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2007 SHARED SUMMITS K2 EXPEDITION

TEAM AND THE PREPARATION

I met Chris Warner in Peru in the mid-1990s. Since then he'd founded Earthtreks, a Baltimore-based guiding company with three rock gyms, and climbed Everest, Lhotse, Cho Oyu and Shishapangma. He'd also been to K2 twice, in years (2002 and 2005) when nobody summited at all. In 2005 I'd failed on Muztagh Tower and we'd met again at the Pakistan Alpine Club. For 2007 he planned to try K2 again, aiming for a new route on the remote East Face, and this, coupled with the bargain price (\$3000, my budget for a new-route project on a high 7000m Karakoram peak), made me accept an invitation to join him.

Don Bowie is a one-time tech millionaire turned (by bankruptcy) to tracking mountain lions in the California Sierra, an emergency medic and mountain search-and-rescue specialist. Don is Canadian, and was a big-wall and new-route expert in North America, including Baffin Island, before he discovered High Asia. On his first trip to Pakistan, in 2005, he'd met Chris on Broad Peak.

Chris was funding the expedition largely through sponsors, which means trebling the budget to keep them happy: cameras, lenses, laptops, hard drives, solar panels, batteries, satellite uplinks, porters to carry the gear and people to operate it. Our people were Joel Shalowitz and Chris Stensland, enthusiastic friends, and PV Scaturro, an oilman turned adventurer with extensive film-making experience.

From Europe I could make only two small but essential pre-departure contributions. One was to arrange the weather forecast from the best team in the business, Meteotest in Bern. A package of their support, two months of daily forecasts giving wind speeds, humidities, precipitation and

temperatures, for a range of altitudes and for the next week, cost 2500CHF. I also chose a cook and assistant cook from our trekking agent, Adventure Tours Pakistan (ATP): with Didar and Javed I came up with two aces, whose work ethic and infectious enthusiasm would deliver far more to the team than just full stomachs.

Chris and I met in the searing May heat of northern Pakistan. I went to change money while he did the briefing at the Pakistan Alpine Club: painless except for our pompous, officious Liaison Officer (LO). Then our gear cleared customs and we set to work packing food and equipment into indestructible blue plastic barrels. Don arrived with Chris II and six duffel bags of sponsored down gear, and PV with enough hard cases of camera equipment to sink a medium-sized battleship. We flew to Skardu, diving in through an uncooperative cloud layer as if the pilot had never left the air force, where Joel caught up with us during the last-minute shopping and introductory interviews.

APPROACH AND BALTORO TREK

In a convoy of jeeps we left behind the sand dunes of the Indus for the heavily cultivated Shigar Valley. As the road turns eastward again, the valley walls steepen and the green fields became tiny cascades of stacked emerald terraces in a vertical desert. At the army checkpoint beyond Dasu, our LO fulfilled his only useful function and then, unusually, left us. The jeeps pushed on and up to Askole, the last habitation in the Braldu Valley, where we pitched our tents while the ATP infrastructure took care of our baggage.

In the morning, our 109 porter loads were reweighed, noted, shouldered and sent on

their way. The Baltoro trek is imposing from the first step, where the last natural terrace is cut by the roaring, dark-brown Braldu River, forcing the trail over a cliff. Pointed peaks are visible in all directions as the route skirts the terminal moraine of the Biafo Glacier, takes to the cliff-side again beyond Korophon, then follows the Panmah River back to the campsite at Jola. The day to Paiyu is hot, straight and flat, but ends with the first glimpse of the Trango Towers and Cathedral. Paiyu, nestled in the last copse of trees, was our home for an extra day while the porters ate their goat and prepared chapatis for six days.

Outside Paiyu, the trail climbs steeply past ice cliffs at the snout of the scree-covered Baltoro Glacier, then follows cliffs, desert sands, boulders and bare ice to Urdukas, all with neck-breaking views of snow-lined vertical granite from Paiyu Peak around to Lobsang Spire. Beyond Urdukas are the snow walls of Masherbrum, with granite peaks behind and the Shining (West) Wall of Gasherbrum IV ahead. Amidst such splendour, the camp at Goro II provides a level of squalour matched only by Concordia itself, with old toilet remains under every rock. On the next morning, clouds quickly cleared off the Gasherbrums (I-V) to reveal the unforgettable Concordia vista, with Gasherbrum IV towering above, Broad Peak at its side, and finally the immense pyramid of K2 appearing to the north. We continued to Broad Peak BC for the night, and in the morning were soon at K2 BC, where we paid the porters and set up camp directly below a 10-man Czech team aiming for the Cesen route.

