When I investigated the Rupal Face in 1963 with Toni Kinshofer, I established that it had some definite weak points. At that time, we looked at the face from three positions — South, East and West — and realised that there were other possibilities in addition to the ascent of the SW Ridge (Kinshofer’s Route). The SE Spur particularly fascinated me — a direct ascent from Tap Alp — together with the E Pillar — a particularly hard route, which started on the upper Bazhin Glacier. The Austrian expedition, led by Hannes Schell, made the first ascent of the Kinshofer Route in 1976. The SE Spur was climbed on 27 and 28 June 1970, by the Messner brothers, Felix Kuen and Peter Scholz, during my sixth Nanga Parbat Expedition.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the first German Nanga Parbat Expedition, led by my brother, Willy Merkl, I wanted to lead a Jubilee Expedition in 1982, to the E Pillar by a new route, the ‘Jubilee Direttissima’. On 8 July we set up our base camp, below the left moraine of the Bazhin Glacier. As usual, I was the leader, doctor and camera man. The other members of the party were Schorsch Ritter, deputy leader, who had been on my expeditions in 1978 to Everest and in 1980 to Kanchenjunga, Valentin Demmel, who had been on Nanga Parbat twice before, Hartmut Münchenbach, Doris Kustermann, store-keeper, and Dr Joachim Zeitz (he and Jörg Rosenkranz looked after the baggage transport from Karachi to Gilgit). All these came from Germany. In addition, we had with us two Poles, Andrzej Napoleon Bielun and Tadeusz (Teddy) Piotrowski, the Swiss, Ueli Bühler, and Captain Nadir, a Pakistani from Gilgit.

I had already studied all available photographs of the E Pillar at home, and discussed them often with Schorsch Ritter. We had come to the conclusion that the dead straight ice gully, leading upwards for 200 m on the northern edge of the pillar, seemed the most promising route.

The other edge of the pillar had been investigated up to nearly 6000 m during my 1970 expedition but, recognising the danger from avalanches, was abandoned.

The E Pillar starts at 3800 m on the Bazhin Glacier and goes steeply up from there, tracing a bold line across ice slopes broken by rocks, straight to the South Summit. This is therefore the shortest route to the main summit of Nanga Parbat. The E Pillar is a rock and ice climb, with an average angle of about 45 degrees. Several steep ice sections are at an angle of about 80 degrees, about 800 m are rock, mainly Grade 2 to 3, with a few Grade 4 sections, and the remaining 3000 m, steep ice at angles between 50° and 65°. There is extreme danger from stone and ice falls between 4600 m and 5800 m and avalanche danger between 3800 m and 4800 m.

At the start of the climb, at 3800 m on the Bazhin Glacier, a rock outcrop had to be climbed. This outcrop, which we called ‘The Dragon’, because of the shape of
The E Pillar of Nanga Parbat showing route of 1982 ascent
its snow covering, protected the climb to Camp 1 (4600m) from the violent ice-avalanches which fell at quite regular intervals from the NE Face of the Bazhin Basin. The Camp 1 tents were pitched on snow at first, then later on rock; previously they were sited in the lower part of the 2000m long ice gully, the ‘Great Couloir’, which was still fairly open.

Our route went up the left hand side of the gully, right to the top. The many ice and stone avalanches which hurtled down from the towering, cathedral-like top of the gully were the main problem.

On 10 July, 300m of fixed ropes were fixed up the Dragon and a more avalanche-proof route in the gully, up to Camp 1 (4600m) was forced through. Three days later, the first tent stood there, thanks due to Ueli Bühler’s skill in building dry walls, which made it possible to flatten out a moderately safe platform. The second tent was destroyed by falling stones, ice and avalanches three times during the course of the expedition as it stood on an exposed rock slab, and later we removed it.

