

# On the Brink on Broad Peak

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**B**LACKEST NIGHT, SILENCE . . . As I approach the edge, I feel frustrated by my sluggishness. I unconsciously tighten my grip on the shafts of my ice tools. The beam of my headlamp is lost in the unending void. My stomach tightens.

Blackest night, sounds . . . my panting and the squealing of crampons on rock under the crust of snow. Am I close to the tower and the gully that will lead me upward? Or am I lost? I can still go down . . . but higher, I don't know. Again uncertainty floats in the pudding that my brain has become here at 7300 meters. I know that this is real, better even than my dream, the dream of navigating alone on the seas of snow, ice and rock on Broad Peak.

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The idea of a new solo route on an 8000er had danced in my mind, but it hadn't come true. On Cho Oyu, two months ago, I didn't have the courage to try it, and although I was happy with the speed of my ascent, it was by the normal route. The same on Lhotse. I felt fine about having climbed each in less than 24 hours, but I was not satisfied with chalking up numbers, collecting 8000ers. I now had eight, but I was losing the essence of what made me climb. Being in virgin territory was what had inspired me in the past, especially in the Himalaya. I had to experience it again on Broad Peak. The risk of failure was much higher, but I already had two 8000ers under my belt this season. My sponsors were happy and despite economic problems in my native Mexico, I could give myself the luxury of other climbs while others played the numbers game. On expeditions to Tibet and Nepal, it was great to share moments of happiness with old and new friends. Moreover, a rest in Thailand with my wife and daughter had let me recuperate physically and mentally in order to go to Pakistan in good form.

My desire grew as I looked at the massive beauty of Broad Peak from 5000 meters on the slopes of Payu, framed by the Gasherbrums on one side and the myriad of rocky Baltoro needles on the other.

As with almost all the 8000ers, Broad Peak's 8047 meters had attracted dozens of climbers who crowded Base Camp and the normal route. However, camaraderie and friendliness reigned between the expeditions. I was a member of a German-Austrian expedition led by Rollo Steffens and we were only a few meters away from the wine and viands of the Basques, who invariably shared their smiles and table. The guitar of the Austrians gave life to the nights, which

PLATE 26  
*Photo by H. Adams Carter*  
**BROAD PEAK.**



often ended with exploding firecrackers much to the amazement of the multinational armed-services expedition.

A day after arriving at Base Camp, I climbed to 7000 meters for acclimatization. I hoped that the weather would hold; they told me it had been surprisingly good in the past weeks. My motivation was of the highest. I was responsible only to myself. I was determined to do my utmost, but without running risks too great.

While through binoculars I observed the beauty of this mountain and saw the many possibilities of new routes, I was amazed that the principal summit had been reached by only two routes, the normal 1957 one with its variants and that of Kurtyka and Kukuczka in 1984. However, as I looked more closely at the rocky barriers and séracs and at the avalanches, the options became fewer. With a general idea and a rough topo in my pocket, I set out on the morning of June 29 intent on breaking the thread that separated my dream from reality. A beautiful turquoise lake at the base of the spur lifted my spirits, as well as the unusual company of a chubby little bird that, as surprised as I, stayed close to me, fluttering from rock to rock. Snow ramps and some easy mixed ground were followed by stretches of rotten rock. I had to self-belay in an off-width crack and along a ridge that seemed more to be of gravel than rock to get to a small snow top.

Even though the solitude of Baffin Island or the deserts of Mexico might be greater, here I felt myself more distant from the world, despite the 70 people at Base Camp. I envied those great pioneers who had really moved alone in these mountains. One cannot contemplate a rescue, errors must not be committed and isolation is complete. I concentrated, knowing I alone was master of my fate.

The creative aspect of opening a new route kept me looking for options, but I hardly expected the grateful surprise of a solid intrusion of basalt supporting the rotten wall. I could advance another 50 meters without fear of breaking a hold. Moreover, the rough black surface had absorbed so much heat from the sun that I could climb without gloves.

After some mixed pitches and a dangerous funnel down which flowed an icy river and where I had to dart between periodic bursts of rockfall, I got to snowy ramps. I halted and for two hours carved out a platform for my tiny tent, but this was no waste of time, since I could fill my water bottles in a trickle melted by the sun, which also dried my boots and clothing. I slept well, and as on the beaches of Mexico, I awoke at nine A.M. I had meant to set off at daybreak and now I had to hurry. I kept following snow and ice ramps, joined by mixed passages, until I emerged on a long slope where I could move rhythmically until the precarious condition of the wet snow made me seek firmer ground. A sharp ridge cut the spur. After gaining the ridge top, where I thought I could just walk upward, I found it played me tricks, because it was a long and complicated traverse where I had to self-belay myself on several occasions. The view of Gasherbrum IV, Chogolisa and the pinnacles was phenomenal. The only problem was that the weather seemed to be deteriorating. Getting to the virgin

snow dome, P 6230, filled me with satisfaction and although the wind had picked up, I spent a second comfortable night despite not having brought a sleeping bag.

