Karakoram Lessons: the High-Altitude Expedition

The British–New Zealand Gasherbrums Expedition 1987

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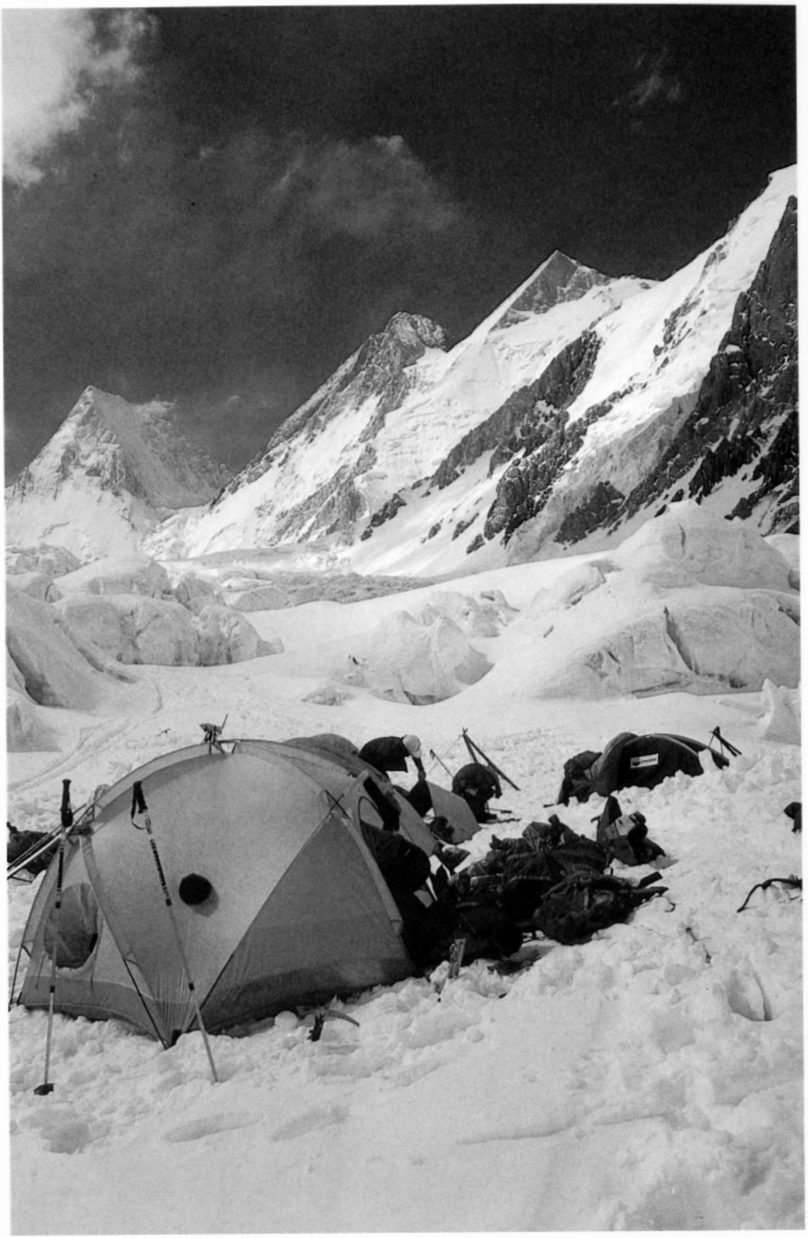
This is not a lesson for those seeking to climb in the Karakoram. Rather, it is a non-exhaustive (and probably unbalanced) retrospective based on the lessons I learnt as leader of the British–New Zealand Gasherbrums Expedition 1987.

