



AAC Publications

Gasherbrum I (8,086m), First Winter Ascent

Asia, Pakistan, Baltoro Muztagh

The Polish Winter Gasherbrum I expedition was organized by the Polish Alpine Association (PAA) and financed by the Ministry of Sports, as well as a group of commercial sponsors. The expedition was part of an important PAA program dubbed Polish Winter Himalaism 2010-2015, the goal being for the next generation of Polish mountaineers to make first winter ascents of the remaining 8,000m peaks.

The expedition comprised four Poles. Agnieszka Bielecka (34) was base camp manager. Adam Bielecki (28, brother of Agnieszka) at 17 climbed Khan Tengri alone, has climbed more than 100 routes in the Tatras and Alps during summer and winter, and in 2011 summited Makalu without oxygen. Janusz Gołab (44), one of the most famous Polish alpinists, was very active in the 1990s, making the first winter ascent of Maniwa and the second ascent of Extreme Dream, both on the Grandes Jorasses, a new route on the west face of the Petit Dru, the first winter ascent of Arch Wall (Troll Wall), new routes on Nalumasortoq (Greenland) and Bear's Tooth (Alaska), a new line on the huge face of India's Kedar Dome, but no ascents of 8,000ers. Artur Hajzer (49, expedition leader) was a partner of the legendary Jerzy Kukuczka, making new routes on Annapurna East, Manaslu, and Xixabangma, the first winter ascent of Annapurna, and more recently three other 8,000m peaks by standard routes, all without oxygen.

The team was supported by two Pakistani climbers employed as high-altitude porters: Ali Sadpara and Shaheen Baig. Both are 8,000m summiters who have been on previous winter expeditions. Our expedition shared base camp with Gerfried Goeschl's international expedition.

The team reached base camp on January 21, 2012, after a six-day trek from Askole, and by February 9 had established Camp 3 at 7,040m on the Standard Route up the Japanese Couloir. Sadpara was frostbitten in both feet and left the expedition. From the 19th to 21st a violent storm raged at base camp, and at one point Golab, inside his tent, was lifted four m. Four tents were lost. From 25th to 27th the team made its first summit attempt but retreated from 6,650m, due to excessive wind. During the descent Golab fell into a crevasse at 5,900m and was injured. During March 4 and 5 another storm struck, this time forcing Golab, at base camp, to spend a night in his harness belayed to ice screws. On the night of the 7th, Baig, Bielecki, Golab, and Hajzer were in Camp 2, having been turned back at 6,600m by strong winds on their attempt to push through to Camp 3. Next day all except Hajzer proceeded to Camp 3. On the 9th Bielecki and Golab left at midnight and reached the summit at 8:30 a.m., descending to Camp 2 by 5 p.m. On the 10th all four climbers were back in base camp.

From the 10th to 15th the expedition tried to coordinate rescue attempts for three missing climbers from the other expedition (see below). When this was abandoned, Bielecki and Golab, both frostbitten (the former on his toes and nose, the latter only on his nose), were helicoptered to Skardu. The remaining members left on foot for Skardu the next day.

Golab reported, "I was surprised by the incredibly strong winds of the Karakoram winter. They persisted almost throughout the expedition. These winds were as strong as in Patagonia but lasted longer, almost without any quiet periods. They forced us to spend weeks at base camp without any possibility of climbing, which was probably the hardest part. It was difficult to maintain the will to climb and the belief in success. The route itself was perhaps not so technically difficult, but hard ice and little snow cover made it tiring and dangerous. Paradoxically, the section which gave me most

trouble was between BC and Camp 1—a long distance, with many objective dangers.

The key to our success was not wasting energy on useless attempts but waiting until we got a weather window. This came on March 8 and 9. It was originally forecast to last three days, but eventually shrunk to one and a half, which, however, was enough for us to launch a summit push. Another key element was our decision to return to Camp II on March 7, giving up the plan to reach Camp 3. We did not waste our limited energy battling the wind, which was very strong that day. Thanks to this we reached Camp 3 the following day in pretty good shape, and this allowed us, after a half-day rest, to leave for the summit at midnight.

This was probably the most important tactical decision and an unusual one, as normally in winter night does not offer conditions for climbing. We were determined enough and departed despite a temperature of -35° C. The climb went all right, without any problems. We reached the summit in almost no wind and clear skies. By the time we got back to Camp 3, the weather was already beginning to change, so it was our last chance. At 5 p.m. the weather had deteriorated full-scale, with mist and very strong wind. We succeeded but sadly our friends from the Goeschl expedition most likely just ran out of time.”

Images

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