Expeditions

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Hidden Peak 1994 & Makalu 1995

Two First British Ascents

(Plates 19–28)

1. The Five Nations Hidden Peak Expedition 1994

You often hear mountaineers complain that the trouble with Himalayan expeditions is that so little of the time is spent actually climbing. That was true of our expedition to Hidden Peak (Gasherbrum I) in July-August 1994. However, we spent few days climbing because we reached the summit so quickly, which is hardly cause for complaint, and what happened during the rest of the trip was equally interesting. Our expedition consisted of climbers and trekkers assembled from five countries: Britain, America, France, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Few of us had met before, but the difficult journey to Base Camp welded us into a cheerful group.

A few years before, I had hiked into Everest with Peter Schoening. I had been interested to hear of his exploits on K2, but what he felt was his greatest accomplishment in the Karakoram was his first ascent, with Andrew Kauffman, of Hidden Peak in 1958. Hearing his enthusiasm for it, I thought I must find out more about this little-known peak. Despite its few ascents (only 24) Hidden Peak has had some notable climbs and descents: such as Messner and Habeler's ground-breaking Alpine-style ascent in 1975, and the first ski descent of an 8000-metre peak when, in 1982, the Frenchman, Sylvain Saudan, skied the original 1958 American route. Since then, the Indian army had moved up the Siachen glacier to the Conway Saddle, just across from Hidden Peak. The Pakistanis did not know the Indians were there until an expedition on Hidden Peak reported someone shelling their camp. As the American route is opposite the Saddle where the Indians and Pakistanis are still entrenched, there have been no takers for a route with more than its share of objective danger. We had to look for an alternative route on the other side of the mountain, and we hoped to find something on the North Face.

Arriving in Base Camp, Scott Barylski and Becky Oleszewski, two of the Americans, surprised us all by declaring that they wished to get married – which they duly did in a ceremony involving the whole team. The bride, wearing a white dress specially made in Rawalpindi, was given away by our sirdar, Mohammed Hussain, while Akmad Lou, our cook, acted as

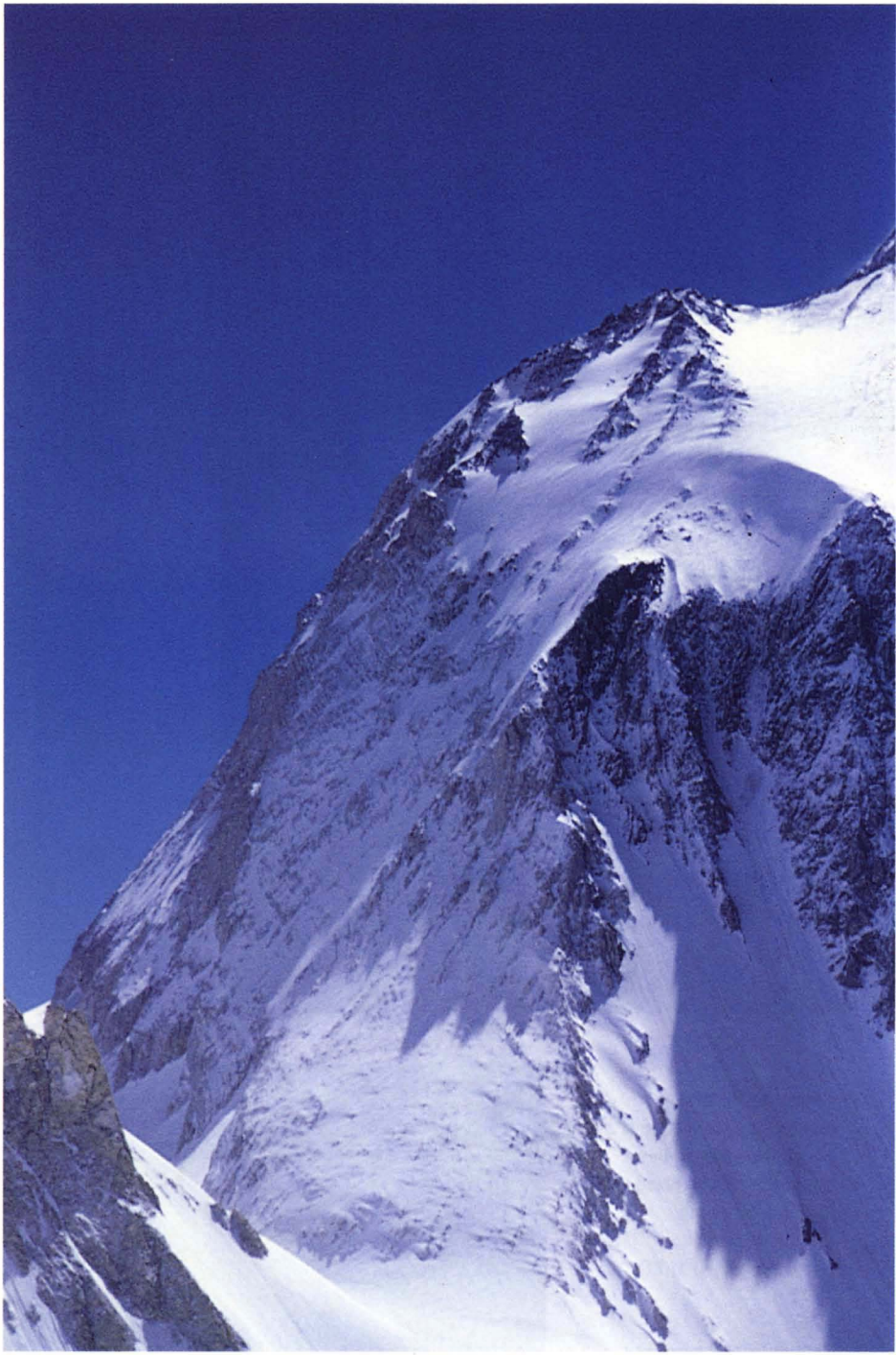
best man. The champagne, originally intended for the summit celebrations, was served on this more important occasion, which was followed by a lively party with plenty of dancing, Balti style, as all our porters insisted on at least one dance with the bride.

