

THE OLD BREED

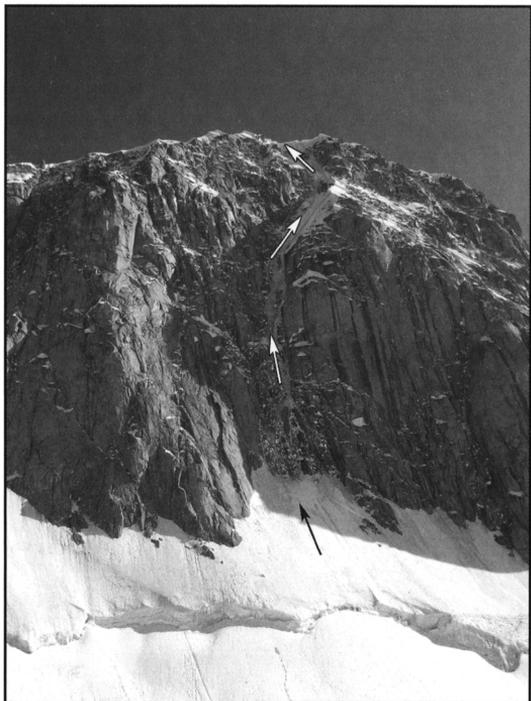
The first ascent of Saser Kangri II (7,518m) and other peaks in the Eastern Karakoram, India.

MARK RICHEY



The south side of Saser Kangri II as viewed from the summit of Tsok Kangri. The "West Peak" climbed in 1985 is clearly visible as the rounded snow shoulder far left of and below the main, east, summit reached in 2011. *Mark Richey*

When we first saw Saser Kangri, in 2001, we didn't even know its name. My partner Mark Wilford and I snapped a few photographs of four massive mountains to the north as we shivered that early dawn in our high bivouac on Yamandaka (AAJ 2002). Later Harish Kapadia, co-leader of our expedition with Sir Chris Bonington, informed us that the great peaks were Saser Kangri I, II, III, and IV.



The north face route on Tsok Kangri (6,585m). Steve Swenson

I became fascinated with these unexplored mountains in disputed Kashmir near the Actual Ground Position Line between India and Pakistan. Gaining permission to climb in this militarily restricted area can be difficult. But in 2006 Harish called and asked me, “Why not go to Saser Kangri II? The East Peak is unclimbed and higher than the West Peak and it’s possible to obtain a permit.”

By 2008 I had started researching the Saser Kangri peaks more seriously. Located in the Buddhist region of Ladakh in northeastern Kashmir, there was little information about this remote area, but a picture taken by Harish from the Kardung La, a high pass to the south, showed a huge rock and ice face on Saser Kangri II (SKII). From his photo, I could see Harish was correct: the virgin East Peak of SKII was higher than the already climbed West Peak. At 7,518 meters, this made

SKII East the second highest unclimbed mountain in the world. Only Ghanker Puensom in Bhutan, where climbing is prohibited, is higher.

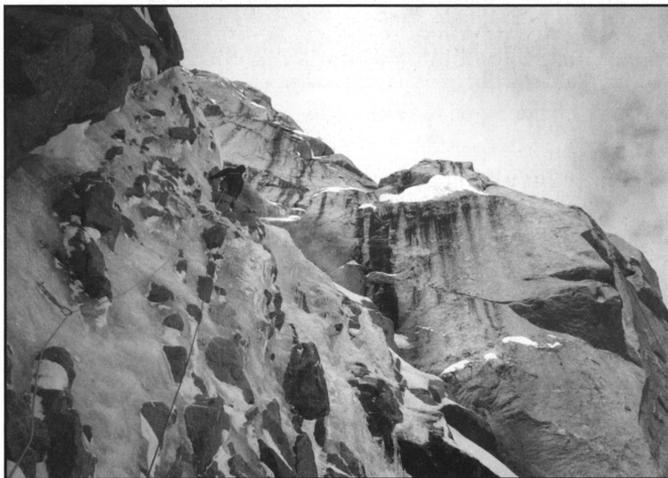
The West Peak of SKII had been reached by a massive Indo-Japanese expedition in 1985 following a route from the north. They claimed the first ascent of SKII, declaring that the “West Peak” was similar in height to the “East Peak” but separated by a long and complex ridge. SKII fell into obscurity even though the East Peak remained unclimbed. I shared the photos with Steve Swenson, and we hatched a plan to attempt Saser Kangri II the following summer. We believed the East Peak was the true or “Main” summit and were drawn to the possibility of the first ascent of such a big and beautiful mountain.

