



AAC Publications

Determination

The first complete ascent of the Mazeno Ridge on Nanga Parbat

We are running on empty. It is 6:12 p.m., late in the day for Rick Allen and I to be on the summit of Nanga Parbat, but that's how it is. We had left base camp almost two weeks earlier with four other climbers, intending to traverse the full Mazeno Ridge. Exhausted, the rest of the team had bailed down the Schell Route from just above Mazeno Gap three days ago. Rick and I decided to press on.

Now we have been wandering above 8,000 meters since 2 p.m., harvesting each small summit as we tried to find the true top in poor visibility. The mist cleared in late afternoon and we climbed up again. I was all but ready to give up, but our years of trust and loyalty to each other provided the spark for Rick to push on in front, one more time, to a high point very near where we'd stood four hours earlier. A peg, a short piece of aluminum, and a length of wire marked the summit.

I'd been on top of Nanga Parbat once before with Rick, in July 2009, crawling about in a strong wind. On that occasion we had climbed the Diamir Face via the Kinshofer Route. We were checking things out, because I was quite certain that if I ever ascended the Mazeno, a fast descent would be vital. Rick and I had each tried the Mazeno before, with Doug Scott and close friends, back in the 1990s. Incredibly, the ridge kept calling me, and to fortify my self-confidence I felt it essential to understand the way off the mountain if my nonsensical yearning to climb the Mazeno endured.

The Mazeno Ridge divides the Diamir and Rupal faces of Nanga Parbat, the ninth-highest mountain in the world. It is 10 to 13 kilometers long—it depends where you measure the beginning. I can assure you it's long, with at least four significant 7,000-meter peaks along the way, inescapable, and then a considerable distance remaining above Mazeno Gap to reach the 8,126-meter summit. Doug Chabot and Steve Swenson made the first traverse of the ridge from August 12 to 18, 2004; they had been acclimatizing for ages before making their attempt, but the effort left them weak and ill. They descended by the Schell Route and graded the Mazeno VI M4 A13. A two-man German team also traversed the ridge in 2008, but there is little written about it. [See *Climbs and Expeditions* for more details.]

I knew it would not be easy. Many mountaineers, including myself, had hit their heads against this proverbial brick wall, starting in 1979. My pal Voytek Kurtyka and the late Erhard Loretan each tried, and gained no new ground. For us to do the same as everyone else seemed a bit pointless. What remained was to complete the ridge to the summit.

During my frequent expeditions to Nepal, I have climbed with some outstanding Sherpas, and for a long time I had been telling them I had a great route for them. Lhakpa Zarok is one of the best ice climbing Sherpas I have ever seen, and I asked him and a friend to join Rick and me in Pakistan. As usual, cash was in short supply, so I decided to ask Cathy O'Dowd along. She raised lots of funds and was responsible for the web site, networking, and weather reports—things Rick and I are dreadful at and avoid as much as possible.

Cathy lacked confidence about climbing the whole ridge, so we decided to take another Sherpa to climb with her, as she fully expected to turn back early but wanted to see the place. As it turned out, she surpassed her own expectations (which I knew she would), though eventually she and the three Sherpas descended after taking part in one aborted summit attempt. Rick and I would not have been in a position to make the top if not for their outstanding efforts.

And so we were six: Rick, Cathy, Lhakpa Zarok, Lhakpa Nuru, Lhakpa Rangdu, and me as leader. It was a tough call to invite my Nepalese pals rather than Western climbers, as I knew mountain guides who had showed a modicum of interest in my project. But at the end of the day, while my Western friends were outstanding climbers, I had only known them in Alpine surroundings. We had not experienced high-altitude rough times together, so I decided it was not worth the risk.

having spent one night at 6,400 meters in our acclimatization phase, we embark on the big push on July 2. Weather reports have informed us that we will be climbing into storm conditions about a week away, but we know we are never going to get a weather window long enough for this climb. Our sacks are heavy: eight days of food that could stretch to 10, maybe. So off we go, along the glacier and up onto the first easy slopes.

