Walking Conway's Great White Roof

The First Traverse of Chogolisa

Andy Fanshawe

Plates 30–31

Chogolisa (7665m), in the Karakoram Mountains of Pakistan, has two summits, the higher SW summit and the NE (Bride Peak) top (7654m). The connecting summit ridge of the huge trapezium is over 1km in length. In 1957, Hermann Buhl was killed, making an attempt on Bride Peak with Kurt Diemberger. Attention was drawn to the peak, and by 1958 Fujihira and Hirai had made the first ascent of Bride Peak, leaving the higher summit still unclimbed. 1975 saw the first ascent of the SW summit by the Austrian Expedition led by Koblmuller, who fixed over 1200m of rope between 5000m and 6700m. No party had ever traversed the summit ridge to include both summits in a single excursion. This is what the 1986 British Chogolisa Expedition of Liam Elliot, Andy Fanshawe (Leader), Hamish Irvine, Ulric Jessop and Simon Lamb hoped to achieve. They made their attempt from the north, from the Baltoro Glacier. The expedition was supported by the Nick Estcourt Award, the British Mountaineering Council, the Mount Everest Foundation and the Sang Award.

It was not until after three weeks from arriving in Karachi on the Arabian Sea that we reached Base Camp at the junction of the Vigne and Upper Baltoro Glaciers, just two hours from Concordia. But it hadn't been easy!

A 26-hour train journey from Karachi took four already weary climbers to Rawalpindi, to near-exhaustion and mind-bending bureaucracy. Forms (in triplicate), ice-throwing machines disguised as air-conditioning, Morris Minor taxis that just *never* broke down, mango milkshakes and, worst of all, Gulzar, our Liaison Officer, were all experienced before Simon, flying direct with his employers, arrived on the scene looking decidedly clean! Another two days in Pindi soon knocked him into shape.

The highlight of the approach was perhaps the first-class jet flight (second class (expedition class!) was full) from Pindi to Skardu. From the flight-deck we were treated to a 270° panorama of the Karakoram with just glass between us at 8500m and the widest imaginable expanse of peaks, most obvious being Nanga Parbat, K2, Broad Peak and Gasherbrum 4.

At Skardu 30 porters were employed (without haste, as many were unwilling to work for government rates), bundled in a tractor trailer and taken to Dassu, the roadhead. This was achieved after three days' hectic wrangling and repeated attempts, often with success, by our agent to divert our porters to Saudin's Mountain Marathon event.

The walk-in to Base was characterized by extremely heavy sacks (a result of over-enthusiastic cost-cutting), desperately cold river crossing (or desperately frightening, depending on whether we were sitting in fish-crates suspended over the Braldu or not), heat exhaustion, litter and dramatic scenery



Photo: Ulric Jessop

30 *Andy Fanshawe digging out a ledge for the mountain tents at 7400m at the site of Camp 4 on 13 August.*

on a harrowing scale. Base Camp was a welcoming place.

One week passed after our acclimatization ascent when Simon, Hamish, Liam and Ulric climbed to the summit of the 'ice dome' at 7150m on the SE ridge of Bride Peak. I could not join them on this assault as I was suffering, as everybody did to some extent, from the extreme gluttony witnessed at Fullers K2 Base Camp. The weather in this period of waiting was the worst that we endured. Interest was maintained by nursing our home brew 'Happy' which was converting alarming quantities of sugar into alcohol!

To traverse Chogolisa would necessitate carrying *all* our gear over the top. We would not be able to enjoy the luxury of a top camp, and a light-weight 'up-and-down' assault on the summit day. Nothing that wasn't considered absolutely essential was carried. 8.5mm rope was replaced by 7mm line—and in shorter lengths, frames were taken out of sacks, Goretex shells for sleeping bags were forgone, and clothing spares were whittled away to virtually none. We didn't even carry head-torch battery spares. There would be no margin for error.

10 August

The day dawned clear and calm. Although clouds gradually built up through the morning, they never looked threatening. Small wonder then that when Hamish suggested that we leave that morning for the base of the climbing proper we all agreed. We would not need to get committed until later on, by which time we hoped to have a better idea of the weather. Within two hours of that decision we had eaten, packed and started on the long approach up the Vigne Glacier. Eight hours of hard going brought us to the very head of the glacier, underneath the biggest feature of the area, the 1500m NW face, and the SW ridge of Chogolisa. Although this face was over 2km wide, only one line stood out as the ascent route, this being threatened by séracs for only a portion of its height. The huge amphitheatre within which we slept that night left an imposing impression.

