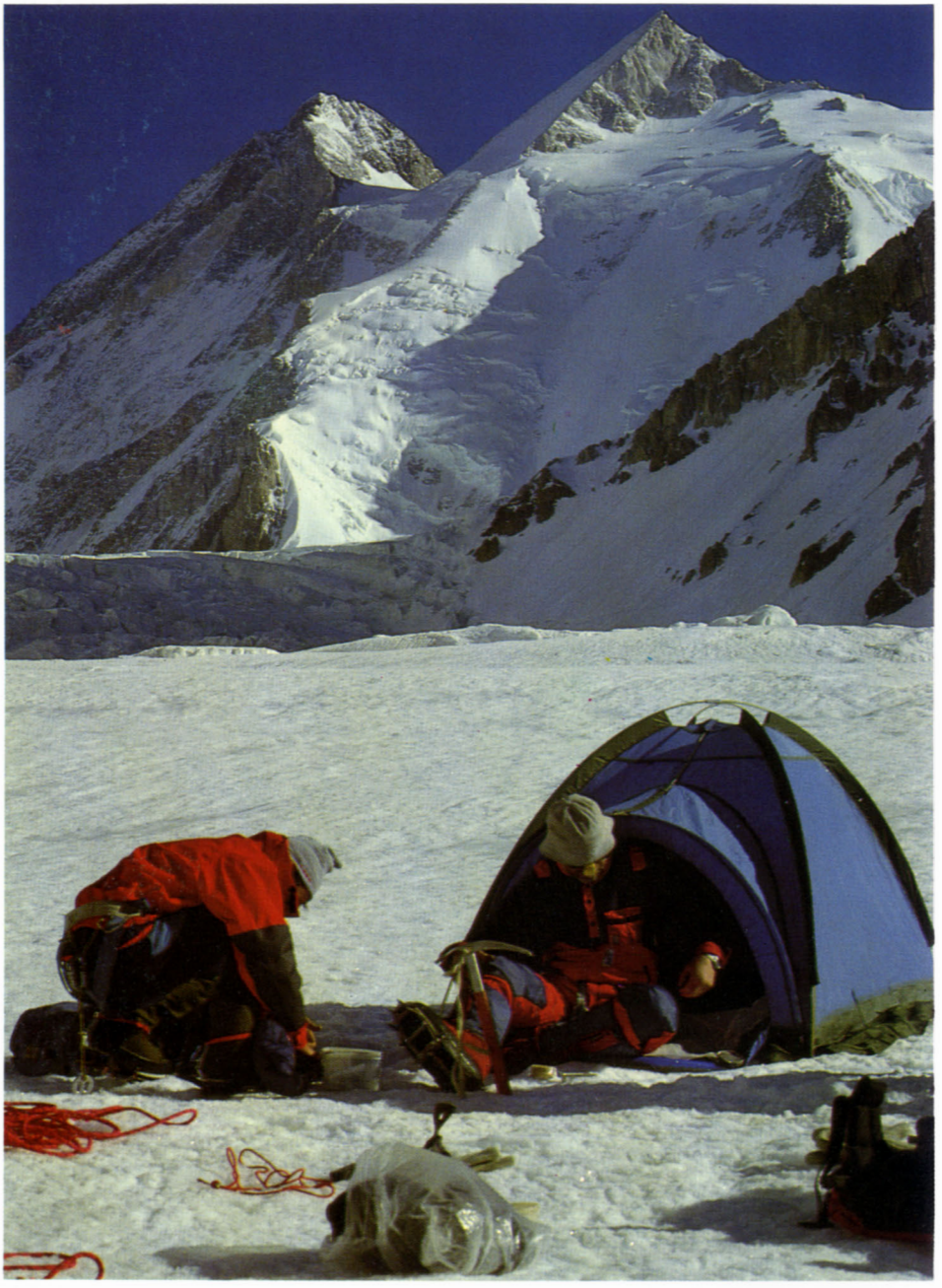
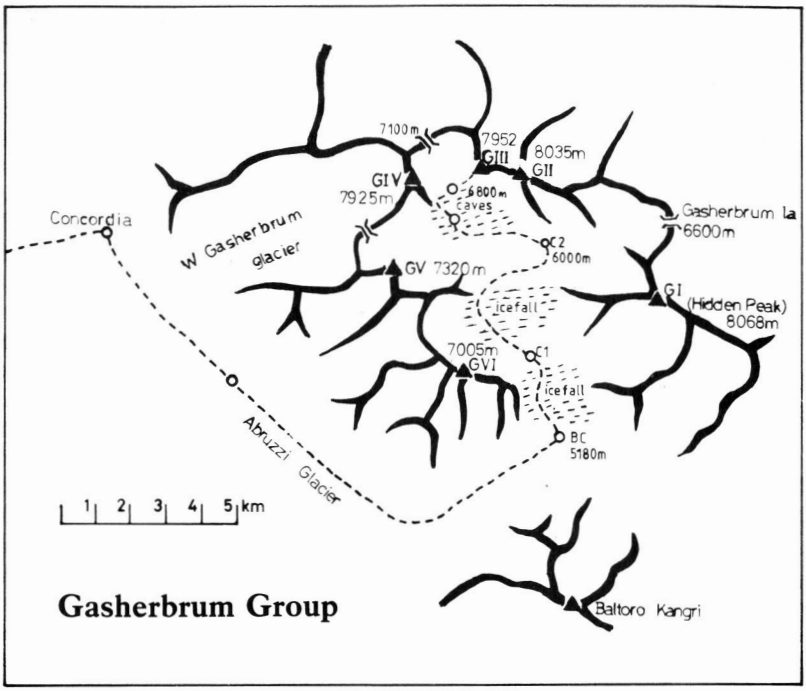


