



AAC Publications

Learning to Walk

The First Ascent of K6 West in Pakistan

Out of the shapeless mass that is the past, moments stand out like still photographs. I remember driving through the concrete canyons of Calgary's downtown one spring morning in 2005 and deciding that, yes, I'd go with Steve Swenson to Pakistan. Until then, I'd avoided expeditions to faraway, exotic mountain ranges, figuring I could do a lot more climbing if I stayed home in the Canadian Rockies. But that July, after 24 hours of continuous travel, I found myself blinking in the harsh sunlight as I stepped onto the tarmac of Skardu's airstrip.

That first trip to the Karakoram was also my first foray into the thickets of Pakistani bureaucracy, which denied us permission for both of the peaks Steve and I'd hoped to attempt. In the end, we settled for playing on the lower peaks of the Charakusa Valley. That trip also was my introduction to Asia's microbes. I vividly recall waking in the middle of the night in a stone guesthouse and making a desperate dash for the squat toilet. The following day, step by slow step, collapsing every few minutes among scrubby grasses, I took six excruciating hours to cover what's normally a two-hour walk.

All that was forgotten once we arrived at base camp, a green meadow surrounded by granite spires, icy couloirs, and hulking mountains. We acclimatized on the boulder-strewn hills and snowy peaks above camp, before a good forecast enticed us up the glacier. At the head of the valley stood the symmetric pyramid of unclimbed Hassin Peak (ca 6,300 meters). Climbing through intermittent flurries, we negotiated steep ice flows, granite grooves, and unconsolidated snow flutings to a spectacular bivouac on the crest of a sharp ridge. The following morning dawned cloudless. We set off for the summit, a mere 800 meters higher, with light packs.

By midafternoon we had ground to a halt 300 meters below the top. The snow, squeaky in the morning, had turned to mush in the fierce Karakoram sun. We gasped at thin air with open mouths. If only we'd taken bivy gear, even just a stove, we could have stopped, rested, and summited the following morning. As it was, throats burning from thirst and exertion, we drilled the first of many V-threads in the soft ice and slid down the ropes.

Walking out of the Charakusa 10 days later, I looked back one last time and thought of early starts under the arch of the Milky Way, curtains of chandeliered ice and verglassed granite corners. It almost didn't matter that the summits had eluded us. And I was secretly glad we'd been denied the permit for unclimbed K6 West, whose intimidating bulk and bands of seracs rose across the glacier from base camp. Yet I could not keep my eyes and camera off it. Is it any surprise that someday it would draw me back?

2006: Less than a year later I stepped off a plane in Islamabad, my T-shirt sticking to my back in the predawn heat. Ben Firth, Eamonn Walsh, Ian Welsted, and I were intent on unclimbed Khunyang Chhish East (ca 7,400 meters). Our gastrointestinal troubles started while we were still in Islamabad and never truly stopped. They punctuated the approach trek, during which, at one of the many switchbacks of the dusty trail, Ian didn't even have time to pull his pants down. They didn't relent during acclimatization, when I had to spend a night outside of the tent on all fours, the falling snow coating my back and the vomit on the ground. And they spelled the end of our attempt on Khunyang Chhish East, when, after two long days' climbing, we started rappelling in perfect weather, leaving behind bivouac ledges stained an ugly brown.

A couple of days before leaving base camp, Eamonn and I made the first ascent of one of the many nameless 6,000ers lining the Hispar Glacier in a 24-hour push. But once the satisfaction wore off, the frustration returned. Before I started going to Pakistan, I liked to quote Dave Cheesmond's saying about the Canadian Rockies: "If you can climb here, you can climb anywhere." I'd climbed rock, ice, and choss all over the Rockies, but this didn't seem to be helping much in the Karakoram.