During the next few days, Demmel, Piotrowski and Bielun secured the next stage, which was to lead up to Camp 2. However, this success, and our pleasure at such quick progress, soon gave way to perplexity as to just where, half way up the gully, we should put the tents of Camp 2. The ice slopes of the gully ran very steeply up to the rock edge, so that it appeared at first that there would be no chance of finding a level place on which to pitch a tent among the steep rock slabs. We considered bringing in our metal platform, which we had previously used on the SW Face of Everest, to set up Camp 2, but again Ueli Bühler’s ingenuity stood us in good stead. He, Schorsch Ritter and Hartmut Münchenbach made two fairly flat platforms for the tents, high above the bed of the gully on the left-hand rock edge, after two days hard and dirty work on the crest of a jagged ridge.

Of course, at 5100m Camp 2 was too low, but in the Great Couloir there was no possibility of pitching the tents higher up, so Camp 2 stayed on the left-hand rock band, at the end of a small zig-zag, diagonal snow field.

From this base the couloir had to be followed upwards to its top. On 23 July, Piotrowski, Bielun and Bühler succeeded in reaching the ridge, and thence the central ice field, by way of a narrow 70° snow gully. The climb from the Great Couloir to the central ice field was extremely dangerous, due to stone fall, and was much too difficult for our Hunza porters, so they only carried loads to Camp 3 once. Because of the danger, the upper part of the Great Couloir could not really be climbed by day and I suggested that, as on our 1970 Nanga Parbat expedition, we should transport stores at night only, setting off at midnight, to make the eight-hour ascent to Camp 3, on the central ice field. On 29 July, Bühler and Münchenbach were able to reach Camp 3 at 5900m. This was an oasis of peace and relaxation for the climbers, after the days of nervous tension exacted by the couloir over the previous fortnight.

On 1 August, Schorsch Ritter tried to persuade the porters at Camp 2 to carry loads up to Camp 3. About midnight they set off climbing down about 50m from Camp 2 into the gully where, on the so-called ‘Wailing Wall’, the loads brought up from Camp 1 hung on a fixed rope. Silently, Ritter worked his way up the 50°-60° couloir on the fixed ropes by the light of his head lamp. They kept well
Camp 2 pitched on the drystone platform built by Ueli Bühler. Nanga Parbat E Pillar

Photo: Prof. Dr. Herrigkoffer
spaced out, so that the 9mm rope would not be strained too much. Ritter knew
that a rope in good condition would not break, but he was afraid that it could
have been cut in different places by the fierce stone falls of previous days. After a
short time his suspicions were confirmed: at first, it seemed strange that he could
haul in so much rope. But then, when he held a frayed end in his hands, he realised
that the climb could not continue that night. His hours of discussion with the
porters, throughout the day, trying to get them to go to Camp 3, had been in vain.

The stone falls in the upper part of the Great Couloir were in fact so severe, and
causd so much damage, that at the end of the expedition the fixed rope between
Camp 1 and 2 had hardly a 50m section without a knot.

On 4 August, Napoleon Bielun came back injured to base camp. Whilst
climbing up to Camp 3 a stone had cut open his right hand, between thumb and
first finger. For the third time on this expedition, I got out my needle and thread
and stitched him together again, as I had stitched up a porter and the Sirdar
Sultan, on previous occasions. It was 'no problem' for our Napoleon and after a
few days, he went up high again — before the stitches had been removed. Doris
Kustermann made him a special glove which he wore on top of the bandages. A
few days later, he was back again with grazed skin under his arms — just before
Camp 2, he had missed the safety rope whilst unhooking himself from one to the
other, and fell 500m into the ice gully, landing in front of Camp 1 completely
soaked through and slightly shocked. However, a few days later, it was still 'no
problem', and he went up high again, later bivouacking at 7000m because he
could not reach Camp 5 in one day. Typical of Napoleon Bielun! But he was not
the only unlucky one. Captain Nadir fell 200m into the gully at the end of the
expedition and suffered a cracked bone in the left knee. In addition, we notched
up at least 12 injuries from falling stones — a high accident rate and more than on
any of my 19 earlier expeditions. But in spite of bodily injuries and longer term
damage, at least all expedition members and porters got safely back home.

