Ups and Downs on Kunyang Kish

The Second Ascent, 11 July 1988

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(*Plates* 24–27, 62)

The final week before departure for Pakistan, and the telephone was red hot. Preparations continued amidst the random heaps of gear and food which were rapidly filling both Mike Sheldrake's house and mine. Despite the cleverly designed bureaucratic assault course, it was beginning to look as if we might at least get there. Then a friend phoned . . .

'Have you seen the *Independent* today?' he ventured in a voice which didn't give much away. 'The Shias and Sunnis have started shooting each other and Gilgit is sealed off to the north and south. The army has been called in and no one knows when the area will reopen.'

I couldn't believe it. A year's preparation, trying to visualize every eventuality, anticipating illness, storms, and porter strikes, but never a civil war at the gateway to the Karakoram!

A week later and our team – comprising Ju Fisher, Mark Lowe, Keith Milne, Mike Sheldrake (Shell) and myself, together with four trekkers, Derek Brown, Maggie Boyd, Phil McHugh and Jane Worthington – had miraculously made it as far as Rawalpindi. Ju, the demon dentist who is periodically banished to the Antarctic to allow his patients to recover, had for once put his boyish charm to good use and managed to organize free champagne on the flight out. We arrived in a heatwave – even the locals were finding it too hot.

First priority was to get into some cooler clothing. The local shalwar camise looked practical, but how boring the colours seemed. Men never swayed from the greys, blues, khakis and whites although the shops were packed full of cloths in pinks, purples and yellows. The tailors measuring us up seemed highly amused by our choice of gaudy colours, but we thought nothing of it. People in the streets stared, but we thought this was simply because we were foreigners. Then we got chatting to a gentleman who spoke excellent English; he pointed out that only women wore such colours and if local men were seen in our clothes they would be considered insane and locked up!

We spent five days doing the usual rounds of government offices, cargo warehouses, bazaars and banks. On our second day in the capital we unexpectedly met our liaison officer while visiting the tourist office. At the age of 24, Captain Mahmood Khan was obviously expected to go places in the Pakistan Army. In keeping with every other government official we met, he didn't seem to understand the concepts of democracy or delegation. To him there was no point in discussing options, especially with mere team members. No, it had to be the leader whom he dealt with, and he had firm ideas on how



62. *Julian Fisher flying off Kunyang Kish, Trivor behind.* (p 76)

everything should be done. From my point of view this was bad news. Many months before, in a rain-swept Otley, I had been 'chosen' as leader so that someone could attend the Mount Everest Foundation interview. Now I had suddenly become the figurehead which, as Derek pointed out, was only there to save the ship from hitting the pier.

For reasons of economy we had forsaken the alcohol licence at Flashman's Hotel and booked into the 'Pine'. This proved to be a mistake in more ways than one. A group of lean, mean Yugoslavs moved into the adjacent rooms. The girls swooned; this was their big chance to get their own back for all the times we had been caught staring past their ears in pubs at the leggy blonde in stilettos. They dashed our egos, staring across the courtyard every time a Yugoslav passed by. Talk was of K2 and not KK.

To celebrate our last night in Rawalpindi we gorged ourselves at the Pearl Continental's outdoor barbecue. Shell and I left early to arrange the morning pick-up with our bus driver. Sitting in the Pine Hotel's reception, we struck up a conversation with a Pakistani guest. 'How I admire your physiques and good equipment,' he said. We stared at one another, completely taken aback – was this to be taken as an innuendo or a case of mistaken identity? 'You must be very brave to climb so high,' he went on, smiling. 'Are you sure you mean us and not the Yugoslavs?' I ventured. Shell and I laughed at our in-joke, secretly surprised and I suppose relieved that someone appreciated our exploit. 'When do you leave for K2?' he added innocently. We managed a weak smile and tried to explain the attraction of climbing a mountain other than K2, but it was a lost cause.

