The idea of a women's expedition to Broad Peak took shape in base camp of the Polish Women's Expedition to K2 of 1982, when our chances for better weather and a successful summit assault were fading away irrevocably. Four of us intended to try K2 again the next year: Anka Czerwińska, Anka Okopińska and I from Poland, Christine de Colombel from France. Participation by Wanda Rutkiewicz, the leader of the K2 expedition, was out of the question due to the state of her broken leg, but nevertheless she offered to help in the organisation stage. The permission would be paid with the money we managed to save on K2 — we thought — the lacking funds we would have to arrange ourselves; we counted very much on Christine, who had already proved her abilities to solve such problems. As the permission for K2 seemed rather uncertain, we had to think of a reserve goal — our choice fell on the neighbour of K2 — Broad Peak (8047m), a mountain as yet unclimbed by women. The whole team co-operated in arranging the food depot for the next year.

The first blow came on the return journey from K2: all the money we had saved with such an effort had been stolen! The idea of a separate permission went with the money. We had no other solution but to join some other expedition. To the five letters we sent to the leaders of the expeditions to K2 and Broad Peak only one positive answer came. The man ready to take the risk of including in his team four unknown women was Stefan Warner, the leader of the Swiss expedition to three eight-thousanders in Karakoram: Gasherbrum I and II, and Broad Peak. This gave us an opportunity to act independently in the mountains: while the Swiss would be attacking Gasherbrums, we could tackle Broad Peak.

Permission and support from our authorities — the Association of Polish Alpine Clubs APAC — settled, we started hasty preparations (time was already short) and to search for the lacking foreign currency. We needed a mere trifle — merely twice the amount we were given by the APAC! Anka Czerwińska agreed to supervise the organising work; undoubtedly she also was the one who put most of her time to complete the preparations. Most of our equipment was sent to Pakistan by the lorry at the disposal of the APAC.

A month before the planned start we got a short telegram from Christine: participation impossible. The loss was important; she is an excellent climber as well as an excellent organiser of finances!. We were close to postponing the whole thing for a year. On the other hand, it was unbearable to think that all our efforts would be wasted only because of money. What was more, we had serious doubts if the next year would be better.

At that moment two international organisations came with the invaluable financial aid: AWHE from the USA and RHM from Switzerland. The amounts were not striking but for us every dollar was important. In spite of this the
expedition's budget looked miserable. The simplest solution was to reduce our team. If there was no money for three, Anka Okopińska suggested that Anka Czerwińska and I should go. Two women to scale an eight-thousander? Nobody had tried such a thing before. The idea was frightening and luring at the same time. Could we manage? Certainly, it would be better to have even one more member, but, if there was no other way, why not actually try? However, till the last moment we made desperate efforts to get more funds. A telegram expected impatiently in Rawalpindi blew away all our illusions: there was no money for the third participant. Only we two were left: Anka Czerwińska and I, and from this moment on we had only ourselves to count on.

Start

Twenty-two porters carried the 550kg of our luggage from Dusso, the last village we could reach with a jeep. It was a real pleasure to walk with such a small group. We had no problems with finding porters, even though there were two big expeditions ahead: the Swiss who started about a week before us and the Spanish Navarra expedition — a heavy classic style expedition to K2 with 300 porters, tables, armchairs and many bottles of wine — we passed them on the way. The Pakistani liaison officer specially assigned to our two-woman team had no difficulties in handling our porters and convincing them that it was worth while to make the way in a shorter time. We took ten days to reach the base of Broad Peak.

Base camp was established on 24 May — it was situated on the moraine almost in front of the snow field leading to the steep chimney — the beginning of our route. To reach the snow field we had to cross a zone of seracs — as the terrain was very unstable, we made a new route in the labyrinth of icy giants every time we went up or down. Base camp? Well, it was too much to describe two tents — one which was a kitchen, a dining room and our sleeping room at the same time, and the smaller one, pitched warily at some distance and destined for our liaison officer. For almost a month he was the only man who greeted us on our returns from the mountain.

Shortly after arranging base camp we rushed to the food depot made the year before. If it was empty, we would soon run short of basic items. The site proved ideal for its purpose: everything was in place. We came back smiling under 30kg heavy rucksacks, each of us pushing a plastic barrel ahead of her.