RECONNAISSANCE

On a cold, grey and windy day, Chris worked on equipment, PV wired the communications tent, and Don and I made a

reconnaissance up the centre of the Godwin-Austen Glacier, weaving through to a high-point from which the smooth upper glacier was visible not far ahead. On our return, we found a pile of clothing still containing a forearm. We read the labels and searched the pockets for clues, but an e-mail search failed to find anyone able to make a positive identification. I later put these remains in a shallow crevasse, but the smell persisted and eventually someone found a torso.

The next day, Chris and I set out to shuttle the first loads to an advanced base camp (ABC) under the East Spur. On a smooth surface near the high-point, I plunged into a crevasse. The fall was long enough that I had time to think about Chris coming in after me; in fact he was, but slid feet-first and chest-deep into another crevasse I had just crossed. Hanging 6-7m down and unable to hear Chris, I made an anchor with two ice-screws, hung my pack on it, removed the ice-axes, strapped on my crampons while hanging, and climbed out. I found Chris still in his slot, and Don and PV just arriving. Don had a Z-pulley set up in seconds, so I could go back down for my pack while PV tried to shoot some film. Then we fled this minefield before the sun could get any warmer.

Eight porters were arriving with more gear, and now we had to take them left towards the Abruzzi ABC, where we soon left everything at an intermediate dump at the edge of the icefall. While Chris and PV accompanied the porters back to BC, Don and I probed for a path through the maze of ice blocks. After four dead-ends, climbing among ice towers only to find a chasm between ourselves and the moraine, I tried a last notch and found a short ramp which

would get us out. We fixed a strand of rope, and the 2007 route to Abruzzi ABC had been established.

NEW ROUTE ATTEMPT

I was out of action for the next week with 'flu'. First Chris and PV, rattled by the crevasse incident, judged the route to the East Spur to be impassable: the new-route plan was over without even seeing it. However, right above them, to the right of the Abruzzi line, were two other rock ridges, slicing up in straight, narrow lines to the base of the Black Pyramid at 6800m. The new plan was to follow the middle spur to a rightward traverse in the Black Pyramid, leading us out on its upper right (East) side and thence to Abruzzi Camp 3 (C3). Chris, Don and PV set to work in mostly excellent weather, shuttling loads, establishing C1 at 6000m, and pushing our fixed line up to 6300m.

In another week-long spell of good weather, we set out to find a C2 and push our route into the Black Pyramid. We found excellent climbing, and views into the spectacularly serac-laden cirque below Broad Peak, but also that warm afternoons meant massive avalanches ripping down all around the upper Godwin-Austen basin. Our own slopes became perilously soft, and Don was caught on the fixed line by a wet slide. I dragged our heaviest 150m rope strand up to a snow bench on the ridge at 6600m, but even this was narrow, sloping and soft. The ridge carried on steeply, the slopes on our right were powdery snow over ice, and on our left soft snow over rock. Lack of camp sites, fixed rope and rock protection, plus the warming weather, were adding up to bad news. We had to conclude that the only safe solution would be the Abruzzi.

BASE CAMP AND OTHER TEAMS

PV had to go home for business, leaving Joel and Chris II well trained in editing film

from Chris and Don, creating two-minute video "dispatches" for internet uploading. By now BC had become an international village: at the bottom of the strip was a massive Russian national team on a prolonged siege of the Direct West Face; next came a Korean team of three climbers, all called Kim (known by their teammates as "big", "middle" and "small" Kim), aided by three Sherpas; later they were joined by the Korean Women's Team built around Ms. Oh; just below us were a large Italian team of four climbers and several film-makers, solo Iranian climber Kazem Faridian and Portuguese climber Joao Garcia with one high-altitude porter. Above us, beyond the Czech team, was another 11-man Russian expedition, climbing the Abruzzi with oxygen, and finally a nine-man American team on the Cesen.

