

KARAKORAM DOUBLEHEADER

Broad and Hidden peaks: Two new routes in less than four weeks.

VALERY BABANOV



Viktor Afanasiev and Valery Babanov climbed the central buttress on Broad Peak's west face for five days to reach a bivouac at 7,600m, where they were trapped for two nights by severe avalanche danger. They traversed to Camp 3 (7,100m) on the west ridge, rested for a day, and then followed the normal route to the summit. *Valery Babanov*

July 31, 6,900 meters. I'm in the murky space of a deep dream, in which I'm standing in a wooden boat, seized by the swift current of a river and speeding headlong toward the horizon. Somewhere far away, along the shore, a small boy is running, waving his hands and crying something. I try to make out his words without success. Then I focus all my attention, and finally some phrases reach me.

"Valera, are you alive? How's your head?"

Some mysterious strength forces me to open my eyes. The weak light of a flashlight and someone's voice: "How's your head? Does it hurt?"

The shroud of the dream begins to fade, and I realize I am in a small tent at nearly 7,000

meters on the southwest face of Hidden Peak. The voice belongs to Viktor Afanasiev, my partner on the ascent. Foggy with sleep, I still don't understand what's going on. "I'm okay, my head doesn't hurt," I say to him. "Last night I took an aspirin."

I look at Vitya, who is holding onto his head. "What about you—your head hurt?"

"A rock flew into the tent. My head is smashed." He lowers his hands, and with horror I see they're covered in blood.

Suddenly I am wide awake. I glance at my watch: 1 a.m. "Well, we've gotten into it this time," I think. I feel a cold draft at my back and turn to look. Like black, empty eye sockets, two huge holes in the tent glare at me. Icy wind and snow rush into our tiny island of life.

"How do you feel now?" This is the first reasonable thing I've said since waking.

"You know, it's painful," Vitek answers, holding his head. "I've got a bandage. Here, Valera, bind up my head, but first take a look at what's there. Maybe try to clean the wound?"

I pull a bottle of warm tea from the sleeping bag and moisten the bandage. The wound is hidden by his hair, but his skull feels intact.

"We can try to descend right away, when it begins to get lighter." I voice aloud that which I scarcely believe.

But Vitek is thinking clearly.

"Not yet," he says, "and I don't want to descend this wall in daylight. We'll be killed by falling rocks."

I agree with him, and he adds, "Let me try to ascend to the col at 7,200 meters in the morning, and there, if things don't get better, we'll start our descent."

In his voice I detect notes of regret, and of course I understand. Each of us has lived for more than a year with the goal of a new route on Hidden Peak.



My desire to attempt new routes on technically complex 8,000'ers grew after our first ascent of the western ridge on Jannu (7,710 meters) in the autumn of 2007. As I was climbing complex mixed pitches at 7,500 meters, I felt that I was completely capable of doing more. Ascents of the giant 8,000-meter summits along classical routes little interested me, but to climb a new, technically complex route, while still in light alpine style—that was something else. The game was worth the candle.

For me, alpinism has always been a means to self-knowledge, and now I am traversing into the next evolutionary stage—into a sphere of human activity that maximizes unpredictability, where survival requires mobilizing all of a person's inner reserves, even his intuition.

I first visited the Karakoram in the summer of 2007 and was surprised by its beauty and severity. I promised myself I would return, and back home, looking at photographs of the Karakoram 8,000'ers, I traced new lines on the bewitchingly beautiful peaks.

The first that caught my eye was the unclimbed buttress on the western wall of Broad Peak (8,047 meters). I couldn't understand why this beautiful and logical line had not been climbed. Perhaps it was the overhanging serac wall in the middle of the face, from which pieces of ice break off from time to time, reminding climbers that it is still "alive." The idea of an ascent via this route gradually became my passion, and then the goal expanded to climbing not one but three new routes on 8,000'ers in one summer. But we would start with Broad Peak.