Photo: Desmond Rubens

12 *Gasherbrum III (L) and Gasherbrum II. The normal route on GII follows the snow ridge, traverses beneath the rock pyramid, and finishes up the skyline (R). The Polish 1975 route to GIII traverses below GII's summit pyramid to the saddle and the hidden valley. The ridge attempted by Rubens and party followed the rock ridge extreme L.*



out our tents, was that our liaison officer chose this period to quarrel with us. Instead of the relaxation we keenly needed, the air filled with tension, only finally resolved when the LO departed towards Askole. The tension was gloriously dissipated by brandy supplied by the neighbouring French expedition in celebration of their success on Gasherbrum II. Clive then departed owing to business commitments and became quite ill on the walk-out.

On 11 August, Paul, Geoff and myself set off up the hill again. Our hope was that, with the snow cave at 6900m stocked, we could make a fairly rapid ascent. No snow had fallen for more than two days and we had had a good report on the snow conditions as far as Camp 2. This report turned out to be erroneous. Initially, we made good progress and by dawn had ascended most of the lower ice-fall. However, higher up, the snow had not consolidated and our slowness begat, as it always does, further slowness. The final mile across the plateau took four hours instead of the normal forty minutes and we arrived at Camp 2 exhausted after a 12 hour day. The dome tents were barely visible and we spent another hour digging them out and repitching them.

We took a rest day to recover and allow the snow another day to settle. Paul then decided to go down and Geoff and I went on alone. The following day we reached the ice-cave at 6400m. This had changed dramatically due to the collapsing seracs above but was still inhabitable. Next day, we returned to the coire ice-cave, Geoff leading one execrable pitch of waist deep snow on the way. However, once on the upper slopes, the snow improved and in the coire the

