

2008 UK/Canadian Distaghil Sar Expedition

Hispar Muztagh, Pakistan, June-July 2008



Mount Everest Foundation Expedition

(Expedition Reference 08/19A)

Final Report

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1 Aim

The goal of the expedition was to climb the North Ridge of Distaghil Sar. This side of the world's 20th-highest mountain is protected by the almost impassable Malangutti Glacier, and has only been attempted once. Distaghil Sar, at 7883m in the Hispar Muztagh, has had only four attempts and two summits, all from the snowy south side. The North Face presents a massive wall of rock and ice; the North Ridge, a line of some weakness, is mostly snow and ice, and was to be climbed in alpine style from a forward camp at its base.

2 Summary

The expedition was led by Bruce Normand (Scotland), and the other members were Peter Thompson (England), Ben Cheek (England) and Don Bowie (Canada). The team spent one month, from early June to early July 2008, working from a base camp (BC) beside the Yazghil Glacier. After initial route-finding forays, the team acclimatised in situ while transporting food and equipment up to P6247, the starting point for a long glacier traverse across the upper Malangutti to the base of the face. This was a slow process due to uncharacteristically unstable weather and poor snow conditions. When the climbers reached P6247 and were able to see their target for the first time, it was obvious that the route, seen by Normand from the same spot in 1999, had in the intervening 9 years disintegrated badly, to the point where it was highly objectively hazardous. The back-up plan of a snow line on the Northeast Ridge of Distaghil Sar East was also in similarly dangerous condition, forcing the team to abandon the expedition with no further climbing attempts.

3 Introduction

3.1 Purpose

The aim of the expedition was to climb the North Ridge of Distaghil Sar. This was to be accomplished by traversing to the base of the north face from the east, bypassing the badly broken Malangutti Glacier. This in turn required a BC on the Yazghil Glacier, and gear transport up and over a summit P6247 to set a forward base for an alpine-style bid on the North Ridge.

3.2 Geography

Distaghil Sar is located at the centre of the Hispar Muztagh, a subrange of the Karakoram delineated by the Hispar Glacier on the south, the Khurdopin Glacier to the east, the Hunza valley to the west and the Shimshal valley to the north (see map in Appendix B). All of the terrain in this region is semi-desert valleys containing deep gorges or wide, stone-covered glaciers, and above these are mostly snow-covered mountains with generally poor rock and very significant glacier and serac cover. Distaghil Sar, 7883m, is



Heart of the Hispar: at left, South Face of Distaghil Sar above the Khunyang Glacier; at right, North Faces of Pumari Chhish and Khunyang Chhish above the upper Yazghil.

the highest peak in this range, and the highest mountain in Pakistan outside the Baltoro and Nanga Parbat. Most previous attempts, and the only ascents, have been made from the south (Hispar) side via the cirque of the Khunyang Glacier (which it should be noted is now passable only with great difficulty). The North Face of the peak is steeper than the all-snow south flank, featuring one major rock wall and highly active serac bands in many places; the glaciers descending from the face form the Malangutti, one of the most tortured sweeps of ice blocks in the entire Karakoram.

3.3 Access

The approach to the north side of Distaghil Sar is by the new road (completed in 2005) up the Shimshal valley. Arriving here from Islamabad in 2008 was still the usual tortuous exercise on the badly decaying Karakoram Highway through Azad Kashmir to Besham, up the Indus to Chilas, and then past Gilgit to the Hunza (680km). However, this situation will change soon (see Sec. 5.8).

The Shimshal River cuts a deep gorge which exits the mountains into the Hunza River at Passu, some 50km beyond Karimabad. It took the villagers of Shimshal 18 years to complete the spectacular and truly vertiginous 40km road, which now links their community to the outside world in 2.5 hours. The road follows the river for half its length, but climbs steeply to cross the Lupghar and Momhil valleys, then traverses a near-vertical cliff and descends to a wider, flat section at Ziarat. It narrows again to cross the river twice in passing the end of the Malangutti Glacier, which still calves into the river but has recently lost a lot of depth at its lower end, and finishes with 5km of flat valley floor to arrive at the irrigated fields and terraces of Shimshal village. The village now has three guesthouses.



Left: Pamir peaks northeast from Shimshal. Right: east over upper Virjerab peaks to Huang Guan Shan (Crown, left), Chongtar (centre) and K2 (right).

Geologically, the Shimshal River is the dividing line between the Karakoram to the south and the Pamir to the north. Shimshal is essentially the last habitable land in the valley, which is almost cut by the terminal moraine of the Yazghil Glacier 3km above the town; behind the Yazghil, the river is fed by two more large glaciers, the Khurdopin, which descends from Snow Lake, and the Virjerab, which descends from the upper Panmah. These regions remain almost unexplored, not least because passage on the upper glaciers is very difficult, but some interesting and untouched 6000m peaks are definitely to be found here. By contrast, the Pamir side is rather more hospitable, and much of the wealth of the Shimshali people comes from grazing thousands of head of livestock on the Pamir meadows in summer.