By mid September 2009, fellow Americans Steve and Mark Wilford, with Jim Lowther from the U.K., and I found ourselves halfway up the 1,700-meter southwest face of SKII. We huddled in two tiny tents perched on a narrow ledge of ice as a storm raged and temperatures dropped well below zero. As we struggled to melt water with a failing stove, we felt our exhaustion from an open bivouac the previous night and the rigors of two months of climbing and reconnaissance. This had included six forays over a 6,000-meter pass, which was our only access to the southwest face from base camp. We retreated on our fourth day. Although unsuccessful, we learned a great deal about the mountain. The southwest face was a direct route to the “Main” summit and relatively safe from objective dangers. But the mountain had revealed a cruel secret: it offered no natural ledges big enough for a bivouac.

By 2011, Steve and I were ready for a second attempt. This time we were accompanied by Freddie Wilkinson, a top young alpine climber. Three other experienced climbers would

join the expedition: Janet Bergman, Emilie Drinkwater, and Kirsten Kremer. Their plan was to share our base camp while attempting other unclimbed peaks in the region, especially a beautiful rocky peak just above base camp.

In addition to the American members, we were joined by six Indian climbers: Chewang Motup (expedition co-leader), Konchok Thinlese (sirdar), Pemba Sherpa (aka King Kong), Dhan Singh Harkotia, Jangla Tashi Phunchok, and Tshering Sherpa. Our base camp was well staffed by chief cook Santabir Sherpa and his assistants Arjun Rai, Aungchok, and Mahipal (aka Kitchen Boy). Raj Kumar, from the Indian Army, served as our liaison officer. Climbing in this restricted region requires “Joint Expedition” status, meaning that there must be an equal number of



Mark Richey leading the ice gully on Tsok Kangri. *Freddie Wilkinson*



Freddie Wilkinson leading the back side of the summit ridge on Tsok Kangri. *Steve Swenson*

Indian climbers and foreigners on foreign expeditions. Since our intent was to climb alpine style with just a three-man team of Americans, we came up with a plan to engage our Sherpa and Ladakhi teammates to help establish advanced base camps for both teams as well as to manage the normal duties of base camp and cooking. This strategy proved essential to our success.

By July 11 the team was comfortably settled in a lovely base camp at 5,000 meters, above the snout of the Sakang Lungpa glacier and just three days’ walk from the Nubra Valley. Wildflowers, awesome boulders, and a gurgling brook in a meadow with amazing views of unclimbed Plateau Peak and other mountains made for one of the finest base camps any of us had ever experienced. Best of all, we had it all to ourselves!

On July 23, Steve, Freddie, and I skied over the 6,000-meter pass we had discovered in 2009 and established Advanced Base Camp (ABC) on the South Shukpa Kunchang glacier. ABC was directly below the southwest face of SKII. The following day our intended recon to the 2009 highpoint ended well below, at our first camp, which we'd dubbed "The Launchpad." Extreme heat triggered major snow sloughs and rockfall in the Great Couloir—the main feature bisecting the southwest face.

It was clearly too hot to attempt SKII. We needed to wait until later in the season, when temperatures would be cooler. So we turned our attention to a spectacular cirque near ABC. There we found a beautiful line of ice runnels up a steep north face ending directly at the summit of a virgin 6,585-meter peak. We left ABC at 4 a.m. on July 31 with nothing but daypacks and climbed 12 pitches of superb grade 4+ ice to the summit ridge. After a tricky traverse around the south side we reached the top at 6 p.m., just as the final rays of sun painted the range in alpenglow. From the summit we had spectacular views north to Saser Kangri II and confirmed that our main objective, the East Peak, was considerably higher than the western point reached by the 1985 expedition.

