

## Nanga Parbat: A Concise History of Exploration and Mountaineering

(Note: the spelling of geographic features varies from source-to-source- i.e., Bazhin and Bezhin. We also have the Rakhoit Glacier but the bridge at the mouth of the valley is spelled Raikot. In any case I have attempted to be consistent in usage)

### Background: Geography and Setting

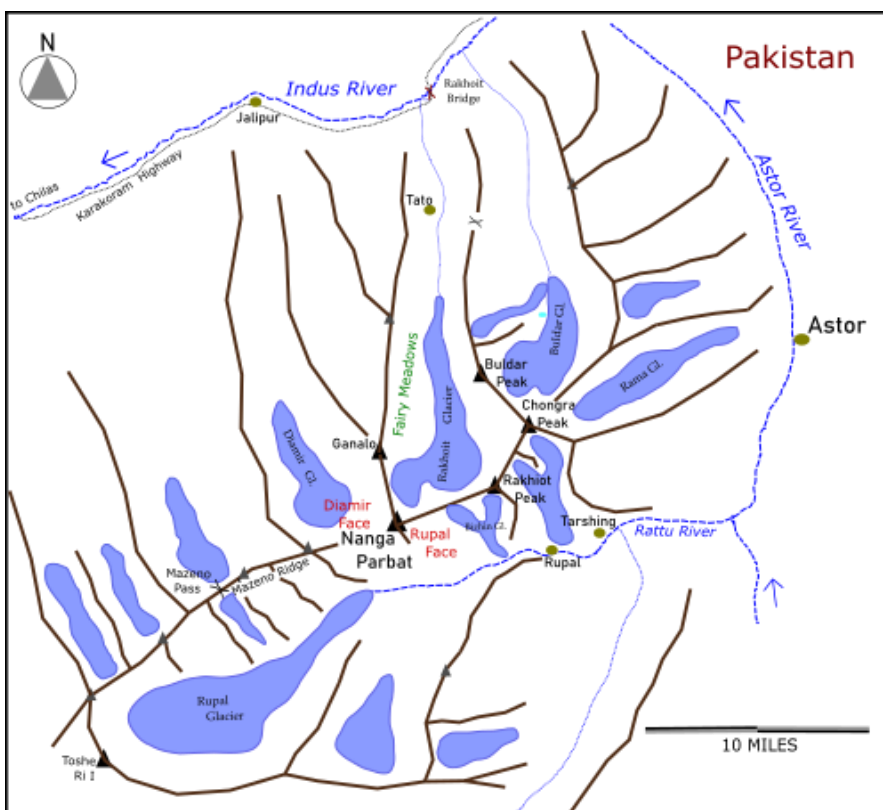
**N**anga Parbat sits at the western end of the Himalaya; although there are plenty of mountains to the north and east, the peak and its satellites appear to stand alone, hence its name which means, 'naked mountain'. A local name for the mountain is 'Diamir' which translates to 'king of mountains'. The planet's ninth tallest peak lies in the modern state of Pakistan. However, until August 1947, at which time greater India was divided or 'partitioned', it was a part of the British India.

There are three principal approaches to the mountain and accompanying climbing venues: the Rakhoit Valley in the north, the Diamir Valley in the northwest, and Rupal Valley and Mazeno Ridge in the southeast. The northern approach to Nanga Parbat starts where the Karakoram Highway crosses the turbid and thundering waters of the Indus River (Raikot Bridge). A trek up steep barren slopes of the lower Rakhoit Valley eventually leads to several villages where the inhabitants have been able to carve out a living in his inhospitable ecosystem. The upper valley contains the 12-mile (19 km) long Rakhoit Glacier. Fairy Meadows lies around 12,000 ft (3650 m) elevation, adjacent too and on the west side of the Rakhoit Glacier. The meadows have become, since I trekked up here in 1986, a bit of a tourist mecca. A gravel 'road' was established back in the 1990's in order to facilitate tourists visits up to Fairy Meadows. I have never traveled up the road, but it

is considered one of the most thrilling and dangerous rides you could ever take.

Most of the early expeditions set up their respective basecamps either in the meadow or just above it to the southwest. The climbing route from here is anything but direct, it is actually one of the longest routes on any of the 8,000 m peaks. It zig-zags up the Rakhoit Glacier in order to gain access to Rakhoit Peak (23,196 ft, 7070 m) and eventually the summit plateau which lies to the southwest.

Another key northern trailhead commences at the village of Jalipur, located on the Indus River, west of the Raikot Bridge. This trailhead provides access to the Diamir Valley. It is a 17-mile (27 km) trek from the Indus to the base of the Diamir Face, the last five miles is along the Diamir Glacier. The face is broad with many rock ribs interspersed amidst numerous snow and ice filled couloirs. There are also a number of hanging glaciers on the upper section that menace the lower face. To climbers left (northeast) lies the Diama Glacier which is perched on the ridge which extends from the North Summit (25,642 ft, 7816 m) over to Ganilo Peak (21,679 ft, 6608 m) and then continuing to the northwest.



Prior to the development of the Karakoram Highway and the airports at Gilgit and Skardu, the main route to Nanga Parbat commenced at Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. From Srinagar expeditions had to trek up and over either the Kamri Bai Pass (13,688 ft, 4170 m) or the more popular Burzil Pass (13,763 ft, 4190 m) which lies a little to the east; both tracks led to the village of Astor, the principal village on the east side of the mountain. From Astor they would follow the Rattu River upstream for a handful of miles before heading east, the path would then as it does today, take them through the villages of Tarshing and Rupal to the foot of the Rupal Face. From here they could continue to the Rupal Glacier and Mazeno Pass (17,500 ft, 5334 m), located on the south side of the mountain. (The Rupal Glacier does not emanate from the base of the Rupal Face, it is located to the south. The Bazhin Glacier lies on the lower Rupal Face). Most early expeditions were intent on using the Rakhoit Glacier route, hence they would trek north from Astor a little over 23 miles to the Indus River, then follow the river to the southwest for eight miles where they would find the entrance to the Rakhoit Valley.

### 1895:

For foreigners have been passing by Nanga Parbat for who knows how long; elements of Alexander the Great's army would have certainly been in the neighborhood in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and laid eyes on its bulk. The modern story of Nanga Parbat however began in June 1895 when Alfred Mummery, Geoffrey Hastings, and John Collie steamed from England to British India with the explicit idea of exploring and then attempting to climb the mountain. The trio was later joined on the mountain by Indian Army officer, Charles Bruce, who of course would become a major force in Himalaya mountaineering in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Alfred Mummery at that time was one of the best technical rock climbers, he had put up some very hard routes in the Alps. This expedition, unlike the large expeditions that would follow in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was more of small-scale camping/climbing

excursion rather than an 'expedition' as we have come to know the term.

The party trekked to the mountain from Srinagar over the Kamri Bai Pass, reaching the villages on the east side of the mountain in mid-July. From here they gained access to the higher terrain via the Rupal Valley. Over the next several weeks, the party, which now consisted of a handful of local porters as well as Major Bruce and two Gurkhas which he had recruited, ventured over the southern ridges and glaciers (Mazeno Pass, Rupal Glacier). In time they eventually made their way into the Diamir Valley on the northwest side of the mountain. This small expedition was loosely structured, loads of misadventures; there were several unscheduled bivvies because they greatly underestimated distances in this vast landscape. However, as Collie notes, the expedition was very memorable.

After several weeks of roaming about and getting lost, Mummery gave some serious thought to climbing the mountain. He decided on a route up the Diamir Face- a mix of steep rock ribs and couloirs which extended from the Diamir Glacier to the summit, a vertical rise on the order of 13,000 ft (3960 m). By the third week of August, after several earlier efforts, Mummery and the Gurkha, Raghobir Thapa, were able to reach 21,000 ft (6400 m) on via one of the ribs (now called the Mummery Rib). From Mummery's perspective, a steep but climbable snow slope connected the rib to the North Ridge, with the summit lying a bit to the south. However, the weather which had been superb until now, started to turn snowy and cold. Shortly thereafter Mummery abandoned his attempt, not only due to stormy weather, but to a reduction in personal as well. Major Bruce had to report back to his regiment, Collie was contending with a disagreeable digestive track and Raghobir had not fully acclimatized to the rarified air.

Although he had given up hope in reaching the summit, Mummery decided on a short but ambitious trek from the Diamir Valley over the ridge to the Rakhoit Valley on the north. The intervening ridge connected the North Ridge from Ganilo Peak to the south, the lowest part of the ridge is now called the Diama Col (there are

actually two). He was motivated by that fact that he wanted to reconnoiter any possible routes to the summit via the Rakhoit Glacier. He could have taken a much longer but less adventurous route—that is head north from the Diamir Valley toward the Indus and then turn east to the foot of the Rakhoit Valley.

On the morning of August 23<sup>rd</sup> Mummery left camp for the last time; in afternoon he rendezvoused with Raghobir and another Gurkha, Guman Singh. That morning both men had gone up the lower Diamir Face to retrieve some gear that had been left behind on the climb. The threesome then commenced their trek to Rakhoit Valley via the Diama Glacier which flows off the north ridge toward the west. The trio was never seen again, nor were their bodies ever discovered. They were attempting to traverse Diama Pass, when tragedy struck. It was quite possible that Mummery did not properly evaluate the terrain on the northeast side of the pass. As it turns out, it is an extremely steep slope, which during and after heavy snowfall is nearly constantly raked by avalanches pouring off the north face of the mountain. A subsequent search by Hastings and Collie for any clues to the trio's whereabouts or demise, turned up no evidence.