I continued along a plateau where I probed with my poles, seeking hidden crevasses and fearful that I might fall in. I followed ramps, which after a couple of hours brought me to the junction with the normal route near Camp III. The weather had definitely changed and the much-feared mushroom cloud hovered over K2. I could not go on. The next morning, after leaving my tent and gear with the idea of returning, I descended with the Austrians who had managed to get to the foresummit the day before.

The continuity of the ascent had been broken, but I had been able to scan the final slope, which would present a challenge when the weather improved. I have happy memories of the days in Base Camp and despite the bad weather, my motivation grew. A week later, the sun shone again.

At 2:30 A.M. on July 8, I left the heat of Base Camp and got to Camp III at ten in the morning. I rested a few hours. While I melted snow and dried my socks, I listened to the jokes of the Basques who were sleeping there. A light wind was blowing and I had left a stove lit inside the tent. I was outside since the stove and I hardly fitted inside in the tiny space. After studying the face for a while, I opened the tent zipper and noticed that the stove had gone out. Stupidly, I lit the lighter and . . . BOOM! The tent vanished, along with my moustache and much skin, leaving only the poles. The pain was intense and I emptied my sunburn-creme tube onto hands and face. This changed my plans. I had to melt more snow and start later than intended, at four P.M.

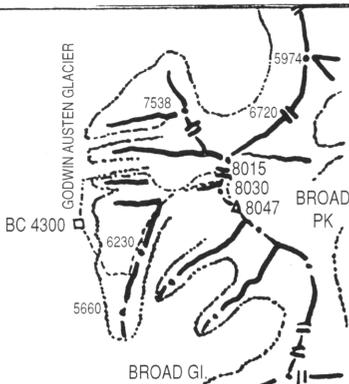
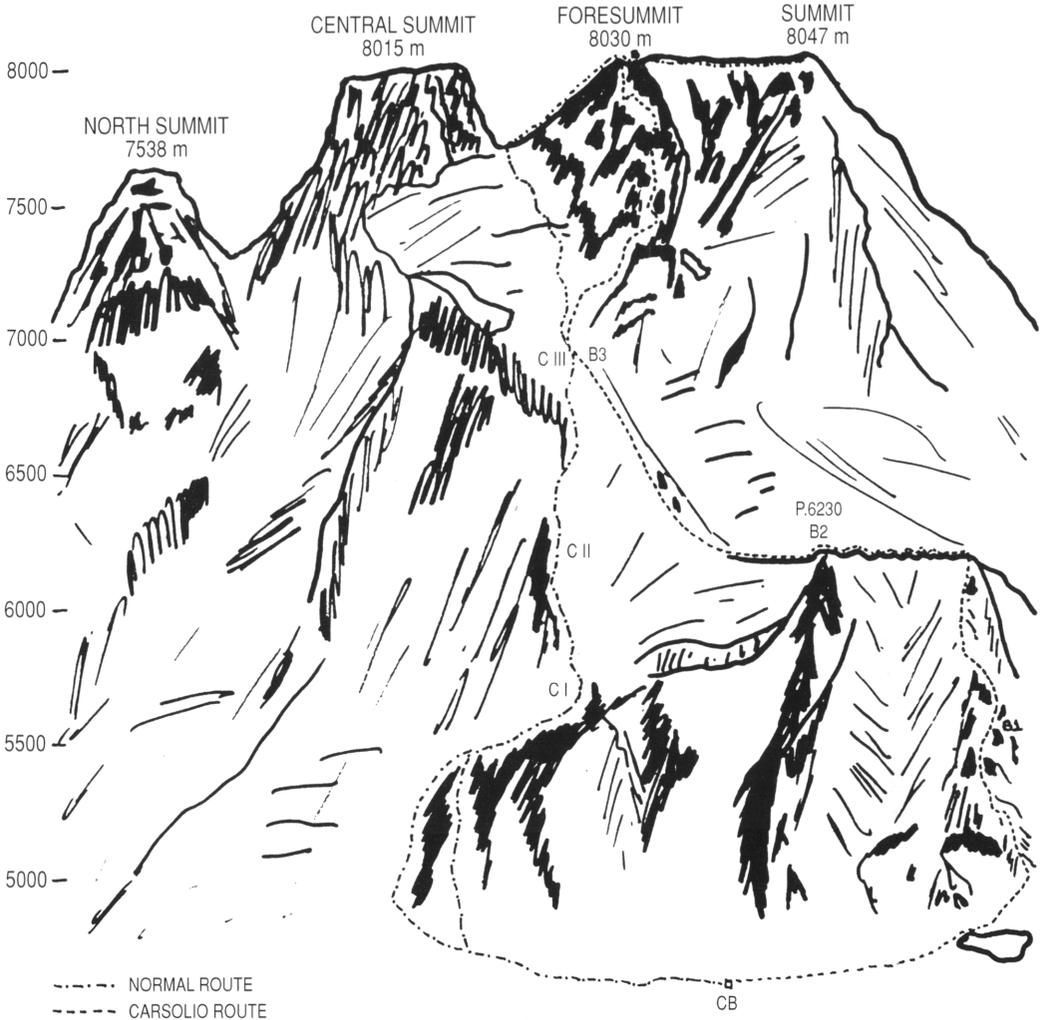
The slope was gentle and the snow was deep. It was dark by the time I got to the bergschrund, which I had to go around near a rocky ridge on slopes that got progressively steeper, fortunately with better conditions. The slopes took me to somewhat unstable mixed ground where I had to concentrate.

