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The Editor
Alpine Journal

30 October 1987

Mount Olympus, 1946

Sir,

John Harding's entertaining account of his 'Olympian Triad' (*AJ* 92, 136–149, 1987) puts me in mind of my own adventure on the Greek Olympus in the first post-war summer of 1946.

As a young Consul in Salonica, I had naturally included in a tour of inspection of my district the summits of Mytikas and the Throne of Zeus, in case any British subjects in distress were held by the Gods. I had enlisted as muleteer and guide the excellent Costas: if not the same as Harding's Costas, then perhaps his father.

A few weeks later I received word from Sir Clifford Norton, my Ambassador in Athens, that his wife, Lady 'Peter' Norton, an enthusiastic veteran mountaineer, was anxious to make the ascent. There had already been one minor clash between Communist guerrillas and Greek military forces in the vicinity of Litochoron, but the major incident there, that was to spark the 'Third Round' of the Greek Civil War, was yet to come. I accordingly took soundings of the Greek military and police authorities in Salonica about the safety of the expedition; though non-committal, they did not expressly try to put me off. As a cross-check I asked what Costas thought. He kept in with both sides, I reckoned, in the interest of his muleteer business. Not surprisingly, he was only too ready to escort the Ambassadress and myself.

On a hot July morning we set off from Litochoron up the wooded gorge, leaving the burnt-out monastery below on our left; after toiling up the steep zigzags through the forest, it was late afternoon when we reached the Spilios Agapitos hut at 2100m. The following day Lady Peter and I enjoyed a good scramble first up Mytikas (2917m) and then up the steep ridge of Stefani, or the Throne of Zeus (2909m). My trepidation at escorting Lady Peter up the exposed section of this ridge proved unfounded. We descended, again rather late in the day, reaching the hut at about 5pm, too late to make the long descent to sea-level the same day. At the hut we found an agile Greek messenger, who had arrived with a written message from friends in Salonica. 'DANGER. DO NOT CLIMB MOUNTAIN. RETURN AT ONCE,' it cryptically read. The

messenger, possibly with an eye on our food supply, did not reveal, as we later learnt, that he was under instructions to return with a reply. Instead we laughed off the mysterious message, having climbed the mountain and intending to return on the following day.

As we sat on the stone terrace outside the hut to enjoy a welcome cup of tea, I glanced down 900m to the edge of the forest below. What did I see but one, two, three, four . . . up to 30 Greek gendarmes emerging in single file from the forest? Some two hours later, as darkness fell, this force arrived at the hut. It was led by a young lieutenant who stated that he had orders to 'protect the Ambassadress'. No further details were vouchsafed. His men were a problem: the water-supply was a mere trickle some distance away; most water-bottles had been emptied on the way up; having left a torrid coast in mid-July, only a limited few had great-coats. The Ambassadorial party retreated to the upper floor, while I rashly issued instructions that men with great-coats should sleep outside, while those without might shelter on the lower floor. The entire night seemed to be spent with one group exchanging places with the other.

At last, at 4.30, the lieutenant whispered to me: 'We have done our duty. Can we go down now?' With an ill-concealed sigh of relief I said 'Yes' and we were left to sleep in peace for another couple of hours. Amid mutterings from Lady Peter of 'more zeal than judgement', we took our time to descend to Litochoron, where we were met by the major in command and a friend from Salonica. They disclosed that a message had been intercepted to the effect that the Communists planned to kidnap the Ambassadress and hold her as a political hostage. This we laughed off as rather a joke, particularly as Communist guerrillas would have had an unenviable task in dealing with a formidable and strong-minded Lady Peter. A few years later a threat of this kind would have been no laughing matter: such has been the change in diplomatic anxieties since those relaxed far-off days.

All ended happily with a lunch party in Litochoron, with presents and compliments exchanged all round. Even the gendarmes found their journey worthwhile, since in the woods near the monastery they had shot a Communist courier carrying messages from Piraeus to the north. For my part, I treasure the memory of two visits to the Gods in a couple of months, even if they were not at home, and also a beautifully bound copy of Marcel Kurz's *Le Mont Olympe*.

