



AAC Publications

Return to the Karakoram

First ascents on Changi Tower and K6 West

STEVE: My dear friend and longtime cook and guide Ghulam Rasool sat next to me as our jeep rolled into the village of Hushe. It had been eight years since we had last seen each other, and I was happy to be reunited for another adventure. This would be our 10th expedition together and my 11th trip to the Pakistan-administered side of the Karakoram.

A deteriorating security situation since my last trip, in 2007, combined with opportunities for first ascents in the eastern Karakoram, had caused me to shift my interest to the Indian side of the Line of Control, where I did two expeditions. Before returning to Pakistan's mountains, I was waiting to see how the government—the Army and their intelligence services, in particular—would handle the growing threat from Islamic militant groups in the tribal areas near the border with Afghanistan. Many of these groups had been supported by the Pakistani security forces for years, serving as proxies in the conflicts in Afghanistan and India-administered Kashmir, but they had now turned on their benefactors. After several high-profile militant attacks, the Pakistan security forces and the public were sufficiently outraged for the military to launch full-scale offensives in the tribal areas. Security began to improve, and I felt it was time to climb in Pakistan again, visit my friends, and assess the security situation for myself.

Over the years, territorial disputes between China, India, and Pakistan have restricted access to parts of the Karakoram, and the resulting “political wilderness” contains one of the largest collections of unclimbed 6,000- and 7,000-meter peaks in the world. After 15 expeditions to the Karakoram spread over the past 35 years, I'd become familiar with many areas of the range. Armed with this knowledge and additional research, I tried to find a politically accessible, technically challenging unclimbed mountain that had minimal hazards from rockfall or snow and ice avalanches.

I focused my attention on the K6 group, which contains three separate summits, all above 7,000 meters. K6 Main (7,282 meters) was first climbed by Austrians in 1970. K6 West (7,040 meters) had been climbed by Canadians in 2013. But K6 Central (7,100 meters) was still unclimbed. I'd seen the central summit from the Charakusa Valley, to the north, and that side comprised a very steep, technical wall threatened from above by hanging ice cliffs. However, I had never been to the Nangmah Valley on the south side of the massif, from which the Austrians had approached K6 Main.

Reviewing maps, photos, and satellite imagery, I could see that a rock and ice buttress extended down from the summit on the south face of K6 Central, perhaps protruding enough to be protected from avalanches on either side. The approach would follow the 1970 approach over the “Austrian Col” from the upper Nangmah Valley to the upper Lachit Glacier.

With this objective in mind, I continued my research to find a smaller peak in the area for acclimatization—and in case K6 Central was not feasible. I found a photo in the 1970 Austrian account showing a beautiful granite tower with the caption, “Changi (6500m) from the east – a fine peak south-east of K6.” Further research turned up an unsuccessful Polish attempt in 2010 on this same peak, which was located just across the Lachit Glacier from the south face of K6 Central, and which the Poles called Changi Tower. The peak's remote, hidden location, along with the confusion caused by a similarly named tower in the upper Nangmah Valley, had kept Changi Tower off the radar of most climbers looking for appealing first ascents.

I asked Graham Zimmerman to join me on the proposed expedition, and he invited Scott Bennett to fill out the team. Both of my partners were 29 years old—32 years younger than me. I thought they could benefit from my expedition planning experience, and I figured their youthful enthusiasm and strength would help get us up the peaks—my challenge would be trying to keep up with them. Our permit was issued by the Gilgit-Baltistan Council on June 18, just 15 days before we left the United States. Fortunately, our visas were issued within a week.

Before leaving the U.S., we promised our friends and family that we would fly from Islamabad to Skardu as a security precaution and not allow ourselves to go overland by the Karakoram Highway. After arriving in Islamabad we were pleased to find that Pakistan International Airlines was flying an A320 jet to Skardu on the weekends; this was a much larger plane than the usual turboprop and would eliminate any backlog. The weather was good on Sunday, July 5, and soon after takeoff our plane circled to a landing in Skardu in peaceful Baltistan. We drove to Hushe and then made the two-day approach hike to base camp at 4,300 meters in the upper Nangmah Valley.

Our objectives were far from base camp, and I knew from previous trips with similar circumstances that establishing a well-stocked advanced base camp (ABC) would prevent us from getting overextended. We agreed to establish an ABC on the far side of the divide between the Nangmah and the Lachit. Launching our alpine-style attempts from a comfortable place to sleep, eat, and wait out bad weather meant we would be stronger—both physically and mentally—when we started up the peaks we came to climb.