A 22-hour round trip, including 13 rappels and a ski in the dark, brought us back to ABC exhausted but thrilled. With suggestions from our Ladakhi companions, we named the mountain Tsok Kangri, a Buddhist expression for the practice of gathering merit and wisdom in life.

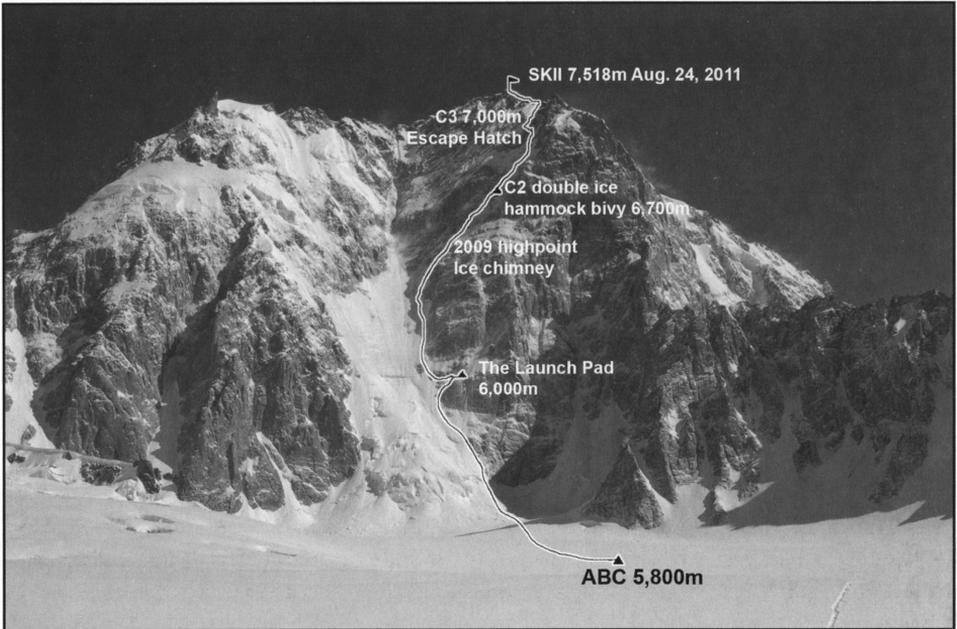
On August 4, encouraged by an excellent weather forecast, we returned to ABC to attempt other first ascents in the area while we waited for the weather to cool down for SKII. The women, after encountering dangerous rock fall hazard on their peak above base camp, joined us while they looked for a safer objective. Steve meanwhile had developed a sinus infection and descended to the Nubra Valley to recover.

First to strike were Emilie and Kirsten with the first ascent of Pumo Kangri, 6,250 meters, via the west face on August 5. Assuming their route to be mainly snow, they carried only one ice screw and no bivy gear. But the snow turned out to be just a veneer over hard blue ice. Conditions slowed their progress and they arrived on the summit in the late afternoon. They made 15 V-thread rappels in the dark and passed Freddie and Janet on their way up to bag the first ascent of Saserling, a spectacular rock tower to the north. Their route follows a steep crack system in good granite for eight pitches of 5.9+ and finishes directly on a pointed summit.

After just one day of rest, everyone skied across the valley to a high camp below a 6,660-meter peak that we named Stegosaurus because of its central spine of rock towers. On August 9, all five of us climbed up steep snow just right of the towers followed by a 300-meter traverse along the exposed final ridge. Just below the top we belayed each other one at a time to the corniced summit. This was the fourth first ascent of the expedition and an altitude record for all the women. The best part was yet to come, however: a superb ski descent back to ABC from high camp. It was great fun watching pro skiers Emily and Kirsten as they effortlessly carved turns and jumped small crevasses.

