Rimo; Changing Fortunes

An Account of the 1989 Indo-British East Karakoram Expedition

NICK KEKUS

(Plates 9–16)

I first heard of the East Karakoram in the winter of 1986 when I teamed up with Jim Fotheringham on the first of many forays north of the border that winter. Jim was his usual enthusiastic self. 'You should really go for Rimo I, great objective.' He continued his tale: '. . . they were not far from the top'. He paused: 'and then Venables dropped his sac, they had to retreat, you can imagine their disappointment.' (See *AJ 91*, 19–32, 1986. This article also contains a useful map of the Rimo area.)

I could, but I wondered how I would ever get there, given the political situation and the fact that the Indian Mountaineering Foundation were allowing only one foreign expedition in the area per season. I soon forgot about Rimo and the Siachen glacier but stored the memory away in the recesses of my mind, to be recalled when the time was right. It was another blank to fill in on my personal map of mountaineering.

Three years later I was all set for a rock-climbing holiday in North America; guaranteed sun and perfect rock were very tempting. A phone-call in the miserable depths of winter soon put paid to my relaxing summer vacation. 'Fancy coming to the East Karakoram, Youth': Doug's unmistakable drawl came over the line. I was easy prey and soon hooked. 'I'm going to Nepal in a few days, then on to Australia. Can you help organize things while I'm away?'

'Er . . . sure, Doug.'

'I'll keep in touch – see you in Delhi, end of May.' He rang off.

All right for some, I thought, as the reality of what I'd let myself in for sunk home.

27 May 1989 saw our team assembled at the IMF headquarters in Delhi. Doug, just in from Australia, met Stephen Sustad and me at the airport and helped us clear customs as we tried to look inconspicuous pushing 10 enormous Karrimor kitbags through the customs hall. The remainder of our (loosely speaking) British team arrived at the Indian Mountaineering Foundation building in New Delhi the same day: Rob and Laurie Wood from Canada, Robert Schauer from Austria, followed by Sharu Prabhu from Bombay.

As we were leaving Britain, reports of fighting on the Siachen glacier caused us concern. However, a telex from the Indians had allayed our fears, with its 'come as planned' message. But, once in Delhi, the real situation was explained to us. The permit for Apsarasas II had, we were told, been 'temporarily withheld'.

We knew then that Apsarasas was off and openly discussed alternative objectives. At the IMF we were also introduced to the Indian contingent of the



9. Rimo group. L to R Rimo III, Rimo II (appearing as a shoulder), and Rimo I. (Nick Kekus) (p 11)



10. Teram Shehr ice plateau, from Pt 6660, Rimo II. (Doug Scott) (p 11)

expedition. While back in Britain we had been told the Indian leader would be Hukam Singh, who had led the successful first ascent of Rimo I with the Japanese in 1988. Last-minute problems had forced the IMF to change leaders to Sonam Palzor of the Indo-Tibetean Border Police (ITBP). Three climbers, also from the ITBP, were included: Tsewang Smanla, Kanhaiya Lal (KL) and Mohan Singh. They were all experienced: Sonam had reached the summit of Everest in 1984, Smanla and KL had climbed Rimo I with the Japanese in 1988.

The main group flew to Leh on 29 May, leaving Doug and Sonam to sort out the intricacies of Indian bureaucracy. It was three weeks before we finally received the go-ahead to leave Leh. During this time we spent several days exploring and acclimatizing in the Stok range, across the Indus valley from Leh. Doug and Sonam arrived on 9 June, bearing good news: our objective was Rimo III, in particular its SW buttress. An American group with permission for Rimo III had failed to raise a team, leaving the way open for our attempt. Doug had previously applied for Rimo III back in 1986 but had been turned down, and then again in 1988, when the American group had beaten him to the permit.