Time passed without my realizing it and I felt secure and happy until I noticed a great void toward the southeast where the light of my headlamp failed to penetrate. My visibility was very much reduced and the night was as dark as the mouth of a wolf. I had a general idea of where I was, but I could locate myself only when I got to the base of a tower where I knew that I had to climb a gully toward the left. The heat from my burns and the swelling of my face and hands were intense. The blisters had hardened. Yet, I decided to ignore all that. The relief that I then felt helped me not to lose more energy fighting the pain.

Dawn was grandiose. An infinite number of sharp silhouettes filled the horizon, especially the pyramid of Masherbrum, incomparable K2 and the massive presence of Broad Peak Central. A quick motion to free the straps of my ice tools made me lose my watch, which I watched bounce down the slope. I would have to concentrate more!

I got to a vertical rock band where I had to self-belay. I was carrying 90 meters of 7mm rope and 50 of 5mm in case I had to descend. I had never had to exert myself so much as in those 80 meters, but fortunately the rock was solid. I was carrying seven titanium pitons and 5 ice screws and had to climb

# BROAD PEAK (WEST FACE)



high above my protection. At the top of the pitch, I flung myself exhausted onto a shelf. The weather was lovely and I could sometimes take off my gloves. There was just a breeze. I rappelled to get my pack and when I got back to the shelf, the morning was well advanced.

Unfortunately, when I pulled the rope up, I noticed that a rock that I had dislodged had damaged it. I had to cut it into 60- and 30-meter pieces. A tension traverse and a mixed section brought me to ramps rising to the left. Although they took me out of the route I had planned, they let me gain altitude easily. I felt the lack of oxygen and in one of those peculiar sensations that one has at high altitude, I saw rocks that appeared to be the guardians of the summit area. I asked them for permission to pass and felt that they granted it.

The ramps ended in a bulge, which, although short, cost me much time. Standing on a shelf, I couldn't figure out how to overcome the next rotten section when I spied that the solution lay lower where a gully would lead me to the final rocky edge. I wedged stones into a wide crack and rappelled on the doubled 60-meter section of rope. When I got to the knot on the bottom, I tried in vain to pendulum across the few meters. I had to tie on the 30-meter section and abandon the longer piece. Now the only way out was upward. Strangely, this quieted me and all feeling of uncertainty vanished. I climbed the mixed ramp to the gully which ended in a bulge. I knew that the way out was to the left and I even knew that the out-of-sight dihedral which was above would be the route. I had the impression that I could see my body climbing from afar, floating, as if I were a spectator and an adviser to the climber. I self-belayed again.

I got to a snowy shelf. As I tried to melt a bit of snow in my dry mouth, I noticed a something shining intensely, not far away, possibly 70 meters off. I feared it might be an hallucination. I had been that high before and never had seen anything like that.

Opposite me was the last barrier, but it was difficult. I tried to climb a crack that reminded me of the Brown crack on the Blaitière but at that moment I couldn't manage it. Soon I tried a slightly overhanging, eight-meter-high dihedral and despite wedging my ice axes and jamming knots into a shallow crack that wouldn't take pitons, I couldn't master it. I made four attempts. Exhausted, each time I slipped and hung from my harness attached by a clove-hitch to the carabiners on the ice-axe straps. My arms lay inert at my sides. I descended and traversed over some ledges, but the walls were even higher. I returned to the dihedral. Using all the tricks I could think of, I still couldn't do it. My alter ego suggested I try a rib to the right which had a lot of knobs, but they broke off. I had to go for it, even at the risk of a fall. I jammed the pick of my axe as high as I could and fell back hanging to rest. I gave myself three meters of rope and started up on the last reserves of my strength, knowing that this was my last chance.