Thus ended the first European exploration of Nanga Parbat; it had started as an adventure by friends, and ended in tragedy. The loss of Mummery and the two Gurkhas was one of the earliest occurrences of men being killed while climbing-exploring in the Himalaya. It was of course not the last, no more so true than on Nanga Parbat.

#### Expedition Personnel (\* fatality)

Alfred Mummery\*- leader

John N. Collie

Charles Bruce

Geoffrey Hastings

Raghobir Thapa\*- Gurkha soldier

Guman Singh\*- Gurkha soldier

Lor Khan- local man from Chilas

#### References

Collie, J.N. Climbing on the Nanga Parbat Range, Kashmir. *Alpine Journal*. Vol.18, no.131 (1897), p.17-32

Bruce, C.G. The Passing of Mummery. *Himalayan Journal*. vol.3 (1931) p.1-13

#### **1932:**

The next attempt to climb Nanga Parbat was in 1932 when a large and well-organized German expedition made the first of many attempts from the north side of the mountain. There were two Americans in the mix of Germans/Austrians, so the official title of the effort was the *German-American Himalaya Expedition*. The Americans were a reporter, Elizabeth Knowlton, who did not do any climbing; and Rand Herron who did climb. The leader of this expedition was Willy Merkl

The expedition proceeded from Srinagar on foot, reaching the village of Astor several weeks later. Due to permit restrictions, the expedition was not allowed to access the Indus Valley; the authorities did not want the expedition to have any interaction with the villagers along this stretch of the river, as the latter were known to be 'unfriendly' toward outsiders. As a consequence, once they had trekked a few miles north of Astor, they veered westward via a cross-country route that took them under the flanks of Buldar Peak (18,386 ft, 5604 m). They traversed three ridges before establishing their basecamp (BC) in the upper region of Fairy Meadows; or what their leader Merkl calls "meadow in Fairyland". Although the distance from Srinagar to Fairy Meadow by foot is just short of 200 miles (322 km), it would take most subsequent expeditions 10 to 14 days to make the journey, often with several days spent in Astor in order to hire local porters and buy food stuffs.

It was now late June and the climbing was about to commence; there was a problem however. The team discovered as they sorted gear at basecamp that a number of loads were missing; unfortunately, this was not gear that could be easily replaced: the stolen loads include a large portion of the climbing kit that was to be distributed to the high-altitude porters; there was nothing to do but to economize where possible.

Camp 1 was established on the Rakhoit Glacier at ~15,000 ft (4570 m). The first night was memorable for Wiessner, Aschenbrenner and six local porters; the camp was hit by an avalanche which damaged tents and blew away their cooking gear. Although no one was injured, it sent a scare through the ranks of the Hunza porters. Despite the ominous beginning, over subsequent weeks a string of camps was established on the Rakhoit Glacier; the route weaved back-and-forth across the upper glacier. The crux of the route was a stretch along the flanks of Rakhoit Peak, this in turn would give the climbers access to the Northeast Ridge. Camp 4 at ~19,000 ft (5790 m) became their Advanced Basecamp (ABC); by the time it was established however, frequent and heavy snowfall made progress above extremely demanding. To add to the climber's frustrations, the high-altitude porters were not performing well at all- most of the time they were ill (real or imagined). All not lost however, Aschenbrenner and Hamberger climbed Chongra Peak West (21,502 ft; 6554 m), two days later Aschenbrenner and Kunigk made the first ascent of Rakhoit Peak.

Despite the setbacks by late July the expedition had succeeded in establishing Camp 7 on the Northeast Ridge at around 23,000 ft (7010 m). Although there had been frequent snowstorms during the previous month, there were periods of good climbing weather interspersed. During the next two weeks however, the weather was almost continuously stormy; climbing ground to a halt. As a consequence, the climbers descended to BC to regroup and hope for an improvement in the weather. By the third week of August the weather had stabilized, at least it seemed like it had, so the team started to push back up through the string of camps. However, the expedition ran out of momentum; very deep snow and the lack of help from the porters but an end to the effort. On this renewed effort the lead climbers never ascended above Camp 4.

It should be noted that the chosen route was very long, the vertical gain from BC to the summit was just under 15,000 ft (4570 m). All of this added up to a lot of load carrying- considerably more than the climbers could manage on their

own. Thus, when the local contingent of porters were not up to the task, it spelled disaster. The local Hunza men at that time were far behind the Sherpas in terms of technical mountaineering ability and mountain savvy. Sherpas had already been used in the western Himalaya and Karakoram for several decades, but Merkl notes that they were not any available for his expedition when he inquired. And finally, as many explorers and mountaineers had already experienced in the western Himalaya and southern Karakoram, the weather in the region during the summer can be very stormy. This is due to the fact that the region has two sources for its summer weather; the mid-latitude storm track which transports moisture from west-to-east, as well as the Indian Monsoon which moves in from the southeast.

In one of those odd occurrences that take place from time-to-time, Rand Herron, who had survived his time on Nanga Parbat, during a stop in Cairo before returning to America, was killed in a fall from Chephrens' (Khafre) pyramid where he was scrambling.

#### Expedition Personnel

Willy Merkl- leader  
 Felix Simon  
 Peter Aschenbrenner (Austrian)  
 Fritz Wiessner  
 Fritz Bechtold  
 Rand Herron- American  
 Hugo Hamberger- doctor  
 Elizabeth Knowlton- American (reporter)  
 Herbert Kunigk  
 Capt. Frier- British (liaison Officer)

#### Reference

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 Merkl, W. The Attack on Nanga Parbat, 1932. *Himalayan Journal*. vol.5 (1933) p.65-74

**1934:**

**A**fter returning to Germany in the autumn of 1932, Merkl set out to organize another

attempt on the mountain. As things worked out the summer of 1934 was the appointed season for destiny. There were two returning members from the 1932 effort besides Merkl, Aschenbrenner and Bechtold. This was a large expedition, eight climbers, one climbing doctor, three scientists, and two British liaison officers; Captains Frier and Sangster. The former had been with the 1932 expedition and the latter was a climber himself, reaching Camp 4 and climbing Chongra Peak West.

Recall that one of the major issues during the 1932 expedition was the lackluster performance by the Hunza porters; who of course had not been trained in the ways of high-altitude mountaineering. In order to circumvent this problem, Merkl was able to recruit 35 Sherpas and Bhutia porters from the greater Darjeeling area. A number of the Sherpas had been high on Mt. Everest with the British.

By May 2<sup>nd</sup> this large contingent amassed in Srinagar. Merkl hired some 600 Kashmiri porters (another account says it was 500) to haul the mountain of gear north. The porters trekked in two separate columns a day apart, using the Tragbal (11,586 ft, 3530 m) and Bruzil Passes. Unlike 1932 where the expedition was not allowed to trek as far north as the Indus River, this expedition was allowed to use the Rakhoit Valley approach. The trek up the base of the mountain began near the Rakhoit Bridge (~3,900 ft, 1190 m) which spans the Indus, some 28 miles (45 km) east of the important village of Chilas. Basecamp was placed above Fairytale Meadows at around 13,000 ft (3960 m).

Merkl's climbing plan called for his team to stick with the 1932 route as far as Camp 4; above they would attempt to find an alternative to the avalanche prone slopes of Rakhoit Peak. The lower camps were established in quick succession, the weather had been climber friendly. The only hiccup was that on the night of June 8<sup>th</sup>, Alfred Drexel who was at Camp 2, died suddenly. Evidently, he had a cold-cough that turned into serious case of pneumonia in a very short amount of time. He was laid to rest not far from BC.

Henceforth upward momentum was reduced due to a lack of tsampa, the staple foodstuff for the porters from Darjeeling.

Nevertheless Camp 4, Advanced Basecamp, was established by the end of June. Above Camp 4 the route ascended the flanks of Rakhoit Peak, this was followed by a slight descent which led to the Northeast Ridge. Once they had traversed the ridge, they would be on the Silver Saddle (in German 'Silbersattel'), which give access to a low-gradient snow plateau. Once across the plateau the obvious route to the summit was along a southwest-northeast oriented ridgeline, however, this ridge contained several subsidiary summits before topping out on the main summit.

The expeditions' Camp 5 was located at ~22,000 ft (6700 m) at the foot of Rakhoit Peak. The route above Camp 5 contained an ice wall (west side of Rakhoit Peak) on which the expedition installed a ladder in a short steep section, in addition, a considerable amount of fixed roped was installed as well. Camp 6 was placed at ~22,800 ft (6950 m) and Camp 7 ~23,300 ft (7100 m); between these two camps the route traversed the Northeast Ridge. Notice that there is little elevation gain between Camp 5 and Camp 7, this in part is what makes this route so long. Up till this point in time the weather had overall been favorable for climbing, on the downside, some of the porters were starting to complain of various illnesses.

