Ascent of Hidden Peak

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There is something exciting about expeditions. In part it must be the uncertainty of them. Perhaps this is adventure. But for Hidden Peak there was something even more. It could be the last chance for an American first ascent of an achttausender, and it seems extremely probable that first ascents of the fourteen achttausenders will become forever historically indicative of the mountaineering activity and ability of the various areas in the world.

Whether for adventure or history or whatever other reason, the ascent of Hidden Peak still required a party, permission and assistance from Pakistan, money, equipment, and an effort to carry out the attempt. Nick Clinch was the driving force behind the 1958 American Karakoram Expedition.* He was the "Director" and organizer.

Late in November 1957, Nick received Pakistani approval through the American Embassy in Karachi. From then on events began to occur at an increasing pace. Our freighter would leave New York by the end of March. In the middle of February as the party was being completed, I became a member. Besides Nick and myself, there were Andy Kauffman, Captain S. T. H. Risvi and Captain Mohd Akram of the Pakistan Army, Tom McCormack, Bob Swift, Dr. Tom Nevison, Gil Roberts, and Dick Irvin. Unfortunately Gil and Dick could not leave their jobs on time and would have to come in later to back us up.

We considered only the world's finest equipment for the expedition and during this short period this equipment was manufactured and assembled for shipping. Under the guidance of Len Frank, Jean Couzy, Guido Magnone, Raymond Leininger, Dr. Jürg Marmet, and the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research, the English, French, and Swiss companies performed spectacularly. Their response was gratifying, as was the response of numerous club friends and American manufacturers who also comprised the party incognito.

* This expedition was sponsored by the American Alpine Club.
From the scattered “brain centers” of the expedition—Nick Clinch’s father, in Dallas, Texas, who was the treasurer; Lawrence Coveney, in Summit, New Jersey, who supervised the shipping; and Nick Clinch, who was flitting about coordinating all plans (and simultaneously studying and passing the California Bar examination)—came a stream of organizational bulletins. To the amazement of all concerned, when the Flying Enterprize II left New York on March 28 our equipment was aboard. This miracle was repeated several times in Europe. A British firm assembled and packaged our food into march-in, base camp, and high altitude boxes and got it on the Kallada within two weeks. And in early April the Meerkerk sailed from Marseille and Genoa with French and Swiss equipment, which included our oxygen apparatus and butane gas stoves. Once, however, the timing was too close. Our crate of boots was placed on the slow freighter Erria instead of the express boat Victoria. This meant a two weeks delay, but once again the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research came through magnificently and arranged to have the boots unloaded at Port Said and air freighted to Karachi.

Nick left early and, after making a whirlwind trip through England, France, and Switzerland to handle last minute details, arrived in Karachi two weeks before the rest of the expedition to help facilitate customs clearances and tranship our equipment by train to Rawalpindi. On May 16, with a good portion of the “uncertainties” behind us, we were reunited in “’Pindi” and welcomed a couple of days of relaxation while waiting for both a government priority and clear weather to allow us to fly to Skardu. Here most of us met our two Pakistani teammates, Risvi and Akram, for the first time. We also visited with the fine Italian party, under Ricardo Cassin, which was to attempt and ultimately climb Gasherbrum IV. Suddenly our sightseeing and reminiscing was interrupted when someone asked about cooking pots. They had been completely overlooked. Local dekhis became an excellent substitute. Then the supply of porter cigarettes turned out to be only half of our requirements so we traded our Camels for local brands at two for one, and another crisis was averted.

The plane ride to Skardu, the point of departure into the Karakoram, brought us into direct contact with the Western Himalaya. It is a highlight of all expeditions. Our Dakota weaved its way along the sides of Nanga Parbat while Haramosh, Rakaposhi, and other giants appeared in the distance.

Skardu, which is the center of government for Baltistan and has a hospital and military post, is primarily a farming community with beautiful mulberry and apricot trees and small terraced wheat and barley
fields so typical of the hill villages in this region. During our two-day stay there we received the utmost cooperation and assistance from the Political Agent, Brigadier Habib-Ur-Rehman, who organized the men needed to carry our sixty-pound loads to Base Camp and assembled a group of high-altitude porters.

The HAP's as we called them, were selected by their appearance and by the written recommendations they had received from prior expeditions. These tattered pieces of paper seemed to be their greatest possession, their pride, their "bread and butter," even though they were ignorant of the contents. It was interesting to study the pattern of recommendations issued by our predecessors. Some were sincere and straightforward, but others sounded like a recording. In a few instances we read negative reports while the Balti mountaineer would stand before us proud and happy, hopefully awaiting selection. Through Captain Rizvi we eventually selected six HAP's.

The evening before we began our march, Brigadier Habib-Ur-Rehman honored the expedition with a splendid formal dinner which included such delicacies as roast ibex and ice cream. As all the distinguished gentlemen of Skardu were present in their Sunday-best we were thankful that we had brought white shirts and ties.

