

Rakaposhi - Almost

RICHARD K. IRVIN

OUR Dakota circled once over Rawalpindi and headed north with nose up, straining for altitude. Below now lay the Sind desert, and far behind was Karachi with its uncountable government offices, each with its interminable delays for permits. Somewhere in the distant past, also, were the hundreds of letters, the begging for supplies and equipment, the packing and shipping, and the dreaming. Now we were here at last. I looked out the window. Ahead rose the steep, blue ridges of the Himalaya, crest above crest to the Babusar Pass. Beyond, I knew, were the Indus Gorge and Nanga Parbat and Gilgit—and Rakaposhi.

I looked around the inside of the plane: down the middle there was a great mass of boxes, bags, sacks, and crates, parcels of every shape and size, all held in place by a tight cargo-net. Scattered around the perimeter of the cargo were about a dozen people, three of whom were my fellow expedition members. Bob Swift and I had been climbing together in California for several years. He is tall, strong, a good diplomat. Most of his experience had been on rock. Hamish MacInnes dozed against the wall—right in character, I thought, for Hamish is usually either eating or sleeping. Hamish learned climbing in his native Scotland with the infamous Creagh Dhu Club. He moved into the Alps at an early age and later went to New Zealand where his antics gained him a certain measure of notoriety. He was the only Himalayan veteran among us; he had attempted Pumori, in Nepal, in 1953. Mike Banks, a captain of the 42nd Royal Marine Commando, is an old friend of MacInnes'. He was busy with a map and the view, his head going around like a spectator's at Wimbledon. Mike had done the least climbing of our team, but he had backed up his alpine experience by two expeditions to Greenland. Mike was elected leader of our foursome on the basis of greater age, thirty-two, and because of the fact that he was the only one of us whose dignity was enhanced by employment. Hamish, Bob, and I each passed our 26th year while in Pakistan.

We skimmed over the pass between little rocky peaks of about 16,000 feet. Ahead on our right was Nanga Parbat, indescribable—but, "no

photographs, please." We huddled over the map. "There's Haramosh, that's the Karakoram now!" There were mountains everywhere, all immensely spectacular in the clear morning air. All of them looked unclimbable, excepting Nanga Parbat: fair enough, I thought; it's the only one that's been climbed. Rakaposhi showed itself for a moment, and then we were coasting into Gilgit. It was a good landing on a clay field with a difficult twisting approach. Captain Fazl I-Haque was waiting for us. He had been assigned to our expedition by the Pakistan army as liaison officer. Fazl was young (24) and slight; and totally inexperienced as a mountaineer, not an enviable circumstance when one is going to Rakaposhi.

We jeeped to the Political Agent's residence, where introductions were followed by luncheon and the allotment of three large rooms for our comfort. We had scarcely finished checking our bags and boxes when the porters arrived: four scruffy, healthy characters sent by the Mir of Hunza. They were led by Isa Khan, a veteran of the successful expeditions to both Nanga Parbat and K2. Isa Khan is a strong and capable leader, and a skillful mountaineer as well. Qambar had been to the Batura Glacier with Rebitsch in 1954 and was said to have killed many men in the Kashmir dispute. He is big and possessed of prodigious strength, but seemed to have altitude trouble. Nadir Aman was young and inexperienced, but he was strong and willing, and he did more than his share of the undesirable tasks. Dilap Shah was also inexperienced. He was older than his fellows by many years, and we were somewhat reluctant to take him on, but we decided to do so as the others assured us he was a strong hunter. In the event Dilap was a very willing worker and proved to be the strongest on the difficult carry between Camp II and Camp III. I felt that our four porters were very good, and I would gladly take them again.

Our next day was an active one, to say the least. Kerosene and food for the porters had to be purchased, the porters' equipment was issued, and everything was loaded into three jeeps and trailers supplied by the Northern Scouts. After an excellent lunch with the Political Agent our ever-increasing entourage climbed into the three jeeps, and we were off for Nomal, 17 miles up the Hunza River. Besides the four of us and Fazl, there were now a police inspector and a tasildar. The tasildar had a cook and an orderly. What with drivers and assistant drivers and the baggage, we were fairly crowded, but it was nothing compared to the 20-passenger loads that customarily careen around Gilgit. For half the distance to Nomal the road follows along the elevated river bank, and there are no difficulties except an occasional stretch of soft sand. Then,

where the river swings to the west, the road climbs up on the cliffs and for a few miles provides the most spectacular drive I have ever experienced. We climbed and dived, twisted and turned; we edged around corners and crept along ledges. Time and again our driver dropped neatly into low-range low gear a split second before we stalled—a maneuver that Bob and I admitted we would not like to try on that road. In the late afternoon we rolled through Nomal and into the rest-house compound. By dark all the supplies had been moved down to the river, and most of them were across. We had gathered at Matum-das, the town on the Rakaposhi side. The river crossing was executed by means of a zok—an inflated skin—and bamboo-raft—piloted by a Hunza version of the Ancient Mariner. The crossing was rendered doubly exciting by the uncertain durability of the raft itself.

