
ALAN HINKES

Another Pilgrim for Nanga Parbat

(Plates 12, 13)

One hundred and four years ago, the first attempt on Nanga Parbat (8125m) was made by a team which included the pre-eminent late-Victorian mountaineer A F Mummery. Sadly, Mummery and the two Gurkhas with him disappeared while searching for a pass to the Rakhiot Glacier, most probably engulfed by an avalanche. Today the central buttress on Nanga Parbat's Diamir Face is known as the Mummery Rib.

Nanga Parbat is the ninth highest mountain in the world and has earned a reputation for difficulty and potential danger from avalanche, rockfall and severe weather. On two Austro-German expeditions, in 1934 and 1937, 26 people were killed and Nanga Parbat became known as the 'Killer Mountain'. In July 1953, six weeks after the first ascent of Everest, Nanga Parbat was climbed by the inspirational Austrian climber Hermann Buhl. He made a daring final push to the top, only surviving the descent by the skin of his teeth and confirming his place as one of the all-time great mountaineers. The story is recounted in his book *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage* which includes a photograph of Buhl before and after the ascent. Taken only a few months apart, in one shot he appears a youthful 29-year-old, in the other at base camp after the ascent of Nanga Parbat he looks more like a 69-year-old. Tragically, Buhl fell through a cornice during an attempt on Chogolisa with Kurt Diemberger in 1957.

Of all the 8000ers, I knew that Nanga Parbat would not be the easiest and I expected a demanding experience. I first got to know the mountain in 1992 after I had already climbed four 8000ers, joining Doug Scott in an attempt on the long and complex Mazeno Ridge. It was a seven-man team, myself, Doug, Sean Smith, two Russians, Sergei Efimov and Valerie Pershin, and two Sherpa friends Nga Temba and Ang Phurba. In July we made our base camp below the Rupal Face beyond the village of Tarshing, near the summer village of Latobo. This is the lowest base camp for any 8000-metre peak at around 3500 metres and makes it very pleasant for resting but a long way vertically to climb to the summit. Unlike most mountains, the Rupal Face does not have a vast horizontal distance from base camp and is fairly straight up.

A few weeks were spent acclimatising on the surrounding 5000-metre and 6000-metre peaks which offered superb views across the valley to Nanga Parbat, the Rupal Face and Mazeno Ridge. This late in the season there were no other expeditions around and we had the mountain to ourselves.

To get fully acclimatised we made a couple of sorties up the Schell Route. It was quite tempting to make a summit push up this fine line, but the plan was to recce the terrain for a descent after the Mazeno Ridge and to get as high as possible for acclimatisation. The Mazeno Ridge looked like an overgrown version of Aonach Eagach in Glen Coe, but much higher, longer and more technical. At some points it reaches 7000 metres before the col separating it from Nanga Parbat proper.

Earlier that year I had broken my arm, which had put me out of action for a couple of months and so I did not feel like committing myself to such a demanding challenge. The others were also rather perturbed at the prospect, but Doug spurred us on. Fate put a stop to any serious attempt when we were engulfed in rockfall on the Schell Route. I knew that this route had a reputation for rockfall, particularly this late in the season. I had dodged a few settie-sized boulders on the way up. In the early evening at around 5100 metres while descending, I was engulfed in a huge fall, enormous blocks missing me by millimetres as smaller chunks bounced off my helmet. I was lucky and survived physically unscathed. Next day Valerie was less fortunate and was swept 80 metres. Amazingly, though cut and battered with broken ribs, he was still alive. Getting him to base camp was a minor epic in itself, and the expedition was effectively over. I felt that the mountain was too dangerous that year and returned to Britain. No mountain is worth a life. I could always return another year and try again in better conditions, perhaps by a different route.

My next attempt, in 1997, after climbing nine 8000ers, was via the Diamir Valley to the Kinshofer Route on the Diamir Face; this route was first climbed by a German team in 1962 and was the route taken by Roger Mear and Dave Walsh during the first British ascent in 1991. The 1997 expedition ended in an infamous and bizarre incident involving a chapatti. Sneezing on some burnt crust or flour that had blown up my nose, I slipped a disc and was trapped in agony before finally being helicoptered out to Islamabad ten days later.