Even before we started our offensive, Broad Peak took toll of another climber, Helmut Ruedele, the leader of the German expedition who did not come back from his solitary assault on the summit of Broad Peak North. Efforts to find his body were in vain. Near the huge boulder commemorating the accident of the three Polish climbers who paid with their lives for the first ascent of Broad Peak Middle there appeared a stone cairn bearing the inscription 'Unseren Freund — Helmut Ruedele — 30.5.83'. The Germans decided to abandon their expedition.

Making Camps

Camp I was established on 26 May at 5800m on a small rocky patch of the ridge leading to the col between the main and middle summits of Broad Peak. This was a perfect site for a camp, the tent we put up there we called Palace. It failed us only once under a terrible windstorm which broke on 1 June.
2 Broad Peak from NE ridge of K2 showing the Middle (higher) and North summits

Photo: Janusz Ferenski
We weathered the storm in newly established Camp 2 (6350m). The whole night long with our heads and shoulders we held up the walls of our shelter pressing down on us under the fury of the hurricane. The good old Dunlop had been carefully mended after the last expedition but, as the poles did not fit properly, it could not be pitched solidly. Without this shelter we would not have any chance to survive. The tent held and in the morning the wind turned to a heavy snowfall. The descent was a hard trial because of the then prevailing icy conditions. Front-pointing on snow-covered green ice while traversing a sheer slope just below Camp 2 has long remained in our memory.

Stormy weather kept us tent-bound for several days. The first try to establish Camp 3 (7-9 June) failed: in the end we stopped helpless, unable to see anything in thick clouds which engulfed the whole mountain. However, we did not waste this time: we managed to mend and rebuild the tents of Camp 1 and 2 and to shift Camp 2 some 150m higher to a better shielded site. We found out that after the last snowfalls the conditions had changed radically; ice was replaced with deep soft snow. While plodding up, one left a deep tunnel in the snow drifts. We are both of rather moderate height so the changes in leading were frequent and carefully observed.

It was not until 14 June that we reached Camp 3 (7100m). We almost lost a chance to make this camp that day because the German tent on which we counted had been completely buried in the snow swept incessantly from the upper slopes. Chance came to our help: fumbling with the ice-axe near some sticks protruding in the snow I noticed a piece of red cloth — this was the tent we were looking for! Digging it out of the snow and pitching it again took us three hours of hard work. We would have rather brought our own tent up there! What's more, the only pole had been broken, and the nylon walls were full of holes. Fortunately, by that time we were quite experienced at mending poles and, having learned by experience, we carried a needle and thread with us. Sewing lasted till dusk.

First Attempts
Our first summit try on the following day (15 June) literally got stuck in waist deep snow drifts, after several hours of hard struggles. Clouds which began swirling around the face gave the signal to turn back. The descent was unforgettable. Broad Peak evidently decided to punish our impudence because it set yet another storm upon us. After groping our way in the blizzard, falling into crevasses which were well out of our route, discovering at the last moment that we were on a ridge leading nowhere, well, we were really happy to see our base camp.

On 25 June we were coming down again from Camp 3 — tired and discouraged more than ever. Our second try failed, the reason being the same as before — damned snow slowing our progress, sapping our strength. This time we got higher, finding a passage through a barrier of seracs halfway to the col; from this place the col seemed to be very close. However, the snow above was even worse, reaching Anka’s hips and my waist and, besides, there came thick clouds — now a tradition — almost blotting out any view. Bivouac made no sense, we were forced to give up.

My low spirits were aggravated by the sad discovery or, rather, confirmation of
my day-long fears: my toes were blue and swollen, I put on my shoes with difficulty. Most probably I had got frostbite! And all that had happened when the weather at last cleared, when the clouds disappeared from the sky, presaging a longer period of good weather (it was actually the only period of good weather during our entire stay in the mountains). This day — the day of our descent — the summit was reached by four members of an English expedition under Doug Scott. They got acclimatised earlier on Lobsang (over 7000m) and attacked Broad Peak in an alpine style. They followed our steps from base camp. Well, they probably did not mind that the trail had already been broken up to 7700m.

