
Indian Face Arête

A ridge climb on a subsidiary peak of Latok III

SANDY ALLAN

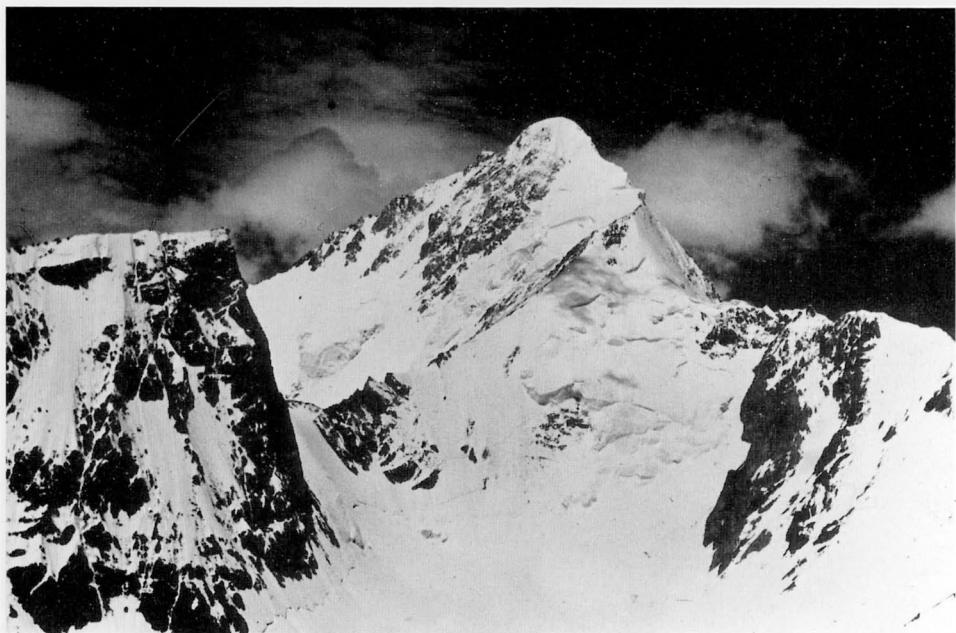
(Plates 8-11)

Pakistan's Latok III (6949m) nestles to the west of Latok I (7145m) and Latok II (7108m), in the Karakoram. Our main objective was the N ridge of Latok II, first attempted in 1978 by an American team consisting of some of the leading exponents of big-wall climbing, Mike Kennedy, Jim Donni and Jeff Lowe. In reasonably dry conditions they reached a high point of 7000m before having to retreat because of illness and severe storms. Rab Carrington led an unsuccessful British attempt in 1982, and in 1987 a French party again made little impression on the ridge. Neither of these expeditions was able to gain the Americans' high point, and both complained of heavy snow deposits which prevented effective progress.

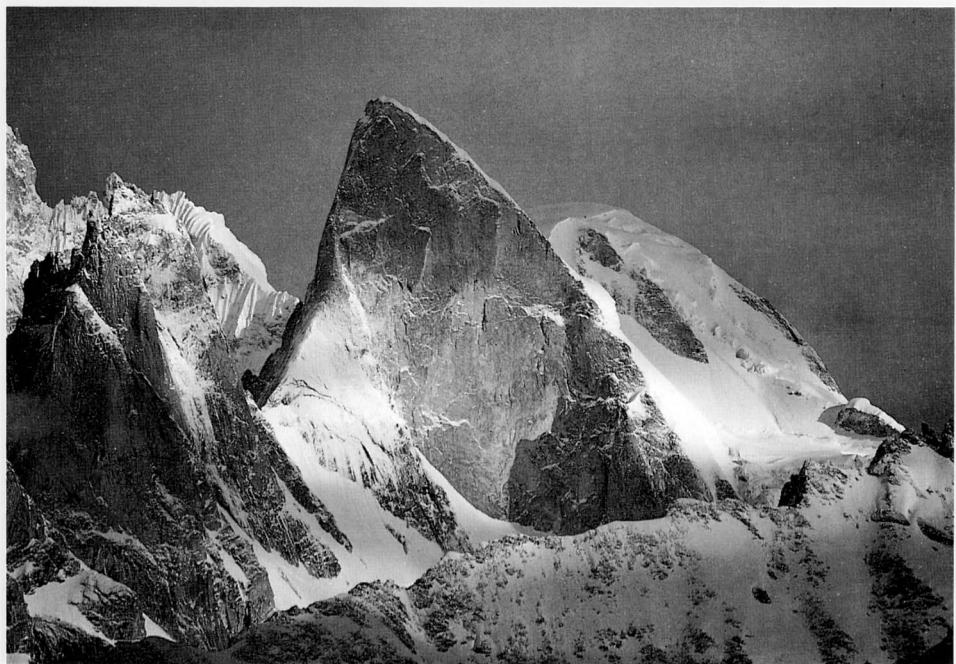
Our expedition, sponsored by Inspectorate, Oilfield Inspection Services Plc, reached Base Camp on 5 June 1990. Although we could see that there was a great deal of snow on the mountain, optimism prevailed at that stage, and we decided to begin our acclimatization for the main objective by attempting some of the other peaks in the region.

