

Cragging in the Karakoram

ROBERT WARREN, *Unaffiliated*

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, Max Kendall and I spent a miserable time on Denali. Throughout the climb, all I could think about was climbing beautiful Yosemite granite in warm sunshine. I enjoyed the adventure, the position and the struggle of living on a big mountain. However, I didn't enjoy the climbing on Denali. That experience helped to define some goals. What I like most is rock: lots of it, vertical and remote. Pictures of the Trango Towers captured my imagination and the idea of a trip to the Karakoram took shape. Several friends from college also crave rock and became intrigued by the idea of a small expedition climbing granite towers amid some of the world's largest mountains and glaciers.

Max Kendall, Peter Gallagher, John Catto, Steve Wood, Kathy Warren, Barbra Loughman and I joined to make these dreams a reality. We decided that the "fun factor" would guide the trip. Furthermore, we all wanted to come back alive, intact and as friends. Pete humorously added that he would climb no fewer than three towers at all costs.

We set our goals on "trekking peaks" because that gave us a free hand in deciding where, when and how we could climb. Our expenses would be entirely out of pocket, so we welcomed the hospitality of the Pakistani government which makes no financial demands on trekkers in "open areas." The Biafo Glacier emerged from our research as a likely candidate which could fulfill the expedition's goals. Galen Rowell first climbed a tower called Lukpilla Brakk off the Biafo in 1984. The description sounded more like rock climbing in an alpine Yosemite than mountaineering in the Karakoram.

Jeeps took us up the Shigar valley from Skardu and we began our approach from the village of Apolygon. A crowd of porters gathered eager for work. We negotiated with 23 of them to deliver us, our gear and six weeks of rations to Base Camp at Baintha in four days but agreed to pay the traditional six days of wages. The porters deposited us on June 18 at Baintha, a well used camp at the tongue of the Uzun Brakk Glacier. Clear water was a twenty-minute walk, but the camp offered access to several potential climbs and the advantage of not impacting another area by our presence. We set up camp, bear-proofed our food cache by stowing it atop a large boulder and began planning a climb of the Ogre Stump.

The Ogre Stump, described by Phil Powers in *AAJ*, 1988, was a two-and-a-half hour hike from our camp. On our third attempt, after bouts with

PLATE 8

Photo by Peter Gallagher

West Buttress on "DECK OF CARDS" from the summit of Lukpilla Brakk. 1=First bivouac on successful ascent; 2=First bivouac on first attempt; 3=High point on first attempt and bivouac on both; 4=Storm bivouac on successful ascent.

