

*"Somewhere above the ice, unwitnessed storms
Break in the darkness on the summit ridge
And the white, whirling avalanche
Blends with the storm, the night, the driven snow."*

—MICHAEL ROBERTS

The Fight for K2

ROBERT H. BATES

ON 2 AUGUST 1953 all *eight* members of the climbing party of the Third American Karakoram Expedition, in excellent physical condition, were camped at 25,500 feet on K2 with ten days' food. The summit of the second highest mountain in the world (28,250 ft.) rose less than 3000 feet above us. It was our hope to establish two men at Camp IX, at 27,000 feet or slightly higher, on August 3rd; and on the following day, if all went well, to thrust at the summit.

That night we were very happy. Food and clothing were good; all members of the team had acclimatized well; a stretch of fine weather was overdue; and morale was high. Success in this great adventure, planned by two of us for 15 years, seemed near. But it was not to be.

On that night, August 2nd, two of us could think back over years of preparation. Dr. Charles S. Houston and I had been members of the American Alpine Club's First Karakoram Expedition in 1938. During that reconnaissance of K2, our party had climbed the Abruzzi Ridge, reached 26,000 feet on the southeast face, and come to the conclusion that the world's second highest mountain could be climbed. In 1939 a second American party, under Fritz Wiessner, attempted the ascent by the same route. Brilliant climbing by the leader took him to somewhat over 27,000 feet, but later Dudley Wolfe and three Sherpas, including the famous Pasang Kikuli, disappeared between Camp VII and Camp VI. Then came World War II.

K2 FROM ACROSS THE GODWIN-AUSTEN GLACIER

Photo, Third American Karakoram Expedition

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Dr. Houston, who had led our 1938 attempt, William P. House, and I all through the war had cherished the hope of returning to K2. But when the war ended, the Indian Government declared that this was not the time for visits to K2; and after partition of the Sub-continent into Pakistan and India, we were told that permission to visit K2 was impossible. By 1952, we had practically given up all hope of returning to our old opponent and had successfully applied for permission to go to Makalu in Nepal, when, by an amazing change of fortune, the Pakistan Government granted Dr. Houston permission to lead an expedition to K2 in 1953. We jumped at the opportunity!

With a year to make preparations, we began work: first on personnel, writing to large numbers of friends, acquaintances and mountaineering club officers in all sections of the United States to ask for candidates. As a result we finally considered carefully about 40 men. Many of these were interviewed personally. Of necessity we turned down a number of excellent climbers, who are sure to distinguish themselves on expeditions in the future, but we were tremendously proud of the team selected.

Dr. George Bell, 27, of Cambridge, Mass., a physicist and our largest and most silent member, was well known for his accomplishments on Yerupaja and Salcantay in Peru. Robert W. Craig, 28, of Aspen, Colorado, philosopher, ski instructor, and humorist of the party, had one of the outstanding records among mountaineers of the Pacific Northwest. Arthur K. Gilkey, 26, brilliant young geologist, had directed the Juneau Icefield Research Project in Alaska in 1952, but was best known to mountaineers for his climbs in the Grand Tetons of Wyoming. Dee Molenaar, 35, geologist and photographer, of Colorado Springs, Colorado, had climbed Mt. St. Elias (18,000 ft.) in the Yukon Territory and was equally at home on difficult snow or rock. Youngest of the party, also 26, was Peter Schoening, a chemical engineer from Seattle, Washington, known for his leadership of the King Peak Expedition to Yukon Territory in 1952 and for his hobby of making a fine art of belaying. (For this skill we were all to be profoundly grateful before the end of the summer.) Capt. H. R. A. Streather, 26, of Warminster, England, who

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had climbed Tirich Mir with the Norwegians in 1951, was selected as transport officer, but he later turned out to be a most valuable member of the climbing team as well. Col. M. Ata-Ullah, 50, of Rawalpindi, Pakistan, a most imaginative and determined officer, was to run our Base Camp and assist in many ways. William P. House, brilliant member of the 1938 expedition to K2, was unable to go this time, but served in the important capacity of expedition treasurer.