Now it was time for the women to head home, so we all descended to the Nubra Valley to say farewell, check on Steve's status, which thankfully had improved, and enjoy a few days of rest, cold beer, and hot springs.

On August 16, Freddie, Steve, and I were back in BC anxious for promising weather. With less than two weeks left in the expedition, we were running out of time. On the 19th we received a forecast calling for high pressure, low winds, and light precipitation for the next six to eight days. The bad news: it would be followed by a significant disturbance. The race was on.



The southwest face of Saser Kangri II (7,518m), showing the line of The Old Breed. *Mark Richey*

The next morning we left BC with Thinlese, Tserring, Tashi, and Pemba helping to carry loads to ABC, which we reached early in the day. On the mountain above ABC, Steve, Freddie, and I would climb in pure alpine style carrying everything we needed to get up and down safely. We packed five days of food, mostly cheese, sausage, soups, and energy bars, six days fuel, a tiny two-man tent, and a minimal rack of eight ice screws, five pitons, and a dozen nuts and cams. To cut weight, we carried just two sleeping bags, one regular and a larger one that two could share. To address the main problem of bivouac sites we carried our own invention: two specially designed “ice hammocks” that weighed only two ounces each. These consisted of an eight-foot by three-foot sheet of fabric with sewn loops on each end that could be anchored to the slope 10 feet apart and then backfilled with snow and ice to extend a chopped tent platform on the ledge-less face.

That night my mind raced with details. Had we planned for everything? Had Steve adequately recovered? Would the weather hold long enough for a summit bid? I tossed and turned with nervous energy until the wee hours. I was worried that we were overlooking something, but I was also just eager to get on with the climb.

Morning arrived with a stiff wind as we skied to the base in darkness. Freddie, in the lead, called back to Steve and me to watch out for crevasses as they’d opened up since our last attempt. We stashed our skis in the cold pre-dawn light and, like automatons, ascended the snow funnel to the bergschrund at the base of the Great Couloir.

Freddie led the first block of 55-degree ice. After three pitches we made an encouraging discovery: hard névé had formed on top of the ice in places, allowing us to move together without belays. With the improved conditions we moved faster than on previous attempts and by late morning, just as the sun beamed over us, we reached the Launch Pad bivy. Though it



Richey and Wilkinson in the Great Couloir of Saser Kangri II. *Steve Swenson*

was colder than in mid July, we knew that the heat of the day could cause rock fall in the Great Couloir, so we set up our tent on the best ledge on route and waited until night to start climbing again.

At 3 a.m. Steve took the lead, sometimes belaying and sometimes simul-climbing, and we flew up the Great Couloir. By 10 a.m. we reached our second bivy in 2009. I took over the lead as we passed mixed

rock and ice to the “Ice Chimney” pitch. Freddie hollered up encouragingly as I passed a tricky bulge and exited onto the steep ice slopes above. We were thrilled that what we learned in 2009 had helped put us above our previous highpoint so early on the second day. But finding a spot for a good bivy was the next challenge—we knew that climbing safely and successfully on such a big wall at this altitude meant we needed to set up the tent, rehydrate, and eat well. Three more pitches and a long traverse to the right placed us on top of a small, rocky buttress. As I joined Freddie at the stance he commented, “I think this is the best we’re going to do,” referring to the 45-degree sloping rock he was belaying from. It was time to test the “Ice Hammock”

After two hours of chopping ice and transporting snow in our packs to fill the Hammocks that slung over the rock like giant brassieres, we had the makings of a ledge just big enough to accommodate our shelter. Without the Ice Hammocks we would have been sitting exposed and upright all night.

We had climbed more than half the wall and had broken through the rock band, a section we’d feared might be the crux of the climb. What’s more, the weather was calm and clear. Only one thing worried us: Steve was clearly not well. While Freddie and I chopped and prepared the bivy, Steve melted water as he was too tired for anything else. This was a bad sign. We all knew it but didn’t discuss it. We feared Steve’s sinus infection might be returning and it could mean the end of the climb. With almost any other climber I would have called off the ascent, but Steve is so experienced and aware of his body that when he says he can go I don’t question him. That night we rested and hydrated well, and despite a lot of hacking and snorting, Steve felt well enough in the morning to move up.