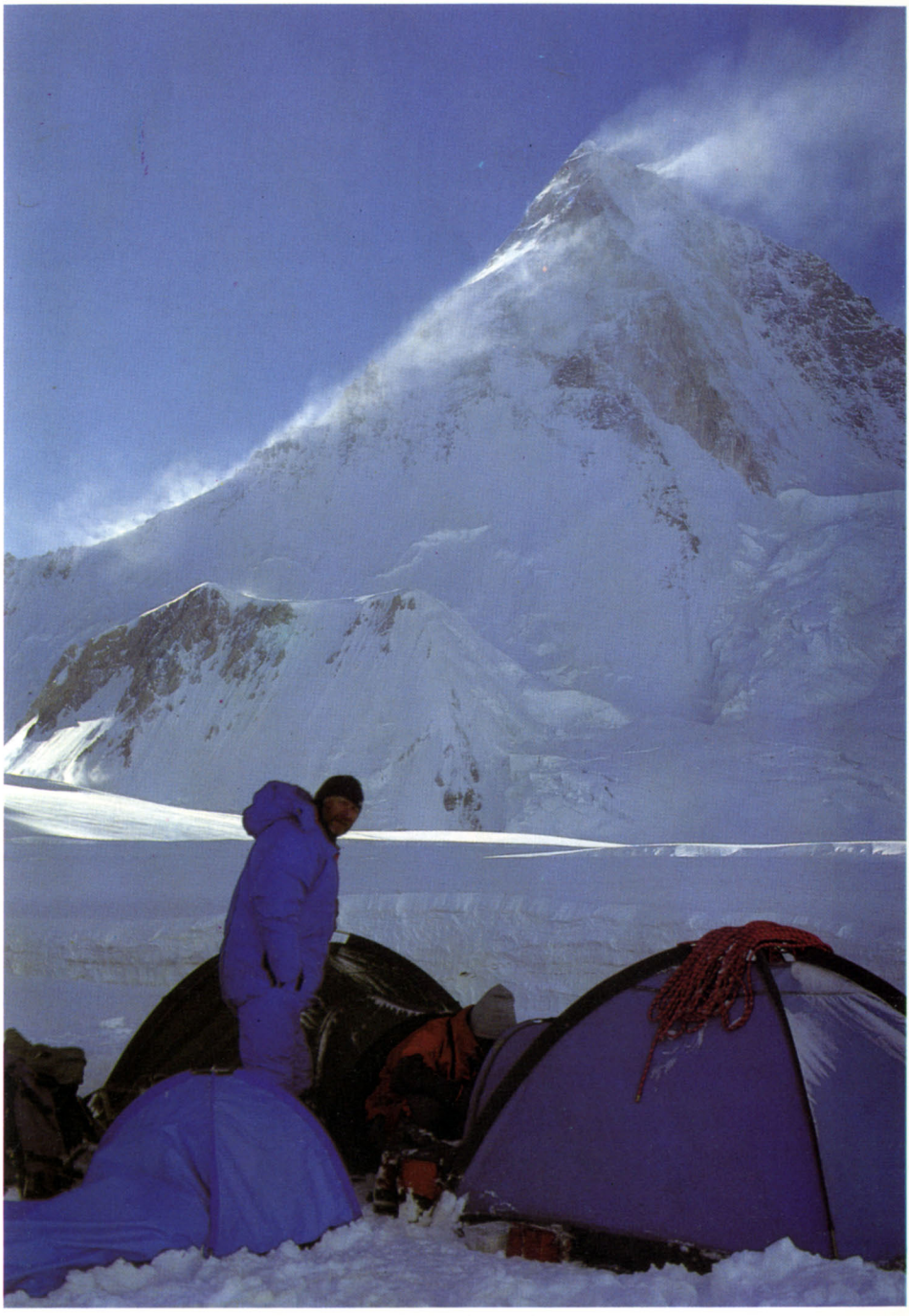


Photo: Desmond Rubens

13 *Gasherbrum IV on the evening after the 24-hour storm. The Italian 1958 route follows the ridge (R).*

wind had scoured the glacier and the going was more reasonable. Even so, it was still calf-deep at times.

The following day dawned clear but windy. We packed sacks and left the shelter of the ice-cave. We had decided to tackle the SW ridge of the mountain, a long mixed ridge seen in profile from BC. It was less remote and its problems were known, at least from the coire.

'Rather like a day on the Ben,' said Geoff, encouragingly, as he led off up the snow slopes towards the first gendarme on the ridge. I was quieter as I pondered this remark, but felt optimistic. This was, after all, what we had come for — lightweight, technical climbing on a big mountain. I just hoped it was not too technical. We gained height steadily, traversed a ramp and reached a prominent gendarme. The wind roared through the gap beyond and we could now see the upper slopes of Hidden Peak. Roping up, we led through about eight pitches. We kept mainly to the face, slightly right of the ridge which had appeared reasonable enough from the coire, but was certainly more difficult on more intimate acquaintance. The climbing was demanding — fairly steep and exposed, slabby, holdless and with enough snow to increase the difficulty. Any snow in quantity was in very poor condition, so that we stuck to the rock wherever possible. We had the satisfaction of seeing the great peaks come into view after an absence of many weeks — Masherbrum, Broad Peak and K2 now visible over the coire rim. As the afternoon wore on, we began to cast about for a decent ledge but the ridge, which had not appeared so unaccommodating from below, yielded us not a single decent site. The cloud was now well about us adding to our problems. We eventually settled on a narrow snow shelf, safely secured but uncomfortable in our mini-dome bivvy bags. By the time we brewed up it was dark. Still, we had made fair progress, judged by our position against Gasherbrum IV.

