
Expeditions

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Against the Odds

The 1993 K2 West Ridge Expedition

(Plates 17–21)

Nine expeditions attempted K2 from Pakistan in 1993. All of these ended up climbing on the Abruzzi ridge (or one of its variations); our expedition was the one exception as we were on the other side of the peak, attempting the second ascent of the West Ridge. With the Abruzzi appearing overcrowded much of the time, we felt fortunate to have our side of the mountain to ourselves.

British expeditions were the first to attempt the West Ridge: in 1978, when Chris Bonington's expedition was discontinued after Nick Estcourt was killed in an avalanche below Camp 2, and later, in 1980, when Doug Scott's expedition reached a high point of about 7500m; both were abandoned before reaching the real difficulties. The West Ridge was finally climbed in 1981 by a large Japanese team using high-altitude porters and oxygen. There was a Spanish attempt in 1982 but no one had been on the route in the intervening 11 years.

None of the climbers in our team was well known and, since our famous predecessors had failed so low on the route, no one gave us much of a chance; in fact both the Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council refused to endorse our expedition. Despite the lack of support from Britain we still felt confident in our ability to succeed.

When we applied for a permit we tried to name our expedition 'The K2 West Ridge Expedition', but the Pakistan Ministry of Tourism rejected this, saying 'Every expedition name must include the name of a country'. This posed a slight problem as our team included five Britons, three Americans, a Canadian, a Frenchman and an Irishman. We toyed with a few ideas but in the end our official name became 'The UK/USA K2 Expedition'.

Once in Islamabad we cut through all the red tape in just a few hours and should have been on the next plane to Skardu. Unfortunately an Indian attack on the Siachen glacier caused the army to commandeer all the planes, so we were forced to hire a bus and set off on the arduous journey to Skardu by road. A day in Skardu to recover was enough, and we were soon hiking up the Baltoro glacier accompanied by a small army of porters. The walk-in was uneventful except for the wonderful weather, which only turned nasty on the last day when we endured the unenviable experience of establishing Base Camp in a ferocious blizzard. Rather than place our Base Camp

on 'the Strip' with the other expeditions, we put our camp below the Gilkey Memorial in a better position for approaching the West Ridge.

It is the custom, on the death of a mountaineer, to place a dinner plate on the Gilkey Memorial, which commands a special but sobering position at the base of K2. As we arrived the first plate of the year was being attached. This was for a member of the Slovenian expedition who had died during a successful ascent of the Abruzzi Spur. We witnessed the sad procession, unaware that this would not be the last plate placed on the memorial that year.

But to us this seemed like another world and our camp was filled with optimism and excitement; after all the planning and anticipation we had finally arrived and were anxious to start climbing. There was, however, an unforeseen difficulty. We had expected a simple walk up the glacier to the foot of our climb; but the glacier was heavily crevassed and it took us several days to scout out a route through it. Instead of the anticipated short stroll to Advanced Base Camp, this complicated route took over six hours. Later we found a short-cut, but it was still a long slog.

These unanticipated difficulties, rather than dampening our spirits, inspired us with fresh determination and, aided by an unusual period of good weather, the entire team worked together on advancing the route. We made spectacular progress and within just seven days had established Camp 3 at 7100m on 8 July. But now the expected storms arrived and we retreated to Base Camp for a much needed rest.

Sadly, on our return, we found another plate attached to the memorial, this time honouring a Canadian who had died returning from the summit. Three successful ascents so early in the season showed that conditions on the Abruzzi were unusually favourable; however, the two accompanying deaths seemed to be an ominous warning.

Meanwhile, with the weather pinning us down in Base Camp, we pondered a little on our own climb. So far, our approach could best be described as a mad, chaotic charge up the mountain. We elected for a change of strategy: we got organised. We reverted to classic siege-style tactics and divided the group into three teams, each taking its turn at the front. Unfortunately this coincided with two weeks of bad weather and despite the leaders, commanding from the rear, urging the advance troops to face the blizzard bravely, only 200m headway was gained when Andy Mayers and Scott Darsney pushed ahead.