The base camp (BC) for the Distaghil Sar expedition was only some 10km from Shimshal village, albeit by a rather convoluted trek across the Yazghil and up its orographic right side on unstable morainal slopes, which necessitated occasional passages on the crevassed glacier. Due to the terrain rather than the distance, this was deemed by the porters and local village committee to represent 3 stages (a stage is now defined as 3 hours' work).

4 Team

The expedition members were Bruce Normand (Scotland, leader), Peter Thompson (England, deputy leader), Ben Cheek (England, equipment manager) and Don Bowie (Canada, medical and communications specialist). The logistics were provided by Adventure Tours Pakistan (ATP), and the support team was composed of Nazar Karim, functioning as guide and (civilian) liaison officer, and cook Meher.

5 Preparation

5.1 Conception

In 1999, Bruce Normand led an exploratory visit to the Yazghil Glacier with Richard Ackerley and Henry Lickorish. At that time the approach to Shimshal village was still a two-day trek, and the trio took only four porters to a point beside the glacier which afforded access to a BC at the pasture of Parigoz (visited only for hunting). They found the Yazghil beyond Parigoz to be quite impassable, and Normand and Ackerley made two climbs above the pasture instead. The first took them to the summit of P6247, the peak directly above Parigoz, and the second took them to Shimshal Whitehorn (officially 6400m) by skirting under the north face of P6247. Normand completed a new route on the Northeast Ridge of Shimshal Whitehorn, missing the true summit (later found to be 10m higher and 100m further) due to a white-out, and to the tragic discovery that Ackerley had fallen to his death literally from the last 10m of the route, which the pair were soloing at that point.

From P6247 in perfect weather, Normand could see the entire upper Malangutti basin, a long snow plateau beneath the base of the North Face. Because Normand and Ackerley were able to descend easily from P6247 to the foot of Shimshal Whitehorn, the way was clear to traverse some 5-10km of glacial terrain to arrive at the bottom of any part of the North Face.



Pictures of Distaghil Sar taken during the 1999 reconnaissance (left), showing the approach across the upper Malangutti basin to the North Face, and (right) taken in the early 1990s, showing the North Ridge in its former condition (photo courtesy of Steve Razzetti).

5.2 Objective

Distaghil Sar is a massive mountain, with three separate summits along an east-west ridge. The western summit is the highest, at 7883m, and has been climbed twice: both the first ascent of the mountain in 1960 by Austrians Diether Marchart and Guenther Staercker and a repeat by a Spanish team in 1982 used the Southwest Ridge. The eastern summit, at 7696m, was climbed by the Southeast Ridge in 1980 and 1992. The middle

peak, at 7760m, appears on some lists as one of the world's highest unclimbed mountains.

While the southern flank consists mostly of long snow slopes with significant crevasse and serac activity, the northern flank is steep and in many places rocky, with large, hanging glaciers over much of its breadth. However, the few previous attempts on the north side have with one exception faltered not on the face, but on the direct approach up the Malangutti, which is so badly crevassed as to resemble an icefall over 10km in length. Both German and Japanese expeditions in the 1980s have failed here. The exception, a New Zealand expedition in 1996, ended in tragedy when three of the six members, who had climbed into the Northwest Face presumably close to the North Ridge, were lost in a major storm.

The aim of the 2008 expedition was to use the long but straightforward alternative approach reconnoitred in 1999 to bypass the extreme difficulties of the lower Malangutti. Because of the length and altitude of the approach, the strategy would be to acclimatise while moving equipment and provisions over P6247 and across to the base of the route, which, with a length of 1800m, would then be attempted in alpine style.

5.3 Permission

The application for permission to climb Distaghil Sar was made to the Pakistani Ministry of Tourism, and was approved. Since 2002, peaks in the Northern Areas of Pakistan but outside the Baltoro have cost 10% of their historical price, meaning that a peak between 7500m and 8000m can be climbed for a fee of 400USD.

5.4 Logistics

The expedition used the services of the trekking agency Adventure Tours Pakistan (ATP) to arrange the permit, to provide staff, to supply kitchen and base-camp equipment and to arrange transport to the upper Hunza. The members bought expedition food and fuel themselves, in Islamabad, in Gilgit and in the Hunza, for the trek and for the climb. Final transport to Shimshal and portage from Shimshal were arranged on-site.

Given the long approach to the route, climbing provisions were brought with a view to spending 20 days in BC and 25 days beyond BC. Gas canisters for the days on the mountain were obtained through ATP. The vast majority of the food was bought in Islamabad, where all but the most specialised items can now be obtained (including real cheese, real coffee, real chocolate, couscous and all breakfast cereals, chocolate bars and biscuits familiar from UK supermarkets); only freeze-dried meals, energy bars and gels, isotonic drinks and some sausage needed to be brought from abroad.

Climbing equipment consisted of four 60m x 8mm ropes with 1.5 standard racks of rock (nuts, cams, pitons), ice (screws of all lengths) and snow (pickets) protection. A number of lengths of fixed line were brought to secure possible dangerous sections which would be climbed repeatedly on the approach ridge. The team brought a range of tents, with

three small or ultra-small, single-wall assault tents for high on the mountain, and two two-man, one three-man and two four-man (rented from ATP) tents for use in BC and in the intermediate camps on the approach. The team had a Thuraya satellite telephone.

