



AAC Publications

Synergy: The Power of Partnership on the First Ascent of Link Sar

Pakistan, Karakoram, Masherbrum Range

(A) Changi Tower. (B) K6 Main. (C) Link Sar (7,041m) from the southeast, showing the line of the 2019 ascent, advanced base camp, and bivouacs. Stocking ABC at 4,700 meters (1,000 meters above base camp) with weeks of supplies was a crucial strategy behind the team's success. Photo by Matteo Della Bordella

Graham: We had spent the night on a broad ledge at 6,800 meters. The pointy apex of Link Sar seemed to loom just above us. But as I kept climbing, it didn't appear to be getting any closer. Then the snow hardened abruptly, and I began sinking less. After many hours of thigh-deep floundering, I began to move up rapidly. Moments later, I felt an abrupt confusion: The snow in front of me seemed to be shifting, its grains moving like rice poured slowly from a bag. For an instant, I thought I was hallucinating because of the altitude. Then I realized I was standing on a slab that had been hidden amid the wind-blasted snows of the high mountain. Now, the slab had broken off, and it began to accelerate rapidly.

I tried to hang on, but I'd only set my axes with a quick punch instead of swinging them deeply into the snow. The growing stream of debris knocked the tools out of their hasty placements. "Falling!" I screamed. My partners, around a corner, couldn't see me as I tumbled backward, sliding headfirst on my back for 20 meters. I cursed loudly as I struggled to right myself, arrest my fall, and regain control. Then the avalanche swept me over a cliff, and I freefell another 15 meters until the ropes caught over a rib of snow and ice. I stopped in midair, face down, staring into 3,000 meters of void.

Steve: Link Sar is a 7,041-meter peak in the Kondus Valley of the Pakistan Karakoram, rising above the Kaberi Glacier. By the time we arrived in June 2019, at least eight previous expeditions had failed in attempts to make the first ascent of this peak.

It wasn't just technical difficulties that prevented the mountain from being climbed. This region had an on-and-off history of opening to climbers, because of the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. In 1979, a few years after the Pakistan-administered Karakoram reopened to climbing, following a decade-long closure, a Japanese expedition made the first attempt to climb Link Sar. From the village of Kaphlu, they walked an arduous 50 kilometers to base camp, including crossings of the Shyok and Hushe rivers on flimsy bamboo rafts held afloat by goat-skin bladders and long marches up shifting, boulder-strewn glaciers. On Link Sar the Japanese found the climbing difficult and dangerous, and they turned back after reaching 5,700 meters.

Unfortunately, this part of the Karakoram would not remain open to climbers for much longer. In 1982, tensions with India caused Pakistan to close the areas to the west of the Salto Ridge and the passes over it that gave access onto the 47-mile-long Siachen Glacier. In the early spring of 1984, India helicoptered troops onto this ridge and the Pakistanis launched a counter-offensive. The Siachen conflict never succeeded in displacing the Indian troops, and it resulted in a standoff comparable to a modern-day version of the World War I trench warfare in the eastern Alps.

The valleys west of the Salto Ridge would be mostly closed to climbers for 35 years. One exception was in 2000, when Americans Dave Anderson, Jimmy Chin, Steph Davis, and Brady Robinson were allowed to climb in the Kondus Valley. They made the first ascent of a peak they named after General Tahir, the commander of the Pakistan Army Siachen Brigade, who had helped

them obtain permission. Afterward, Jimmy shared with me some photos of the Kondus and pointed out the mountain dominating this valley above the village of Karmading: Link Sar, an unclimbed 7,000-meter peak. Knowing that openings to such restricted areas can be fickle, I applied right away and received a permit for Link Sar in 2001.

The 2001 expedition was able to drive to base camp on a narrow jeep track that in the 1980s was blasted out of the cliffs above the Kaberi Glacier to supply troops faced off with Indian soldiers. During the three weeks before I was able to arrive, Steve Larson, George Lowe, Joe Terravecchia, Andy Tuthill, and Eric Winkelman followed the 1979 Japanese route to 5,500 meters and discovered the upper part of their route was threatened by seracs. They retreated to base camp, where I finally joined them. Several of us explored a different possibility on the southeast face. We didn't have the time or resources to get much higher than about 5,200 meters, but this route seemed promising and we planned to return. Unfortunately, General Tahir rotated to a different command the following year, and the Kondus Valley was again closed to climbers.