At Matum-das we exchanged our coolie team for another and moved on to Jaglot, where we executed our third and last coolie change-over. We followed the Jaglot Nullah away from the Hunza Gorge to Darbar, which is an uninhabited meadow below the snout of the Biro Glacier. A good trail continues around the terminal moraine of the Biro and up through the last pines to the outwash plain of the Kunti Glacier. We then followed up the true right bank of the Kunti Glacier to the base-camp site, a grassy little shelf at 14,000 feet. We had arrived at Base Camp completely intact in just four days from Gilgit; surely one of the shortest march-ins of Himalayan expeditions.

This is the southwest corner of Rakaposhi, whose summit is triangulated at 25,550 feet, and our base camp was the same as that used by at least two of the five previous expeditions. The area is bounded by two immense ridges, the southwest and the northwest. The Kunti and Biro glaciers lie between these two ridges with a common drainage down the Jaglot Nullah, and they are separated by the relatively short southwest spur ridge. The southwest spur abuts against a steep dome of ice known as the Monk's Head, and the Monk's Head is connected to a col at 21,000 feet on the main southwest ridge. It had been assumed by all previous parties that if one could reach this col, the way to the summit was open and easy. And so it appears.

Conway's expedition of 1892 was the first to come to Rakaposhi.* It made a brief reconnaissance of the approaches and moved on. In 1938 came Secord and Vyvyan, who concentrated on the northwest ridge and reached a small peak of 19,700 feet, which was cut off from the upper

* William Martin Conway, *Climbing and Exploration in the Karakoram-Himalayas*, London, 1894; "Climbing in the Karakorams," *Alpine Journal*, August 1893, vol. 16.

part of the ridge by a steep descent.† Tilman and Gyr were on the scene in 1947; they also climbed the 19,700-foot peak and agreed with Secord and Vyvyan.‡ From the Kunti Glacier camp they reached the southwest spur and climbed along it until they came to a 19,500-foot gendarme. This they climbed "with difficulty" and gazed across the half mile gap to the Monk's Head. Tilman is said to have muttered "Hopeless! Hopeless!!" They returned to the northwest ridge, on which they managed to ascend to the crest beyond the descent from Secord's peak. However, they judged the route too difficult for laden porters. In 1954 two more expeditions arrived. The first, a German-Austrian party under Rebitsch, was quoted as saying that any possible route was either too difficult or too dangerous.§ The second group, a party from Cambridge University, led by Tissières, climbed once again the 19,700 foot peak, then shifted to the Kunti Glacier camp and climbed onto the southwest spur in force.|| They crossed the Gendarme and placed a camp at the foot of the Monk's Head, then climbed the ice slope to the shoulder at about 20,500 feet. They were turned back from the mountain by weather before any supplies could be carried up. As the route taken by our predecessors seemed to be the best, if not the only, route, we planned to go direct to the Kunti Glacier Base Camp and push up along the southwest spur without any preliminaries.

The British-American Karakoram Expedition arrived at Base Camp on May 27 with 57 loads of food and equipment, and the work began immediately. It's just a talus walk up to Camp I, at 15,500 feet, and when we were acclimatized it was done easily in an hour. No one stayed at Camp I; it was used only as a storage depot while loads were being relayed up the couloir to Camp II. The couloir was snow-filled, twisting and steep. There was some danger of rock fall or avalanches when it was snowing, but it wasn't too bad if the trip was done quickly on the hard early-morning snow. Camp II is at the head of the couloir, just off the crest of a 17,300-foot saddle on the southwest spur. Bob, Mike, and Hamish moved into Camp II on June 5, and on the 6th, three more loads got through as the weather closed in.

† Campbell Secord and Michal Vyvyan, "Reconnaissances of Rakaposhi and the Kunyang Glacier," *Himalayan Journal*, 1939, vol. 11. Michal Vyvyan, "A Journey in the Western Karakoram," *Alpine Journal*, November 1939, vol. 51.

‡ H. W. Tilman, *Two Mountains and a River*, Cambridge, 1949; "Rakaposhi," *Alpine Journal*, November 1948, vol. 56.

