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Broad Peak (8,047m), first winter ascent and tragedy

Pakistan, Karakoram, Baltoro Muztagh

Led by veteran Himalayan winter mountaineer Krzysztof Wielicki, a small Polish expedition arrived at Broad Peak base camp on January 23 and began establishing camps on the normal route.

At 5:15 a.m. (dawn) on March 5, Maciej Berbeka, Adam Bielecki (who one year previously made the first winter ascent of Gasherbrum I, see [AAJ 2012](#)), Tomasz Kowalski, and Artur Malek left Camp 4 at 7,400m for a summit attempt. This departure time was based on three things: good conditions and a good weather forecast for the coming days; the traditional "rule" of not setting out at night on high mountains in winter; and the fact that the climbers had reached camp quite late, having climbed directly from Camp 2 (6,300m), and therefore needed adequate rest. Above 7,700m there were three crevasses, and the most difficult was secured with a fixed rope.

Berbeka and Bielecki swapped leads to the ca 7,900m pass between Broad Peak Central and Broad Peak Foresummit (Rocky Summit, 8,028m), arriving at around 12:30 p.m. From here they roped as two teams, Bielecki and Malek in front, followed by the highly experienced Berbeka, 58, an IFMGA guide, with the much younger (27) Kowalski. In summer it is normally only a few hours from the pass to the summit. However, the climbers found unexpected technical difficulties, not present in summer, on route to the Foresummit, which they reached at around 4 p.m.

All decided to continue, moving separately. Bielecki reached the main summit at 5:20 p.m., Malek at 5:50 p.m., and the remaining two at 6 p.m. Each member started to descend immediately. At this altitude in winter, waiting for others simply brings on rapid general physical deterioration and hypothermia, making it more risky for the entire team.

None of the climbers had reported any signs of weakness or difficulty during the ascent. They could have upheld the "let's stick together rule" and abandoned their attempt, but conditions and the forecast were exceptionally favorable: nighttime temperatures between -29° and -35°C , almost no wind, no clouds and therefore perfect visibility. Under these circumstances chances of success were deemed very high.

Unfortunately, once they left the summit Kowalski suddenly deteriorated and had difficulty descending. It took him 12 hours to reach the pass (normally around an hour in summer), where it is surmised he remained. Berbeka did not descend with Kowalski, who made radio contact on a couple of occasions and reported seeing him once or twice lower down the mountain. Bielecki returned to Camp 4 at 10:10 p.m.; Malek arrived at 2 a.m. on the 6th. In the early hours of that day Berbecki was spotted at 7,700m, though during the descent he never made radio contact.

Bielecki and Malek had technical problems with their radios and were unable to use them, but on separate occasions both tried to reascend to look for their team members (Bielecki during the night, and Malek the following morning). After just a few steps they realized they were too exhausted.

On the 6th, the experienced Pakistani mountaineer Karim Hayat set out from Camp 2. He reached the crevasses at 7,700m, but despite good visibility saw no sign of Berbeka and Kowalski. With still no sign on the 7th, Wielicki reluctantly had to accept that, having now spent two nights out with no bivouac equipment, the two climbers had no further chance of survival.

This was the seventh attempt to climb the mountain in winter. The first of these stands out as one of the most remarkable in the history of winter Himalayan climbing. In 1987–88, the great Polish expedition leader Andrzej Zawada took a team to Pakistan to attempt K2. Zawada's concept was well ahead of its time; the first 8,000m peak in Pakistan was not summited in winter until 2011.

By the end of February 1988 the Poles had failed to get higher than 7,000m on K2 but were well acclimatized. Maciej Berbeka and Aleksander Lwow, two of the strongest mountaineers of their day, were given permission to make a light and fast attempt on neighboring Broad Peak. Lwow gave up high on the mountain, leaving Berbeka to continue alone. He reached the "summit" in strong winds and gathering gloom, and during the descent bivouacked in a snow hole in the vicinity of the 7,900m pass, before reaching the top camp at 7,300m next day. Later, Berbeka realized he had made a mistake, having stopped on the Foresummit, only ca 400m distant from the main top.

Berbeka was certainly one of the major activists in the 1980s Polish scene. He came to global prominence in 1981, when he made a new route on the south face of Annapurna, climbing direct to the Central Summit on a line reported to be similar in difficulty to the north face of the Matterhorn. In January 1984 he made the first winter ascent of Manaslu, only the second 8,000m peak to be climbed during the calendar winter season. One year later, on another major Zawada expedition, he made the first winter ascent of Cho Oyu via a new route on the southeast pillar. In the post-monsoon season of 1986 he climbed a highly difficult new line on the left side of the south face of Dhaulagiri, reaching the Japanese route high on the southwest ridge; he was unable to summit due to bad weather. Berbeka's ascent of Broad Peak made him only the fourth person to achieve first winter ascents of three 8,000m peaks, and out of the world's 14 8,000ers, only K2 and Nanga Parbat have not now received a winter ascent.

Lindsay Griffin, [Mountain INFO](#), from information provided through Artur Hajzer, leader of the 2010–2015 Polish Winter Mountaineering Program, by Adam Bielecki, Artur Malek, and Krzysztof Wielicki.

Images



Adam Bielecki on the main summit of Broad Peak, with K2 visible behind.



Base camp in bleak winter after a storm. The normal route on Broad Peak, followed by the first winter ascensionists, climbs to the prominent col (above the foreground tent) and then up to the main summit on the right.



Maciej Berbeka during the winter ascent of Broad Peak.



Maciej Berbeka during the winter ascent of Broad Peak.



Artur Malek below the last crevasse at 7,800m. The Godwin Austen Glacier is far below, and on its far side rise the western flanks of Marble Peak (6,256m, left) and Khalkhal Peak (6,379m). Right of these lies the Savoia Glacier.

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