In 2003, India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire in Kashmir. To test whether this would induce the Pakistanis into reopening the Kondus, I applied for and was denied a Link Sar permit in 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007. Pakistani friends warned me that repeated applications to climb in this restricted area might arouse suspicion from the intelligence services—they might misinterpret my motives and think I was a spy. I decided to wait.

In the meantime, other climbers, most notably Jon Griffith from the U.K., started to make attempts on Link Sar from the Charakusa Valley, where it was possible to obtain climbing permits. Jon's four expeditions from 2012 to 2015 climbed up to the horseshoe-shaped ridgeline at the head of the valley, between K6 and K7, from which a spur ridge led eastward toward Link Sar. However, they discovered this spur was capped by a series of large granite towers and was nearly impossible to traverse. On their last attempt, Griffith and Andy Houseman topped the westernmost tower along the spur, naming it "Link Sar West," but illness and the obvious difficulties ahead prevented them from going further.

In 2015 and 2016, the agencies responsible for Pakistani security opened some previously closed valleys adjacent to the Kondus to climbers. By now, any suspicion of 007-style activity on my part would be forgotten, and I applied for a Link Sar permit again in 2017, along with Chris Wright and Graham Zimmerman, two much younger climbers. Our permit was granted, and my 16-year quest to return to this area had succeeded!

Advanced base camp, an ideal launch pad for the upper mountain. Photo by Graham Zimmerman
Graham: For over two months in the summer of 2017, Steve, Chris, and I struggled to find a path up the southeast face from where Steve had left off in 2001. We clambered up ridges that wound to nowhere or ended in slopes under the threat of serac walls. We spotted a small glacier on the north side of the main ridgeline that seemed to bypass all these difficulties, but we couldn't see a way to get over the ridge and down onto the glacier. Back at ABC, we noticed that an ibex herd was crossing this complex ridge system, so we followed their tracks over "Ibex Pass" and found a way onto the little glacier and up to the site of Camp I. The route we'd discovered was relatively safe from overhead hazard, but intense storms pinned us down again and again far below the summit. When we staggered back to base camp for the last time, our expedition staff members and old friends, Hajji Rasool and his son-in-law Nadeem, embraced us. We all knew we'd be coming back.

As we negotiated for a permit for the 2019 season and discussed strategies for our next attempt, we decided to bring on a fourth partner. Like Steve, Mark Richey was in his 60s and had a family. In 2012, he and Steve had received a Piolet d'Or, with Freddie Wilkinson, for the first ascent of Saser Kangri II (7,518 meters) in the Indian Karakoram. The addition of another longtime climber, with whom Steve had such a strong partnership, seemed to create a balance between the power of youth and the

wisdom of age. Mark's response to our invitation was emphatic: "Let's go do this thing!"

Steve: The Kondus is one of the deepest valleys in the Karakoram, and our roadside base camp at 3,700 meters was 800 meters lower than base camps in the nearby Charakusa or Nangmah valleys. The 3,300 meters of relief between here and the summit was a similar distance to that found on K2 or Everest. Besides poor weather, operating out of such a low base camp was one of the main reasons we had failed in 2017. This time we had a different plan.

The idea was to establish and supply a more robust advanced base camp at 4,700 meters and live there for weeks, if necessary, with two of our hired cooks. We wouldn't need to go down to base camp every time it stormed, like we did before. There had been record snowfall in the Karakoram the previous winter, and we would have to wait for it to slide off in seasonal avalanches, melt, or consolidate before climbing. But this would give us plenty of time to carry everything we needed up to ABC.

We couldn't do all this work ourselves, and an exposed rock band above the Kaberi Glacier presented safety challenges for the low-altitude porters. Our solution was to train five experienced men from the nearby village of Karmading to use harnesses and lanyards, so they could secure themselves to a sort of via ferrata that we built through this section with old ropes.