Finally this assault ended when Etienne Fine started to feel unwell in Camp 3 at 7100m. Since he had climbed this high a week before without problems, we did not, at first, consider altitude sickness and thought he had just overworked himself. Luckily our doctor, Andy Collins, was also at Camp 3 and diagnosed pulmonary oedema. Etienne was still capable of walking and we immediately descended. All was going well until suddenly he collapsed, murmuring incoherently. Andy took over and declared he must give him an injection of Dexamethazone. Etienne put up a spirited



17. The 1993 K2 West Ridge Expedition. The West Face of K2.
(Jonathan Wakefield) (p39)

resistance, but he was soon overcome by weight of numbers, and the dose was duly administered somewhere in the proximity of his backside. Thus prodded into action, he shot off down the hill and was soon safely back in Base Camp.

After some rest Etienne appeared to be fully recovered and, after consulting all our doctors (three of them) and getting a second opinion from the other doctors on 'the Strip' (another three), he was pronounced fit to climb. We then held one of our few team meetings; Etienne declared that he wished to continue climbing and Andy Collins agreed to accompany him. We also decided on another change of strategy. When the expedition was in a state of chaos we had advanced 1700m in seven days. When we used organised siege tactics, we had advanced 200m in thirty days. We voted for chaos!

On 20 August the team rejoined the fray with renewed vigour, with Etienne and Andy bringing up the rear. Unfortunately Andy contracted a virus and was forced to descend, but Etienne decided to carry on alone. Meanwhile the team had established Camp 4 at 7600m and then descended, leaving myself and Dan Mazur to explore the route to 7800m. On returning to Camp 4 we found Etienne showing signs of oedema again and feeling quite weak. Although it was 5pm we decided to descend immediately. This critical decision probably saved his life, but the descent was a nightmare as Etienne mustered all his remaining strength to struggle down. The night was clear, which aided our descent, but in the bitter cold there was a serious risk of frostbite. The situation was not helped by a freak malfunction of our radio, which could transmit but not receive. With no radio contact and the rest of the team in Base Camp several days climb away, we could expect no help for some time.

Before us was a large snowfield followed by several steep rocky cliffs. Once we had reached the steep sections of the route we could lower Etienne on the rope, but before this we had to negotiate several long traverses, and crossing them was only possible if Etienne could walk, however shakily. Painfully we made progress down. Several times Etienne collapsed, gasping for breath, and only persistent cajoling would get him going again; but we kept moving.

Eventually, after hours of continued effort, Etienne gave up, and no amount of persuasion could stir him; it seemed to be the end. We knew we could not move him, and could only wait beside him and watch him die. Fortunately we did have a small medical kit and, as a last resort, we decided to try and inject him with Dexamethazone – but the liquid was frozen solid. With our bare hands we fiddled with the needle and vial until our fingers were dangerously numb. Finally Dan lost patience and jabbed the syringe into Etienne anyway. Surprisingly, this affected a staggering spurt of energy from Etienne. We were going again.

But although Etienne was moving he was only semi-conscious. Remarkably, he was still able to climb across some very tricky ground.