Freddie took over the lead early, climbing rock to the top of the buttress and then moving diagonally up a broad gully we coined “The Ramp.” Although never steep or overly technical, the relentless low angle water ice was taxing, particularly at 7,000 meters with full packs. Nonetheless, The Ramp offered an amazing passage through an otherwise imposing rock wall. After eight pitches, the Ramp dead-ended at an overhanging cul de sac. Freddie spied a weakness on the left side of the rock wall, traversed into a crack system, hooking and

dry-tooling with a balancy move into a blind corner that turned out to be the technical crux of the climb. “This is f---ing awesome climbing” he screamed down, clearly enjoying himself. We named it the “Escape Hatch” pitch, a key passage to easier snow and ice slopes above. Steve and I followed, arms pumped and lungs burning as we joined Freddie at a small stance.

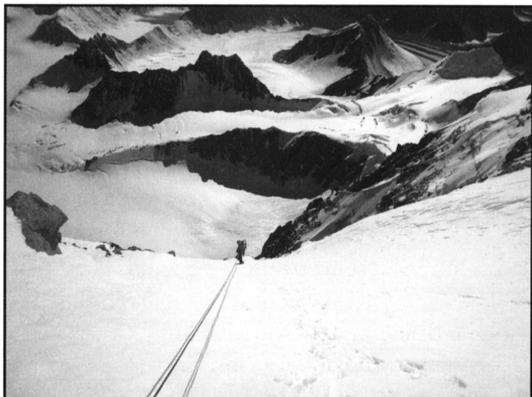
Since it was late in the day, we began searching for a bivouac, but wherever we excavated snow and ice we hit rock within a foot. Just as we were beginning to lose hope, Freddie lowered around a corner beneath an overhang and shouted, “I think we can chop it here, just maybe.” I joined him, and we feverishly hacked at the ice while Steve melted snow again and dried his clothing that was soaked from a leaked water bottle in his pack. This time we were without the advantage of our Ice Hammocks as we had used both at previous camps and left them in place for the descent. As darkness enveloped, we squeezed into the tent, its outer corners sagging over the void. The tent was tied to an ice screw and a safety tether also snaked through a hole in the top. We filled the corners with boot shells and extra gear; it was marginal at best.

Shoehorned into the two-man tent, we shifted awkwardly about the stove as it swayed precariously in the center while Steve hacked up phlegm throughout the night. He later confided, “I was thinking I just needed to make it to the high camp, where Freddie and Mark can go for the summit while I wait for them in the tent.” That team approach epitomizes Steve’s character and is testament to our close friendship. Freddie and I were thinking differently. We were so close we could taste the summit, and the weather was amazingly calm and clear. We had dreamed of this mountain for three years and worked so hard that we couldn’t imagine leaving Steve behind. We never even discussed it.

As we ate soup and cheese, we strategized for the next day. We would take light packs, leaving the tent and most of our equipment behind—gambling on making it to the top and back in one day. I would lead to the summit ridge, where Freddie would take over. If snow was deep, Steve suggested he could help plough, but we knew it was going to be a fight for him just getting to the top in his condition.



The second bivouac on Saser Kangri II, where Richey’s two-ounce Ice Hammocks saved the night by holding snow for a level platform.
Steve Swenson



We woke to a fourth day of perfect weather and climbed three pitches of moderate ice to a broad shoulder on the summit ridge. Surrounding us were unclimbed mountains and unexplored glaciers as far as the eye could see. Tsok Kangri was far below us now. Freddie led us up a gentle slope and along a sharp crest and then stopped and waited for me just a rope length from the top. “Go on,” he said, “you go first.” When there was nowhere higher to go, emotion overcame me and I let out a long, primal scream. I have climbed many

mountains over the years, but this one felt special. Perhaps because I had dreamed of this moment for three years—to be the first to summit a Himalayan giant, with best friends, and to do it in our best style—and maybe because I knew I was reaching a turning point in my climbing. At 53 I was old for this game, and there might not be another such opportunity.