On the central ice field, our route met that of Yannick Seigneur; the
Frenchman had set up his Camp 2 on a hump of ice which now, two months later
in the season, turned out to be a dangerous serac, about to break off. During the
course of our expedition this ice balcony fell, bit by bit, down on to the Bazhin
Glacier — and with it, some of the remains of the French camp, such as helmets,
tent material and other equipment.

Our third camp at 5900 m was in the middle of the central ice field, on the edge
of a crevasse. Our two Hauser Boomerang tents stood on a good safe site. Later
we placed them 30m higher and even nearer to the crevasse. At Camp 3 there was
no fear of avalanches and stone falls, as there had been in the two lower camps.
There, at Camps 1 and 2, the tents were swept away several times by avalanches
or the tent fabric was torn by falling stones. It was very lucky that no-one was
staying in these camps when the danger was at its greatest. These two camps cost
us many tents and on the day that the expedition ended, our tent at Camp 1 was
swept off the rock spur again by a violent avalanche during the night.

After two hard days work, on 31 July, Ritter and Bühler reached the top of the
400m 55°-65° ice-wall on the central ice field for the first time, and made the route
secure. Whilst making the ascent they came across fixed ropes, left by the French
during their attempt in spring this year, which were frozen in and unusable.
The French had chosen a route right in the middle of the pillar and reached a height of almost 7000 m on it. Bad weather forced this group, amongst which were several Germans, to make a descent, during which the leader, Seigneur, fell in a wet snow avalanche, breaking a rib and bruising his pelvis. He had to be flown out by helicopter to Gilgit.

Camp 4 at 6500 m was not set up until 9 August. This camp stood on an ice ridge, completely safe from avalanches. At first it consisted of one single Boomerang tent and then later was reinforced with a second tent by Napoleon Bielun. Thus the departure point for summit attempts was established.

On 14 August, Schorsch Ritter and Teddy Piotrowski found a route from this camp, across the first ice field, which tapered off towards the rocks. At 7 o’clock, after a long day, the two finally reached a suitable camp site for Camp 5 at 7500 m on the second ice field. By the time a platform had been hacked out of the ice to pitch a tent on, it was night. Whilst he was working, Schorsch Ritter let his insulation mat slip from his hands and it disappeared down the slopes, never to be seen again. The two of them spent the night with only half an isomat to protect them from the ice-cold ground.

Next morning, they awoke at Camp 5 to brilliant blue skies, and decided to make an attempt on the summit that day. At 8 am Ritter set out from Camp 5 and climbed the second ice field. Piotrowski followed, a long distance behind, an hour later. A strip of rock, threatened by ice and stone falls, separated the middle ice field from the much steeper third one, which led up to the South Saddle and the South Summit. Schorsch Ritter again led, and found the route to a steep snow ridge, which they then climbed. Teddy was able to fix the short piece of left-over rope which he carried, around a protruding piece of rock to safeguard the descent. They made quick progress up to about 7700 m, in spite of the sticky wet snow into which Schorsch Ritter sank chest-deep at times. Then this snow got very deep and he hardly made any progress, so he tried to cross over to reach ice or hard-packed snow. Backwards and forwards he went, like a polar bear at the zoo, and could not believe that further progress simply was not possible. Teddy was also having trouble on this steep section and went 20 m higher with difficulty. It began to snow, the sun had already disappeared behind the South Summit and it became bitterly cold. They both decided that they would have to go down, to gather their strength to make another attempt next day.

When they arrived at their lonely tent on the second ice field at Camp 5, they were surprised and delighted to find Hartmut Münchbach and Ueli Bühler, reinforcements for next day. Bühler was feeling stronger again after the stomach infection he had had at base camp, and Hartmut seemed to be in ‘bombing’ form. The two who had come up had brought not only provisions but also more rope with them, so that the descent of the difficult section on the third ice field, below the summit, could be safeguarded. That night they were all convinced that the summit would be conquered next day, as they assumed that the tracks ploughed through the endless powder snow on 15 August, by Schorsch Ritter, would still be there to make the ascent easier.

