Expeditions

Eight Days on Nanga Parbat

DAVE WALSH

(*Plates 4–7*)

My first view of Nanga Parbat came in 1975 during a flight from Islamabad to Skardu. On a beautiful clear day its vast bulk sat majestically on the hot brown earth of northern Pakistan. I recalled the photograph of Hermann Buhl's solitary ice-axe planted on the summit, with his Tyrolean pennant carefully tied to it. I could imagine the despair he must have felt when, on hurrying to descend as far as possible before nightfall, he realised he had left it behind on the summit. Retracing his footsteps in such an exhausted condition was out of the question. It was now simply a matter of surviving the night at over 8000m. Without food or drink and with only the bare minimum of clothing, the prospect of returning to his companions must have seemed a distant hope. Buhl was fortunate, the weather was kind and he did return. The loss of several toes was perhaps an acceptable price to pay for the conquest of Nanga Parbat.

Roger Mear had invited me to join a team of six for an attempt on the NE ridge of Everest planned for the autumn of 1991. When it seemed unlikely that sponsorship would be forthcoming for this very expensive trip, I suggested that we consider a two-man attempt on Nanga Parbat. For a long time I had thought it odd that a mountain with a reputation akin to that of the Eiger should have remained unclimbed by a British team.

Some months later the phone rang: it was Roger to enquire how preparations were going for the trip! Well, the truth was I hadn't done anything. 'I'm planning to reread *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage*,' I replied. I think he got the message and, without appearing too disappointed with my efforts, he set to with his formidable organising energies to get things moving. During the same telephone conversation Roger casually mentioned that he would be getting married two weeks before we were due to leave, but not to worry as he thought Nanga Parbat Base Camp would make the perfect honeymoon location!

We arrived in Islamabad on 17 June, to be met by our agent Nazir Sabir. The following five days were divided between visits to the Ministry of Tourism for lengthy briefings, meetings with our liaison officer, hiring a cook and his assistant, and negotiating the labyrinth of the Rawalpindi bazaar in search of items of food and kitchen equipment. We were joined in Rawalpindi by Ian Hilton and Kevin Higgins who were to be our two companions during the first part of the trip. They had contributed towards the costs in return for some climbing from our Base Camp. This arrangement suited Roger and me, as we anticipated several weeks of acclimatisation before we could attempt a quick ascent of the peak.

I should say, at this point, that we had made no definite decision about our route. Yes, we did have permission for the Messner route but also considered



4. Nanga Parbat: Dave Walsh on the summit couloir. (*Roger Mear*) (p9)



5. View from Camp 4. (*Dave Walsh*) (p9)

the Mummery rib, along with the Kinshofer route, as other possibilities. The only approach we had totally discounted was that of the first ascent, with its nine miles from Base Camp to summit and a well founded reputation for avalanche danger.

For the 15-hour drive from Rawalpindi to Bunar we hired a private bus, leaving at 4am in order to arrive at Chilas (where we would spend the night) at a reasonable hour. After a short drive to Bunar the following morning we were met by what resembled a posse gathering prior to a hanging. These were our porters. An alarming proportion of them were armed to the teeth with an assortment of rifles, guns, revolvers and sometimes all three. We had been forewarned that porters from this valley were a law unto themselves and were unlikely to accept the government's agreed daily rate of 140 rupees. Our bargaining hand looked decidedly weak. During the inevitable and protracted negotiations amongst rival villagers we carefully distanced ourselves from the general mêlée, seeking out a shady spot where we could escape both the heat of the day and that of the discussion.

Eventually loads were selected and carried, either by porters or donkeys, on the four-day walk to Base Camp situated on the N bank of the Diamir glacier at 4200m. Although perhaps a little lower than we would have liked, it did have grass and a plentiful supply of running water. From our tents we had a clear view of the entire W face of Nanga Parbat and we were able to pick out both the Messner and the Kinshofer routes. These two were split by the line of the unclimbed Mummery rib. During the next three weeks we spent many hours examining every detail of this enormous face.

