
Commentary



151. Simon Pierce, *Above Val Ferret (i)*, 2007, watercolour, 15.5 x 20cm
(*Alpine Club collection*)

JIM CURRAN

Reflections on K2, 2008

As the editor of the journal put it to me, 'In the silly season of August, two media stories are more or less guaranteed – first, "Exams (GCSEs and 'A' levels) are getting easier"; second, "Climbers die on K2" '. Sometimes Mont Blanc or the Eiger are substituted, but you get the drift.

In 2008 there was a media feeding frenzy as a multiple tragedy played out on K2. It was fed by daily, even hourly news reports from base camp as satellite phones, emails and blogs poured their news and views into cyberspace and were quoted or misquoted worldwide. As a so-called 'expert' on K2, having written a history of the mountain, I had to field phone calls from all over the world. For three weeks the phone rang every day, then (to my relief) stopped as suddenly as it had started as the spotlight moved on to the imminent collapse of civilisation, the American elections, England's cricketers etc.

What to make of all this, as the story slowly unravelled? Twenty two years ago I was at K2 base camp when the last act of a grim season was played out. As the shocking fragments of a hugely complex story emerged I could only send one brief message to the outside world via a Pakistan Army helicopter. On my return to the UK I was horrified by the speculation and ill-informed criticisms that had already been voiced. If modern communications had been around, I can't imagine the confusion that would have ensued. Or rather, I can, because that is exactly what happened in 2008.

Now on the receiving end of the news, I was at pains to point out that the story was still unfolding and it would be quite wrong to speculate, or worse, judge. This, of course, was not what was wanted. I was reminded of a story Brian Hall told me in 1986. Asked what he thought had happened to the seven climbers missing high on K2, he surmised that there might have been a major avalanche or sérac collapse. That night on The News, it was reported that there had indeed been an avalanche. 'Hey, I was right,' thought Brian, before it dawned on him that this was his own reconstructed comment.

K2 in 1986, Everest in 1996, K2 again in 1997 and now another huge disaster – is it inevitable that with ever-increasing commercial expeditions to the 8000 metre peaks that this will continue? Each of the above disasters contained variations on similar themes – fixed ropes not in place, deals done in different languages, broken promises, avalanche, storm etc. But there is one common factor that seems to be to be painfully self-evident: far too many people in the wrong place at the wrong time. On 1 August 2008 on K2 *twenty-two* climbers set out from the Shoulder, all intent on climbing the Bottleneck (how appropriate that name has become). From articles in *The Observer* magazine by Ed Douglas and in *Rock and Ice* by Freddie Wilkinson, which meticulously pieced together the fragmentary stories, there were

problems with fixed ropes (which should have been avoidable) and at least two big sérac falls above the Bottleneck (which were unavoidable). Lack of fixed rope caused delays, and when the sérac falls occurred, many were stranded above the Bottleneck with no fixed ropes. It seems that there was a wide spectrum of experiences on the mountain. No 'complete passengers', as have been ferried up Everest, but probably not enough experienced climbers to cope with the events unfolding. Unforgiving old men like me would suggest that to reach the summit of K2 only climbers of vast experience should be there.

Russell Brice, who has led more commercial trips to the north side of Everest than anyone else, has compiled statistics to show that nowadays K2 is easily the most dangerous of the 14 eight thousanders with a jaw-dropping ratio of 20.29% deaths per 294 ascents. Everest now drops to 10th place (4.53%) and Cho Oyu is at 14th with less than one. These numbers do not take into account the 2008 disaster. Talking at length to Russell at the 2008 Kendal Mountain Film Festival, I was impressed at how, on the north side of Everest, he left almost nothing to chance, as his long safety record proves. He made a point of telling me that he left spare ropes at vulnerable places that could quickly replace absent or damaged ones if necessary.

Given the seemingly inevitable growth of expeditions to K2, perhaps the pertinent question is, can there be any way out of an apparent spiralling of disasters stretched away as far as we can see? Some obvious if unlikely solutions are:

Ban all climbing on K2. (This won't happen). Only one expedition a year to the Abruzzi. (This won't happen). Devise time-slots over the summer for each expedition. Hard, if not impossible to police but could ease the traffic jams near the top of the mountain.

Investigate the possibility of avoiding the Bottleneck and the hanging séracs altogether. Unlikely, yes, but remember Fritz Wiessner very nearly did just that in 1939, climbing hard mixed ground almost to the summit snow-slopes. If this could be linked to the 'Basque' route to the left of the Abruzzi (suggested by many to be an easier and safer route), it might be possible to avoid the Bottleneck and the dangerous traverse under the sérac altogether. It would require some selfless effort to climb and fix the upper slopes but surely it is a possibility worth exploring? Although many of us hate these high-altitude *via ferratas*, if you are going to have them, then make sure they do the job properly. It will of course devalue the mountain, but in a way this is already happening. If the death toll on K2 can be reduced then it would be worthwhile.

A final impractical solution is to advise would-be K2 summiteers to be aware of history. Look at the list of those who have failed on K2 and lived to tell the tale. Houston, Bonatti, Scott, Bonington, Whillans, Boardman and Tasker are just a few of the great climbers who have given the mountain best. There is no disgrace in joining their company. Which would you prefer – a reputation for shrewd judgement or your name hammered out on a saucepan lid and hung with all the others at the Gilkey Memorial? Think about it.