Because of the conservative food strategy and equipment deposits in Pakistan (Normand, Bowie), combined with the members all obtaining 35 or 40kg baggage allowances from their chosen airlines, the team was able to dispense completely with the need to ship anything to Pakistan by air cargo. This saved very significant amounts of time and money, as well as removing the potential for serious or even show-stopping delays due to Pakistani customs.

5.5 Finances

Full financial details are presented in tabular form. Numbers are quoted for convenience in UK pounds (GBP) at the exchange rates prevailing at the time when the money was spent (early June): 1.00GBP = 2.00USD = 133PKR. It should be noted that the pound has slipped considerably against the other major currencies, and that the Pakistani rupee has fallen catastrophically (for the citizens of Pakistan) against all hard currencies, in the interim.

Expenditures

Item	GBP
Airfares	2300
Insurance, climbers	1650
Equipment, overseas	1450
Peak fee	200
Environmental levy	100
Agency fee	300
Insurance, staff and porters	35
Staff	1200
Porters	800
Food and fuel	950
BC equipment	650
Gas canisters	275
Transport	560
Accommodation	280
Meals	110
Satellite telephone	180
Weather forecast	120

11260

The total cost of the expedition, including a reasonable attribution of all direct expenses incurred overseas, was thus £11260. This number is startlingly low for such a major peak, and was achieved not by cutting any corners but as a consequence of i) the very low peak fee in the Hunza, ii) the abolition since 2006 of military liaison officers outside the Baltoro, iii) the avoidance of air cargo fees and iv) the very short approach which kept overall porter costs rather low. No expenses are included for medical equipment: a very comprehensive expedition first-aid kit was provided by Bowie, but with no major incidents occurring, this was never used.

Income

The expedition was the grateful recipient of a number of significant grants.

Donor	GBP
Nick Estcourt Award	£1500
Mount Everest Foundation	£2650
British Mountaineering Council	£2000
Shipton-Tilman Award	US\$4000 = £2000
	8150

Personal contributions from the four climbers were then £780 per person.

Equipment grants and support included:

- Rucksacks and a summit tent from Equip UK
- Boots from Bestard
- Clothing at wholesale prices from Rab UK
- Equipment at wholesale prices from DMM UK
- A £500 grant and equipment at wholesale prices from Lyon UK
- Freeze-dried meals from Reiter Travel Lunch

The expedition would like to thank all of its sponsors for their generous support.

5.6 Insurance

Cheek and Normand had full expedition insurance through the BMC, and Bowie full insurance through a private US company (Berkeley Insurance).

5.7 Medical

All members had or obtained current inoculations against tetanus, diphtheria, polio, typhoid and hepatitis A and B. Malaria is not a problem in the arid climate of Pakistan, and the risk of rabies is lower than the risk of the immunisation procedure. Bowie provided a very comprehensive first-aid kit, including injectables, for all regular eventualities, but in the event this was not used. None of the members other than Cheek (prophylactic diamox) used any altitude medication.

5.8 Travel

Cheek and Thompson flew from Islamabad to Manchester with Air Blue, and Normand from Frankfurt to Lahore with Kuwait Airlines, continuing to Islamabad by bus (5 hours). All three members arrived in Islamabad on the morning of 31st May. Bowie arrived on 5th June from Kathmandu with Pakistan International Airlines. Transport as far as Passu (upper Hunza) was arranged through ATP, with overnights in Chilas and Passu. Jeeps from Passu to Shimshal and back were arranged on-site, and all return travel to Islamabad was accomplished by public bus, the members returning at different times.

Prospective expeditioners in northern Pakistan in 2009 should note that i) it is unlikely that the Babusar Pass shortcut (Abbottabad to Rakhiot Bridge, cutting four hours from the journey and avoiding the increasingly unsettled Northwest Frontier Province) will be completed before mid- or late summer; ii) the Chinese project to rebuild the road from Rakhiot Bridge to Khunjerab Pass is now in full swing, with men and machines arriving in force in late summer 2008, and the entire stretch is expected to be a construction site next year. In the meantime, the existing KKH continues to deteriorate steadily over its full length as these developments are awaited.

6 Expedition Log

31st May

Cheek and Thompson, flying directly to Islamabad, and Normand, flying via Lahore, arrived almost simultaneously at the ATP office. They were greeted by ATP's owners, Ashraf Aman and Naiknam Karim, and introduced immediately to their staff, guide Nazar Karim and cook Meher. With no word from Bowie on his exact schedule, the team adopted a relaxed approach to the planning and went only to change money.

1st June

The team paid ATP for all of its services, dispensing the rest of its money. With the staff anxious to move into action, a major raid was organised on the new Metro Cash-and-Carry, a novelty in Pakistan and a huge boon for climbers. Some 40000PKR was disbursed on all the expedition staples and a wide selection of more specialised items. Normand discovered that his equipment deposited with ATP had been shipped to Skardu rather than to Islamabad, and efforts were made to have this returned.

2nd June

With a view to their plan to climb in the Chinese Tien Shan after the expedition, Cheek and Normand spent the morning in the heavily fortified embassy enclave applying for Chinese visas. In the afternoon, Normand went for the expedition briefing at the Alpine Club of Pakistan, which was a distinct non-event. Cheek and Thompson rounded up various items of hardware for BC, for the kitchen and for portage.