After such a start it was only fitting that we should have a prolonged spell of good weather, and in just a few days we had established a camp at 6600m, on the col between Hidden Peak and Gasherbrum II. From Base Camp the route started out through a complex icefall that led up to the Gasherbrum glacier. Fortunately a line through the icefall had already been worked out by the expeditions on Gasherbrum II. At the top of the icefall the two routes parted and we headed off alone around Hidden Peak. We had to negotiate a second icefall up to the col but we found a straightforward and safe route through it. From the col, Markus StAehelin, Jean-Michael Meunier and I explored a route up the North Face to about 7000m. We found a route to the small plateau at 7100m but the rock was incredibly friable and loose. Normally much of this rock would be cemented in or covered by snow and ice, but as it had been such a dry year much of it was exposed, making the face far more dangerous and difficult than usual. We therefore abandoned this route and decided to continue via the North Couloir, a route with a history of fatal avalanches, but in this dry year it was a safe and logical line. This has become known as the standard route, even though it was the last of Hidden Peak's eleven routes to be climbed and had only had three ascents previously.

During a rest in Base Camp, Markus StAehelin hiked round to K2 to make a phone call home. He was shocked to discover that his girlfriend was pregnant, which understandably kept him on the phone longer than anticipated and left him with a $600 phone bill. Having already consumed all the champagne, we could only celebrate by climbing to the summit.

In all, six of us reached the top of Hidden Peak: Markus StAehelin, Frank Levy, Jean-Michael Meunier and myself on 4 August; and Daniel Mazur and Andy Collins on 12 August.

While Dan and Andy were on the summit, a climber from the Bosnian Gasherbrum 2 expedition collapsed when he suffered an embolism. As another party, camped 100yds from the stricken climber, refused to help, Markus, Frank and I climbed for seven hours throughout the night to find him, still alive but unconscious, at the foot of Gasherbrum 2. We had brought with us a stretcher, fashioned from a plastic barrel, into which we securely strapped the stricken climber. With the help of the victim's companion, we hauled him across the crevassed glacier and down through the icefall, often having to manhandle the stretcher across wide crevasses with a mixture of deft rope work and brute force. In the icefall we were joined by the rest of the Bosnian team and by 5am the three of us passed the injured man over to his team mates, who dragged him across the last part of the glacier to their Base Camp. Already he was showing signs of recovery, and by 10am he was on a helicopter back to hospital in Islamabad.