It soon became obvious that to attempt the Messner route would require an inordinate amount of good fortune. Whilst it looked to be a technically straightforward line, it had, in our view, an unacceptable degree of avalanche risk. This was borne out as we witnessed dozens of avalanches crashing down the route at all times of the day and night.

The weather seemed to be falling into a regular pattern of four good days followed by two bad ones. During the bad days we were all prone to bouts of 'mountaineer's back', an affliction equivalent to Tilman's 'mountaineer's foot', which causes the sufferer to lie in a supine position for hours at a time, only interrupted by calls of nature and to stock up with food supplies that can be eaten in the same posture.

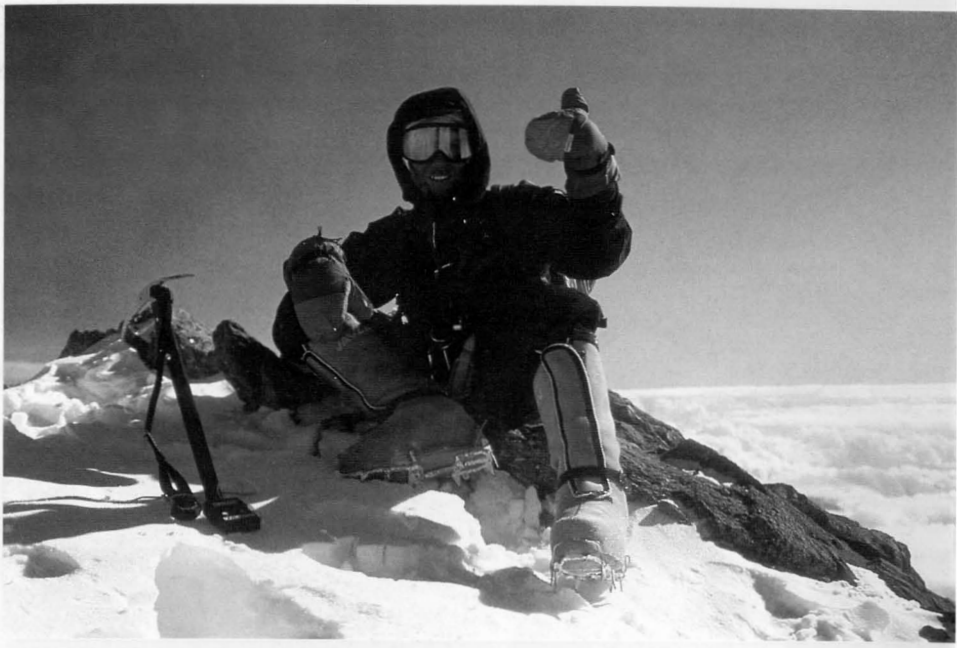
Our preoccupation with this condition was suddenly jolted, literally, into a rapid attempt to gain the vertical, in my case bringing about an attack of light-headedness, by what sounded like an exceptionally large avalanche. Having arrived in a kneeling position, I looked hopefully around the tent for something to hang on to. I should have noticed before now that tents don't have grab rails. Suddenly I heard someone shout 'earthquake!' Seeing a whole Himalayan valley shaking for what must only have been seven or eight seconds was a very sobering experience. Immediately, avalanches began pouring from the faces high above our camp. Unfortunately the cloud base was only just above us, so that we only saw the aftermath of what would have presented quite a spectacle. The earthquake provided the catalyst for us all to gather around a brew of tea in the cook tent and while away the remainder of the day theorising as to its position on the Richter scale.

We had now been at Base Camp for almost three weeks. Having climbed several minor peaks, watched very carefully for any activity taking place on the Diamir face, and discussed our options at length, we felt the time was right. The weather pattern was such that breaks in the good spells did not seem to last for more than two or three days. We decided on the Kinshofer route via the direct finish, first climbed in 1962. In 1961 Kinshofer's party had approached the summit from the Bazhin gap, following the last section of Buhl's route. They were turned back by heavy snowfall. It was to be the following year before Kinshofer and his two companions, Low and Mannhardt, were to reach the summit, so completing the second ascent – nine years after Buhl. They too had to face a fight with the mountain. In rapidly deteriorating weather, they were forced to bivouac on the way down. Low fell and died from his injuries, while Kinshofer and Mannhardt suffered severe frost-bite.