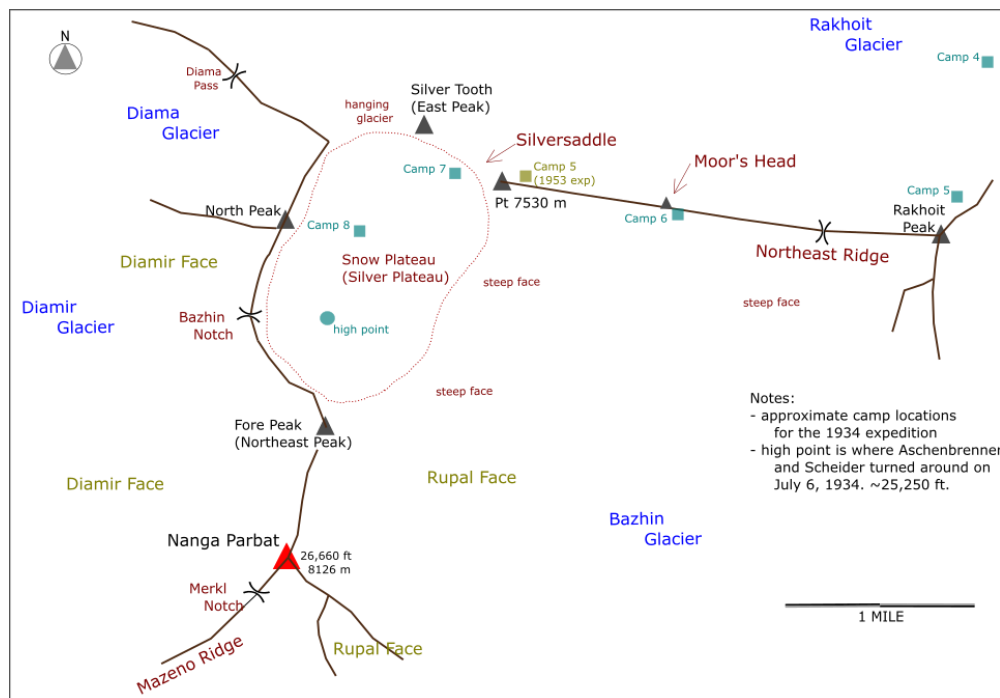
By July 6<sup>th</sup> five climbers and 11 porters had reached the Silver Saddle and were in search of a location on the snow plateau to locate Camp 8. Early that afternoon Aschenbrenner and Schneider, who were emerging as the strongest of the climbers, pushed up the snow plateau in the direction of the summit, ultimately reaching ~25,250 ft (7700 m). The contingent behind the lead climbers could not keep up so Camp 8 was installed backdown around 24,400 ft (7440 m). It emerged later, that Aschenbrenner and Schneider entertained thoughts of continuing on to the summit that afternoon. They estimated it would have taken four to five hours to reach the summit, returning to Camp 8 that evening. However, due to the fact that a climbing plan was already in place which called for a summit bid the next day by a larger party, they decided to forego any summit bid on their own and maintain the schedule.

On the night of July 6-7<sup>th</sup> strong winds began to rake the upper mountain. On the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> windspeeds had not diminished, so the climbers remained in Camp 8 and hoped for improved weather the next day. Unfortunately, their hope had no basis in reality, the storm only intensified. A second night was spent at Camp 8; by morning it was evident that the storm was worse than ever. Merkl, as expedition leader who was himself at Camp 8, told everyone to descend to Camp 4 and wait further developments. The first rope team to leave Camp 8 was that of Aschenbrenner and Schneider with three Sherpas (Pinju Norbu, Nima Dorje II, Pasang). The second rope team consisted of Merkl, Wieland and the remainder of the porters. By the time these teams departed Camp 8, conditions were as bad as it could have been; extremely windy, low visibility and very cold. It should be noted here that in Captain Sangster's notes, much of it collected after the expedition from the testimonies of the survivors, that on the morning of July 8<sup>th</sup>, despite the very unpleasant weather, "No climber or porter appeared to be in bad condition..."

Just above Camp 7 Aschenbrenner and Schneider un-roped from their porters. The two climbers told the Sherpas to follow immediately in their tracks. In Bechtold's narrative he states that the reason the two Austrians unroped was that in the extremely low visibility the porters, who were in the middle of the rope, kept wandering off the tracking in various directions. In addition, one of the two sleeping bags had been blown off the pack of one of the Sherpas, leaving five men with one bag; hence it was imperative that they reach Camp 5 or Camp 4 that evening as Camps 7 and 6 had no sleeping bags.

Aschenbrenner and Schneider were able to

reach Camp 4 that same evening (8<sup>th</sup>) while their three Sherpas stopped at Camp 7. How and why this rope 'team' ended up so far apart will be explained below. The descent of the second rope team was a bigger disaster: they attempt to bivvy "under the Silver Saddle without a tent", to quote



Bechtold. By this time the windstorm had turned into a blizzard and everyone above Camp 4 was struggling to survive. The details of who was where and what exactly occurred, are a bit vague which is understandable considering the life-and-death situation; however, the net result is undeniable and tragic.

From July 8 through the 15<sup>th</sup> a massive amount of snow fell on the upper mountain. Not only was visibility restricted to a few meters, the snow was so deep that movement was hardly possible. The fate of the second rope team is as follows: Sherpa Nima Norbu died on the night of July 8-9<sup>th</sup> in the vicinity of the Silver Saddle. Wieland died just above Camp 7 on the 9<sup>th</sup>. Merkl and Welzenbach (the latter had been at Camp 7) decided to stay at Camp 7 while four of the Sherpas made the decision to descend. They struggled down but had to dig a snowcave before reaching Camp 6 (or they missed the camp completely).

On the afternoon of the 10<sup>th</sup> the climbers that were residing at Camp 4 could see through a

rift in the clouds that a group of seven were descending the north ice wall of Rakhoit Peak. Henceforth a team from Camp 4 attempted to ascend with needed supplies to meet this group of survivors. The recently fallen snow was so deep that the rescue party could make little progress back up the route, they could not even make it as far as Camp 5. However, four badly frostbitten Sherpas turned up at Camp 4 that evening. On July 12<sup>th</sup>, three climbers and three Sherpas from Camp 4 were able to reach Camp 5. They found one body lying in the snow near one of the tents; additional bodies were strung-out on the fixed ropes above. The rescue party returned to Camp 4 that evening. Even at this late date, not all life had been extinguished above Camp 4, although time was running out.

At Camp 7 Welzenbach succumbed on the 13<sup>th</sup>. The next day Merkl, whose life was ebbing, and the remaining Sherpas departed Camp 7 in hopes of reaching Camp 6. Only one Sherpa made it to Camp 4 that evening, the rest did not even make it to Camp 6; they dug a snowcave enroute. Again, on July 15-16 Aschenbrenner and Schneider attempted to reach Camp 5, but they never made it (another account states that they did make it to Camp 5 but no higher). On the 17<sup>th</sup> two of the scientist, Misch and Raechl who had been working at the base of the mountain when the storm commenced, reached Camp 4 in order to assist in the ongoing rescue/evacuation. They also attempt to reach Camp 5 but were not able due to the very

deep snow. Merkl and Sherpa Gaylay, died during this interval in their snowcave above Camp 6.

One haunting aspect of this was reported by Aschenbrenner, while one of the rescue teams which was wallowing in snow deep snow above Camp 4, they heard “cries for help could still be heard on the ridge as of July 16.” Sometime later “...the waving figure, seen earlier above, had vanished.” At this juncture, everyone from Camp 4, many with severe frostbite, descend to BC. It must have been a somber group at BC while they organized their outbound trek. The members of the expedition headed for Germany or Darjeeling during the first days of August.

Analysis: Since Captain Sangster was the liaison officer, he made inquiries into the tragedy and then wrote a short day-by-day accounting as post-expedition notes. From those notes we know that when the climbers/porters departed Camp 8 on July 8<sup>th</sup>, they were carrying limited gear- the hope was that they would be returning shortly. The logic was clear: why carry sleeping bags, tents, stoves, etc. down when they would just have to carry it back up in a day or two? Of course, they did not know that the storm would last for a solid week and that they had no inkling of the quantity of snow that would fall. In hindsight this was a major mistake, they were not taking high-altitude mountaineering in the Himalaya seriously enough. This was not the Alps: not only was the altitude much higher, but the weather, as they learned,

even in the summer, was far more severe than anything that the Alps could muster. For example, Angtsering, one of the surviving Sherpas notes that that on the second rope team that left Camp 8, the two Europeans had a tent but no sleeping bags, while two of the Sherpas each had sleeping bags but no tent. We also know that a significant quantity of the gear from Camps 6 and 7 had been taken up to Camp 8 where there was a large contingent of porters and climbers.

Secondly, after the expedition returned to Germany, Aschenbrenner and Schneider came under considerable



criticism for un-roping from their three Sherpas. It was seen as a move to save their own lives with little or no concern for the lives of the Sherpas who were in their employment. We cannot be too critical because it is one of those extreme situations that you would have to be there or in a similar situation to really understand.

Aschenbrenner's post-expedition report on the July 8-15 storm indicates that on July 8, the Europeans who were at Camp 8 agreed that Schneider and Aschenbrenner with three Sherpas would break trail down to Camp 4, with the second rope team following closely behind. He reports that Schneider was in the led, then the three Sherpas followed by himself. The traverse down below the Silver Saddle was dicey, of which Aschenbrenner writes; "The storm increased so much that we could only descend the steep slopes with the greatest precautions." He continues, "Pinju Nurbu and Nima Dorje were going very badly, while Pasang was in his best form. We had with us two sleeping sacks, one for the porters and one for ourselves."

However, a very strong gust of wind nearly blew Nima Dorji off the mountain, they sleeping bag he was carrying was ripped off of his pack and it sailed away; he was saved by the belay of his ropemates.

It is worth a long quote from Aschenbrenner as this is a critical juncture when Nima Dorji was almost blown off the mountain; "We five men were left with but one sleeping-sack. Consequently, it was of vital necessity to attain Camp V or Camp IV on the same day if we wished to avoid death from freezing. In the raging blizzard we could not see 10 meters in any direction and of course went frequently astray. To avoid these wanderings, fatiguing for the porters, we un-roped over the not difficult terrain near Camp VII. We instructed them to follow exactly in our tracks: this they understood thoroughly. On one occasion as the storm for a moment tore asunder the clouds, we perceived the second party coming down over the Silbersattel."

