

# K2's South Face

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TOGETHER WITH Tadeusz Piotrowski, I found myself beneath K2 as a member of a large international expedition, organized by Karl Maria Herrligkoffer from Munich. For me, the invitation to participate in this expedition was a sheer delight. Not only could I try to climb the second highest peak in the world, I was also relieved of the onerous task of organizing the expedition. We had a permit to climb Broad Peak and the south face of K2. Unfortunately, most of the members did not show enough sporting spirit to attempt even K2's normal route, let alone anything new. I couldn't believe this since on Polish expeditions we always try to attempt something different.

We split into two groups with two separate Base Camps. One was for Broad Peak. Ours for K2 was set up on June 7 at 5070 meters. We found a huge crowd of people already there below K2 since the mountain was being attempted simultaneously by Italians, French, Americans, English, Poles, Austrians and Koreans.

We decided to attack the center of the south face. The first part of this I already knew from a previous attempt in 1982 with Wojciech Kurtyka, when we had tried it alpine-style. This year there were three Swiss and German Toni Freudig, who were to climb with Tadeusz Piotrowski and me. They had wanted to go up the Abruzzi Ridge, but not having permission, Dr. Herrligkoffer was on our side and forbade it. And so, on June 9 we started on the face and reached 6000 meters, where we set up Camp I. From there on, the real problems began. Two Swiss climbers, Beda Fuster and Rolf Zemp, pulled out. The next day four of us fixed some rope on the sharp, snowy ridge and deposited equipment at 6200 meters. At this point the third Swiss, Diego Wellig, withdrew too.

On June 19, only three of us set off from Base Camp, each carrying 25 kilos. Under the first sérac at 6400 meters we got to the site of Camp II and the following day carried up ropes and food. We saw we could climb around the sérac up a steep ridge alongside it. On June 21 we fixed 500 meters of rope on the ridge. Unfortunately, at this point Toni Freudig gave up too. There were now just two of us. On June 22, carrying two days' food and bivouac gear, we started up the fixed ropes. By midday we had reached the steep, snow-covered icefields. They were an absolute torture to climb. We bivouacked at 6950 meters and the following day got to 7400 meters, where we bivouacked again. On June 24 the excellent weather began to deteriorate and black clouds gathered. At midday we hung our equipment from pitons and descended to Base Camp in a raging snow storm.

Bad weather held us one week in Base Camp. We were determined that on the next attempt we would reach the summit. When the sun came out on June 3, the two of us set off again. We reached Camp II without difficulty and the next day got to the place at 7400 meters where we had cached our gear. The 1000-meter climb at that altitude left us exhausted. On the 5th we were on snow-covered icefields which led into an enormous couloir. Because of its shape, we called it "The Hockey Stick." After a bivouac at 7800 meters, we climbed the couloir and confronted a steep headwall, not visible from below. We set up our next bivouac at 8200 meters, hoping to find a route over this barrier. Where the wall rose about 100 meters, it seemed the most logical place to ascend. The first 30 meters were the most grueling.

On July 7 we started the day's climbing with the idea that we would overcome this difficult obstacle and reach the summit that very day. Our hopes were quickly dashed. We rated that section as V+ difficulty. If that takes a maximum of strength and concentration in the Polish Tatra, imagine what it demands at 8000 meters! Moreover, to economize on weight, we had taken with us only four pitons and one 30-meter rope. It took me the whole day just to scale this one rope-length. Instead of reaching the summit, we had to bivouac a second time at 8200 meters. That evening we ran out of gas with which to melt water; through carelessness we had dropped a gas canister a few hours before. The next morning we had to make do each one with a small cup of water melted on a candle!