11 August

At 1am under a broken sky I emerged from sleep and immediately put on a brew. By 2.30am we started on the face and moved up slowly, over a huge avalanche cone, behind Liam trail-breaking through a light powder cover. Higher up, patches of exposed ice and névé provided much-needed relief, but by noon we were still more than 300m from the ridge. The slope was dangerous and further uphill progress was exhausting. An annoyance—how had we landed ourselves in the present position?—kept hammering on my tired mind. We stopped, pitched our tiny tents and rested, difficult though this was under the baking sun.

12 August

Although tired, I was very pleased when, at 2.30am, we were again moving, now on steeper ground though mostly unroped to allow us to progress at our own pace. A couple of séracs were negotiated before we at last reached the SW ridge, uncorniced but razor-thin, that led us to the col at 6700m. Here the

Austrians made their Camp 4 after climbing the SE face at the head of the Kaberi Glacier on the first ascent of Chogolisa in 1975. We could at last look south—to the Kaberi and Chogolisa Glaciers, to K6 and K7 and into the Hushe Valley. For the first time Masherbrum dominated our view—the N ridge, its greatest spectacle, making one massive sweep 8km on to the Baltoro. The weather was excellent now, the pace and mood relaxed. We stopped that day on what turned out to be the last decent area of level ground below the summit, on the very crest of the ridge.

13 August

By the morning we were under 10cm of fresh snow. Spindrift gusted everywhere. Ulric's Karrimat was picked up by the wind and lost, and things suddenly seemed very uneasy. Slow progress was expected, and was achieved steadily up the ridge. Very poor visibility at first was harrowing, but later we had clear views of the summit, over 600m above, and we pushed harder until it was again enveloped in cloud. The wind on the ridge higher up looked terrifying—clouds and spindrift were absolutely screaming over the edge. There were no ledges between us and the top; nothing to aim for, and we were certainly not going to make the top today. Upward progress was painfully slow and required several deep panting breaths for each single step. I switched off my brain, and not a single thought registered in the next 12 hours. The slope levelled a little, to about 35°, and, exhausted, we set about digging out a ledge for each of the bivouac tents—this took another three hours!

The wall on the uphill side of the tent shared by Simon and me slowly caved in under the ever-increasing weight of driven snow. Cooking was impossible to achieve without the tent filling with spindrift which poured in through the minutest of cracks in the entrance, kept by us for ventilation. To add to the misery, by nightfall the clouds abandoned us on that lonely spot. Although this gave a beautiful sunset, it did little to inspire hopes for a comfortable night. Temperatures crashed. A half-inch layer of hoar-frost appeared instantly on the inside walls of the tent when we closed the entrance and struggled for sleep. For me sleep was impossible, my mouth drying out as the rest of me seemed to get wetter. Heavy and frequent breathing fought a numb, almost relaxing feeling, that I badly wanted. I writhed in my pit. It was a hideous place.

14 August

It had been a desperately cold night—that morning I recorded −28°C on my tiny thermometer. It occurred to me that it had been some time since I had felt any sensation in my toes. I remembered my eight-day stay in Chamonix Hospital last Christmas with frostbite, grimaced, and then tried not to let it worry me again. Getting out of the tents and into boots at that temperature and altitude (*c* 7400m) was difficult enough without having to teeter on a snow and ice-slope 2000m above the glacier!

It was 5am, four hours after alarm, before Simon and I eventually started moving, following the trail left by the others, about an hour ahead. The weather was perfect—ample compensation for a deathly cold night. Certainly now we would top our mountain!



Photo: Liam Elliot

31 Hamish Irvine on the summits' ridge of Chogolisa at c7660m, looking N to K2 and Broad Peak.

At about 8.30am we were all together on the summit of Chogolisa. Here was the place that, more than any other, we had wanted to reach. The place that had dominated our lives for the past 10 months. The place where the glare of the sun was the only obstruction to a view that lifted every emotion I had, upwelling tiny tears of joy. I briefly hugged Hamish, quite forgetting for the moment the huge drop on either side of our razor ridge. Liam sat pensively, gazing along the summits' edge or down one of the ridges splaying out into the chaos of the Karakoram. Someone took a picture, but it will never look the same again . . .