We left Skardu 112 porters strong on May 21, but without Captain Akram who was in the hospital with bronchitis. He would have to come in later with the Italian group. We stopped at Shigar, Koshumal, Dassu, and Hotu before reaching the last village of Askole. Here many of the porters were replaced by Askole "wallahs," who had heavier clothing and were more familiar with traveling on the Baltoro Glacier. Flour, the principal bulk of the porter food was purchased and sixty porters were hired to carry this additional load. We also realized that most of our three porter-loads of small coins was unnecessary, as paper money was more convenient and far lighter. We disposed of the unwanted change by paying off the porters with it, but not without some complaints. The big protest came from the village Lambadar, or headman, who supplied our flour. Our bags of coins in payment were so heavy that he had to have his husky son assist him in hauling them away.

Two days out of Askole, anticipated difficulties began to arise. A can of milk disappeared. Then we discovered that we did not have a full porter-ration of certain food items such as sugar, ghee, and tea. In lieu of this we granted them an additional monetary allowance and again the men were happy. At the snout of the Baltoro Glacier several inches of snow fell on us during the night but the porters continued after a
late start the following morning. Two days later at Urdukas a porter strike occurred as predicted. They requested one day to cook *chupattis* for the final five days on the glacier. Our demand that they continue at 10:30 the following morning was accepted, though we did not know this until 10:29. Urdukas is always a big uncertainty and a serious one. Sincerity and bargaining ability seem essential at this point.

There was fresh snow one day out from Urdukas and the second night was cold and miserable for the porters. Camp on the third night beyond Concordia provided natural wind-protection but it was below freezing. Though there was still a day's march to Base Camp, we decided to pay off all but 20 of the best-clothed porters and relay from this point. The next few days were a hodgepodge of reconnoitering and relaying as Base Camp finally took form on the northwest side of the Abruzzi Glacier midway between the South Gasherbrum and Upper Baltoro glaciers.

It is truly a wonderful feeling to be looking up at an *achttausender* with just that little distance between you and the summit. This is where climbing begins. Months of time, hundreds of people, 7000 pounds of supplies, and thousands of dollars had brought us to this rendezvous—utopia to a mountaineer. Curiosity, doubt, humility, enthusiasm, confidence: This is mountain climbing.

Hidden Peak, also called Gasherbrum I, was northeast of Base Camp in the "V" between the junction of the South Gasherbrum Glacier which flows from the north and the Abruzzi Glacier which flows from the southeast. There are six Gasherbrum Peaks which form a horseshoe around the South Gasherbrum Glacier. From Hidden Peak the main ridge continues southeast to form another horseshoe around the Abruzzi Glacier with Sia Kangri at the head of the shoe and Baltoro Kangri opposite Hidden Peak. Our approach must be somewhere on either the south or west side of the mountain.

Reconnaissances up the South Gasherbrum and Abruzzi glaciers presented four potential routes. A northwest ridge descends from the summit to the South Gasherbrum Glacier. Its upper 2000 feet is steep and obviously requires rock climbing. The west face is primarily a hanging glacier with avalanche hazards but it is the shortest route. The 1936 French attempt followed the "bee-line" route, but it involves a steep rock and ice buttress which terminates at the south summit of Hidden Peak, still several miles from the main summit. In 1934 André Roch and Hans Ertl, who were members of an international expedition under Professor G. O. Dyhrenfurth, investigated an arête that leads to a huge snow plateau southeast of the summit. We selected this route and called it the "Roch arête."
A luxurious Camp I was established on the upper part of the Abruzzi Glacier at the base of the Roch arête. Nevison and I attached fixed ropes onto aluminum pickets placed in the snow slopes above Camp I. On June 15, Nick, Andy, Mac, and three HAP’s established Camp II at 20,800 feet. The weather was spotty during the next few days, but relaying loads from Base Camp to Camp II and some route-fixing toward Camp III continued. This also provided time to acclimatize and exchange leads. On June 21, Andy and I reached the crest of the arête (22,000 feet) where Camp III was to be stocked. We could see the corniced ridge leading to the upper plateau, which connects Sia Kangri and Hidden Peak. The obvious route was a long march across the plateau and through the col between the south summit and the main summit ridge. The difficulty was distance and the possibility of getting trapped on the plateau by an excessive snow fall which would occur if and when the monsoon struck. Our plan included stocking Camp III completely and then dividing into teams for the final assaults. It was essential that we maintain a supply line and yet be able to move quickly in good weather.

Sahibs and porters worked hard relaying loads to Camp III. Packs varied in weight from 25 to 55 pounds. We rotated the tasks of making the route and relaying loads to break the monotony. Every few days, and always within a week, there would be a rest day which was usually forced on us by the weather. We tried to pack early in the day to avoid avalanches and although a four to six hour climbing day would have been preferable, many days stretched into eight to twelve hours, especially between camps I and II. Lower down, the HAP’s packed as a group in company with one or more of the sahibs. Unfortunately two, one of whom had a leg injury and another who was sick, were restricted to Base Camp early in the attempt. Later a third HAP became ill from the altitude.