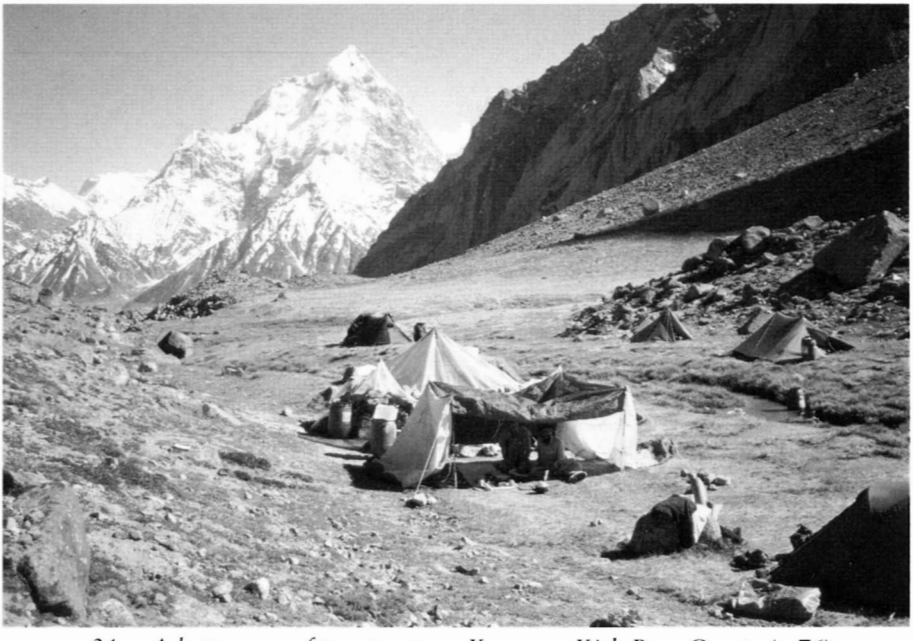
The following morning we left the city bound for Aliabad, a village some two hours beyond Gilgit on the Karakoram Highway. The town of Chilas was reached by 10pm; it had been the centre of much of the recent fighting and according to local reports had seen several thousand deaths. The road from here to Gilgit had only just reopened following the hostilities and we were stopped at a number of 'security check-points'. These generally consisted of a solitary OAP armed with a musket guarding a large twig placed across the road.

Once in Aliabad we made the big mistake of assuming that the locals knew the extent of their road network. They seemed certain that a jeep track ran all the way from the KKH to Hispar village; this was great news, reducing our anticipated walk-in from six to three days. It was only by driving as far as we could, clearing minor landslides, failing to clear a rather more major slide and eventually walking, that we found the track ended several miles short of Hispar. The weather was bad and everyone was dispirited by this setback. Even the arrival of a group of nymphets, masquerading as Operation Raleigh, did little to raise morale. The following morning Mark, Keith, Phil and Derek joined the girls for a day's walk up to Rakaposhi Base Camp beneath the W face of the mountain. Early in the descent Phil twisted his knee badly; unable to walk, he managed to slide and hobble back to the road. This proved to be the end of the trip for him, all plans of trekking up the Hispar glacier with Jane, Maggie and Derek frustrated.

The next day, Thursday 9 June, saw us go our separate ways; Phil to England and a knee operation, the rest of us to Nagar and negotiations for



23. *Chomochior from top bivouac on Kishtwar Shivling. The W ridge faces the camera L of the skyline.* (p 63)



24. *A better use of parapentes – Kunyang Kish Base Camp.* (p 76)

