
BRENDAN MURPHY

Latok I

(Plates 56, 57, 59)

The North Ridge of Latok I (7145m) rises 2400m above the Choktoi Glacier in Pakistan. Despite much attention over the past 20 years, the route remains unclimbed (the mountain itself was climbed from the south by a Japanese expedition in 1979). The first attempt, made in 1978 by Jim Donini, Michael Kennedy, and cousins George and Jeff Lowe, came the closest to success. This team, climbing in 'capsule style' (using a small amount of fixed rope that is steadily moved up the mountain), spent 26 days on the route and got within 150m of the summit before being thwarted by continuous bad weather and altitude sickness. Although they were robbed of the summit, their effort surely rivals the achievement of Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker on the W face of Changabang two years earlier.

In the summer of 1996, a British expedition returned to the Choktoi with the dual objectives of the North Ridge of Latok I and the unclimbed SE Pillar of Baintha Brakk (the 'Ogre', 7295m). Dave Wills and I were to attempt Latok, while our companions targeted the Ogre. Dave had attempted the route twice before: once in 1991 as part of an Anglo/New Zealand expedition during which he reached 5800m with Carol McDermott; and once with myself in 1994 when we failed even to reach his previous high-point. Both attempts had been made in Alpine style carrying only a few days' food and bivouac gear. We adopted the same approach on this occasion.

The day after our arrival at Base Camp (16 July), Dave and I set off to acclimatise on a couple of unnamed 6200m peaks above the Sim La. Dave was fit after climbing in the Alps for ten days beforehand (he had to resign from his job to come on the trip), and I had residual fitness from an attempt on Changabang earlier in the year. On our return to Base Camp, we decided to establish a camp at 5350m before trying the route proper. A well-stocked tent 550m above the bergschrund reduces the size of the route to near manageable proportions, as well as obviating the need to descend the 'Gully of Doom' (in which I had been knocked unconscious in 1994 by a falling rock) during bad weather. We also decided to fix 100m of static rope at the top of the Gully, on a couple of steep pitches which in 1994 were taking us much of the day to climb. Early in the season these are fine ice pitches, but later they turn to vertical shale.

After a false start on which we turned back at the bergschrund with gut problems (probably too much dahl at Base Camp!) we spent a night and



56. Latok I, 7145m: Dave Wills climbing on the first day of the four-day attempt in July 1996. (*Brendan Murphy*) (p99)

day in perfect weather establishing the camp and redescending to Base Camp. Just after midnight on 28 July, we set off with 25kg rucksacks containing food for five days, gas for eight days, and hopefully enough hardware to get off – the only viable descent is by abseiling the route. Quoting from my letter to Kate Phillips:

'I find Latok so intimidating before I set off; I'm fine once I've started climbing though. I suppose it's the size and seriousness of the route; the thought of getting stormed high up ... I'd be completely psyched out if I knew that people had died up there. Made me think of the first ascensionists on the Eiger; must have been very bold.'

29 July was the fourth day of what turned out to be a five-day spell of the best weather I had seen in the Karakoram for many years. By late afternoon, we had passed the high-point reached by Dave Wills and Carol McDermott in 1991 and chanced upon a tent platform at 5900m right on the crest of the ridge. The climbing had been extremely varied – terrifying corniced ridges, straightforward but exposed ice slopes, wind-sculptured ribs of bottomless powder, and steep mixed ground – never desperate, but always challenging. Our friends attempting the Ogre were visible as tiny dots on the glacier below ferrying loads to the foot of their route; I wondered whether they appreciated the rarity of this spell of stunning weather.

The following day we were brewing by 3am and away by first light. This was new ground for us and route-finding was difficult; it was comforting occasionally to stumble across the odd peg probably from an earlier Norwegian and the original US attempts. The climbing was more technical and intricate than the previous day and we failed to find a bivouac site before dark. At 9pm, I finally arrived at a snow mushroom which I thought we might be able to demolish to create a platform. On closer inspection, Dave discovered that it was bigger than we had thought and decided to cut a platform on it rather than destroy it (which would have been hard work).

'We spent the next hour hacking out a good ledge just big enough to fit our tent. I was just getting my sleeping gear together when there was a loud crash and Dave disappeared from view. He had been tied on and fell 15 feet; his rucksack hadn't and fell 5000. All we found of it a few days later was a mangled gas canister. So there we were at 6200m with no tent, but far worse no stove. Dave, of course, had lost his sleeping bag, duvet, spare clothes, film, water bottle, etc. Fortunately, he had clipped in essentials like tools and crampons, but hadn't got around to securing his sack. It was a salutary lesson for me; I might have been tempted to sleep on that ledge without tying in (as is my wont) and it could have gone during the night. Dave spent a very cold night shivering in my duvet on a rock seat. At least I had my sleeping-bag.'

'Next day was perfect again (to begin with). I was gutted. We had blown the route. There was nothing for it but retreat. We spent the entire day till 10pm

abseiling back to our in-situ tent. Never had such abseil problems: 4 times the ropes got totally jammed. I've never had to jug up a jammed rope before. I was in a foul mood due to tiredness and frustration. The only consolation is that high cloud was building up although it was still very sunny. Fortunately, this gave us some melt-water to drink because we had had only 1 litre since the previous morning and we were very dehydrated. So the in-situ tent was a life-saver, or at least a great relief. Dave had (impressively) stashed a spare stove there so we were able to brew into the small hours. So in a strange way the time spent establishing the camp during those first 2 days of good weather paid off.