July 9, 4,900 meters. A gray, rainy morning. Instead of getting our fill of sleep, we slowly climb up the glacier, burdened with 20-kilogram rucksacks. We are just two—Viktor and me. Behind us are almost two weeks of acclimatization, in which we reached 7,100 meters via the classic route on Broad Peak—this was completely sufficient for a “lower 8,000’er” such as this.

During our first days in base camp we had carefully observed the serac wall on our proposed line and identified a route through this 100-meter-high ice barrier. My inner voice told me we had chosen the right way, and that everything would be all right. Now, despite the poor weather, we have decided to begin our ascent. The forecast promises slow improvement over the next few days, and we don’t want to sit around and wait.

The first day is always the most difficult. We go in silence, each of us sunken into himself. I don’t know what my partner is thinking—possibly the same things as I: about friends and relatives who remain below; about the mountain and the risk to which we submit ourselves; and about our chances of ascending and returning.

Sometimes I notice that the rhythm of my steps coincides with the rhythm of my thoughts. At times they merge and I disappear into a deep, practically intangible void, in which everything dissolves—glaciers, summits, even time—and I am swimming in space with no beginning and no end. Everything around me appears to be woven out of mist, and life itself in this whole scene appears to be unreal. It seems to me that in such moments one touches Eternity.

I snap out of this condition when I stumble on a rock. The return to reality is always a little sad.



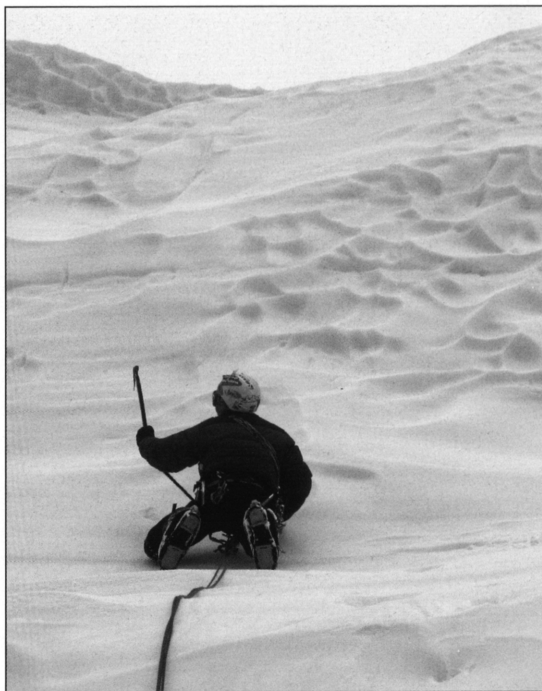
Babanov leads mixed terrain, ca 6,500m. The looming serac wall at 7,000m occupied the climbers’ thoughts for days. *Viktor Afanasiev*



July 11, 6,500 meters. Morning. I throw back my head and look toward the top of Broad Peak. We are still in shadow, but up there the warm rays of sunrise are already touching the summit of the colossal mountain. The few clouds hanging in the blue sky look completely benign.

For the last two days we have been climbing in horrible conditions. It was as if the mountain were testing us. Often sharp gusts of wind carried stinging snow and cold. And now, as a reward for our stubbornness, the sky has made a gift of its silence, mixed in deep blue colors.

Every step brings us closer to the massive ice barrier, hanging threateningly overhead. Several times during these days huge pieces of ice break away and roar down a couloir to our



Babanov starting up the 100-meter serac barrier at 7,000m, the technical crux on Broad Peak. Viktor Afanasiev

right. We can't relax even though we know our current route is safe from this debris. Every cell of one's tired body senses the proximity of such a monster. And tomorrow we'll have to encounter the wall in the flesh—our route lies directly through it.



July 12, 7,000 meters. From the break of dawn, the sun is covered by a shroud and a strong, gusty wind is blowing. Above us, at the lip of the 100-meter serac band, are huge snow flags, in the whirling vortex of which the sky itself disappears. It's awful to imagine that we have to climb through this. From below, a few days ago, we had studied the glacial barrier through binoculars, and now we remind ourselves that we've found the only weakness (if one can speak of it that way). When we approach the serac wall directly, it appears even more imposing. But the certainty that

we have found the right path gives us strength.