Tuesday, 12 June, saw Doug Scott, Simon Yates, Rick Allen and myself camped at 5100m on the Sim La in our North Face Himalayan Hotel which we left at 1.30am to make an attempt on Biacherahi Peak. However, after climbing unroped through a band of seracs and up over the col, we were halted by very unstable snow on the final summit ridge. This was disappointing, but we were appeased by an ascent of an adjacent snow dome which we called Biacherahi Dome (5750m). From here we were rewarded with fantastic views of our proposed objective and its neighbouring Latoks, of the Muztagh Tower, Masherbrum, K2, China and the Ogre, immediately to the east. Our descent was fraught, with great risk of avalanche, and it was late afternoon before we returned to camp; we descended thence to Base Camp, as snow conditions remained treacherous and prevented any further ascents.

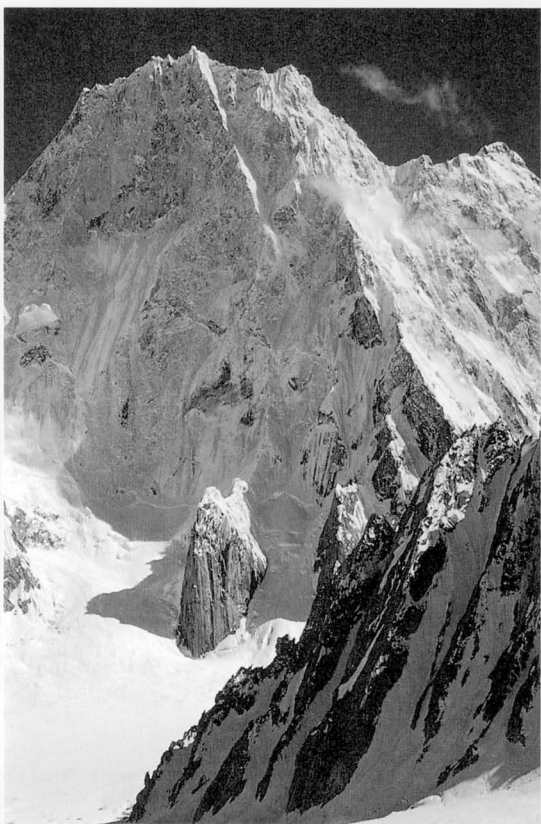
Some of us had set our sights on the peak of Hanispur South, to the north of our Base Camp. On 15 June Simon, Rick, Rick's wife Alison, my sister Eunice, Richard Cowper (a *Financial Times* reporter) and I headed for a high camp on Hanispur. At 1am the following morning Simon, Rick, Richard and I left camp. After five hours Simon and I came to a high spot on the ridge and admired a panorama of Masherbrum, Latoks and Hushe peaks. Above us, again, there lay steep unstable snow, so regretfully we decided to return to Base Camp.