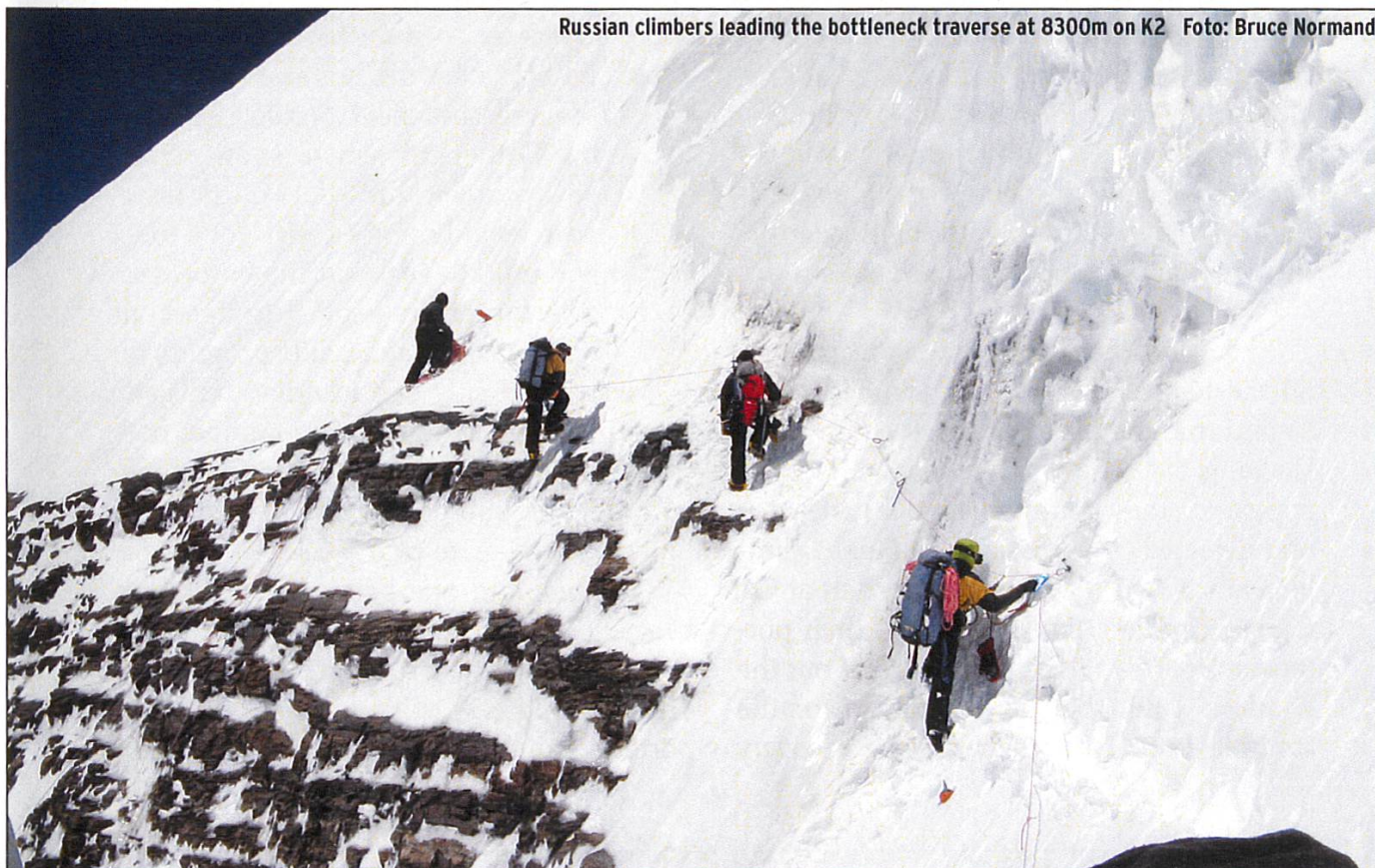
THE ABRUZZI ROUTE

The weather was still perfect, so Chris and Don packed equipment for the Abruzzi while I reclimbed our rope and stripped everything, arriving back at C1 in a tangle of 1km of red 5mm cord. The next morning we were back at ABC, talking with the Korean leader, Mr. Hong. His team was using this window to fix rope to C3. He said he would be happy with some of our ropes, and an undertaking that the Koreans should be the first team to summit. We set off up the history-laden slopes of the Abruzzi to C1.