But most of us were able to maintain reasonably good health. Akram, who had arrived with the Italian expedition, had recovered and was acclimatizing amazingly fast. Mac had a slight case of pneumonia which curtailed his activity, although he was still able to continue. Other minor illnesses were disconcerting, but tolerable. It would, however, seem easy to become a hypochondriac at these altitudes, and the presence of Dr. Tom Nevison with medical supplies was encouraging. A twenty-four hour supply of oxygen and penicillin was a requirement in each camp for combatting pneumonia. They were the first items taken in establishing a new camp.
By June 28 Camp III was stocked and that evening we assembled in one of the tents. A final plan to establish and supply two more camps was outlined. Then we voted to determine the first, second, and third summit teams.

On June 29, with three HAP’s, we set out en masse for the plateau and Camp IV. Both Mac and Captain Rizvi, who was a member of the second team and destined to stay at Camp IV, became ill and were forced to return. We managed to get off the ridge onto the plateau by attaching a fixed line and dropping it through a cornice. Bob, Tom, Nick, Andy, and I occupied Camp IV and got ready for the pack to Camp V. But the weather deteriorated, curtailing any hope for a rapid ascent.

Now two things occurred which permitted our attempt to continue as planned when the weather finally cleared. Two HAP’s, Rehim Khan and Qasim, continued relaying from Camp III to Camp IV even in the bad weather. Thus we would not have to waste good weather by returning for additional supplies. Secondly, on two different days the second team of Nick, Bob, and Tom plowed out a track onto the plateau for almost half the distance to Camp V, and although new snow and wind would fill this in it was much easier traveling over the packed path than over untrodden snow.

On July 4 all five of us started for Camp V which we hoped to establish at the 24,000-foot col between the south summit and the main peak. It was slow packing. After reaching our high cache of oxygen bottles we rotated the lead periodically, the first climber, who carried a light load, using oxygen. We were still a half mile short and 500 or more feet below the col when we pitched Camp V, with one tent near a huge crevasse. Nick, Tom, and Bob deposited their loads and slowly plodded back towards Camp IV to become our support party. That evening Andy and I rested and prepared the oxygen equipment, clothing, and packs for the following day. A small amount of oxygen was bled near our faces through the night to assist sleeping.

Next morning, after two hours of preparations, we shouldered our packs shortly after five o’clock. With our crampons stamped through small plywood food-box sides to act as snowshoes, we headed for the col. As the snow steepened, the plywood panels became useless, but they had already performed invaluable service. Just below the col we discovered a place where part of the cornice had broken off, which provided a
route to the col that required a minimum of muscle-work. Here on the windswept rock of the col we rested briefly at 9 o’clock, then continued across the upper snow-bowl in a more or less direct line for the summit. The lead was exchanged every few minutes. The snow gradually steepened; then changed to snow-and-ice-covered rock, and finally to rock and the summit ridge. Our second oxygen bottle was connected at noon and we increased the flow rate from two to three liters per minute. To a certain extent we used belays on the rock.

A snow couloir just east of the summit provided a corridor to the crest of the ridge. This couloir proved especially treacherous due to wind-crusted layers of snow that were most susceptible to breaking off under the crampons. Finally we reached the ridge and the temperature seemed to drop as a brisk wind became evident. This high ridge, including the summit, is all snow. At three o’clock we reached the top. One hour provided a minimum of time for taking photographs and observing the great peaks of the Karakoram. Four *achttausenders* lay in a line from our point to the summit of K2, some 18 miles away. Saltoro Kangri, Masherbrum, Chogolisa, Broad Peak, Mitre, Crystal, Mustagh Tower—they seemed endless. A cloudless day and a beautiful sight. Below we could see movement at Camp III and between III and IV. Finally we made mirror contact. On the other side of the mountain, and several thousand feet below, a fine line on South Gasherbrum Glacier indicated the Italian approach to Gasherbrum IV.

The descent became mechanical shortly below the couloir. At the col we disposed of the weight of the oxygen bottles. A half hour from Camp V we shared a dexidrine. It was dark as we entered the tent at nine o’clock.

The next day we could see the second team ascending from Camp IV, so we left Camp V intact and started down. We met Tom, Nick, and Bob halfway. Here, as clouds began to swirl across the summit, they decided to abandon attempts to get the entire party up. Nick and Tom continued up to remove Camp V, while Bob, Andy, and I went on down.

Enroute back, Nick and I made a side trip to the base of K2 and the memorial commemorating those who had lost their lives on that mountain. There we paid tribute to them, including my climbing companion Art Gilkey, and to those dozens of other Karakoram climbers who had contributed to making our climb a success.
Summary of Statistics

Area: Karakoram Himalaya, Pakistan.

Ascent: The first ascent of Hidden Peak, also known as Gasherbrum I (26,470 feet), by Peter K. Schoening and Andrew J. Kauffman, 2nd, July 5, 1958.

Personnel: Nicholas B. Clinch (leader of the party); Captain Mohd Akram; Richard K. Irvin; Andrew J. Kauffman, 2nd; Thomas McCormack; Thomas O. Nevison, Jr., M.D.; Captain S. T. H. Rivsi; Gilbert J. Roberts, Jr.; Peter K. Schoening; Robert L. Swift.