3rd June

Normand spent the morning picking up the passports at the Chinese embassy and the afternoon sorting his deposited equipment, which had arrived from Skardu. Cheek and Thompson continued the search for and purchase of more variety in the menu. At this point Bowie's situation became clear: he had been on an expedition to the South Face of Annapurna, which had ended as scheduled, if somewhat acrimoniously, early in the week of 19th May. He had been back in Pokhara preparing to fly to Pakistan when news arrived that his erstwhile teammates, Iniki Ochoa and Horia Colibasanu, were in trouble on the summit ridge of Annapurna. Ochoa was suffering from cerebral oedema and was lying unable to move in a tent at 7500m. Bowie had immediately joined forces with Denis Urubko as part of a spontaneously formed international rescue team, and had returned to the mountain as fast as possible. For two days the pair had fought their way up the face in dangerous conditions to bring oxygen and more medicine to Ochoa, who in the interim had been reached by Ueli Steck; Steck was administering dexamethasone on Bowie's instructions, but on the fourth day reported that Ochoa had died. The beaten and exhausted climbers had returned to Pokhara to find the country in a state of siege due to demonstrations accompanying the final abdication of the king from all positions of authority, and Bowie was unable to do anything to buy an air ticket, process bank transfers or deal with visas. Only on the morning of the 2nd had some semblance of normalcy returned in Kathmandu, where he then had to begin arranging everything again.

4th June

The members in Islamabad continued waiting. Bowie was rejected from his flight due to a visa snafu, and did not leave Kathmandu.

5th June

The members in Islamabad continued waiting. Bowie spent the morning at the US embassy and the afternoon flying, touching down at last in Islamabad at 11:00pm.

6th June

The united team finally left Islamabad at sunrise for the long haul up the Karakoram Highway, arriving in Chilas well after dark.

7th June

An early departure from Chilas had the team in Gilgit on time for some morning shopping (kerosene, batteries, food, camera equipment). Normand, accompanied by Cheek, took the opportunity to visit Richard Ackerley's memorial stone in the British Cemetery. The journey continued to Aliabad in the Hunza, where the staff took an hour out to visit their families and then bought the expedition quota of vegetables and eggs, after which the team continued to Passu for the night.

8th June

After some negotiation and various lies about the state of the jeeps, and of the road to Shimshal, the team set off in late morning up the spectacular canyon leading to Shimshal village. In Shimshal, some more negotiation began over porter wages. As is now standard in the remoter valleys of Pakistan, the locals have their own usurious rates, here printed up stylishly on headed notepaper, which are approximately double the officially agreed rates (agreed at a general meeting of trekking agents and village chiefs which the Shimshalis refuse to attend). Not much was negotiated on the first day, with the members of the village committee refusing to budge on their own prices; these were in fact only village officials, and not the men who would be carrying the loads, some of whom joined the discussion to sympathise with the visitors. No agreement was reached. The team made clear that they only had a finite amount of money, and if the locals continued to insist on their prices they would receive less work (fewer loads, shorter distances), or possibly none at all.

9th June

From early in the morning, groups of worried would-be porters were gathered around the guesthouse. In the end the village committee compromised on their demand for equipment money, given that the trek would be only three stages (the fourth was out of the question at the price demanded, but also of no obvious benefit to the climbing plan) and one night out. The team repacked from 42 loads down to 35, leaving some unnecessary food and ropes in Shimshal. The porter train set out in the early afternoon, after the men had been home for lunch, and walked up-valley for a mere 2.5 hours to a camp site beneath the lateral moraine of the Yazghil Glacier.

10th June

The trek involved first crossing directly over the Yazghil Glacier on ice significantly more convoluted than Normand had encountered in the same place nine years previously. The porters showed great enthusiasm in the sometimes difficult terrain along the opposite moraine edge, not always waiting for the climbers to confirm a passable route. However, the end of the third stage, "Yukshin Gardan Base Camp" (the site used by Robert Schauer's 1984 expedition, which accomplished the only ascent to date of Yukshin Gardan Sar), turned out to be a long way before the climbers were expecting, in a barren ablation valley with only extremely muddy water. Some of the climbers were ahead when word came back that the porters had stopped. Bowie returned, and a minor altercation ensued. As a consequence, the de facto BC had been chosen (altitude 3700m). The team set to work smoothing tent platforms and erecting the kitchen and dining tents. Clean water was at first a 500m walk away, out on the white ice of the glacier, but soon Nazar and Meher built a filter system (graduated layers of sand and gravel in a barrel) which produced remarkably clear water.



Left: porters at work on the lower Yazghil. Right: BC beside the Yazghil.

11th June

The team spent the morning sorting equipment and the afternoon acclimatising on a short hike up a gully on the BC side (Yazghil Sar side) of the glacier, obtaining a view over the central Yazghil and of the eastern flanks of P6247.

