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The Golden Pillar

The First Ascent of the North-West Pillar of Golden Peak (7027m), Karakoram

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In the heart of the Karakoram, in the ancient Mirdom of Nagar, lies a little-known mountain. Although the Karakoram Highway passes no more than 30km from it, the peak is not visible from the road. Yet from Nagar the mountain is striking.

On the Skardu side of the watershed, the peak is called Spantik. (This may be a Balti name: I have not been there.) According to some sources the peak is also known as Yengutz Sar: this is clearly erroneous, as the peak cannot be seen from the Burushaski-speaking Yengutz Har Valley ('Valley of the Torrent of the Flour Mills'), and Sar is not a Burushaski synonym for peak; it means pond.

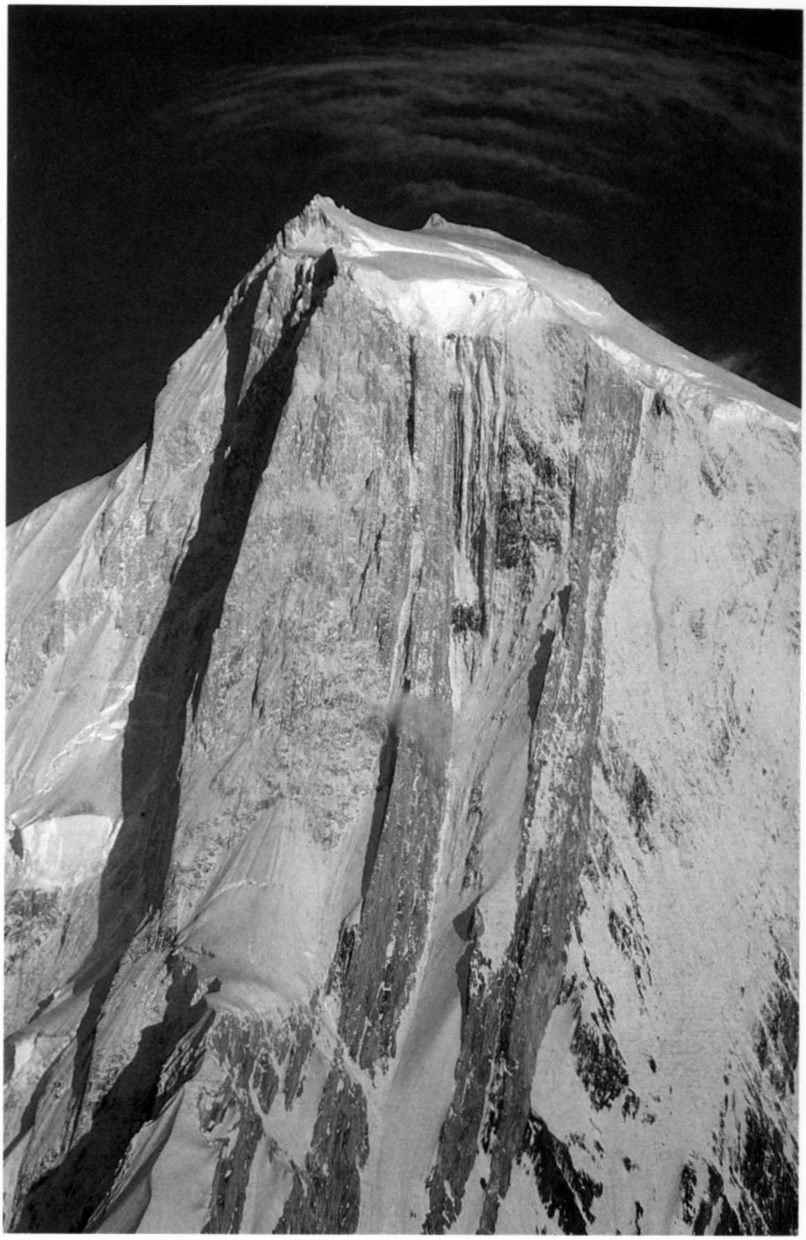
The first Westerners to attempt the mountain were the Americans, Fanny Bullock Workman and her husband Dr William Hunter Workman. In 1906 they climbed the laborious Chogolungma Glacier, taking in the peaks of Chogo and Lungma on the way to the plateau, about 300m below the summit. Their name for the mountain was Pyramid Peak.

