

The ascent of K6

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(Translation: E. N. Bowman)

The members of the 1970 Austrian Karakoram Expedition of the Vienna Academic Section of the Austrian Alpine Club arrived in Pakistan at the beginning of June by means of a truck and a mini bus. It was a youthful party, consisting of Dietmar Entlesberger (28), Gerhard Haberl (24), Christian von der Hecken (25), Helmut Krech (23), Erich Lackner (22), Fred Pressl (21), Gerd Pressl (23), Heinz Thallinger (25), with myself as leader (24).

We now entered upon a period of frustrating delay, for the permission accorded us by the Pakistan Government to attempt Malubiting (7453 m) was withdrawn and in its place we had been allotted K6 (7281 m). Our original objective, the ascent of Khinyang Chhish (7852 m), was out owing to the complete closing of the Hunza valley.

Our greatest difficulty was arranging transport to Skardu. The overland route via Gilgit was prohibited by the Kashmir Government, the Pakistan International Airlines had no more transport planes available and to hire a military plane would have cost a fortune. In the long run we managed to charter a passenger plane which flew us to Skardu with all our baggage, where we arrived on 16 June. On the same day we reached Kapalu, 100 km distant, after a reckless trip by jeep. Two days later we crossed the Shyok river and marched with our hundred porters up the Hushe valley to Kande. After crossing the Hushe river we turned eastwards up the Nangmah valley. This was a place of unusual savage beauty, enormous 1000-m granite cliffs overhung the valley floor and seemed almost to meet overhead. It was a world of gigantic rock towers formed of reddish-brown granite, gloomy walls of ice and turbulent glaciers.

We pitched Base Camp on 21 June at 4300 m on the true right bank of the Nangmah glacier.

Seen from the south, K6 does not soar abruptly into the sky and lacks the elegance of a Masherbrum or of a Chogolisa. It is a wide and ponderous mountain with a threatening aspect displaying a huge ice-clad South face a kilometre-wide and more than 2000 m in height.

K6 which is the culminating point of the well-known Kondus Towers has been seriously attempted three times before; in 1964 from the Kondus valley by the Berlin Karakoram Expedition, in 1961 by the British R.A.F. Expedition and in 1969 by an Italian expedition both from the Nangmah glacier. All these attempts failed owing to the unusually difficult terrain. Wolfgang Axt describes K6 as 'possibly the most difficult 7000-m peak in the Karakorum',



54 K6 from Base Camp. This and next three photos: Eduard Koblmüller

55 View from 6700 m on South-east ridge

× K12

×
+ K6 - SHOULDER (6600 m)

× K13



and G. O. Dyhrenfurth considers it 'an ideal arena for our young tigers'. It was indeed a worth-while objective for our expedition.

Separate reconnaissances on 23 June brought our first results. The 'ice-ramp' attempted by the Italians in 1969, and considered by the British in 1961 as the only possible route, ascends the western part of the South face, terminating far to the west of the summit, and is subjected to the danger of falling ice throughout its entire length. If this route were attempted it would be necessary to follow the very long West ridge of the mountain to the summit tower, the second portion of which is dominated by the huge gendarmes, which were possibly the cause of the Italian failure. A *direttissima* up the South face is out of the question, while the North (Chogolisa) face might be equally difficult.

Two days later we discovered the 'Austrian Route'. Starting out of a completely unknown glacier basin lying to the east of the Nangmah valley, a narrow hanging glacier on the South-east face, leads up to the K6 'shoulder' and terminates on the South-east ridge.