12th June

As a consequence of the previous day's overview, a major reconnaissance was undertaken. Normand went up the Yazghil to the meadow of Parigoz, from which he and Ackerley had climbed P6247 and Shimshal Whitehorn in 1999. Thompson went directly across the Yazghil to investigate a steep drainage leading to a remnant glacier. Bowie went down-glacier to reconnoitre the drainage leading to the North Face of P6247, and of the col below Shimshal Whitehorn. Cheek had planned to accompany Thompson but, having brought no crampons for the glacier, switched to an acclimatisation hike higher up the previous day's gully. Bowie was back early, having found the drainage cut by an awkward cliff band. Normand found the Yazghil passable, if more complex than in 1999, but the glacier above Parigoz to have deteriorated very badly. From a straightforward glacier hike and serac scramble, this had become only a route of last resort. Thompson found some brief, compact mud slopes, beyond which the drainage was easy to follow, opening out to a broad site at the foot of the small glacier. This route was chosen as the focus of the efforts on the lower mountain.

13th June

Grey weather with low clouds. Rest day.



Left: crossing the Yazghil. Right: bouldering near BC.

14th June

All four members carried loads up Thompson's drainage to the foot of the glacier, establishing a gear dump on the future site of C1 (4800m). The descent was found to be a very efficient scree run, and a route was marked clearly across the Yazghil.

15th June

With Bowie nursing a sprained ankle and Thompson resting, Cheek and Normand carried another load to C1, returning in the evening.

16th June

Rest day. To this point the weather had been mostly good, with no precipitation and some passing clouds. However, a strong westerly flow had persisted at altitude for the entire time the team had been in the area, and fast-moving, thick clouds were a semi-permanent feature to the south, covering the high peaks (Khunyang Chhish and Pumari Chhish) bordering the Hispar Glacier.

17th June

All members carried loads to C1, with intent to stay and to work on the route up to C2, which was planned as the summit of P6247. Three tents were pitched in C1.

18th June

Snowfall. The first truly bad weather of the expedition arrived at a most inopportune moment. No action could be taken at all due to clouds, low visibility and continued snow.

19th June

In the morning it was still snowing. In the afternoon, still with clouds and low visibility, some of the members climbed the lateral moraine on the orographic right of the glacier (to 5100m) to investigate the possibility of continuing up the glacier from there. This appeared to be the most straightforward line.

20th June

The morning weather remained questionable, but cleared relatively quickly. The team set off with heavy packs and glacier gear to try to make a further depot at the top of the glacier, just before the route would climb a steep snow flank to join the Northeast Ridge of P6247 (and the point Normand and Ackerley had accessed from the Parigoz glacier in 1999). However, snow conditions on the glacier rapidly turned questionable, even with the use of snowshoes, and the climbers turned back from a depot around 5200m.

21st June

The night was clear and the following morning fine. The team carried another heavy load up the glacier, past the depot and on to a site, known as C1.5, at the very top of the glacier (5400m) and at the foot of the snow flank. Normand and Thompson went back to collect the previous day's depot while Bowie and Cheek pitched two tents. By this time, still only mid-morning, the weather had deteriorated and snow showers were becoming steadier. The rest of the day was spent in the tents.

22nd June

Poor weather in the morning, turning fine. The team spent the afternoon climbing an adjacent peak, measured at P5512 by GPS. Fine views were had to the south, where the upper-level winds over Khunyang Chhish and Pumari Chhish remained strong, and to the east to the enormous West Face of Yukshin Gardan Sar.

23rd June

The team climbed the snow flank above C1.5, with Bowie and occasionally Normand, on one rope, breaking trail in sometimes quite deep snow. At the top of the flank, Normand scaled a disconcertingly soft and essentially vertical 5m step to place a fixed rope. The next obstacle was a horizontal ridge section of some 60m, which was steep on one side, overhanging (corniced) on the other and soft throughout. Normand crossed this and left a fixed rope, but with snow conditions now softening alarmingly, the climbers deposited their loads before the cornice traverse and descended to C1.5. Here, with the weather closing in again, a snap decision was made to descend to BC for a rest and to collect more equipment. The route up P6247, which had taken Normand and Ackerley 2 days from Parigoz (albeit with correspondingly light loads) was turning into a major time sink due to weather, snow conditions and the nature of the ridge itself, which was far from being the walk-up found in the late 1990s.



Giants of the upper Yazghil. Upper left: West Face of Yukshin Gardan Sar, 7641m. Upper right: North Face of Pumari Chhish, 7492m. Lower left: North Face of Khunyang Chhish East, 7400m (unclimbed). Lower right: North Face of Khunyang Chhish, 7852m.

24th June

Rest day. Cloudy with occasional showers, heavier at altitude, but clearing by evening.

25th June

Rest day. Again mostly grey with occasional showers.

26th June

The team moved back to C1.5, carrying what was expected to be the last load (food and additional ropes) required for a bid on the mountain. Cheek and Thompson decided at C1 to take the conservative option of staying there, while Bowie and Normand continued to C1.5.