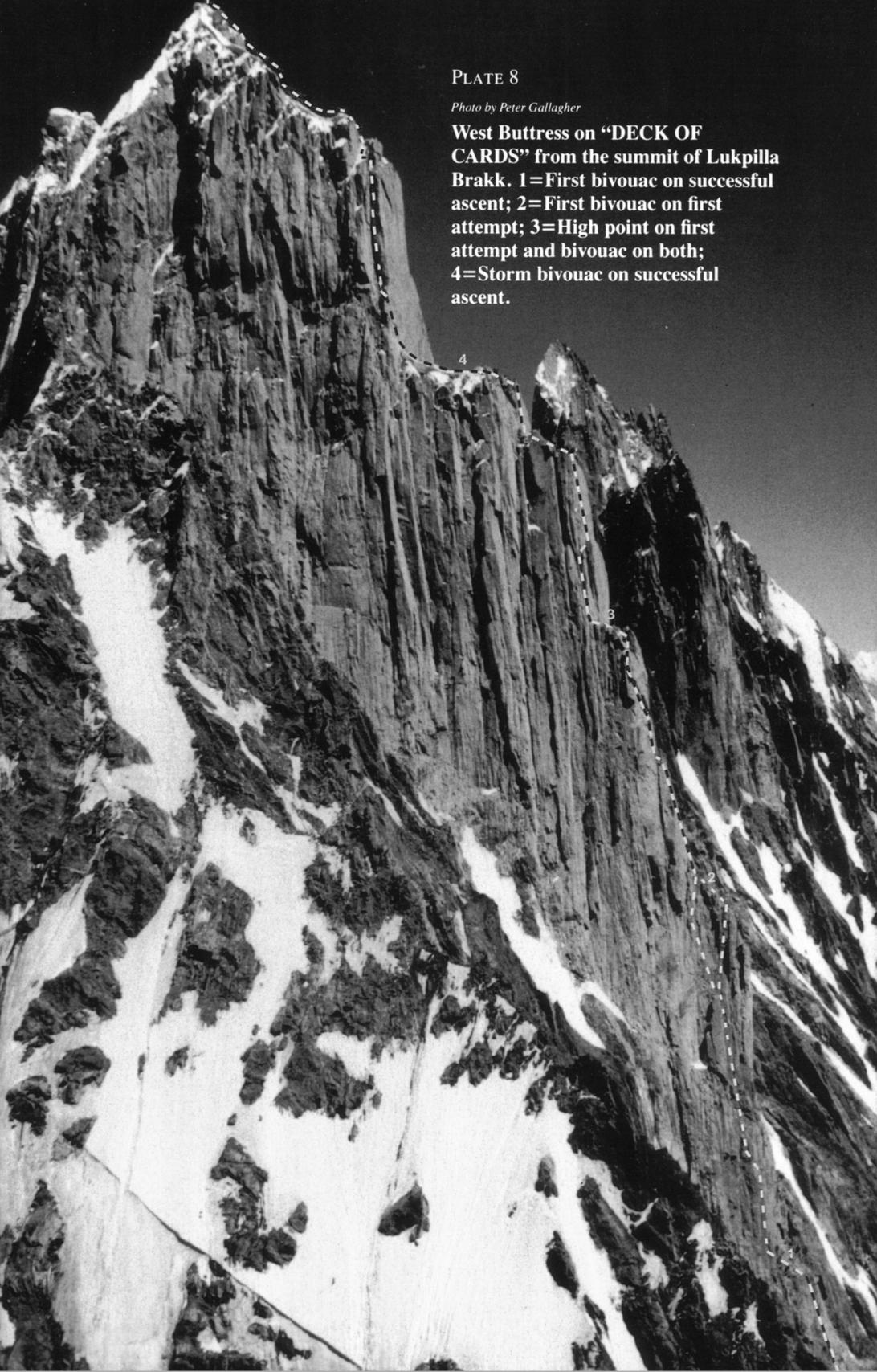


PLATE 9

Photo by Max Kendall

**Robert Warren leading a cold 5.11
pitch on "DECK OF CARDS."**



altitude sickness and stormy weather, Peter Gallagher and I completed an alpine ascent to the summit on June 29. We followed a combined route which began with the German route on the south face and joined the American route on the west ridge to the summit.

After regrouping people and supplies, we set our sights on the spires above the Biafo Glacier. John Catto and Steve Wood focused on Lupkilla Brakk. Despite bad weather, they climbed what appears to be a new route on the west side of the spire. They reported good rock, moderate climbing and the best bivy either had ever had. They had intended to follow Rowell's route but they found no anchors to indicate previous passage. The route ascends just to the left of Powers' route, with which it shares six pitches.

Pete Gallagher, Max Kendall and I began what was to be the crowning achievement of the trip, the "Deck of Cards," which tops the ridge separating the Uzun Brakk and Biafo Glaciers. Our maps dubbed this mountain P 19,370. The locals we encountered didn't have a name for it, so we chose the name "Deck of Cards," which describes the appearance of the granite slabs standing on end amidst other spires on the ridge. Pete named the route "Four Aces" after a rot-gut whisky brewed in Pakistan for tourists. The name stuck because of the four vertical buttresses forming the route and the four climbers who participated in the first ascent.

Unlike Lupkilla Brakk, which begins on the glacier, the Deck of Cards rises out of the top of a 2000-foot hill. Route finding, talus and a general dislike of staggering uphill with a heavy haul bag convinced us all that this would be a one-shot attempt. Pete said that he would never walk up the hill again and the rest of us agreed. In three hours, the approach was over and we began the arduous task of hauling bags up the low-angle pitches at the bottom. We carried no water, hoping to find ice and snow to melt, but our bags certainly weren't feather-weight because of the crampons and ice tools we would need for the summit pitches.

Three very loose low-angle pitches eventually brought us to solid 5.10 granite on the left side of the lower buttress. This first hard pitch sported shallow, hard-to-protect cracks which caused Pete and me to worry from memories of the Ogre Stump. But as we continued up, the cracks became much deeper. The loose rock remained a concern, but we were able to climb around most of it while the third climber trundled what he could. The left side of the buttress offered pitch after pitch of steep 5.9 and 5.10 rock climbing and finally led us to a bivouac on the top of the first buttress.

Looking back on the day, we were all pleased. Each of us had shared the leading, hauling and complaining. The bivy was a comfortable spot for us all and we mined a big chunk of ice from a nearby chimney for water. We slept under a brilliantly clear sky and awoke confident that we would bag a first ascent.