And in 1986 the wife of the present British Ambassador in Athens climbed Olympus.

Yours faithfully,
Edward Peck

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The Editor,
Alpine Journal

29 December 1987

How High? The Altimeter

Sir,

How many mountaineers with a basic scientific background really understand the intricacies of the altimeter? I certainly don't and 'learned colleagues', who have been using theirs faithfully for a great deal longer than I, are similarly in the dark.

Many discrepancies can, of course, be attributed to rapidly fluctuating weather conditions and the absence of suitable, accurately known, spot-heights. However, a sojourn in the Atlas mountains during a period of remarkable anticyclonic stability left me with the belief that I had invested a great deal of cash on an instrument which, whilst giving a fair indication of approaching weather systems and localized atmospheric instability, was singularly useless in conveying the information suggested by its appellation.

I was beginning to doubt the value of including its extra weight, when I was struck by the thought that aircraft, even in pre-radar days, were making a pretty good job of landing in poor visibility. A few well-directed questions rapidly acquainted me with the International Commission for Air Navigation.

There are a number of corrective measures that we need to consider when computing the true altitude: instrumental error, frictional drag, etc; but all these are negligible in comparison with that associated with temperature.

'Come now', you will say, 'but my Thommen is temperature-corrected' and, indeed, this is true. However, the physical interpretation, quite simply, is that, at a given altitude, fluctuations in direct localized temperatures will not

ALTITUDE (*Feet*)	PRESSURE (*Millibars*)
0	1013
2,000	942
4,000	875
6,000	812
8,000	753
10,000	697
12,000	644
14,000	595
16,000	549
18,000	506
20,000	465

alter the reading. It is the absolute value of the isotherm, at that height, which is required.

The ICAN has designated a standardized calibration for the altimeter. The ICAN law assumes a sea-level temperature and pressure of 15C and 1013mb respectively, together with a drop in temperature of approximately 1C for every 500 feet of altitude gained.

The decline in pressure with altitude is shown in the table. Note that over the first 2000ft rise the drop in pressure is 1mb for every 28 feet, whereas from 18,000–20,000ft the drop is 1mb for every 49 feet of height gained. The cooling effect predicts a still-air temperature of 24.5C at 20,000ft.

Thus an altimeter, zeroed at sea level, will correctly read 20,000ft if the isotherm is 24.5C; if it is 30C, then the true altitude is 19,500ft; if 20C, then 20,400ft; and, if 15C, then 20,800ft.

Many mountain ranges in the summer season will not cool as rapidly as ICAN suggests (freezing isotherm at 7500ft), leading to an underestimate of altitude.

There is no 'rule of thumb', and a specialized circular slide-rule is needed to compute the true altitude. Loosely speaking, in the range 20,000 to 24,000ft (c6000–7300m), by adding or subtracting approximately 80ft (c25m) for every 1C below or above ICAN, one will not be wildly amiss.

Yours faithfully,
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The Editor
Alpine Journal

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K2 1986

Sir,

This letter to the *AJ* is about K2 – the tragedies of summer 1986 and just some of the writing about them (most of it without checking up with the survivors). One example '. . . back on the surface of the ice Casarotto stood up, took a few steps, then lay down on his rucksack and died' (from a Chicago mountaineering magazine); the truth is that Renato Casarotto was unconscious when we got him out of the crevasse, never stood up again and died soon afterwards. Another example: Julie Tullis in more than one report after the bivouac is 'crawling the last bit to the tent at 8000m'. This is pure invention – I pulled her, as she was just sitting and resting, when the clouds had opened up suddenly and the camp became visible just in front of us. Obviously writers love spectacular formulations. Or they keep quiet about reasons – such as in the 'spectacular' description of my getting through the ice-fall after climbing down K2, heavily

frostbitten and having survived five days of storm. The writer knew pretty well that I was starving and that there was no food, that I was moving with slippery moonboots through this ice-fall, tired and with no rope-belay – as there was no rope – but he does not tell the reader this: perhaps it might have damaged the effect of the story. 'I wanted to get the feeling right – of course I may have made errors in some of the facts' was the answer of the writer when I complained. Whose feelings were respected? There seem to be new ethics coming up in mountain literature. (It all fits in perfectly with a plan, which I heard about recently: to chop up Julie's and my K2 documentary of 1984, 'The elusive summit', and make out of it a new film about the tragedy of '86; are there any limits left?)