Even though Schneider and Aschenbrenner lost sight of their three Sherpas, they were not unduly concerned as they would be "In any case they would be collected by the following party"; that is the second rope team. On the flanks of

Rakhoit Peak the two climbers decided to deviate from the route which they judged as being too dangerous. In order to avoid the traverse, they climbed 500 ft up Rakhoit Peak and then straight down to Camp 5 where they found some food and sleeping bags. They continued onto Camp 4 arriving there in the afternoon. Bechtold, Bernard and Mulleritter where the Europeans at Camp 4 to greet them. As noted, Angtsering, who had been on the second rope team, stumbled into Camp 4 on July 14<sup>th</sup>.

In the lime-light of the post-expedition, statements were taken from several surviving Sherpas as well as from Aschenbrenner and Schneider regarding the events of July 8-16<sup>th</sup>. The agreement is quite good amongst the various accounts especially considering events were experienced from different locations on the mountain. It did come out in a short statement given by two of the surviving Sherpas: Kitar and Parsang, that they met up with the three Sherpas who had originally been on rope team one, in the vicinity of Camp 6 on July 10<sup>th</sup>. According to Kitar, the three "...told me that on leaving Camp 8 with Schneider and Aschenbrenner they could not travel as fast as the sahibs, who told them that the track was easy." By the third day of the storm, the 10<sup>th</sup>, it did appear that it was everyone for themselves, as Kitar and Parsang continued to descend without attempting to link up with their comrades.

Thus ended the 1934 German Himalayan Expedition to Nanga Parbat; the death toll, including Drexel was 10. In July 1986 when I trekked up to Fairy Meadows there was a memorial (mound of rocks with a bronze cross) near the old site of BC. This marks the grave of Drexel and also a memorial for those who died on the 1934 expedition. The cross and plaque were installed by members of the 1937 German Expedition. Since I was there the memorial has been updated and expanded.

One unique aspect of this expedition was the use of skis and skins by some members on the lower mountain. They were used to ascend Chongra Peak and at one point some climbers made a ten-minute descent from Camp 4 to Camp 2 using skis.



Expedition Personnel (\* fatality)

Willy Merkl\*- leader  
 Fritz Bechtold  
 Peter Aschenbrenner  
 Alfred Drexel\*  
 Willi Bernard- doctor  
 Erwin Schneider  
 Peter Mullritter  
 Uli Wieland\*  
 Willi Welzenbach\*  
 Richard Finsterwalder-cartographer  
 Walter Raechl-geographer  
 Peter Misch-geologist  
 Capt. R. Frier- (British)-Liaison Officer  
 Capt. R. Sangster- (British) Liaison Officer

Sherpa Fatalities:

Nina Nubu  
 Nima Dorje II  
 Nima Tashi  
 Gay Lay  
 Dakshi  
 Pinju Norbu

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death of Merkl the mantle of leadership now fell to Dr. Karl Wien, a young but accomplished geologist and mountaineer who had the previous summer climbed in Sikkim with Paul Bauer's small expedition. Despite the great loss of life on the 1934 expedition, Dr. Wien was willing and able to step into Merkl's shoes and get a team of Germans to the top. The planet's ninth highest summit was not going to defeat German determination and spirit. There were two returning members from 1934; Mullritter and the Sherpa Pasang Norbu, the latter had been as high as Camp 8.

The selected route was once again via Fairy Meadows and the Rakhoit Glacier. Although there had been considerable accumulation of new snow during the last half of May, Camps 1 and 2 had established in good time. Camp 2 was hit by the remnants of an avalanche on May 26 but did little damage. We can only wonder however how that event, even though small, weighed on the psyche of the climbers and porters in light of recent history.

On May 31, due to the accumulation of recently fallen snow, Wien decided to recall the climbers to BC and await consolidation and an improvement in the weather. The first week of June provided a respite from the storms; there were some periods of sunny/warm weather. Climbers hence resumed their upward push; Camp 3 was established on the Rakhoit Glacier (~19,700 ft, 6000 m) followed by Camp 4 (20,300 ft, 6190 m). As the climbers made steady upward progress, Wien devised a summit plan; four climbers and an unspecified number of porters would occupy their highest camp (C8). Two of the climbers would in Wien's words ..."secure the way to the summit for the other two." He also wanted to switch from using tents to snowcaves from Camp 5 and above.

By June 7<sup>th</sup> Camp 4 had been turned into an Advanced Basecamp being stocked with a large amount of food and climbing gear. This date also marked a downturn in the weather- wind and fresh snow returned. Despite the storms the lead climbers at Camp 4 repeatedly attempted to get to a point on the route where they could establish Camp 5. Persistence paid off, a suitable site was finally reached on June 14<sup>th</sup>, however, the camp

**1937**

Despite the major disaster of the 1934 expedition, there was still significant interest within the German mountaineering community for a renewed effort on this elusive peak. With the

was not occupied. The 14<sup>th</sup> turned out to be a pivotal day in the life of the expedition. Lt. Smart, the British liaison officer who had been at Camp 4, descended to BC with five sick porters in tow. This left seven Germans and nine Sherpas at Camp 4 on the night of June 14-15.

In what must have seemed as a repeat of 1934, a series of storms enveloped the mountain beginning on the 14<sup>th</sup>. After this date no communications from the large contingent at Camp 4 was received at BC or any of the lower camps. In addition, no one from the lower camps reached Camp 4 until June 18<sup>th</sup> when Dr. Luft and porters made their way to the camp; or at least the site of what had been Camp 4. There was nothing there. Luft reports that the area was "...covered by a gigantic ice avalanche." As it turns out, a serac located some 1,000-1,400 ft (300-400 m) above the camp "...had split and strewn a vast field of enormous ice blocks and debris down the slope." At the time he estimated that the avalanche was at least a day old. Later it was determined that the camp was demolished shortly after midnight on June 15. Luft and his porters probed the surface for any bodies or gear, eventually they found three rucksacks belonging to three of the Germans.

Nothing else could be done at that time so Luft retreated to BC and sent word of the disaster to Gilgit; he requested tools and additional manpower in order to search for bodies. Men from the Gilgit Scouts (a unit of the Indian Army) responded as did several Pakistani engineers who were in the area. In addition, three prominent Germans, including Paul Bauer, flew over from Germany. It took time but by July 15<sup>th</sup> a team of searchers had assembled at the site of Camp 4. Recent warm weather had caused the lower Rakhoit Glacier to break-up, forcing the team to push out a new route up to Camp 4, slowing their response time. They spent a number of days probing and digging the site.

In time the search party started to find bodies: Pasang was lying in his sleeping bag under 10 feet of snow. Eventually they found all but two of the Germans, each was lying in their sleeping bags in tents that were relatively undisturbed. In other words, the avalanche did not carry the camp

down the glacier as one would expect with a powerful air blast proceeding the mass behind it. The camp was pretty much buried *in situ*. The bodies of the Germans were reburied next to each other, although the surviving Sherpas requested that the remains of their fallen comrades be left undisturbed.

The efforts of the search team not only settled the question of how the tragedy had occurred, but they were able to retrieve the diaries of the five Germans whose bodies were recovered. The diary entries locked in the date of the avalanche and indicated that the occupants knew that the camp was menaced by some large seracs. However, the general consensus was that the relatively flat ground upstream of the camp would deter anything from hitting it. Obviously, the run-out zone did not provide enough protection. The 30-year-old Dr. Wien was killed and in a bit of irony, Sherpa Pasang Norbu and Mullriteer who had survived the 1934 storms, were also victims.

#### Expedition Personnel (\* fatality)

Dr. Karl Wien\*- leader  
 Peter Mullriteer\*  
 Adolf Gottner\*  
 Dr. Hans Hartmann\*  
 Gunther Hepp\*  
 Pert Fankhauser\*  
 Martin Pfeffer\*  
 Dr. Ulrich Luft  
 Professor C. Troll  
 Lt. D. Smart-(British) Liaison Officer

#### Sherpa Fatalities:

Pasang Norbu (had survived the 1934 storms)  
 Karmi  
 Mingma Tsering  
 Chong Karma  
 Nima Tsering I  
 Nima Tsering II  
 Ang Tsering  
 Gyaljen Monjo

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Pfeffer, M. The Disaster on Nanga Parbat, 1937.  
*Alpine Journal. vol.49, no.225 (1937) p.210-227*