I woke to a fabulous dawn over Broad Peak and K2. We brewed, packed a few sweets, took a couple of ropes and some gear and left by 7am. The ridge was now more accommodating and we moved unroped. The wind was ferocious. Accidentally leaving my nose exposed yielded superficial frostbite within minutes. I pulled the hood of my down suit more tightly around my face and soon the skin became more pliable. Geoff (as usual) was out in front, but at least we were gaining height. The 7000m-plus peaks on the coire rim were now far below us. To the north, the brown lands north of the Shaksgam River contrasted with the great peaks of the Karakoram. Masherbrum looked straight at us, Hidden Peak reared its noble form clear of the rapidly moving cloud, Broad Peak savage indeed from its Chinese side, K2, monarch of them all.

We passed a tower on its leeward side gaining some respite from the wind. Then we followed steep ledges around the tower traversing back towards the ridge with the upper coire some 600m below our heels. No second chances here. Back on the ridge, we were on a narrow crest with a succession of small pinnacles. We gained some more height, then roped up, as the ground had become more difficult. Only two more pitches and we had run out of time. The cloud was now tearing through the gaps in the ridge and Gasherbrum IV had been blotted out for some time. Moreover, the way ahead was not at all obvious. Routefinding, rather than technical difficulty (though that was not lacking),

Photo: Desmond Rubens

14 *Gasherbrum IV W face seen from Concordia. A porter can be seen crossing the moraine in the foreground.*

was the problem. There was no question of descending this ground in the dark or of bivouacing without gear in this wind. I was certainly not sorry to go down as I now felt very tired. The weeks of being in the ice-fall had taken a mental as well as a physical toll. I estimated later that we had reached a point about 200m (vertical) below the summit. Even the most optimistic estimates would have required three to four hours to cover the remaining ground at that altitude.

We began to reverse the route. Back at the sheltered section I rested awhile. The sun came out and I tried to absorb some of the stark beauty of this, the wildest landscape I had ever seen. Reward enough, I thought, for the weeks of toil. We arrived back at the bivvi ledge at dusk, the bags flapping vertically into the air. We retied them and got in. Halfway through the night a knot came undone and I found myself suddenly four feet lower. I hauled myself back up hand over hand and retied the knot more carefully.

In the morning I knew my feet were frostbitten for sure. My hands had suffered slightly as well from taking sunrise photographs. With a tremendous struggle we got my feet back into my boots. Although it was still very cold, the weather was kinder but we were more tired. I recall applying first principles as I made a delicate traverse back onto the ridge during the descent. Three points of contact, one limb moving at a time, crampons searching for a foothold, slow deliberate change of weight, ignore the 1000m exposure down to the S Gasherbrum glacier. Images of home came to mind, encouraging my brain to keep in gear. From the ridge, we abseiled down. We reached the snow slope exhausted with the cave hundreds of metres below. Still, now we only had to move forward and we descended. Near the cave the ground sloped less steeply and it seemed like going uphill. I remember noting Geoff lying motionless in a heap. No point in stopping: twenty steps now to the cave, ten, five, one. I crawled in; filled the dixie; lit the stove; and collapsed into my bag. Geoff arrived and we began the recovery process.

A rest day, then slowly down the exposed slopes of the upper ice-fall for the last time. The following evening we reached Base Camp. I remember the last mile along the moraine in the dusk and wet snow falling. We were going at the slowest possible speed without actually being stationary. We arrived to find the tents wrecked by ice-melt, one ruined beyond repair: a very low point. Slowly we made two tents habitable and at last I got the stove primed with the wretched local fuel.

Next three days — holiday. We enjoyed the sun and peace of a deserted Base Camp. I was back in Britain by 3 September, Geoff a few days later. My feet eventually recovered though two toes have a more interesting shape than prior to the expedition.

Reference

1. Fosco Moraini *Karakoram — The Ascent of Gasherbrum IV*.