The summit ridge—the objective, after all, of the expedition—lay to the NE. Bride Peak, the NE top, was clearly discernible one kilometre distant. As we set out along the ridge, K2, Broad Peak and the Gasherbrums caught our eyes, quickly humbling us. The way was occasionally delicate, but never technically difficult. Nowhere did we rope, and, what we had predicted would take us a whole day, took us 4 hours. The summit of Bride Peak is a rocky surmount about 20m high. The south side of very steep snow was by 1pm very clearly unclimbable. The slaty rock on all other sides was shattered to such an extent that it was decidedly unstable. It was impossible to fix a belay on the rock, not even a spike, and, with no placements for ice-screws or snow-stakes in the surrounding snow, we were left with little option but to climb unroped to the top. Ulric and I tentatively moved up the *rognon*, making at last a wild (and somewhat exposed!) mantleshelf move to gain the top. There was room for one person to stand on the summit, but a gust would certainly blow you off. We sat on the summit at 7654m, just 11m lower than the main top. There was, surprisingly, no feeling of urgency to descend. We exchanged photos, enjoying the moment, before retiring with great difficulty back to the ridge and the others, who were convinced by our terrifying display that the risk on this lower summit was too much to justify.

Liam, realizing the need for descent, was the first to turn his back on the summit and to start on the long push down. There was no lingering now. We waded through deep snow for six dreamy hours. Liam and I reached the col at 7000m at about 7.30pm. The weather, for ever changeable, turned foul again. Simon and Hamish quickly appeared, but Ulric was nowhere to be seen. Not one of us could have mustered the energy to go back up that slope to help Ulric, or to search for him. We got on with the chores of bivouac life, preparing drinks and pulling into our sleeping bags, now heavy and sodden. I somehow managed to convince myself that Ulric had arrived back, and that there was nothing to worry about. Maybe I did this because I thought that Ulric's head-torch, like mine, was no longer working, or because I remembered that I had cut a trail across a snow-slope disturbingly prone to windslab avalanche. Whatever the reason, I had shut it from my mind. Ulric appeared to Liam and Hamish at about 9pm—Simon and I had already retreated into the tent. In the last two hours, nearing the point of total exhaustion, he had covered only 200m. I poked my head out of the entrance and saw him just 10m away, coming across the slope. He looked like a figure out of hell, slumped and walking ever so slowly towards us. His beard, heavy with ice and shining in our torchlight, was drawn from his thin face and his arms hung limp, rocking gently.

Once the euphoria of the summits had worn off, weariness started to settle on me like a lead weight. As I staggered up to my neck in dangerous slabby snow, I got further and further behind the others. I donned my head-torch and followed the trench left by them, until the situation became confused and I followed an avalanche runnel for 50 precious metres before realizing my mistake. In my shattered condition regaining the track cost me dear, and I started crawling along what I hoped was the right track. Then once again I was uncertain where to go, as the trench ahead seemed to bifurcate. Whistles and flashes of my head-torch were greeted with an indifferent silence. Anger and frustration welled up inside me—I couldn't understand why nobody would help me; and I couldn't bear the embarrassment of spending the night in the open only yards from the tent, just because I was incapable of following a two-foot-deep trench in the snow. Then suddenly I spotted a dim glow just ahead of me. It turned out that Hamish, who was on his way back to help, had run out of head-torch power. Eventually, after what seemed like hours, I was ensconced in a warm pit with hot food (which I had to cook myself!) and a brew. Sleep came in mid-chew . . .

15 August

Simon and I decided to try and push to Base Camp in one day, and we left very early, the only occasion when we were the ones to start on the day's trailbreaking. Liam quickly followed once the others had confirmed that they were OK and were about to make a move. By 11am he and Simon decided that they would wait for the others, and that pushing back was unwise in view of the time of day and the state of the ice-fall leading down to the Upper Baltoro. At this stage I was convinced that frostbite had set in, the euphoria had gone, I was tired and wanted nothing more than to get down as soon as possible.

At 6pm I collapsed into the cooking shelter where our cook Mohammad Ali handed me a brew of tea and a huge meal. With my only mildly frostnipped toes immersed in warm water, and with the gentle burr of the stove brewing more tea, the relief I felt is indescribable.

At 4pm the next day the others appeared and a second wave of euphoria swept camp.