Long before we were to assemble with "Ata" at Rawalpindi, work had to be done: clothing, food, equipment, and funds were needed. In some ways, clothing was the easiest. We tested such items as quilted underwear and magnificent scarlet jackets filled with down. We had leather boots with rubber cleated soles and also rubber boots known as "thermos bottle" or "Mickey Mouse" boots because of their shape and sealed-in insulation. These later proved to be the warmest boots we wore on the mountain.

Our climbing equipment was good but not extraordinary. We had 7/16- and 3/8-inch nylon climbing ropes and 2200 feet of fixed rope. Tents, packs, and packboards were largely of American make, but our ice-axes and crampons were European. Our food included meat bars—each a pound of steak dehydrated to 4 ounces—Italian *pan forte*, and several precooked dehydrated vegetables. We also had baby food cereals, which required no cooking, but proved tasteless. How American babies can eat such stuff regularly I can't understand! In general, however, our food was light, nutritious, and easy to prepare. We packed it in some 4000 polyethylene bags, each containing two men's portion of one item for one meal. Larger plastic bags held the food supply for two men for one day. The work involved in making these bags from sheets of plastic, putting in the food, squeezing out the air, and heat sealing them was arduous; but thanks to members of the Harvard Mountaineering Club and other friends we completed it. This packaging proved a tremendous success on the mountain.

Heroine of this period of preparation was Dorcas Houston, whose home was inundated with tons of food and equipment, and filled at all hours with helpful packers and interested on-

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lookers. The young Houstons loved it all, even when the linoleum of the kitchen floor was gummed with a mixture of sticky raisins, excelsior and dehydrated potatoes, and flaky baby food oatmeal infiltrated the dining room rug. Casualties were inevitable. For instance, the bread knife was never the same after it cut 24 Italian fruit cakes into eight sections each. Mrs. Houston must have considered even moving into the garage during our major packing weekend when a 24-pound turkey was consumed at one sitting during a pause in the furious tempo of loading and strapping boxes.

It was Mrs. Houston, too, whose discovery of a tasty new kind of chocolate led to a gift from the company of 30 lbs. of the chocolate, 30 lbs. of another kind of chocolate, and 30 lbs. of sugar-coated peanuts, plus a cheque of \$50. Members of the American Alpine Club were very generous with donations and loans, and these plus personal funds and contracts with the *Saturday Evening Post* and the National Broadcasting Co. temporarily solved our financial problems and we were able to proceed. The National Broadcasting Co. was to show our movies on television, and so we went well equipped with tape and wire recorders.

In mid-April our two and a half tons of food and equipment left New York for Karachi on the freighter *City of Carlisle*, and a couple of weeks later I flew to Karachi to meet the ship, shepherd our gear through customs, and get it on the train to Rawalpindi. All went well. The rest of the party flew to Karachi and on May 27th to Rawalpindi. We had chosen this time of year to assault K2 because previous expeditions and the Pakistan Weather Bureau were unanimous in the opinion that late June, July, and early August is the period of best weather in the Karakoram. Opinion seemed unanimous, too, that no monsoon ever reaches the Karakoram. The nearest weather station, Skardu, reports an annual rainfall of about 7 inches, and the barren rock faces throughout the Karakoram testify to its dry climate.

On June 2nd we flew to Skardu on a flight that seemed especially remarkable to Dr. Houston and me. Fifteen years before,

CAMP V (22,000 ft.) WITH MASHARBRUM IN THE BACKGROUND
Photo, Third American Karakoram Expedition

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we had driven for a whole day to get from Rawalpindi to Srinagar and then had walked 241 miles over rough terrain to get to Skardu. Now in an hour and a half we had traveled the same distance! And this time we were greeted by rajahs with garlands of roses, brilliant cloths hanging throughout the bazaar, and placards in English with words of welcome. When we saw the modern hospital and moving picture theatre we were even more amazed. The Pakistan Government has done wonders in Skardu.

Capt. Streater, who had flown in earlier, met us, saying that all porters had been arranged for, but prices were high. We had estimated porter costs as three times what they were in 1938, but they cost six times as much! Twelve Hunza porters were there, too, of whom we were to take six with us on the lower part of the mountain. These people lack the humor and experience of Sherpas, but are bigger, more rugged and aggressive, and should build up an excellent tradition as mountain porters. Sherpas, of course, were not available in Baltistan, where bitterness against India for holding southern Kashmir runs high, and we were strongly advised to use Hunzas and train them as we went. They performed well.

