

THE GREAT KARAKORAM EXPEDITION

The report of an expedition to attempt first ascent of Ultar
(7388m, 24,239ft) the highest unclimbed mountain in Pakistan.

Report editor; A V Saunders December 1991
Further information;

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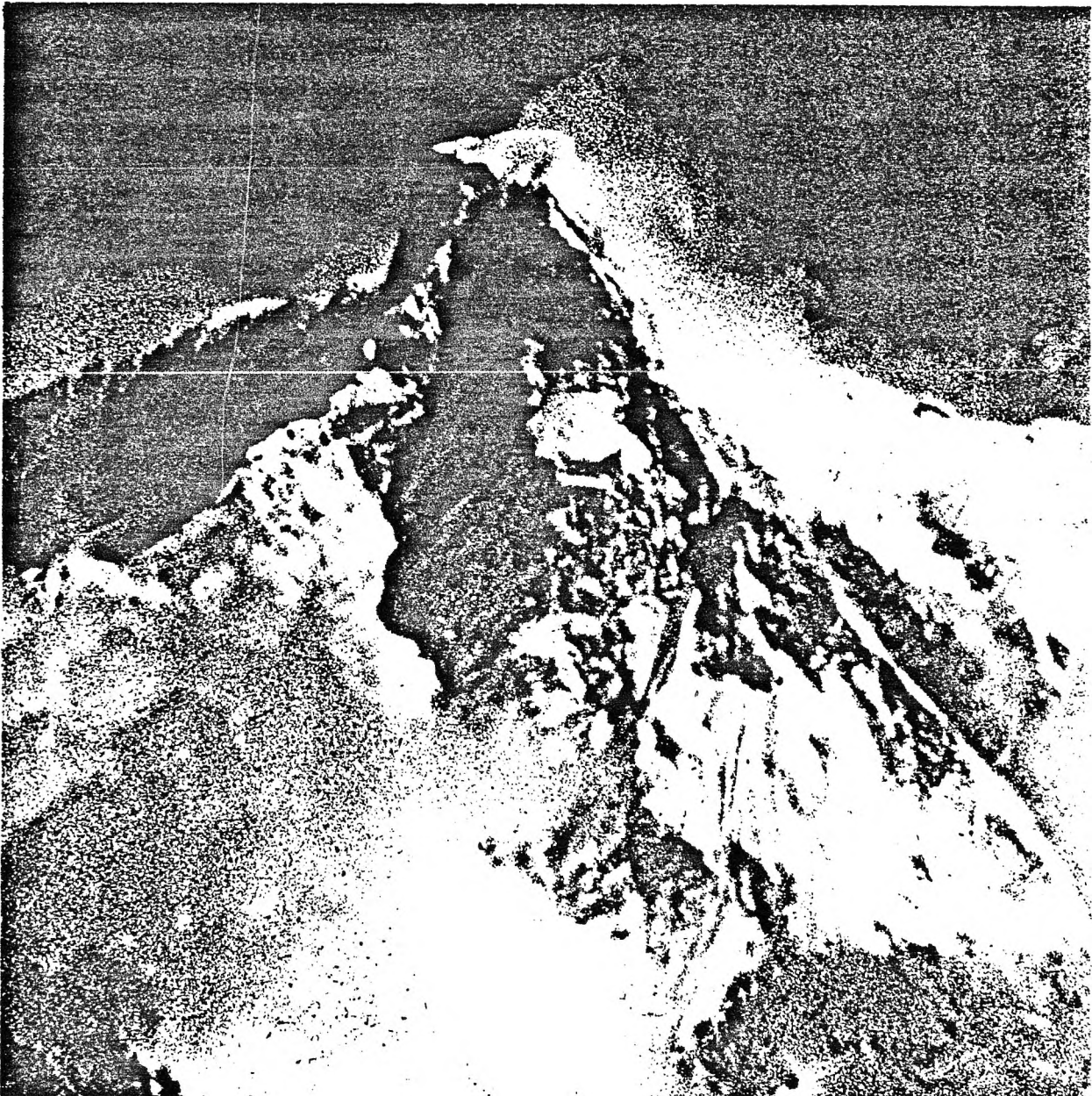
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ABSTRACT

The Great Karakoram Expedition was an expedition to attempt the first ascent of Ultar 7388m, a peak overlooking the Hunza Valley. The expedition took place during August and September 1991. The principle aim of the expedition was not accomplished, although a considerable amount of exploration of previously unvisited parts of Ultar was carried out.



INTRODUCTION

THE KARAKORAM

The Karakoram forms the western wing of the great Himalayan chain. It is easy to be superlative about the range: it contains the greatest concentration of high peaks in the world and the greatest area of glaciation outside the Poles. But the real attraction is the sheer beauty of the granite spires and their remote setting. Surprisingly the majority of expeditions visit only a few selected valleys. For example, in an average year there will be some 50 to 60 expeditions to the Karakoram of which 70% will attempt to climb just six popular peaks. As a direct result of this concentration, there are still magnificent opportunities for exploration in the range. Ultar is one such opportunity.