Together with the porters, we carried all our supplies to ABC and were able to move in on July 5—it was summertime, but we still had to dig away about a meter of snow to set up our tents on the grass. The July heat triggered avalanches all around, and it wasn't until the 15th that we were able to move up to Camp I, at 5,200 meters, following the route we had established in 2017. Two days later, Chris and Graham led the team above Camp I via a mixed rock/ice gully and a snow ridge, the only safe way up a broad 600-meter-high rock wall flanked on both sides by active seracs. Climbing at night to avoid the heat, we set Camp II at 5,900 meters, which had been the high point of our previous expedition. There were no other peaks in the valley where we could readily get to this elevation to acclimatize, so we spent two nights at Camp II before descending to ABC. The top was still around 1,000 meters higher. It felt desperately far away.

Agreeing on the best weather window to make a summit attempt is one of the most stressful parts of expeditions like these. Satellite phones and internet technology enabled us to get up-to-date custom weather forecasts, but I had learned that such information doesn't completely replace gut feelings based on experience. After much debate, we finally left ABC on July 31 with a forecast for two good days followed by a couple of mild stormy days, and then what looked like a long spell of clear, calm weather. This would give us plenty of good days to reach the summit and return, as long as we carried enough food and fuel to wait out the poor weather. We were gambling that the long-term forecast wouldn't change.

Graham: After waiting out the afternoon heat at Camp I and then climbing the difficult mixed pitches through the rock barrier all night (about 10 pitches, up to M6+), we were back at our second bivouac by midmorning on August 1, perched on an ice rib that was safe from all except a catastrophic collapse of the serac barrier that loomed above. We moved faster now that our bodies were more acclimatized. Still, the thought of climbing the overhanging glacial ice above us in the nearly 6,000-meter air made me wince.

The next day, Mark and Chris found a way to sneak around the seracs and onto a tabletop of ice separated from the main face. It was my turn to lead, and I hoped I could find a line that avoided the overhangs of ice rising out of the gap between us and the main face. Finally, a snow bridge spanned the chasm, and I carefully stepped onto its soft surface. It held my weight.

Chris Wright on a beautiful ice hose during the first ascent of Link Sar. Photo by Steve Swenson

On the other side, I relaxed into the simple cadence of ice tool placements and crampon kicks into soft ice. I could feel moisture in the air. Clouds were starting to close in around us, but, as planned, we were prepared with enough food to wait out the short storm that was in the forecast. Soon we made it to a snowy ledge on a protruding glacial ice feature that we had seen from below and in our photographs from Changi Tower, a 6,500-meter peak that Steve and I, along with Scott Bennett, had climbed for the first ascent in 2015. We hunkered down in our tents, knowing our camp was far from any overhead hazard and for now, at least, we were safe.

Thirty-six hours later, on August 4, with the storm forecasted to end soon, we started before dawn and climbed 200 meters above our previous bivy. However, the wind and snow continued, and before long we were sitting in the dark at the edge of a bergschrund, still engulfed in a blizzard. The shoulders of my partners slumped under the pounding snow, and to maintain morale I decided that any activity was better than none, so I found our shovel and started digging. Steve immediately caught on to my plan, and then the others joined in. As I dug, I started to feel warmer. After an hour, gusts still buffeted the mountain, but now we were tucked into a snow cave, sheltered and comfortable. The mood of the team shifted quickly as our bodies warmed. Eventually, the shadowy forms of mountains around us started to emerge as the storm finally abated. Once again, we started upward.

The vertical ice directly above our snow cave was some of the best I've experienced in the mountains—with just a single swing, my axes stuck securely. Quickly, however, the firm surface gave way to seemingly endless deep snow. Hours later, I stared down between my feet at my partners, who were tied to a feeble belay anchor composed of a snow-filled stuff sack and a picket buried deep into the slope; the rope was strung out for 30 meters between us, attached to nothing. As I slowly dug upward through the drifts, I hoped for a small patch of ice into which to swing my axe or place another screw. Instead, I shoved another picket into the soft snow and continued higher, carefully crafting each step and plunging the shafts of my axes.