The expedition crossed the Indus at Skardu on June 5th with over 100 porters and began the rough, two-week march to Base Camp. Drought had dried up many springs and we had great trouble getting anything but silt-laden river water to drink. At Dassu the coolies insisted that the trail along the southeast bank had been damaged by rock-fall, so we crossed the Braldu River by goatskin zhak and followed the northwest side. Up and down the cliffs of the barren river gorge we worked our way, occasionally passing through villages where delicious mulberries clustered on the trees, always within sight of distant snowy summits. At Askole, the last village on our way to the mountain, we bought *atta*, took on some 75 more coolies to carry this flour for our men, and made arrangements for mail runners. Then we were off for the Baltoro Glacier and its fantastic spires and pinnacles. Masharbrum rose above us in perfect weather,

ROPE BRIDGE ACROSS THE BRALDU
Photo, Third American Karakoram Expedition

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and we had fair views of the Muztagh Tower and the Gasherbrums before turning up the Godwin-Austen Glacier, which flows between Broad Peak and K2. Six of the world's highest peaks rise in this fabulous area.

On June 19th, the day we were to arrive at Base Camp, Dr. Houston and I arose very early and went on ahead to select the site for Base Camp. Our 1938 campsites on the Godwin-Austen moraine near its confluence with Savoia Glacier had totally changed, but we finally located an even better site a little farther east. Our objective, the second highest mountain in the world, rose awesomely above us.

In the next few days we reconnoitered two different routes to the site of our Old Camp I, on the glacier near the foot of Abruzzi Ridge, and started to move up supplies. Then came reconnaissance to our old Camp II, where we found jam, ovaltine, and a 4-man Logan tent of the Wiessner party in almost perfect condition. Craig and Gilkey placed several hundred feet of fixed rope between Camps II and III, for the route is unpleasantly exposed for heavily-laden men. Our Hunzas carried loads to Camp III and helped us build tent platforms there that hung dramatically over space. This camp was 100 yards from our old Camp III, which had been dangerously exposed to stonefall. Above this point we did not take the Hunzas, who were neither equipped nor technically trained to meet the severe conditions above. They returned to Base Camp just before a storm struck the climbing party at Camps II and III.

Shortly after this storm, at Camp II, Dr. Houston neatly pulled a tooth which I had loosened earlier while biting a very tough chicken leg at a dinner given for us at Askole. One of the Hunzas, a professional dentist at home, was fascinated by the forceps and the doctor's modern methods. Later, Charlie gave him the forceps.

Above Camp III, we pushed steadily on to our old site for Camp IV, just below the House Chimney. This is a narrow, ice-filled gash about 100 feet high, that cuts the cliff band of steep, reddish yellow rock that blocks the Abruzzi Ridge at 21,500 feet. Ropes from the 1939 party still hung in the Chimney (which was first climbed by Bill House in 1938), but of course

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they were entirely untrustworthy. Charlie Houston led this dangerous pitch as determinedly as George Bell had led the wicked gendarme below. Above the Chimney, Schoening placed an aluminum A-frame he had had made for the purpose in Seattle, and it proved invaluable as we hauled up 900 lbs. of food and equipment.

We found food and the remains of tents at IV, and when Schoening and I reconnoitered to Camp VI, a pitiful sight greeted us. Within the remains of two Meade tents lay three neatly rolled Sherpa sleeping bags, still with their characteristic smell, a primus stove, ovaltine, and in a primus stove box a blue bandana handkerchief filled with excellent Darjeeling tea. From this camp three gallant Sherpas, splendid men—Pasang Kikuli, Phinsoo, and Kitar—had departed on 29 July 1939 to attempt the rescue of Dudley Wolfe, whom circumstances had caused to be marooned at Camp VII. None of the four ever came back. Mountaineers should never forget their magnificent rescue attempt. They were men among men, and we paid silent homage to them.

Storms had bothered us continually above Camp II, costing us an extra day or more in every camp. Indeed, we had been forced repeatedly to work in unsettled weather. Snow and wind hammered us at Camp VI shortly after Houston, Craig, and Bell returned from a reconnaissance to the top of the Black Pyramid, as we called the culminating point of the Abruzzi Ridge. Actually the ridge is more a rib on a broad face than a true arête. From VI to VII the way is very exposed and the holds are small. This is probably the most dangerous section on the route. Loose rock continually endangers the lowest men as a group moves upward. With fresh snow over these slabs and ledges, climbing with 30 to 40 lbs. was most unpleasant.