Two days later, on the morning of July 4, we finally stand high on the ridge and get good views down the other side to the Diamir Glacier, 2,500 meters below us. We can see the tents of teams tackling the Kinshofer Route. I wish them success, hoping they'll climb high on the Kinshofer, our planned descent route, but as it transpires they will only reach Camp 2 and then go home.

It is cold on the ridge—the Lhakpas and Rick wear their down suits all the time; I wear my down parka constantly. Deep, unconsolidated snow and afternoon mist make for slow progress, and when views come it seems a ridiculous distance to the summit of Nanga Parbat. It taunts and frustrates our team, some who are probably thinking their leader is a dreamer, and potentially insane!

We are moving alpine style, breaking trail while carrying big sacks, roped into teams of two, taking everything with us. We have more muscle power and more supplies than either of the two teams that have traversed the entire ridge to Mazeno Gap, but even with the outstanding Nepalese we are moving slowly, semi-intentionally, trying to preserve energy in the unconsolidated snow, as we know that we are here for the long haul.

On day four, we are going along well when Lhakpa Nuru, who has traversed under a rock outcrop and is trying to climb a steep snow gully to regain the winding knife-edge, falls some 40 meters after sugar snow collapses under him. Zarok is almost in Nuru's footsteps, with lots of pooled loose rope. The sliding fall goes on until Zarok gets a grip and Nuru stops. With re-ascent difficult, we climb down to him and try to traverse around the snow and rock buttresses, finding an old loop of accessory cord jammed in a crack. Nightfall catches us in a bad place.

We huddle under a rock overhang, the slope below steep enough that a dropped rucksack has a good chance of landing at the foot of the Diamir Glacier. My determination to hack at rocks gets one tent precariously pitched. Rick excavates a natural coffin-shaped cave to share with Rangdu, and Nuru and Zarok curl up half-sitting on an uneven rock ledge. It is a bad night that leads to a short day.

After climbing steeply back to the ridge and on to a col, we bivvy again to give everyone time to recover. The next day is our predicted storm day, but we can't get a satellite signal, so have no idea of the updated forecast. What we see suggests high winds. Ahead lie twin peaks, featuring steep mixed ground, narrow exposed ridges, and few camping places. We choose to stay where we are and sit out a storm that, in the end, does not really come. But it is windy—it would be pushy to move!

On the seventh day, we start moving again. The effort remains relentless: wind, deep snow, tricky mixed passages, one peak after another after another. The exposure superb: a traverse in the sky with terrain dropping steeply on either side, spreading out into views of distant peaks. The ridge winds like a serpent's back, decorated with curved cornices poised in frozen waves. We pass our "point of no return" with an awkward, diagonal abseil to descend a rock wall. Should anything go wrong now, retracing our steps would be barely possible; we'd be better off to press on to Mazeno Gap.

On day eight, we cross Mazeno Peak (7,120m), the highest point on the traverse, and the ridge widens. Now we stand at the start of the pinnacles, the last challenge between us and the main massif. From the Chabot and Swenson report, we know this obstacle to be the crux; it took them 13 hours. Yet it looks so straightforward, and I can sense Cathy and the Lhakpas already skipping ahead to summit day. Me, I hold so much respect for the American climbers that I expect a tough time and simply hope for the best.

The next day, July 10, the hours accumulate and the pinnacles seem endless, a crenelated, twisting ridge dropping ever downward, getting narrower and more convoluted as parts of my team get ever more exasperated with it. After 11 hours of climbing, we reach the Mazeno Gap (ca. 6,850m) in the last blush of daylight. Only two other teams have gotten this far. None has gone further.

Tired, but with a sense of achievement, we sleep late before making our way up to a high camp at 7,200 meters. This will do for a bid for the summit at 8,126 meters—it's a tad far, but we could make it. We know we are climbing into a high wind forecast, but food is depleted— one big push to go and perhaps, just perhaps!