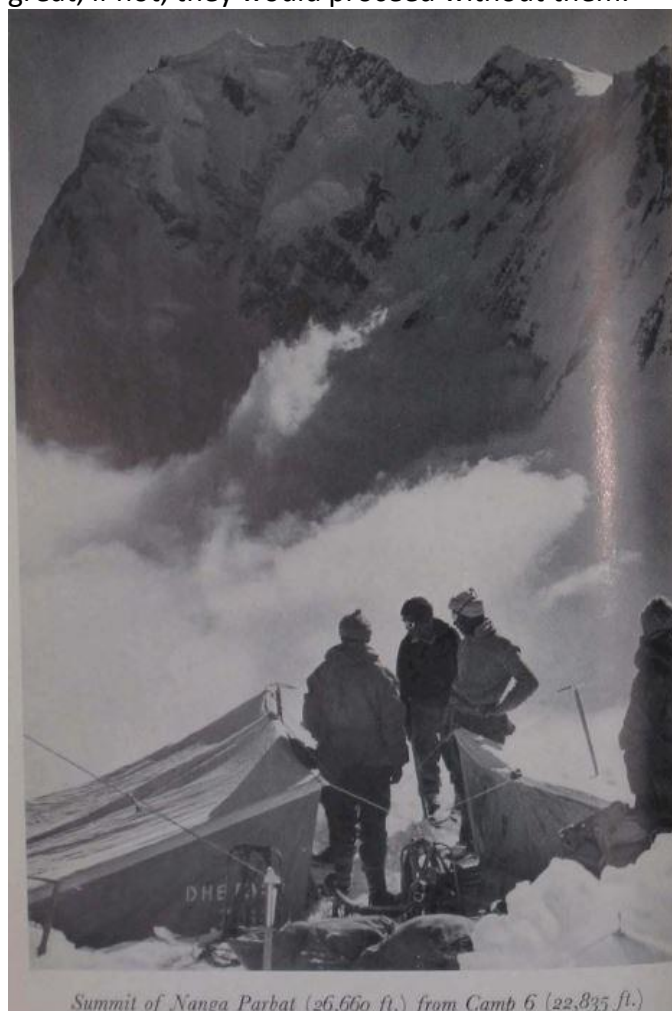
### 1938

After the 1934 and prior to the 1937 expedition, few mountaineers would have entertained thoughts that anything could top the 10 deaths recorded in 1934. As it turned out, 15 died during the 1937 effort to reach the summit. To date there had been four expeditions to Nanga Parbat and 28 deaths. How many years would pass before the next group of adventurers would try to define the odds and set foot on its deadly slopes? The answer is of course, only one year would transpire before yet another German expedition came to grips with Nanga Parbat.

Paul Bauer the head of the Nazi run *German Reich Association for Physical Exercise*, was the leader on this the next expedition to attempt the Killer Mountain, as it was now nicknamed. Recall that Bauer had flown out to Nanga Parbat with two others at the end of the 1937 disaster in order to search for the dead as well as for clues to what occurred. He had a comprehensive climbing resume; besides extensive time spent in the Alps, he had climbed in the Caucasus. In addition, he had led the 1929 and 1931 German Expeditions to Kangchenjunga, which involved some of the hardest big mountain climbing to date. During the summer of 1936 he led a small team, of which Dr. Wien had been a member, into western Sikkim where they climbed a number of peaks to the east of Kangchenjunga, centered around the Zemu Glacier.

This expedition would also try its collective luck on the Rakhoit Glacier route. One does have to pause and wonder why they did not use this opportunity make a reconnaissance of a different route- the Rakhoit Glacier route as noted above, is very long and obviously very dangerous. It is possible that Bauer maintained continuity with the two previous expeditions because of the deployment of his 'secret weapon'- the aeroplane; specifically, a Junkers 52.

The Ju52 as it was abbreviated, was a low wing trimotor which was subsequently used as a troop and logistics carrier during World War II. The airplane was skinned in an aluminum-alloy with distinctly rectangular passenger and cockpit windows. The airplane and its pilot Alexander Thoendes, were based at Srinagar some 82 air miles south-southeast of the mountain. The expedition had a radio which it was hoped would allow them to talk with Thoendes when he was in the vicinity of the mountain, however, the primary signal system was for a large red ribbon to be deployed at the camp or site where the climbers wanted a drop of supplies to be made. In his post-expedition write-up, Bauer notes that he viewed the use of the Ju52 as an experiment, and like many experiments, it might not work; so, he made sure that all the camps could be supplied by traditional load carrying. If the air drops worked, great, if not, they would proceed without them.



Summit of Nanga Parbat (26,660 ft.) from Camp 6 (22,835 ft.)

The expedition departed Srinagar in early May and this time broke from tradition and trekked to the southwest of Nanga Parbat, that is through the scenic Kagan Valley and over the Babusar Pass (13,691 ft, 4170 m). They arrived at Fairy Meadow on May 31. Bauer had purposely delayed the start of his expedition several weeks later than previous ones, due to the fact that previous expeditions had encountered a significant amount of soft snow and stormy weather on the lower mountain in late May. He thought he could avoid this inconvenience by a later start. Another 'trend' that was not overlooked was that there seemed to be a period of stable weather from mid-June through early July. Hence the plan was to establish Camp 4 (Advance Basecamp) no later than mid-June so that a push to the summit could be made in late June - early July. This of course did not leave much time to establish Camp 4 and get it supplied.

An additional novelty this expedition introduced, with the help of the local contingent of the Gilgit Scouts, was the heliograph. Sunlight (or artificial light if used at night), could be sent as Morse code flashes over large distances when reflected off of a mirror. Four heliograph stations were set-up between Fairy Meadows and Gilgit- the purpose was so that messages could be quickly relayed on clear days and nights. It appears that it was used as a backup for the shortwave radio so the expedition could receive weather forecasts. However, it is not clear from the post-expedition reports how well the system worked.

During the early days of June Camps 1 and 2 were established. Climbers noted from the start that the Rakhoit Glacier had changed considerably from the previous summer- and not for the better; it was more broken-up than ever. June 10<sup>th</sup> was a noteworthy day, despite the cloudy weather, the Ju52 made its first air drop; in this case multiple boxes of food and fuel were dropped near BC. Despite the use of parachutes there was some damage to the boxes and their contents, but overall, it did appear that the methodology was sound. The Ju52 made several subsequent airdrops in late June and again in early July

Due to the condition of the glacier and the on-and-off stormy weather the build-up of the

lower camps proceeded at a slow pace, but nevertheless they were established. When it came to sighting Camp 4, it was located several hundred yards away from where the previous summers' disaster had occurred. Above Camp 4 the route deviated from the 1937 route; Bauer did not want to climb over the top of Rakhoit Peak, but traverse its slopes to gain access to the ridge that led up to the Silver Saddle (closer to the route used in 1932 and 1934).

When the climbers started to make the traverse just below Rakhoit Peak they came across one of the previous expeditions fixed ropes; there was a body attached to the ropes. It turned out to be Pinju Norbu, one of the Sherpas who had been on Aschenbrenner and Schneider's rope team one in 1934. The climbers removed the amulet that is common for Sherpas to wear around their neck and then buried his body in a crevasse below the traverse. The amulet was returned to his family later that summer.

Camp 5 was placed on the ridge to the northeast of Rakhoit Peak while Camp 6 was installed on the ridge between Rakhoit Peak and the Silver Saddle, near a prominent rock formation the Germans called the 'Moor's Head'. Not far away they came across two bodies lying in the snow. It was reported that "...the bodies were perfectly persevered." It turned out to be Merkl and Sherpa Gaylay.

Unfortunately for the expedition, the weather reverted to a period of storminess; hence Bauer recalled everyone to BC. Not long after everyone had come down to BC, as one might guess, the weather improved. Fritz Bechtold, writing after the expedition, notes that during this period "...our own party also, though they would not admit it, lacked their old spirit." Bechtold does not comment on why the climbers were now in a funk; we can speculate that the lack of an extended period of good weather was a major component, which in turned resulted in a slow pace. Recall that Bauer hoped to be pushing for the summit by early July and it was now early August.

Despite the lack of enthusiasm at BC, porters and climbers moved back up on the fourth assault during the first days of August. It did

appear that the moisture from the Indian monsoon was moving into the region in waves- hence the periods of storms followed by a few days of clear weather. On this the last foray up the mountain the lead climbers only managed to reach Camp 5 before Bauer called off any further attempts. The highest point reached by this expedition was in the vicinity of the 1934 Expeditions Camp 7, that is about 700 ft (210 m) below the Silver Saddle.

The stormy weather and broken-up glacier took its toll on the team as they were forced up and then back down too many times. On the positive side, no one died on this expedition, which considering the track record, in and of itself was an accomplishment. At the time that might not been much of a consolation to the climbers. Another positive were the airdrops; some 70 loads were dropped and only a few were not retrievable. In addition, after the expedition had returned to Srinagar, the Ju52 was flown on at least one reconnaissance flight around the mountain in order to scout out potential routes.

#### Expedition Personnel

Paul Bauer- leader  
 Fritz Bechtold- (1932 expedition)  
 Dr. Ulrich Luft (1937 expedition)  
 Chlingensperg  
 Dr. Balke  
 Rebitsch  
 Ruths  
 Schmaderer  
 Ebermann-radio operator  
 Alexander Thoendes- pilot  
 Major Hadow (British)- Liaison Officer  
 Lt. Mchenna- (British) Liaison Officer

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Bauer, P. Nanga Parbat, 1938. *Himalaya Journal*. vol.11 (1939) p.82-106  
 Bechtold, F. Nanga Parbat, 1938. *Alpine Journal*. vol.51, no.258 (1939) p.70-78

date the Germans had launched four large expeditions in a span of seven years, all had focused their efforts on the potential route up the Rakhoit Glacier. Needless to say, this expedition was a small affair, more of a group of friends on a climbing holiday rather than an expedition, at least compared to what had transpired previously.

There were four principals, all fresh faces to Nanga Parbat. The team was led by Peter Aufschneider (Austrian and friend of Paul Bauer), although new to Nanga Parbat he was no stranger on big mountains. He had participated on the 1929 and 1931 German expeditions to Kangchenjunga. Another Austrian was Heinrich Harrer, he had not climbed any tall mountains, however, the previous summer he was a member of the team that made the first ascent of the difficult and awe-inspiring North Face of the Eiger. The German contingent consisted of Hans Lobenhoffer and a medical student, Lutz Chicken.

The team took on the dull but utilitarian title: German Himalaya Expedition of 1939. The objective was to explore and reconnoiter the northwest flank of Nanga Parbat for possible routes to the summit. This of course is the Diamir Face which Mummery and companions attempted in 1895. The Germans had seen this face in detail while on one of the Ju52 sorties the previous summer. After a lot of bad luck and heartbreak on the north side, it was finally time to give the Diamir Face a close inspection.