After the storm at VI, we all established a cache on the windy col at the top of the Black Pyramid, and next day Gilkey and Schoening left very early with light loads to find a site for Camp VII. To our dismay and surprise, they could find nothing. Almost in desperation Craig and Houston helped them to carve a platform in the steep ice slope so that they could bivouac in a small tent and continue the reconnaissance next day. That night

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one-third of their tent overhung the slope, but they managed to sleep, and next morning, which was cold and raw, they examined the slope where the 1938 and 1939 parties had set up their Camp VII. To their utter amazement, they found that the whole small plateau of the old Camp VII had slid off the mountain!

Now there seemed nothing to do but attempt to climb the steep ice slope that had daunted the 1938 and 1939 parties and had caused them to traverse at this point. With great skill and daring, Gilkey and Schoening now began to cut steps straight up from the point where the two previous expeditions had made the "ice traverse." Ice pitons were sunk, some 300 steps were cut—at 25,000 feet!—and gradually, as firm snow was reached, the slope began to ease. At frequent intervals throughout the day, those of us at Camp VI, where visibility was zero, talked to the two men above. Though the weather was better where they were, we were all relieved and thrilled by the news that they had forced the "ice cliff" and found an excellent position for Camp VIII! Our morale soared. If we now could firmly establish Camp VIII, we should be in a strong and enviable position. Or so we thought.

During the next two days considerable fresh snow fell, but by nightfall on August 2nd all eight of us in the climbing party



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were firmly established at Camp VIII. We were all there because we wanted the carrying capacity of eight men to establish two men without delay at Camp IX, from where they would assault the summit. Our plan was for two men to make the attempt from Camp IX. The day they attempted the summit, we would move up a second pair to Camp IX to try for the summit on the following day if the first team failed.

But these plans were never carried out. On the night of August 2nd monsoon winds smashed at our exposed camp with unbelievable violence. We could not even communicate with the other tents pitched three feet away, for most of the time the drumming of the blowing snow and groans of the straining tent fabric eliminated all other sound. On the night of August 3rd, Houston and Bell reported that their tent could not hold much longer. It survived the night, but at seven-thirty next morning we heard a faint cry, "Our tent's gone!" Houston made two trips from his torn tent to the one Streather and I were sharing—that was all he could manage. We hauled him in, brushed him off, and warmed him. George Bell crawled in with Gilkey and Schoening. No man could survive more than a few minutes without shelter in this terrible blast of wind and blowing snow.

For the next few days, as the storm continued, we never knew how long our tents would endure. That was our greatest concern. Another was how we were to get liquid. Food we had, but the violent buffeting of the wind so thrashed our tents that the flame of our stoves would be sucked out soon after we managed to get a stove lighted. Some days we had tea or hot cereal, but often we couldn't manage it, despite almost continuous attempts. One can't eat much snow and keep warm nor can one melt much snow by friction, but we did our best. Since we were breathing through our mouths, however, we lost more moisture than we gained; and as our blood became thicker, we repeatedly lost sensation in our toes. Our feet were warm inside the sleeping bag, but our toes lacked sensation unless we kept kneading them hour after hour.

On August 7th, during breakfast, a brief lull developed in the storm. The snow stopped, the wind dropped, and we began to

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discuss the state of our supplies, the condition of the snow, and what two climbers we might still be able to push up to Camp IX if the weather completely cleared. During the storm we had voted Bell and Craig, and Schoening and Gilkey to be the first and second teams to try for the summit. Art Gilkey was apparently in excellent condition for the final assault. But our optimism was brief. Ten minutes after breakfast, Art Gilkey stepped out of his tent and fainted from pain. Somehow he had developed thrombo-phlebitis, with a blood clot in the calf of his left leg.