On another beautiful day we enjoyed the best climbing yet. The route weaves up snow-fields through rock spurs, then follows a rock ridge, climbs a short, vertical wall and comes out at the base of House's Chimney, a steep groove of alpine ice leading to C2. Stunning panoramas unfolded over Xinjiang, the Gasherbrums, Broad Peak, Chogolisa and Masherbrum. It would be the only time we would see this section in good weather, but on this day our only problem



Sunrise on Gasherbrum I, II and III from the SE shoulder of K2 Foto: Bruce Normand



Russian climbers leading the bottleneck traverse at 8300m on K2 Foto: Bruce Normand

was the fixed line, an unpleasant spaghetti of ancient, knotted ropes and decaying anchors. At C2 we found one large Korean tent pitched a stack of destroyed tents, and spent two hours hacking in blue ice to make an adequate platform. Of our seven nights at C2, only the first half of the first one was still, and otherwise we saw only hurricane-force winds and driving spindrift.

Where June had delivered mostly fine weather, July brought storm conditions with only three windows. Lured by a three-day window, we climbed straight to C2 in snow and moderate winds, which made for very atmospheric filming. A fine morning deteriorated rapidly as Don led us up the left edge of the Black Pyramid. I took over at 7100m, where the ropes disappeared in metre-deep snow. I wallowed into the white-out trailing our own rope, finally finding the platform of C3 graced by another large, yellow Korean tent. I had to go back for my pack, and we all staggered into C3 at last light. On another fine morning, we abandoned a vain attempt to move upwards in waist-deep snow due to the avalanche threat. When Joel radioed from BC to tell us that this ethereal weather window was already closing, we decided to leave just as the Korean team arrived for a summit bid. In the event, they were to spend five nights weathering the next storm, with the Koreans in their tent and the Sherpas in ours.

The next weather window was decisive for all the teams. The Koreans climbed to C4 to find that the tent, oxygen, food, fuel and sleeping bags they had deposited had disappeared; they returned to BC exhausted and dejected. The Russians had eight climbers at C3, and a pair even left a tent at C4. Garcia, Faridian, the Italians and their porters all left gear at C3. Our team sat out the window: I felt that we should go for the summit, but Chris needed more recovery

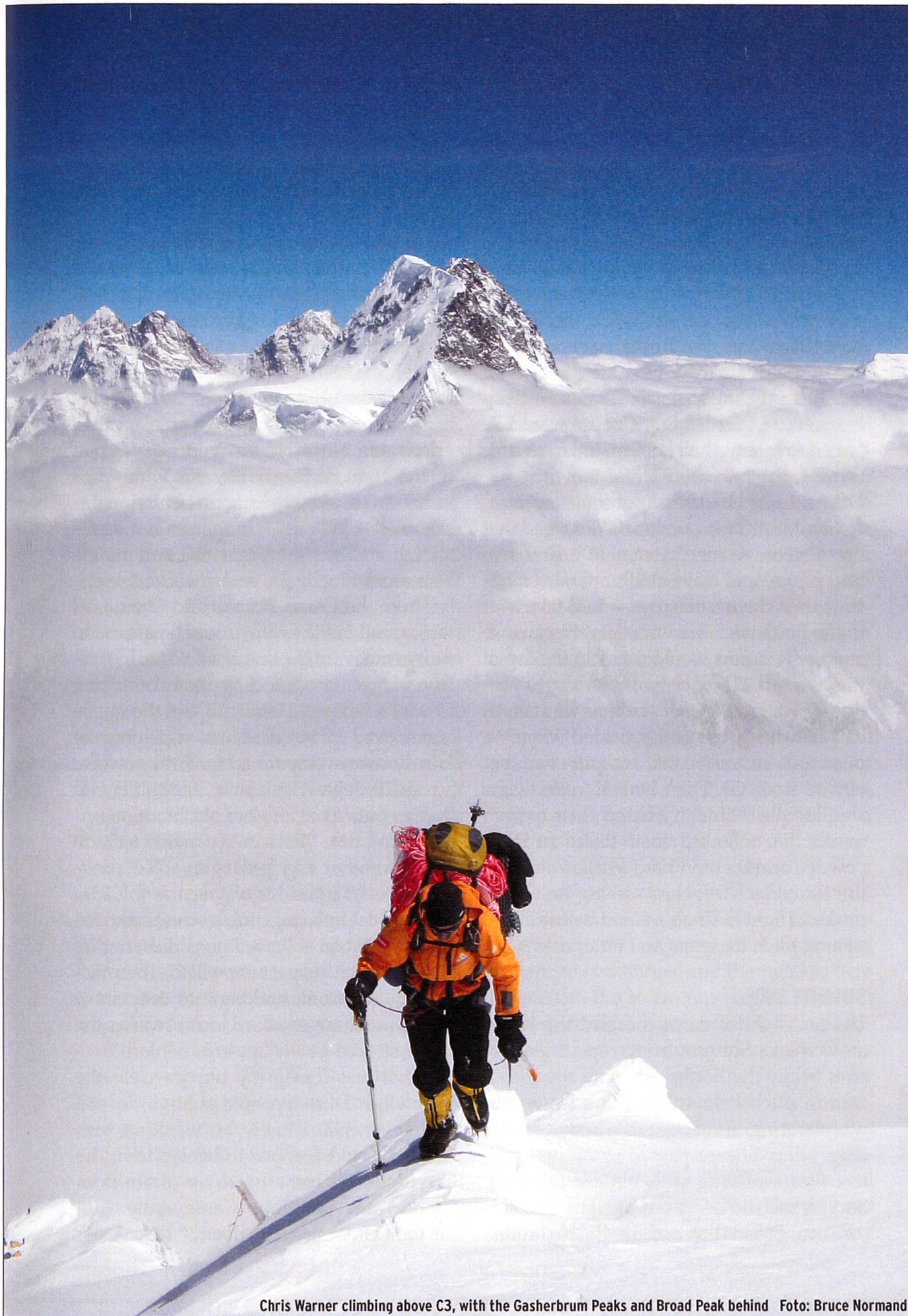
time. We used one perfect day to clear our previous C1. As we overanalysed forecasts for the next window, the other teams were clearly waiting for our cue.