The Workmans' effort was not bettered till half a century later, when in 1955 a party of West Germans under the leadership of R Sander made a successful ascent by the Chogolungma Glacier, possibly following the route pioneered by the Workmans. The Germans used the name Spantik and also (presumably in honour of their home town) renamed the mountain 'Frankfurterberg'.

Visitors to the region have a habit of adopting bizarre nomenclature. One Italian expedition in 1954 improved on local usage with Cima Marconi (Sumayar Bar Chish) and Cima Bolzano (Melangush Chish).

On the N side of the mountain a large monolithic pillar catches the evening sun, and gives the peak its Burushaski name; Ganesh Chish, which means Golden Peak.

The Golden Pillar is marble. The rock is crystalline, almost sugary in parts, but often sound. The pillar is the *coup de grâce* of a vertical outcrop of this metamorphic limestone, which leapfrogs the glaciers from above the village of Hoppar. Looking out from high on the pillar we were able to see the cream-yellow rock arcing from glacier to glacier for 25km, like a series of rainbows.



2. Golden Pillar from Melangush.

The Golden Pillar is the clear, unavoidable challenge of the mountain: it soars from the glacier for 2200m. The summit is about 300m higher and is set back, perhaps 3km from the pillar.

We saw the pillar in 1984 while attempting to climb Bojohagar Duonasir (7329m), a mountain directly above the Karakoram Highway. Not only did we fail to climb the mountain, but a Japanese walking club made the first ascent while we were there. They used five camps and several kilometres of fixed rope, while we were attempting an 'alpine-style' ascent. In spite of this obvious difference in attitudes, when Phil Butler and I met them on Day 10 of our gruelling 14-day climb, they were very decent. They offered us food and had kind words about our effort.

The 1984 Bojohagar Expedition was an NLMC (North London Mountaineering Club) affair, and it was much the same team that, seeing the Golden Pillar in 1984, knew they would have to return. Even though Golden Peak was on the horizon, it was clear that something remarkable, very nasty even, decorated its N face. At first the pillar reminded us of Cenotaph Corner.

