We Failed on Ultar

A V SAUNDERS

(Plate 14)

Ultar I (7388m) is the highest and most attractive peak of the Ultar group, one of the highest unclimbed massifs in the world. It might seem odd that a mountain situated less than 3½ miles from a main road should have remained unclimbed for so long, but this is less surprising when you consider that the summit of Ultar I is a full 3½ miles above the Karakoram Highway. It is a mountain with intrinsic technical difficulties and a huge vertical interval. On the S side, the summit is nowhere less than 3500m above the bergschrund. Being a high mountain at the end of a massif, it seems to attract particularly foul weather. These factors have contributed to the defeat of all teams to date.

In recent years there have been several attempts to climb the mountain by large and well-funded Japanese expeditions. One of these tried the shorter but more dangerous N face but were foiled by objective dangers, mainly avalanches, and narrowly avoided fatalities. Other attempts have concentrated on the S ridge, gaining this from Karimabad. In 1985 a Polish expedition tried an alternative start to the S ridge, but they found the approach from Hametabad too long and difficult to support the climbing above.

In 1990 Tsuneo Hasegawa, who made a name for himself in the late 1970s by soloing the three great Alpine north faces in winter, used siege tactics to reach a high point 200m below the summit of Ultar, starting from Baltit and following the S ridge. The Hasegawa route follows a logical and apparently safe line from the Ultar glacier above Karimabad. Hasegawa returned in September 1991 to complete his route, passing Mick Fowler and Crag Jones on their way down. The Japanese team had 6800m of kevlar rope and planned to establish up to six camps. On 10 October Tsuneo Hasegawa and Kiyotaka Hoshino were killed in an avalanche, and were buried under Ultar by Hasegawa's wife.

In contrast to Hasegawa's methods, we decided to climb in the lightest possible style, with no fixed ropes or fixed camps. We are not interested in alpine-style ascents for their own sake. There is no point in handicapping yourself just to prove superiority. One may as well attempt to climb hopping on one leg, backwards. The point of lightweight ascents is that they are less damaging to the ecology and economy of the Himalayan regions. An additional argument is that lightweight methods, in the hands of reasonably competent climbers, can actually be safer than siege style. Although 'lightweight' has some drawbacks when it comes to sitting out bad weather, it can be a safer option than having to travel over dangerous ground several times on fixed ropes. This is perhaps a lesson to be learned from Hasegawa's tragedy.

Our team opted for an ultra lightweight approach. Because of the proximity of 'civilisation' to any route on the mountain, we decided to dispense with the

traditional base camp and only set up camps for short periods. Our idea was to explore the various routes on Ultar and then concentrate on one of them. This approach allowed us to split into two teams: Jones and Fowler attempting the S ridge (by a variation of the Hasegawa route) from the village of Baltit; Sustad and Saunders attempting the SE face, the 'hidden' face of the mountain, via the village of Hametabad.

While Mick and Crags were climbing on their side of the mountain, Steve and I were on the SE 'hidden' face. At midnight on 31 August we had reached our Advanced Base on the edge of the Hidden glacier. We had just packed for our final, ultimate, last ditch attempt to force a new route up Ultar.