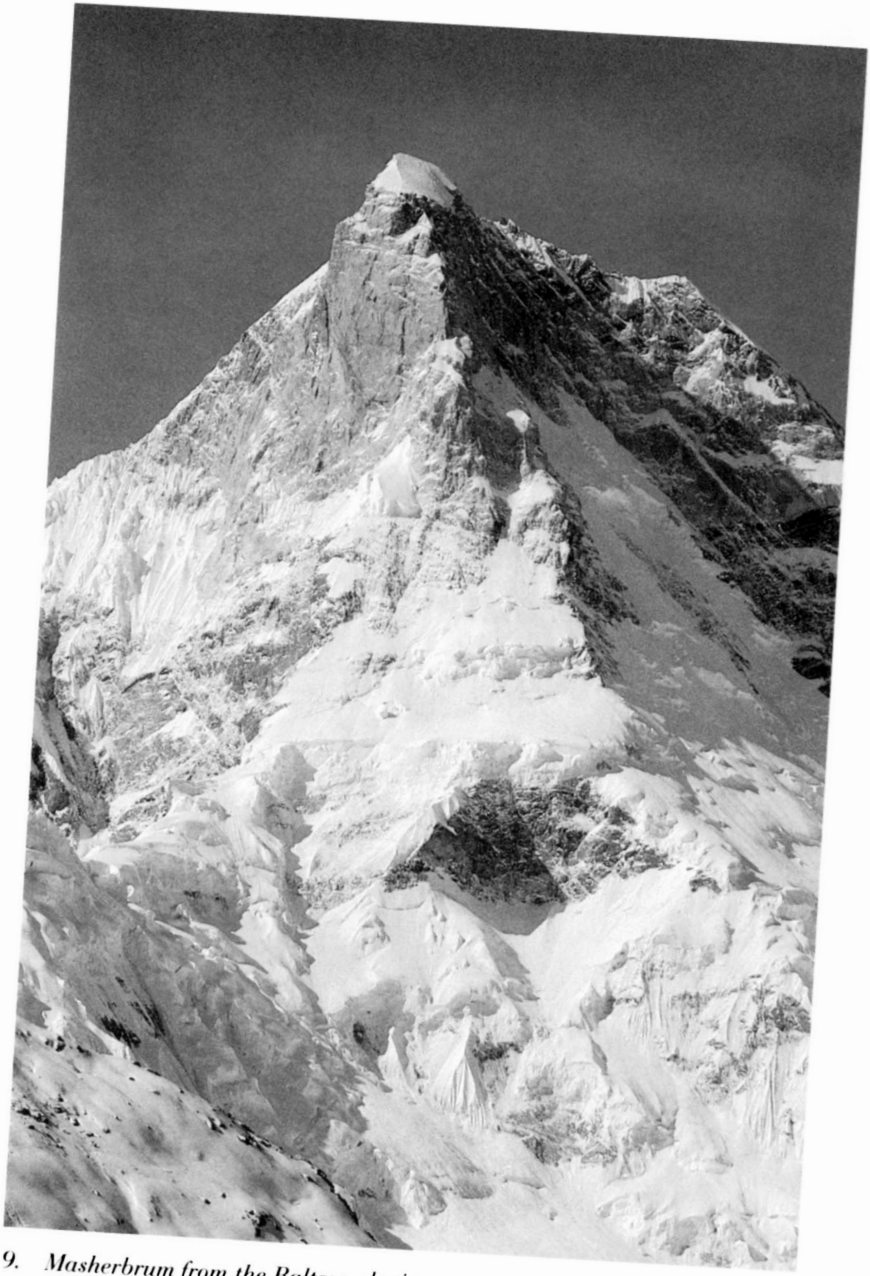
Plans for this trip started in 1985 with my wife-to-be (at the time) Julie-Ann Clyma and my partner of previous trips and fellow mountain-guide, Iain Peter. There followed a period of changing objectives and team members as advice emerged, options changed, and individuals found their circumstances or motivation altered. Eventually we set our sights on Gasherbrums 2 (8035m) and 6 (7003m) and found that we had become a team of nine. Despite an early application to the Pakistanis, our permission to climb ran into unexpected problems.[1] However, persistent writing to the highest authorities in Pakistan, and an invitation to His Excellency the Ambassador to attend the marriage of Julie-Ann and Roger, eventually overcame these! Eight months prior to departure the real hard work started. Julie-Ann and I had to give up climbing and social activities for the word-processed sponsorship effort, as the bulk of the organizational work fell on us.

Financed, equipped, and rationed, the team were all together on 11 May in Islamabad. Our reception there was simply superb. Further to Iain, Julie-Ann and myself, the expedition members were: Steve Jones, Donald Stewart, Richard Thorns (cameraman), Jean-Pierre Hefti (Swiss), Guy Haliburton (NZ), and Carol Nash (NZ); our Liaison Officer was Eshaan Ullah, a member of the Pakistan Alpine Club. Our main objectives had become: to make a (relatively) straightforward ascent of Gasherbrum 2 (previously unclimbed by Britons or New Zealanders); to make a ski descent of its S face; to film the climb and ski descent; and to attempt a new route on Gasherbrum 6 (which is probably a virgin peak).