19. Hidden Peak (Gasherbrum I), 8068m: the section of the route between the col at 6500m (Camp 2) and the high camp at 7500m on the shoulder (*upper R*). (*Daniel Mazur*) (p61)

'Which was more satisfying,' I asked Frank, 'climbing an 8000-metre peak or saving a life?' I could tell from the wide grin on his face that he felt the same as I did.

However, we still had one more adventure ahead of us before we would reach home. On the walk-out we had to cross the Gondogoro Pass. It was a long trek that day, and as their food and shelter were on the other side of the pass, our porters were determined to get across before nightfall. When I got to the pass I could see that Chris Reijmer and our liaison officer Captain Khyam were tired from the arduous walk and lagging a long way behind. It was clear they would arrive too late to go over the pass that day, but the porters and other expedition members had already started climbing the pass. I made arrangements, therefore, for Chris and Khyam to stay with a trekking group camped before the pass, and hurried after the porters. It soon became clear that there was no way the porters were going to turn back, but I did manage to get Haji Ali, the sirdar, and Rosi to go back with some food and sleeping-bags. When Captain Khyam arrived at the trekkers' camp, the rest of our expedition was already over the pass and it was getting late. However, the Captain ordered Haji Ali and Rosi to accompany him over the pass. They refused and tried to persuade him to stay with the trekkers, but he insisted on continuing over the pass alone and at night. It was not until the next day that we realised he was missing, and our search of the area revealed no sign of him. It was with some trepidation that we arrived back in Skardu, minus our liaison officer and fearing the worst.

At army HQ, the Brigadier considered the evidence, declared that he was sure the Captain must have fallen into a crevasse and therefore there was nothing to be done. The next day he showed up. Naturally there were investigations and enquiries; nevertheless, when I left Pakistan I was assured by the Ministry of Tourism that no action would be taken against us and that we would not be blamed for what had happened.

Epilogue: In December I received a letter from the Ministry of Tourism: all members of the expedition were banned from climbing in Pakistan for four years. Scott and Becky made their marriage legal on returning to America. Markus became the father of a baby boy in March 1995. Tragically, Frank Levy was killed in a climbing accident in July 1995.

2. The International Makalu Expedition 1995

This expedition was a large affair with a complement of 35 members from six countries. It consisted of a climbing team and three separate trekking parties, so, although the Makalu area was nearly deserted last year, there was never a shortage of company. Our goal was the South-East Ridge, one of the longest routes in the Himalaya, and previously only climbed with oxygen and high-altitude porters. Also, Makalu was the last of the 8000-metre peaks not to have had a British ascent.



20. Hidden Peak (Gasherbrum I). The route to the summit follows the skyline ridge from the high camp on the flat area (*lower L*) at 7500m. (*Daniel Mazur*) (p61)



21. The view from the summit. *Peaks from L of centre* Gasherbrum IV, Gasherbrum II, Gasherbrum III and (*R of centre*) K2. (*Daniel Mazur*) (p61)

The expedition arrived in Kathmandu on 21 August. All the formalities were taken care of as smoothly as can be expected, and we were able to fly to Tumlingtar, and the start of the trek, on 23 August. We had been warned that the walk-in was one of the most unpleasant treks in the Himalaya, with monsoon rains, leeches, and stifling heat – and so it proved to be. One of the advantages of expecting the worst, however, is that it never turns out to be quite as bad as you had feared. We were wearied by the hard trek but our spirits were lifted by the unexpected sunny day on the Shipton pass which gave us a tantalising view of the East Face of Makalu. We reached the mountain on 3 September and set up Base Camp on a grassy knoll at 4800m; a marvellous site with an imposing view of the South Face.

Blocking our path to the South East Ridge was a menacing-looking icefall leading up to a col at 6600m on the ridge. Recent expeditions had by-passed this by climbing either to the left or to the right of it, but both these alternatives looked tediously long, so we opted instead to tackle a line through the middle of the icefall.

A couple of days' reconnaissance showed that a direct line was feasible and, after several days work, we found a suitable route through the maze of crevasses and séracs. A narrow slot, some ten metres deep, that cut through the séracs proved to be the key to the route, while at the top of the icefall we had to climb two 30m ice walls to gain access to the glacier above at 5300m.