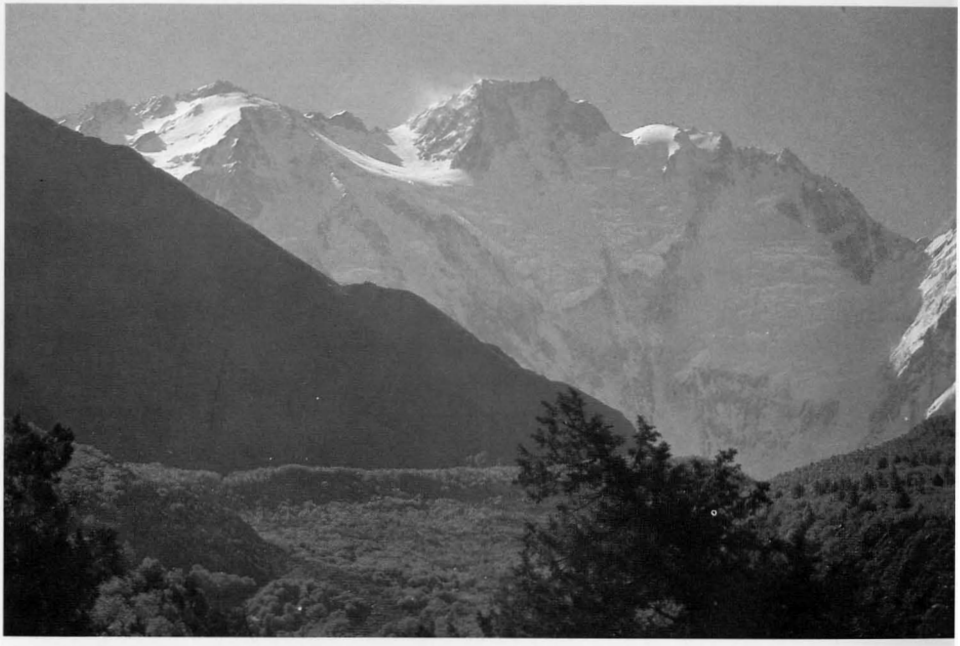
By now we both felt moderately fit, well fed, and fairly confident that we could be up and down within eight days. Roger is a meticulous planner of such things: working out our calorie intake, paring down the weight to the last ounce, and calculating the amount of fuel (gas) to the last therm were all grist to his mill. Meanwhile I busied myself with fine tuning items of personal kit: making sure that all zips could be operated with gloves on, that gloves were fitted with wrist loops, that lighters could be hung around one's neck. Crampons were resharpened, straps on rucksacks cut to a sensible length – the list went on and on. All items to be carried were discussed, handled, weighed, taken or abandoned. Roger's wife Ghazala, who is a doctor, put together a medical kit and carefully explained how and when to use the various coloured pills. On the day before leaving Base Camp there was the ritual of packing our sacks; they weighed in at 30 kilos.

The next day, in good weather and with over 4000m of climbing ahead, we set off. It was around midday. Ghazala had offered to come some of the way with us to help carry our load and also, I suspect, to delay leaving Roger until the last possible moment. Our plan was to camp at the beginning of the large couloir that forms the logical breach of the W face. From this camp we planned to continue each day, climbing as much as we could manage before pitching our little tent. The couloir had been subjected to an unremitting bout of siege tactics from a group of 20 Koreans, who had been at it for over three weeks and had still not reached its end. In four hours or so we were camped just below their Advanced Base Camp. We chose to camp some distance away from them to avoid the awful mess which had accumulated around their tents. Roger returned with Ghazala until she was safely across the glacier, while I put up the tent and made some tea.

