



AAC Publications

Chamshen (7,017m), west ridge

India, East Karakoram

Chamshen lies in the Saser Kangri Group, fairly close to the disputed territory and war zone of the Siachen Glacier. Access to these mountains is only possible for foreign climbers as part of a joint expedition with an equal number of Indians. Chamshen's lack of previous attention is largely due to mapmakers' decisions: In the past it has been marked as 6,965m, but a recent survey upped the altitude to over 7,000m.

In July and August it formed the goal for an expedition comprising Divyesh and Vineeta Muni (India); Susan Jensen, Andy Parkin, and Victor Saunders (U.K.). There was a support team of six Sherpas for the Indian members (Ang Dorji, Chedar, Dawa, Mingma, Karma, and Samgyal), along with support staff and a liaison officer.

The approach from the Nubra Valley, north of Leh, was long, complex, and involved making the first crossing of a high and difficult pass: Sakang Col (6,150m). After establishing a main base camp on the glacier below the col, the team spent much time in reconnaissance, and made several attempts before crossing on August 10. The ascent involved steep climbing and was exposed to rockfall during the heat of the day. The group then descended to a glacial cirque between the high peaks of Saser Kangri III (7,495m) and II (7,518m), and then down to the large North Shukpa Kunchang Glacier. From here they ascended northwest to establish Chamshen base camp at 5,600m.

On August 14, the British members were planning to recross Sakang Col to resupply, and were camped on the edge of the cirque about one and a half kilometers from Saser Kangri II, when at 10 p.m. a massive avalanche swept down this mountain's serac-torn north face. Although the main debris did not reach camp, the blast from the leading edge was so powerful that it lifted Parkin's tent into the air, over the top of Jensen and Saunders' tent, along the glacier, and into a deep crevasse. Parkin, still in his sleeping bag, fell through the floor of the tent and miraculously jammed ca15-20m down the crevasse on the only small snow bridge—a few meters either way and he would have gone to the bottom. Thinking he might be the only survivor, he twisted around and saw the small glimmer of his headtorch below him. Using this he managed to locate his outer boots, which had also landed on the bridge.

Meanwhile, the tent containing Jensen and Saunders had rolled 30m across the glacier, coming to a halt just before the same crevasse. Parkin's axes and crampons, Saunders' axes and inner boots, the stove, and all food were missing. The party carried one rope, which Parkin would normally have commandeered for a pillow. Fortuitously, that night it had remained in Saunders' tent, allowing him to effect a rescue.

Several strenuous hours later, Parkin, his rucksack, and the remains of the tent were on the surface. Badly battered and bruised, and with a back injury later found to be a minor fracture of the sacrum, Parkin was unable to stand. After pitching the remaining tent, and lashing it securely to the glacier in preparation for the inevitable second avalanche blast (which hit at 5 a.m.), the three sat out the remaining night.

Next morning, with the use of strong painkillers, Parkin was able to hobble 2km to the junction with the North Shukpa Kunchang Glacier, where he was left in a tent while the other two broke trail back to Chamshen base camp. Early on the 16th, Divyesh Muni, Saunders, and a team of Sherpas reached

Parkin and carried him back to camp.

Many expeditions visiting Pakistan and Nepal take a satellite phone, and due to its tough build and better coverage in Asia and Europe, most mountaineers opt for a Thuraya. For the same reasons, and the difficulty of tracking conversations, this is also the phone of choice for terrorists. As a result, India forbids expeditions to carry any satellite phone (and GPS) in the mountains, and in 2010 banned the use of Thuraya throughout the country. However, Saunders had smuggled a Thuraya sat phone into India to use in an emergency.

Saunders phoned the expedition agent in Leh for a rescue, and this was carried out by Indian Air Force helicopters on the 17th, the pilots displaying exceptional flying skills in low clouds and poor visibility. With Parkin safely in Leh, all remaining expedition members then had to endure a week of poor weather, stretching their food and fuel. With his cover now blown, Saunders decided he might as well use the phone to get a weather forecast, and received the promise of a clear spell for their remaining days in the mountains.

On August 21, after establishing camps at 6,000m and 6,500m, the whole team summited Chamshen via the west ridge. By the 24th they had recrossed Sakang Col.

On arrival in the Nubra Valley, Saunders was arrested and then summoned to a court hearing in Leh. After the Ladakhi judge had dwelt at length on the seriousness of the crime, punishable with a prison sentence of up to seven years, she relented, confiscated the phone, and let him off with a fine of around \$30. The team is indebted to the Indian Air Force and local agent Rimo Expeditions, as well as other friends who worked around the clock to arrange the rescue.

Lindsay Griffin, MountainINFO
from information provided by Victor Saunders

Images



Chamshen from base camp on the North Shukpa Kunchang Glacier. The team reached the obvious col and then climbed the skyline ridge to the summit.



Looking east down the North Shukpa Kunchang Glacier from Sakang Col. The British camp was situated close to the toe of the rock spur left of center, opposite the huge, serac-torn north face of Saser Kangri II on the right.



A strong Sherpa team prepares to move Parkin down the glacier.

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