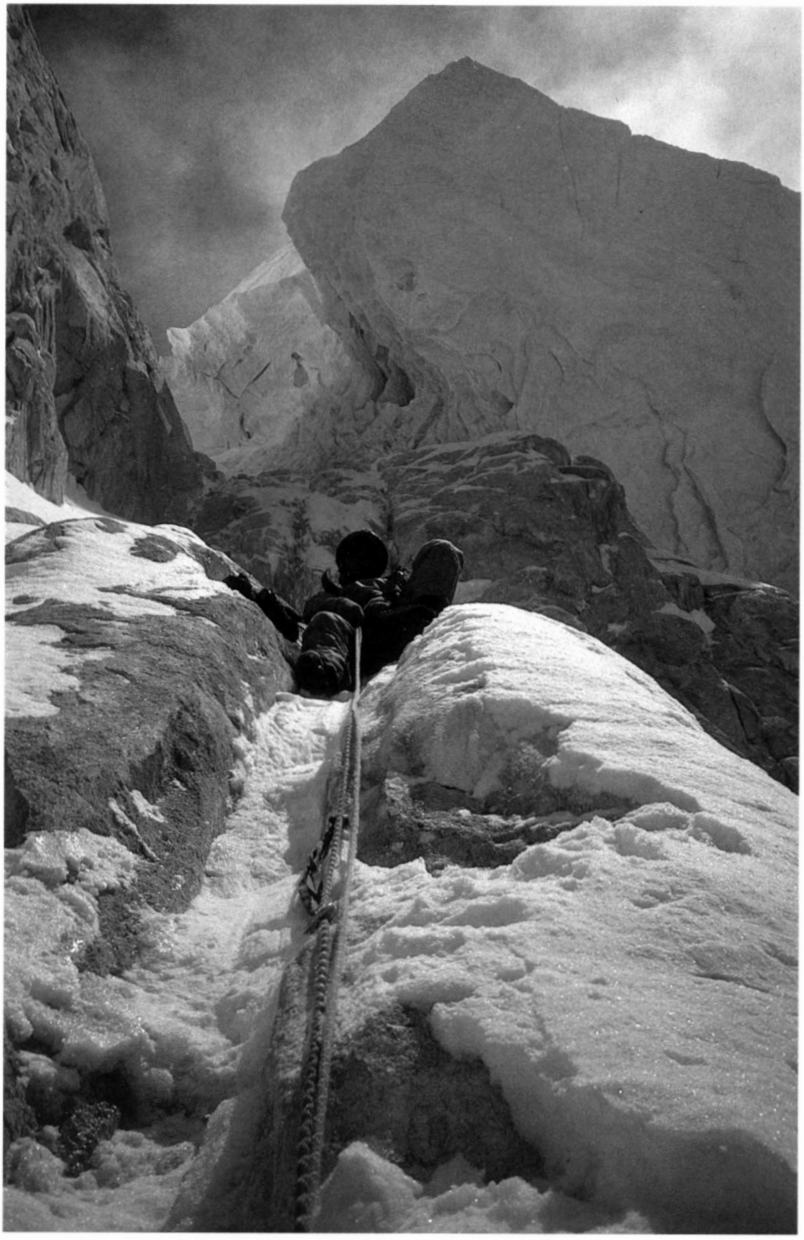
In England, further enquiries revealed a little of the mountain's history. From Poland the encyclopaedic Kowalewski sent us some photographs taken from Kunyang Chish. Nazir Sabir, Doug Scott and Tadeusz Piotrowski (who perished on K2 during the tragic summer of 1986) all kindly donated 'front-on' prints, which all but persuaded us to cancel. At about this time we began to compare the pillar to the Walker Spur, just a little higher, and perhaps a bit harder.

Also during 1986 the team jelled. It was to consist of the Bojohagarites Phil (Lobby) Butler, Mick Fowler, Dr John English and myself, together with two NLMC members new to this sort of thing, Liz Allen and Bruce Craig. George Fowler (Mick's father), Dr Iqbal Ahmed, our Liaison Officer and Rajab Zawar, our Nagari cook completed the expedition team.

We established our Base at a place known to the locals as Suja Bassa (c4000m) on 14 July. The march from the road-head at Hoppar had taken five days, though it could easily have been done in three. The porters had originally wanted to make six days of it, but we compromised on five and a goat. (It is 'traditional' for expeditions to give their porters a goat.) Visitors to this region should note that, whilst the daily rate of pay to the porters is not excessive, the 'traditional' day stages can be as short as one and a half hours. This makes Nagar the most expensive region of the Karakoram for expeditions. We found the Hoppar men honourable: having struck a bargain, they invariably stuck to it.

We made a dump of gear two hours above Base at a place we called Hewitt's Camp. (There was evidence that this Canadian geologist had used the same site in 1986.) Hewitt's was directly across the small Golden Peak glacier from the base of the pillar, at c4500m. From here we could see that the pillar was divided into four sections. First a 400m pinnacle, the First Tower, barred access to the long serpentine Snow Arête. The Snow Arête ended in a small step, which led to the third section, a tiny Hanging Glacier. The fourth part was the point of the exercise: 1200m of wall, like a great spear thrust into the sky.

As climbers we operated in pairs, and I teamed up with Mick Fowler. Mick is a Civil Servant by profession, who has (among other, equally unique,



3. Belay beneath the monstrous 'ice ear'.

'achievements') made a speciality of climbing the loose shale cliffs of Devon. I accompanied him once on one of these excursions, and I remember, as I anxiously studied the clutch of insecure-looking ice-screw belays, Mick enthusing wildly about the 'quality' of the route. We were following a crumbling overhang, and, every time we moved, sections of cliff fell away to land in the sea, far below. It was very probably the most terrifying experience of my life.