We were shocked! Gilkey had never been ill before, and we had never heard of anyone developing thrombo-phlebitis on an expedition. Smallpox would have been no more surprising to us. There was but one thing to do: get him down before pieces of the clot broke off and entered his lungs or other vital organs. At once we wrapped him in his sleeping bag in the shattered tent, broke camp, and started to drag him down; but we had not estimated the depth of the new snow. Only 120 yards from camp we stopped, for the whole slope was saturated with new snow and in danger of immediately avalanching. Our old route had become a trap. We needed all our strength and over an hour's time to work Gilkey back through the three-foot depth of floury snow to Camp VIII, where we grimly repitched the three tents.

At this point Schoening and Craig went off to see if they could find some other route down. If they had been unable to, we would all have been in an extremely bad position, for even under favorable conditions, the slope below us would not consolidate for several days. Fortunately, the storm, which was now beginning again, held off just long enough for our two scouts to climb down to a rock ridge which they thought could be descended and from which we hoped to be able to cross to our old route below the avalanche slope. But new storm clouds rolled in to limit further observation. Over the walkie-talkie

MASHARBRUM (25,660 ft.)

A British party made a fine attempt to
climb this peak in 1938.

Photo, Third American Karakoram Expedition

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Col. Ata-Ullah gave us the weather forecast specially broadcast to us: more storm!

We doubted our ability to slide or carry the helpless Gilkey down from Camp VIII, but were determined to try it if he couldn't walk. Fresh gusts of snow tore at our tents for the next three days. We were getting low on food even with half rations, and our energy was being sapped. On August 10th we decided that two men should stay with Gilkey when the storm lifted, and the others go down and attempt to bring back food from VI. Though we all volunteered to stay with Gilkey while the others went down, Dr. Houston insisted that he must stay for medical reasons, and he chose Streater to remain with him.

On August 11th, however, Houston came to my tent. "We must take him down," he said.

Someone asked, "In this storm?"

"Yes. It means life or death for Art."

During the night a clot had entered Gilkey's other leg, and at least one piece had entered his lungs and been thrown off with difficulty. Outside the tent where Gilkey lay in his sleeping bag, ferocious gusts were pounding at the little camp, straining the tents to the utmost, but without another word we all began to pack. The venture seemed absolutely desperate, but we would have done anything for Art Gilkey, as he would have done for us. We lashed the torn tent around his sleeping bag, tied four nylon ropes to it, and started down. "How do you feel, Art?" we asked as we started off. "Just fine," he said with a drawn smile, but he knew the odds against him. I have never known a braver man.

The next hours none of us will ever forget. As the furious wind lashed us, beards, eyebrows, and goggles became coated with ice, and hands and feet steadily lost sensation. Once, while we were belaying Gilkey down a long snow couloir, he and Bob Craig, who was with him, disappeared under a powder snow

CAPT. STREATER AT CAMP III

Note height of tent platform built out over 3,000-foot slope. Tent has "Gothic Wand" in center to resist wind and slough off snow.

Photo, Third American Karakoram Expedition

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avalanche, but the rope held firm and the cold powder roared on without them. It was a near thing for Craig. The whole descent was desperate. Snow squalls blotted out everything and nearly choked us. By three in the afternoon we were nearly exhausted. Craig unroped and traversed across to our cache at Camp VII to try to enlarge the platform there and get up a tent. The rest of us, except for Bell, were near Gilkey on a steep ice slope, getting his ropes to pull over to where we could get a belay and move him horizontally toward Camp VII. Above us was a snow gully, below us nothing to halt a fall to the Godwin-Austen Glacier, nearly two miles below.

As we were in the act of moving across to a belay point, without warning George Bell fell. Whether a rope snagged and pulled him off the ice slope, he doesn't know; his feet and hands were numb and the gusts were furious. Streather, who was roped to him, was torn off and hurled into the rope between Houston and me. All of us were still several feet from the nearest belay. As I saw Houston disappear, I thrust desperately at the ice with my axe and at the same instant was thrown violently backward. Nothing, I knew, could stop us. This was the end. I bounced down over rock outcrops, and, just as I expected the next bound to be several hundred feet and end it all, I stopped!

My head was much lower than my feet, and my hood was jammed over my eyes. The rope had wound around my hands, and I was nearly helpless. Just then I heard a groan, almost in my ear. Someone pulled the ropes off my hands. I grabbed a rock and swung around. There was Molenaar with his hair on end and blood trickling over his moustache. Above me, I could see Streather trying to stand up. Then blowing snow blotted everything. A moment later I heard a cry from below, "My hands are freezing!" There, 60 feet below, on the edge of nothing and without his pack, crouched George Bell! He had been as high above us a moment before. His outstretched hands were bare and a sickly white. I climbed down to him and worked a pair of spare mittens onto his hands. His had been whipped off in the fall.