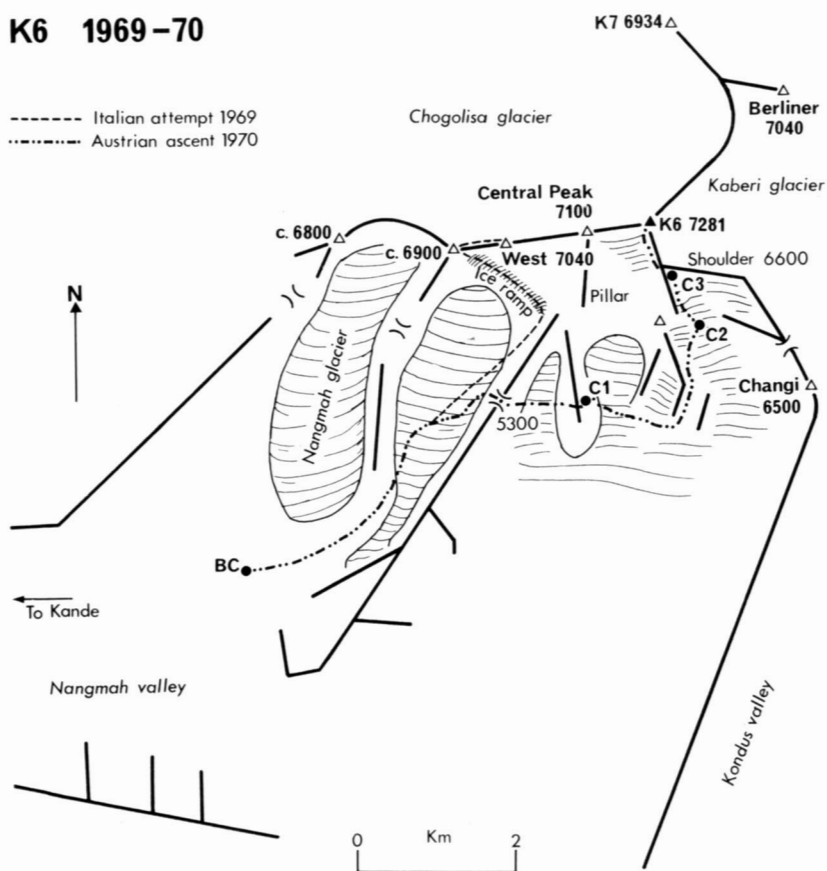
On 24 June the whole team carried up equipment for the erection of Camp 1 (5100 m) at the foot of the 'Austrian Route'. To reach this point we had to traverse a col at 5300 m, both sides of which needed 250 m of fixed ropes.

Next day Gerd and Fred Pressl, Erich Lackner and I climbed up to 5900 m and set up Camp 2. The climbing was difficult, up steep ice-gullies. We attached another 350 m of fixed ropes and reached the hanging glacier, the lower part of which was impassable.

Camp 2 was completed during the course of the next few days, and on 30 June early in the morning Erich, Gerd and I left it to continue the climb up the South-east face. Late that afternoon we reached the 'Shoulder' at 6600 m after considerable strenuous tracking work and overcoming of steep slabs and zones of séracs. We found an admirable site for Camp 3 (6600 m) at the beginning of the South-east ridge.

The weather which had been glorious for the last ten days now showed signs of breaking up with dense cloud banks forming in the south. Nevertheless, we decided to continue the climb.

On 1 July a party of three inched their way up the heavily corniced ridge, gaining 350 m and finally reaching the foot of the prominent summit tower. We were only 250 m from the top but K6 won the day.

K6 1969-70

Map 4. K6, information supplied by E. Koblmüller. For location refer to A.Ĵ. 67-78

Exhaustion due to the strenuous activity of the last days coupled with lack of acclimatisation (we had only been in the mountains for ten days) and insufficient equipment on the mountain to cope with the extreme rock-climbing up the summit wall broke our momentum and finally put paid to our spontaneous assault.