After the two-day journey along the Karakoram Highway to Skardu – and with additions to our provisions and equipment – we started the walk-in from Dusso on 19 May with 84 porters, one sirdar and one cook. The Balti porters were robust and we found them honest and hard-working. They were good companions and in harmony with the mountain environment; with prayer, song and dance they found their way through any hardship. 13 days after leaving Dusso we arrived at Base Camp (c5280m) on the Duke of Abruzzi glacier. Our arrival coincided with that of an American expedition with whom we had caught up (they had been delayed for eight days by bad weather, just three days away from Base Camp!), and later we were to be followed by a West German group; both teams were also aiming for Gasherbrum 2.



8. *A temporary camp on the S Gasherbrum glacier. Gasherbrums 4, 3 and 2 in the background.*



9. Masherbrum from the Baltoro glacier.

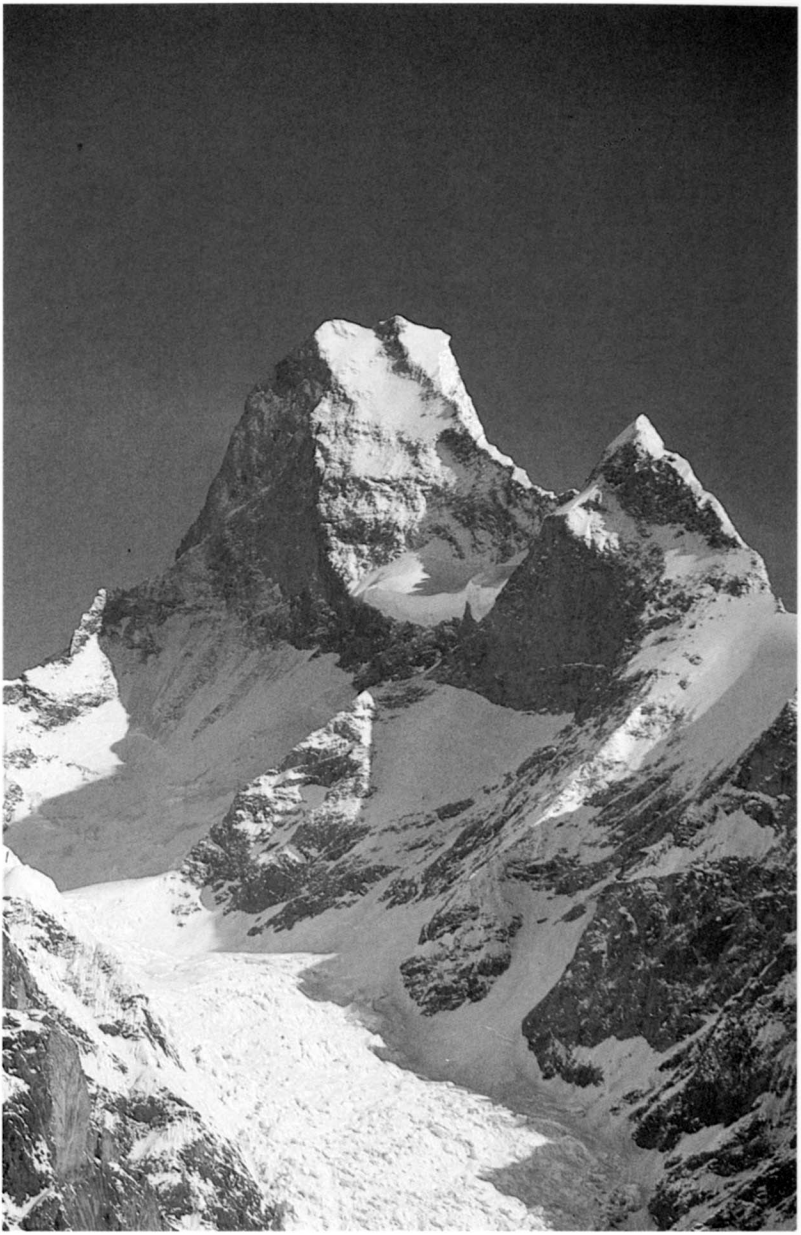
The S Gasherbrum glacier is regarded as one of the most difficult and dangerous in this part of the Karakoram. Although this may be true, by careful route-finding we established a safe and relatively straightforward passage. Once beyond the ice-fall we took a line near the true right bank of the glacier towards Gasherbrum 5 because (as we found to our cost, losing a tent) avalanches sweep down from the NW slopes of Gasherbrum 1 across the glacier, endangering any route along the true left bank.