7. *Chong Kumdan I (7971m): an unattempted 7000er.* (Harish Kapadia)
(p 28)



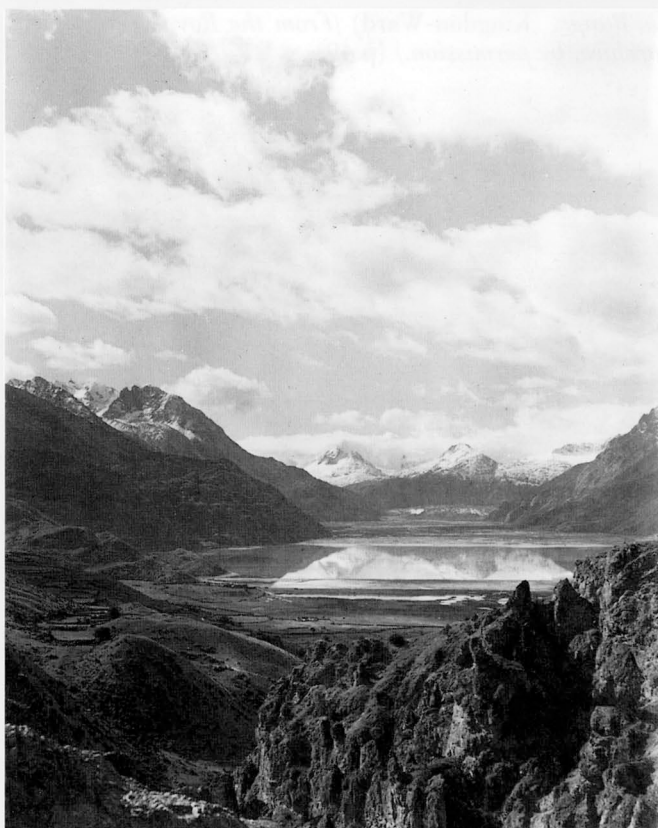
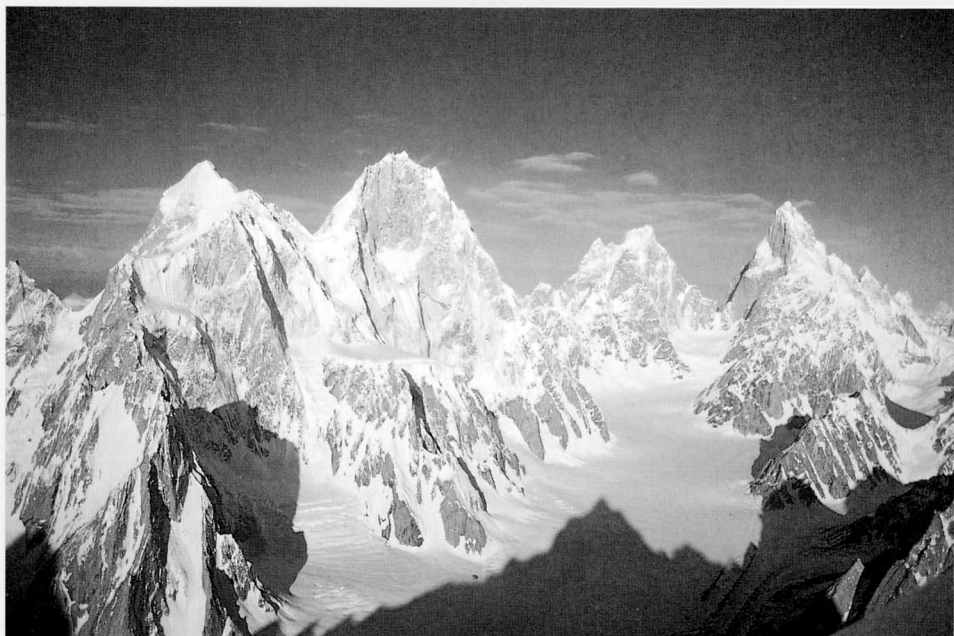
8. *Biachari peak and dome.* (Sandy Allan) (p 43)



9. *Latok II.* (Sandy Allan) (p 43)

10. *Latok II, Ogre and Choktoi glacier from Hanipispur.*
(Sandy Allan) (p 43)





11. *View from Hanipis-
pur down Choktoi
glacier to Hushe
peaks. (Sandy
Allan) (p 43)*

12. *The lake, Shugden
Gompa. (Kingdon-
Ward) (From the
Royal Geographi-
cal Society archive,
by permission.)
(p 49)*

Between such forays we walked up the Choktoi glacier to view Latok II. We could scarcely believe that we were looking at the same mountain as the one in Mike Kennedy's photographs which had initially enticed us to this area of Pakistan. Doug and I began to realize that the very deep snow was not melting off fast enough to allow Rick and myself to keep to our imposed timetables – work back in Aberdeen's oil world was beckoning.