We leave at 1 a.m. on day 11, climbing in strong winds. I am tail-end Charley, struggling with my goggles; Nuru is in front. To Rick and Cathy's disappointment, I want to stick to the ridge, seeking a technically cool new line to the summit, instead of traversing lower on the Diamir flank. As daylight expands we arrive spectacularly on top of a subsidiary peak with views to the far western horizon. Sadly this bump is nowhere near the true summit. We are traversing along the exquisite rocky ridgeline that runs between the Rupal and Diamir faces, with awesome exposure. From our bump we are forced to downclimb diagonally over treacherous mixed ground, sugar snow, and loose rock. Nuru is demoralized, and Cathy cold and exhausted.

By 7 a.m., Cathy and Nuru have had enough and they turn back. Rangdu is roped with Zarok, and me with Rick, and we move together on Scottish grade III/IV mixed ground. I wish I had two tools, but in my rush to get to Pakistan I had left my best tools in storage in Chamonix, so I was dependent on our Pakistani stash. We climb steeply up rotten rock and then traverse deep snow to another rock wall, where we find Rangdu and Zarok coming back toward us, wanting to descend. We are already too late, and I so regret being ignorant about this aspect of the mountain.

There is half-hearted talk of another push to the summit during the long traverse back to our high camp. Then Lhakpa Zarok slips and starts off down the slope; Rangdu tries to hold him but is catapulted off his feet, and they cascade down the face. From where Rick and I are standing, the angle appears to ease before dropping off steeply, but I am beginning to think they may not stop. Finally, after around 300 meters, they come to rest just meters above the steeply dropping seracs of the Diamir face. They stand up and slowly climb the face to rejoin our traverse line.

After 18 hours of climbing, in fading light, we arrive back at our high camp, rejoining Cathy and Nuru. There are almost no supplies left. The decision to descend the next day seems obvious. The Lhakpas and Cathy make it clear they are going down.

I wake up feeling so fine! I want to keep my options open. Zarok and Nuru are almost ready to strike their bivy tents in preparation for their descent. I call through frosted tent fabric to Rick, and he shares my optimism.

Grace and acceptance fill my mind as I watch Cathy and the three amazing Lhakpas head down the Schell Route on that misty enshrouded day. Did I see this coming in my planning stage? Their contribution has been immense. As expedition leader and mountain guide, my sense of duty and accountability is tangible.

Later we learn that, during their descent, they missed the turning off the ridge to the east in the mist

and found themselves abseiling into the bowl to the west. Rangdu badly injured his ankle in a fall in the dark, forcing him to spend the night with Cathy under a cliff at the foot of the bowl, exposed to hanging seracs. Early in the morning, an avalanche swept over the tent, but the cliff face protected them, and then, after they reached the safety of the moraine, a second avalanche filled the bowl. Two days after leaving high camp, they reached the road and took Jeeps to Chilas, where they waited in a hotel for us.

After Cathy and the Sherpas depart on July 13, Rick and I rest the remainder of the day. We are left with the satellite phone with a three-quarter battery charge. The forecast is reasonable for four days out. The remaining food generously left for us consists of an almost full packet of digestive biscuits, a serving of porridge, some boiled sweets, and several gas cylinders. Once the others are long gone, I realize that I have not got my own lighter, and they have many. Why did I not remember to take one?

The facts are: We are tired, have little food, and we do not have it in us to repeat our more direct line of the day before and push it to the summit. I am a bit disappointed but accept the realistic option. Our plan is to climb up a bit and then try a rising traverse to the summit pyramid, turning it on the left to join the Kinshofer Route somewhere above 7,500 meters. The tent will be a burden, so we leave that behind and just take sleeping bags. We impulsively leave the sleeping mats as well, as we think we can descend the normally fixed Kinshofer Route in a day.

Light snowfall, wind, and tiny sloughs have erased our tracks on the face from the previous attempt. We make slow work of the traverse. Rocky ribs finger down the face, demanding precise footwork; we use whatever natural protection we can find. We push on, breaking trail in deeper snow. We share leads on a steeper couloir, and I haul myself over a hanging cornice, hoping the debris misses Rick. We begin to recognize features on the Diamir side from our 2009 ascent. It is 5 p.m. and the summit is still far in the distance. Finally, at around 7,700 meters, we dig into a snow bank with our ice axes, move into the cave in the dark, and eat our last biscuits.