I emerged from the dihedral panting. The ramp which followed was covered with sand, snow and loose pebbles. Worst of all, the miserable clove-hitch got stuck. I was finally able to loosen it, bring up the rope and fling myself onto a

PLATE 27

*Photo by Carlos Carsolio*

**One of the pinnacles on the new route on BROAD PEAK. Chogolisa in the background.**



shelf. I lay there I know not how long, gasping and with cramps in my fingers. When I finally managed to gather my thoughts, I realized I now had neither rope nor pins. I wedged the knot of a fragment of rope under a large block of rock and attached my harness. I had left my 5mm rope in my pack at the foot of the dihderal. I descended with a strap tied to my waist and a carabiner as a brake, cleaned the pitch and climbed back up.

I was exhausted, but I still had ten meters to climb. Opposite me, under a bulge, was a dark hole that led to a perfect, undemanding chimney. Above, only sand and snow separated me from the foresummit. I had made it! Gratefully, I advanced toward the strange gleaming. On the snowy foresummit, someone had left a metal stake, which was reflecting the sunset light.

Night was approaching, and although I still had an hour and a half of light, I left my pack on the stake and headed for the main summit. I descended to a little col and continued along a succession of hummocks, greatly aided by a telescopic ski pole. (To think that I had nearly thrown it away when my pack was tormenting me!) I had to walk carefully and not approach the cornices. At times there were tracks, possibly those of Göran Kropp who had left them a few days before. I constantly had to remind myself not to stop to rest and I was dragged forward by the closeness of the summit. The orange sunset tones were fantastic. I felt a deeper emotion than ever before. An intense sense of peace overcame me. I was in harmony with the whole interior and exterior cosmos. No tears, no gleeful shouts, just a sea of tranquillity.

When I caught sight of Gasherbrum IV reflecting the last rays of the sun, I knew I was nearly there. The summit is an inclined plateau where there was a stake and a fragment of rope. I wanted to take them with me, but I didn't waste my energy for that. Instead I sat down behind the stake to savor the moment. The silhouette of K2 reflected the last rays of the sun, while all the rest sank into an impenetrable darkness punctured here and there by countless sharp shadows. I observed in ecstasy.

Night fell and with it came the imperious need to get back down. While I began the return with all my senses elevated and peaceful, I felt that down there in Base Camp, 3000 meters lower, someone was praying for me. Later, I found out that the sirdar and the cook, wonderful grandfathers who had accompanied expeditions even from before the time I was born, were worried and petitioning Allah for my safe return.

The extra lithium headlamp batteries helped me a lot. After interminable walking, I got to my pack to begin the descent. But where to go? After a search, I decided it would be safer to wait for dawn rather than to let a cornice end my adventure.

I returned and bivouacked below a little col near the foresummit on a block of rock, almost without wind, although nearby on the shoulder of K2 it was blowing a gale, as Wojciech Kurtyka later told me. In the past, I had not let myself fall asleep at such an altitude, but I was so fatigued and so confident that I would survive that it was different. I woke up three times during the night to

stretch, wearing only the clothing I had on my back, but the night was so unusual for the Karakoram that I escaped all frostbite.

Not descending into the night had been a good decision since not knowing the route, I'd have run great risk. At dawn, I began the descent, now fighting an increasing wind and in rapidly deteriorating weather. What a lovely ridge and what gorgeous views! I could imagine how Buhl, Diemberger, Schmuck and Wintersteller must have felt when setting foot here for the first time.

Below the col, the descent was easy. I met Emmanuel Morin of the armed-forces expedition, who was heading for the summit, and he gave me a delicious sip of tea. In Camp III, Patxi Ibarbia, Peyo Angulo and Walter Kunzendorf treated me like a king and gave me much-needed drink. The next day, the mountain was furiously bombarded by storm.

Aside from the satisfaction I got from this climb, this ascent reaffirmed for me the difference between an idea and an illusion and that the realization of a dream is in creating motivation and daring to take the first step. I am profoundly grateful to Broad Peak for all it has taught me. I am sure that on its slopes lie many other treasures to be discovered.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Baltoro Karakoram, Pakistan.

NEW ROUTE: Broad Peak, 8047 meters, 26,400 feet, via a new route on the West Face, done in two stages: to 7000 meters on June 28 to July 1, 1994 and from 7000 meters to the summit on July 8 and 9, 1994 (Carlos Carsolio).

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