At 5 o’clock next morning, Camp 5 came to life. The four men, each close behind the next, climbed the second ice field, to the east of the seracs. At first Bühler led, but after about 50 m on this still fairly flat terrain, he asked Schorsch
Climbing up to Camp 5 through the first icefield on the E Pillar of Nanga Parbat
Ritter to take over again. Ritter ploughed on, increasing the gap between him and the others. Behind came Münichenbach, then Piotrowski and last Bühler, who had still not quite recovered from his illness.

The previous day's tracks made progress easier, and soon Schorsch Ritter was standing again on the flat snow ridge which bisects the third ice field. He could see Ueli Bühler, about 150 m below, taking long rests, leaning on his ice-axe again and again. His rests were getting longer and longer, only 50 m above the camp, and he told the others that he felt terribly tired. Schorsch Ritter suggested that he should go down to Camp 5 again, and wait there for them. Ritter, still the route-finder, meanwhile reached the previous high point, a vertical ice-wall, where he fixed a rope and then pressed on upwards. The sheer ice, covered with one and a half metres of powder snow, was so difficult, that it took a whole hour to climb 50 m. The heat on the glacier made the task even harder, melting the snow on his red oversuit, and since he was not wearing windproof trousers, the water ran into his Neoprene gaiters, so that he was soaked through and water was squelching in his boots.

Whilst Münichenbach and Piotrowski were following, the three of them saw Bühler emerge from the cloud far below like a spectre, but he appeared to be going upwards, still following their tracks. The trio pressed on upwards, through the deep snow, taking turns to lead. What looked like firm snow or hard ice from a distance actually kept turning out to be waist deep wet snow. Snow avalanches slid down from the slopes above, past the climbers.

It took Schorsch Ritter almost one and a half hours for the last 70 m and finally he stood at 7950 m, about 90 m below the South Summit. It was late afternoon and even though they were so close to their goal, all three were in agreement that at 5.30 pm, it was better to return to Camp 5 to avoid having to bivouac, which, on a very cold night, could have had serious consequences. Having seen nothing of Ueli Bühler during the descent, they assumed that he had got down to the camp. They were therefore all the more amazed and horrified when they suddenly saw him again, climbing far above on the summit slopes. They tried to make contact by shouting but without success.

We knew that Ueli is a brilliant solo mountaineer — a few months previously he did the North Face of the Eiger in winter in 8½ hours solo, so we naturally believed that he had set off for the summit of his own accord. The fact was he was alone did not worry us unduly but what did disturb us was the fact that Ueli would have to bivouac and was completely unequipped. This very night, according to the weather reports, autumn would begin on Nanga Parbat and the temperature at 8000 m, which until now had been around -19°C, would fall to -35°C. Clearly, he would either reach the South Summit, at the end of the Pillar, and come back badly frostbitten — or not come back at all and become the 41st victim of Nanga Parbat.

But we also knew Ueli's attitude to the mountain. He had been studying it for a long time, the avalanches which had fallen from the Pillar and the Bazhin Basin — and he had taken into account the stone falls which are most prevalent when the sun shines — the reason why all movements between Camps 1 and 3 took place only at night. In spite of his youth (he was only 21) Ueli was already a very prudent climber. All this calmed our fears, but the fact remained that he was
making this attempt without bivouac gear, without food supplies, without a cooker and hence without drink.

Ritter and Piotrowski stayed at Camp 5 and waited for two days for Ueli. Münichenbach went down to Camp 4, ostensibly to make radio contact with Base Camp, since the radio at Camp 5 had broken down, but continued his descent to Base Camp without using the radio. This was unfortunate as I particularly wanted him to wait at Camp 4 for the summit party, to cover their retreat.