On 7 June, Julie-Ann and I found a route through the upper glacier to a site for Advanced Base Camp. This was at c6000m and at a safe distance from possible avalanche danger from the S face of Gasherbrum 2. By this stage we had seen most sides of Gasherbrum 6 upon which several possible routes were evident. But it was decided to put our initial effort into attempting Gasherbrum 2, completing our film, etc, leaving Gasherbrum 6 for the end of the trip.

In all our time after arriving at Base Camp we did not have a reasonable period of settled good weather (the best spell of weather, six days, actually occurred during the walk-in). Hence, with time lost because of bad weather and conditions, and time needed for load-carrying and filming, it was not until 25 June that we were in a position to start climbing above Advanced Base Camp. Through a combination of factors, including the complication of filming and the presence of fresh deep snow, the whole expedition set off on the original route of ascent: the Moravec SW spur (1956 Austrian).

On 26 June all members of the team climbed the elegant lower spur past the normal site for Camp 1 (c6500m) to camp on a broad shelf at c6650m below some seracs. Next day everyone moved up without difficulty through the seracs and deep snow to the usual site for Camp 2 (7000m) at the foot of a mixed rib which leads to the summit pyramid. From the other two expeditions, five American and two German climbers who were making their summit attempts were spending the night at this camp.

The next day (28 June) started with some indecision. Fresh snow and cloud brought doubts about the weather, our acclimatization to these heights was questionable, and route-finding on the mixed rib or adjacent deep snow proved problematical in the dark. Hence, by midday everyone in our party except Donald, Jean-Pierre and Richard were back at Camp 2. Iain and Steve stayed at the camp but during the afternoon, in poor visibility and avalanche conditions, Carol, Guy, Julie-Ann and I descended to Advanced Base Camp. Meanwhile, in the early afternoon Jean-Pierre reached the summit, followed some time later by Richard (three of the Americans and the two Germans also reached the top). Close to the summit Donald turned back, worried about over-exhaustion. That day, during their ascent, the three had agreed 'not to be influenced by each other's decisions about climbing the peak'. The summit pair were extremely tired from their ascent. Richard, who had carried a super-8 camera, film and batteries to the summit (but did not shoot a single frame), was particularly exhausted and had problems with his vision. At one point during the descent he fell some 300m, luckily without injury. After this incident one of the descending German climbers insisted that Jean-Pierre and Richard should stay together and look after each other. From c7700m Jean-Pierre used skis for



10. Muztagh Tower from the Baltoro glacier.

his descent. Both summit climbers were helped back to Camp 2 during the last stages by Donald, Iain and Steve.