With all these problems, we obviously couldn't reach the summit with our complete rucksacks and so we left behind the tent, sleeping bags, mattresses, food, everything. With only bivouac sacks and cameras, we started upwards. Since the section we had climbed the day before was followed by forty meters of easier climbing, at noon we reached the Abruzzi Ridge at 8300 meters, at the spot where Wanda Rutkiewicz and her French companions had bivouacked in June. Although the route was easier now, it was covered with loose snow, slowing our progress. At about six P.M. I wondered if we would ever get to the summit. It was now or never. The weather was beginning to change and mist hid everything. Under a sérac we found some litter, including empty French soup packets. Was this another of their camps? As I moved around the sérac, I saw the ground begin to flatten. At 6:25 I finally reached the top! I took from my pack two small scarves which my sons had given me and hung them on my ice-axe together with the red-and-white flag of Poland. I took a few pictures. Just then Tadeusz appeared. We congratulated each other and took some more pictures. We were both ecstatic, I, because my dream of climbing the south face of K2, my twelfth 8000er, had come true, and Tadeusz, because he had climbed an 8000er, one of the highest and most difficult in the world.

Dusk closed in at 8300 meters. I took out my flashlight and we kept on. Suddenly the bulb burned out and we were plunged into darkness. We dug a hole in the snow and bivouacked in our bivouac sacks, shaking with cold until the morning.

At the first light we started the descent. The heavy snow sloughed off in small avalanches. Often unable to find our way, we found ourselves on very

difficult terrain where we had to rappel. During the day we managed to descend only 400 meters. As darkness fell, we reached easier terrain. Our bivouac was even worse than the night before. For two days we had not even had a drop of water and our bivouac sacks were worn and full of holes. The night was absolute torture as we shivered in the frigid cold and snow penetrated every nook and cranny. We got only snatches of sleep.

In the morning the weather had cleared a little and we were able to see a route down. Worried that the break in the weather was only temporary, I got ready quickly and set out, but Tadeusz tarried. Shortly I was able to see that we were on the route; I could make out Korean tents below at 7300 meters. I waited for Tadeusz and finally he joined me. It was about half past ten o'clock. Immediately below us was a very steep slope. This was the spot where in 1953 Art Gilkey died. When I asked Tadeusz for the rope, I discovered that he had forgotten to bring it with him from the bivouac. I started down first with Tadeusz behind me. The ice was harder than usual. Just after I warned Tadeusz to go a little to my left, I saw one of his crampons slip off. When he tried to bang his other foot into the ice, the crampon shot off his other boot. I was directly below him. He fell full force onto me. I braced and could barely keep my footing, but I was totally unable to catch him. He hurtled down over the edge.

I climbed down very slowly and took five-and-a-half hours to cover the 200 meters to the Korean camp. I was under the strange illusion that somehow I might see Tadeusz there alive. I found a radio in one of the tents but it was dead. There was a little gas cookstove and I drank and ate. Then I fell into a deep sleep and woke up the following afternoon. I had slept for 20 hours. Just after four P.M., I started down, meeting two Koreans on the way up. I stopped at the next Korean camp at 6800 meters where I was looked after by a solitary Korean host. From there I was at last able to make contact with Base Camp. I told Janusz Majer about the accident, but he already knew, having heard from the two Koreans I had met. He told me that two rescue teams had gone out to search in vain for Tadeusz under the face where he had fallen.

The next day I returned to Base Camp to the large group of people there where congratulations were intermingled with condolences. Everybody was very kind to me. Our Italian doctor inquired about my physical condition, some one tried to film me and somebody else recorded my story on tape.

Four days later I flew by helicopter to Skardu. I had my last sight of K2, but I felt no joy at having conquered its magnificent face, just two of us, partly in alpine-style, and without supplementary oxygen. My experiences on that mountain were too tragic and the price we paid for victory was too high.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Baltoro Karakoram, Pakistan.

NEW ROUTE: K2, 8611 meters or 28,250 feet, via South Face; summit reached on July 8, 1986 (Jerzy Kukuczka, Tadeusz Piotrowski). Piotrowski fell to his death on the descent on July 10, 1986.