2009: This time Eamonn, Ian, and I had chosen yet another unclimbed bastion of granite and ice, Pumari Chhish East (ca 6,900 meters), one valley north of Khunyang Chhish. Thanks to the cooking of our friend Hajji Ghulam Rasool, we mostly avoided the gastrointestinal eruptions that had plagued our previous trip. But success—real success—continued to elude us. We climbed two smaller peaks in single-push efforts, but our attempt on the higher and harder Pumari Chhish East came to naught when, after an exhausting day of climbing, I threw up my dinner of undercooked freeze-dried chili and cheese. What would it take to finally find success on the great peaks of the Karakoram?

2013: As Ian and I stepped off the plane in Skardu, I experienced a comfortable feeling of familiarity: the car horns and clouds of exhaust along the main thoroughfare; the quiet, walled-in gardens of the back streets; Rasool's toothy smile when Ian and I walked out of the terminal building. But in other ways, everything was different.

Two nights earlier, armed men had stormed the Diamir base camp at the foot of Nanga Parbat and murdered 10 foreign climbers and a local cook. I came within a breath of saying I was going home. Jesse Huey, the third member of our team, did just that. But our objective, K6 West, lay deep inside traditionally peaceful Baltistan. By flying north we could bypass the troubled Nanga Parbat area. Cerebrally, I thought we'd be quite safe in Skardu and Hushe. And viscerally, I realized how much I still wanted to spend the summer in the Karakoram.

The last day of June dawned cool and showery as we walked beside the Charakusa Glacier, gray clouds hiding the big peaks at its head. Umbrella in hand, I skipped along the trail, chatting with porters one moment and enjoying solitude the next. After the surreal and yet all too real horror of the Nanga Parbat massacre, after all the subsequent hesitation, I was happy simply to be alive and in the mountains.

Even better, my engine wasn't smoking, to use Rasool's colorful phrase for diarrhea. Was it thanks to his scrupulously clean hands, so different from those of our cook in 2006? Or was my engine becoming used to running on Pakistani gasoline?

We started acclimatization the very next day by scrambling up the Flame, a 5,000-meter hill above base camp. Toward the top, postholing through isothermal snow, I was rudely reminded of what thin air felt like, as my lungs couldn't keep up with my legs. The Flame set the tone for the next few weeks. Every time we ventured above base camp we went a little higher, while trying as much as possible to avoid actual climbing. With sharp ridges and vertical faces all around, it felt strange to be seeking out snow slogs. Had we grown lazy? Or had we learned from earlier trips, when we'd proudly eschewed the easiest routes and failed to acclimatize as a result? What mattered at this stage was our red blood cell count. We'd find enough steep ice and granite on K6 West.

For our last acclimatization outing we planned a traverse of the triple-summitted Farol (ca 6,300 meters). After two days of deep snow, corniced ridges, and steep couloirs, we pitched our little, yellow tent in a comfortable wind scoop just below the west peak. The following morning, with the sun lighting up the symmetrical pyramid of Chogolisa to the north, we started weaving between cornices toward the central peak. An hour later we were back, finding the sharp ridge to be more demanding than we'd expected or wanted. We spread our sleeping pads on the snow and settled in for a day of eating and reading. In 2006 we'd thought about spending a night on the summit of a 6,400-meter peak to acclimatize, but headaches made us seek the comforts of base camp instead. Now we knew there was no avoiding the dull rigors of acclimatization—we spent two nights on top of Farol West.

Back in base camp, we ate, read and waited for a favorable forecast. Every few days we'd receive SMS updates from Mohammad Hanif, an experienced meteorologist with the Pakistani weather office. They'd be couched in precise yet poetic prose: "Harsh weather next 3 days, be careful" or "5 day window opening in 2 days, don't worry." Hanif's latest forecast predicted a weeklong spell of good weather to begin in three days. I was glad of the enforced rest, for I feared K6 West almost as much as I desired it.

