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BRITISH NANGA PARBAT EXPEDITION 1995

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REPORT

Nanga Parbat, the most westerly of the great peaks of the Himalaya, rising from the gorge of the Indus river to form the greatest vertical interval from valley floor to summit in the world, was first climbed in 1953 by Herman Buhl. Since then most of the faces and ridges have been climbed. One route, however, the Mazeno or West Ridge, is such a formidable undertaking that it was not even attempted until 1992, and still remains unclimbed. It stretches for nearly ten miles, at an altitude of over 22,000 ft., over seven subsidiary summits, before culminating at 26,658 ft. on the main peak of Nanga Parbat - the world's ninth highest mountain.

Actually, a half-hearted attempt was made to climb the ridge by the French in 1979. It seems that they climbed directly up from the Mazeno Pass to a minor summit, north of the actual Mazeno Ridge. They fixed a considerable amount of rope but gave up, due to bad weather. The only other activity in the vicinity was a very brave attempt by three Basque climbers to reach the highest of the seven Mazeno peaks, from the north in 1986. They climbed for nine days, alpine style, up very steep rock, ice and snow, but had to retreat just a few rope lengths from the Mazeno summit. They made 36 long abseils in their descent.

In the summer of 1992, our mainly British expedition attempted the Mazeno Ridge in three stages. That year the weather was generally good. After arriving at Base Camp on 26 July, we climbed a minor summit opposite Nanga Parbat on 28 July, and then the more difficult point 5750 of "Lilley" peak, via a new route up the north west side. Phase two involved climbing the Hans Schell route on the north side of Nanga Parbat, to 7300 m. on 16 August. Two major rock falls either injured or deterred members of the expedition. Only four were fit or available to attempt the Mazeno Ridge.

Ang Phurba, Nga Temba, Serge Effimov and myself established a base camp at 4800 m., some 3 kms. south south east of the Mazeno Pass. The next day we set off to climb the ridge which goes north to Pt. 6880, the first of the seven Mazeno summits. After 12 hours climbing, we arrived at a suitable camp site on the crest of the north south ridge, at about 5850 m. We spent 26 August climbing around and over the pinnacles of the ridge, with some difficulty (T.D.) to camp at 6400 m. On 27 August we climbed up on ice and snow to Pt. 6650, and then on over the first of the Mazeno summits, Pt. 6880. We continued east along the ridge, over Pt. 6825, to camp on a wind-swept saddle, to the east. On 28 August we climbed up to Pt. 6970, which was as far as we got. Ang Phurba was somewhat demoralised from the previous rockfalls, from which he had been injured and also from an extremely windy night. We retreated directly down to the Mazeno Pass.

I looked forward to another attempt in the future, knowing that this could be the most elegant and safest way to the summit, but I also knew that the most difficult of the Mazeno summits had yet to be crossed.

The 1995 attempt began when all the team assembled in Islamabad on 17 July. We were Wojciech Kurtyka (Poland), Andrew Lock (Australia), Rick Allen, Sandy Allan and myself (U.K.), and also Steven Thomas who was going to join us on the approach.

After waiting two days for the airline to take us to Skardu we gave up and motored up the Karakoram highway, arriving in Skardu on 20 July. On 21 July we left Skardu (2200 m.) on Raleigh M-Track mountain bikes. We were accompanied by mountain bike expert and journalist, Steven Thomas. Unfortunately, Steven on his first trip to the east succumbed to chronic diarrhoea, which severely weakened him. However, he rode where he could, gave us a lot of encouragement, and kept the bikes adjusted, as cables, mainly brake cables on the descent, stretched with use.

Because the walk-in to Nanga Parbat was a relatively short three days, we decided to spend three days on mountain bikes, riding up onto the Deosai Plains and down to the Rupal-Astor River Valley. Our first day's ride took us around the Satpara Lake, and up to a camping place by the Satpara River at 3785 m., 32 kms. from Skardu.