We were away by 6am next morning and were soon giving the debris from the Korean camp a wide berth. As there was no sign of life from their tents, we set off following a line of fixed rope, much of it belonging to the Koreans, with an equal amount dating from the first ascent and presumably a number of subsequent ones. We had not intended using fixed rope so did not carry ascenders, but we weren't intending to look a gift horse in the mouth either, so we soloed alongside, clipped on by a short sling. The couloir is 1000m long, ending at a narrow col. To the left of this col an improbable looking rock



6. Dave Walsh on the summit of Nanga Parbat. (*Roger Mear*) (p9)



7. Nanga Parbat, 8125m: Diamir Face. (*Dave Walsh*) (p9)

buttress is the key to gaining the upper icefield. The rock band is festooned with old rope, wire cable (from the first ascent), and even caving ladders. We would deal with all that in the morning – it was now after 3pm and we had both had enough for the day. But where to camp? We climbed on towards the band of rock, convinced that we would find a ledge big enough to pitch our little tent. No such luck. Everything sloped alarmingly. We were faced with a construction job that took a full two hours to complete. Made of compacted snow, the platform was barely the size of the tent, which we secured to the rock with rope.

Small tents have the obvious advantage of being light to carry but present some annoying problems for sleeping in. On average, 12 to 14 hours may be spent in the tent each night. Even sleeping head to foot, space is at a premium. The problem is even worse when you try to cook in the tent, and careful coordination is necessary to avoid disasters with stoves and pans of water. We both had difficulty in sleeping in such a confined space. We aimed to be away at first light each morning. One of us would light the stove and make a hot drink which would assist the swallowing of a couple of oatmeal biscuits. While this was going on, the other, usually me, would lay still, feigning sleep, until the other had dressed. Each night saw an improvement in our efficiency at getting into and out of sleeping-bags. We simply took less off! I think on one occasion the only kit I took off were crampons and goggles.

Day two dawned fine. We were ready to do battle with the rock band. There were several choices of route here and we chose the one with the most old rope and ladders dangling from it. Roger took off his crampons; I didn't and spent an entertaining hour or so trying to flick sections of old caving ladder off my feet while pulling on the ragged ends of some very bleached ropes. Climbing the rock free would have been alpine grade V, we reckoned. However, at over 6500m, carrying a 50lb sack, the joys of free climbing were a distant memory. Panting with the effort, I emerged at the top onto a mixed ridge. On my left stood a 10ft steel tripod, probably used on the first ascent to accommodate a wire cable for hauling gear over the rock band. Roger arrived making some forthright comments about the condition of the ropes we had been shinning up. My own method was to grasp as many strands as I could, hoping they were not all attached to the same 30-year-old peg.

We climbed for another four hours on steep broken ground, followed by a pleasant snow ridge at about 40 degrees. Again we were disappointed to arrive at what looked, from below, like a good ledge for siting the tent, only to discover that it sloped at 20 to 30 degrees. There was nothing for it but to start cutting out another ledge. This work took at least two hours, owing to the hard ice under four or five inches of powder snow. We were both anxious to get into sleeping-bags and rehydrate with vast quantities of tea.

Talking quietly of climbs, mutual friends, food and rarely of what we were doing on the mountain, we would drift in and out of sleep. The next day dawned cloudy with a hint of snow in the air. Ahead lay an ice-slope of some 50 degrees. Metal stakes and the occasional strands of rope emerged from beneath the ice. We were reminded of the altitude as soon as we began front-pointing. Leading for three pitches before swapping over the lead, calf muscles screamed, crying out for more oxygen. If only we could get off our front points, but to do this

meant hacking out a step in blue ice and wasting rapidly diminishing reserves of energy. We pushed on each time for our allotted 50m, placed an ice screw, then sorted out a comfortable position before taking in the rope.

It was now snowing hard, with visibility down to 30m, and we had pitched 14 rope-lengths before the angle eased and we could contemplate looking for somewhere to stop. Soon we saw an abandoned campsite and thoughts of a ready-made site filled our minds. These hopes were dashed as we arrived to find a wreck of a tent filled with ice; and it occupied the only ledge we had seen all day. We flattened what remained of the tent and pitched ours on top of it, hesitating momentarily when we realised that neither of us had checked if there was a body buried inside it.