On July 15, two weeks after starting the climb, we leave our snow cave early, taking all our possessions with us. We are on the summit plateau by 2 p.m., and eventually find the summit after 6 p.m. Seventeen years after our first attempt on the Mazeno Ridge, we have taken it all the way to the top.

Descending from the summit, our footsteps are all but obscured with drifting snow. Darkness surrounds us, but experience leads me directly to the cave we'd left that morning. Rick cannot get our remaining lighter to spark, and the half cylinder of gas on the Sumo stove now seems almost extravagant. Fortunately, sleep comes easily.

As we start down the Diamir Face, Rick breaks trail at first, but he is too slow, so I take over for almost the entire day, moving along a seemingly endless downward arc. Mist comes in, and I take a bearing slightly above the traditional Camp 4 on the Kinshofer Route. Rick is behaving out of character, but his work yesterday justifies exhaustion and respect.

No one has climbed Nanga Parbat in two seasons. We are on our own. My concern makes me telephone our agent, Ali, to tell him we are descending the Diamir side, and to send some valley clothes around the mountain with fast porters. I also enquire about our helicopter bond and the potential for rescue if needed.

Rick hears my words and realizes he is the cause of my concern. Digging deep, he seems to get his act together. We carve out another snow cave in unpleasant weather. Rick's energy is wasted as his side of the cave collapses. My excavations are a bit better, and we squeeze ourselves partway in. We try again to get a spark from the stove and lighter, but it is useless.

Day 16: again, no water, no food. We shake off the spindrift, rope up, and move down a steep slope, crusty in places. It is loaded and unstable; Rick triggers an avalanche and rolls as I hold the rope from my solid stance. The slope is perhaps slightly safer now, but we know not to assume! Our options are zero: stay and deteriorate, or keep descending.

We walk the avalanche track until we need to traverse off to one side. Below and to our left is the site of Camp 3. We uncover occasional anchors for fixed ropes, and check them before abseiling hard ice sections. The old ropes are hopelessly frozen; we consume time with 25-meter abseils on our own doubled rope. At dusk, in enveloping mist, we arrive on a ridge above the site of Camp 2. Rick wants to go one way, I the other, and I am sure my memory is correct! There is no snow bank here, so we hack out a ledge, tie ourselves on, and begin a long vigil, sitting in our bags on a few coils of rope. I notice that Rick has not done his vitally important sock change and foot care routine for two or three nights. We are both weak, and I wonder if he is as exhausted and frozen as I think he is.

The weather continues to hold fair as dawn breaks and we move down to the site of Camp 2 on the Kinshofer. We urgently need to hydrate! Rick falls asleep in the sun; I peel off the last of my down layers, changing into my underwear. I awake a slumbering Rick and encourage him to remove his down suit. He does so, and we harness and rope up again. I ask Rick to go in front, as I'm certain that I have the alertness to hold a fall if necessary.

Just above the Kinshofer Wall, we see someone arranging a belay. We descend to greet Marek Holecek, who is soon joined by Djenek Hruby; they are acclimatizing before trying a new line on the Rupal side. Rick is subdued and hardly speaks; I am smiling as I get the Sumo

stove set up, making signs to ask for a light. Marek takes off his sack, carefully clips it in, and hands me a lighter and sugar sweets, which I open with my teeth, giving a handful to Rick. They share their flask of tea. My stove is efficient, and soon we have lots of water. Rick coughs and sputters, throwing up the initial hasty drink, but then settles. Marek tells us to use their food and tents at Camp 1, and then they climb on.