On 23 July we rode and pushed the bikes up a very stony, twisty, and sometimes precipitous track, right up onto the plateau. At 10.30 we rode over the Ali Malik Mar Pass (4080 m.). After wading rivers and crossing rickety bridges, we crossed another high point (4070 m.) to arrive at a camping place (3850 m.) just beyond the Kalapani River crossing, 68 kms. from Skardu.

On 24 July we left camp in pouring rain, cycling by the Shaucer Lake (4050 m.), crossed the Chakor Pass (4266 m. or 4280 m. depending on which map is read), and down steeply to have lunch at Chilam (3380 m.). By evening we had reached the Astor-Tarashing Road (2350 m.), after a very steep and sometimes dangerous descent. We went along the road for a few kilometres to stop our cycling at dark, at which point we piled the bikes and ourselves onto the accompanying jeep, having done 152 kms. from Skardu. We then drove into Tarashing (2911 m.) arriving at 9.30 p.m. (171 miles from Skardu).

The rain continued on 26th and also on 27th, but we decided to start the walk-in, and that evening we reached Latabo (3350 m.) We left Steven at Tarashing, awaiting the repair of the Astor road, since the torrential downpour had washed away large stretches of road and several bridges. It was to be another week before he was able to leave Pakistan.

On 28th we walked passed Shaigiri to camp (4050 m.) in the valley where the track turns north for the Mazeno Pass.

On 29th we arrived at the higher Mazeno base camp (4850 m.). Wojciech and myself put our tents exactly where we had had them in 1993 on our abortive attempt at the Mazeno, but that year we never got onto it. I was avalanched some 400 m. down the Mazeno west peak during our acclimatisation period. On that occasion we had to retreat me on horseback with severely torn tendons in my right ankle.

After a rest day we set off to acclimatise on the route of 1992. This was quite a radical departure from our usual tactic of acclimatising on other mountains in the vicinity and coming to the main climb fully acclimatised and full of curiosity to set off. Due to the bad weather and radio reports that the monsoon in the Indian sub-continent was going to be stronger this year than usual, and also due to the fact that none of the other members of our group had actually been on this route before, we went straight onto it.

We set off on 31 July and reached the pinnacle at 5630 m., where we cached our climbing gear and retreated back down to base camp.

On 2 August we returned to the pinnacle and climbed beyond, approximately to pt. 5900 m. I was not a well man, suffering from an operation earlier in the year on my knee, and now all my joints seemed to be aching. Favouring my injured knee, I was using an undue amount of energy. I suffered heat exhaustion, wrapped up in my Buffalo clothing, in the hot afternoon sun. There was not really room for two tents at pt. 5900 m. so Rick helped me descend to the pinnacle where we

camped the night. The next day we all retreated back down to base camp. Incidentally, the problem of heat exhaustion was an experience I had not had personally nor witnessed before on expeditions. At first I thought I might be experiencing cerebral oedema, since besides experiencing thirst, sweating and goose flesh I became mentally disoriented, unable for instance to give names to my concerned companions. After quenching my thirst with mineral balance drinks, my mental state returned to normal (sic) and I was able to function O.K. after a half hour's rest. Peter Steal's "Medical Handbook for Mountaineers" makes plain that the essential differences between heat exhaustion and cerebral oedema are the constant severe headaches that accompany cerebral oedema and the inability to sit up and perform simple physical tasks. That night I slept nine hours when with cerebral oedema the patient sleeps fitfully and may vomit. I enjoyed the meal of potatoes, onions and tuna which Rick prepared.

After another day's bad weather Rick, myself and our excellent liaison officer, Abdul Quadir, walked up to the Mazeno Pass (5358 m.).

On 5 August I made the decision to retire from the expedition. To climb an 8 mile route, alpine style, and beyond 8000 m., I knew I had to be in the best of health and in the peak of physical condition, which I was not. I would only hold back the others.

On 6 August I walked out to Tarashing, motored out and then down the Karakoram highway, arriving in Islamabad on 9 August, where I was laid up for three days in bed suffering from severe gastric enteritis.