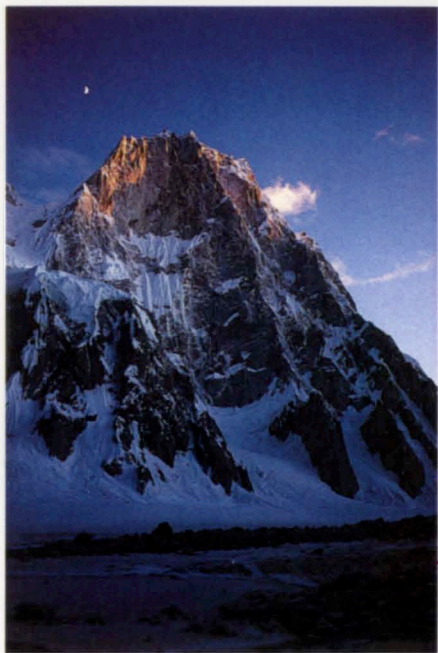
'I awoke the next morning to the sound of snow. Although it didn't last long, I thought we had better clear out before the Gully became a death trap. As it was, despite a lot of cloud, the snow held off until the evening. Thereafter it rained for about 3 days. Everyone returned to Base Camp for much Bridge playing. So as it was, Dave losing his sack saved us from bad weather high on the hill. I estimate we had another 3 days to the summit from our high-point, so we would have been caught out. So who knows what might have happened. Would have been unpleasant and scary for sure. Even on the first day of retreat with all that high cloud around. Such a long route; need to be so lucky with the weather. Yet it will go.'

Despite this setback, we still had the enthusiasm, equipment, and time for a second attempt. Unfortunately, we were confined to Base Camp for the following two weeks by illness and poor weather. On 13 August, we finally arrived back at the top of the Gully only to find that our tent had been blown off the ridge.

'Bit sad really as it had our stock of hardware, food and gas. Very fortunately though, we spotted it stuck on a ledge on the far side of the ridge about 60m below. I was able to abseil down and retrieve its contents although the tent was shredded. We were massively lucky to find it, otherwise end of trip. Funnily enough, the only thing we didn't recover was one of my stuff sacks containing the abseil tape. This was rather serious since we had nearly 2000m of climbing above us from which to retreat with no abseil tape! We cannibalised the guy ropes from the tent and other bits and pieces of gear and hoped to make do.'

The following day we regained our tent platform at 5900m only to be pinned down for three days by heavy snow.

'We were hanging on in there in a safe spot (free from avalanche danger) hoping for good enough weather to continue. In the meantime, we were on half rations: 1 chocolate bar, 1 sachet of soup and ½ a packet of noodles per day (plenty of tea though!). Funnily enough, the tedium of spending 80 hours in a bivouac tent wasn't too hard to deal with; must have a low mental metabolic rate! Much of that time was spent snoozing though. A book would have been good. Fowler and Saunders spent 6 days in a Gemini before the Golden Pillar. Apparently Fowler always carries a book ...'



57. The N Face of Latok I. The N Ridge is the right skyline. (*Dave Wills*) (p99)



58. Matt Dickinson climbing an E1 pitch at 6200m on the SE Pillar of the Ogre. (*Al Powell*) (p103)



59. The E Face of the Ogre, seen from Latok I. The SE Pillar is the left skyline. (*Brendan Murphy*) (p103)

On the fourth day, we had no option but to bail out owing to lack of food and gas. On this occasion, all 31 abseils proceeded without incident and we were eating chapatis at Base Camp that night.

'I'm very glad to be down here rather than on the hill. About ½m of snow has fallen at Base Camp over the past 3 days, more higher up. We were lucky to get down in a relative lull; despite snow and high winds that morning, it eased long enough in the afternoon to allow us to get down the "Gully of Doom" in safety. I'm a bit concerned about the Ogre boys, although not unduly yet. Just worried because one of their camps is in a bowl which is hugely avalanche prone. But they may have decided it's too dangerous to retreat, or they may be so high on the mountain that they don't want to retreat. I'll be extremely impressed if they top out. It must be mighty miserable up there. Character building though.

'This mountaineering game is a strange business. On the hill a few days ago confined to a tent in a storm, I wanted nothing more than to return to civilisation. Somewhere where I could be safe, warm, and have enough to eat. The thought of being in a pub, curry house, or especially rock climbing in the sun was so appealing. But now I've been down at Base Camp for a day, I want nothing more than a last shot at the hill!'

The unseasonably bad weather continued for several more days, added to which I was struck down with sinusitis. The prospect of cleaning the mountain, let alone reaching the summit, was becoming increasingly unlikely. But as the weather cleared and I recovered, the dream was re-awakened. In retrospect, I think I was too physically drained to have made a determined attempt on the mountain. Furthermore, the safe return of our friends from the Ogre was accompanied by a sense of completion that took the edge off my desire for the summit. Nevertheless, on 29 August, we reascended to our camp in the knowledge that a bid for the summit would mean missing our return flights. As it happened, the weather deteriorated and it was snowing by morning. At least we were able to recover our gear and leave the mountain as we found it. I can't say I was sad to retreat.

For both of us, the North Ridge of Latok I remains an inspiring and tantalising objective. I am convinced that given good health, conditions and weather, the route can be climbed by two people in Alpine style. We may well return.

Summary: Brendan Murphy and Dave Wills made three Alpine-style attempts on the North Ridge of Latok I, 7145m, in July and August 1996. They reached a high point of 6200m after three days of climbing, before a dropped rucksack forced a retreat. Subsequent attempts were foiled by bad weather and illness.