Meanwhile, Dee Molenaar had seen someone unconscious. It was Houston. I unroped and climbed carefully down to him.

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He stood up when I touched him, but he didn't know where he was. There was no time to waste; we must gain shelter. "If you ever want to see Dorcas and Penny again (his wife and daughter), you climb right up there now," I said, with great intensity, pointing to where Molenaar held him on a rope. A look of fear came over him; he turned and climbed rapidly and skillfully over the difficult rock.

Gradually we assembled everyone at Camp VII. Craig anchored Gilkey securely on two ice-axes, and Streather, Craig and I began to enlarge the platforms and get up the tents. Apparently we had been saved by a combination of circumstances: Schoening had a strong belay on Art Gilkey, and just before the accident Molenaar had tied onto one of the loose ropes used to pull Gilkey across the slope. Bell's fall pulled off Streather, who fell into the rope between Houston and me, and then into the rope between Molenaar and Gilkey. He fouled onto both. In this way the weight of Houston, Bell, Molenaar, and me came on Streather, and through him was transmitted to Gilkey and Schoening, who held us all. It couldn't happen, but it did!

As soon as the tents were up, Streather, Craig, and I traversed back to the icy gully, 150 feet away, to see whether we could move Art Gilkey to Camp VII. We had called to him and he had called to us while we were chopping the tent platforms, but the storm made words indistinguishable. Now, as I crossed the rib of rock separating Camp VII from the icy gully, I saw something I shall never forget. The slope was bare. An avalanche we never heard above the roar of the storm had swept the gully. There was no trace of our beloved and gallant companion!

The shock was terrible but at the moment somewhat dulled by our exhaustion and the perils of our own position. That night Houston was continuously out of his head except when he slumped unconscious, and he needed continuous care. Thank God the gale ceased in the evening. At dawn, however, it began again, but all of us, though badly shaken and going largely on nerve, fought our way down the steeply angled icy slabs to Camp VI. It was like descending the icy roof of a cathedral, but nobody slipped.

Camp VI seemed like heaven. For the past two days we had

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done the most desperate climbing of our lives, but we still had a long way to go. Next day, August 12th, we were trapped in our tents, but on the 13th we worked our way to Camp IV as Houston showed a marvelous recovery and was the last man to descend the Chimney. On the 14th, despite appalling conditions of snow and ice-covered rocks, we climbed down to Camp II, where our faithful Hunzas met us. We looked for Art Gilkey's body all the way but never found it.

The meeting at Camp II we shall never forget. Our porters fed us and cried over us and prayed for us. Our own feelings were too deep for words. Somehow all but one of us had been saved to live again and climb again and savor the joys of friendlier mountains.

We reached Base Camp on August 15th and next day left a memorial to our brave, beloved comrade Arthur Gilkey in a magnificent cairn erected at the confluence of the Savoia and



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Godwin-Austen Glaciers. His ice-axe rests there. No man has a monument in a more beautiful and majestic place.

On August 17th the battered party began the return march to Skardu. Houston, whose indomitable spirit and leadership had shown from the start, had a chest injury, and Craig and Molenaar had frostbitten heels. George Bell, whose feet were badly frostbitten and who had shown tremendous nerve in the descent, now had to be carried,* and all of us showed signs of our battle for life. Still, our spirits were good. All of us who came back would climb again.

Summary of Statistics

ATTEMPTED: K2, 28,250 ft., Karakoram Range, Northern Pakistan; unclimbed and second highest peak in the world.

HEIGHT REACHED: 25,800 ft.

PERSONNEL: Leader, Dr. Charles S. Houston; Col. M. Atallah, Robert H. Bates, George Bell, Robert W. Craig, Arthur K. Gilkey, Dee Molenaar, Peter Schoening and Capt. H. R. A. Streater.

*In September the small toe and one joint of the big toe on Bell's left foot were amputated in Boston, but thanks to Dr. Houston's care this was the extent of his loss. Bell is now skiing and climbing as well as ever.