The choice of route had always been clear: an aesthetic ice line on the northwest face that appeared safe from the seracs that threaten most of the northern aspects of K6 and its neighbors. Unfortunately, we'd have to approach it up a broken icefall and through a narrow valley with huge mountainsides rising on three sides. More than once we'd witnessed avalanches sweep across nearly the entire width of the gorge. But there was no other way.

On July 25 we got up before dawn. A visibly moved Rasool made us milk tea and porridge. As we were about to shoulder our 20-kilo packs, he sprinkled flour on our heads. A traditional Balti farewell: May you come back safely and grow old and gray.

Two hours later we clicked into crampons at the base of the icefall. I was glad to be done with the anxious anticipation and to focus on simple, immediate actions: a burst of front-pointing up an ice wall, an end run around one crevasse, a face-in downclimb into another. As the midafternoon sun turned the snow into wet cotton candy, we dropped our packs inside a safe bergschrund. I breathed a sigh of relief. A vertical mile of icefields and rock walls rose overhead, but the random hazards of the approach were behind us.

In the morning, spindrift poured off the lip of the 'schrund as I swung repeatedly at the snow above it. Finally my picks bit into something substantial and I pulled onto the slope above the crevasse. We spent the day climbing seemingly endless 50- to 60-degree icefields interspersed with vertical pitches. These would've been easy enough in the Canadian Rockies. Here, at nearly 6,000 meters and with a heavy pack, my forearms and calves quickly filled with lactic acid. Nearing the top of a pitch, I'd rush tool placements and forego screws, intent on reaching lower-angled ice where I'd be able to drop my arms and stand flat-footed.

By late afternoon we reached the shelter of an overhanging rock wall. The ice below it swept up to near vertical, but after a couple of hours of work we'd fashioned a long foot ledge. Extended with a nylon tarp anchored to screws and filled with ice chunks, our makeshift ledge accepted two-thirds of the tent. Dinner was soup and mashed potatoes—after Pumari Chhish East, I would never again take chances with half-cooked freeze-dried meals at altitude. Sleep came easily.

The morning dawned blue and cold. Right above where we'd spent the night, a band of shattered granite reared up. The most promising option was a thinly iced, right-leaning gash. In spite of the cold, or perhaps because of it, I was eager to get moving and offered to lead the first few pitches. I balanced delicately up gritty slabs, tapped up a narrow ribbon of hollow ice, and, almost out of rope, squirmed into a nearly vertical gully. I anchored to stubbies in ice splatters on the left wall.

After an easier pitch the gully swept up past vertical. Icicles dripped from the overhanging rock. I didn't want to let doubt take root in my mind, and as soon as Ian arrived at the stance I grabbed the rack and started up. At least the gear was decent, if upside-down screws in snapped-off columns could be called that. Judging them to be solid, I relinquished control and committed to the knee-drops and lock-offs. Swinging desperately at thin ice, I expected to come off at any moment. But a pick draped over a rock fin stayed put, and I got my feet back under me. I'd gotten what I wanted: hard climbing above 6,000 meters.

Light and space flooded my senses as I ran out the ropes on the small icefield above. We still had a long way to go, but the steepest part of the wall was behind us. As we moved up and left to avoid a steep buttress, the summit ridge came into view. The thought of flat ground was alluring, and I almost

suggested continuing into the night. Then I thought better of it: It wouldn't do to climb ourselves into a hole of exhaustion. We were finally grasping the immense scale of these mountains, and the patient effort it took to climb them. Stopping below a boulder in the middle of a steep slope, we chopped another ledge and crawled inside the tent long after dark.

In the morning it took us another few hours to reach a notch in the ridge. I peered down the south side. "It looks like good corn skiing," I joked, elated to see mellow ground ahead. After soup and mashed potatoes, we headed up an easy snow ridge. I hadn't forgotten the miscalculation on Hassin Peak, and we carried the tent, sleeping bags, and stove. For a while, as we trudged up the ridge, it seemed we might summit that very afternoon. Soon, though, the broad crest degenerated into a corniced knife-edge of smooth granite. Disappointed, we strode down sun-warmed snow to the notch where we'd first gained the ridge.