The team trekked north via the Kaghan Valley and then onto the Indus River. From here it was a short trek up the Bunar Valley to the edge of the Diamir Glacier, where they installed their basecamp (~12,600 ft, 3840 m). They initially gave some consideration of ascending the Diama Glacier towards the North Peak, but decided not to attempt this due to avalanche danger. Henceforth they focused their attention on the broad Diamir Face, specially between the Bazhin and Merkl Notches. Chicken and Lodenhoffer climbed the second rib (Mummery Rib) on the Diamir Face and stumbled across a 10-inch-long piece of wood- most likely a remnant of Mummery's attempt some 44 years previous (why would Mummery or his Gurkhas carry wood this high?). The climbers

#### 1939

**W**ith Europe tittering on the brink of war in the summer of 1939, it is surprising that any effort was directed toward Nanga Parbat at all. To

witnessed a number of avalanches that came from the Bazhin Glacier, which endangered some of their potential routes higher on the face. This spooked the two Germans and therefore they abandoned any further attempts on the face.

Meanwhile Aufschnaiter and Harrer climbed the middle rib on the flank of North Peak, but that fizzled out as well. The highest point any of the climbers reached was around 20,300 ft (6190 m); however, they came away with the idea that Nanga Parbat could be climbed from the Diamir Face, although rock-fall and ice avalanches would be a serious concern. The climbers also made the trek over to the Rakhoit Valley and were duly impressed with the scenery; forest and meadows with 13,000 ft (3960 m) of mountain relief as a backdrop.

This expedition is famous for what occurred after the members had left the mountain, not what they accomplished on the mountain. In early September, while the team was waiting in Karachi for the ship that would take them back to Europe, they were arrested by the authorities. Since they were in British India and now that Germany and England were at war, they were denied the opportunity of returning to Germany and switching from climbers to combatants.

The four climbers were sent to a British internment camp in northern India where they would sit out the war as noncombatants. They tried to escape, but could never quite make it; until April 1944 when Harrer and Aufschnaiter busted loose and headed east. After many adventures they made their way into Tibet and away from the long arm of the British. Eventually the two men reached Lhasa and befriended the young XIV Dali Lama. The two Austrians fled Tibet in 1951 just as the communist Chinese moved in.

#### Expedition Personnel

Peter Aufschnaiter -leader  
Heinrich Harrer  
Hans Lobenhoffer  
Lutz Chicken- doctor

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Chicken, L. Nanga Parbat Reconnaissance, 1939.  
*Himalaya Journal. vol.14 (1947) p.53-58*

#### 1950

World War II and its aftermath put mountaineering in the Karakoram-Himalaya on hold long after the fighting had concluded. Most of Europe was in ruins not only physically but economically as well; hence it took some time for expeditions from outside the Indian Subcontinent to make their way back as well (i.e.-the 1950 French Annapurna Expedition). But in time they did return; by the mid-1950's, large national expeditions were a common sight in the Himalaya and Karakoram. However, when they did return there had been monumental changes in the political structure of the region. British India and the various principalities that it had contained was no more; it had partitioned into East Pakistan (Bangladesh), India, and West Pakistan (Pakistan). Nanga Parbat now was within the political construct of West Pakistan.

The 1950 attempt was one of those expeditions where everything went horribly wrong; in fact, the principals had no intention of visiting Nanga Parbat until a few days before they arrived at its base. Here is how it unfolded; three Brits, Thornley, Crase, and Marsh had made plans to spend an entire year in the northern part of the Karakoram. Details are lacking on the where and what they hoped to accomplish over the allotted period of time, however, they commenced this ambitious program in October of 1950. Three weeks into the expedition and for reasons were are not told, it fell apart. One can only assume that it was due to a lack of permits from the Pakistani authorities.

The trio decided to salvage their proposed expedition by making an early winter reconnaissance of Nanga Parbat. They were already in the neighborhood and they had a lot of gear-so why not? They trekked up to Fairy Meadows, set up their basecamp on November 11 at ~12,500 ft (3810m). They had four Sherpas in their employment, however, there was an agreement that the Sherpas would not proceed above basecamp.

Undaunted the three Brits established Camp 1 and after supplying it started to make the route to Camp 2 on the Rakhoit Glacier. By November 18<sup>th</sup> Marsh was back at BC with a case of frostbitten toes. Crase and Thornley procced to push the route further. From the account written by Marsh, the two men did establish Camp 2 and climbed as high as 18,000 ft (5490 m). Marsh could follow their progress from BC, and saw that they had pushed up to the site of Camp 3. Thornley and Crase were last sighted on December 1. For the next three days the weather was clear and Camp 2 was clearly visible, however, there was no sight of the two climbers at the camp or anywhere along the route. On December 4<sup>th</sup> a storm moved in and deposited a deep blanket of snow. After the storm cleared, there was still no sign of Thornley and Crase, and unfortunately Camp 2 had also disappeared from sight, at least from Marsh's perspective at BC. Needless to say, Marsh was understandably concerned and despite the poor state of his feet, started back up the mountain to search for his two comrades.

Due to the nature of the circumstances, two of the Sherpas relented from their earlier 'no higher than BC' agreement, and accompany Marsh as he set out. The deep fresh snow restricted their efforts; they were not able to reach what they thought would have been the location of the highest camp; more importantly, there were no signs of the two missing climbers. After Marsh returned to civilization a search from the air was conducted, but it revealed nothing as to the fate of the men. Marsh concluded that they fell into a crevasse on or around December 1, he drew this conclusion because there was little avalanche activity during the period, so the probability they had been killed by an avalanche appeared to be slim.

Paying honor to his friends and fellow mountaineers, the only survivor of the trio wrote; "I am sure they would wish for no better tribute than that when they were last seen they were going up and still going strong."

#### Expedition Personnel (\* fatality)

J.W. Thornley\*

W.H. Crase\*

Capt. R.H. Marsh

#### References

Marsh, R.H. Nanga Parbat: The Accident of December 1950 (under Alpine Notes). *Alpine Journal*. vol.58, no.282 (1951) p.130-131

A brief accounting through 1950 indicates that there had been seven expeditions to Nanga Parbat, four of those had resulted in multiple fatalities. To put it another way; Climbers: zero, Nanga Parbat: thirty. Mountaineers had of course died on other large mountains, but the number of fatalities on the slopes of Nanga Parbat was staggering.

#### **1953**

The next German effort, number six, was under the leadership of Dr. Karl Herrligkoffer, the younger half-brother of Willy Merkl. Dr. Herrligkoffer was a frequent visitor to the Himalaya through the 1970's as a leader of assorted expeditions. He was controversial in the German mountaineering community for his 'divine right monarchy' attitude as a leader; however, he had a gift for raising monies which drew climbers to his expeditions even if they did not like the man.

When expedition personnel arrived in Pakistan, they were given red-carpet treatment by the local authorities. We are not told why they were so well received but the Pakistani government even flew them to Gilgit at no cost. It is possible that the Pakistanis were glad to see a large expedition find its way back into the western Himalaya after the long interlude caused by the war. This was also one of the first large expeditions to Pakistan, recall that the country did not come into fruition until August 1947.

Dr. Herrligkoffer's plan was to follow the Rakhoit Glacier route like his predecessors, but his innovation was to install fewer camps. We have to wonder if he had given any thought to routes on the Diamir Face? One problem that arose before the expedition even started was that Dr. Herrligkoffer was unable to hire any Sherpas, they

were already committed to other expeditions, especially the very large British effort on Mt. Everest which was taking place at the same time. This left Hunza porters, few of which at this time were trained as high-altitude porters, and fewer still who were willing to venture high on the mountain. In the end, only four Hunza men could be counted on to work on the upper mountain.

The expedition established its basecamp in late May just above Fairy Meadow; there was still a considerable amount of snow on the ground at this elevation. Higher up not surprisingly, avalanches were frequent. A shortwave radio was installed at BC as Dr. Herrligkoffer had arranged for weather forecast to be broadcast two times per day for the expedition's edification.

Camp 1 was located on the edge of the moraine ~14,800 ft (4510 m). From here the climbers began the circuitous trek on the now notorious Rakhoit Glacier. Camp 2 (~17,400 ft, 5300 m) was not sited in an ideal location; it was in a potential line of fire from several hanging glaciers that loomed above, nevertheless it had to do. Camp 3 (~20,000 ft, 6100 m) was installed close to the 1937 Expedition's Camp 4. Up to this juncture the climbing was more route finding through the crevasses and seracs of the glacier; above the real climbing began.

Over the previous weeks the weather had been unsettled-intermittent storms had deposited a considerable amount of fresh snow on the mountain. Nevertheless, the team continued to push the route; Camp 4 was established at the base of Rakhoit Peak (~22,000 ft, 6710 m). The next significant event was the storm of June 12-16; the lead climbers waited out the weather at Camp 3. The storm did deposit fresh snow but fortunately not the massive amounts that bogged down earlier expeditions. Shortly after the weather improved, the lead team regained Camp 4 and then traversed over the top of Rakhoit Peak. They located Camp 5 on the ridge near a rock known as the Moor's Head (~22,600 ft, 6890 m). Some sections of the traverse were fixed with ropes to facilitate the loads that four of the porters were willing to carry to Camp 5 but no higher. By now it was the third week of June, and all things considered the build-up of

camps had been quite rapid considering the amount of soft snow the team had had to deal with.