K2 The 1993 West Ridge Expedition

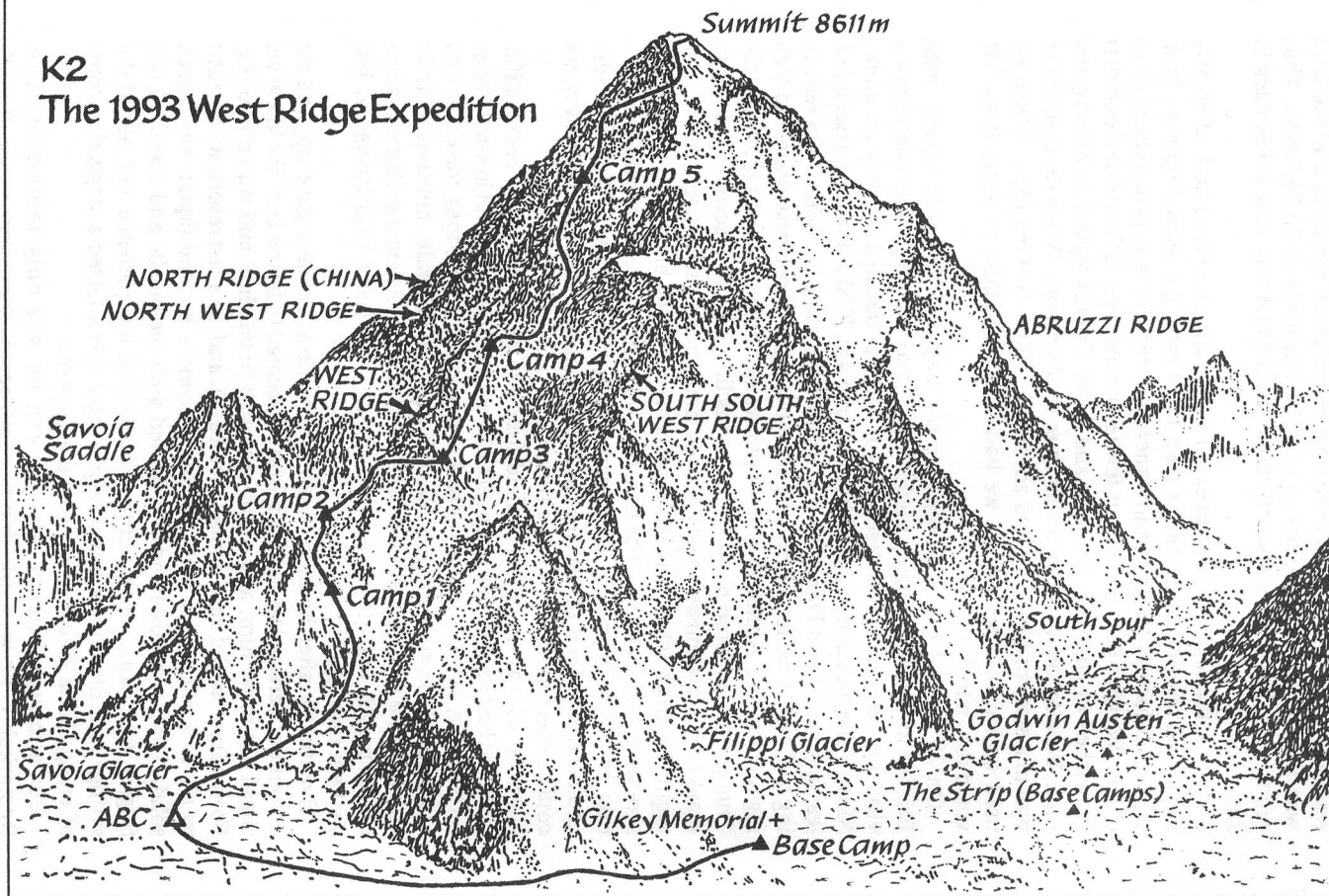


Diagram based on a drawing by Jim Curran



18. Jonathan Pratt and Dan Mazur between Camps 2 and 3 (at about 6700m).
(*Jonathan Wakefield*) (p39)



19. Camp 2, at 6600m, after a heavy snowfall. (*Jonathan Wakefield*) (p39)

Years of experience and his ingrained climbing ability must have carried him through. Once on steeper ground things got easier; Etienne was able to abseil and we made much faster progress, arriving in Camp 3 at 4am.

By the time daylight arrived we knew we were over the worst, but we were still at 7100m and had some difficult terrain to cover. Fortunately Etienne remained conscious and was able to continue under his own steam, even if slowly and with plenty of help. We spent that night in Camp 2 and next morning started to descend to Camp 1, when we met Jonathan Wakefield and John Arnold who, despite minimal information on the radio, had guessed the situation and come up to help. By this time, all three of us were extremely tired and meeting them was an immense relief. We had to wait the rest of the day in Camp 1 because of the danger of avalanches, but our descent that night was uneventful as, by now, Etienne was recovering and the rest of the team had arrived to help us.

In Base Camp, Etienne completely recovered from his oedema but all his toes were seriously frostbitten. An immediate evacuation was his only hope. After a couple of days of anxious waiting, we were relieved when the helicopter arrived and took Etienne to Skardu. Subsequently, back in France, he had to have all ten toes amputated.

While we were preoccupied with Etienne's rescue a terrible tragedy was happening on the Abruzzi: two Germans and a Swede had died descending from the summit. Now the mountain had claimed five lives, and it was an inescapable fact that every summit party had suffered a fatality: K2 was living up to its reputation.

Being somewhat isolated from the other expeditions, we were not affected by the prevailing feeling of despondency; rather we felt ready for the summit. We set off in poor weather, realising that it would take us five or six days to reach the top; hopefully by then conditions might have improved. Seven of us left camp together, but as we progressed some of our climbers started to drop out. Earlier, Andy Mayers had suffered frostbite on his hands, feet and nose; he bravely tried to continue but now he felt it would be too painful to go on. Then Scott Darsney suffered an attack of cerebral oedema and had to return, accompanied by John Arnold. That left four of us in Camp 4.