"Belay is ready."

"Climbing."

From this moment the broader world ceases to exist and my view compresses to two square meters of cold ice. After only a few meters of climbing, my calves are filled with lead and my lungs struggle to extract enough air. Every blow of a tool into the hard ice requires unbelievable effort. My gaze slides down past my legs into two kilometers of empty space. I try to climb the steeper parts without hesitation, stopping only when my arms begin to throb. Finally, in the afternoon, fairly exhausted, we cross the lip of the glacier onto the sloping upper snowfields. The route above appears to be much easier.



July 14, 3 a.m., 7,500 meters. We are awakened abruptly by something heavy shaking our tent. Avalanche! Instantly my body is clenched with fear that we might be carried away. Fortunately our little house withstands it, but we can no longer sleep.

The snow falls uninterruptedly.

Above us are arrayed huge snowfields with slopes ideal for releasing avalanches. Now all that's possible for us is to pray to God that He might protect us. We take turns crawling out into the darkness and digging out the tent with a shovel and our gloved hands. With Vitek outside, I analyze our situation: "Yes, we made a big mistake choosing this place to camp. But who could



The long traverse across avalanche slopes at ca 7,500m on Broad Peak. *Valery Babanov*

have supposed yesterday evening, when we set up the tent, that the weather would worsen so abruptly? And we didn't have much choice—on all sides, for several hundred meters, there are only sloping snowfields....”

“Valera, avalanche!” Vitya’s shout interrupts my reflections.

“Ready!” This is all I can manage.

Bending at the knees, I support the roof with my back. A merciless mass presses against me. A few more seconds and I would have been crushed.

“Vitek, are you alive?” I shout uneasily.

A muffled voice reaches me: “Yes, alive!”

The night seems unending. Avalanches fall every 15 to 20 minutes. We wait impatiently for sunrise and preserve the hope that we will escape the hellish circle into which this horrible weather has driven us.

In the morning the snowfall eases, but it is out of the question to move up or down. We find a bergschrund, dig in, and hope for better weather. The next day, July 15, the sky is blue but the huge slopes of Broad Peak are loaded with fresh snow. We are only 300 meters below the col, but it is too dangerous to climb the 45-degree slopes above us. We decide the only possible route is to traverse far to the right to reach the classical route on the west ridge. If it weren't for the avalanche danger we wouldn't even consider doing this, but we have no choice. Pushing through snow that sometimes rises above our waists, we start our traverse. We are lucky: Avoiding a couple of avalanches along the way, we finally manage to reach Camp 3 on the normal route at 7,100 meters. We spend the night here alone.

After all this, it seems to me that we're so weakened and battered that only one path remains: to descend to base camp. Already we have been on this massive mountain for over a week, the majority above 7,000 meters. But we convince ourselves to remain one more day and rest. Half asleep in the sun-warmed tent, we can relax and start to think about the summit again.



July 17. The weather is good and other climbers have joined us at Camp 3, including three members of our expedition, so we have help pushing through the deep snow to reach the col at 7,800 meters. From there, as though in a slow-motion film, Vitya and I advance up the side of the main summit. The higher we climb, the more majestic the panorama around us. The setting sun bathes all the mountains in a magical light, softening their outlines like velvet.

Out of my memory swim the photographs and words describing the first ascent of Broad Peak by Hermann Buhl and Kurt Diemberger in 1957. They too ended up on the summit toward the end of the day, in the rays of the setting sun. Diemberger expressed what he experienced in his diary: *"This was perfection itself. Flickering in a light mist, the sun dropped to the horizon. Below us it was night. Under darkness spread the world of people. Only here, and only for us, was there light..."* My consciousness, clouded by the altitude, unspools the whole story countless times. At some point it even seems to me that the invisible figure of Buhl is accompanying us on the final meters to the summit.