On day four we could move together and made a long rightwards traverse to gain the Bazhin glacier. Here the glacier gently undulates and would have been almost pleasant under more favourable conditions. But now we were breaking through windslab. A spot on the glacier was agreed upon for our next camp and, with no technicalities to worry about, we set off, alternating the tedious task of trailbreaking. Arriving about midday we were relieved that this time there was only soft snow and not ice to clear for the tent.

By the evening of day five we had passed beneath the Bazhin gap and traversed the base of the summit ridge, still 1000m above us. We camped at 7700m; yet another awful site for a tent, and it was almost three hours before we were both inside and melting snow for much needed drinks. Roger was managing to force down some food, while I made do with mint cake washed down with lots of tea. Tomorrow was going to be a big day, with over 1000m of ascent: almost double that of our best day since leaving Camp 2. We lay down to rest; neither of us slept very much.

Roger started the stove at 2am. By 4am we were having serious doubts about setting off. We were enveloped in cloud and it was snowing. Roger suggested giving it a go until nine o'clock by which time the decision might have been made for us. We stumbled off in the dark, heading in the general direction of the summit couloir. Immediately we were floundering in deep snow. Wading up to your thighs while heading for Point Five gully on the Ben may not be enjoyable, but it is short-lived; here, at nearly 8000m with another 500m to go, morale was at a low ebb. We had pared our equipment to the bare minimum: half a bottle of water, some chocolate and mint cake, and one bivvy bag. We wore all our spare clothing.

Nine o'clock came. Neither of us spoke. Following in Roger's footsteps was quite relaxing. Secretly hoping he would forget to call me through for my spell at trailbreaking, I concentrated on placing my feet carefully in his footsteps. He stepped out of his tracks to let me through; I thanked him and continued with no great enthusiasm. Ten o'clock arrived and we agreed to go on as long as we felt in control. But how would we know we were still in control? If only we could see where we were in relation to the couloir! At midday we emerged from the cloud into a world of deep blue skies and glittering snows, contrasting with the soft gold-coloured rock bounding the couloir. Surely we could make it now. We agreed to turn back at 5pm whether we reached the summit or not. We had on all our clothing, which was only just warm enough on the move; a forced bivouac was not an option we cared to think about.

Although we were very tired, the nearness of the summit injected extra life into our tired limbs. At last, 100m below the summit, we were able to traverse off the tiresome snow and onto the wonderfully sound rock – no more breaking through the weak crust that had formed in the upper part of the couloir. Twenty minutes later we were shaking hands on a perfect summit. It was 4.15pm, Sunday, 21 July 1991.

Three rock pegs, forming a triangle, had been hammered into a slab of rock, presumably to support some flag or other. The Rupal Face plunged dramatically away beneath our feet. Hermann Buhl's ridge, the N ridge, snaked away into the distance, eventually disappearing into the endless sea of cloud that lay beneath us. Buhl had arrived on the summit at 7pm, three hours later than we had and with an appalling distance to return to his last camp. Providing we could locate our camp, we should be down in two or three hours. Reluctantly we turned our backs on the summit, resisting the urge to linger and witness the magically changing colours of sunset. Our tracks had gone. Using the altimeter to avoid descending too far, we arrived at the tent in a little over two hours.

I brewed some tea, fighting the urge to sleep. Roger had already succumbed and lay, in a mound of down, pressed against the wall of the tent. Two days later we were walking into Base Camp for a pre-arranged meal of egg and chips and more egg and chips, followed by sleep and more sleep.

Summary: On 21 July 1991 Dave Walsh and Roger Mear made the first British ascent of Nanga Parbat, 8125m, by the Kinshofer route on the Diamir Face, via the direct finish. After three weeks' acclimatising, they made a lightweight assault over eight days, taking with them 30 kilos of equipment each, including a small tent. On day six they set out at 4am to cover the final 1000m of ascent, reaching the summit at 4.15pm. They took a further two days to descend to Base Camp.