On 19 July Fowler and I made a preliminary reconnaissance of the approaches to the pillar (it took three days to reach the Hanging Glacier). Meanwhile, English and Allen made a start on the descent ridge. They were stopped by deep snow and indifferent weather, but not before they had climbed the initial 400m prominence, a sort of pyramidal tower. Butler and Bruce inspected the Yengutz Pass, which had not, as far as we knew, been crossed. This initial flurry of activity was followed by a period characterized by various attempts to climb either the pillar or the ridge, which failed in outbursts of appalling weather.

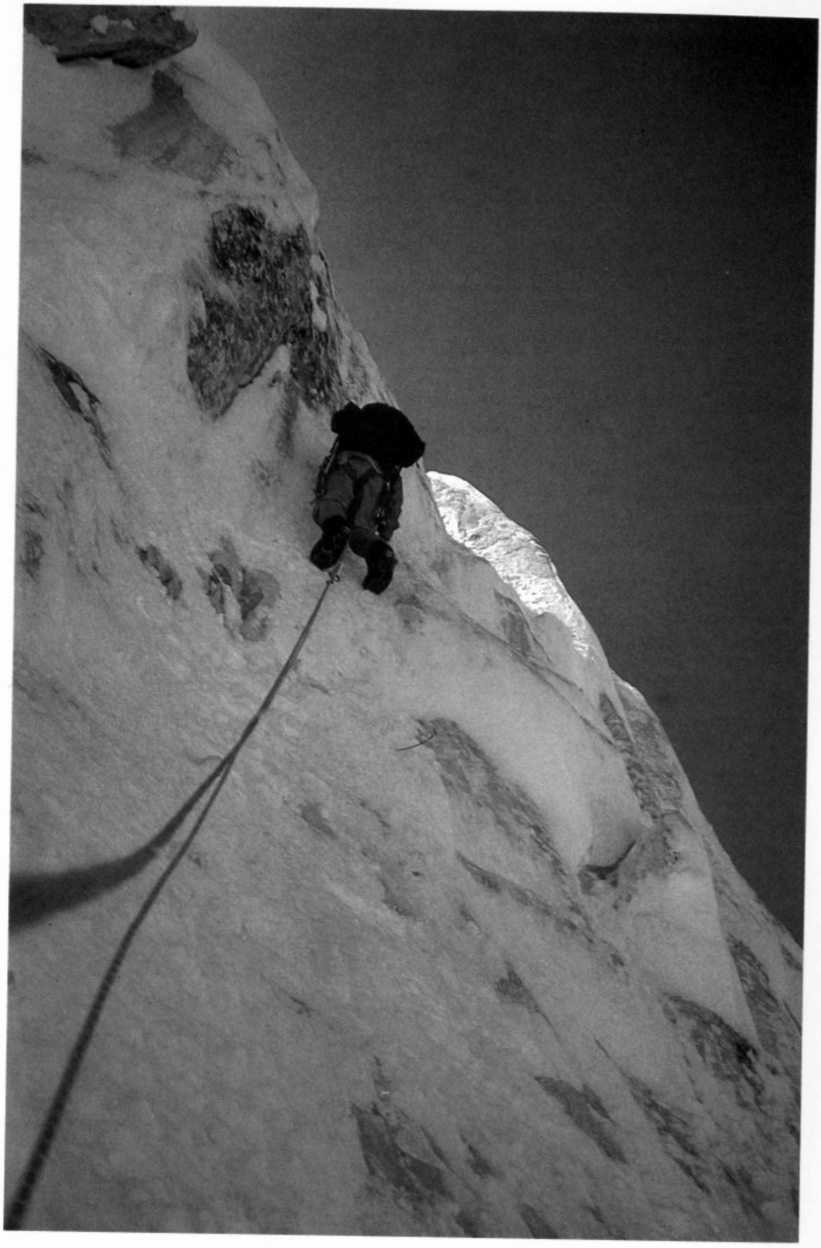
On the evening of 5 August Fowler and I walked up to Hewitt's Camp, knowing that this was our last chance to try the route. Fowler was due back at his desk on the 23rd, and, if we allowed 10 days for the climb, he would just make it.