During the last week of June, the team members at BC heard a weather report warning them that monsoon moisture was headed in their direction. Sure enough, from June 28-30<sup>th</sup> another storm engulfed the mountain. Lady luck was on the side of the climbers for a change; the storm was short lived. By July 1 the lead climbers are moving back up the route. The next day Buhl and Kempter, who had been doing much of the route finding to date, occupied Camp 5, ready to make a summit push. Recall that previous expeditions had their ultimate camps considerably higher. From Camp 5 Buhl and Kempter would have to finish climbing the Northeast Ridge to the Silver Saddle, then up the long snow plateau which would place them near the summit ridge. No one had been past the plateau so the final few hundred meters were *terra incognita*. One thing the two men knew was that it was a long haul: the distance from Camp 5 to the summit was on the order of 3.7 miles (5.9 km) with an elevation gain on the order of 4,600 ft (1400 m), if one factors in all of the up-and-downs along the route.

Buhl departed Camp 5 at 2:30 AM on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, Kempter was slow to rise and did not clear the tent until about an hour later. The two climbers had previously decided they would proceed without a rope and virtually climb solo; hence leaving camp at different times was not a major issue. Buhl traversed the ridge and passed through the Silver Saddle in good time. Regarding route conditions above he wrote: "The climb beyond Silberstattel was extremely strenuous. I was continually stumbling amid meter-high snow-ripples and climbing over them..." He reached the Bazhin Notch at 2 PM. Kempter had followed, but lagged far behind Buhl; in fact, Kempter turned around that afternoon somewhere on the snow plateau. What Buhl saw of the remainder of the route from the southern end of the snow plateau he judged to be more difficult than he or anyone else had anticipated. Here is how he describes it: "A sharp serrated ridge goes on from here with jumbled rock-towers breaking off into steep, snow-



covered icy walls on which snow drifts form most beautiful filigree work.”

He had been on the move for about 12 hours, fatigue was becoming an issue, so he implemented a strategy: he divided the ridge into 40-80 ft (10-20 m) sections, he climbed that section and then took a short rest before proceeding with the next section. This worked well until he arrived at the base of a 165-200 ft (50-60 m) tall rock tower. There was no way he could work his way around it; the only option was up. He describes this simply as “it was the hardest climbing!” After he surmounted the rock tower, he was on the shoulder of the summit ridge around 26,450 ft (8060 m), from here he can clearly see the summit about 200 ft (60 m) higher. He notes that his energy reserves were nearly depleted but he was able to focus on the task at hand. “With hands and feet I pushed myself forward, looking for the highest point.” Once again, his strategy paid dividends; at 7 PM he became the first human to stand atop Nanga Parbat. It had been a 17-hour effort to this juncture and he has little in the way of survival gear for the coming night.

While on the summit he had the presence of mind to take some photographs, he also tied the flags of Tirol and Pakistan to his ice axe and took a photo. He departed about 30 minutes after arriving, and decided to leave his ice axe with the flags as proof of his success. He did retain his ski poles. Leaving his ice axe behind instead one of the ski poles with the flags attached, was an interesting decision I am not sure very many mountaineers would duplicate.

Sometime later while descending a steep slope, one of his crampon’s worked its way loose from the boot. One wonders if he wished he had his ice axe at this stage, in any case he does not mention it in his account. In the increasing darkness he was able to find a small ledge on which he was able to place both feet, he re-attached his crampon and decides to spend the night on this precarious ledge. He leans against a slab of rock for the entire night; he does not have anything to drink or eat. Earlier he did manage to swallow some Dextro-Energen tablets (dextrose) which he says improved his circulation. Over the course of the

long night, he does fall asleep several times, but fortunately he does not lose his balance. When he does awake, he was “...terrified to find myself at an altitude of 8,000 m, leaning on a steep wall where the slightest loss of balance would have thrown me into the abyss.”

By 5 AM he was on the move yet again. The ideal weather held for another day. During this part of the descent, he frequently imagined that he had a climbing companion, this figurative partner did provide a certain amount of moral support. Just past the Bazhin Notch he curled up and took an hour-long nap. Not long afterward he came to a feature he refers to as the secondary summit, which required him to ascend 100 ft (30 m). It took him an hour to climb this short distance: “every step was now torture” he writes. He plodded onward, eventually reaching Camp 5 at 7 PM that evening (July 4<sup>th</sup>); he had been on his summit quest for over 40 hours.

Reaching the summit was not without costs, he returned to Camp 5 with one frostbitten foot. The following day his foot began to thaw and blister and hence he could not get his boot on. Needless to say, that the descent from Camp 5 was difficult, not only because of his frostbitten foot, but because the Rakhoit Glacier was very broken-up and littered with avalanche debris. There were no subsequent summit attempts by the remaining expedition members, as they had spent all their energy and resources getting Camp 5 established. Buhl of course did make it safely back to BC although a photo of him taken at this time shows a man about 30 years older than his actual age.

After the expedition Buhl wrote; “We did not vanquish this mountain but we climbed it because it was merciful to us.” Well-chosen words considering that 30 men had died in attempts to be the first to tread its summit.

There are a couple of points worth noting regarding Buhl’s successful climb. Overall, he took great risk, but it of course paid off. We know he had some extra clothing, but he took no other bivy related gear. He had a little food which he left at one of his rest stops but did consume several dextrose tablets during the descent. He also notes he had a flask with half a liter of cocoa-tea. This is

not much to survive on if he had been delayed, his margin of safety was very slim to nonexistent. Fortunately, the weather was ideal- great visibility and wind the was not a factor.

During the 1999 climbing season the Japanese mountaineer T. Ikeda, found Buhl's ice axe on the summit of Nanga Parbat. He brought it down and later presented it to Buhl's family in Austria. After success on Nanga Parbat, Buhl went on to be part of the team that had made the first ascent of Broad Peak in May-June 1957. Immediately after Broad Peak he proceeded to climb Chologisa with fellow Austrian, Kurt Diemberger. The pair were close to reaching the summit in late June but turned around in poor weather. On the descent, Buhl, in low visibility, stepped through a cornice and plunged to his death.

#### Expedition Personnel

Karl Herrligkoffer- leader

Hans Ertl

Albert Bitterling

Fritz Aumann

Otto Kempter

Hernman Kollinsperger

Peter Aschenbrenner- (Austrian)

Kuno Rainer- (Austrian)

Hermann Buhl- (Austrian)

Dr. Walter Frauenberger- (Austrian)

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#### **The Rest of the Story...**

**A**fter the first ascent via the Rakhoit Glacier route, it was up to subsequent mountaineers to test their skills against two of the greatest mountain faces on earth; the Diamir located on the northwest and the Rupal to the southeast. Recall that the 1895 and 1939

expeditions had given the Diamir Face a close inspection. In the summer of 1961, not surprisingly a German expedition set out for Nanga Parbat; Dr. Herrligkoffer was the leader once again (A.J. 1962). This team was intent of climbing one of a number of possible routes up the Diamir Face. They ultimately reach the vicinity of 23,500 ft (7160 m) before giving up. The remainder of the route from their high camp to the Bazhin Notch according to the lead climbers, did not look problematic- the weather however had been miserable.

The next attempt was in 1962 when the German's did successfully climb the Diamir Face (now called the Kinshofer Route), making it the second team to stand on the summit (Kinshofer, Mannhardt, Low). Unfortunately, Sigi Low, was killed while descending (A.J. 1962). To say that Nanga Parbat was a 'German mountain' was an understatement. They could lay claim to the first two ascents, including the difficult Diamir Face. But there was unfinished business to be attended to. In 1963 Dr. Herrligkoffer led a reconnaissance to the Rupal Face followed in 1964 with a full expedition. However, due to problems with their permit, the Pakistani authorities asked that they abandoned their attempt just as it was commencing.

In 1968, the now 52-year-old micro-manager Dr. Herrligkoffer, was back on the mountain with a team intent on climbing the Rupal Face. As per usual for German expeditions, this was another large team, the European personnel consisted of 11 men and one woman, the latter being the niece of Dr. Herrligkoffer. Climbers steadily made their way up the ribs and couloirs that form the wall, eventually reaching a respectable 23,300 ft (7100 m) before turning for home. During the effort the weather, like so many preceding expeditions had experienced, was not climber friendly at all.

Undaunted by two failures to climb the Rupal Face, Dr Herrligkoffer and team were back at the base of the face in the summer of 1970 for a renewed effort; the expedition was labelled as the Sigi Low Memorial Expedition (A.J. 1971). Recall that Low was the climber who in 1962, after reaching the summit via the Diamir Face, had

perished on the descent. In total there were 16 Europeans on the roster. Two of the climbers on this expedition were brothers from South Tirol (northern Italy), Reinhold and Gunther Messner. Like all Herrligkoffer expeditions, this was not a close group of friends sharing a climbing adventure, it was more of an uneasy business arrangement.

A string of camps was established on the face with the Messner brothers sharing the role of lead climbers for much of the effort. In total five camps were installed, the route weaved its way through the Wieland Glaciers, Welzenbach Icefield, up through the Merkl Couloir before making an upward traverse to the summit. By late June the Messner brothers as well as Felix Kuen, Peter Scholz and Gerhard Baur were in position for a summit bid. Until now the weather had been good; there were fewer storms than previous expeditions had experienced.

On the evening of June 27<sup>th</sup> Baur and the Messner brothers occupied Camp 5 just below the Merkl Couloir; Kuen and Scholz were installed at Camp 4. For some reason there was no radio at Camp 5, so it had been pre-arranged that a rocket signal would indicate the weather forecast: red for bad and green for good. The occupants of Camp 5 saw a faint red rocket above Basecamp, indicating the weather would be deteriorating. Henceforth it was determined that on the next day Reinhold would make a quick bid for the summit while Gunther and Baur would fix ropes in the Merkl couloir for subsequent attempts.

