
High Asia



Julian Cooper, *Weisshorn*, oil on canvas, 61 x 40cm, 2012

RICK ALLEN

The Long Ridge

The first full ascent of the Mazeno Ridge of Nanga Parbat



Rick Allen and Sandy Allan on the ridge, intent on realising a 17-year dream.
(Lakhpa Rangdu)

The place that Everest occupies in the popular imagination in Britain is largely occupied in Austria and Germany for a host of historical reasons by Nanga Parbat. The first successful ascent of the mountain was by Herman Buhl who reached the summit alone, via the Rakhiot Flank, in 1953. By the 1980s the major faces of this most westerly of the Himalayan giants had been ascended. The keen eye of Doug Scott was caught by the unclimbed Mazeno Ridge, dividing the Rupal glacier from the Diamir flank and running for nine kilometres at around 7000m without any reasonable prospect of escape to north or south before rising to the summit at 8126m. Doug made a determined attempt in 1992 with Sergei Efimov and Valeri Pershin, but Valeri was seriously injured acclimatising on the *Schell*



Looking along the ridge towards the summit (*Lakhpa Rangdu*)

Route and the team did not get very far along the ridge. Doug returned in 1993, again unsuccessfully, and again in 1995 from the Rupal side with Voytek Kurtyka, Sandy Allan, Andrew Lock and me. Voytek, Andrew and I reached a point about one third along the ridge before capturing a memorable image and retreating.

Sandy and I spent the next 17 years thinking about how we might return to this most intimidating objective. Meanwhile, six other teams, including some of the best of our generation, made various attempts. In 2004 Doug Chabot and Steve Swenson succeeded in reaching the col at the end of the ridge but were too exhausted to continue to the summit; the German pair of Luis Stitzinger and Joseph Lunger reached the same point in 2008. No one else got close and we realised some new thinking would be needed to go further. In 2009 we joined Gerfried Göschl's team on an ascent from the Diamir side, reconnoitring the potential descent and studying the ridge at every spare moment. Sandy and I reached the summit on 1 July, crawling the final metres in a fierce cold wind.

For 2012, Sandy invited Lakhpa Rangdu, Lakhpa Zharok and Lakhpa Nuru to join us plus Cathy O'Dowd, the talented South African alpinist and double Everest summiteer. It would clearly be a very long and committing, alpine style push and highly dependent on good weather. This being so, Cathy organised for regular weather forecasts to be prepared and sent by text from her adopted Andorra. In a few short months we had a team



Cathy O'Dowd on the ridge. (*Lakhpa Rangdu*)

and some funding and assembled in Islamabad in June that year.

The tourism-starved hotel at Chilas on the Karakoram Highway made us very welcome and soon after we were bumping along a jeep track to the village of Tarshing where the evening light revealed the top of the Rakhiot Face emerging from the cloud. From Tarshing it is a three-day walk up the Rupal glacier to our basecamp below the Mazeno pass, making Nanga Parbat one of the most accessible of the great peaks and the fulcrum of a fine trek encircling the mountain massif.

Early days were spent pushing up soft snow ribs and onto a subsidiary ridge to build our acclimatisation and get food, cooking gas, climbing ropes and tents into a position at the start of the Mazeno. Fine mornings often deteriorated into afternoon cloud and evening snowfall. The Met Office in Bracknell had already warned me that records for Nanga Parbat showed an almost complete absence of long periods of stable weather but at least the forecasts coming in from Andorra were proving to be fairly reliable. Acclimatisation for the Lakhpas was not a problem. They had just come from working on major expeditions in Nepal and they fitted in with our Pakistani base camp staff without any tensions.

Three separate sorties over 10 days brought us to a point where we were almost comfortable sleeping at 6400m, the forecast was looking reasonable for a week ahead and on 2 July (Day 1) we embarked as a team of six on the route.

Day 2: Retracing our steps along the subsidiary ridge in fresh snow takes us back to 6400m. Normally we would reckon we could carry a week's food and gas and then it lasts as long as we make it last. Crucially, the Sherpas have changed the arithmetic and we embark with food for perhaps 10 days and gas for 14.