On 17 August, I climbed a ridge opposite with friends, so that I could see any possible movement above Camp 5. The fascinating thing about the East Pillar of Nanga Parbat is that one can survey the whole climb from the summit ridge of Rakhiot at 5300m. This is probably unique for an eight thousander.

The weather had been unsettled since 9 August. Most mornings at 7 am cloud banks at 7000m would creep towards the eastern slopes and into the Bazhin Basin and visibility would be lost. Thus it was that we did not see Ueli Bühler descending from the South Summit to Camp 5. I was constantly at the Teleport and was amazed when at 5 pm Schorsch Ritter suddenly made contact from Camp 5 on his half broken-down Teleport. The conversation was erratic but Ritter told us that Ueli Bühler had appeared on the second ice field and by calling out had attracted their attention. We decided to make contact again at 6 pm. Later Ritter told us: 'I was electrified when suddenly I heard someone call out on the afternoon of 17 August at about 5 pm. Teddy laughed at me and I thought I was hearing things. Nevertheless, I kept looking and saw Ueli climbing very slowly down the summit ice field'.

At 6 pm Ritter came on the air again. Now his main concern was to direct Ueli to Camp 5 by shouting to him, as at first Ueli went too far to the right, then too far to the left and it took a little while until he actually saw Schorsch, recognised the tent and staggered into Camp 5. Bühler was suffering from altitude sickness and from hallucinations. Physically he was at the end of his tether, with frostbitten fingers and toes, but was in good condition otherwise. The icy bivouac just below the South Saddle had undoubtedly weakened him severely, but his determination to reach his goal, the South Summit, had remained unshaken.

This episode reminds me of my first Himalayan Expedition in 1953. Then Hermann Buhl suffered from altitude sickness, had hallucinations and obsessions and also survived a bivouac (but standing up) on the N Shoulder of Nanga Parbat, though in less severe temperatures. He too had his goal, to reach the summit, fixed in his mind, and his body was the servant of his will. Hermann Buhl also reached his goal and made the descent to safety at Camp 5 under his own steam.

So, on 17 August 1982, at around midday, Ueli Bühler made a bold solo ascent of the 8042m S Summit of Nanga Parbat after an icy cold night's bivouac in a snow hole with temperatures between -30C and -35C. He had built his summit success on the two days of struggle on the steep ice-wall, which had been led by Schorsch Ritter as far as 70m below the S Saddle (8020m). Four members of my expedition (Ritter, Münchenbach, Piotrowski, and Bühler), had solved for the first time the mountaineering problem of the extremely steep, difficult and dangerous E Pillar. Ueli Bühler finally set foot on the upper end of the E Pillar, the S Summit.
Silberplateau and Silbersattel (right) and the 7910m false summit from 8042m on Nanga Parbat S Summit

Photo: Prof. Dr. Hertigkäfer
Ueli Bühler describes the final ascent thus:

‘On the afternoon of 16 August, thin cloud drifts on to the third ice field, under the S Saddle of Nanga Parbat, and the blazing hot sun loses some of its strength. This makes me feel stronger, so I can keep pace with my comrades. At about 5 pm the cloud gets thicker and it begins to sleet. Nothing more can be seen of the others. Suddenly I am alone in this desert of ice and snow, at about 7700 m. I have difficulty in thinking clearly. Am I fully conscious? I scrape a snow hole in the steep slope with my ice-axe, to make a shelter. I don’t think at all of going down to the tent or that I ought to eat and above all drink. Suddenly I wake up in the hole. I look out and see the sun shining again and far below, my comrades, going down to Camp 5. They missed me in the cloud, although they perhaps passed only a few metres from my snow hole. I think it is only morning, then the growing darkness convinces me that the opposite is true. Sometimes I wake up in the night and each time I think I have a companion and speak to him.