GRAHAM: By the 21st of July, with the help of our friends Nadim and Ibrahim, we had established an ABC. We chose to reach the Lachit by crossing Hidden Col (the same saddle used by the 2010 Polish expedition), which was lower and more direct than the less steep but heavily melted-out Austrian Col. We fixed three ropes over the col to ease load carrying.

From ABC we could see the entirety of the south pillar of K6 Central, pointing directly toward the summit. We were disappointed to discover this feature did not continue all the way down the wall, but instead tapered into a broad snow slope that covered the lower third of the face. Here we would be exposed to avalanches falling from the large seracs perched high above. Our concerns were confirmed a few days later when a massive release from one of the seracs scoured the lower third of the face and heavily dusted our camp, over a kilometer from the wall. We also could clearly see Changi Tower from our ABC. Reaching this summit had been our acclimatization strategy, but with the south face of K6 Central now off the menu, Changi became our primary goal.

On July 24 we reached the basin directly below the 250-meter slope leading to the “Polish Col” at 5,900 meters. The 2010 team had reached this col and climbed three pitches up the north side of Changi Tower before retreating. It took us two days to navigate a complex icefall leading to this point. Not being fully acclimatized, and with a storm approaching, we cached some food and equipment in the basin and descended to base camp.

In the first week of August, we received a forecast of four consecutive days of good weather. We packed our bags and headed for ABC, and early on the morning of August 8 we made our way back up the icefall under partially clear skies. With a track in place and crisp snow conditions, the icefall took only three hours to navigate. At our cache below the Polish Col, we reorganized our gear and packed supplies to spend three and a half days on the route.

We climbed unroped up 50° snow and ice to reach the col and immediately started up the north face of the tower. We planned to split the climbing into two blocks—day one would be mine to lead, and the second day was up to Scott. We climbed in “caterpillar style,” with the leader carrying a light pack and fixing his rope for the second, who would jug quickly with a medium-size pack. This second would trail another rope to fix for the third, who would jug with the heaviest pack. I climbed the 60° ice above the Polish Col as quickly as I could. This eventually led into a series of mixed pitches made

challenging by deteriorating ice conditions in the heat of the day. I was very happy when I finally placed a solid rock anchor after six pitches.

We decided to bivy at the base of a rock wall about 200 meters above the col. While Scott and I climbed the cliff above, Steve stayed behind to work on the tent platform. We had carried an ice hammock developed by Steve's longtime climbing partner Mark Richey, which made the job of building a ledge in the 60° ice much easier. Scott and I fixed our two ropes and rappelled to help Steve finish the platform, put up our tent, and start melting snow.

As we settled in for the night and ate, we discussed our strategy for the following day. Steve felt we needed to carry bivy kit with us, but Scott thought we could move fast enough to reach the summit if we went light and left our bivy gear behind. The unknown nature of the terrain above loomed heavily as we discussed how we should proceed. In the end, we decided to try to reach the summit and return to our tent in a single push, but we would carry a single sleeping bag and stove to make it possible to spend the night out and continue to the summit the next day if we didn't reach the top before dark.

From the top of our two fixed ropes, the climbing began with moderate snow and ice involving short vertical sections. Above us, around a corner on the northwest face, loomed a steep corner system we called the Great Dihedral, which seemed to offer a promising route through the formidable final headwall. As Scott led into this giant corner, he switched between rock shoes and crampons, short-fixing above each belay anchor to increase our speed. An overhang capped the top of the Great Dihedral, and I wondered if this obstacle would force us to climb into the night. But Scott cut left below the roof on face holds and quickly moved out of sight, calling off belay a few minutes later. Steve looked over at me and smiled: "He is climbing very well!"

Two pitches later, Scott was standing just below the summit, with the final rays of the sun peeking over the horizon. We each made the last few moves to the final rocky wedge of a summit, whooped and high-fived, and then I started leading the descent in pitch black. Scott had been right: We had been able to make it to the summit from our bivy in one day—mostly because of his efforts. After many hours of rappels, we arrived back at our bivy tent at 3:30 a.m., exhausted but happy. We slept late the following day before starting the rappels to the Polish Col and the basin below.