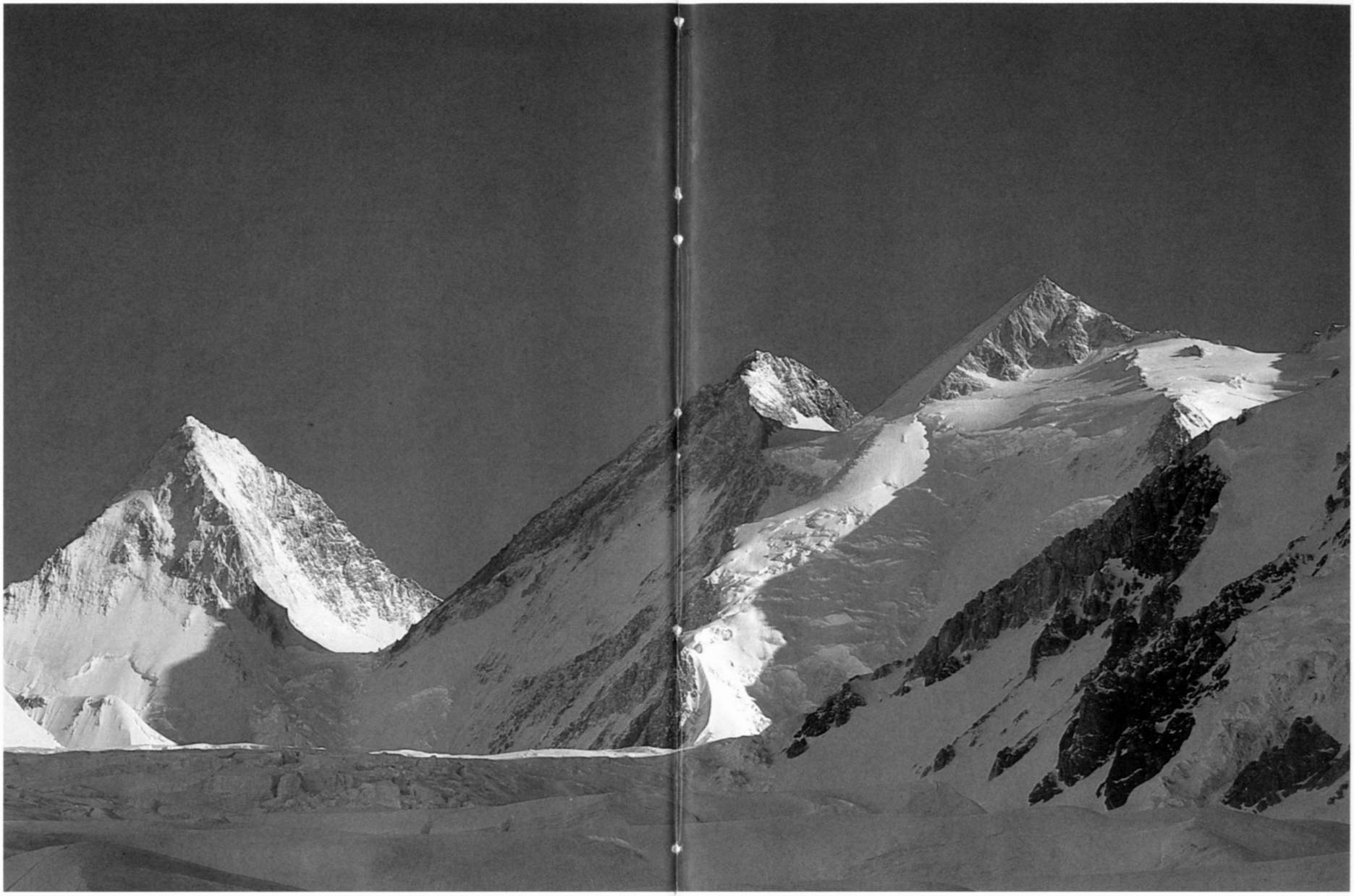
Jean-Pierre and Richard were exhausted and showed early symptoms of acute mountain sickness. The pair took lasix tablets to reduce risk of oedema and were provided with many drinks to alleviate dehydration. Next day all five set off to descend to Advanced Base Camp. Jean-Pierre used skis for his descent, while the others came down on foot. At c6750m Jean-Pierre decided to traverse off the route which had been used for ascent, so that he could ski down the S face proper. Tragedy struck at this point; apparently losing control of his skis on a patch of ice, Jean-Pierre slipped and fell 700m to the foot of the face with fatal consequences.

Next day, 30 June, Donald, Guy, and I moved Jean-Pierre to a crevasse near where he fell. I have never been so unhappy in the mountains as on that day. When I had finished helping to bury Jean-Pierre, I was struck down with grief. Fate had been unkind indeed; it provided the chance meetings which led to our friendship at a time when it was Jean-Pierre's ambition to ski Gasherbrum 2, and I was organizing an expedition there. It fell to me to find the final resting-place of this modest and thoughtful man. There is no solace in the grandeur of his tomb, the S Gasherbrum glacier, nor in the enduring nature of his headstone, the S face of Gasherbrum 2; but somehow they do not seem inappropriate.