We had packed carefully after lunch, checking and rechecking each detail. A great sense of fate hung in the afternoon like an impending storm. We packed and repacked our sacks, tidied the tents, laid out our clothes in order, until there were no displacement activities left. Then we shouldered the enormous loads and wordlessly began to walk. The weather was variable in the extreme: there was even a minor snow-storm while we were walking.

During that night we climbed the 1000m to the Hanging Glacier, and spent the remainder of the 6th praying for good weather. On Day 2 we were fortunate and, starting at 4am, we were able to climb 10 pitches of slabs and walls to reach the Amphitheatre by 5pm. It was important to reach this, as there was no possibility of finding a bivouac ledge on the slabs.

We had thought, when we started, that the main difficulty on this day would be the little walls which crossed the slabs, and a larger wall that barred access to the Amphitheatre. In fact we found that the reverse was true: there was no ice on the rock, and the blank-surfaced slabs offered precarious climbing, with no protection. The walls, however, contained cracks which could be cleaned of snow to provide the occasional runner.

On Day 3 the weather was not so kind, and we stopped at midday for a brew which became a bivouac, as it began to snow heavily. We had climbed out of the Amphitheatre by a steep system of chimneys and grooves. This was one of the few parts of the route which we had not been able to examine with binoculars, so from a route-finding point of view we had passed one of the two cruxes. This day also included some of the most technically demanding climbing of the route. The first pitch out of the Amphitheatre was a groove with an overhanging section. Mick managed to place two wobbly pegs above his head, then began to swear loudly and forcibly . . . for a long time. He could not, it seemed, clip the pegs because the sling was stuck under his hood. At the end of



4. Near the top of the 'slabs'.

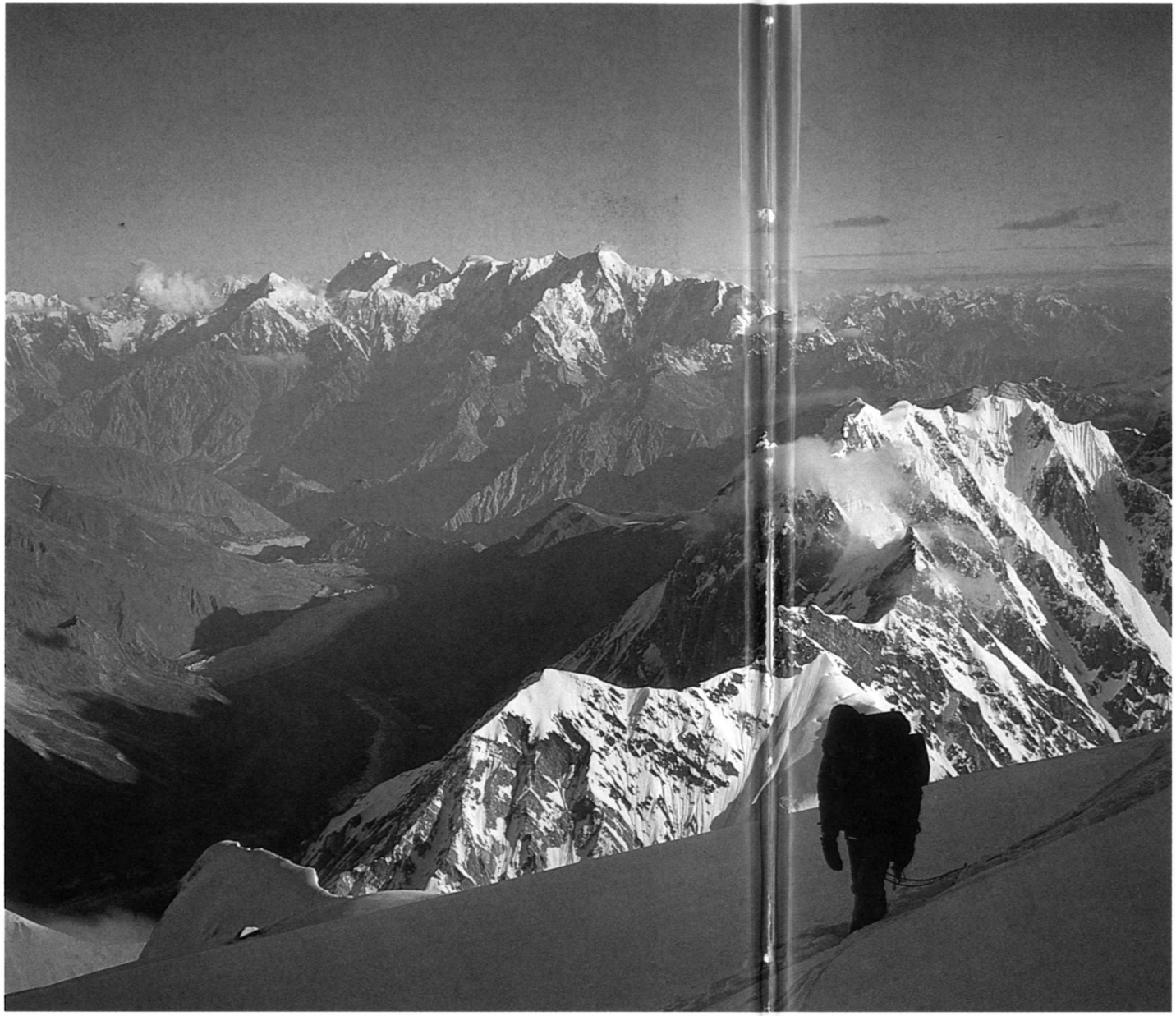
the pitch Mick was grinning like a cat with two tails. I thought that he was rightly pleased with his difficult lead, but I was wrong, he was belayed on black shale. Even more disconcerting for me was the shale chimney that continued in the direction we wanted to climb. Mick had begun his damned enthusing again. The chimney looked as if it might be coated in thick ice, but we were deceived. The pitch was horrible (for me), verglas on shale fragments.