As we climbed up to make Camp 5 the weather started to deteriorate and Jonathan Wakefield decided to go down. The next day Andy Collins, Dan Mazur and myself continued up. Our plan was to try for the summit; but since an overnight bivvy seemed likely, we took a tent and stove but left our sleeping-bags behind. Our progress was hindered by technical climbing, and towards evening we reached a forbidding rock band at 8200m where we elected to stop for the night.

The next day dawned windy and cold, and optimistically we prepared ourselves for the summit. Andy and Dan crawled out of the tent and I was just putting my head through the door when I was rudely shoved back by the others scrambling to get back in. The shelter of the tent had fooled us:

the ferocity of the wind and its accompanying hail was unbearable. That day the quest for the summit was out of the question, so we waited in the hope of better conditions the next morning. With three of us in a small bivvy tent without sleeping-bags, we spent the day struggling with the constant cold, cramped conditions and thin air. Things did not improve as the temperature dropped sharply with the coming of night. We massaged each other's freezing feet, and stole a few hours' fitful sleep.

Unfortunately the next day proved worse than the previous one and after such a rough night we willingly admitted defeat and scurried back down the mountain. During this time Andy unwisely removed his gloves to adjust his crampons, and received frostbite on all his fingers. When we reached Base Camp he too took the helicopter out, but happily back in England he made a full recovery.

By now all the other expeditions had departed, leaving just Dan Mazur and myself at the base of K2. After nearly a month of perpetual storms we enjoyed a period of almost perfect weather. We were being lured back up the mountain before we had rested sufficiently from our recent spell at 8200m. We resisted the temptation; but after four days we could wait no longer. We were in a hurry, so we adopted a new strategy – continuous climbing; that is, climbing non-stop throughout the night and day until we reached the top. Thirty-six hours later we were back up at Camp 4, but now the clouds began to drift in and it started to snow. Rushing up the mountain didn't seem so important any more, so we stopped for the night.

During the next two days the weather deteriorated still further. However, this did not prevent us from climbing, and we moved up to our previous high point at 8200m, this time taking the precaution of bringing our sleeping-bags. After a comfortable night we woke at 3am. The air was completely still and the sky was awash with stars – conditions were perfect. We began preparing for the day ahead. Everything goes so slowly at this altitude that it was 7 o'clock by the time we were ready. When we left the tent the mountain was shrouded in cloud and it was snowing lightly.

Our first task was to penetrate the imposing 100m rock band immediately above us; slowly we made our way up it via a series of short ramps and tricky slabs. A narrow gully led through the top of the rocks onto the snow band that crosses the SW face at 8300m. Here we were met by a vicious wind which howled across the exposed face. Compared with the exhausting effort of gaining vertical height, it was easy work making the horizontal traverse across the face and we soon reached the SSW ridge, also known as the Magic Line. Here we received a nasty shock. We were faced with a towering rock cliff with no obvious line of weakness. After exploring the alternatives, a narrow chimney appeared to offer the only chance of success, but this started with 10 metres of blank wall. The bitter wind cut through to my very bones and threatened my resolve.

'It's getting late,' I said. 'Perhaps we should turn back.' Dan gave me an arched look as if to say 'These Englishmen, they will have their little jokes!'



20. Jonathan Pratt (L) and Andy Collins setting up Camp 3 at 7100m.
(*Dan Mazur*) (p39)



21. Jonathan Pratt digging a platform for Camp 5 at 8100m.
(*Jonathan Wakefield*) (p39)

Without a word he turned back to the cliff and was soon hammering in some pitons and starting to aid his way up. With each agonising move, he appeared to be on the point of falling off; just in time, he was able to pull up into the narrow chimney, which provided much easier climbing. On the other side of the ridge we were sheltered from the tearing wind and for a moment the clouds cleared, giving us a glimpse of the summit 300m above us. Our goal seemed so close, but we knew we still had a long struggle ahead. As we climbed the SSW ridge, we realised that if we continued we would be committed to spending the night out high on the mountain; but neither of us gave any hint of wanting to turn back. The climbing was steep, and made more difficult by loose rock cloaked in a light covering of powdery snow. This slowed us down considerably, but when we reached a simple snow slope the summit appeared within our grasp. But our hopes of summiting before nightfall were frustrated as we bogged down in a patch of bottomless snow. Realising that further effort was futile, we traversed over to the ridge and bypassed the snowfield on some rock slabs.