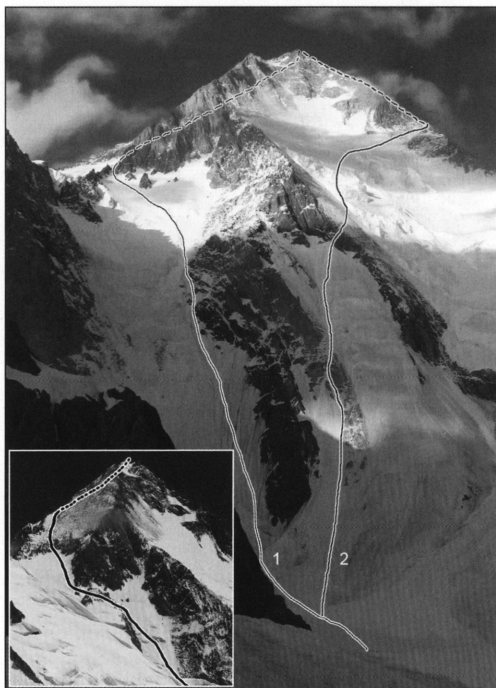
The sun is nearly touching the horizon when Vitya and I reach the top. We have only a few short minutes to enjoy its warmth and to impress in our memory this magical feeling. We know that night will soon arrive, and we have before us the descent, full of danger.



Now it's already nearing the end of July. We've moved our base camp below two other giant 8,000'ers: Gasherbrum I (Hidden Peak, 8,068m) and Gasherbrum II (8,035m). Our next goal is a new route along the southwestern wall of Hidden Peak. On July 28 we start up the long glacier toward the base of the wall. One could say this is just an easy stroll except the glacier is broken with gigantic crevasses, and if not for the bamboo wands placed by previous expeditions, Vitya and I would have had to work much harder to find a safe passage. At midday the sun is scorching. It's incredible that we are in such blistering heat above 5,000 meters.

After an hour we decide to rope up because the glacier is becoming very broken. On this glacier a month earlier the well-known French alpinist Jean-Noël Urban fell into a crevasse and perished. Such an absurd death, on flat ground.

I sink into my thoughts. Life. Death. Living stars, dead stars. Today you prance on the steed of your success, and tomorrow that success turns its hooves on you.



(1) The Russian route on the southwest face of Gasherbrum 1 (Hidden Peak). After cresting the face at ca 7,200m, they joined the 1977 Yugoslavian route at 7,600m and followed this to the top (see inset photo). (2) The Polish route (Kukuczka-Kurtyka, 1983). Valery Babanov

It always seems to us that we're lucky, and that the mountain Spirits preserve us. But at some moment you take a misstep, the world turns upside down, and you are among these Spirits. This has happened to many of my friends—they did not return, remaining forever in the mountains. Living stars, dead stars....



July 29, 5,800 meters. It's almost dawn, and we still haven't started up the face. To approach the southwestern wall of Hidden Peak, we need to enter a narrow and very dangerous basin enclosed by huge slopes and overhanging glaciers. If something falls from above, that will be the end, but we have no choice—this is the only possible approach. In such places one has to disconnect one's brain completely and simply put on racing shoes.

After another hour—oooff!—we have sped past the worst of the glacier, crossed the bergschrund at 5,800 meters, and started climbing. In contrast to the new line on Broad Peak, where there was a lot of rock and mixed climbing, ice climbing predominates. However, our equipment is almost the same: a few ice screws, several pitons and cams, a lightweight tent, a sleeping bag for two, a stove, and four gas canisters. We have provisions for six days. As usual, the first person climbs with the lighter rucksack.

Sometime after 11 a.m. the sun illuminates our wall, and the slope, which from below appeared to be peaceful and safe, is raked by rocks melting from the ice above. A cobblestone the size of a fist whizzes past about half a meter to my left. Without verbalizing it, we agree that while one of us is climbing the other will carefully watch out and shout a warning if something comes flying. We still need at least four hours of work to escape the bombardment zone.