In base camp we thought over the situation. The main reason for our two failures was evidently this 1000m in height between Camp 3 and the summit, which, combined with snow conditions, was impossible to make in one day. Our plan was to move the last camp higher, close to the seracs. To save the time of clear weather we decided to go straight to Camp 2 and from there reach the new camp. However, we had to stay a few days to rest and to cure my frostbite, which fortunately was not as bad as it had looked at first. The weather had to hold!

The day before our start a group of Swiss with Stefan Wörner appeared to our surprise in base camp. They had climbed Gasherbrum I and II and now were heading for Broad Peak to accomplish their goal. They wanted to set off for the summit the same night. So we would not be climbing alone. But it was unavoidable. We could not delay our start any longer!

**Summit**

29 June. We started at 2.30am, a couple of hours after the Swiss. From the beginning a nice surprise: after several sunny days the snow was hard, and conditions just excellent. We were going quickly, like never before, feeling perfectly fit. At dawn we reached Camp 1, at 10am we were in Camp 2 catching two Swiss there. I thought we had to seize the opportunity and go straight to Camp 3. Though the sky was still cloudless I was afraid of the wind which any moment could bring a change of weather. We could not lose this chance! I managed to convince Anka that it was better to continue. That this was a lot for one day (more than 2000m in height) we learned to our cost; reaching Camp 3 tired, we were grateful to our Swiss colleagues who made their camp close to ours and helped us in digging our tent out of the wind-packed snow.

In our tent we found two English (one of them Don Whillans) who announced the shocking news that in a higher camp they had left the body of their friend who had died most probably of pulmonary oedema which had developed suddenly on the way. The news blew away all our zeal for the summit; we had to convince ourselves that we should not give up at that moment.

We hardly slept this night, the incessant wind tugging frenziedly at the tent’s nylon sides and forcing a spray of snow powder inside which covered everything: rucksacks, sleeping bags and our faces.

It was not until 7.30am that we set out. The Swiss had gone on their way long since, their footsteps almost obliterated. The snow was hard and we were moving quickly, trying in this way to protect ourselves from the cold. By the time we had reached the seracs the sun appeared, but the wind was still strong. I tried to pass quickly the ill-fated camp. Still I could not help feeling that we were striving for
our goal literally over dead bodies. I almost rushed up along the fixed rope which ended the passage of the seracs. From this place the known view opened to the col which seemed so very close. Only then I forgot my blue mood and thought — how was it? — that we had the summit in our pocket.

I reached the col at about 12.30pm. The way ahead followed the long rock-snow ridge, in places sharp and exposed to cornices. Only the first outcrop was outstanding and steep — it led to the so-called second summit; sometimes taken for the main summit, both peaks being separated by a long, wearisome, in the end almost flat ridge.

At the base of the outcrop I met Lori (Erhard Loretan, the quickest of the Swiss group) who was already descending from the summit. He assured me the rope was not necessary, fixed ropes had been left by previous expeditions to belay more difficult sections. I decided to go alone, at my own pace, not waiting for Anka who was behind at the col. The strong wind forced me to move quickly, I was afraid of further frostbite. I thought I would wait for Anka on the top.

Marcel Ruedi, the second Swiss descending from the summit told me the summit was one hour away. I recognised it at once, it looked just like the picture in Schmuck’s book about the first successful expedition to Broad Peak. Ahead of me I could see two tiny figures clearly visible on the skyline, moving slowly up along the ridge. Then they stopped; then turned down.

3.30pm. The main summit greeted me with gusts of wind. Visibility was perfect, chains of mountains filled the horizon. Only one giant rose above showing its triangular face cut with a crack — like a scar. K2 — the mountain of my dreams — was looking at me proud and indifferent. I took out a camera and quickly took several pictures of the panorama. I tucked into the snow a little banner I took for the summit. In a moment my fingers became white cold and stiff. I gave up the idea of staying here any longer.

At the col I caught up with the two Swiss. I learned from them that Anka had decided to turn back earlier. Later on we established that the point she reached was half-way between the second and main summits. I sighed with relief when I saw two small figures down near the seracs, Anka and Marcel.

The goal of our expedition had been reached. Now began the descent.