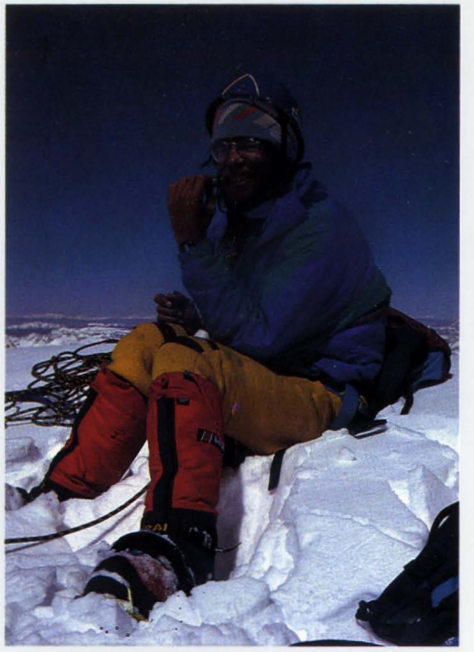
On 17 June we finally left Leh for Panamik, on the military road crossing the precarious Khardung La, to descend into the fertile Nubra valley. The problems with porters in the Nubra valley were well known: they often have far more lucrative work with the army and are naturally reluctant to carry for expeditions. We tried to overcome the difficulty by employing Nepalese porters in Leh, but the current poor relations between India and Nepal prohibited this. However, Sonam managed to engage eight young students from Leh. We looked questioningly at their designer jeans and flowery shirts, wondering if they were capable of the hard work required. The porter shortage and further delays in Panamik forced Robert Schauer to return to Austria; he had limited time, half of which had disappeared with the setbacks. Robert's departure was depressing: it focused our thoughts on the shortage of time and put undue strain on our dwindling morale.

With our small group of porters we left the Army Base Camp at the Siachen snout on 19 June, following the ever-shifting glacial moraine to reach the aptly named Dust Camp in the Terong valley. Dust Camp became a 'half-way house' as porters ferried loads up from Army BC and we started pushing up to Base Camp (4300m) at the junction of the North and South Terong glaciers. On 24 June the Leh boys left the expedition; they were unable to sustain the load-carrying and incited the Panamik porters to strike. Temporarily we carried heavy loads ourselves, sometimes up to 35kg, but soon managed to persuade 20 porters to continue, albeit with reduced loads of 15–20kg. By 28 June we had established and occupied Advanced Base Camp (4800m) on the North Terong glacier. Bad weather persisted and we only had fleeting glimpses of the Rimo peaks through the swirling cloud. Stephen and I were joined by the three Indians Mohan, KL and Smanla for a recce to the Ibex col (6000m), while Doug, Laurie and Sharu explored the cwm beneath Rimos I, II and III. It was at this time that Rob Wood developed worrying chest pains. He experienced great difficulty in acclimatizing and finally, on the advice of the expedition doctor, he returned to Canada.

Doug, Laurie and Sharu's exploration had revealed Rimo III's SW



11. K2 from Pt 6660, Rimo II. (Doug Scott) (p 11)



12. Stephen Sustad on the summit of Rimo II (7373m). (Nick Kekus) (p 11)

buttress to be out of condition as a constant stream of powder swept the wall. However, a fine ridge on Rimo II appeared to offer a reasonable and safe route. In view of our diminished time and the unsettled weather we plumped for this, Sonam agreeing to the additional peak and to a short extension of the permit time. We established Camp 1 (5400m) near the base of the W ridge of Rimo II and, with the help of our Indian friends, proceeded to carry supplies up to this camp. The intention was to join the Indian lads and make an ascent via the mountain's W and N ridges. However, the three Indians could not agree on this choice of route. They preferred the easier though more dangerous couloir to its left which gained the col between Rimo II and Rimo III some 400m below where the W ridge emerges on to the N ridge. We, for our part, could not agree to the couloir route, especially after Smanla had been struck by falling rocks while fixing ropes. Finally, the night before our departure for the mountain, we compromised. Just beyond where the W ridge joins the N ridge there is a prominent 'Notch'; it was agreed that we would follow our separate routes to meet here for the final climb to the summit.