I reached home on 13 August to be laid up a further three weeks with some mystery virus. I'm not sure if I'll go back to Nanga Parbat.

On 6 August Sandy, Rick, Wojciech and Andy climbed passed the previous high point and traversed the pinnacles of the north south ridge, to bivouac at 6000 m. ca. On 7 August, with Sandy having a headache, the other three descended to the previous tent site and ferried up food, gas and gear to the new camp.

With heavy snow falling the next day, the team reluctantly descended in case the accumulation should become so significant to make all the lower slopes dangerous. The 9th and 10th were fine days whilst they were resting up at base camp.

On the 11th, Sandy due to pressure of life back home, decided to leave the expedition. The three remaining members were back up to 5900 m. and the next day they climbed up the steep ice slopes, over the first and second domes, to bivouac in a cwm just below the crest of the ridge at 6700 m.

On 13th, in cold, clear weather, they reached the actual crest of the Mazeno Ridge to get a superb view down the Diamir Face of Nanga Parbat. They continued along the ridge for one and a half hours, to leave a cache of food and gas at a rocky outcrop. Snow began to fall and the wind gained in strength, so they retreated to their bivouac at 6700 m. (this was the day of the fatal storm on K.2 when Alison Hargreaves and others were tragically killed). On 14th the trio descended to base camp, soloing the ice faces all the way, numbing their minds and toes. They spent the next five days resting up at base camp waiting for the weather to improve.

On 20th they climbed up to bivouac at 6400 m. and on 21st they bivouaced at 6700 m. in heavy snowfall. On 22nd there was more threatening weather but they decided to move along the ridge. In white out conditions, they reached the cache, redistributed the loads, and continued along the ridge on the south side of the first rock pinnacle. They turned the second rock pinnacle on the north, and continued up snow slopes to the crest of the third Mazeno peak. Here they carved out a bivy ledge at 7000 m. in a hollow on the north side of the ridge, overlooking the Diamir Glacier.

On 23 August they ascended a knife edge snow arret onto the summit of Mazeno 3. After an hour and a half they had only gone 50 m. They now had four days food left, and maybe five days' gas, and in front of them was much precarious ground, which would involve belaying each pitch. They concluded that the weather was too uncertain to be committing themselves deeper into this serious territory, and reluctantly decided to retreat for the night back to the bivouac at 6700 m. On the following day they descended all the way down to base camp.

On 25th they packed up, with Wojciech taking all the gear down to the road head with Abdul Quadir. Andy and Rick took one porter over the Mazeno Pass and descended the Loiba Glacier in an electric storm and hailstones. They continued on down to the Karakoram highway. On the 27th the team was reunited in Gilgit, and on 29th arrive in Rawalpindi.

After the debriefing at the Ministry of Tourism on 30 August, Rick and Wojciech departed Pakistan, and Andy left on 4 September for Australia.

On the basis of this attempt, the three members going to the high point concluded that it would take a week of fine weather for a strong party to complete the traverse of the Mazeno peaks. It was thought that the party that succeeds in doing this, would be unlikely to accomplish the ascent of Nanga Parbat in the same push.

The team hope that in the future a group of strong climbers will emerge to take on this challenge and without the laborious process of fixing the whole of the ridge with rope. An exceptionally strong party, given exceptionally good weather conditions, may climb this Mazeno Ridge, and all the way to the summit of Nanga Parbat.

Our expedition did not achieve its objective but it was another interesting encounter with the high mountains. All that we did do was made possible by the goodwill and generosity of many individuals, firms and organisations, here in the U.K. and out in Pakistan. Mohammed Khan cooked us excellent food throughout the seven week expedition. Ghulam Ali facilitated movement of men and materials up and down the valleys from Gilgit to base camp on four separate occasions, and Abdul Quadir proved to be exceptionally helpful throughout the expedition and, all in all, the best liaison officer any of us had ever had before in Pakistan.