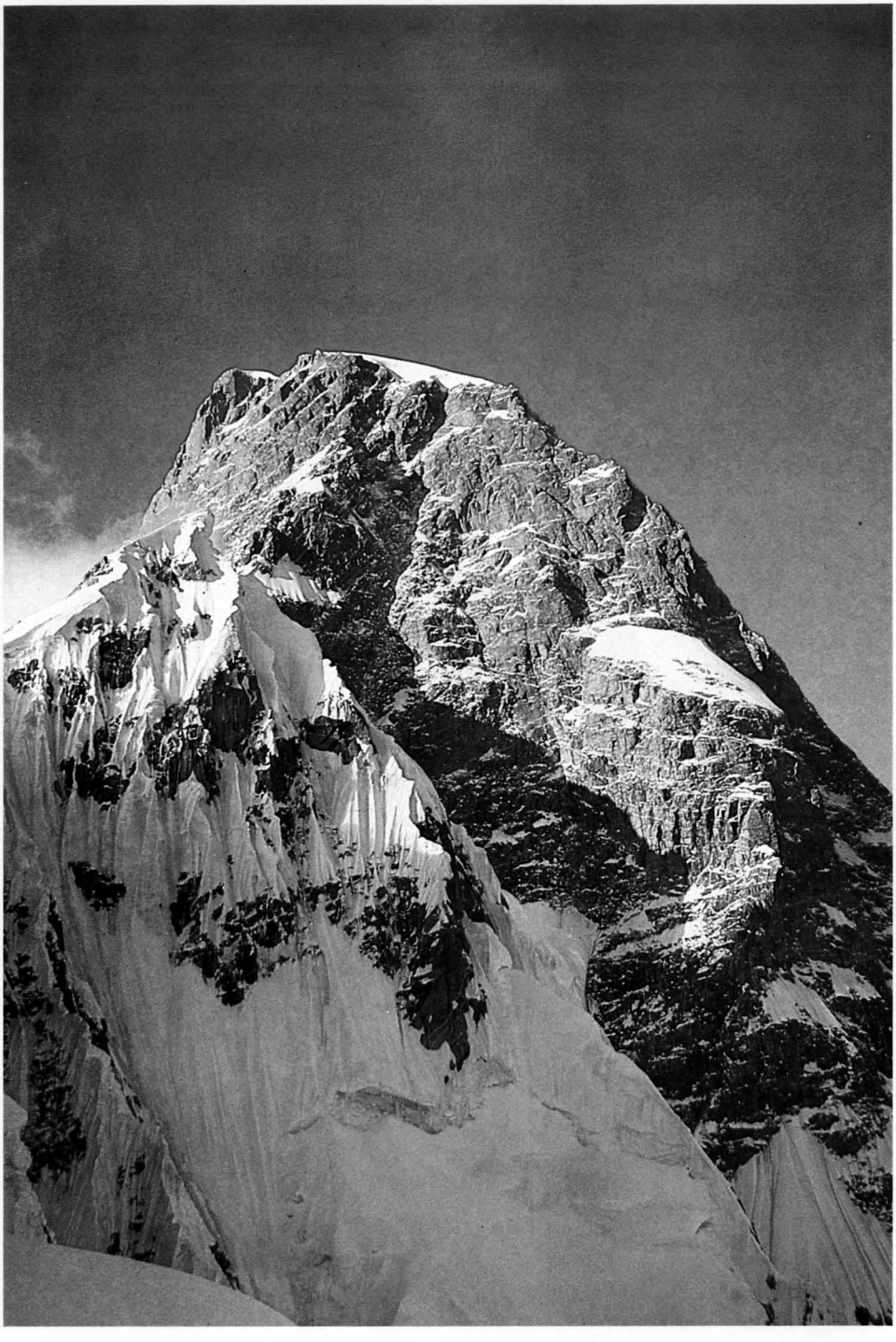
'Your rucksack looks like you are carrying a drunk,' said Steve, and it was true; the sack hung crazily sideways – not unlike one of my buildings, I suppose. We had eaten a spoonful of grapenuts for breakfast, then watched the stars wink out one by one, as an enormous black shadow engulfed the sky. It began to rain. This is what it had been doing for the past week. It poured down. It sounded like someone was playing a fire hydrant on our minuscule tent. It sounded like the entire Hidden valley would turn into a lake overnight. It sounded depressing.

The rain continued over breakfast, and in order to conserve our precious 'hill food' we dined on hot water and boiled wild rhubarb. We would have to start up the mountain that evening or abandon the climb altogether. There was nothing else for it – we only had a week's food left.

As the day wore on the rain faded into drizzle which, in turn, drifted down the glacier and into the Hunza valley beyond, leaving a freshly scrubbed sky and a glistening landscape. Steve and I were alone in the Hidden valley, except for the wildlife. Once we saw an ibex and her fawn watching us from the top of a nearby boulder. Another time, the elusive creatures scrambled to escape us by climbing pinnacles I would not dream of setting foot on without a rope. There were two sets of large cat tracks, though we never saw any other sign of the snow leopard. By the spring from which we drew our water there were signs of marmot. Lammergeier, *ram chakor* (a kind of partridge) and several other birds of various sizes and colours also inhabited the valley. I suppose we were not really alone at all.

Our new line looked long, but seemed to avoid the worst of the seracs. It began with 1500m of broad couloirs in the shape of a giant 'Z'. We left our campsite at dusk and almost immediately became lost in the boulder scree. With only a pencil-thin beam of torchlight, night climbing can be very confusing. Our rucksacks, filled with seven days' food, gear for 40 or 50 abseils, ropes, tent, stove, sleeping-bags and clothes for the −20°C we expected during the nights, weighed over 50lbs. At 40% of my body weight, this was far more than I or Steve wanted to carry, but we had already thrown out what we could: water-bottles, toothbrush, spare food, suncream (we would make do with lip-cream) and, worst of all for Sustad, the last two chapters of *Moby Dick*, which he had torn out of Melville to reread. We didn't dare throw out any more food; seven days' was not too generous for 4000m of climbing.