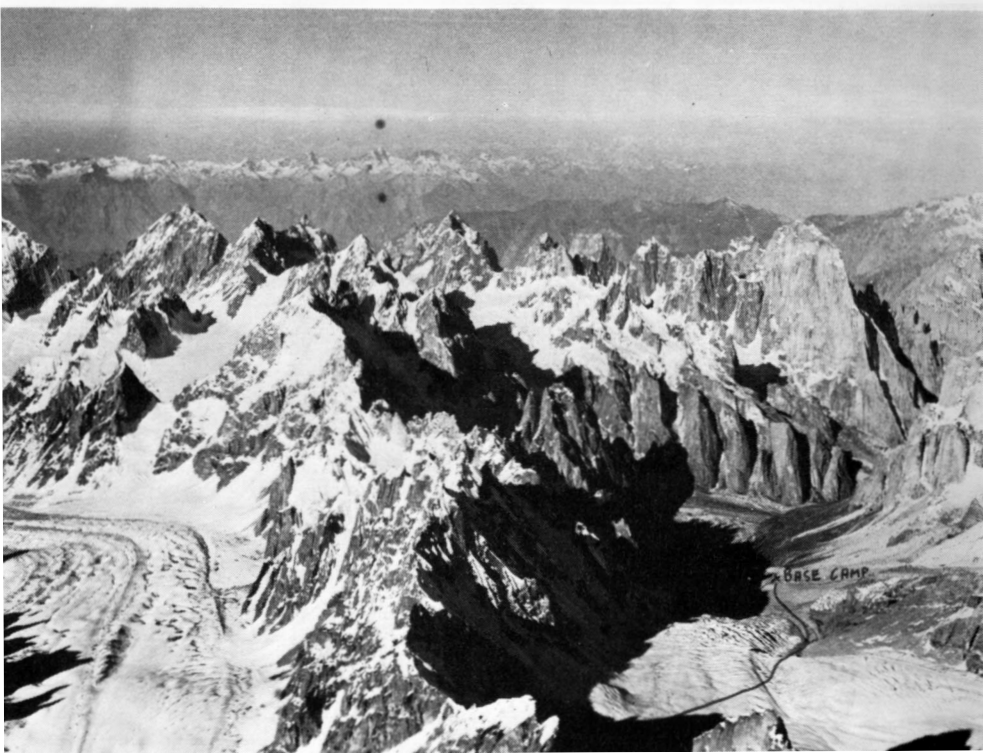
The onset of bad weather and acute signs of mountain sickness forced us to return next day to Base Camp. There now ensued two weeks of abominable weather, and all we could do was to wait. Daily snow-falls made it impossible to get any further than Camp 1 and a determined attempt to reach Camp 3 collapsed in a heavy snow-storm.

At last on 15 July Dietmar Entlesberger, Gerhard Haberl, Gerd Pressl and I succeeded in digging out Camp 2 and pressing on to Camp 3. Despite six hours hard work we were only able to free one tent of Camp 3, which was buried under a metre of new snow, make temporary repairs and then Gerhard and Dietmar went down to Camp 2.

Next day the weather was brilliant, and Gerd and I set off heavily loaded for the summit tower, the foot of which we were only able to reach by mid-day owing to vast quantities of fresh snow. After a severe struggle, and employing artificial climbing methods, I finally succeeded in overcoming the first vertical pitch and attached 100 m of fixed rope. Parts of this were rated as V+ A2. Late that night we were reunited with Gerhard and Dietmar at Camp 3.

To our complete surprise the morning of 17 July showed signs of an imminent break up of the weather, in fact it began to snow within two hours and mist and storm were in the offing. Not to be put off, however, we pressed on, for

56 *View from South-east ridge down to Nangma glacier*





57 Changi (6500 m) from the east—a fine peak south-east of K6

we felt that this was our last chance. As a result of the track-making which we had carried out on the previous day, we made fairly rapid progress along the South-east ridge and by nine o'clock we were at the foot of the summit tower. In spite of the falling snow, two parties climbed up the fixed ropes, surmounted the ensuing steep rock and ice-couloir and finally vanquished the icy groove of the last pitch (Grade III). At mid-day Gerhard, Gerd, Dietmar and I stood on the top of K6. Several hours later we reached Camp 3, completely exhausted, and next day we were reunited with the backing-up party at Camp 2.

Owing to the continuance of the bad weather, a week and a half passed before we could even think about organising a second summit party and evacuating the high camps. During a brief period of fine weather, Erich, Fred, Helmut, Dietmar and I managed to get up to Camp 3, where we found the tents had completely disappeared under the snow. The weather broke again in the night of 28 July so that we were not able to get all the members of the expedition on the summit as we had wished. We were able with extreme difficulty to evacuate all three high camps, but were forced to leave 750 m of fixed rope on the mountain. We left on 1 August after a sojourn of six weeks.

We had an adventurous time getting back to civilisation. The flooded Shyok river, now 300 m wide, had to be crossed on do-it-yourself rafts, composed of air-beds, and after waiting in Skardu for three weeks for an aircraft the Pakistan Government eventually opened up the road so that we finally reached Rawalpindi at the end of August after a hair-raising trip by jeep via Gilgit and the Babusar Pass. Austria was reached on 16 September.