I looked up to a serac wall that I hoped would mark the end of the wallowing: Its ancient gray ice undulated in the flat high-mountain light. It seemed a little closer than it did the last time I'd checked, but still far away. What had drawn me to this peak? Why was I drawn to chase these summits, worlds away from so much that I love? I looked down again at my partners, dear friends and mentors. Chris leaned into the snow slope to rest while Mark and Steve hung off the belay and gazed out over the range, their posture demonstrating their obvious comfort in this wild and high space. I shook my head to clear my thoughts and refocused on upward progress.

From our final bivouac, our fifth night above ABC, we could see the summit 250 meters above in the fading light. Next morning, August 5, Chris led the ice wall above our tents and then started traversing up and left along the side of a steep, corniced snow ridge punctuated with a couple of rock towers. After several pitches, I took over the leading. And then snow in front of me began shifting and I was sliding headfirst toward the void.

Steve Swenson follows a corniced ridge during summit day on LinkSar. Photo by Graham Zimmerman
After the avalanche sent me tumbling over the cliff, my partners were far above me and hidden around a ridge of rock and snow. I yelled toward the belay, wanting to let them know that I was conscious, but I couldn't hear a reply. I righted myself and swung into the wall to place a cam. If I could unweight the rope, they would at least know that I was awake and moving. I probed my body, expecting to find an injury, but only noticed one missing zipper pull ripped from my pants.

Steve had just arrived at the last belay station to join Chris and Mark, and now he traversed over the rock and snow ridge toward me. Finally able to communicate, we established that neither I nor they were injured. Steve placed a new anchor, and I jugged one of our ropes while Steve belayed me on the other. Two hours after the fall, I embraced him, teary-eyed. He said, "Man, I was so frightened by what might have happened to you that I'm still shaking. I think we should go down." Mark and Chris soon joined us. They were amazed that I was unscathed but remained silent, as if unsure what to do or say. Occasionally one of them would glance at the summit, less than 150 meters above us.

"Guys, I can feel myself coming down from a pretty intense adrenaline rush," I said. A chill was creeping into my body, and my head felt light. "But I am not hurt. I'm just going to huddle into my warm jacket and sit here, but if one of you is up for leading, let's go up, because there is no way I am coming back up here after this."

Chris offered to take over the lead again, and after a short discussion he started upward. Avoiding the now-obvious section of unstable snow, he moved slowly and deliberately, trying not to waste any energy. I could tell he was tired from days of exertion at altitude, but a single-minded drive for the summit kept him moving upward.

Three pitches later, we regrouped at a stance less than a rope length below the summit. The only anchor Chris could find, a bollard constructed from a thin snow mushroom, didn't seem like enough to me, particularly given my headspace. I crawled into a hole in the snow so I could act as a deadman, another piece of the anchor.

Starting up again, hoping to reach the top, Chris placed a screw and then plunged the shafts of his ice tools into the steep slope above. They sheared through loose drifts without catching or creating any tangible pathway for upward progress. After 10 or 15 meters, he retreated.

Mark Richey on Link Sar's summit.

"Is all this simply a large cornice?" Mark wondered.

"Are we on top?" Steve said as he arrived from the stance below.

"Are we failing?" I asked myself quietly.

Mark craned his neck to look up at the slate of snow that led toward the top. I knew he had a lot of experience with soft, steep snow from years of climbing in the Peruvian Andes. "Mark, I think you are the only one who knows how to deal with this," I said. "Will you have a look?"

"Yeah, I'll go see," he replied.

Up to this point, I think he'd been holding back his eagerness to lead, knowing Chris and I could go faster than he could, simply by virtue of our youth. Now his desire shone unconcealed in his eyes: the glint of a younger man.

As Mark cast off into the loose, insecure snow, with a single ice screw for protection, Steve said, "We need to be attached to the mountain better than this." He started digging into the slope in search of good ice. Above us, Mark swept his axes overhead to carve a trench in the steep wall, packing the loose snow at his feet to support his weight and then stemming against the trench walls. Steve, with only his lower legs protruding from the tunnel he'd dug, called to me that he'd found a deep vein of ice and was building a V-thread for our anchor. After nearly an hour, Mark screamed down: "I'm on the fucking top!" The path to the summit was now clear, as was the first step back toward the safety of base camp. Thirty minutes later, we were all on the apex of Link Sar.