Day 3: On the morning of 4 July we gain the ridge and peer down the other side to the Diamir glacier, 2500 metres below, where we can see the tiny orange tents of a basecamp. We hope they will put in new fixed line on the Kinshofer Wall and break trail to the summit but within a few days the basecamp vanishes.

From here on we are moving alpine style, carrying everything with us, but huge sacks and soft snow make progress slow. The Mazeno is like a high altitude Cuillin Ridge under deep winter conditions, undulating over multiple crests. The highest, Mazeno Peak (7100m), lies about midway along but it is hard to make out one from another.

Day 4: Lakhpa Nuru has traversed under a rock outcrop and is trying to climb a steep, thigh-deep snow channel to regain the winding knife-edge ridge when the unstable snow collapses under him and he falls some 40 metres. Re-ascent is next to impossible in these conditions and we climb down to him and try to traverse around the buttresses to get to the next col. Time slips away and as evening approaches there is nowhere for three tents. We aim for a rock overhang where I can excavate a semi-cave under the rock for Lakhpa Rangdu and me, Sandy and Cathy can perch a single tent on half a platform and Nuru and Zharok wrap themselves in tent fabric on a narrow ledge between us.

Day 5: Thankfully the night is calm, but no one feels good in the morning and we cover just 150m of technical ground to a small col and the next bivouac.

Day 6: High winds are predicted for today so we all sit tight through a blustery morning, but the wind dies and another day passes without progress. We are still not halfway along the ridge.

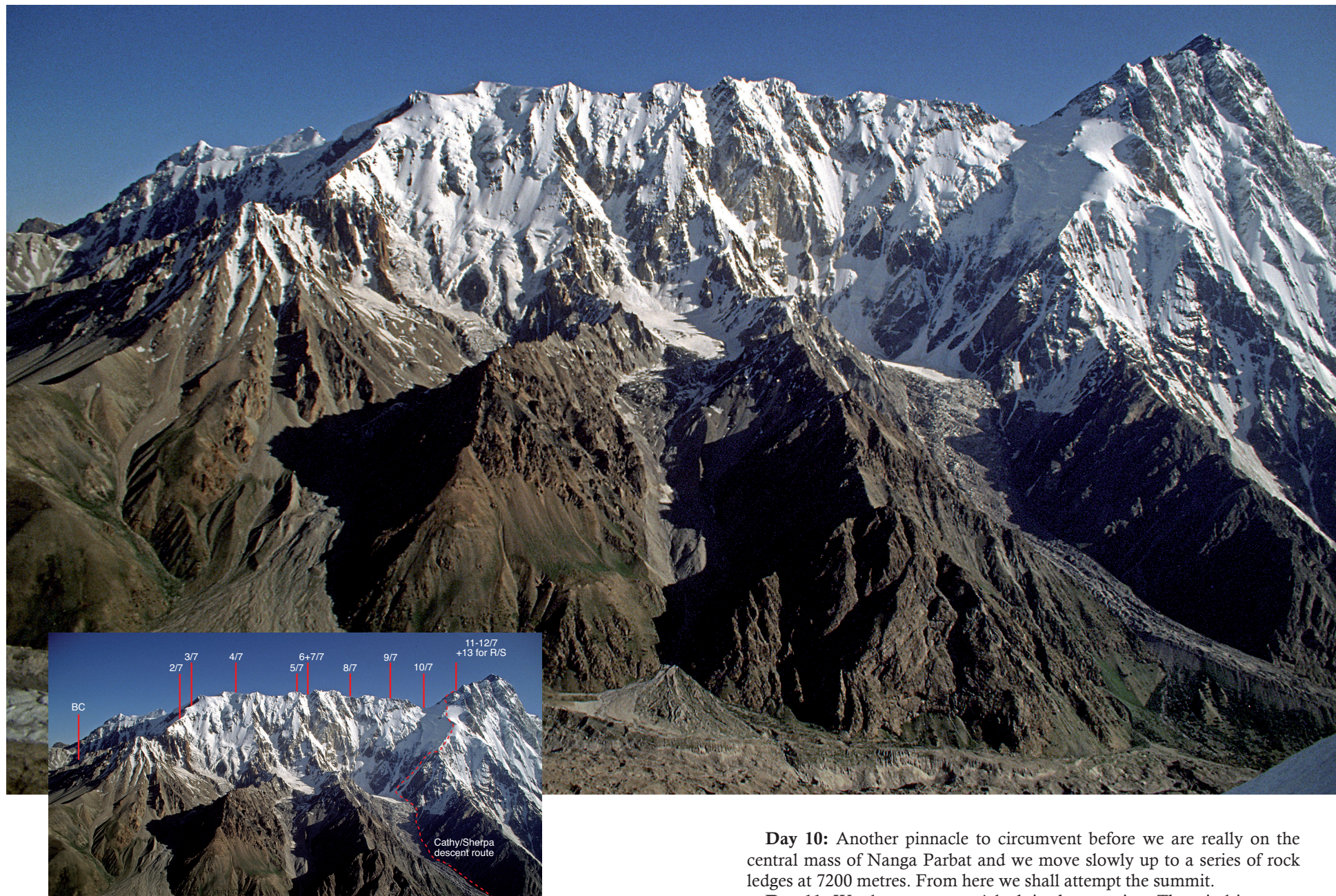
Day 7: We are slightly refreshed and rested; there is a detectable decrease in our packs and we know intuitively, even if we don't feel it, that we are now really acclimatising. The situation is breathtaking as we wind over peaks and cornices with precipitous drops plunging away on both sides. A tricky diagonal abseil to gain a col on the ridge defines a psychological point of no return. We are only going forward now.