SUMMIT PUSH

We set off before dawn on Sunday 15th July, in the usual driving snow. Even before C1, Joel's new forecast window had slipped by a day, offering Thursday and Friday as the best weather. On Monday we moved to C2, climbing the most technical parts of the route in wind and cold of a ferocity we had not yet encountered. Shortly behind us, the four-man Russian summit team arrived, finding their tent ripped and full of snow. Don helped them dig out their sleeping bags and mats, which they took to the two dilapidated Italian tents. The next morning the weather was as bad as ever, but we left at noon. This time I led us through now-standard storm conditions to 7100m, where Don took over, heaving his way through another metre of snow on top of our fixed line.

Wednesday at C3 arrived with better weather. All our gear, together with 400m of rope, added up to truly monstrous packs. Most climbers who die high on K2 fall off the 45-degree snowfield beside the serac above the Bottleneck, where snow conditions are invariably dreadful. Chris insisted that we would bring enough rope to fix not only the Bottleneck but the entire section to the top of the serac. I trudged out in the lead, making reasonable progress on the windward side of the ridge, but halfway to C4 the snow became entirely bottomless. With storm-force winds suddenly whipping around us, we were forced to set up an intermediate camp, C3.5. The Russians arrived, and one pair pushed through the next hundred metres, but also admitted defeat and retreated to C3.

The morning was still and bright. Garcia's porter set out first, then middle Kim and I



Chris Warner climbing above C3, with the Gasherbrum Peaks and Broad Peak behind Foto: Bruce Normand

made the running in waist-deep snow, and the Russian leader arrived to help with the final trail-breaking. The work was short but brutal, and soon all the teams were pulling into C4 at 7800m, seeing for the first time the serac and Bottleneck. Tents went up, except for the Russians, whose tent had disappeared, and they were forced to dig a snow cave. Faridian and the Korean women also arrived and set up, while the Italians brought up the rear. In the sweeping view down the South Face were 11 climbers far below, struggling to finish the Cesen: clearly even the four leading Czechs would be forced to mount their summit bid from a lower C4.

I went around to discuss summit-day strategy and distribute our rope. We agreed that the Korean women's team (Oh and two Sherpas) would leave at 10pm and start fixing, then the Korean men would take over to the Bottleneck, we would fix the traverse and the Russians would finish to the top of the serac. At 11pm we had both stoves producing water at speed. Another windstorm had blown up, but had subsided when we piled out at midnight. Nobody had yet moved from C4. Then both Korean teams shuffled past, hidden behind their oxygen masks. We followed their tracks in deep powder, and then on hard-packed snow as the Shoulder steepened, seeing only pinpricks of light both above and below in the silence, pitch darkness and bitter cold.