Continuous fog and snow rendered route-finding very haphazard, and we experienced a lot of difficulty tracing a reliable route across the heavily crevassed glacier. We were still struggling to find a way to Camp 1 when it was time for our trekkers to leave. Their departure was an embarrassing reminder of our slow progress; in their ten-day stay they had reached a higher altitude hiking up the grassy slopes surrounding Base Camp than we had achieved on the mountain.

Fortunately, a short time later, we managed to put in Camp 1 at about 6000m and, not long after that, a higher camp was established on the col at 6600m. Nearly all of the team were involved in the route-finding, although my own part was rather limited as I was having a hard time acclimatising.

Dan Mazur and Scott Lewallen attempted to climb the South East Ridge and reach the Black Gendarme (a prominent point at 7800m), but they made little progress against the strong winds and deep snow. It was clear that any attempt to climb above the col before the end of the monsoon would be futile.

It was now mid-September and the monsoon should have been over; instead, every day brought fresh snow and strong winds. During the next two weeks we made several forays back to the col, but there was really little point in our efforts and nothing was achieved.

By October the monsoon was still with us, and all we could do was look up at the snow and cloud swirling around the mountain. Our patience was wearing perilously thin.



22. The 1995 International Makalu Expedition. Makalu, 8463m, from the south. The SE Ridge is the right-hand skyline. (*Jonathan Pratt*) (p63)



23. The slot which was the key to the ice-fall at 5100m. (*Jonathan Pratt*) (p63)



24. Andrew Collins on the SE Ridge at 7700m. (*Jonathan Pratt*) (p63)

A sunny morning saw us all rushing back on the mountain for one last effort. But two days later, as we dug out the wreckage of Camp 2, the weather was as bad as ever. Spending several days waiting in wind-battered tents, our spirits sank as we tried to come to terms with failure. For me, it was not just the thought of failing to reach the summit that I found so exasperating, but failing so low on the mountain. It seemed all was over when Alex McNab concluded that there was no point in continuing and headed down. We were all tempted to follow him, but fortunately some of us held out a little longer: we were to be amply rewarded.

On 6 October conditions improved noticeably, so five of us set off for the summit, still two miles horizontally and 2000m vertically ahead of us. After wading through deep snow to 7000m, Andrew Lafferty realised he was not sufficiently acclimatised for such a long outing and decided to descend. The rest of us had similar apprehensions but, as it looked like now or never, we opted to continue and hope for the best.

That left four of us to carry on. We climbed as two ropes: Dan Mazur paired up with Alexi Nikiforov, and I teamed up with Andy Collins. We had all climbed together before on high peaks, and the confidence we had in each other, along with the calm weather, gave us a feeling of optimism.

We climbed on the South East Face, aiming to connect with the ridge at 7300m. We had expected some difficult technical climbing below the ridge, but it proved to be well within our capabilities and we reached the ridge that afternoon. Here the only site for a camp was in an alarmingly exposed position. We were only too well aware that only a couple of days before we would have been blown off the mountain; however, it turned out to be a calm night which did wonders to boost our confidence.

The ridge was far broader than we had imagined, and the Black Gendarme now appeared well within range. However, several hours of exhausting effort in the ever-thinning air were necessary before we reached the rocky spires at the base of the Gendarme. By then the ridge had narrowed into a delicate, sharp-edged fin which demanded our complete concentration.

But now we could see a way down into the Eastern Cwm on the other side of the ridge. This would provide a far simpler alternative to following the ridge itself. When Doug Scott had been on this route, his team had experienced great difficulty dragging themselves out of the Cwm after spending so much time at altitude. With this in mind we had brought some fixed line to help get ourselves out of the Cwm but, with some relief, we found that we had only to drop about fifty metres before we were able to traverse below the crest of the ridge. Unfortunately, our pleasure in making it to the Cwm was short-lived, as crossing over the ridge took us from a bright sunny day into bitter winds and swirling clouds. Although it was still early in the day, we recognised the futility of clawing our way forward into the stinging barrage of spindrift, so we made camp in the shelter of some small séracs at about 7700m.