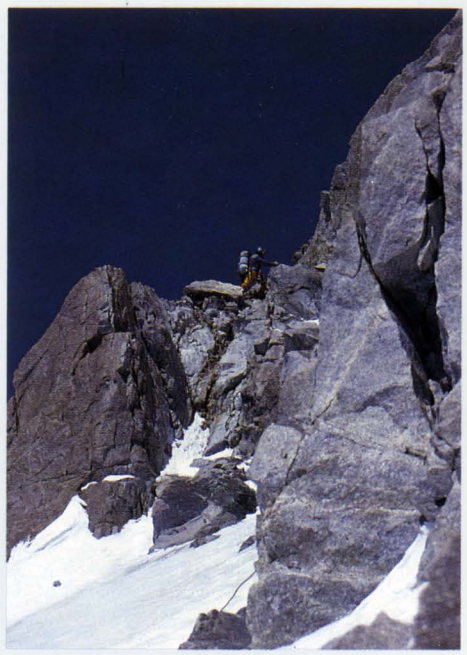
On 10 July Stephen and I followed the winding footprints of Doug and the girls. They were just starting up the W ridge, roped together. We soon caught them and took the lead, happy to continue solo while the climbing was easy. After 600m of climbing we reached a change in direction as the ridge curved to a distant serac band, while the terrain turned rocky and steep. We roped up and I led the way, weaving around the steepest of the rock-walls, the snow softening as the sun rose on a glorious day. Gaining height, we could now look out across the Teram Shar ice-cap, seeing new vistas, an endless roll of sparkling peaks disappearing towards Pakistan. Above the rocky section the ridge opened out into a broad convex slope. The snow had turned to mush and, our progress extremely slow, we struggled from one rock island to another, often finding the rock easier to negotiate than the snow. Finally, crossing a slight narrowing of the ridge, we picked our way up the side of a serac wall to the spacious flat top which offered an ideal campsite. Steve and I soon settled into our cramped tent for an early night. Doug, Laurie and Sharu arrived just before sunset, very tired, Doug having led every pitch while the girls had jumared behind with heavy sacs.

Steve and I continued in the lead the following day, negotiating the steep buttress behind our camp on its right-hand side. The climbing now became interesting. At first steep ice led to the toe of the rocks, and we then took a devious line through the steep rock. A narrow icy groove, which saw us gain the top of a shattered tower, was followed by more mixed terrain which proved awkward and tenuous. Finally we arrived on the crest of the buttress from where we could see the more broken continuation leading to the N ridge, emerging close to the 'Notch' and our high-altitude rendezvous.

From above I could just hear the low chatter of voices. Instinctively I looked up, scouring the ridge for their source. I shouted out enthusiastically, knowing it must be our Indian friends on the ridge above. Soon three figures appeared, silhouetted against the bright sky. They waved and shouted excitedly. I assumed they must be at a bivouac site but, as communication was difficult, I could not be sure. Steve and I set off to join them, but we had not gone



13. Rimo III, SW buttress. (Nick Kekus) (p 11)



14. Rimo III. Climbing to the N ridge on the second day. (Nick Kekus) (p 11)

far when we noticed the Indian lads starting back down the N ridge. This was strange – what were they doing? We continued, hoping to shed some light on their actions. Once on the ridge we found fixed rope snaking down to the col and their tiny tent poised on its exposed crest. The three Indians could clearly be seen, milling around the tent and we shouted down, receiving a wave in return, but further communication was impossible over such a distance. We followed the fresh foot-prints in the snow to their end and over the next prow we were greeted by a string of colourful prayer-flags draped on outcrops spanning the narrow ridge. The remains of burnt juniper smouldered on an adjacent rock. This was the scene of a *puja* – a prayer ceremony. Were they coming back up or was it an offering for a safe retreat? Steve was at first reluctant to pitch our tent on this site: it just so happened that the only suitable tent platform was directly beneath the prayer-flags. He muttered something about bad Kharma and disturbing the spirits. I reassured him with the thought that after the *puja* it would probably be the safest place to camp and would undoubtedly bring good fortune for our final ascent to the summit.

Doug and the two girls had stopped some four rope-lengths beneath us on a small snowy platform and were busy pitching their tent. I told them of the Indians' descent, and Doug soon after shouted up with the news that their tent had disappeared. From where we were there were several blind spots on the ridge and we could not see this new development. We all concluded that the Indians must be coming back up to join us.

Steve and I relaxed, enjoying the last of the warm afternoon sun. It had been the fourth day of perfect weather – for how long could it continue? Tomorrow we would cut loose from the burden of our tent and equipment, going light for the summit. Doug and the girls would traverse beneath the ridge to gain the Notch while we would continue over the rocky crest to reach the same place. The final section of ridge looked steep and awkward; it would be no less demanding than our second day. The sun dipped low over the peaks across in Pakistan. I thought of all those soldiers compelled to fight over this breathtaking country, and the tragic waste of resources by two nations who can ill afford the terrible cost. Then of the lonely, often miserable, existence of the Indo-Tibetean Border Police, patrolling the bleak Depsang plains, sometimes away for three months at a time from their home and family. What a contrast to our brief recreational visit to this magnificent region. As the bitter cold crept upon us we slipped into the sanctuary of our tiny tent, concerned and perplexed at the antics of the three Indian climbers.