I continue to be amazed by how warm it is in the Karakoram compared with the Nepalese Himalaya. We are already higher than 6,000 meters, and water is streaming down the wall. It's funny, but we're hard to please: If it's hot that's bad and if it's cold that's bad, too.

July 31, 7,200 meters. We climb onto the col in warm sunshine. Despite his battered head, Vitek has fought his way upward through deep snow as though nothing had happened. Yet I cannot forget the events of the previous night: the rock flying into the tent, and Vitya's blood-covered face.

"Vitya, how's your head?"

"You know, Valer, not bad. Sometimes it aches a bit, when I start to speed up. But I can live with it." A smile is visible on his face. "I very much hope that I fully recover for tomorrow's push."

His words are like balm for my soul. "Yes, everything will be alright," I respond, and I really believe it. How could it be different?

For the rest of the day we relax in the tent, enjoying the warmth, the light, and the thought that perhaps we might go to the summit after all. In the still tent, I slowly sink into my thoughts: If we succeed in finishing a new route, we will have accomplished something similar to what the Poles Voytek Kurtyka and Jerzy Kukuczka did in 1983, when they climbed a pair of new routes in the Karakoram in one summer season. One on Hidden Peak, and the other on Gasherbrum II. Already 25 years have passed since their ascents, but no one has done anything similar in these mountains. So where is the progress in world alpinism? Or did this pair, with their creative thinking, outstrip their time by many years?

August 1, 8,068 meters. After several minutes on the summit, I turn to face the slope and descend, carefully controlling every step. It is about 4 p.m. and the weather is wonderful. I realize that I

don't feel any thrill from what we've accomplished. Even my memories of the summit, about which I've dreamed for so long, are swiftly fading. Maybe I am simply tired.

Vitya is 50 meters above me. He is just as careful as I am, with his face turned toward the slope, completely focused on the descent. We are unroped, and our lives are in our own hands. Down, down, down. Now I can see our tent, a small, yellow spot, lost on the vast expanses of Hidden Peak.

Three more endless hours pass before we reach the tent and I can allow myself to drop onto a nearby rock and relax. Attentiveness is no longer needed, and it's pleasant to just sit without moving or thinking. In such moments I feel an inner liberation—from anxieties and fears, from attachments and promises, from all that binds people and limits their freedom. I simply dissolve into the space that surrounds us. Maybe the feeling of nirvana is similar?

Editor's note: After descending from Gasherbrum I, the two climbers had hoped to climb a new route on 8,035-meter Gasherbrum II, but they abandoned their attempt in the face of poor weather and accumulated fatigue.

SUMMARY:

AREA: Baltoro Muztagh, Karakoram, Pakistan

ASCENTS: Alpine-style first ascent of the central buttress of 8,047m Broad Peak's west face (3,000m, ED VI WI5 M6 90°), Viktor Afanasiev and Valery Babanov, July 9–18, 2008; summit reached July 17. They joined the west ridge route at Camp 3 (7,100m) after ca 2,000m of elevation gain. Alpine-style new route on the southwest face of 8,068m Gasherbrum I (2,300m, ED VI WI4 M6 80°), Afanasiev and Babanov, July 29–August 2, 2008; summit reached August 1. After cresting the southwest face, they joined the 1977 Yugoslavian Route (southwest ridge) at 7,600m and followed this to the top.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Valery Babanov was born in 1964 in Omsk, Russia. He began climbing at age 16, and since the late 1990s he has climbed major new routes in Nepal, India, and Alaska, often solo. Earlier in 2008, he attempted the west pillar of Dhaulagiri with Nikolay Totmyanin, and eventually summited the 8,167-meter peak via its northeast ridge. An internationally certified guide, he lives in Calgary, Alberta, and Chamonix, France.

Translated from the Russian by Henry Pickford.



Afanasiev cooks at 7,200m, his head bandaged after rockfall struck him inside the tent at 6,900m on Hidden Peak. Valery Babanov