Day 8: We cross Mazeno Peak, the highest point on the traverse, and the ridge widens; but with the spaciousness comes crevasses and the going is as treacherous as ever. For perhaps an hour there is an alarming static electrical charge in the air and I have vivid memories of a companion struck by lightning on Mont Blanc.

Day 9: The Mazeno Gap seems close now but the Americans reported the pinnacles ahead to be the toughest challenge on the ridge. They drop away, each more convoluted and technically exhausting than the last, and we climb until nightfall. Only two other teams have ever got this far, none has gone further.



Rick and Sandy making progress. 'The Mazeno is like a high altitude Cuillin Ridge under deep winter conditions...' (Lakhpa Rangdu)



The 9km Mazeno Ridge of Nanga Parbat viewed from across the Rupal glacier, showing (inset) the expedition's bivouac sites en route to the summit. Descent was via the Diamir Face on the far side.
(Doug Scott)

Day 10: Another pinnacle to circumvent before we are really on the central mass of Nanga Parbat and we move slowly up to a series of rock ledges at 7200 metres. From here we shall attempt the summit.

Day 11: We depart at one o'clock in the morning. The wind is strong and Nuru breaks trail up steep snow and mixed ground close under the ridge. At first light we are on a prominent shoulder with spectacular views, the shadow of Nanga Parbat stretching to the western horizon. Cathy



Rick Allen crossing mixed terrain below the summit pyramid, day 13. (Sandy Allan)

is climbing with Nuru for the first time today and the partnership is not working well; she is deeply chilled and becoming exhausted and Nuru does not make sufficient allowance for this. By 7am Cathy has lost belief in reaching the summit and they retreat.

I am climbing with Sandy; we are slow, moving carefully across mixed technical ground, assuring one another with the rope wherever we can. We fall behind Rangdu and Zharok who seem unstoppable, just visible at the base of the steep mixed ground of the summit pyramid. They are clearly moving towards us, not away from us and we wait for them with sinking spirits. It is 11 o'clock and they have decided that it is now too late to reach the summit and return safely. I am deeply frustrated, but the logic is impeccable and Sandy and I agree to return also, laboriously breaking trail up to our knees in the crusty slope.

There is some half-hearted talk of another push to the summit but I have serious doubts as to whether any of us have enough left in us. Suddenly, Lakhpa Zharok misses a footing and starts off down the slope, Rangdu tries to hold him but is catapulted off his feet and they cascade down the face like a pair of rag dolls. From where we are standing, the angle appears to run out before dropping off steeply and we cannot believe they are not stopping. Finally, after tumbling about 300m they come to rest metres above the steeply dropping séracs of the Diamir Face. They brush the snow off

themselves, begin to move, and slowly climb back up the face to re-join our traverse. At the tents, we are re-united with Cathy and Nuru and the mood to descend is strong. Everyone is extremely tired, there is very little food and the Sherpas are shaken by their ordeal.