On the morning of 12 July Steve and I wrestled the frozen tent into its undersize sac. There was no sign of the Indian lads. Doug and the girls were similarly stirring below. We were just about to start climbing, so I thought I would make one last scan of the N ridge. Inadvertently I looked into the great snow bowl bounding the eastern side of the Rimo group, which forms the head of the S Rimo glacier. 'I'm sure that's a tent' – I pointed to the tiny black form on the glacier below. Further searching revealed three dark figures moving steadily up the SW flank of Rimo IV. They were indeed our Indian friends, already halfway up the mountain; we could only guess at the early hour they must have left camp. They had abandoned Rimo II. Later, when we questioned the Indians



15. Rimo III. Above the final pinnacle on the summit day. (Nick Kekus) (p 11)

on the change of course, their answers varied between not having enough fuel and thinking we were against them using fixed rope!

Steve and I started up the ridge, at first taking a line on the left of the crest following steep snowy flutings. This proved desperate as we sank into the blank rock beneath. We quickly reverted to the rock again, climbing the black shaly crest with relative ease. After 10 pitches we reached the fore-summit from which we could see the snaking ridge leading more easily to the main top. We moved together, putting in the occasional ice-screw, anticipating another hour of climbing to the summit. At 2pm we reached the foot of an impending black tower which appeared to be composed of the worst kind of loose shale imaginable. Large unstable blocks perched at impossible angles convinced me that a frontal assault was out of the question. The steep snow on the eastern side offered the only practical way. Reluctantly I ventured on to this bottomless powder, digging away until the rock beneath revealed holds and a means of progress. This continued for 20m before, as I broke through the flowery cornice to straddle the rocky ridge at an airy notch, the W face of the mountain dropped before me; an icy air current rushing through the gap added to the drama. Beyond, Steve led an impressive wall composed of more perched blocks: he made it look so easy. I struggled to keep in contact with the rock, dispatching several monstrous blocks in the process.

The summit was close now and we could feel the tension mounting with every new rise gained. One last icy step and we were there. Collapsing in the soft summit snow, we shook hands and lay back to catch our breath, enjoying the warm sun of the brilliant day. Behind us, only 12m higher and temptingly close was Rimo I. I suggested it glibly to a 'laid-back' Steve, but it was 3.30pm and we both knew it was not possible; after all, we did not have permission. We were content with the first ascent of Rimo II. We surveyed the endless vista of peaks: to the north-west the familiar profile of K2 rose – and was that Nanga Parbat hazy on the far western horizon? To the south the Saser Kangri group stood out, left of the bleak sepia Depsang plains.

We started our descent, well aware of the time that had passed while we were on the summit. Moving together as much as possible and rappelling all the lower ridge, we seemed to make fast progress, but the light was going fast and urgency crept into our actions. Finally we cut two metres off our rope (our limited hardware depleted) to make the last abseil and gain the Notch an hour after dark.

During the next two days we all descended safely to Advanced Base Camp, Doug and the girls having turned back at the Notch. The Indians had also returned. They had completed their ascent of Rimo IV (the second ascent) and had returned via the Ibex col, covering almost 35km on glaciers and crossing two cols over 6000m. This was a fine piece of mountaineering of the type at which the Indians excel.

Our thoughts now turned to the future. The weather was set fair and conditions on the mountains were good, so Doug, Steve and I decided to attempt Rimo III, SW buttress. We had left all our food and equipment for the ascent at Camp 1 and planned for several days' rest before making the attempt. On 15 July our liaison officer, Rajeev Kakkar, arrived at ABC with a letter from



16. Rimo IV. Indian ascent (2nd) L of rocks in centre. (Doug Scott) (p 11)



17. 'The Bus'. (Mal Duff) (p 43)

Sonam, calling off the expedition. We were surprised and angry. We had spoken to Sonam only the previous evening on the radio, and he had given no indication of his intentions. Steve left for Base Camp immediately to try and persuade Sonam to reconsider, but he was already too late. Sonam had left for Army Base Camp, and porters were evacuating equipment there. Fearing repercussions such as occurred on Peter Hillary's expedition, we had no option but to comply. Sonam could offer no satisfactory reason for his decision and later admitted that he had been hasty.

A few days later the weather broke: we had been climbing in a brief window of perfect weather. And so, despite the frustrations, delays and personal conflicts, Steve and I at least came back with a mountaineering success, but we were all left wondering about what might have been.

As Sonam said to Doug on the way out: 'We will never know why things turned out as they have – maybe it's for the best.' There was no arguing with that.

(See also Doug Scott's Commentary in Area Notes (India), pp251–254 of this volume.)