Although it snowed overnight, the next morning brought visibility, if not clear skies. As the mists receded we recognized the features that would act as landmarks. It was enough to go on with. We began to follow lines on the right wall of the pillar. By midday we had reached a large flat ledge, the top of a giant jammed block. Here we made tea and relaxed, until it occurred to us to look up. We were surrounded by overhangs, completely blocked in. Fowler led an aid pitch to gain the lowest of a series of ramps, using a technique that had been developed in Europe in the days of Heckmair. I had never seen anything like it, but Mick was not prepared to learn new tricks just then. The lower ramps led to a Shield which was the other area of uncertainty for us. From Base Camp there appeared to be no line round this feature, but a hidden chimney revealed itself at the end of the ramp. It was blank-sided, and there was no belay at the top, so I was forced to belay Mick by wedging my body across the chimney, and asking him not to fall off.

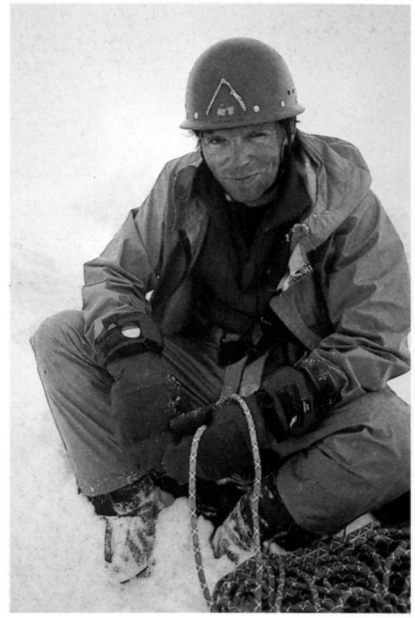
I do not remember ever having had a more miserable bivouac than the one we had that night. We were benighted, something we said we would avoid at all costs, and there was no ledge, nor any possibility of cutting one, on the thin ice. We used the tent as a hanging bag, inside which Mick spent the night dangling in his harness, while I stood in my rucksack. Both methods had their drawbacks. It snowed all night.