SUMMIT DAY

The first light of dawn revealed the Korean woman's Sherpas fixing rope three pitches below the Bottleneck, with the men's team a pitch below them. Suddenly Don was shouting, and above us a body was sliding. Nima Sherpa passed us on his back, feet first, wrestling with his axe to arrest, but instead slid away out of sight. The sun rose over Broad Peak and the Gasherbrums,

the spectacular vista a stark counterpoint to what we had just witnessed. The women's team was paralysed. The men's team began to descend: tears streaked big Kim's face as he passed us, and the other four wore masks of stone.

Chris moved up to the top anchor, fixed the rope and pushed on as I belayed. I followed Chris, gasping at every step, while Don was our gatekeeper, letting through only climbers with fixed ropes, essentially just the oxygen-assisted Russians. At Chris' belay we asked Roman if he could lead. He cracked his trademark big, gold-toothed grin, said "No problem" and churned off to the right of the Bottleneck with Chris in his wake. Now the queue behind us included the Italians, Portuguese and Iranian, Oh and her Sherpas, small and middle Kim ascending again, and one Czech climber from the Cesen. Roman and Chris fixed the strand and the mob trooped past me to wait again.

Don staggered up, feeling ill and thinking his day was over. I climbed past the queue and moved in beside Chris, watching the four Russians prepare to lead the traverse across 70-degree ice above the Bottleneck. Roman pulled out another old, blunt mountaineering axe. "Roman - use this technical tool." Another big, gold grin: "No problem". He smashed his way across the 15m of steep ice, placing three screws and an anchor. Nikolai followed, and did another pitch into the suspect snowfield. Then Victor took the front, hacking into deep snow to find purchase in a hard lower layer as the queue snaked slowly upwards behind.

When it was finally my turn to clear the serac edge, Don appeared behind me, still feeling terrible. I knew he wouldn't turn back now, and dropped in behind him. The Czech climber came up to us: „I am from Czech team. We climb Cesen route. Please look after me going down.“ Libor Uher

was feeling exhausted and exposed, and was looking for back-up. Visible on the final snow slope were the Russians and Koreans. The Italian leader, Daniele Nardi, Chris and I headed the oxygen-free charge, Garcia, Faridian, Don and Uher followed, while two more Italians, Mario Vielmo and Stefano Zavka, were far behind.

We pulled up onto the summit crest at 4:30pm. Chris filmed Nardi thanking his sponsors while I went to the true high point and took photographs of disappointingly small peaks arrayed far below us. The wind was still and the sun warm, with only a few clouds spread around. Chris came over to me, then Don, and then Uher and Faridian, for embraces and photographs all round. Then, as the sun sank lower, it was time to go. As Chris and I followed the weaker climbers down into the shadows, we met Vielmo and Zavka still ascending.

At the fixed line, Chris watched Don while I stayed at the back. As I waited for my teammates to clear the serac edge, taking sunset shots at 8400m, Vielmo and Zavka were out of sight on the summit. Don started moving faster, while it was my turn to feel ill. At the bottom of the fixed ropes, in full darkness, Chris and Don found Uher lying in the snow, hypothermic and barely coherent. They marched him to within 200m of C4 before having to drag him. By now the wind was picking up, and I passed the others to stagger on to C4 and get help for Uher. Garcia's porter started to prepare hot water, but the two Italians refused to offer any assistance. The Russians and Koreans had their hands full looking after themselves, so we piled Uher into our three-man tent. When Chris moved in, two lights were visible, still above the Bottleneck. By this time Vielmo had told Zavka he was afraid of frostbite and had moved ahead, carrying their only radio: the cardinal rule of mountaineering, never leave the weakest mem-

ber at the back, had been broken. Chris put Uher in his sleeping bag and made do with two down jackets, but for the next few hours melted snow. I was weak and spent the night wrapped around my bottle of hot fluid. As the winds rose further, Vielmo had to radio for help in getting back to C4, where he arrived alone at 1am.

DESCENT

By 7am it was starting to snow. We were slow and tired, and were just firing up the stoves when Garcia announced that he was leaving in 30 minutes with the Koreans and Russians. As they did so, the storm was growing to full white-out conditions. In our tent, I was better, Chris was wrecked, Don was now our strongest and Uher wasn't all there. The Italians came repeatedly to our tent: "We must leave. It is terrible out here. Nobody could survive in this." We kept telling them to go, as we worked to get ourselves and Uher ready, but clearly they were not capable of descending in these conditions, and needed us to lead.