GRAHAM: On the 12th of August we moved all of our equipment from the Lachit Glacier back over to the western side of Hidden Col. In the past weeks, Scott and I had spied a possible alternative way up the southern ramparts of K6: the southwest ridge of K6 West. It weaved over and through a series of towers that represented major question marks, but through our spotting scope it seemed we should be able to find a way. From the summit of K6 West it looked like an easy traverse along a snow ridge to the summit of unclimbed K6 Central. The western summit had been climbed only once, by our friends Raphael Slawinski and Ian Welsted in 2013, via the northeast face, on the other side of the mountain.

Steve made the challenging decision that he would sit out the attempt on K6 due to the short turnaround time after Changi Tower and a recurring sinus problem. Instead, he gave us advice on how best to prepare for the route, and he offered, along with help from Nadim and Hadim, to bring down the remaining gear we had cached from our Changi Tower climb and to take care of our exit logistics. Scott and I felt conflicted about leaving our partner, who had offered so much help, but we were also very excited at the opportunity to attempt another route.

We departed camp at 10 p.m. on August 17. Throughout the expedition we had been receiving forecasts from Jim Woodmencey at Mountainweather.com, and his latest prediction was for a large storm to arrive on the 21st, so we needed to move fast. Our hope was to climb the lower snow slopes at night while they were frozen. Unfortunately, when we reached the gear cache we had left on the upper Nangmah, it was snowing hard and visibility was poor. We pitched our tent, planning to start

moving once the weather cleared.

The skies finally cleared as the sun rose, and our late start placed us on the steepening snow slopes below the southwest ridge just as the heat of the sun began to bear down upon us. We peeled off layers and swore at the deteriorating conditions, but kept moving forward. By early afternoon we had reached a bivy, and we slept through the remaining heat of the day.

The following morning we were moving by 2:30 a.m., simul-climbing in the dark toward the looming buttresses we knew would constitute the crux of the route. As the sun rose we came across signs of an earlier attempt on the route—pitons and bail cord that looked to be from the 1960s or '70s, just below the first difficulties. Later, Steve would discover that these were most likely from an Italian attempt on K6 Main in 1969. (Like us, the Italians hoped to climb over K6 West and Central. They first attempted the southwest buttress, reaching around 6,000 meters, and then climbed ice ramps to the right to about 6,900 meters on K6 West.) In the morning light we traversed alongside the buttresses on moderate benches of snow and ice, with short mixed pitches (up to M6) that led to more snow ramps. The crux showed up in midmorning at an overhanging chimney and short icicle. A sequence of good sticks and wide stems brought us to yet another snow bench.

As the day wore on, we moved onto the ice sheet that gave access to the ridge crest far above. The sun came around and once again we stripped layers, moving together up the 60° to 70° slope. Our calves burned while kicking into hard ice under a thin layer of rotten snow, and we started to feel the effects of climbing for over 18 hours. Just as darkness began to settle over the range, we reached the ridgeline and stumbled onto a perfect tent platform. In the fading light we spied our line to the summit: a series of low-angle snow ramps through an icefall. As we set up the tent and dove in, I quietly hoped the snow ahead would be firm.

These hopes were quickly dashed in knee- to hip-deep snow when we moved away from the tent at 7 a.m. The summit was only 400 meters above us over moderate terrain. But it proved to be an ordeal plowing through the deep snow, until finally we reached the top of K6 West at 1 p.m. Under stunningly blue skies, the breadth of the Karakoram was spread before us.

It was a powerful moment, staring out to the 8,000-meter peaks to the northwest and the lesser-known mountains along the front line between India and Pakistan to the east. A moment filled with inspiration and beauty. But my eyes wandered back south toward our descent. We had hoped to continue along the technically easy traverse to unclimbed K6 Central, but the round trip would have taken another whole day of climbing, and our forecast still predicted a major storm for the next day. We turned and started back down.

At our tent we slept for a few hours before waking at 8 p.m. to finish the descent at night, when the temperatures would be cooler. During the climb we had spotted a potential descent route that avoided the rock buttresses we had traversed. It involved rappelling the west face to reach the West Nangmah Glacier, from which we could traverse back up and over the southwest ridge before descending the snow slopes we had climbed on our first day.

After 29 rappels, we were back on the glacier by midmorning on the 20th. Cirrus clouds spun across the blue sky, indicating a storm was in fact on its way. As we walked back to base camp, Scott and I chatted happily about how well the climbs had gone, and our conversation consistently came back to Steve and how, in many ways, his guidance had made these climbs possible. We were both grateful and extremely psyched.