Moments later we were all on top together. We cheered, embraced, shook hands, and I squeezed Steve so hard that in his weakened condition he could hardly breathe. We babbled on about our incredible fortune: a great team, a virgin 7,500-meter peak in a remote Karakoram Range on an absolutely perfect day. It seemed surreal as we gazed northwest past unclimbed peaks to the Karakoram giants in Pakistan. Steve pointed out K2, Broad Peak, and the Gasherbrums. It truly was, as Steve put it, “dreamy.”

It had been anything but easy for Steve and it is proof of his tremendous will and endurance that he carried on in spite of feeling so poorly. In his words, “I have climbed other mountains that took more strength, but this one hurt the most.”

Below us and half a kilometer to the west was a rounded dome of snow above a prominent rock tower that we recognized as the “West Peak” of SKII. We estimated it to be 100 to 150 meters below us and lacking any real prominence. This confirmed our suspicion that the East Peak was not only the true summit of Saser Kangri II, but also that the “West Peak” was a shoulder of the summit ridge and not an actual summit.

Eventually we had to go down. We reminded ourselves that the job is not done until all are safely in base camp. Arriving at our high camp by early afternoon, we crawled inside to rest. Steve was worse now and unable to lie down for fear of choking on his phlegm. He spent the night sitting upright at the door while Freddie and I squished into the back and did our best to make him comfortable. No one slept and in the morning we rose to cloudy skies and a light snow falling. Freddie set the first rappel as I melted water and hurriedly packed the tent.

Although we were all tired, Steve was exhausted, moving painfully slowly and beginning to lose his mental acuteness. One of our ropes had been cut by a falling stone the day before and we needed to pass the knot on each rappel. At one point Steve accidentally unclipped himself from the rappel rope without even knowing it. After that we watched him like hawks.

By midday, we had descended half the face and with shade from cloud cover we were lured into continuing down the Great Couloir rather than stopping to wait for the cool of

night. Several rappels into the Couloir a thunderous crack echoed above and rocks of all sizes rained down on us. We were all tethered to a single ice screw, swaying from side to side as we dodged the deadly projectiles for what seemed like eternity. No one was hit and, amazingly, Freddie captured the whole event on video.

Thirty-five rappels, the last 12 by headlamp, delivered us to the glacier and our skis. It was insanely scary sliding down the icy surface by headlamp, accelerating toward crevasses that we could bridge with our skis but knowing that putting on the breaks at the wrong time might lead to a plunge into the abyss.

In the foggy darkness we skied right past our camp, but eventually our faithful companions, Tinless, Dhan Singh, and Pemba heard our calls and hurried to greet us with hot tea and cheers of congratulations. We drank and by midnight collapsed into our bags and fell into a comatose sleep.

That is until 3 a.m., when I awoke to a persistent tug on my leg. “Go away, let me sleep” was my first reaction. It was Steve. “I am in trouble and I need help,” he whispered in a weak voice. One look in his eyes told me it was urgent. His coughing was dislodging big chunks of sticky phlegm that periodically would block his airway. With the SAT phone we called Steve’s doctor friend Brownie Schoene in the United States and asked for advice. “Keep him hydrated and make sure he doesn’t suffocate.” Weighing the circumstances and our remote location, we placed a call to Global Rescue, our American Alpine Club rescue provider, and initiated a helicopter evacuation. Over the next 12 hours we communicated our position and situation to Chewang Motup of Rimo Expeditors, joint leader of our SKII expedition, to my wife Teresa who had joined Motup in Leh, and to the Global Rescue agent in Boston. They, in turn, contacted the Indian government to obtain the complex clearances required for the Indian Air force to send their highly trained helicopter pilots up the South Shukpa glacier for the evacuation. They had never before landed a helicopter on these glaciers.