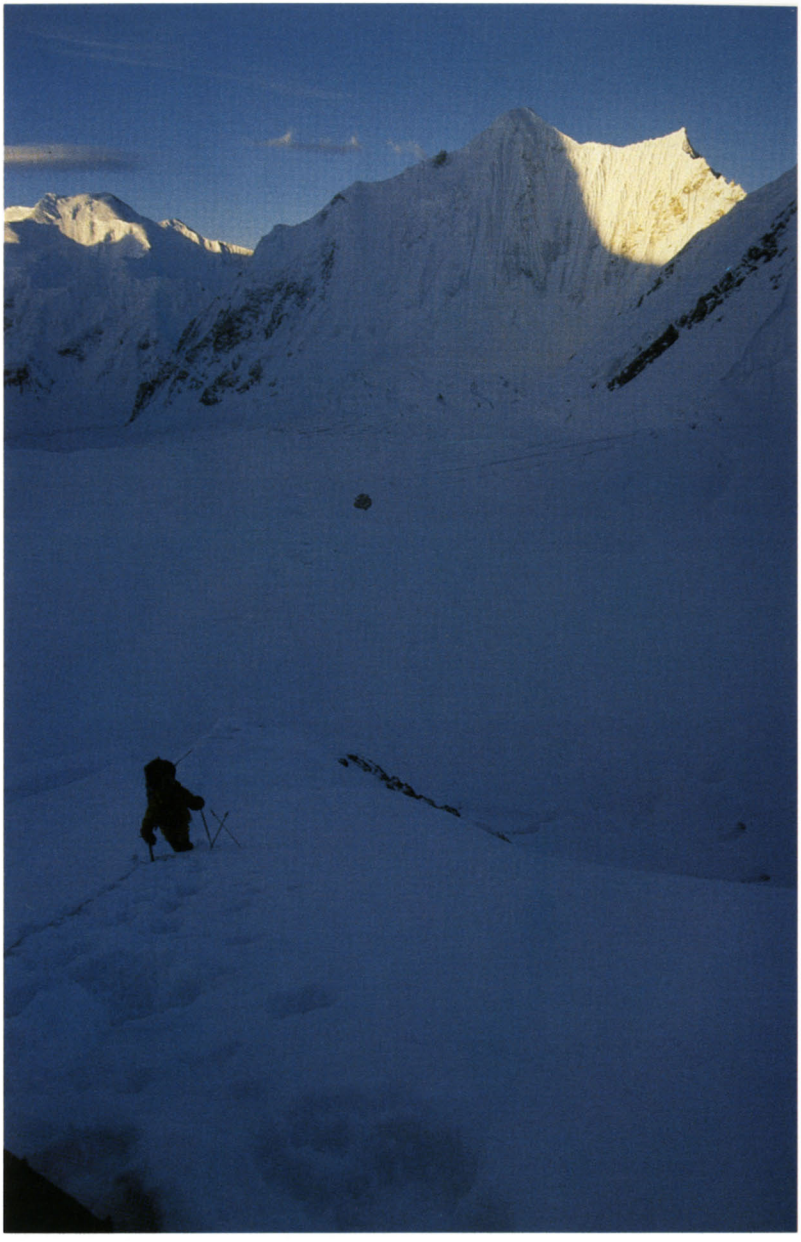
During the following days at Base Camp, Steve (Jean-Pierre's friend of many years) decided that he should leave for Islamabad to initiate the correct procedures and to ensure that the Hefti family were informed of the tragedy as soon as possible. It was also agreed that we should carry on with our attempt on the mountain and complete our film which we wanted to dedicate to Jean-Pierre.

On 5 July the seven remaining members of the team ascended to the usual Camp 1. Next day Richard returned to Base Camp because he was still suffering from the exertions of his summit climb and was hence unable to carry on filming much above Base. The rest of us set off for Camp 2 in the cool of early evening, but we were delayed by very deep snow. Hence Camp 2 was not reached until late that night, with myself and Donald dangerously near to the borders of cold injury. During the ascent I was suffering from severe stomach pains caused by insufficiently cooked dehydrated food which I had eaten at Camp 1. Because of this, on the following day Julie-Ann and I set off later than the other four, and we did not climb for long before turning back. Donald also soon turned back, feeling drained. Iain, Carol and Guy were stopped at c7300m by deep snow and by breathing problems suffered by Carol. Hence, all six of us were back at Camp 2 early that morning. In the afternoon two German climbers arrived; we made room for them in one of the tents and the snow-hole we were using.