The first pitch up the face of the second buttress set the stage for the rest of the day. The climbing was devious, mind-numbing and difficult 5.11. The exposure of over 3000 feet to the glacier stepped up the slow trickle of adrenalin a notch or two. Pitches became consistently more difficult and the second 5.11



COLOR PLATE 4

Photo by Peter Gallagher

**“DECK OF CARDS,” above the Biafo
Glacier, Baltistan.**

pitch of the day taxed our physical ability with a fall and our mental stamina with a secret desire to free-climb the route.

Bad weather began to move in. Max climbed the third 5.11 pitch while Pete and I froze. The ropes tangled and we lost a lot of time sorting out how to haul the bag. The situation began to get desperate as the snow and wind picked up. In another easy pitch we made our way to a ledge. We immediately burrowed into our bivy bags to wait out the worst of it. The storm held and we all started the slow inevitable process of getting soaked, shaking off the drifting snow and packing it between and under our bags. Cold gripped us all and none of us slept. The morning dawned much as the night had progressed. We devoured Power Bars, almost came to blows over misplaced hot chocolate and believed that this would be our last morning alive.

Pete led the descent. We foolishly had neglected to fix our anchors on the way up and paid for it on the way down. Pete painstakingly cleared the snow, fixed the anchors, threw down the ropes, trundled the loose rock off and finally retrieved the ropes from each rappel. Max and I struggled with the heavy bags and the ice-plastered walls. Eight hours of hard work brought us to the base of the route where we found our hot chocolate and laughed at our predicament. After a brief discussion, we agreed to leave the rock gear and to give it another go though it meant toiling up that hill again.

Several days of storm gave us a rest. When the weather broke again, we made our way to the Four Aces. Steve Wood traded places with Max Kendall. This time we carried a Bibler tent. The pitches up to our previous high point were a joy. We bivouacked just above the second pitch and excavated a fantastic sand ledge on which to pitch the Bibler. We fixed four pitches of rope, which allowed us the fun of climbing without the haul bag or aid gear in tow. The next morning we blasted up to our previous storm bivy and again made camp. Peter and I fixed a long pitch and anchored it to the only bolts drilled on the route.

The weather continued to hold and we started up the face of the third buttress. Pete led a beautiful hand crack which split the buttress and eventually became a thin A1 crack. We were forced to traverse a section that we all shuddered to think of reversing in a storm, so we fixed one of the haul lines. I drew the next pitch which started with a hard 5.10 layback and eventually turned to A4.

The weather again began to deteriorate, but fortunately we were now on top of the third buttress. Pete chose to hack out a ledge from the ice while Steve and I frantically climbed the next pitches, hoping to fix rope up to easier ground before the full brunt of the storm set in. We weren't so lucky. We fixed a pitch and a half and returned to the warmth of the tent and a hot cup of soup.

During the night, the storm dumped a foot of snow, but we remained warm and dry. We all slept despite the cramped accommodations. The next day brought more of the same and we began to ration food and fuel. By the end of the second day, the sun peeked through the clouds and the snow stopped falling. The third day brought clear weather and the sun dried us and the rock. During the storm, a cut on my hand became infected, which caused me great pain and concern.