I had had enough of snow-plodding with heavy sacs and was delighted to join Doug on a superb arête which curved steeply into the sky behind Base Camp, towards the summit of a subsidiary peak of Latok III. We put together a big-wall rack, a haul sac and bivi equipment and headed off to do some exploring. We had only intended to investigate the possibilities, but when we reached the foot of the ridge our enthusiasm took over and we found ourselves on superb clean sun-kissed rock. After four pitches with moves of up to 5c, we stashed the haul sac and abseiled down to the glacier. As we wandered round the base of the arête to check the descent route I saw what looked like the profile of an Indian's face sculpted from the rock high on the ridge, so we named our proposed route the Indian Face Arête. We decided that we could either descend via the crest and rounded ridge to the east, or abseil steeply down a snow-ice couloir to the right of the route.

On our return to Base Camp Rick and Simon announced that they intended to explore the Nobande Sobande glacier and perhaps attempt Bobisighir (6411m). That evening we sat in the mess tent drinking brews of tea and chocolate, and talked about our proposed climbs. For the first time in the expedition we were talking about attaining objectives. Dylan – admittedly sounding rather aged – came from the portable speakers, and life was ace. Doug and I planned to depart very early from Base Camp, climb all day and (Insh' Allah) abseil from the summit in darkness, to return to Base Camp in the early morning. How are the mighty fallen!

9am on 18 June saw Doug and myself at our previous high point on the arête. We had a brew and decided to jettison the haul sac, bivi equipment and some of the rack. We retained the stove and some herb tea bags, boiled sweets and two tracker bars each. Doug did hesitate as he threw the haul sac, but our enthusiasm was so high for the superb feeling of free climbing that we did not really want to burden ourselves with material possessions, even though such things can keep you warm at night!

So we were committed to climbing, and climb we did. It was ace-swinging pitches of 5c, sustained 5c, the rock occasionally flaking but basically very clean. I chose the first main steep aid pitch to take my first-ever leader fall. As I lay face down on a snow ledge beside Doug's stance he told me that I had loosened my peg runners by hammering too much on my highest peg, expanding the crack, and zipping most of the others. But expertise comes with experience, and as I traversed out right and moved up another system I was secretly pleased to belay below a huge overhang and let Doug lead the next pitch. At first it was extremely steep until he went out of my view on, I guessed, a tension traverse, as he shouted 'slack on green and tight on red'. The sound of hammering followed, punctuated with expletives, and a white powder fell on my head. Doug announced that the rock was turning to powder when he tried to

place a pin, and he was unable to get a good placement. After two hours the green rope became yellow and the red pink in the light of my head-torch. I lowered Doug off, and we began to search for a bivi.

Doug went down one more pitch and called up that his previous stance was OK, perhaps roomy enough for two. I tied off the rope, hurried down, and cut a ledge in the snow with my hammer as Doug brewed; he was not feeling well. Meanwhile I continued clearing a level space on which Doug could lie down and I could sit. Our meal was tepid herb tea and a tracker bar. We had no bivi gear, but did not want to abseil off. Sleep came intermittently.

The morning found us shrouded in powder snow. My lead was not very pleasant as I climbed in my walking boots to regain my belay stance, tied in and shivered myself back to warmth. Doug came up and was soon back at his high point of the previous evening, again punctuating the Karakoram silence with the pleasing sound of the hammer. Three hours later I started to second the pitch – and was I impressed by Doug's climbing! He had led the pitch by leap-frogging our three blades, with two small 'Rocks' persuaded into cracks and one poor King pin as his only protection. Above, I enjoyed climbing free again, and we were on easier 5b, 5c ground.

We soon came to the ridge proper, with its huge balanced blocks and snow dripping in the sunshine. We changed from our rock-boots into our somewhat drier and more substantial Brasher walking boots and climbed together for a spell, but soon the going became technical again, so we pitched 5b. It was good value to be high up and near the top, although the climbing was becoming progressively bittier. As we approached the summit it was late evening and Doug spied a good bivi. I reversed a scrappy pitch, filled the rucksac with snow as Doug fixed the abseil, and down we went to the bivi site on a rock ledge. Sleep came after cold herb tea and half a tracker bar.

Chattering teeth woke me: I thought they were mine, but perhaps they were Doug's. We contemplated the final steps to the summit, but began abseiling instead. We were happy and felt that we had done all the good climbing. Latter-day views of climbing right to the summit were not for us on this occasion.