Well, this shall be a factual letter to the *Alpine Journal*, which is known to be serious about facts, and the above should just be pointed at as samples for a terrible situation in expedition reports. If writers did really check their writing before print, it would not be possible that so many errors happen and so many inventions occur. Julie and I reached the summit of K2 at about 5.30pm on 4 August in the greyness of slowly worsening weather. How can somebody sitting at Base Camp below the clouds dare to pretend that it was as late as 7pm and end up with a negative judgement, that we should have turned around earlier – especially as the bad weather could be recognized days before? (So – why no walkie-talkie warning from Base Camp?) The facts are that, on 4 August, not only did the Abruzzi group start for the top, but so did the Americans on the N side of K2; other expeditions topped Broad Peak and Gasherbrum 2 on the same day – and I do not think they were all weather idiots. Even if Julie and I had given up the summit and had descended with Rouse or Bauer, we would have got trapped with the whole group – some hours could not have saved us, we were all one full day too late! The day which we lost on the Shoulder because of the overcrowding, it was the loss of 3 August which was fatal! If we could have stuck to our original plans, nobody would have ended storm-trapped at 8000m.

On 4 August, after the fall, Julie and I had to bivouac on top of the hanging glacier, as we were away from the route and the flash-light did not work – that night there was no storm yet up there, otherwise we would not have survived (lower down it seems to have stormed earlier . . . it's a big mountain). It is, further, not correct that the Koreans had prepared the route to beyond the Shoulder, they had in the end put new fixed ropes to 7250m (the serac-wall below Camp 3). Somewhere I read of the 'less experienced' Julie Tullis: I want to say for my good team-partner that she was very accurate, incredibly resistant and probably more experienced than a good many of the mountaineers on K2 . . . after years of being a climbing teacher and seven expeditions, in which she went four times to or above the 8000m level. Also the equipment she chose was not 'old-fashioned' (this opinion came from a person that went for rescue with no rope). Julie and I were self-sufficient in our preparations on principle and, suspecting that our Camp 4 Depot might have disappeared, had carried up everything for a new Camp 4 on the final attempt. At c7000m, after we learned about the Camp 3 disaster (that it had been destroyed too by the big avalanche several days earlier), we had offered Hannes Wieser our spare tent and gas, but he said that there was a tent arrangement with the Koreans, and he did not want

to carry it up. This was the last chance to avoid the risky situation, when two big expeditions (Koreans and Austrians) relied on just one tent at 8000m for subsequent summit attacks – the Koreans certainly out of helpfulness towards the Austrians, believing they would descend to Camp 3 after their summit push of 2 August. Willi Bauer's reports of this day (he played an important part in the matter) differ strongly from mine and the Koreans', but many days at high altitude may have changed his memory partially . . . otherwise there is no explanation how it is possible that, elsewhere on the mountain, he states in one report that he 'helped Diemberger down through House's Chimney', and in another that he climbed down alone through this chimney and then waited for Diemberger in the camp below. Unfortunately, authors have also mixed up both our reports between us, while the only right way was to keep them separated. Bauer wants to have 'rescued' Julie and me, which is not true – again the authors should have checked with both of us! A detailed report by me and Dennis Kemp ('K2 – The Facts') was published in December 1986 in *Climber*, but of course I could not then foresee several justified questions, and even less could I imagine what might bloom from fantasy.

Yours faithfully,
Kurt Diemberger