When Don emerged, he found that one pair of crampons had been stolen from our vestibule. As he was digging all around the tent in a vain search, Nardi finally dropped the bombshell on us: "Stefano didn't come back last night", and yet here they were hell-bent on getting out. Uppermost on our minds were the possibility of the storm worsening, the certainty of deteriorating avalanche conditions, and the need to help Uher. With the storm now raging and with all the stronger climbers already descending, the best opportunity to look for Zavka had been lost. However, the Italians' near desperation to leave prevented any rational discussion on the possibility of a search.

Don set off into the white-out with no crampons, breaking trail for Nardi, Faridian and Michele Fait, the fourth Italian. Half an hour later I did the same, with Chris minding

Uher and Vielmo coming behind. After a radio call during one wait for a clearing in the white-out, Chris told me "Don may have broken his ankle". The inevitable had happened and he'd taken a long slide, but was already heading down the fixed ropes to C2. Chris decided to stay in C3 with Uher, sending me on to help Don. When I caught him at 7100m, we were back in the teeth of the storm. He wasn't making it look as though help was necessary, abseiling and hopping painfully but efficiently. On the last section above C2, a gap in the fixed line stopped him cold, and I had to climb back up to cut out a section of old rope to bridge it.

In C2, all three Italians and Faridian had occupied Garcia's three-man tent, making no efforts to sort out their own, or to consider the injured climber. Given the dark and stormy conditions, Don pushed into this tent as well. I was left to excavate the snow and garbage from the Italian tent, a process which took half the night by the time I'd prepared enough water. Someone had eaten the food we'd left with Garcia, and I was given Italian left-overs, but Don announced that he was fine. In fact he'd only been given 200ml to drink (black tea from Faridian), which caused a fluid crisis the next day as the Italians left without lighting a stove. Vielmo simply took Don's sleeping bag, and Nardi tried to take his down jacket.

At dawn, I was awoken by Nardi's departure. In a shouted exchange with Don over the roaring wind, I agreed to bring him water. When Nardi discovered how strong the wind was, he simply abseiled away, leaving Don on his own. At end of the rope above C1, Don had to scream at the Italians until one of their porters fixed a strand for him to reach camp. Chris, Uher and I caught him at the end of the fixed ropes, finally below the worst of the wind, where were helped immeasurably by members of Uher's team. They set ropes for Don to abseil into ABC,

where they had brought a stretcher. Chris stayed here with Don, while I returned to BC with the Czechs.

CONCLUSION AND HIKE OUT

BC saw first some handshakes with the Americans, then some rib-crushing bear-hugs from the Russians, then more embraces from the Czechs. In our camp Joel, Chris II, Didar and Javed were almost overcome by far more emotion than I had the energy to muster. The following morning saw perhaps the triumphal moment of K2 2007, when 34 men and one woman from the Czech, Russian, German (just over from Broad Peak), American and Pakistani (BC staff) teams stretchered Don through the icefall to BC. I slept helplessly through it all. A Belgian doctor with Garcia's team came to bandage Don's ankle. Our attention turned to getting him a helicopter, but the weather remained uncooperative.

In the Italian camp, a self-imposed media embargo included refusal to talk to Zavka's family or the Italian Embassy, both of whom tried contacting us. Then false statements were made that they had helped Don, and that Don's evacuation was the reason they had not waited for Zavka. Next, their non-climbing leader began calling his embassy every hour for a helicopter evacuation. When we asked the American team to carry Don down to Broad Peak BC to improve his evacuation chances, the Italians felt compelled to walk, despite their claimed injuries, to Concordia. In the end, the Pakistani airforce used an evening window in the clouds, some four days after the return to K2 BC, to lift all the evacuation cases.