In 1998 I was back with a real determination to climb the Kinshofer Route. I had bought a place on an Italian expedition, initially intending to solo the mountain. Nanga Parbat rises almost straight out of the rough grass meadows of the Diamir base camp at 4100 metres, so there is no long, crevasse-strewn approach – ideal for a solo attempt. It is similar to the North Face of the Eiger which rises out of the meadows of Alpiglen above Grindelwald. Nanga Parbat also has similar rockfall dangers, exposure on its steep icefields and local weather storms.

It seemed that Nanga Parbat was reaching out to strike me even before I got to its slopes. Chantal Mauduit was also on the Italian permit and she was killed in Nepal attempting Dhaulagiri. In late May, just before leaving for Pakistan, I had a car crash and broke some ribs. I thought that I could recover in Islamabad, walk in gently and take it easy, acclimatising slowly as my painful ribs healed. I spent a couple of weeks in Islamabad cycling



12. Looking out from the summit of Nanga Parbat along the Mazeno Ridge in late evening. (*Alan Hinkes*) (p34)



13. Alan Hinkes on the summit of Nanga Parbat after climbing the Kinshofer route. It was his tenth 8000m peak. (*Alan Hinkes*) (p34)

up the Margalla Hills while my ribs mended and while dealing with the usual changeable bureaucracy. Not much had altered in Chilas and the Diamir Valley since the previous year. I met up with local acquaintances and spent four days strolling to base camp. The locals still had their guns on show. This part of Pakistan, known as Kohistan, used to have a reputation for lawlessness and banditry.

The Italians had gone ahead with their 'celebrity guest' Kurt Diemberger. Kurt is a living legend, but at 66-years-old I felt that he should know better than to attempt Nanga Parbat. I certainly hope to be climbing and in the hills at 66 and beyond, but I hope I will be sensible enough not to attempt an 8000-metre peak. Stoically, Kurt struggled up the dangerous Kinshofer Gully and the steep, strenuous Kinshofer Wall to Camp 2 at 5800 metres before admitting defeat.

It was late June before I arrived at base camp. There were a few other expeditions, Colombian, Spanish, Korean and Japanese. Although officially part of the Italian expedition, I set up a separate base camp kitchen with a local villager, Rehman, as cook. I had employed him on a previous expedition and he is an excellent chapatti maker. Most of the other expedition members had already been on the hill. The Colombians had been there for three weeks already and were bursting for a summit attempt.

The Diamir Face is over 4000 metres, as high as the Kinshofer Route and perhaps twice that in length. Getting acclimatised is not easy and even getting up to 5800 metres, the height of some base camps, is difficult. Traditionally, the Kinshofer Route is climbed with four camps. I intended to climb semi-alpine style. Camp 1 at 4800 metres is located at the toe of the central rock buttress, but it is a dangerous avalanche prone and rockfall site. I decided to ignore it and push on up to the site of Camp 2 at 5800 metres just above the Kinshofer Wall.

Leaving base camp at around 1am with a heavy sack, it would take about ten hours to climb the 1000-metre Kinshofer Gully and 200-metre Kinshofer Wall. The gully is a calf-burning snow and ice slog and is strafed by rockfall after dawn. The wall is intimidating: loose, overhanging and strenuous and the key to establishing yourself on the route to the top. Tatty old fixed ropes litter the gully and the wall, along with precarious alloy caving ladders. This is no place for the faint-hearted and definitely not a place to be in the heat of the day when the rocks smash onto the slope like incoming mortar fire.

There are a few safe sites to be dug out at 5800 metres before more interesting and safer mixed climbing leads to the Second Icefield. This is similar to its namesake on the Eigerwand and leads to a snow and ice shelf at about 6300 metres where I decided to stash a tent for Camp 3. Above this, the icefield leads up past a precarious and exposed spot for one tent at 6500 metres to a traverse right and up and back to the foot of the final trapezoid summit mass at 7100 metres. Tucked into a flat spot among crevasses is the site for Camp 4, unfortunately exposed to avalanches from above.