Reinhold set out early in the morning with little in the way of survival gear and no rope; the latter being understandable as he was on a solo quest. Meanwhile, Gunther and Baur had some 'communication' issues between themselves; the net result was that Baur descended to Camp 4 and Gunther decided to attempt to catch-up with his brother. While this was transpiring, Kuen and

Scholz moved up to occupy Camp 5 so they would be in position, weather permitting, for their own summit bid the next day.

By late morning, Gunther had been able to catch his older brother, who at this hour was above the Merkl Couloir. However, this feat of high-altitude mountaineering was only possible because Gunther had given an all-out effort; which later cost him dearly. Reinhold was surprised to see his brother, nevertheless they proceeded to the summit as a climbing pair (minus a rope as Gunther did not bring one).

Above the Merkl Couloir the route angled north traversing several small interconnecting snowfields; the weather was actually very good, Reinhold notes that the sun was out and that he was overheated in his climbing apparel. As it turns out the red rocket had been fired in mistake; the red colored rocket had been wrapped in green



paper! Whoever fired the rocket mistook the green wrapper for a green rocket. The weather forecast was for a continuation of clear skies. The Messner brothers proceeded slowly to the summit; the pace had diminished significantly compared to the morning hours due to the afore mentioned heat, altitude and accumulated exertion

They set foot on the summit in the late afternoon; this had been a very strong effort over difficult terrain. The duo spent about an hour on the summit, during which time they took copious photographs, unfortunately none of these photos survived the descent. With an hour of daylight remaining, they started to move back down the mountain.

Recall that Reinhold had no bivy gear and as it turned out nether did Gunther; an even more

looming issue was they had no rope; hence they would be forced to downclimb the steepest sections of the route. It became readily apparent that Gunther was lagging far behind Reinhold; Gunther had made a valent effort on the ascent, leaving Camp 5 hours after his brother. However, now he was running out of energy and this was no trivial descent. He had overexerted himself on the ascent and was probably suffering from altitude sickness as well.

Shortly after leaving the summit Gunther suggested that they descend the Diamir Face rather than the Merkl Couloir which he complained was too steep. Reinhold pointed out that the plan was for fixed ropes to be installed in the Merkl Couloir, so if they bivvied on the ridge they could descend the couloir the next day. However, Reinhold did not realize that the no ropes had been fixed in the couloir, a task that Gunther and Baur had neglected to perform.

In gathering darkness, they proceeded to descend the ridge to the south (towards the Mazeno Ridge), why they went so far off route Reinhold does not reveal in his post-expedition account. They ended up bivvying in the Merkl Gap.

It was a clear and hence a cold night, temperatures were on the order of minus 30°F (-34° C); the brothers sat on their outer boots and wrapped up in a space blanket. They survived the hours of darkness without too many problems, at least it seemed that way at the time. As they looked down from the gap in the early morning light, they noticed that the terrain directly below was very steep; there was no way they could make the descent without a rope. The night out in the open at 8,000 m had not done any good for Gunther's weakened state.

As luck would have it around 8 AM Reinhold saw Kuen and Scholz slowing ascending the Merkl Couloir; help was on the way, or so it appeared. Reinhold did manage to shout down to Kuen who was at one point only about 100 yards (95 m) below. The wind was blowing so communication was sporadic; Reinhold asked for a rope, but Kuen did not understand and continued on to the summit with Scholz. After the expedition there was a lot of controversy regarding what

was and was not communicated between Kuen and Reinhold during this brief encounter.

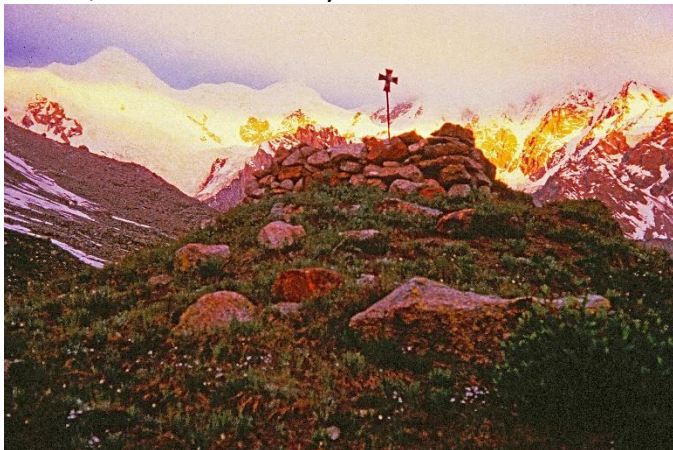
It became readily apparent to Reinhold that their comrades were not going to be of any immediate help and they most likely did not have a spare rope anyway. Climbing back up the ridge toward the summit was not an option due to Gunther's weak condition; the only other option was to descend the Diamir Face which they proceeded to do that morning

The brothers downclimbed the upper glaciers and eventually found their way onto Mummery's Rib. Gunther was lagging behind his brother but was making steady progress. They bivvied a second night on the upper section of the rib. The descent continued the next morning; all was well with the two men until they reached the lower section of the Diamir Face. Reinhold, who was well ahead of Gunther, reached the bottom of the face in the afternoon and was able to find some running water near one of lateral moraines of the Diamir Glacier; he had not had a drink in over two days. He waited for Gunther who was nowhere in sight. Reinhold was initially not worried because they had reached relatively easy ground; however, as the afternoon wore on and Gunther still did not make an appearance, Reinhold retraced his route along the lower face.

Reinhold's shouts for his younger brother went unanswered, there were no footprints to follow as the snow had been hard when he had crossed the area. Despite his weariness, Reinhold worked his way back up to the point where he had last seen his brother; there was no sign whatsoever of Gunther. He did spot a large debris field where an ice avalanche had come to rest; it was starting to appear that Gunther had been in the path of this avalanche, there was no other explanation that fit the facts.

After wandering through the night on the Diamir Glacier, Reinhold moved back down to the upper Diamir Valley; he was suffering from frostbitten toes and fingers. He had not eaten for four days, in addition, his energy reserves were just about drained, compounded by the emotional strain from losing his brother. All of this added up to a hellish experience. He walked and crawled

down to the nearest village, where he did receive some aid by the locals. He was also racked by dysentery which added to his misery and weakened state. As he slowly descended through some of the larger villages, the locals came to his rescue, he was eventually carried down to the



Karakoram Highway on a homemade stretcher. A day later he was in a hospital in Gilgit. Meanwhile, Dr. Herrligkoffer had written-off the Messner brothers as lost, when low-and-behold the expedition arrived in Gilgit the same day that Reinhold was admitted into the hospital. There was a brief but 'strained' reunion between the good doctor and Reinhold.

In the post-expedition reports and press releases there were a lot of recriminations. A number of expedition personnel accused Reinhold of abandoning his brother in order to complete the traverse. The mental toll on Reinhold was much more intense and lasting than the physical toll; despite the fact that a number of his toes were amputated.

Nanga Parbat had been Reinhold's first 8,000 m peak, over the next 16 years he climbed the remaining thirteen 8,000 m peaks. In 1978 Reinhold returned to Nanga Parbat and soloed, alpine style, the Diamir Face also without supplemental oxygen. His ascent route followed a line to the right of the Mummery Rib. In his book, *The Naked Mountain*, he says that this climb "...was and remains the boldest climb of my life." This was not the end of the story as regards the Messner Nanga Parbat legacy; in August of 2005 Gunther's body melted out of the snow/ice around 14,450 ft (4400 m) on the lower Diamir Face. His body was in

the location where Reinhold thought he went missing based on the ice avalanche debris he saw in 1970.

The frequency of attempts on Nanga Parbat increased significantly beginning in the late 1970's despite its reputation for being a 'killer mountain'. The 1980's and 1990's were the heyday- just about every conceivable route or variation were attempted and climbed. During the summer months the 'naked mountain' was cloaked by a mantle of mountaineers hailing from all over the globe.

Another noteworthy climb took place in August 2004 when Steve House and Bruce Miller make an alpine attempt on the Rupal Face; they ran out of stream just below 25,000 ft (7620 m). With the face nearly completed, House returned the next summer with Vince Anderson; the duo was able to work their way up the Central Pillar. They stepped on the summit in early September. This eight-day climb was a major feat in high-altitude mountaineering; two climbers versus 13,500 ft (4110 m) of very difficult mixed climbing. This is especially true when compare to the massive expeditions that had preceded them. The margin for error was razor thin; fortunately, the weather remained ideal throughout the climb.

The first winter ascent occurred in February of 2016 when a multi-national force consisting of Ali Sadpara, Alex Txikon and Simone Moro reached the summit via the Diamir Face. The climbers actually started their climb on two separate expeditions but joined forces high on the mountain as various compatriots started to call it quits.

It is interesting to look at route statistics, especially the frequency at which certain routes are climbed. By far and away the Kinshofer Route on the Diamir Face is the most used; on the order of 80% of traffic on the mountain is on the Kinshofer Route. Routes on the Rupal Face are occasionally climbed but not often. Most interesting is that the Germans beloved route via the Rakhoit Glacier, since 1953 has had very little traffic.

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#### Photo Credits:

Page 7: 1938 Bauer Exp.-Silver Saddle and Snow Plateau.

Page 11: 1934 Merkl Exp.- (see caption)

Page 19: 1938 Bauer Exp.-Aerial of Diamir Face taken from the Ju52.

Page 21: from authors collection. German memorial at Fairy Meadow, July 1986. The memorial has since been updated.