I arrived last and fell into a deep embrace from Chris. The sunset cast waves of purple hues over the massive breadth of the Karakoram. Some of the steepest and wildest mountains of the world surrounded us in all directions. There were no words. There was only the afterglow of depths of shared exertion and partnership. Then, I declared, "Let's get the hell off this mountain safely," and we started our descent.

Steve: Two more days of rappelling and downclimbing brought us back to Camp I around midnight.

There we had the first of several food parties, the quantity and quality of our cuisine improving the lower we got on the mountain.

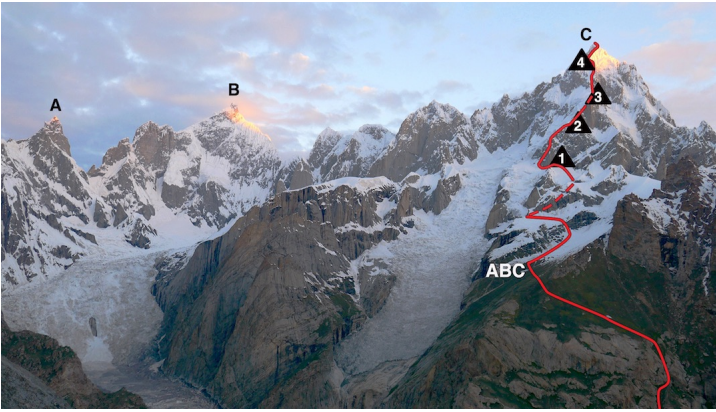
Feeling comfortable and safe, I felt ready to begin reflecting on our experience. Climbing a world-class objective like Link Sar doesn't require someone to be the best climber in the world. We had survived Link Sar because of the failures we were willing to accept. We succeeded on Link Sar because we were persistent, learned from our mistakes, applied our 126 years of combined climbing experience, and understood what partnership means.

Summary: First ascent of Link Sar (7,041 meters) in the Pakistan Karakoram via its 3,400-meter southeast face, by Mark Richey, Steven Swenson, Chris Wright, and Graham Zimmerman, July 31–August 8, 2019. The route gained about 2,300 meters above advanced base camp and was graded M6+ WI4 90°.

About the Authors: Steve Swenson, a retired engineering consultant and past president of the American Alpine Club, lives in Seattle and Canmore, Alberta, with his wife, Ann Dalton. His more than 50 years of climbing includes 19 expeditions to the Greater Ranges. Graham Zimmerman lives in Bend, Oregon, with his wife, Shannon McDowell. He is co-owner of Bedrock Film Works and leader of the Protect Our Winters Climb athlete program. The two men discussed the first ascent of Link Sar in episode 22 of the AAJ's Cutting Edge podcast (see below).

The Cutting Edge · Link Sar with Steve Swenson and Graham Zimmerman

Images



(A) Changi Tower. (B) K6 Main. (C) Link Sar (7,041m) from the southeast, showing the line of the 2019 ascent, advanced base camp, and bivouacs. Stocking ABC at 4,700 meters (1,000 meters above base camp) with weeks of supplies was a crucial strategy behind the team's success.



Chris Wright on a beautiful ice hose during the first ascent of Link Sar in Pakistan.



Steve Swenson follows a corniced ridge during summit day on LinkSar.



Waiting out a snow squall above Camp 3.



Advanced base camp on Link Sar—an ideal launch pad for the upper mountain.



Zimmerman and Wright embrace on top of Link Sar at sunset.



Mark Richey prepares porters to use a “via ferrata” the team installed for load carrying to ABC.



Bypassing the enormous serac above Camp 2.



Moving up again after an avalanche swept Graham Zimmerman from this face, just to the right of the foreground in the photo. Zimmerman was unharmed, and the team eventually decided to continue.



Steve Swenson scopes the crux pitches above Camp 1. This passage, discovered in 2017, was climbed at night for safety.



Chris Wright launching into the lower mixed crux at the start of the first night on the Link Sar summit push.



Chris Wright leading awkward mixed ground with a heavy pack low on the rock band between camps

1 and 2. The team climbed all night to complete 10 pitches, up to M6+, and reach their second bivouac by midmorning, before the day's heat made lower-elevation climbing too dangerous.



Mark Richey on Link Sar's summit.

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