While we set up the tent again and made more mashed potatoes, we talked about what to do. We still had a couple of gas canisters; the weather held. Maybe we could drop down the south side of the ridge and outflank the knife-edge? It would mean losing height and make summit day much bigger, at an altitude unfamiliar to both of us. Success, seemingly so close a few hours earlier, now seemed like a long shot. But as the shadow of a rock pinnacle crept closer to the tent, we made up our minds to try again in the morning.

When we left the tent the sun was still below the horizon and the cold felt almost Alaskan. We frontpointed down a steep, icy slope, contoured below a rock wall, and, picking a likely line through crevasses and seracs, started kicking steps. This time luck was on our side: The snow was firm and we gained height slowly but steadily. After a couple of hours we regained the ridge above the knife-edge. In deep shade, at nearly 7,000 meters, we couldn't move fast enough to stay warm. The cloudless sky was the dark blue of high places, so different from the pale lowland sky that we might've been on an alien planet. Kick by deliberate kick, we switchbacked across an icy slope, a string of shallow tracks unrolling behind us in a thin crust of snow. Every few minutes we'd stop to swing blood back into our fingers.

Slowly, as the angle eased, we emerged into the sun. The summit was a gentle slope on the south side and a huge precipice on the north. Ignoring Ian's protestations at the other end of the rope, I edged toward the highest point, hoping for a glimpse of our distant base camp. To no avail. Perhaps if I'd been a raven I could have peered over the fragile edge. For a long time we sat in the sunshine: talking, sipping from our water bottles, and trying to hold on to this moment.

One V-thread, then another and another—we made close to 30 rappels down the northwest face the following day. Back in the 'schrund we waited all afternoon, looking longingly at the valley, while around us the mountains fell apart in the heat. When evening stilled the bombardment, we made a dash for base camp. We felt very small as we zigzagged between crevasses, with batteries of seracs and snow mushrooms ranged silently on three sides. Fortunately they stayed silent, and as night fell we took off our crampons, switched on our headlamps, and started hopping across the granite rubble covering the Charakusa Glacier.

A couple of hours later, we looked up to see lights waiting on the edge of the meadow above the glacier. It was Rasool and his helper, Iqbal, come to bring us milk tea and chapattis, and to take our packs. Farhan, our liaison officer, gave an impromptu speech about how we'd remember this moment all our lives. At the time I thought he was being bombastic. Now I think he may have been right.

Summary

First ascent of K6 West (7,040m) by the northwest face and west ridge, by Raphael Slawinski and Ian Welsted, July 25–30, 2013. The two Canadians climbed alpine-style, bivouacking four nights during the ascent and once on the way down (1,800m, WI4+ M6+). Before their ascent, a Japanese trio made a spirited weeklong attempt on the same route, reaching 6,450m.

About the Author

Raphael Slawinski, 47, lives in the shadow of the Canadian Rockies in Calgary, Alberta. During the week he's a professor of physics at Mount Royal University. Come the weekend, depending on the season, he morphs into a sport climber, ice climber, or alpinist.

Images



Ian Welsted heads into moderate mixed terrain, above the steepest climbing on the 1,800-meter northwest face of K6 West.



The K6 massif under moonlight, with less snow than the Canadians found a few days later. (A) K6, 7,281m. (B) K6 Middle, unclimbed. (C) K6 West, 7,040m.



Raphael Slawinski starts the second pitch of “the gash,” the climb’s technical crux.



Slawinski leads steep ice low on the face. In back: Kapura Peak.



Welsted nears the top. Behind him is the Nangma Valley.



Welsted and Slawinski capture the moment atop K6 West (7,040m).



Welsted attempts to return circulation to his hands at 7,000m.



Ian Welsted frontpoints easier terrain low on K6.



Surveying the the foot of K6.



The ledge more or less accommodates a tent for a K6 bivy.

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