The 3.30 alarm was greeted with relief. It was Day 5, and looking up we could see the final ramps. When we reached them they looked easy; as we climbed the truth dawned on us. They were covered in a layer of powder snow, which, when swept off, revealed blank rock, no runners, and the impending side wall pushed you off balance. We had hundred-foot run-outs, and lots and lots of fear. These ramps in turn led to the final corner, a vertical book-shaped corner under an ear-shaped serac. Mick made short work of the difficulties, banging in the pegs with care. (I had asked him not to disturb the serac above us.) And then we found the snow leading to the plateau so deep that we began to have horrible thoughts of being forced back down the way we had got up.

The next day, Day 6, was to be our summit day. At 6am we started out from the tent, leaving all but our clothes and a stove behind. At 12.45pm we stood on top of the Golden Peak. It was 11 August 1987. We could see Bojohagar, Batura, Diran, Trivor and other large peaks, but from Kunyang Chish black clouds were invading the sky. The storm overtook us within the hour. First the electric shocks: we hid, trying to bury ourselves and our axes in the snow; then high winds swept in from the south. We began to have fears for the tent: we could imagine it flying down to Base Camp in advance of us. The winds brought drifting snow and white-out. Our tracks disappeared. We were high on the plateau, surrounded by precipices. We found, after a bit of experimentation, that if we got down on all fours, we could feel the softness in



5. Summit Plateau. Ultar and Batura on the horizon.



6. Mick Fowler.

the slope where our tracks had been filled. In this way we crawled down towards the tent.

By the morning of Day 7 the weather had regained its composure. It was clear and very, very cold. Below us, a sea of cloud filled the valleys. This was worrying because if we could not see the descent ridge, we could not be sure where we were to leave the plateau. During the climb we had noted a tongue of plateau stretching out over the ridge. On this tongue lay some ice blocks which we called the 'crumbs' on the tongue. After three nerve-racking hours of crossing the high plateau, with its crevasses large enough to swallow a battleship, we arrived at the top of an ice-fall. There, below us, were the 'crumbs'. The valley fog was receding and the tongue was revealed, but where on the edge of the tongue was the descent? We knew that, if we picked the wrong spot, not only would we miss the ridge, but we would also be abseiling over large seracs into space.

Descending the ice-fall involved making our first-ever snow-bollard abseils; these led to the tongue, where we found the 'crumbs' were 12 metres high. Guessing that the ridge would be near the tip of the tongue, we pitched the tent and waited for the mist to clear down to the valley. We made brew, and dozed. We were feeling mentally tired and needed to get down. At 5.30pm the mist cleared. We had no 'dead men' for snow belays, and so we dug a large hole in the soft plateau. I got as deep into the hole as possible, and we had a 'live man' belay. Mick gingerly stepped towards the edge, then got on his stomach and crawled towards it. It was an easy cornice, and he descended about a metre before coming back to the belay.

'Well Mick, how is it?'

'You try,' was all he said.

A few minutes later I was looking over the edge of the cornice and saw the descent ridge snaking down to the English–Allen prominence. Surely we were going to survive this climb? Already I began to debate the value of it all. What is the point of mountaineering? It seemed to me in that moment that the nature of the goal did not matter. We are driven to reach for goals, but we can learn no lessons from them. There is no pot of gold, only the rainbow.