It was exactly three weeks after arriving at base camp that I felt ready for a summit push. I had been up to 6300 metres and stashed a tent with some gas and food. I now reckoned the weather seemed set in a pattern, the snow conditions were as good as they would get and I was fit enough.

On 18 July I made my third frightening push to Camp 2, leaving base camp at 2am and arriving at 5800 metres at about midday. Next day was a short three to four-hour climb up to the stash at 6300 metres. Now there was a group of climbers determined on pushing to the top. One Japanese, four Korean, one Australian, one Pakistani and me.

On 20 July we pushed up to 7100 metres which took over 12 hours through deep snow and an afternoon and evening white-out storm. Arriving at 7100 metres at 5pm in a blizzard, I realised that digging a tent platform and surviving would be a challenge in itself, let alone setting off for the top that night. But the evening cleared and seven of us decided to go for the summit on 21 July. I would have liked to have set off at midnight but melting the snow for water in the wind and spindrift took a painfully long time. Eventually seven of us left at about 3am for the final 1000 metres to the 8125-metre summit, the Japanese having dropped back.

Immediately the going was tough, with deep snow making for slow progress; with cold feet, frostbite was a real concern. This final west-facing slope does not get any sun until the afternoon, making Nanga Parbat a particularly cold climb. I had estimated that the ascent would take me about ten hours, so a midnight start would have meant a 10am summit, enough time to descend before the afternoon blizzard and nightfall. Now, as we struggled with the deep snow, I knew that it would be at least 4pm before the summit was reached. I could only hope that the weather would hold.

As I ploughed on, at times stopping to film with the digital video camera, I felt that the weather was going to sock in and engulf us in a protracted afternoon storm. Going down was probably the sensible option, yet I was so close now that if I retreated I realised that I might not get another chance or a weather window that year. I steeled myself to push on through the blizzard, sure that it would only be an afternoon storm as the weather seemed set in a pattern; I hoped that it would not turn into a several-day monster.

Spindrift poured down the slopes, filling in our tracks behind us as the storm battered us for three or four hours. Finally, we were above the clouds, only half an hour from the summit, but it was now 6pm and not far off dark. Already base camp and the Diamir Valley were in the deep shade. At 6.30pm we were in alpenglow on the summit. I filmed a little before heading down into the darkness.

I was prepared for a descent in the dark and had a head torch and two batteries. But I was not relishing the prospect, and knew that a minor epic was on the cards. What I had forgotten about was the avalanche risk. Now the slope back from the summit to 7100 metres was massively loaded by the afternoon's snowfall. I pushed ahead to find a descent route, but there

were no tracks to follow and the slope was sliding off around me like castor sugar. I was scared but had no option other than to press on down in the dark. Just before midnight I stopped short of the tents at 7100 metres; it was too dangerous to break trail solo through the crevasses. I waited until about 2am for two of the Koreans to catch me up, knowing that they had a rope and that we could tie on for this last fifteen-minute section. When they reached me, they wondered why I had stopped and then told me that they had thrown their rope away. I felt that we were stranded until daylight when it might be possible to see a route. However, one of the others got up and walked ahead for 50 metres or so. I followed and then spotted the safe line. After three hours of waiting in the dark and bitter cold I had been so near to the safety of the camp. Ten minutes later I was at the tent and struggling to get my crampons off before collapsing inside.

It had been roughly 22 hours since I had left. Later that morning, in full daylight, I packed up the tent to descend but, realising that the avalanche risk was still high, I only reached the camp at 5800 metres that day, 22 July. Next morning, I left early and abseiled back down the Kinshofer Wall and Gully. I was relieved that this would be the last time that I was there, as rockfalls were becoming more frequent. A couple of days later, one of the Japanese climbers was killed halfway up it.

At the base of the Diamir Face, Rehman's cousin met me to help carry my 40kg rucksack to base camp. Rehman had egg, chips and tea ready for me. I was totally burned out, and felt as physically and mentally tired as after I had climbed K2, but I also felt satisfied that Nanga Parbat was in the bag. Only four more 8000-metre peaks to go.