At K2 BC, Chris and I packed our climbing and electronic gear. On the morning of our departure, we gave away mountains of untouched food to the Americans, and strode off as well as our weakened frames could manage. From Concordia, and our

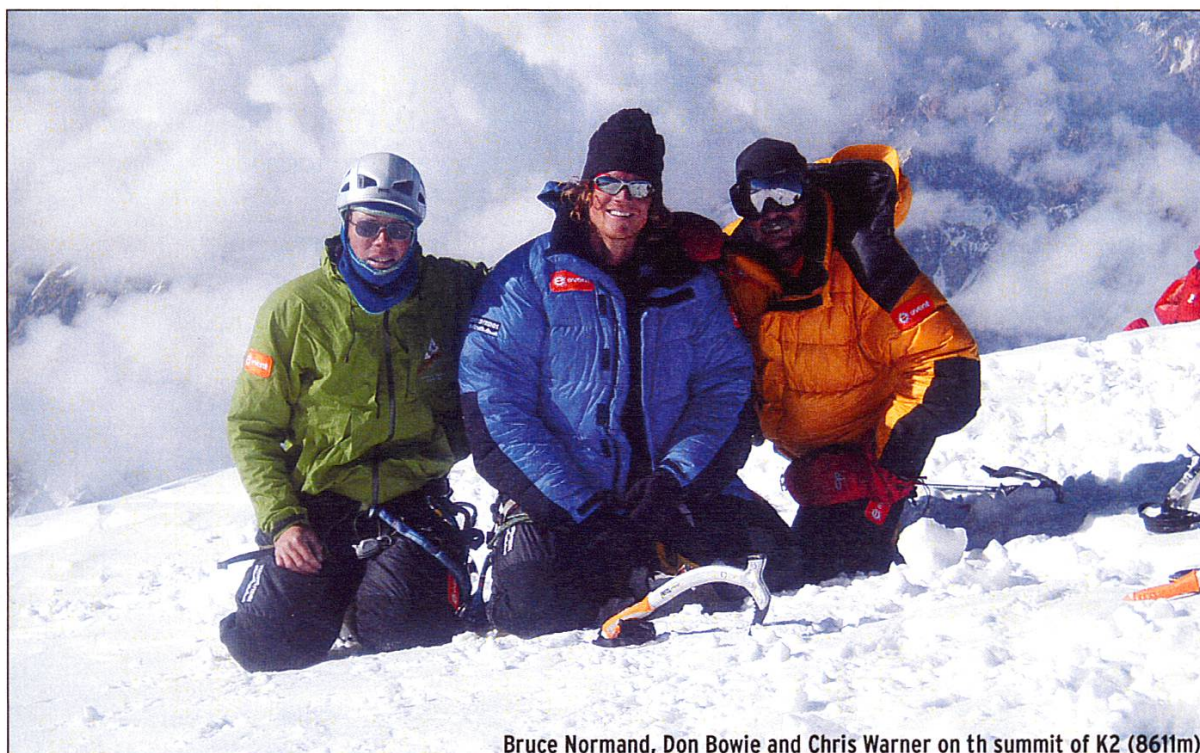
final glimpses of K2 and Gasherbrum IV, we wandered down the Baltoro on another leaden day, far behind our porters. The day past Paiyu brought us views of Cathedral, the Trangos and Uli Biaho on a spectacular morning, which lapsed into unaccustomed heat on the long march to Jola. In Askole, an ATP jeep was waiting to ferry us to Skardu, where we waited for two days as our gear arrived. Then we drove down the Karakoram Highway, through dramatic, barren mountains to Chilas, then winding high above the Indus gorge to Besham, over interminable foothills into the greenery of Azad Kashmir, and finally onto the plains and to Islamabad. The debriefing was uneventful other than the absence of our LO, a breach which seemed set to earn him a serious reprimand. The final farewell from our friends at ATP was phrased in terms of "when we return next year", not "if".

PERSONAL REMARKS

K2 is known as „the mountaineer's mountain". Climbing it was for me a departure

from my usual new routes and exploration. While using the normal route was not the intention, teamwork, safety and reaching a summit are always paramount. It was a challenge, and to succeed without oxygen or drugs an achievement. Perhaps I am more proud that, in an atmosphere of egotism, selfishness and incompetence, we were able to help create an attitude among the K2 climbers of cooperation, mutual assistance and hard work. Finally, we proved quite comprehensively the falsehood and stupidity of the "8000m myth" now so prevalent on the easier high peaks, that at such heights it is impossible to carry equipment (ropes, stoves, sleeping bags, even tents), one cannot perform normal climbing functions like belaying, and under no circumstances could one ever rescue another climber. After K2 I can say with authority that there are never any excuses for violating the fundamental rules of mountaineering.

*By Bruce Normand
www.sharedsummits.com*



Bruce Normand, Don Bowie and Chris Warner on the summit of K2 (8611m)