27th June

Bowie and Normand found the snow on the flank very considerably deeper than on the previous push, and that all footprints had vanished. Finding the cornice traverse to be reasonably firm, they shuttled their packs and the previous depot across to a flat site

beyond it. They then pushed on, through very deep snow on the north side of the ridge to bypass a step, and then in less demanding snow on the ridge crest, towards the summit of P6247. However, a huge, longitudinal crevasse began to separate them from the true ridge crest, beyond which the north side of the mountain was in no way usable as it had been in 1999. They arrived at a point 100m below the summit, beyond which was a tenuous crevasse crossing for which the midday temperatures were not at all suitable. They left another gear depot and descended soft snow to C1.5, where Cheek and Thompson were camped after two runs from C1. By this time clouds were moving in again, and by evening it was snowing.

28th June

Bad weather. The climbers descended to BC again.

29th June

Very heavy rain overnight. Persistent unstable weather, especially at altitude.

30th June

Continued poor weather, with considerable snow at higher elevations.

1st July

Remaining unsettled and mostly grey, although with no further significant precipitation. At this point the team had decided to obtain a professional weather forecast (from Meteotest in Bern, Switzerland), and was immediately promised 10 days of stable, high-pressure weather.



Left: on the ridge above C1.75. Right: Bowie among icicles.

2nd July

Indeed the weather dawned excellent and stayed that way. All four members climbed directly to C1.5 with light packs. The strategy now was to aim for a single push to C2 with enough equipment for a realistic summit bid.

3rd July

Bowie and Normand rebroke the trail to the depot, with heavy packs and finding the snow deeper than ever. Cheek and Thompson, finding their packs too heavy, deposited some equipment en route. Because of the snow conditions, proceeding beyond the depot would have been unduly dangerous, and so it became, officially, C1.75.

4th July

Bowie and Normand, again with heavy packs and breaking a new trail, moved back to their previous high point. Cheek and Thompson, after collecting their lower depot, elected to continue with double carries and brought one load to this point, but returned to C1.75 for the night. Bowie and Normand climbed through an impressive icicle band in impressively deep snow from the most recent storm, Bowie being forced to lead unladen. The two topped out on P6247, where Normand left some equipment, but they returned to the previous depot to make a C1.95 for the night.



Mysteries of the upper Khurdopin. Left: unknown snow peak seen in front of K2. Right: unknown rock peak seen in front of the Ogre.

5th July

Now with a solid trail, Bowie and Normand were quickly back on top of P6247 with all of their supplies. The view into the basin below the North Face of Distaghil Sar was not encouraging. Extensive, partially-covered crevasse fields, disintegrating serac slopes and the odd ice cliff presented a rather different picture from 1999, and this was only the approach. The route itself seemed more bare and less stable, particularly around the serac edge below the hypothetical C5. The pair quickly established that the 1999 descent to the col with Shimshal Whitehorn was now completely barred by a continuous ice cliff, and set off directly towards Distaghil Sar to seek an alternative route into the upper Malangutti. This they found, although it involved crossing one very large and hollow crevasse while threatened from high above by a very large and unstable serac. They continued over the smooth glacier surface flanking Shimshal Whitehorn, to a point fully south of that mountain at an altitude of 5600m. This position marked the point where

further progress would have involved venturing into a crevasse field. The climbers now had a full view of Shimshal Whitehorn, the unclimbed P6300 clearly visible from BC, the north side of Yazghil Dome and the full northern flank of Distaghil Sar. On this, the North Ridge route appeared involved, time-consuming and unjustifiably dangerous, particularly below the “C5 serac”. The back-up plan had been the Northeast Ridge of Distaghil Sar East, an all-snow route in the 1999 photographs but now cut by at least two serac edges, and inaccessible from below because of the decay of the long snow flank which had appeared to offer a ready approach.

The climbers returned to the summit of P6247, arriving shortly after Cheek and Thompson, on their first carry. Cheek was now moving very slowly, due to some combination of a chest cold and the altitude. Still, he spoke of the possibility of trying a route from the basin below, either on P6300 or on Shimshal Whitehorn. Bowie and Normand had considered the Southeast Face of the Whitehorn as a possible new route, direct and eminently feasible, but not particularly aesthetic from the point of view of climbing quality. At this stage they decided the route did not justify the risk of having the other climbers also descend into the basin, despite the fact that this would mean cancelling the expedition with no consolation prizes whatsoever. The team spent the night in C2.



Decay of the upper Hispar I: photos from 1999 (left) and 2008 (right) of Shimshal Whitehorn (upper panels) and of P6247 (lower panels).



Decay of the upper Hispar II: photos from 1999 (left) and 2008 (right) of Distaghil Sar and the upper Malangutti basin (upper panels) and of the North Ridge (lower panels, centre and right shots both from 2008).

While the writing is on the wall in the 1999 photographs for a number of places, the full extent of decay and destruction visible in 2008 is surprising. At the intermediate altitudes of the ridge on P6247, Normand estimated that at least 10m of compact snow would be required to restore it to its 1999 condition.

6th July

In the morning the descent started. Bowie and Normand made two downward carries between C2 and C1.75, and Cheek and Thompson two carries between C1.75 and C1.5. The entire route was cleaned with the exception of the very first strand of fixed line, as the soft step could not be reversed safely under any circumstances. Despite the forecast, the day became cloudy around noon, with light snow following later.

7th July

The day was cloudy with decreasing snow showers. All four members made a double carry down to C1, then continued with one heavy load to BC.

