
ROGER PAYNE

Summer on the Savage Mountain

(Plates 27-30 and front cover)

Our small expedition to K2 was the culmination of a two-year project that combined industry, development and mountaineering. With support from Eastern Electricity the expedition oversaw the installation of micro hydroelectricity systems in two mountain villages on the approach to the Baltoro glacier. The hydro systems were requested by the villages; they work with the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) which is a development charity. The technology is simple and manufactured locally (these types of schemes have been developed by Intermediate Technology). The villagers provided the necessary labour, and the turbines and generators were installed by AKRSP Engineers who received special training and assistance from Eastern. Our job was to liaise with the different interested parties and to try and resolve any local problems that might arise.

Our journey to K2 was punctuated by stops related to the development objectives. At Skardu we met AKRSP Officers and toured current initiatives. At Shigar our expedition doctor, Caroline Williams, visited the small but very busy hospital and delivered a donation of medical supplies. We stopped at Mango to inspect progress on the new micro hydroelectricity scheme and at Hoto to check that the installation carried out in 1992, as part of the project, was in good order. Progress at Mango was very good and the Hoto scheme was running as expected. Valuable discussions took place at both villages with village leaders and AKRSP representatives.

We arrived at Base Camp on 29 June, which coincided with a period of weather and conditions that were about as perfect as it is possible to get. After only eight days of our lightweight attempt on the Abruzzi Spur of K2, Alan Hinkes, Victor Saunders, Julie-Ann Clyma and I had already established Advanced Base and two camps on the ridge itself (at c6150m and 6800m): we were fit and acclimatising fast. The climbing to this point was interesting throughout, with quite a lot of mixed ground and the difficult House's Chimney leading to Camp 2.

On the last and probably the best day of this fine spell three members of an American/Canadian expedition reached the summit. During their descent one of the summit climbers tripped and lost control in the Bottleneck; moments later he was tumbling out of control down the S face. This was the second of five fatalities on K2 during the summer of 1993. The other members of the team arrived back at their high camp on the Shoulder (c8000m) in strengthening winds and poor visibility. From



27. Avalanche on the S face of K2. (*Roger Payne*) (p54)

Camp 2 Julie-Ann and I watched a wall of black cloud engulf the southern horizon and then the peaks near us. The Americans had to draw on all their strength and experience to descend in deteriorating conditions.

The summer's first fatality was a 35-year-old mountaineering instructor from Slovenia. His expedition had made very rapid progress on the mountain. Only 21 days after setting up Base Camp four members of the expedition reached the summit ridge in bad weather on 13 June. During the descent, in which one member almost failed to relocate Camp 4, three suffered serious frostbite and one succumbed to oedema.

Until the beginning of 1993 only 78 individuals had recorded ascents of K2 by one of the seven routes that lead to its summit. In 1986 Julie Tullis and Alan Rouse reached the summit but – in a year that claimed the lives of 13 climbers on the slopes of K2 – they both perished at Camp 4 on the Shoulder having been trapped by a ferocious storm. Despite almost 30 attempts since 1986, there had been no ascents of the Abruzzi Spur during the intervening years.

Throughout mid-July the weather was very unsettled with almost daily snowfall. Strong winds roared on K2. The summer seemed to be following the same pattern as in 1992 when our plans for a new route on the SW face of Broad Peak were thwarted by midsummer storms bringing high levels of precipitation, with rain at Base Camp and avalanche conditions up high. However, there were still three other expeditions trying for success on the Abruzzi and, like them, we tried to make progress with optimistic forays onto the spur.

It was not until 21 July that it was possible to pass our previous high point of the 7th when Julie-Ann and I climbed above the Black Pyramid and left a dump of equipment and food just below Camp 3. This section of the climb has several steep steps and the Black Pyramid itself was compact slabs littered with very old fixed ropes.

Ideally, five days is the minimum amount of good weather necessary for a summit bid: four to get to the top and back to Camp 4 and then, crucially, a fifth to find the way down to Camp 3. As over half of the previous ascents of K2 had been in the early part of August we were confident we would soon be making final preparations for our own summit attempt.

Another period of bad weather followed, with very strong westerly winds that accelerated between K2 and Broad Peak North. Although the weather was far from perfect, on the 27th we were moving again. Members of the German and Swedish expeditions had set off before us to discover that for the third time tents at Camp 2 had been seriously damaged by the wind. One of the Swedish tents and all its contents had simply been blown off the mountain. They contacted us by radio and we gave them permission to use our tents that had stood firm during the storms. Despite strong winds and poor visibility on the 30th we all ascended the Black Pyramid and crossed the sérac band to reach the site of Camp 3 and the snow slopes leading to the Shoulder. We arrived in the afternoon and started to dig a snow cave, just big enough for four, by 10pm. But a Swedish



28. Julie-Ann Clyma climbing up to Camp 1 on the Abruzzi Spur.
(Roger Payne) (p54)



29. Roger Payne climbing on mixed ground between Camp 1 and Camp 2.
(Julie-Ann Clyma) (p54)



30. Julie-Ann Clyma at 7000m on the Abruzzi Spur. (Roger Payne) (p54)

climber, who had been unable to locate his team's camp, and a member of the Dutch International team without bivouac equipment, sought shelter in our snow cave. Hence, Alan and Victor spent the night in their Camp 4 bivvy tent.