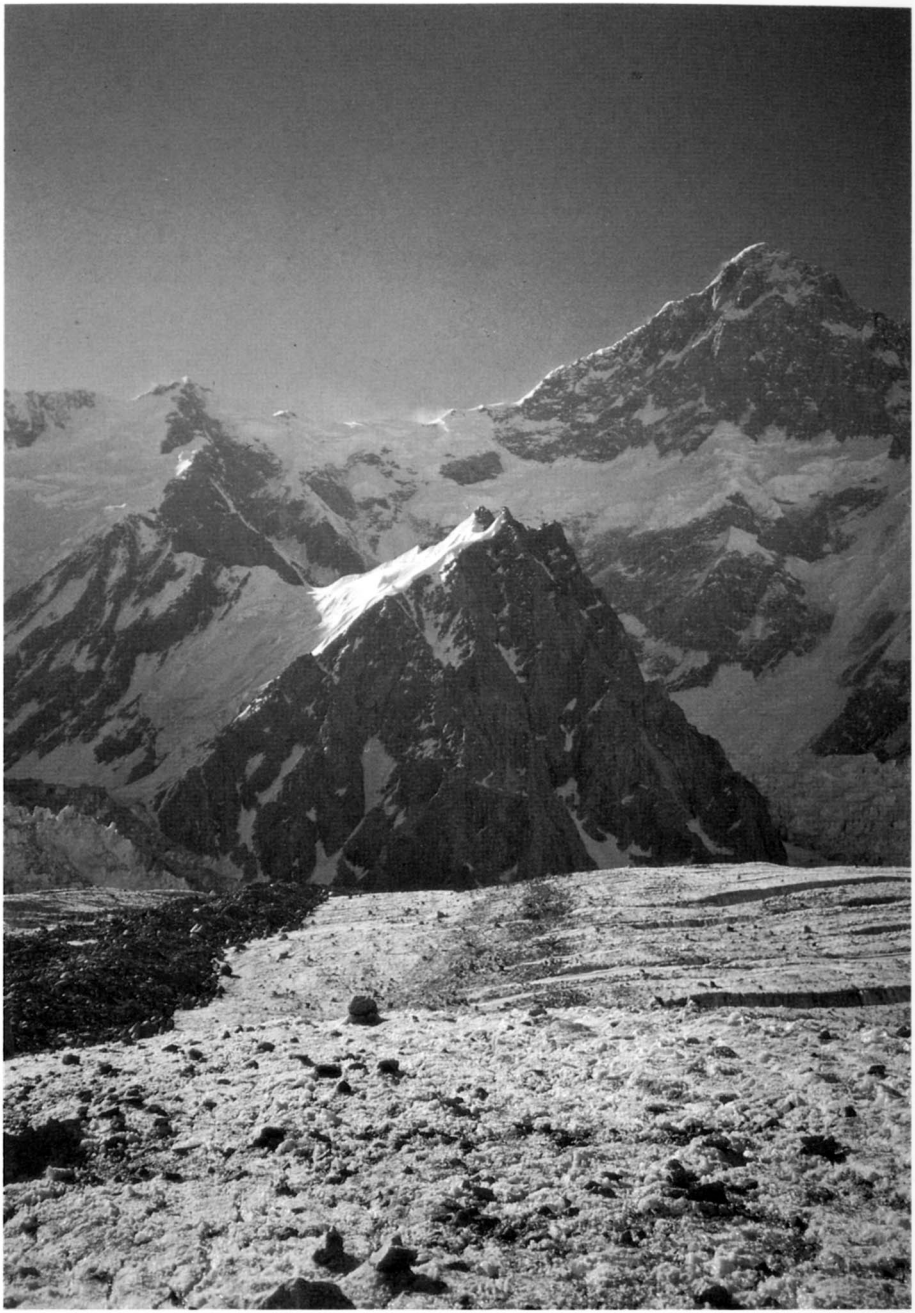
porters. The Nagari men have acquired a reputation over the years for demanding high rates of pay, walking short stages, stealing and even the murder of clients. Two days earlier we had seen Piotr Młotecki's Polish Expedition leave Aliabad bound for Batura I. They seemed pretty experienced and by coincidence included Zygmunt Heinrich, one of the four men to reach the summit of Kunyang Kish back in 1971. We watched their porters strike several times in the course of leaving and wondered what the Nagars had in store for us.

Our negotiations were completed surprisingly quickly; always a bad sign. Within four hours, terms were agreed and porters picked. We knew that we were being ripped off financially but, going on all the information available from previous trips to the area, we were paying the typical Nagar rate for six stages. Unfortunately, the men were not prepared to reduce the walk-in to five stages by using tractors to the end of the track, and in any case there was the major landslide which we had reached previously, preventing us from driving to Hura. Nobody could say when the road-gang would get around to clearing the block and we knew damn well that it could wait longer than us.

