

1978 American K2 expedition

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An American expedition of 12 climbers and 4 high-altitude porters, led by James Whittaker, succeeded in climbing K2 in September by a route which followed the entire length of the NE ridge, traversed across the E face below the summit pyramid and reached the Abruzzi Ridge for the final section. Three of the 4 summit climbers did not use oxygen at any point, the first time that K2 has been climbed without such aid.

To avoid possible conflicts with the British K2 expedition, the Americans left very late, not arriving in Pakistan until 15 June and Base Camp (5000m) until 5 July. By this time a heavy monsoon season was being felt, even in the Karakoram. For the next 2 months, the team was plagued by a series of 4- to 7-day storms, which were never separated by more than 3 days of fair weather and repeatedly disrupted attempts to establish the higher camps. The lower route followed the 1976 Polish attempt and placed 5 camps at 5550m, 6160m, 6800m, 6950m and 7690m. The major technical difficulties were steep ice in the couloirs leading from the glacier to the ridge crest between Camps 1 and 2, and a long, steep traverse along the jagged ridge crest between Camps 3 and 4. The end of the NE ridge at 7690m was finally reached on 18 August, but storms prevented a camp from being established there until 28 August. The following afternoon, James Wickwire and Louis Reichardt found a camp-site at 7950m, from which it was hoped to complete the direct route up the NE face, on which the Poles had come so close to being successful in 1976. Storms prevented an assault, however, and deposited large amounts of snow on the upper mountain. Rick Ridgeway and John Roskelley made an attempt on 6 September, but reached only 8000m before becoming convinced that potential avalanche conditions were so dangerous that they should not continue.

Seeking better conditions, Terry Bech, Wickwire and Reichardt traversed from Camp 5 (7690m) across the E face to the Abruzzi Ridge on 5 September, encountering no technical difficulties but very deep snow. From a new Camp 6 at 7850m, Reichardt and Wickwire struggled for 13 hours to reach the summit (8611m) late in the afternoon of 7 September. Reichardt made the ascent without supplementary oxygen. On the descent Wickwire lagged behind and was benighted, spending a miserable night in his bivouac sack but was able to continue in the morning. He refused offers of help from the next ascending pair. Meanwhile Ridgeway and Roskelley had moved across to the new Camp 6. They were able to guide Reichardt with their headlamps to camp after he had overshoot it in the dark by some 50m. The next day, 8 September, Ridgeway and Roskelley climbed to the summit without oxygen in 12 hours, despite very severe winds. Foul weather and fatigue made the descent a horror. The summit climbers did not reach Base Camp until 12 September. The expedition left the next morning and reached Skardu on 23 September.