25. Andrew Collins at 7600m on the SE Ridge of Makalu. (*Jonathan Pratt*) (p63)

We made a late start the next day, after a difficult night straining for sleep in the thin air. We ambled up the Cwm, aware that we did not have much ground to cover that day. However, we paid for our indolence when we were forced to spend three hours digging a tent platform, during which time a strong wind picked up. This made our work not just exhausting but painful as well, as we wrestled with the tents with frostbitten fingers and stinging faces. We were now at 8100m and, as sleep was impossible, we spent most of the night brewing tea or lying in our sleeping-bags nurturing a pounding head.

We set off with the warmth of the new day and made quick progress up the headwall, only slowed by the occasional patch of deep snow. It was just after midday when we reached a rock pyramid, barely one hundred metres below the summit.

We climbed this pyramid on the right but encountered difficult snow at the top, so we abseiled down and tried the rocks on the left, but this also led to difficult ground. We had one more option and that was to descend fifty metres and climb back up behind the pyramid on a steep snow slope. Halfway up the slope we stumbled into bottomless snow, which forced us to traverse back to the pyramid. After three hours' effort we found ourselves back where we had started – floundering in a band of impenetrable snow at the top of the pyramid.

Meanwhile, our teammates in Base Camp were monitoring our progress through a telescope and were becoming increasingly bemused as we appeared to be climbing round in circles.

Time ticked by as we furiously attacked the slope in front of us with ever-decreasing vigour. An hour passed. We could not gain a single yard. After a particularly exhausting and futile effort to advance from the top of the pyramid, Andy and I collapsed in the snow, so disenchanted that we were on the point of giving up, even with the summit only a hundred metres above us. Fortunately, however, Dan had different ideas.

'I'm going to the summit,' he shouted, flinging himself into the waves of snow and thrashing around like a man drowning.

Suddenly he burst through. He only made a few yards, but they were the vital ones. Now we knew we had done it, and it was only a question of whether we would reach the summit before nightfall.

One and a half hours later we came to a small rocky outcrop on the ridge. Scrambling to the top brought our climb to an end, just as the setting sun brought the end of day. With the approaching night came a cutting wind, but we were warmed by the inner glow of being on such a spectacular summit. We lingered there, watching the clouds pile up against Everest as the sun dipped below the horizon. With the surrounding scenery disappearing into the gloom, we reluctantly started our descent. Almost immediately the full moon rose from behind Kangchenjunga, its light so bright that we were able to retrace our steps without using our headlamps. Tired and cold, we got back to our tents at about 10pm.



26. Daniel Mazur approaching the summit, Alexi Nikiforov behind. (*Jonathan Pratt*) (p63)



27. Jonathan Pratt on the summit of Makalu, Lhotse and Everest behind. (*Andrew Collins*) (p63)



28. The shadow of Makalu, taken from the summit. (*Jonathan Pratt*) (p63)

Despite the exertions of our summit day, we did not lie-in the next morning; we were still worried about climbing out of the Cwm. But we were still quite strong and able to climb back up to the Black Gendarme without much difficulty. From there it was all downhill, and we got back to Base Camp without further incident.

Because of the unusually late monsoon, our expedition endured long periods of hardship and frustration which limited our success. But for those of us who prevailed, the gentle glow of that sunset from the top of Makalu will always be with us.

Summary:

The Five Nations Hidden Peak Expedition 1994
Six members of the expedition reached the summit of Hidden Peak (Gasherbrum I), 8065m, on 4 August and 12 August 1994, with Jonathan Pratt and Andy Collins making the first British ascent. Team members were: Jonathan Pratt and Andrew Collins (UK), Daniel Mazur, Chris Shaw, Scott Barylski and Rebecca Oleszewski (USA), Frank Levy and Jean-Michael Meunier (France), Markus StAehelin (Switzerland), Chris Reijmer (Netherlands), Mohammed Hussain (sirdar), Captain Khyam (liaison officer) and Akmad Lou (cook).

The International Makalu Expedition 1995
On 9 October 1995 four members of the expedition reached the summit of Makalu, 8463m, via the South East Ridge. They were Jonathan Pratt and Andrew Collins (UK), Daniel Mazur (USA) and Alexi Nikiforov (Russia). This was the first British ascent of the mountain.