§ Matthias Rebitsch, "German-Austrian Karakoram Expedition 1954," *The Mountain World*, 1955.

|| George Band, *Road to Rakaposhi*, London, 1955. Roger Chorley, "To the Monk's Head on Rakaposhi," *Alpine Journal*, May 1955, vol. 60.

It snowed then for several days, during which time the only accident occurred when I tried to get through to Camp II but was forced to give it up. I left my load in the couloir about a thousand feet above Camp I. On June 12 a big avalanche came down the couloir carrying away the load I had cached. The equipment lost was vital, but then everything we had was of the same category, and anyway, it melted out a week later near Camp I. On June 13 I got through to Camp II with the porters, and we were moving once again.

Above Camp II the route follows snow slopes for a thousand feet, then traverses upwards across moderately steep ice to a point at 18,700 feet on the end of the southwest spur. We hacked out across the ice a continuous ledge which became known as "The Road to Rakaposhi." Beyond Point 18,700 the ridge dips past the Cambridge expedition's Camp III at 18,600 feet to a low at 18,400 feet, then climbs with continuous cornices to our Camp III at 19,200 feet and to the Gendarme at 19,500 feet. On June 15 we moved Bob and Mike to the old Camp III, which is fairly spectacular: indeed, I see by my diary that I described it at the time as a stone platform built on a cornice. Bob and Mike moved their camp to the 19,200-foot site the next day, and on the 17th Hamish and I carried loads to that camp while Bob and Mike explored over the Gendarme. All this time the porters had been plodding up and down the couloir, with the result that Camp II now had food and fuel sufficient for over two months—if you didn't mind what you ate. The porters were due to move up to Camp II and to seven rupees a day, but the night of the 17th brought snowfall, and the whole operation slid to a halt.

Ten days later the storm came to an end, and Bob and Mike, having eaten their week's supply of food, returned to Camp II. The following day Hamish and I re-occupied Camp III, supported by Bob and Mike, while the porters moved up from Base—and we were back in high gear. The Gendarme is a major obstacle in the ascent of Rakaposhi; enough food and equipment must go over it to provide four more camps beyond, and it is too difficult for even the best Hunzas. Leaving Camp III the route traverses an ice slope, then climbs steeply up to a line of rocks which roughly marks the cornice. These rocks were followed along to the top of the Gendarme, a very narrow and exposed summit. On the far side a snow slope drops away for a hundred feet, levels off, then plunges three hundred more at an alarming angle to a small col. Beyond the col our route passed through a large schrund to reach the miniature glacier-basin below the Monk's Head, the site of Camp IV. With fixed ropes and bucket steps the Gendarme could be passed rather quickly, and

by carrying two loads a day we were able to establish Camp IV with all hands on July 3. Camp IV was on a gently inclined snow shoulder overlooking the little basin and the Monk's Head above it. It was, like Camp III, at 19,200 feet.

We began immediately on the Monk's Head, cutting steps out to the ridge on the western extremity of the great ice face. The ridge was not overly steep, but resting places were few—only those we cut. We climbed mostly on crampons to avoid chopping steps, and a fixed line was attached until we ran out of it. At 20,000 feet there was a flat resting spot on top of a little ice cliff, and a short distance above was a tricky corner to go around, out from under another ice barrier—places we would long remember after the descent. At 20,500 feet we came out onto the gentle snow slopes leading up to the Monk's Head summit. We had thought it best to traverse along the corridor side of the Monk's Head to avoid the double descent involved in following the crest to the 21,000-foot col on the main southwest ridge, but the slopes proved to be exceptionally steep ($70^{\circ}+$) and we were forced onto higher ground. Our first carry fell short of the Monk's Head crest by about 100 feet when an afternoon snowstorm got out of hand; but the second try succeeded in placing loads at a roomy campsite on the col—I called it "Corridor Col." (The Corridor is that part of the Biro Glacier which makes a right-angle bend around the Monk's Head and lies in the slot between the Monk's Head and Rakaposhi, forming a possible but very dubious route to Corridor Col.) The climb to Corridor Col was a very tiring affair, for, although the difference in altitude between camps was only 1800 feet, there was an additional 400 feet of descent to be added in. We all took a complete rest day before carrying our personal gear to establish Camp V at 21,000 feet on July 8. We had about 10 days' food and fuel, but due to an oversight there was no potato powder—all the more regrettable in that we had been existing mainly on that item.