8th July

Nazar left for Shimshal to find porters for the walk out. The climbers returned to C1 for the final downward carry, made in mostly cloudy but dry weather.

9th July

Rest and packing day. A party of 17 porters arrived in the evening from Shimshal.

10th July

Exit. The weather was reasonable and the camp was packed into 18.5 loads, of which Bowie and Normand took the 0.5 but could not motivate the porters to split the last load, even for money. This load was collected later. Porters in Shimshal are now largely students from universities “down-country,” at home for the summer holidays. With the advent of the road and the decline of the traditional economy, it remains to be seen whether any Shimshalis will work as porters in 10 years. The entire walk out to Shimshal village was completed in 6-8 hours. Because 11th July is the most important festival day in the Ismaili Muslim calendar, marking the inauguration day of the Aga Khan, there would be no jeep service from Shimshal on the next day or the one after. Because our staff wanted very much to be at home with their families (in Aliabad) for the festival, Nazar had arranged a jeep to leave the same evening. Thus as soon as the last porters had arrived, the team was whisked back to Karimabad, where the expedition could be declared formally at an end at 11pm. However, for this last leg of the journey the team was without Cheek, who had announced in Shimshal his intent to stay there to climb alone.

7 Conclusion

The expedition was not successful in its declared aim of climbing Distaghil Sar from the north. The major conclusion which can be drawn is that conditions are changing very rapidly in the world’s mountains, even at the very highest altitudes. That 10-year-old information could be badly out of date is in fact familiar to climbers in the Alps (due mainly to the effects of summer 2003), and this situation can now be taken to be true also in parts of the Greater Ranges.

8 Acknowledgements

The expedition acknowledges with gratitude the generous assistance of the following organisations for financial support:

- the Nick Estcourt Award,
- the Mount Everest Foundation,
- the British Mountaineering Council,
- the Shipton-Tilman Award,

and of the following companies for providing equipment and provisions:

- Equip UK,
- Bestard,
- Lyon UK,
- DMM Wales,
- Rab,
- Reiter.

9 Postscript

It is with great regret that I have to include this postscript to the expedition report, detailing the disappearance and presumed death of our colleague Ben Cheek. Ben decided directly after the expedition, and against the advice of the other members, to remain in Shimshal to attempt the unclimbed North Face of Shimshal Whitehorn (6400m) alone. He left Shimshal on the morning of 11th July, but never returned from this mission.

Peter Thompson and I, who were still in Pakistan, mounted a full search and would-be rescue mission, which lasted from 19th to 31st July. Despite the unstinting help of the British Embassy, the BMC's insurance provider Fortis Insurance, agents Pearl Tours and ATP in Pakistan, many local Shimshal porters, friend and climber Lee Harrison (who flew out especially from the UK) and the Askari Aviation branch of the Pakistan Army, which flew two complete helicopter searches, we were unable to find any trace of Ben.



Left: Ben on the summit of P6247, with Yukshin Gardan Sar behind. Right: searchers combing the avalanche track below the North Face of Shimshal Whitehorn.

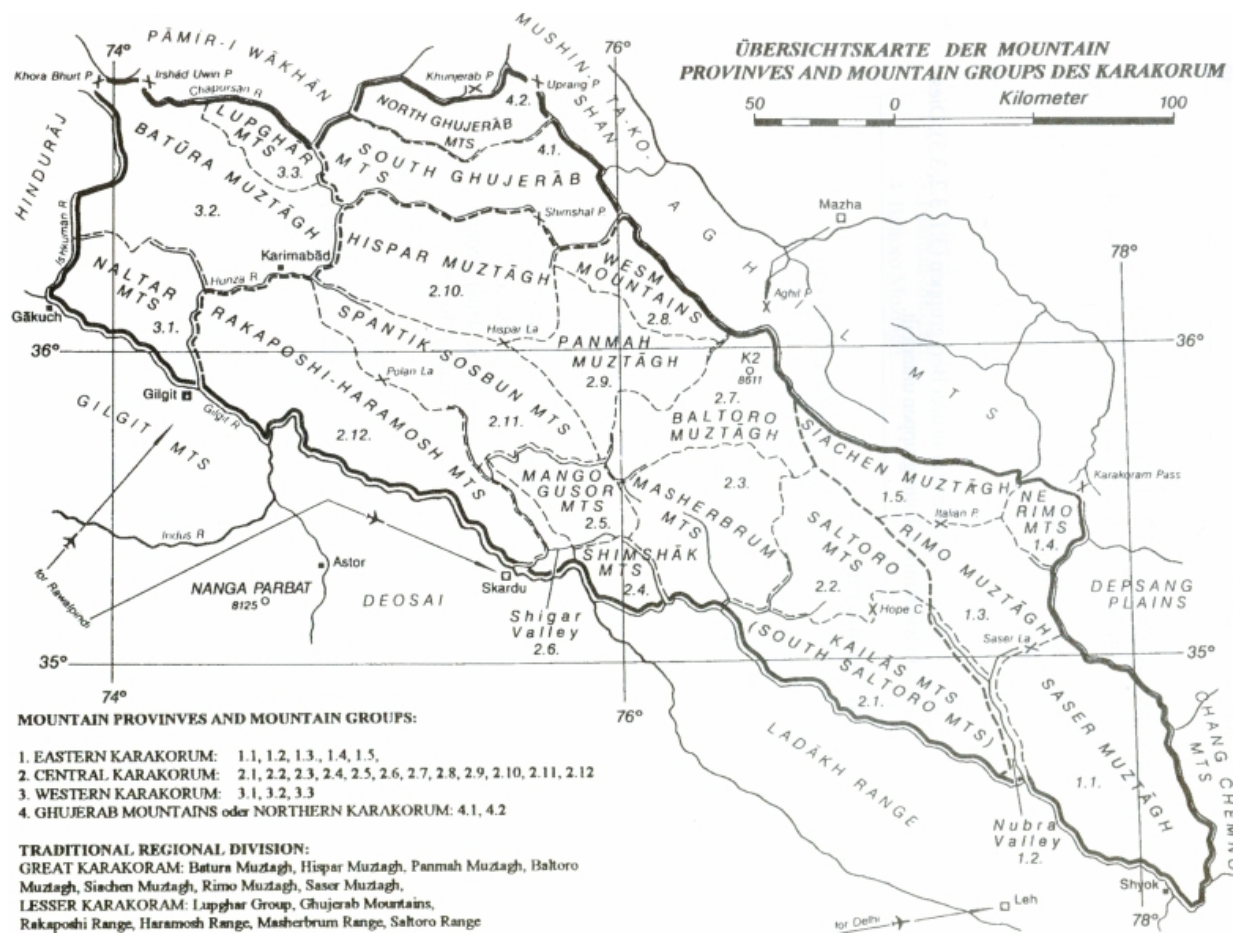
The most likely scenario is that he perished in an avalanche very early in his climb: there is a major, permanent avalanche cone at the base of the North Face, but a search of it did not find him near the surface. The two helicopter searches ruled out the possibility that he climbed out of the face and had begun to descend a different side of the mountain. Ground searches excluded the possibility that he chose not to climb the face at all, and went elsewhere.