Day 12: As I begin to brew up for Rangdu in the morning, the other tents are stirring. Sandy pipes up, 'Come over when you are up and have a chat about our options'. We have options? The Sherpas and Cathy are decided upon descent via the *Schell Route* but Sandy is not ready to commit. The forecast is reasonable for four days out. My hopes flicker; normally I am the one with the crazy ideas and Sandy is the steady, safe, professional mountaineer that he is. For the first time on the trip I realise how committed Sandy is to succeeding. The others pack their tents and generously leave us the remaining food: a packet of biscuits, a single serving of porridge each and some boiled sweets. We hug and they depart, leaving us to contemplate our options on a little stony platform.

I wander around the ledges a little, enjoying the solitude. This is where Hans Schell and Robert Schauer emerged from the Rupal Face. Below us lies the descent line chosen by Messner after the disappearance of his brother. At a snowy col above us, DDR labels on a tiny cache of food date it before the fall of the Berlin Wall, making history palpable (and edible).

Far below, a drama is unfolding as Cathy and the Lakhpas miss a turning off the ridge to the east in mist and abseil into a huge, west-facing bowl. By nightfall Cathy and Rangdu are separated from the faster moving Nuru and Zharok and Rangdu takes a fall, injuring his ankle. Trapped between threatening séracs above and a bergshroud below, they hack out a narrow tent platform beneath a rock wall.

Day 13: At 5am the entire bowl avalanches above Cathy and Rangdu, pouring over the cliff but leaving them unharmed. They descend warily to join Nuru and Zharok on the moraines below and painfully continue down to the waiting crew on the Rupal glacier.

At 7200m, Sandy is reluctantly convinced that we do not have enough left in us to repeat the new, direct line of the day before yesterday and push



Rick Allen (left) and Sandy Allan on the summit of Nanga Parbat (8126m), day 14.

it on to the summit. We shall try a rising traverse across to the summit pyramid and turn it on the left to join the Diamir Face route somewhere above 7500m. We get radical, leaving the tent standing with our mats inside and take just sleeping bags and a stove. We can surely descend the Diamir Face in a day?

A light breeze, a few flakes of snow and tiny sloughs have been enough to erase the tracks on the face and we make slow work of the traverse. Rocky ribs finger down the face, demanding precise footwork and whatever natural protection we can find. Features I vaguely remember from the half light of dawn three years ago materialise slowly as the tiny orange tent vanishes behind us and we approach the upper part of the Diamir route. It is 5pm and we are nowhere near the summit, we must find somewhere to dig a cave. Finally, at around 7700m we dig into a snow-bank, make a tiny cave and eat our last biscuits.

Day 14: It is the 15th of July. We move out and up but visibility is poor in swirling cloud. Up and left, we emerge on the summit ridge at 2pm but the ridge has multiple summits and this is not the highest. The clouds finally clear and we grasp where we are, but Sandy is all in. I break trail slowly and we reach the summit at 6.12pm in evening sunlight. Seventeen years after our first attempt on the Mazeno Ridge and 28 years after we set out to follow in the footsteps of Pete and Joe, we have realised half a lifetime of dreams. We take photos and linger into the alpenglow before descending to our cave and another cramped night. The lighter stops working and the spare matches are hopeless so the last half gas cylinder is useless and we have neither food nor water now.

Day 15: Today, I have nothing left, my hands will not warm up and I fumble with everything. Sandy breaks trail the entire day along a seemingly endless arc towards the traditional Diamir top camp (four). No one has been there this season and the Diamir route is unclimbed in two years. We call our agent, Ali, to tell him we are descending the Diamir side. Sandy is worried enough about me to start muttering about helicopters but I am having none of it. The satellite phone battery fails at that point, resolving the matter. We dig another snow cave with walls so thin I put my elbow through them in the early hours. My sleeping bag is ultra light, not much more than an extended *pied d'éléphant* and my feet are really beginning to pay the price. I can wiggle the toes but they remain stubbornly cold.