We had decided at Camp IV that it would not be possible for only four of us to place more than two camps above the Monk's Head: the first, our present Camp V, to be on the Corridor Col, and the last, Camp VI, to be as high as possible. We had thought that, as the climb was presumed to be easy beyond that point, we could place Camp VI at 23,500 feet, or hopefully, at 24,000 feet, by means of one hard carry. So it was with dismay that we discovered that the angle of the broad ridge above Corridor Col was just as steep as the Monk's Head below. About 800 feet above the Col the angle lessens considerably while travel becomes menaced by crevasses; then the ridge narrows and steepens gradually to culminate

in an exposed ice arête leading to a level platform at 23,000 feet. When we reached this platform about four hours after leaving Camp V, the weather had deteriorated. It was now snowing, and as Bob and Mike had to descend to Camp V it was decided to place Camp VI on the platform. The tent was erected, and Hamish and I were left with three days' food and fuel, one stove, one pot, and one tremendous view. The horizon, unencumbered by Rakaposhi's last 2000 feet, extended over about 260 degrees of arc, from the direction of the Baltoro Peaks, south past Nanga Parbat, and around by the Hindu Kush as far as the Batura peaks. Unfortunately, Disteghil Sar and other Hispar peaks were hidden behind Rakaposhi.

The earth turned eastward into darkness, and at Camp VI Hamish and I began our first night at 23,000 feet. I awoke suddenly and tried to focus my eyes on the luminous dial of my watch. I read ten minutes to four. With great effort I peered out at a clear and beautiful night, determined that the weather was good, and collapsed back into my sleeping bag. A short time later I again checked my watch, only to discover that it was now ten past twelve! I made no attempt to analyze this phenomenon—it was easiest to accept as the correct time whatever the eyes and watch might indicate at any given moment. Dawn arrived at last, and with very little mental strain Hamish and I determined that today would be a repetition of the previous day weather-wise. As afternoon snow would push the summit rocks into a realm beyond our ability, no reason could be found to attempt the upper reaches of the mountain that day. We went back to sleep, and the day, of course, was perfect.

Shortly after noon Bob and Mike, who arrived from Camp V with their sleeping bags and a little food, were as surprised to find us in camp as we were to see them on this day. Our two-man tent withstood the afternoon conversation and dinner; then somehow we all managed to stretch out for the night. At 3 A.M. I announced the hour and raised up to a sitting position, only to be greeted by a gruff voice proclaiming 3:30 as the appointed time—the voice belonged to the same individual who had been most adamant for a 3 A.M. rising. At 3:30 I began "cooking" breakfast while the others dozed; then, at 5:30, we found ourselves out in the pre-dawn cold making final adjustments for the climb. The morning was brilliantly clear and terribly cold, with a strong wind which cut through our windproofs and could not be faced directly. We began climbing roped together, the only time I think that we were all four on one rope, and first surmounted a very steep rise just above Camp VI. The sun rose out of the dust, and the Karakoram spun itself into gold—below

us there was only the dark world of man—and far away to the east we could see a shadow of a great mountain, so high it could only be K2. We threaded our way through a crevasse system on the second try, then found at last that the slope was open and easy. Hard snow gripped our crampons, and the angle was pleasant. Above us the snow was broken down the middle by a ridge of rocks projecting only a few feet above the snow and running all the way up to the plateau. This we christened the "Lizard's Tail," and we made our way towards it. As 8 A.M. came we arrived one at a time at the Lizard's Tail. The first 500 feet above Camp VI had taken 2½ hours, and it was still 2000 feet to the summit. We discussed our situation, which, although a complex one, had several clear points: it was very unlikely that anyone could reach the summit that day without a bivouac during the night, and no one wanted to spend another night with four at Camp VI. Also, there was not enough food for another full day of four men at Camp VI. But I think it was the talk of frostbite that finally decided us to turn back—and a cold, strong wind that was cutting us hard. We gazed up the Lizard's Tail from 23,500 feet, the highest any of us had ever been, then turned and started down.

Bob and I continued to Camp V that day, while Mike and Hamish waited at VI in anticipation of a day with less wind and another summit try. On the morning of July 12 we arose to find a great wall of black clouds approaching from the southeast; Bob and I immediately began the descent of the Monk's Head in order to make room for Hamish and Mike at Camp V. The storm was rolling over the southeast ridge of Rakaposhi when we began the descent, and we found that the snow had deteriorated incredibly during the last four days. The fixed ropes had melted deep grooves in the ice, and the ice pitons had melted out—they now swung free from the ropes. It was snowing by the time we reached the 20,000-foot resting ledge. Alas, this was now a honeycomb of crevasses, nothing seemed solid, and only with great difficulty and loss of time did we re-anchor the fixed line here. No sooner had Bob started down the line than he tumbled into a crevasse that "wasn't there four days ago." Heavy snow, wind, and lightning surrounded us. Lower down I huddled against the slope while Bob descended the fixed line. Suddenly I saw a dark object shoot over the edge and disappear into the Biro chasm. Then I saw Bob clinging to the rope out on the Monk's Head face—he had been severely shocked by lightning and had dropped his pack to gain better control; but the pack, instead of sliding down into the basin, had gone sideways and was lost. Bob regained the arête, and I went down to