In order to avoid the 'wall' that marathon runners hit, we stopped each three hours for a brew of melted ice, and some sweets. After the second brew, the



14. Ultar I: the summit block. (*Crag Jones*) (p49)

moonless night and thin torchlight led us into the wrong couloir. We were forced to retreat from the blank granite wall, abseiling down two pitches before we could regain the correct line. It took us 14 hours in all to reach our intended bivouac site, perched on top of a pocket-sized hanging glacier. The last two hours were a form of purgatory unique to the Himalaya – being caught out in the sun on ice. We had 200m of hard ice to traverse – not steep, but so hard and brittle that only the tips, about a quarter of an inch, of our axes and crampons could penetrate the surface. This was the First Brittle Ice Traverse. It was horribly precarious, and on top of it all was the sun which, being stripped of its protective layer of atmosphere, seemed to consist mainly of harmful rays: ultraviolet rays, infra-red rays, microwave rays, X-rays, cosmic rays, cook-em-alive rays and boil-in-your-skin rays. Under the Geneva Convention, Himalayan climbing would certainly be illegal. It is so hot at these lower altitudes that you have to climb at night until you are over 7000m. And there was another problem with the heat – we couldn't sleep. Baking in the tent, we listened to the mountain around us growling as small icebergs detached themselves, pounding a path to the nearest glacier.

At the Pocket Sized Hanging Glacier we ate one day's hill food and stashed another; not much food either – a small packet of instant mash, a tiny wedge of cheese, a clove of garlic, stock cube and watery drinking chocolate; about 1500 calories in all. It is estimated that climbers consume 8000 calories per day, and we knew from past experience (this proves you never learn from your mistakes) that we would lose about a kilogram in body weight for each day on the hill.

That night we started on the next section of our route, traversing left along the top of our pocket glacier, under 1300m granite cliffs, to a V-shaped icefield guarded at its base by a large bergschrund which had fanglike icicles drooling from its upper lip. Suddenly there was a sound like a Volkswagen Beetle, followed by a dull thud.

'Waaatchout Steve . . . stonefall!'

'I know – let's get on with it,' came the laconic reply out of the darkness. One good thing about fear: my feet, which had been icy cold, were now experiencing a delicious liquid flow of lukewarm blood.

Climbing through the bergschrund required our full concentration. Pitches of steep ice were followed by near vertical sections of heavily verglassed rock. Occasional pebbles or small icicles whistled and tinkled as they missed us in the eerie darkness. We worked in little pools of headtorch light, thinking, 'Now this is why we are really here'. Steep, difficult and mind-absorbing climbing. Problems. How to pass this overhang? How to protect that balancing act? Will a knifeblade in this hairline crack do? A fat nut behind the flake? Our route followed the left fork of the 'V' icefield, always moving left towards the summit. The final pitches of the icefield brought more of that ghastly brittle ice: the Second Brittle Ice Traverse. Again the sun caught us and it also dawned on us that we were tired and lead-limbed. Steve offered me a sweet to raise the blood sugar level. We stopped to contemplate our position.

'Magnificent, Steve, eh?'

'Guess we must be eight or nine thousand feet above the glacier. Can you see which way the route goes?'

Always the same questions: which way and how hard? This time we were too high. The line we had identified through the binoculars was 100m beneath us, and we were faced with a 65m traverse across a steep granite cliff, on the other side of which lay our next objective, the Great Triangular Icefield. The Granite Traverse, in spite of being in the sun, turned out to be a delightful surprise – huge bucket-like holds, and a yawning abyss below our feet sweeping away to the glacier. Rust-red rock, Wedgwood sky, paper-white snow. The climber's version of sunbathing on the Costa Blanca. A Third Brittle Ice Traverse led to a fine bivouac site under a small icecliff on the Great Triangular Icefield. Here we spent the rest of the day hiding from the sun, sleeping-bags draped over the tiny tent to block out the sun's rays.

We were now one night's work from the summit ridge. Our line would follow the Great Triangular Icefield, a feature of about 50 degrees, dotted with icecliffs here and there, to its apex 500m higher. The top of the icefield was connected to the summit ridge by a double-corniced snow crest, about 165m long, leading to 65m of difficult climbing which, in turn, led to a col on the summit ridge at under 7000m. From this col we could see easy snow-slopes to the 7388m summit. We felt optimistic about the weather, which had remained perfect, and about our chances. But our optimism was horribly misplaced. By 11 the next morning we knew our climb was over. Not only that – we would be lucky to make it down alive.

Steve and I had climbed to the end of the Double Corniced Crest, a hateful and difficult section with all the solidity of a haystack on edge, balanced on a skyscraper. Steve was in the lead, on the Fourth Brittle Ice Thing, when I noticed that my left crampon had broken. We had a discussion at rope length, me shouting and Steve hollerin'. We agreed to push on. Within five minutes Steve hollered that his ice-hammer had broken. In all our combined climbing careers, spanning a total of 27 years, neither of us had broken an axe or crampon. Now, within the space of five minutes, we had broken one each. It was unbelievable. We were one day from the summit, after six weeks of effort. The sun shone out of a mockingly blue sky. I could have cried had our situation not been so serious. Now we had to reverse all those Brittle Ice Traverses with broken tools. It took us the rest of the day to struggle back to our last bivouac. I remembered how Stephen Venables had dropped his rucksack, our stove and tent poles at 7450m on Rimo I; now I knew how the poor fellow felt. Devastated. I had caught him jumping up and down, tearing at his hair, and wailing 'Why me? Oh, why me?' And now I felt like doing the same. So did Sustad, which just shows that Norwegian-Americans are not totally devoid of emotion.