Next day my thoughts are clearer again. Light cloud is moving across the sky. Nevertheless, I decide to go on, as the summit can’t be very far away. But what bad luck! The ground is getting steeper and steeper and the snow slope is increasingly interspersed with patches of bare, very hard ice. This requires the greatest concentration. Before midday I reach the place where the others turned back yesterday. Because of the steepness they have fixed a rope to make the descent easier. I have to take my left glove off, to undo the zip of my jacket pocket. Horrified, I notice that my little finger is hanging half-bent, the top half white, and motionless. I quickly check my right hand and see that all my fingers show signs of varying degrees of frostbite. After the first shock, I banish all thoughts of an early descent. As if drawn by a magnet, I keep climbing. Two hours later I am on the S Saddle, which is flanked on the right by a higher mountain and on the left by a lower one. These must be the main and S Summits!

The S Summit at 8042 m is the end of our E Pillar. I plod on up to it. I have already taken some photographs from the S Saddle and now from the S Summit I take photographs in all four directions. I have neither the time nor the energy for the main summit (8125 m). I have had nothing to drink since early yesterday and only a little packet of Bahlsen biscuits to eat. In spite of the icy cold, I put two stones in my pocket. The view all round is so sparkling-white and peaceful that it is easy to forget that danger lurks. The icy places which caused problems coming up, need even more care and concentration going down. One slip would be the end of me. At the end of my strength, I reach Camp 5 at twilight. Schorsch and Teddy welcome me with hot tea. At first, I hardly realise that I am among human beings again. My fingers and toes are given first aid.

The descent to Base Camp throughout two days and a night requires my utmost determination to see it through. I am so exhausted, that without the support of my two friends, who waited a day for me, I can hardly manage the descent. My frostbitten hands and feet are agonisingly painful.’

Ueli Bühler spent the night of 17 August with Schorsch Ritter and Teddy Piotrowski at Camp 5. He was quite exhausted and had an insatiable thirst. It was clear to his friends that they could no longer think of going to the summit
themselves; their task now was to get the severely altitude-sick man back down again. Schorsch Ritter wrote:

'It is clear to us that we must get Ueli to a lower camp as quickly as possible, not only because of his frostbitten fingers and toes, but also because of his extremely bad general condition. The descent became a path of suffering for him, I believe. With a short piece of rope, left over from securing the tent at Camp 5, I belayed him as much as possible going down. We took a whole day to get to Camp 4. Twice he fell on the rope, which showed how necessary it was. Once he fell into a crevasse and made no effort to get out.'

Camp 4 was reached late in the evening. All night Ueli Bühler was delirious, reproached his friends for no good reason, felt he was being ignored, suffered severely from altitude sickness and afterwards remembered none of these things. On 19 August, the three first climbed down the 400m ice-wall on the central ice-field to Camp 3 — always belaying each other. Then at 3 pm they left this camp to go down to Base Camp. First they followed the edge of the Great Couloir. It was already night and a stone fall had once more chopped off the fixed rope, but they still had 5m of rope left to lower Ueli down in the place where the 100m rope was missing. At 11 pm they reached Camp 2, where the clearing-up squad, three Hunza porters, was waiting. The helicopter from Gilgit had flown in at 5 pm, assuming that Ueli would be at Base Camp already, but at that time he had not yet even reached Camp 2. Schorsch Ritter with Ueli Bühler and Teddy Piotrowski only arrived at Base Camp at 3 am on 20 August. I had waited all night by the radio, so that I could set in motion whatever emergency measures were needed.

After their arrival at Base Camp, we sat together for two hours in the cool of the early morning and the new arrivals continuously drank Coca Cola, hot tea and beer, one after the other and all together. After they had had a few hours sleep, the helicopter was again at Base Camp and 30 hours later, thanks to good luck in catching immediate flights to Rawalpindi from Gilgit and thence to Zurich via Copenhagen, Ueli Bühler lay in a crisp, white Swiss hospital bed.

The end joints of several fingers and half the length of all his toes, had to be amputated. But Ueli is not at all downcast and on his last visit to Munich was enquiring about the possibilities of a K2 expedition. He has his next goal in mind already.