Our first choice of cook, having read about him on Mick Fowler's and Tony Saunders's Spantik Expedition, had to be Rajab Ali. As the call went through the assembled crowd, a small gnarly character struggled to push his way to the front and climb on to the verandah. He proudly produced his photographs and reference from the previous year's trip and asked if we could supply him with some boots. His feet looked about size 6, but he seemed happy with Ju's size 10 American baseball boots, complete with multicoloured stars, declaring them a great fit. He shuffled off to gather his belongings together while trying his best to prevent the unlaced boots from falling off. The crowd erupted with laughter at this comic scene. Rajab was a real comedian and kept us cheerful throughout the trip.

Our 45 porters arrived early the following morning to be allocated their loads. It had stopped raining for the first time since our arrival in the mountains and everything appeared to be going smoothly. As each porter was given his load, he fixed up a harness and disappeared around the back of the building. It came as a surprise to discover them loading all the gear on to tractors and trailers. As soon as agreement had been reached the previous day, a gang had been sent out with dynamite to clear the landslip. The road was 'miraculously' clear again and they even had the gall to offer us a lift if we paid! I think it was more for reasons of pride than the desire to get fit that we chose to walk.

We quickly fell into a routine: Mahmood lining up all the porters for early morning parade, then marching at the head of the column while the Sirdar carried his sack, with everyone else ambling along at various speeds. Base Camp was set up on 15 June at Bularang, a grassy ablation valley above the Kunyang glacier at 4300m. Kunyang Kish itself lay on the opposite side of the glacier, its W summit hiding most of our chosen route, the N ridge, from view. It is always a bit difficult to find superlatives which make your objective sound special to prospective sponsors. Other people's quotes are especially useful, making the world's 33rd highest mountain grow in stature to: '. . . possibly the biggest single massif in the world, a peak which covers an area three or four times that occupied by K2 . . .' (from an article by Stephen Venables, himself a would-be



25. *Kunyang Kish (7852m): NW spur leading up to N ridge.* (p 76)

conqueror of KK on two previous occasions). To add spice, we were also planning a parapente descent of the mountain.

Kunyang Kish has been attempted many times, with little success. The peak's long S ridge was tried by the British in 1962 and the Japanese in 1965 before Zawada's Polish team triumphed in 1971. All three expeditions resulted in loss of life, giving the peak something of a reputation. Attention then turned to the N ridge, with Dave Wilkinson's expeditions of 1980 and 1981. Accompanied by Venables and Bartlett, he made the first serious recce of the NW side of the mountain, finding a relatively non-technical route up the NW spur which runs from the Kunyang glacier (*c*4700m) to its junction with the N ridge at 7100m. This meeting point, marked by what appears from a distance to be a mere pimple, grows into a sizeable problem on closer acquaintance and was aptly christened Sod's Law Peak by Wilkinson. It is so-named because there is no easy way of avoiding its summit in order to reach the N ridge. Wilkinson and Co were dogged by bad weather and heavy snowfall on both expeditions, failing to climb the final 750m of ridge above Sod's Law. On arrival in Hunza, we discovered that a Japanese expedition had also attempted the route in 1987, retreating after one member was killed in an avalanche at about 6700m.

The route from Base Camp to the climb lay in a 7km arc up the Kunyang glacier. This proved to be a particularly demoralizing start to the route, but Shell and Maggie found a route through the maze to establish Advanced Base Camp beneath a 400m rock pyramid which marked the foot of the spur. Derek, Jane and Mahmood helped us with gear carries up the glacier before leaving on their trek to Snow Lake via the Hispar La.