We did our best to make Steve comfortable, but at times the waves of choking nearly overcame him and we feared for his life. Secretly, Freddie and I prepared crude tools, plastic tubes from a harness and a sterilized Swiss Army knife, for a last resort tracheotomy if it came to that. Meanwhile, Teresa and Motup worked the phones relentlessly back in Leh, badgering every government official who would take their calls to keep the pressure on and get a helicopter to BC before it was too late.

Fortunately the tracheotomy was not required and at 3 p.m. the telltale whir of rotor blades filled the air. Freddie and I felt a huge relief.

Two choppers flying low over the mountains made a big circle before putting down next to our makeshift heli pad. The second chopper was a backup in case the first would have trouble taking off from the 19,000-foot landing zone. We loaded Steve and within an hour he was at the general hospital in Leh.

Thanks to intravenous antibiotics and the expertise of great doctors and nurses, Steve made a rapid recovery. Although weak, he was able to return to our hotel after just a few days.

Meanwhile, Tashi, Pemba, Tshering, Dhan Singh, Freddie, and I broke down ABC, traversed up and over to base camp, and the next day everyone descended to the Nubra Valley where we met Teresa, her friend Lisa



Teresa Richey, Chewang Motup, and Steve Swenson in Leh after the helicopter rescue. *Steve Swenson Collection*

from the States, and Motup. After a few days we were all together in Leh for a wonderful celebration.

SKII and our other climbs were a great success for all of us and provided a remarkable adventure. Collectively, we made five first ascents including the world's second highest unclimbed mountain. All were climbed free, in alpine style, without the aid of fixed ropes or camps.

We are extremely appreciative of the support we received from our Indian team members and of the Rimo staff for helping us establish and supply our Advanced Base Camp on the South Shukpa glacier. Without that support, we would certainly not have been successful. We were delighted with the tasty meals and attention provided by our cook Santibir and his assistants in BC. Most of all, we are grateful for the friendship and camaraderie we all shared on this marvelous joint expedition.

We are also indebted to the Western Air Command of the Indian Air Force for their courage and superb skill evacuating Steve so flawlessly. Lastly I would like to acknowledge and thank my wife Teresa for being there when we needed her most.

SUMMARY:

Area: Eastern Karakoram, India

Ascents: First ascent of Saser Kangri II (7,518m), via the southwest face: The Old Breed, 1,700m, WI 4 M3, August 24, 2011, by Mark Richey, Steve Swenson, Freddie Wilkinson. First ascent of Tsok Kangri (6,585m), via the north face: 680m, WI4+, July 31, 2011, by Richey, Swenson, Wilkinson. First ascent of Pumo Kangri (6,250m), via west face: 450m, WI3, August 5, 2011, by Emilie Drinkwater, Kirsten Kremer. First ascent of Saser Ling (6,100m), via the south face: 350m, 8 pitches, 5.9+, August 6, 2011, by Bergman and Wilkinson. First ascent of Stegosaurus (6,660m), via the south glacier to south ridge: August 9, 2011, by Bergman, Drinkwater, Kremer, Richey, and Wilkinson.

2011 SKII joint Indo-American expedition members: Mark Richey, Co-leader; Chewang Motup, Co-leader; Steve Swenson, Climber; Freddie Wilkinson, Climber; Emilie Drinkwater, Climber; Janet Bergman, Climber; Kirsten Kremer, Climber; Raj Kumar, Liaison Officer; Konchok Thinlese, Sirdar, Climber; Pemba Sherpa (aka King Kong), Climber; Dhan Singh Harkotia, Climber; Jangla Tashi Phunchok, Climber; Tshering Sherpa, Climber; Santabir Sherpa, Chief Cook; Arjun Rai, Cook's helper; Aungchok, Cook's helper; Mahipal, Kitchen Boy.



Mark Richey, Steve Swenson, and Freddie Wilkinson on the summit. Steve Swenson

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Mark Richey began rock climbing in 1972 in the Quincy Quarries of Massachusetts and continues to climb and explore wild places around the globe with his best friends.

When home he works in an architectural woodworking company that he owns with his wife Teresa, who often accompanies him on his adventures.