Next morning our radio contact with Base Camp revealed that from the German and Swedish teams ahead of us, six climbers had reached the summit the previous day. Three members had died during the descent. Alan and Victor started to move up the wide snow slopes above to the site of Camp 4, but stopped at c7700m to assist the surviving member of the Swedish summit team who was frostbitten and exhausted. They brought him down to Camp 3 and then descended back to Base Camp. He was physically and emotionally drained. He had spent the whole of the previous night trying to get his team mate down from the summit. By morning when his own life was in serious danger he left his partner who was suffering from cerebral oedema.

Overnight Julie-Ann and I looked after the exhausted climber at Camp 3, and next day (1 August) we lowered him down the mountain. Visibility was poor and very strong winds again battered the Abruzzi Spur. There was a heart-stopping moment when one of the old fixed ropes on a steep section of the Black Pyramid broke while the injured climber and I were simultaneously abseiling. Fortunately some quick footwork meant a serious fall was just avoided. After 13 hours' continuous effort Advanced Base Camp and other members of the Swedish expedition were reached without further incident.

After the rescue and helicopter evacuation of the Swedish team member there followed a long spell of continuous bad weather. During this period two very unusual discoveries were made. Almost exactly 40 years after the epic descent of the Abruzzi Spur, during which American climber Art Gilkey was swept away in an avalanche, some of his remains appeared on the glacier only 400m from Base Camp.

The eight members of the 1953 expedition had spent ten days at their Camp 8 (7700m) in bad weather and Gilkey had developed thrombophlebitis. They lowered Gilkey down in a storm and at one point one man fell and pulled five others off. Incredibly, various ropes became entangled and Pete Schoening held them all on one belay. Gilkey was left belayed to two ice axes while tent platforms were dug for the night. When they went back to move Gilkey he had disappeared, apparently having been swept away in an avalanche. It seemed imperative that we should try and make contact with the members of the 1953 team and, through them, any surviving relatives, to ensure that the remains were disposed of in accordance with their wishes. Next day a few remains of a very small Asian person were found. We speculated that these were probably one of the three brave Sherpas who had died trying to save Dudley Wolfe who became stranded high on K2 in 1939. After our return it was established that these were almost certainly the remains of Sherpa Pasang Kitar.

The 1st to the 13th of August, our planned summit attempt period, brought the longest spell of unsettled weather of the whole trip. Each day

the snow continued to fall and as the winds raged up high it seemed less and less likely that we would ever get back on K2. However, on the afternoon and evening of the 13th, the weather did appear to clear, the pressure started to rise and we returned to Advanced Base Camp. The following morning everyone moved up to Camp 1, but by 7am we could see that the weather was closing in again rapidly. Victor moved on up to Camp 2 that afternoon, but the rest of us stayed at Camp 1 for the night. On the 15th we were all together at Camp 2, but we became trapped there in continuous bad weather with very strong winds. Each evening the clouds would part for half an hour or so, raising our hopes for the next day; but each night the wind roared and whipped fresh snow around the ridge to reveal another day of continuing storm.

Finally on 19 August, in just marginally improved conditions, we moved up to Camp 3. Although in strong wind and cloud it was a joy to be moving again on the Black Pyramid. However, despite our down suits the cold was penetrating. On the slopes above the sérac band we found thigh-deep snow. Climbing to the site of Camp 3, only a few inches of our 15ft marker wand indicating the entrance to our snow cave was visible; a blanket of at least six feet of fresh snow covered the entrance. We dug out the cave only to discover that the roof had collapsed. With darkness approaching and the prospect of climbing above on avalanche-laden slopes it was decided to retrieve our gear and descend. We reached Camp 2 at 10pm that night and spent all of the day of the 20th clearing the mountain to reach Base Camp at 7pm. We did not fix any rope on K2 and, along with rubbish from other teams, we cleared all our equipment and rubbish from the mountain and Base Camp. Our porters had already arrived and so we were up again at 4am on the 21st to pack our loads and start the walk-out.

During the day of our departure huge avalanches swept both the S face and Abruzzi Spur of K2. The walk-out was concluded with a visit to Mango where the new hydroelectricity scheme was in full working order and greatly appreciated by the locals.

Obviously it was a great disappointment that none of us reached the top of K2. Unfortunately the expedition was plagued by bad weather associated with the worst monsoon on the Indian subcontinent in 50 years. However, we had an enjoyable time, worked together very well and showed that a lightweight approach to climbing on the world's second highest mountain can work. Through our development project during the summer of 1993, a sustainable and positive impact was made on the mountain environment.

Summary: Prolonged bad weather thwarted the efforts of the 1993 British K2 Expedition to reach the summit via the Abruzzi Spur. However, in a summer which saw five fatal accidents on K2, the team suffered no injuries or illness and rescued an injured climber from high on the mountain. The expedition also oversaw the installation of two micro hydroelectricity schemes in villages on the approach to Base Camp.

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Jacket photographs:

front, K2 from the Godwin Austen glacier (Roger Payne);
back, the Croz Spur of the Grandes Jorasses, soloed by
Alison Hargreaves on 10 November 1993 (Dave Sharrock).

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