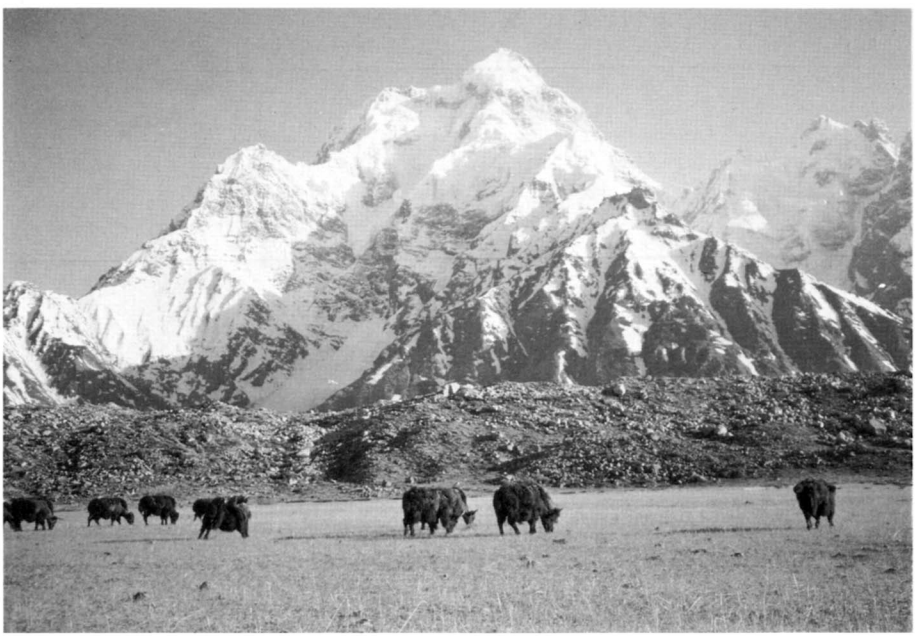
To reach the crest of the spur we planned to use a straightforward ice gully, so avoiding the difficulties of the pyramid by sneaking around the back. This had previously been named Garadh Gully because of the likeness to its namesake on Ben Nevis. The following morning, Wednesday 22 June, called for a 2.30am start. I was feeling a mixture of excitement, apprehension and gross overburden, not helped by 3kg of parapente. By 9am we were at 5500m on the ridge, gasping a bit and happy to leave the next narrow section of the ice arête until the following morning when it would be considerably easier; or so we thought. Sitting around all day in beautiful weather, admiring the surrounding chain of 7000ers, brewing up and chatting all seemed good value – perhaps this Greater Ranges lark was OK after all. But by midday we were being fried alive and the novelty was starting to wear thin.

Another 2am start, traversing the sharp arête with huge drops hidden by darkness. I set off shortly before the others so that I could take my time. The technicalities increased and I stopped to weigh up a course of action. Mark climbed around me and disappeared behind a rocky kink in the arête, coming to a halt below a blank section of rock. The rest of us sorted out a 7mm rope, but as I started running it out we came to the conclusion that things seemed wrong. If our predecessors had soloed their route, it certainly wasn't on this kind of ground. As we sat perched on a rock ledge waiting for dawn to arrive, a call drifted across from Mark out in the void: 'If I had a pair of rock-boots I think it would go!'

Daylight confirmed our suspicions; a series of difficult pinnacles lay



26. *Julian Fisher descending from Camp 3 on Kunyang Kish. The N ridge is in sunlight behind.* (p 76)



27. *Yak pastures beside the Hispar glacier overlooked by the N face of Makrong Kish (6605m).* (p 76)

ahead. With our puny resources and the size of the hill it seemed sensible to retreat to the top of Garadh Gully and climb a different gully to the ridge, so bypassing the pinnacles. Sure enough, an 800m ice slope led to a site for Camp 1, snuggled beneath a large ice cliff.

We started finding lengths of Japanese fixed lines, often running up vertical cliffs where we chose to walk round the side. Within three days of leaving ABC we had established Camps 1 and 2, Keith and Mark had dumped some food near a site for Camp 3 at 6630m, Shell had spent a solitary night in a snow-hole beside the dump, while Ju and I carried loads up to Camp 2. The following morning Shell descended to Camp 2 with a chest infection and a particularly virulent gut problem. Ju and I carried loads up to Camp 3, discovering at the lunchtime radio call that the others were returning to Base Camp for a few days' rest. Plans to make a further carry up to Camp 3 were thwarted by overnight snowfall and whiteout conditions the following morning. Not wanting to be trapped beneath a huge avalanche slope during a protracted storm while the others ate all the tinned fruit at Base, we followed our stomachs off the hill.