Day 16: I have never climbed at altitude without water or the means of melting snow and I wonder, absentmindedly, what is going to happen. I have an urge to urinate and pass a surprising quantity of Beaujolais. The imperative to expel toxins trumps dehydration. We can still move so we move, across and down a slope, crusty in places. I teeter down a plaque which breaks away, triggering a narrow avalanche. I roll out of the slide into snow that is not moving and Sandy holds me on the rope. Below the site of camp III, we uncover occasional anchors for fixed ropes and use them to abseil hard ice sections. The old ropes are hopelessly frozen in. At dusk we arrive on a ridge above the site of Diamir camp II. No snow bank



Rick Allen descending below the Kinshofer Wall on the Diamir Face, day 17.
(Sandy Allan)

here so we hack out a ledge, tie ourselves on and begin a long vigil. Sitting on a few coils of rope in my lightweight bag, my toes get cold and stay cold.

Day 17: The weather continues to hold fair as dawn breaks and we move down to the site of camp II. I finally change out of my down suit and fall asleep in the sun before Sandy stirs me and we continue to descend steeply.

Did I hear a voice; am I dreaming? No, there it is again. Just above the Kinshofer Wall, someone is arranging a belay. We descend to greet Czech climber Marek Holecek who is soon joined by Zdenek Hruby. They share a flask of tea, energy bars and a lighter. The only other climbers on the mountain are right here, right now. Call it providence. Refreshed, we launch onto the decaying tangle of fixed ropes on the wall and continue down the huge snow/ice couloir below. The bottom of the couloir seems

further away than ever as I descend into the night, facing in, kicking steps and slumping over my axes every few minutes. At 11pm we stumble over avalanche debris and small crevasses until an illuminated tent appears on a ledge at the foot of the buttress. Three high altitude porters emerge and embrace us. Incredibly, Ali has mobilised them from their beds in Skardu to camp I on Nanga Parbat in less than 48 hours. They can scarcely have stopped moving, let alone slept. We drink and eat and sleep.

Day 18: We descend the glacier to the Diamir basecamp. We have climbed the route of our lives and lived to drink a Czech beer in the sunshine.

Postscript: Lakhpa Rangdu was subsequently diagnosed with a broken bone in his ankle and Rick lost half a toe to frostbite.

Summary: An account of the first ascent of Nanga Parbat via the Mazeno Ridge in June-July 2012 by Sandy Allan and Rick Allen. The ascent was recognised with a Piolet d'Or at Chamonix in April 2013.

Acknowledgements: The team thanks the following for their support: The Mount Everest Foundation, Mountain Equipment, Adventure Pakistan, Scarpa, Andorra meteorological office, Andorra Telecom, Mora Bank (Andorra), Vitadomat (Andorra), Dick Smith Foundation, Cairngorm Mountain Sports / Braemar Mountain Sports.

AGNIESZKA BIELECKA & ARTUR HAJZER

The Polish Gasherbrum I Winter Expedition



Gasherbrum I (8068m) (centre left) on the day of the Poles' summit push.
(Agnieszka Bielecka)

Winter 2011-12 saw the Gasherbrums once again the focus of attention in the hard game of winter mountaineering at 8000 metres. The trio of Simone Moro, Cory Richards and Denis Urubko had opened the psychological door with their ascent of Gasherbrum II (8035m) in February 2011 – the first of the Karakoram 8000ers to be climbed in winter – and now two teams had their sights on Gasherbrum I (8068m).

A Polish team, led by the Himalayan veteran Artur Hajzer, was bound for the 'normal route', following the north-west facing Japanese couloir. Meanwhile the Austrian Gerfried Göschl, leading a small international team, was set on completing a new line on the south side; he had reached 6650m there in March 2011. The fate of the two teams underlines the fine line climbers tread at high altitude in winter.

Artur Hajzer's expedition was part of the 'Polish Winter Himalaya 2010 – 2015 Programme', an initiative launched by Hajzer himself and the