STEVE: On August 25 we left base camp with 27 porters and reached the road in the Hushe Valley that afternoon. Four days later we boarded the weekend A320 flight from Skardu to Islamabad. It was the first time I'd ever flown both in and out of Skardu on the scheduled days.

Flying to and from Skardu eliminated traveling along the Karakoram Highway, the main security risk faced by climbers going to Baltistan. Rasool had said, "The people in Baltistan are peaceful Shia Muslims who welcome foreign tourists," and I found this to be true. The mountains' natural barrier, along with a strong military presence near the frontier with India, makes it very difficult for militant Sunni groups to travel to this region. In addition, the recent military crackdown in the tribal areas has resulted in the lowest level of terrorist violence in Pakistan since 2008. A Skardu policeman seemed to reflect the feelings of many local people when he said to me, "We are supportive of these military operations and want the country to be rid of these miscreants."

It remains to be seen whether the Pakistan intelligence service or senior army officials will stop supporting all militant Islamic groups. For now, we found that taking certain travel precautions minimized our security risks, and we enjoyed a safe, friendly, and successful expedition to the Pakistan Karakoram.

Summary: First ascent of Changi Tower (6,500 meters) by the north face and northwest face (850m, 5.10 A2 M6), August 8–10, 2015, by Scott Bennett, Steve Swenson, and Graham Zimmerman. Second ascent of K6 West (7,040m) by a new route, the southwest ridge (1,800m, M6 90°), August 18–21, by Bennett and Zimmerman.

About the Authors: Steve Swenson, 62, is a retired civil engineer based in Seattle and Canmore, Alberta. He is finishing a book on his expeditions to the Karakoram, to be published in the spring of 2017. Graham Zimmerman, 30, based in Bend, Oregon, is an alpinist and filmmaker. The climbers wish to thank the American Alpine Club, Mugs Stump Award, New Zealand Alpine Club, and Mount Everest Foundation for support of this expedition.

Images



Balti guide Ghulam Rasool, happy to rejoin author Steve Swenson for another expedition after an eight-year hiatus.



Changi Tower (6,500m) from ABC. The climbers ascended the icefall to the Polish Col, left of the peak, and then generally followed the left skyline to the top.



Steve Swenson arrives at the Polish Col, with the Lachit Glacier behind.



Swenson (left) and Scott Bennett, fresh as daisies after descending Changi Tower.



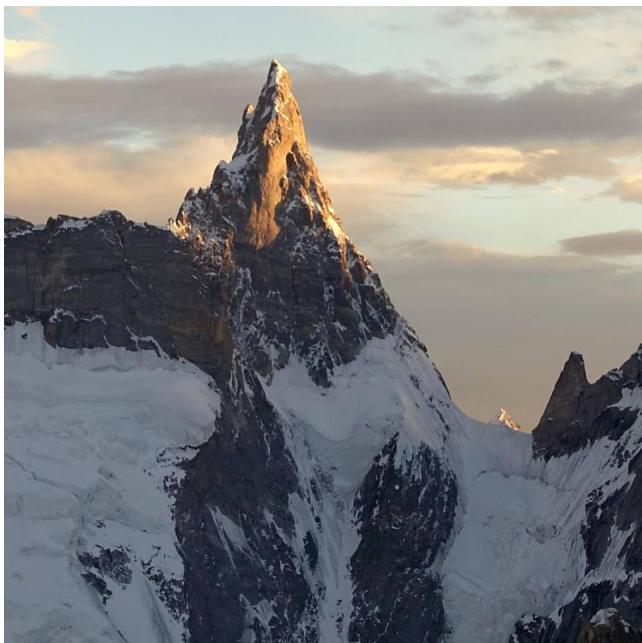
Graham Zimmerman midway across the key traverse on K6 West's southwest buttress.



View from K6 West to the spectacular upper north side of K6 Main (7,282 meters).



The K6 massif from the south, showing the new route up the southwest buttress of K6 West (7,040 meters), with the unclimbed central peak in the middle. In 1969, an Italian team reached ca 6,900 meters on K6 West by the snow and ice ramps right of the buttress.



The east side of Changi Tower (6,500m) from about 6,000m on Link Sar. The 2015 route ascended the right skyline from the prominent col.

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