Returning to the ridge brought us into the full blast of the wind. As the clouds closed in again with the fall of night, we found shelter under an overhanging boulder. We rested for a while and pondered whether to bivouac here and go to the summit in the morning or continue to the top during the night. As the weather was getting worse by the minute, we decided to go for the summit while we still had a chance.

We left our packs at the bivvy and weaved our way up through the rocks onto the summit ridge. By now the weather was very bad and, as we climbed, clouds built up down below us. The wind gathered them up and sent them racing over us like ghostly horsemen; it was as though we were in a dream. We ignored it all and kept plodding relentlessly on and on. The great ridges of K2 dropped away from us on all sides, disappearing into the turmoil of the ever-changing clouds. Suddenly we were there; there was no more mountain above us; we were on the summit. It was one hour to midnight.

'Take a photo,' gasped Dan.

All through the trip people had been complaining that I did not take enough photos. 'Don't worry,' I assured them, 'I'll take the important one, the one on the top.' I reached for my camera – it wasn't there. I had left it in my pack. Dan glared at me. 'You idiot!' he said, and stumbled back down the ridge.

We had stayed on the summit for only a few seconds. Now getting down was all that was in our thoughts. Soon we were back at our overhanging rock, where we made another brew. It was tempting to sleep there for the night, but the noise of the wind was telling us not to delay. As we set off I became conscious of a mysterious being accompanying us. I could not see it, nor did it speak to me, but I could feel its presence; it was climbing with us as if part of our team. Almost immediately after leaving the bivouac we reached the steep rocks and had to start abseiling. We only had a meagre 15m of rope and a few pitons, so we had to make many short abseils and

use natural anchors. Each time I looked for suitable anchor points, I consulted our 'presence', and mysteriously I would notice a placement for the rope. In this way the three of us slowly descended the rocks, making about 15 abseils in all.

Light came as an imperceptible warming glow in the swirling clouds; it was now that I noticed that the 'presence' was gone and also, more disconcertingly, that we were lost. We were on the top of an overhanging cliff which overlooked an easy-looking snow ramp. This was not the way we had come up, but we couldn't find our tracks nor recognise any familiar terrain. To abseil down the cliff would be irreversible, so if the snow ramp led to a dead end we would be in trouble; but looking in vain for our ascent route was using up our fast-ebbing strength. We decided to go for it. Fortunately the ramp led back to the crest of the ridge and we knew we were safe.

But our troubles were not yet over. Traversing back across the SW face was sheer misery as we now had the wind against us, which iced up our faces and penetrated to our very core. Equally discomforting, the snow conditions had worsened and we had to front point our way, fighting to keep balance in the buffeting wind. Eventually we regained our small tent at 3pm. We had been away from it for 32 hours.

It took us another three days of exhausting work to drag our weary bodies back to Base Camp. Knowing that five people had died descending K2 that year, and that the mountain could still spring a nasty surprise, we did not relax our guard until we were safely back in Base Camp. Well, we thought we were safe in Base Camp. There we found that we were not the only ones who had been experiencing an adventure. A large menacing sérac had detached itself and come crashing down as a huge avalanche sweeping past our camp. All our tents had been flattened and destroyed. Certain disaster was only averted by the fact that only one person, Captain Wasim, our liaison officer, was in camp at the time. His tent was sheltered behind some rocks and although it was ripped to pieces he was unharmed. We vowed to leave at the earliest opportunity; we were the only expedition to summit without suffering a fatality and we wanted to keep it that way.

One last plate was added to the Gilkey Memorial that summer. The plate honouring Al Rouse and Julie Tullis had been lost during the previous winter, so with the help of Captain Wasim we placed a new plate to their memory.

Summary: The 1993 UK/USA K2 Expedition made the second British ascent of K2, and the first British ascent of the West Ridge (second overall). Dan Mazur (USA) and Jonathan Pratt (UK) reached the summit on 2 September 1993. The other team members were Dr Andrew Collins (UK), Andrew Mayers (UK), Jonathan Wakefield (UK), Dean James (UK), Mike O'Shea (Eire), John Arnold (Canada), Etienne Fine (France), Scott Darsney (USA) and Greg Mortensen (USA).