join him. He was shaken but climbing fairly well, and together we worked our way back into the basin, where we found two items which had come free of the pack: a movie camera and a cup. The snow in the basin was very bad and the trip across to Camp IV was a nightmare. We kept sinking in up to the thigh, and the last hundred feet we went in all the way at every step. Both of us were completely exhausted when we arrived a half-hour apart at Camp IV, where we found the tents nearly collapsed. We put the camp in order, then ate for five hours, and finally faced up to a night at 19,200 feet without Bob's gear. Bob used my sleeping bag, while I used my down jacket and a waist-length sleeping bag that I was carrying for extra warmth. I did not shiver, but I did not sleep either.

We spent July 13 (Friday) in Camp IV resting, talking, eating, sleeping a little. The second night was colder than the first, and although it was still stormy out and we had food for three weeks, it was apparent that we must go down to Base Camp where Bob had another bag. We were away at 9 A.M. and in a few minutes had walked on good crusty snow to the base of the Gendarme. Then suddenly we sank in up to the knee, and the next step to the waist. In an hour we gained only 200 linear feet up to the 50-degree slope of the Gendarme. At times, when the snow would give and give, it seemed nearly hopeless—there seemed to be no bottom at all. The Gendarme was crossed with great caution, while warm, wet snow fell—typical monsoon snow. We reached Camp III in the early afternoon, far too exhausted to continue down that day. The one tent was a collapsed wreck. Inside it we found eggs, apricots, and half of a dead goat which imparted a characteristic odor to the region. We cleaned up the mess and settled in for our third night at 19,200 feet with one sleeping bag.

On July 15 we left Camp III at 8 A.M. and in spite of poor snow were able to attain Cornice Camp in an hour and a half. Then, going over the rise at 18,700 feet my crampons caught, and suddenly I found myself tumbling down the Kunti side of the ridge. The first time around, I saw a group of rocks sticking out of the snow, and as I rolled and came up the second time, I made a blind contact with both hands and one foot, and stopped. It was my turn to be shaken. Bob retrieved me, and we continued the descent. "The Road to Rakaposhi" had disappeared, and the ice slope had only a very thin coating of snow left. I cut down a rope length, but a bruised hand made it too painful to continue, so Bob cut all the rest of the way. He chopped for over three hours, and it was not until 3 P.M. that we arrived at Camp II. For an hour we rested, then off for Base Camp. The couloir was a chaos of rotting and scree-covered ice, com-

pounded with rockfall and waterfall, but at last we came out onto the scree above Camp I. We dodged the last boulder to be fired down on us by Rakaposhi and stumbled down to Base Camp. I was so tired that the porters had to help me out of my windsuit and boots. That night I had the first solid sleep in many weeks.

Hamish and Mike had been following a day behind Bob and me, although we had seen nothing of them, and they arrived at Base Camp late the following afternoon. They immediately declared their intentions of starting a second attempt as soon as we could get a couple of days of good eating, for which purpose we all went down the Jaglot Nullah to Barit. I didn't feel much recuperated, even after two days of eating, and had gained back hardly any of the 30 pounds I had lost. But more compelling, there was a boat that Bob and I had to catch. So Bob and I saw Hamish and Mike off as they started up from Base Camp on July 23, for another attempt. They returned on the 25th, Hamish half carried by the porters and suffering from some undetermined illness. Mike proposed an assault on the summit with Isa Khan, but the latter declined the honor. Bob had a fever, too, but somewhat less violent, so we two decided to leave in the direction of Karachi. In Gilgit I was overtaken by the fever and incapacitated for four days, while the monsoon floods brought transportation to a halt. It all came out all right, however, and we made our ship with two days to spare.

Meanwhile, back on Rakaposhi, Hamish recovered, and he and Mike began the third attempt. They reached Camp III and spent several days there, in bad storms and with inadequate food. They tried to retreat to Base Camp by means of a new and direct descent to the Kunti Glacier, but were prevented by oversized crevasses and returned to the ridge.

We were all much impressed by Rakaposhi. It is a very long climb, and it is a real climb, not just pushing along. This route certainly can be climbed to the summit, and there probably is no other way by today's Himalayan standards. Although we had only 2000 feet to go, the difficulties were not all overcome. The last pitch to the summit will very likely be found the most difficult part of the whole route. My best wishes to the next party, and good luck—they will need it.