Ben will be sadly missed. He possessed a lightheartedness and sense of humour which kept all his teammates and our BC staff laughing, and his energy and youthful spirit was always positive. Our days climbing alongside Ben will not be forgotten quickly. All our thoughts are with the Cheek family in their grief.

Appendix A: Bibliography

www.alpine-club.org.uk/hi/index.htm

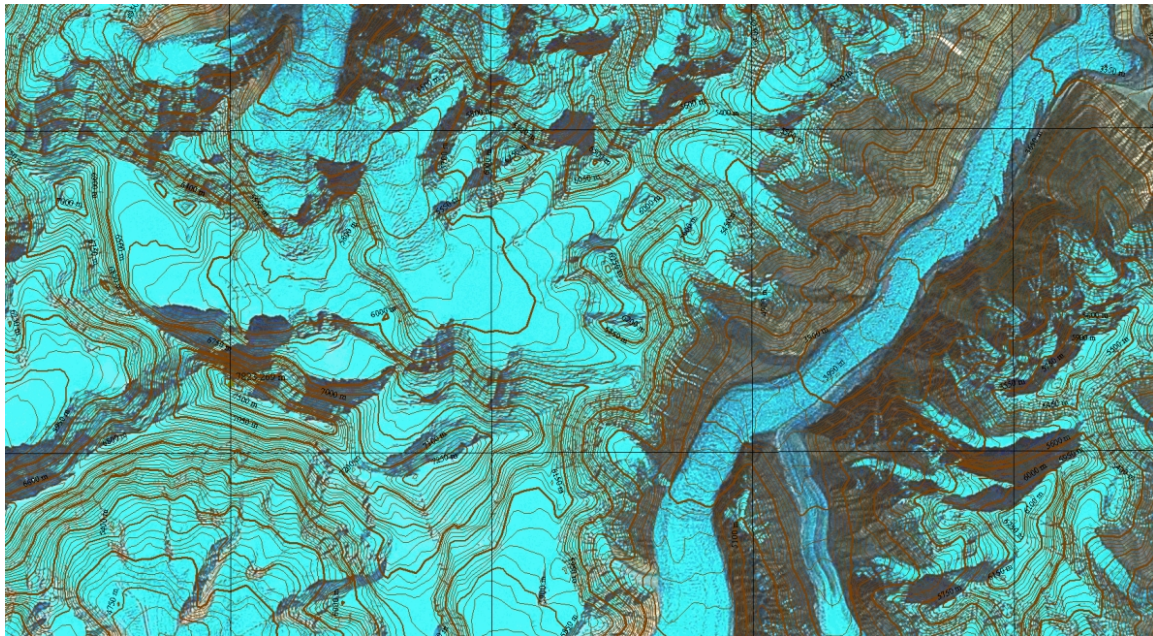
Appendix B: Maps



(a) Karakoram Range showing location of the Hispar subrange.



(b) Distaghil Sar: approach to BC via Shimshal village and proposed route to North Face (courtesy of Google Earth).



(c) Map section showing Distaghil Sar, upper Malangutti Glacier basin and (at right) Yazghil Glacier.

Appendix C: Contact Information

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