With the return of good weather Shell accompanied Maggie down to Gilgit, hoping to get back in time for a final attempt on the mountain. Mark and Keith set off for ABC, followed a day later by Ju and myself. They stayed a day ahead of us for the next three days, carrying food up to a dump just below the summit of SL Peak as we arrived at Camp 3. We all sat out a day of bad weather on 5 July, with wind and snow blasting the tents. Morning revealed mist, a fresh blanket of snow and an overnight drop of 90m in the barometer. Ju was struck down with an upset stomach, Mark felt it prudent to descend, while Keith and I were both fed up with going up and down – our next descent would be our last! So it was that Keith and Mark packed up their tent and personal kit, I shouldered food and gas for Ju's and my summit push and the three of us set off up the steepening slope towards the summit of SL Peak. Keith and I shared the trailbreaking through demoralizing deep powder. He was far stronger and did 70 per cent of the work; I kept on thinking that we were mad to go on in such conditions.

We reached the previous dump at 7000m but there was still no sign of Mark. I left my load and began descending tracks which were almost obliterated by fresh snow, meeting a rather unhappy Mark half-way down. He still thought that we should be descending, and had only set off because he had the tent and radio. On reaching the dump, they dug the tent in below a rock outcrop and prepared to sit out the bad weather. Ju and I did likewise at Camp 3, enlarging Shell's snow-hole to fit two of us. Another day of boredom followed, with Ju's condition worsening to the point where he couldn't eat or move from his sleeping-bag at all.

The cloud was starting to disperse by the following morning, so Keith and Mark set off upwards. Ju seemed worse, listless and groaning; I packed our kit and coaxed him into first gear. The descent rapidly steepened and I wished we had a rope. Ju slowly descended the line of pigeonholes, periodically slumping over his axes in a groaning heap, while I waited for him to peel off backwards. On reaching Camp 1 he offered to continue down alone, but it was too late to

catch the others and I couldn't face that waist-deep snow again. I had been unable to carry my parapente above this point on the ascent, so as a consolation prize I decided to fly back down to ABC. Laying the canopy out on a creaking cornice in a flat calm I felt as nervous as on my first flight. It inflated perfectly but takeoff eluded me, as I struggled to run fast enough down incredibly lumpy wet ice with an oversize rucksack. I was fuming at having lugged my canopy up to 5850m, only to carry it down on my back in a hopelessly tangled mess. My depression reached new depths when Ju made a remarkable recovery, collecting his parapente from a lower cache and flying from the top of Garadh Gully down to ABC. If this was the highest British parapente flight to date, then mine was surely the highest crash!

Meanwhile Mark and Keith had pressed on over the top of SL Peak, dumped food at the base of the N ridge and returned to Camp 4. The following day they continued across the broad col and established Camp 5 a short way up the ridge. Deep snow often hampered progress and on the steeper sections they would probably have chosen to carry a rope, but the last decent length was fixed below the summit of Sod's Law. A final camp was made on 10 July and the following morning they set off carrying only day food and brewing kit. They couldn't believe it when the summit was reached at 1.30pm, with the altimeter indicating a further 600m to go and clear weather to boot!

During the following two days they safely descended avalanche-prone slopes to reach Base Camp, while Ju and Shell returned to clear Camp 1 and fly down to ABC. Shell had narrowly missed getting back in time for a summit attempt, following his mammoth one-day walk-in from the roadhead. The rest of us cleared ABC and Rajab proudly prepared a celebration feast. First Mark and later Keith ambled into camp, looking rather as if they had just left a five-day beach party.

Celebrations in the cook tent – a mixture of whisky and excessively rich air seemed to be affecting Keith: 'You see, that's the problem with walking downhill,' he explained in his lazy drawl. 'You forget to breathe.' So that's where I had been going wrong!