On the next day, 8 July, everyone except Carol set off for the summit. As a result of the stomach pains my food and liquid intake was reduced to almost zero. Hence I was now severely dehydrated. As a result of this I was climbing slowly and only with enormous effort. Although not too far behind the others I decided to turn back at 7500m. Julie-Ann, who had waited for me at this height, descended with me. With the two Germans, Iain, Donald, and Guy reached the summit in the late afternoon. Iain was able to use his skis (which he had carried



11. Gasherbrums 4, 3 and 2. The Moravec route (SW spur) is picked out by the sun, traverses under the summit pyramid and climbs the final ridge from the R.



41. Julie-Ann Clyma on the lower part of Gasherbrum 2's SW spur. Baltoro Kangri and Gasherbrum 6 in the background.

up on his previous attempt) to descend from 7500m, and he arrived at Camp 2 in gathering darkness. During the descent Donald looked after one of the Germans who had become tired and dangerously cold. However, all were safely back soon after dark.

Next day Donald and I filmed Iain as he ski'd down to Camp 1. Carol, Guy, Donald, and Iain (and the exhausted German, now abandoned by his partner) spent the night there, but Julie-Ann and I carried on down to Base Camp. Over the next two days Iain and Donald finished filming the ski descent.

The whole team was back at Base Camp on 12 July. More expeditions were now arriving at Base Camp, with reports of other groups following. Members of our team, now keen to depart, wanted to use porters from the expected arrivals for our walk-out. However, we still had plenty of food and fuel, and Carol, Julie-Ann and I wanted to make another attempt on Gasherbrum 2. At this stage in the expedition we had our biggest fall of snow.

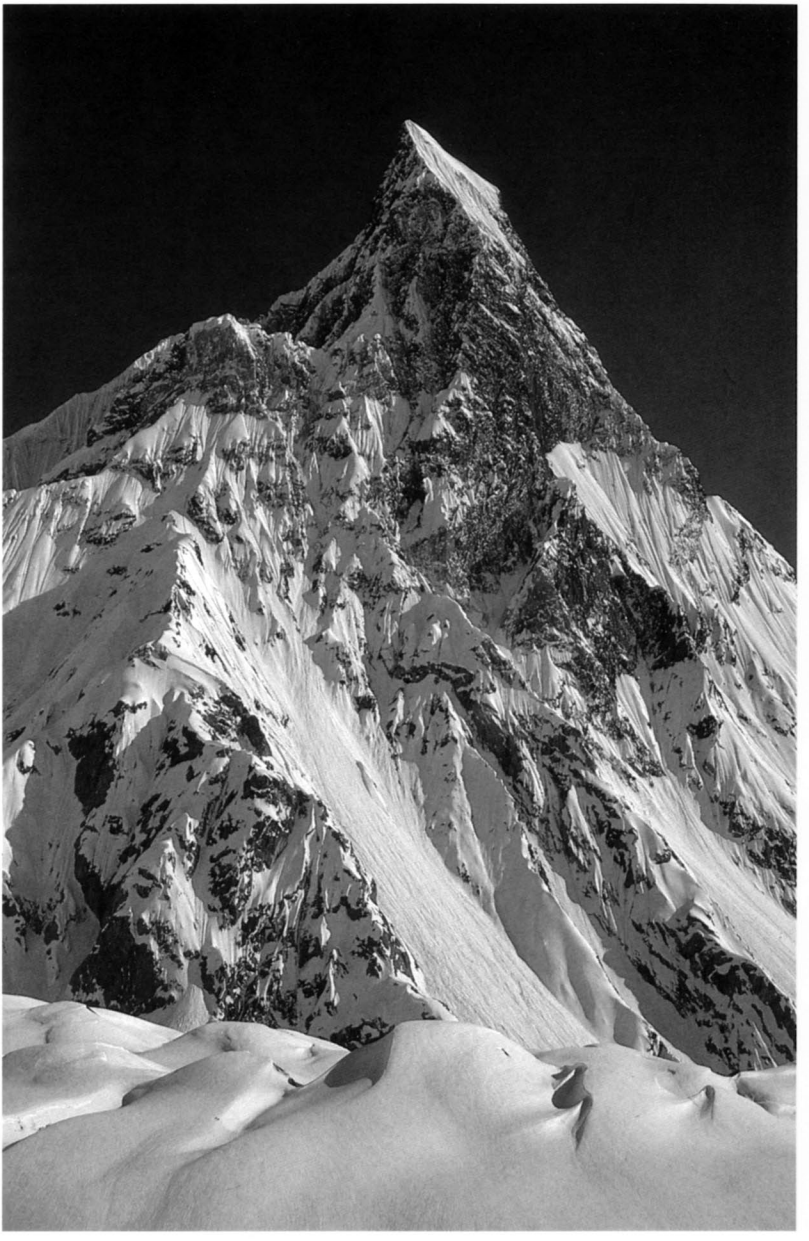
The three of us set off on my birthday, 16 July. A thin veil of cloud held the promise of yet more snow. We did not make good time; once beyond the ice-fall the fresh snow from the most recent storm became deeper. I had hoped that in the last stages of the trip I would be free from the effort and compromise which had been necessary to make the expedition run. But it was not to be; we had only two or three days to climb the mountain before porters would be hired and the walk-out started. By the time we got to Advanced Base Camp it was snowing steadily. Visibility was reduced to only a few metres; we spent the afternoon resting at Advanced Base waiting for the snow to stop. At 4pm Julie-Ann and I had to leave for Camp 1 (we had left sleeping-bags, etc, there after the previous attempt). We set off in better visibility but heavier snow. Carol wisely stayed at Advanced Base Camp.

