

# The August Catastrophe on K2

H. ADAMS CARTER

THE YEAR 1986 was a tragic one in the great mountains. It was not an influx of inexperienced mountaineers innocently straying into situations which were beyond their capacities. A shocking number of the world's most skilled climbers met death on the heights. Many climbers seem to have lost respect for hazards in the mountains, purposefully to cut the margin of safety to nearly zero, to risk total physical and mental exhaustion after too much time spent at excessively high altitude, to carry insufficient food and fuel, to show little team spirit or desire to help one's fellows, to be selfish, to engage in unhealthy competition. Many of these factors, together with terrible weather at crucial times, compounded the effects of inadequate food, water, shelter and of high altitude.

K2 was the scene of grim tragedy in early August. Already six deaths had occurred on the mountain in June and July as reported in the *Climbs and Expeditions* section. Another seven were soon to lose their lives. These last victims were members of five different expeditions, who happened to be on the mountain at the same time.

Koreans had been working on the route for some time, fixing ropes and installing camps. The full Korean account appears in the *Climbs and Expeditions* section. The Austrian expedition was composed of Alfred Imitzer, leader, Willi Bauer, Hannes Wieser, Michael Messner, Manfred Ehrenguber, Siegfried Wasserbauer and Helmut Steinmassl. They set up Base Camp on June 19 and for a few days made good progress on the Abruzzi Ridge. They continued to be active on the mountain although they were hampered by bad weather. For instance, on July 8 Imitzer made a solo attempt to 8000 meters, before having to descend in bad weather. However, the weather kept them mostly moving up high and then back down again. On July 26 material from Camp IV was found in avalanche debris at the foot of K2, which indicated the loss of valuable gear which had already been carried high. Yet, it appears that they did not carry up sufficient supplies to replace the loss when they made their summit try.

On July 28 and 29 all seven Austrians started out from Base Camp for a final attempt, but the group dwindled to Bauer, Wieser and Imitzer. On arriving at Camp III at 7300 meters, they found that the camp had also been partially destroyed and that a tent and its contents were missing. According to Kurt Diemberger, also Austrian but a member of a different expedition, the Austrians made a deal with the Koreans to carry up a Korean tent from Camp III to Camp

PLATE 2

*Photo by H. Adams Carter*

**K2 from Base Camp.**



IV at 8000 meters on August 1 and to make their summit bid on the 2nd. The Koreans would move up to use their own tent on the night of the 2nd while the Austrians descended to Camp III. In perfect weather on August 2, Imitzer, Bauer and Wieser started for the summit attempt. They took much time to fix ropes in the "Bottleneck" and on the icy traverse above it and had to turn back at 8400 meters.

Meanwhile Austrian Kurt Diemberger and Englishwoman Julie Tullis, who were a high-altitude film crew with the Italian Quota 8000 Expedition but were filming for German television, had been moving up for another summit bid. On July 6, they had reached the "Bottleneck" and had retreated because of unfavorable weather. They had left a carefully anchored rucksack at 7900 meters but on their return it was missing, possibly removed by the Koreans' high-altitude porters. By good planning, they had carried up another complete Camp IV, just in case the gear should be missing. They camped beside the Korean tent on August 2. Some 100 meters lower, within calling distance, Alan Rouse from the British northwest-ridge team and Dobrosława Miodowicz-Wolf from the Polish expedition had their tent. She was affectionately called Mrufka by all the climbers. The name means "ant" and is written "Mrówka" in Polish.

The Austrians descended from their summit attempt later than planned, but did not keep on going down to Camp III as they had agreed. After considerable argument, two of them squeezed in with the Koreans, five men in a three-man tent! Imitzer descended to crowd in with Rouse and Mrufka. Rouse said that he did not sleep at all that night and so was in no condition to try for the summit. The next day he and Mrufka moved their tent up with the other two.

On August 3, while the other climbers rested at Camp IV, South Koreans Jang Bong-Wan, Kim Chang-Sun and Jang Byong-Ho, the only climbers using supplementary oxygen, went to the summit. That same day, Poles Wojciech Wróż and Przemysław Piasecki and Czechoslovak Petr Božik completed the first ascent of the south-southwest ridge and began their descent down the Abruzzi Ridge. The Koreans and the Poles were caught in the dark. Wróż fell to his death, possibly having rappelled off the end of a fixed rope. Bauer shone his headlamp on the tent so that the descending climbers could see the camp. The first got to the camp at ten P.M. and the last at four A.M. Rouse and Mrufka took Piasecki and Božik in with them. Rouse tried to sleep half in and half out the entrance in a tiny snow hole.

On August 4 Piasecki, Božik and the Koreans began their difficult descent. Rouse and Mrufka started for the summit at 5:30 A.M., followed by Imitzer alone, then Julie Tullis and Diemberger and finally Bauer and Wieser. Wieser turned back after 100 meters, fearing frostbite because of damp mittens. Rouse broke trail to within 100 meters of the summit where Bauer took over. Bauer and Imitzer reached the top at 3:30 P.M. Mrufka, exhausted, quit at 8500 meters and descended with Rouse, who had got to the summit at four P.M. Diemberger and Julie Tullis reached the top at 5:30. Diemberger was leading the rope on the descent. Tullis slipped, pulling her companion off. They fell about 100 meters. Though not seriously hurt, they had to spend the night in the open at 8400

meters. Although a severe storm had begun further down the mountain, they were able to return to the others in Camp IV in a whiteout the next morning.

It then stormed unmercifully for five days and they were all trapped. Diemberger and Julie Tullis had to abandon their tiny tent, which kept being drifted over with snow. Diemberger joined Rouse and Mrufka, and Tullis went in with the Austrians. She weakened, lost her vision and finally died peacefully in her sleep on August 7. On August 8 they ran out of food and fuel and could no longer melt water. On August 10 it stopped snowing, but the wind was still at gale force. Diemberger and Mrufka tried in vain to get Rouse up, but he was hallucinating and near death.

Bauer stirred his companions Wieser and Imitzer into descending with him and Mrufka, but Wieser and Imitzer were so weak that a short distance below Camp IV both collapsed and died. Diemberger set out alone half an hour later. Bauer did most of the trail breaking in the deep snow. Camp III had been destroyed in the storm. Rope had been fixed almost all the way down from there and each went separately.

At nine P.M. Bauer got to Camp II, where he finally could melt snow and eat something. Diemberger arrived at ten P.M. Mrufka never did reach Camp II, probably having fallen between Camps III and II. They waited for her until noon before descending together past House's Chimney. Bauer went on ahead to Base Camp and alerted a rescue crew. Diemberger reached Advance Base at midnight where he met the rescuers. Michael Messner and Przemysław Piasecki climbed back up to 7100 meters but found no signs of Mrufka. Both Bauer and Diemberger were badly frostbitten and were helicoptered out on August 16. On August 4 the Korean success was marred by the death of their sirdar, Mohammad Ali, who was killed by rockfall near Camp I.

A total of 66 climbers have now stood on the summit of K2. Twenty-four climbers have died on the mountain, thirteen of them in 1986.