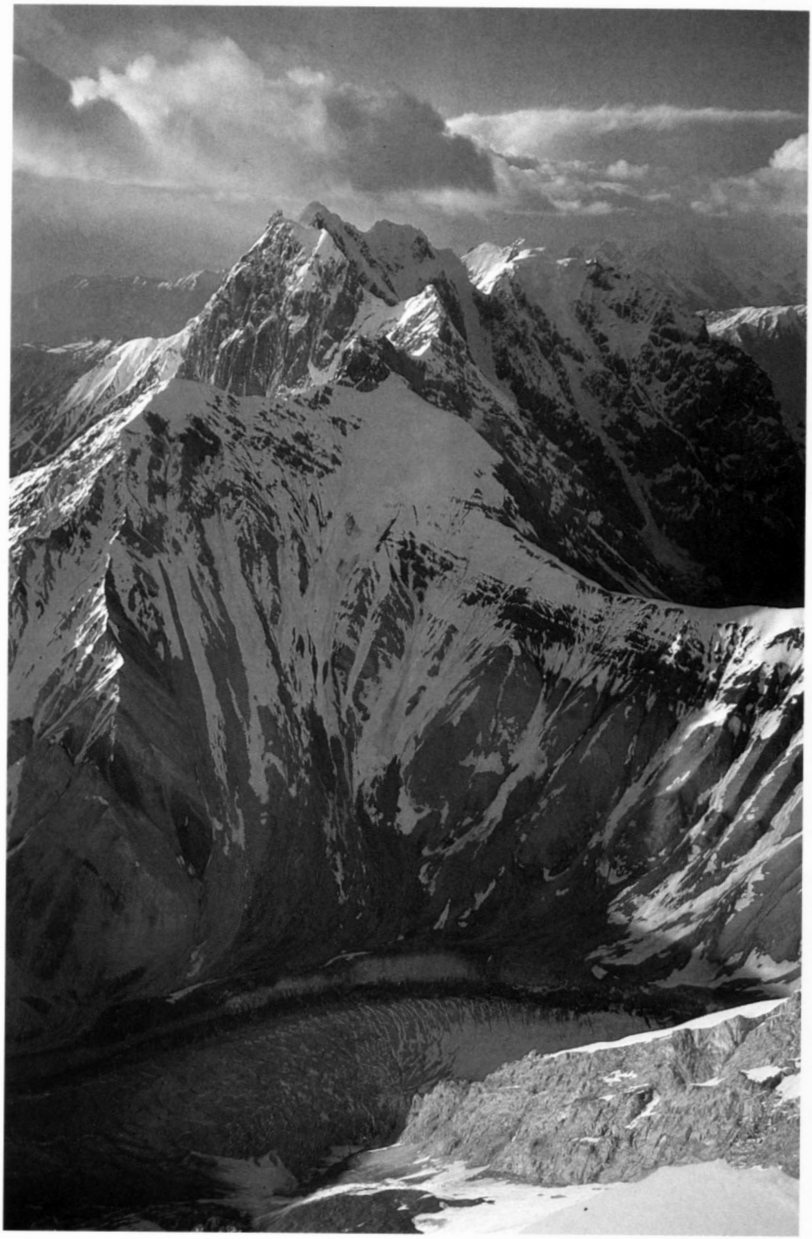
'I suppose it's because we live in an achievement-orientated society,' I said to Mick. He looked at me as if I had just announced that I was stark staring mad.

In the tent we discussed our plans, should we get down safely. Over to the north I could see the Yengutz Har Pass. I decided that, after a day's rest, I would try with the others to cross that pass. Fowler said that, if we could get down the next day, he would walk out to Hoppar the next morning, take the jeep and bus to Gilgit the following day, and hope to catch his plane to London from Islamabad on Sunday.

'Why the great rush?' I asked.

'Because it means that by Monday the 16th I shall have parked those Civil Service shoes under that Civil Service desk and saved a whole week's annual leave – know what I mean, Vic?' He tapped the side of his nose.

Iqbal, Lobby, Bruce and myself did eventually complete the traverse of the pass. It took us four hard days for the round trip – much longer than we had



7. Girgindil Chish (c. 6000m), from the Golden Pillar.

anticipated. We made the mistake of selling our rope in Hispar, then descending the Hispar Gorge on the wrong bank. We found ourselves soloing across difficult rock-climbing ground above the roaring Hispar River. The other three showed great patience and waited for me to arrive – tired and emaciated.

As for Fowler, I don't know how he got the energy, but he caught the flight. By Monday morning, 9.30 sharp, those Civil Service shoes were under that Civil Service desk.

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