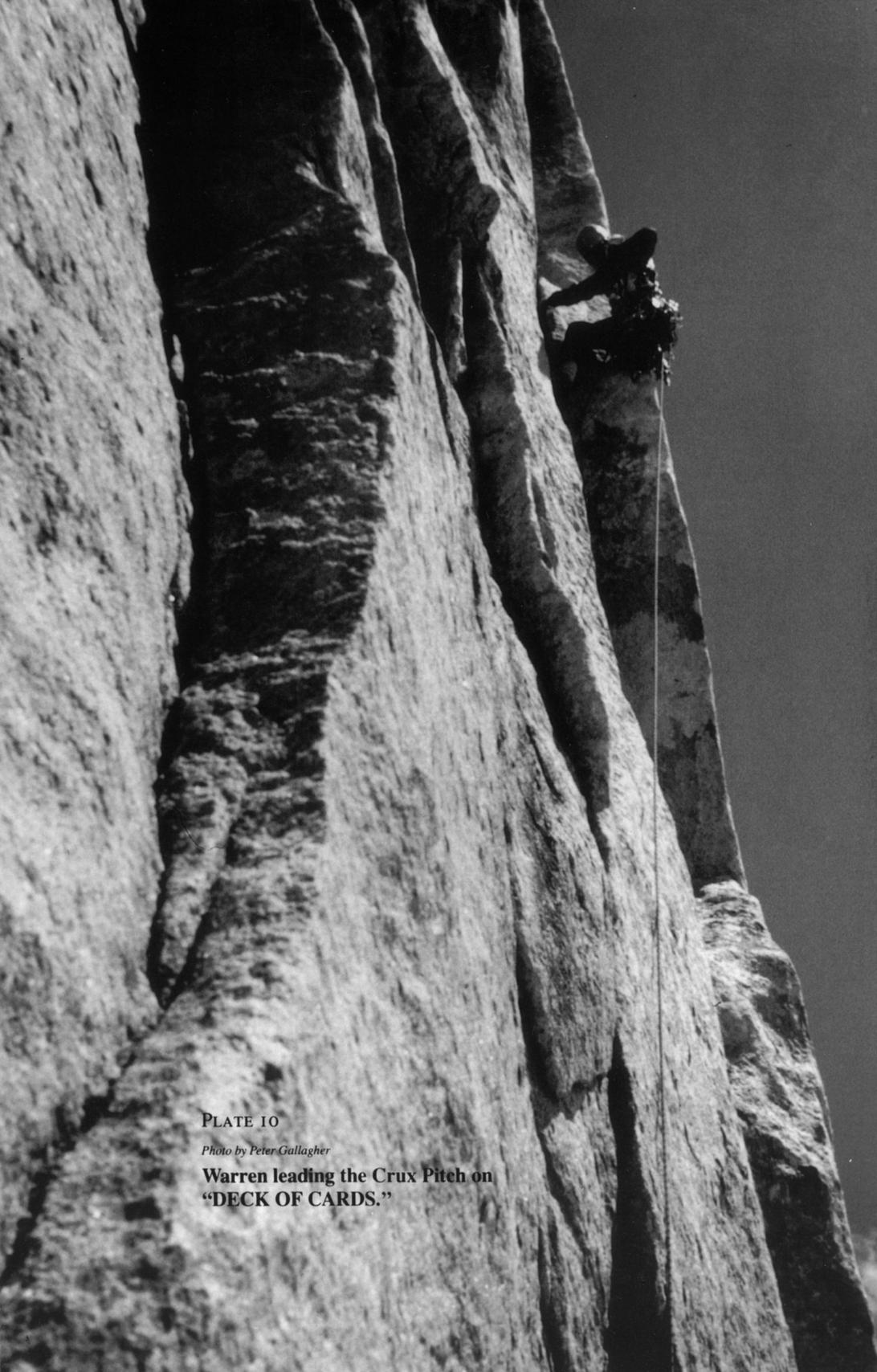


PLATE 10

Photo by Peter Gallagher

**Warren leading the Crux Pitch on
"DECK OF CARDS."**

That afternoon, Steve and I went up the last buttress to fix ropes to the final snowfields. The cracks and chimneys would normally have been fun 5.9 climbing, but the water running down the cracks turned it into two awkward dangle-and-thrash aid pitches. Steve was completely soaked and, by the time we reached the bivouac, he verged on hypothermia. But the job was finished and we had a line up to the final snowfields.

The summit day dawned crystal clear. We all jumared the fixed lines and put on the crampons which we were finally happy to have hauled up the wall. Eight pitches of moderate ice led us to the top. Not a breath of wind nor a cloud in the sky spoiled the view of Nanga Parbat, the Ogre, Mustagh Tower and other giants near K2.

We descended the route to our second bivouac. My hand was extremely painful and I feared I might lose a finger, but the deed was done and we were heading toward safety and friends. Miraculously, the fuel in our stove held out not only to provide water for that night and the next day but we ate the very last of our rations hot!

We all felt the trip a success and began to wind down for the trek out. I nursed my finger. Kathy and I climbed a snow peak across from Latok III, Steve concentrated on his artwork. However, Pete needed more. He had come to the Karakoram to climb *three* spires. In continuing crystal clear, calm weather, Max and Pete completed the grand slam, reaching the top of Lupkilla Brakk and descending in three days, following the route that Steve and John had put up earlier in the trip.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Biafo and Uzun Brakk Glaciers, Karakoram, Pakistan.

ASCENTS: Ogre Stump, 5486 meters, 18,000 feet. First alpine-style ascent of the South Face, June 29, 1990 by R. Warren, Gallagher (VI, 27 pitches, three bivouacs, 5.11, A2).

Lupkilla Brakk, 5380 meters, 17,650 feet. New route on the West Face, July 6, 1990 by Catto, Wood and July 27 by Gallagher, Kendall (VI, 30 pitches, two bivouacs, 5.11).

"Deck of Cards," Four Aces route, 5869 meters, 19,370 feet. First ascent, South Buttress, July 19, 1990 by Warren, Gallagher, Wood (VI, 33 pitches including 8 pitches of moderate ice, four bivouacs 5.11, A4).

PERSONNEL: Max Kendall, Peter Gallagher, John Catto, Steve Wood, Robert and Kathy Warren, Barbra Loughman.