We left the bivouac the following evening, having spent the day preparing our abseil equipment, attaching short slings to our ice screws and pegs. We planned to cut ice bollards to save our precious supply of abseil gear. There were 2500m of descent to the glacier to prepare for. 5000m below us flowed the Hunza river, and edging it, like fine purfling, the Karakoram Highway. We waited until dark for the sun to go off the slopes, for the stone and avalanche slopes to refreeze, and possibly because the sight of that long descent was too horrible to contemplate. No moon. Deep, dark night – except for the St Elmo's Fire flickering behind Rakaposhi. On our line of descent we could see nothing. Soot

black. We could have been caving. As I dangled in the middle of our first abseil, there was a sound like a freight train coming out of a tunnel, as a large section of mountainside decided to share our icefield. Spinning round on the abseil ropes, I was utterly bewildered. In the echo of the receding explosions and the sulphurous cordite of the rockfall, I shouted up to Steve that we might live longer if we abseiled down the rocky left side of the icefield, well away from the fall line.

'You're right – if we stay here we are going to maybe die.'

That's an Americanism, the 'maybe die' bit. We had a running battle over language throughout the trip. Usually we reached no firm conclusion.

On the rocky left side, our ropes immediately jammed. It was Steve's turn. With heart in mouth, he pulled tight on the free end; it would not move. He was not tied into the belay – he could not be, since the other end of the rope was somewhere up there in the blackness. He pulled again; there was no movement. I shone my torch at him and he made a face like he had just chewed a lemon.

'I am going to have to pull from higher up . . . I guess it's the knot . . .' I nodded.

'Take care,' I said impotently, making plans to try and grab him should he fall in my general direction. Steve was up there for half-an-hour, while I shivered with cold and neurosis.

'Victor,' came the voice from the dark, 'if the ropes go on jamming like this we are going to definitely die. If we abseil down the middle of the face, we'll only maybe die.'

'Incontrovertible logic,' I said to myself.

In the middle of the icefield there was a waterfall in a large runnel. It reminded me of the monsoon drains we used to have in Malaya – deep concrete channels meant to take away storm water, but which usually lay like mantraps, just under the flood surface. The ropes took the first opportunity of falling into the waterfall and freezing solid, bending at unpredictable angles, and more or less imitating wire hawser. Some hours later – I don't know how many – two abysmal and free-hanging abseils deposited us below the fangs of the bergschrund. We were not far below the Hanging Glacier bivouac, where we stopped for two hours before pushing on to make the most of the night. The imperative was, as always, to make as much ground as possible before the sun made all progress impossibly dangerous. Against that we had to set our growing exhaustion and increasingly dysfunctional limbs.

Steve, with the instinct that marks him out as a real mountaineer and not just a climber, had searched for and seen an abseil that avoided the First Brittle Ice Traverse. It took us past the Pocket Hanging Glacier seracs where the ropes twisted into corkscrews and jammed tight.

'I can't believe these ropes,' said Steve, as I clambered up the free end. 'They are the worst jamming ropes I have ever used . . . they should carry a health warning.'

The sun emerged into an almost clear sky as we reached the 'Z' couloirs. The Hidden Valley was spread out before us like a model landscape. It was incredibly, and compellingly beautiful.

In that moment a realisation dawned on me. We weren't unlucky at all. We

were privileged just to be there. To have attempted two new routes from this valley ... To have explored this unvisited glacier ... My mood suddenly changed from one of deep despair to sheer exultation, helped by the knowledge that we might now survive the descent. I shouted to Steve:

'Hey, Steve ... wouldn't you rather have failed on this route than have succeeded on the Japanese route?' After a moment came the reply:

'Yeah ... every time.'

Summary: In September 1991 a four-man team: Mick Fowler, Crag Jones, Victor Saunders and Steve Sustad, with Kees 't Hooft and Julian Freeman-Attwood filming, aimed to make the first ascent of Ultar I (7388m), the highest peak of the Ultar group in the Karakoram. Fowler and Jones were unsuccessful on the S ridge (a variation of the Hasegawa route). Saunders and Sustad were within 600m of the summit, via the SE face, when a broken crampon and, shortly afterwards, a broken ice-hammer enforced a difficult and dangerous retreat.