The snow was deep, and it took five hours to reach Camp 1. Julie-Ann did nearly all the trail-breaking in the occasionally thigh-deep snow. We were both very cold by the time we reached the snow-cave.

Next day the weather was perfect, but avalanche conditions were acute. Descent appeared only marginally less suicidal than continuing upwards. Julie-Ann was bitterly disappointed at going down. She so wanted to climb this mountain and would probably have done so had she not stayed with me when I was not going well. As we descended we constantly triggered small avalanches on either side of the ridge beneath us. Suddenly, to our left, the weight of fresh snow set off an avalanche from the large hanging seracs on the S face. Airborne powder and serac debris raced down the face and exploded across our ascent tracks from the previous day. Before reaching the glacier we had to make the final slope avalanche so that it would be safe for us to descend. From Advanced Base, with Carol, we carried down expedition equipment to Base Camp where porters had already been hired. The walk-out started on the morning of 19 July.

Ours was the first British expedition to climb any of the six Gasherbrum peaks, and we made the first British ski descent of any 8000er. However, the loss of Jean-Pierre and the circumstances which surrounded my final summit attempt make it difficult for me to feel either success or achievement.

I do not wish to draw conclusions, but several important points may be useful to future parties. Thorough acclimatization is absolutely essential, not



12. Mitre Peak from Concordia.

just from a fitness point of view, but to help ensure clear thinking and correct decision-making. Even then, once at high altitude, an individual's judgement can be severely impaired; good team-work and clear organization help to counteract this, and an attitude of collective responsibility will help to ensure safety and success.

Recent years have seen drastic changes in the style of climbing high-altitude peaks. Team-work born from responsibility has been exchanged for the team-work of convenience. An individualistic approach can facilitate rapid and lightweight ascents in good conditions, but it leaves only the smallest margin for unexpected delays or problems. Climbers arriving at camps without the means to support themselves, or allowing themselves to get into such a condition that others unexpectedly have to help them, are examples of an attitude which, I am sure, has contributed to some recent accidents.

To Edward Whymper's excellent advice to individual climbers,[2] reminding us of the need for prudence in the mountains, and to 'look well to each step', I would wish to add: care for your companions; and climb with those who will care for you.

NOTES

1 We experienced lengthy delays with the issue of climbing permits and had to enlist a lot of support for our application. On arrival in Islamabad the Ministry of Tourism Officials made reference to parties who in the past had 'extended' permits or had simply climbed peaks above 6000m or in restricted areas without permission. Their message was clear: help to make our rules work, and the system will work for you. As none of us had been to Pakistan before, we felt let down by our predecessors. There is a clear responsibility here for those who climb in ranges where restrictions apply.

2 E Whymper, *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*, 6th Ed. Webb & Bower, 1986, p216.