Revived somewhat, we launch onto the decaying tangle of fixed ropes on the Kinshofer, using our 50-meter rope to abseil. Then, roped together, we downclimb a huge snow and ice couloir into the night, facing in, kicking front points into ice with semi-frozen toes. Rick keeps stopping and falling asleep. Respectful of our fragility, I am glad to stop too and ease my foot pain. I mentally count seconds into minutes to rest sufficiently, and then encourage Rick to move again, though fearful we'll slip off. I know and trust Rick—he is exceptional—but we are both so wasted!

At 11 p.m. we stumble over avalanche debris and small crevasses until an illuminated tent appears at the foot of the buttress. Three high-altitude porters emerge and embrace us. Incredibly, Ali has mobilized them from their beds in Skardu to Camp 1 on Nanga Parbat in 48 hours. They had moved continually through the night so they could be at the camp to wait for us. The next day, 18 days after we started up the Mazeno Ridge, the porters help us down to base camp, where we drink tea on plastic chairs, sat on nature's carpet of wild flowers.

Summary

First complete ascent of the Mazeno Ridge (west ridge) of Nanga Parbat (8,126m), by Sandy Allan and Rick Allen, July 2–July 19, 2012. The two climbed with Cathy O'Dowd, Lhakpa Nuru, Lhakpa Rangdu, and Lhakpa Zarok to a high point beyond Mazeno Gap. Those four started down the Schell Route on July 13, and Allan and Allen continued to the top, summiting on July 15. They descended the Kinshofer Route on the Diamir Face, reaching base camp on July 19.

Read more about the expedition at www.mazenoridge.com.

About the Author

Sandy Allan is an IFMGA/British Mountain Guide (www.teamascent.co.uk), born and brought up in the Scottish Highlands. At the time of their ascent of Nanga Parbat, Allan was 56 and partner Rick Allen was 58. Based in Newtonmore, Allan is a passionate Scottish winter climbing activist.

Images



The lower route up to and along the Mazeno Ridge.



Rick Allen descending after the failed first attempt on the summit.



Sandy Allan (left) and Rick Allen on top.



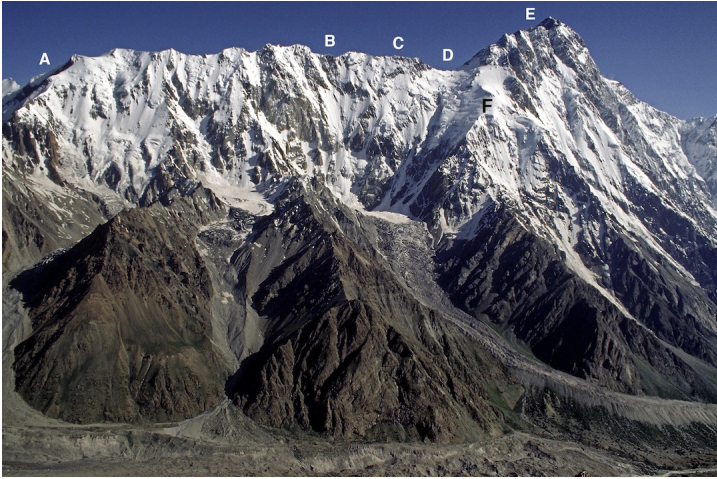
Rick Allen descending the Kinshofer Wall. The many fixed ropes were too frozen to be useful.



Sandy Allan rappelling toward the Kinshofer Wall.



Big packs and a long way to go: Moving across the Mazeno Ridge.



The Mazeno Ridge of Nanga Parbat, Rupal Face to the right. (A) The team acclimatized on the lower ridge before setting off alpine-style. (B) Camp before Mazeno Peak (7,120m), high point of the traverse. (C) The Pinnacles, crux of the traverse. (D) Mazeno Gap, reached on Day 9. (E) After one failed attempt, Al- lan and Allen summited and descended to the north. (F) The remaining team members descended a variant of the Schell Route.



View from the Pinnacles to the summit, with the two highest camps marked. (1) First attempt from 7,200m camp by full team on July 12. See Climbs and Expeditions for another view. (2) Allan-Allen route to 7,700m bivouac and summit. After another night at 7,700m, they went down the Kinshofer Route (dashed line).

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