ULTAR 1

Ultar 1 is at 7388m, (24,239 feet), the highest and most attractive peak of the Ultar Group, which is in itself the highest unclimbed group in the Karakoram, and one of the highest unclimbed massifs in the world. At first this may seem odd, because the summit is less than 3.5 miles from the road, the Karakoram Highway. But the Highway is also 5000m (3.5 miles again!) lower than the summit. Any route to the summit from the south side would involve a climb of not less than 3,500m.

In recent years there have been at several attempts to climb the mountain, mainly by large and well funded Japanese expeditions. (There was a Polish expedition in 1985). One expedition tried the shorter, but more dangerous North Face of Ultar 1. There they were foiled by objective dangers, mainly avalanche, and narrowly avoided fatalities. Other attempts have concentrated on the South Ridge, gaining this from Karimabad. (The alternative start to this ridge, from Hametabad, was tried by the Poles who found the approach too long and difficult to support the climbing above.)

In 1990 Tsuneo Hasegawa, a man who made a name for himself in the late 70s by soloing the three great Alpine north faces in winter, used seige tactics to reach a high point of 200m below the Summit of Ultar, starting from Baltit and following the South Ridge. The Hasegawa Route follows a logical and apparently safe line from the Ultar Glacier above Karimabad. Hasegawa returned in September to repeat his route, passing Fowler and Jones on their way down. The Japanese team had 6800m (22,000feet) of kelvlar rope and planned to establish up to six camps. On 10 October Tsuneo Hasegawa and Kiyotaka Hoshino were killed in an avalanche, and were buried under Ultar by Hasegawa's wife, Mrs Masami Hasegawa.

In contrast to Hasegawa's methods, we decided to climb in the lightest possible style, with no use of "fixed ropes", or "fixed camps".

We are not interested in so called Aline Style ascents for their own sake. There is no point in handicapping yourself just to prove superiority. One may as well attempt to climb hopping one leg, backwards, that would certainly be the more difficult style of ascent. The point of light weight ascents is that they are less damaging to the ecology and economy of the Himalayan regions. In addition to this argument, lightweight methods in the hands of reasonably competent climbers can actually be safer than seige style. Although "lightweight" has some drawbacks when it comes to sitting out bad weather, travelling light and travelling only once through dangerous areas can be a safer option than reascending dangerous areas several times on fixed ropes. You have to balance your chances of getting up against the chances of survival. This is perhaps a lesson to be learned from Hasegawa's tragedy.

Ultrar 1 is a mountain with a huge vertical interval, (on the south side, nowhere less than 3500m) and intrinsic technical difficulties. Being a high mountain at the end of a massif, it seems to attract particularly foul weather. These factors have contributed to the defeat of all teams to date.

There has been some recent confusion regarding the naming of the peaks, and we were informed that a German expedition was attempting Ultrar in June and July but, though they called it Ultrar, they were in fact climbing Bojohagur Duanasir 7329m. Throughout this report we will be adopting the naming, spelling and heights as used in the SFAR map (see Research, page 11).

THE EXPEDITION TEAM

Julian Freeman Atwood (UK)

Born 2 October 1953: Forester.

Has been mountaineering 17 years, expeditions include Xixiabangma in the Chinese Himalaya, Mount Kenya (c.5600m) and the exploratory expedition to South Georgia recorded in Stephen Venables "Island at the Edge of the World."

Michael Fowler (UK)

Born 15 May 1956: Civil Servant.

One of Britain's leading Alpinists since 1978 (Voted "The Mountaineer's Mountaineer" in the Observer Magazine, July 1989). Several new routes in Britain on both rock and ice. Ascents abroad include the North Faces of both the Matterhorn and the Eiger, and further afield the technically difficult South Face of Tauliraju (5830m) in Peru, a hard new line on Killimanjaro (5865m), East Africa, the West Face Direct on Ushba North, USSR, and the Golden Pillar of Spantik (with VS). Member of the Committee of the Alpine Club as well as a regular, and highly popular, contributor to mountaineering magazines and journals.

Kees t'Hooft (NL)

Born 3 October 1953: Film Maker.

Previous expeditions include Makalu 1989 with Saunders and Sustad, South Georgia 1990 with Freeman Atwood, and several mountaineering film projects.

Caradog Jones (UK)

Born 25 November 1958: Renewable Resource Analyst

Several new routes in Britain, the Alps and further afield, including; First British Solo of the Diamond Couloir, Mount Kenya, a hard new line on Mount Kilimanjaro (with MF), First Ascent (solo) of East Wall of Peinietta of the Paines Towers, Patagonia, and the third ascent of Mt Paget, South Georgia.

Victor Saunders (UK).

Born 9 Feb 1950: Architect.

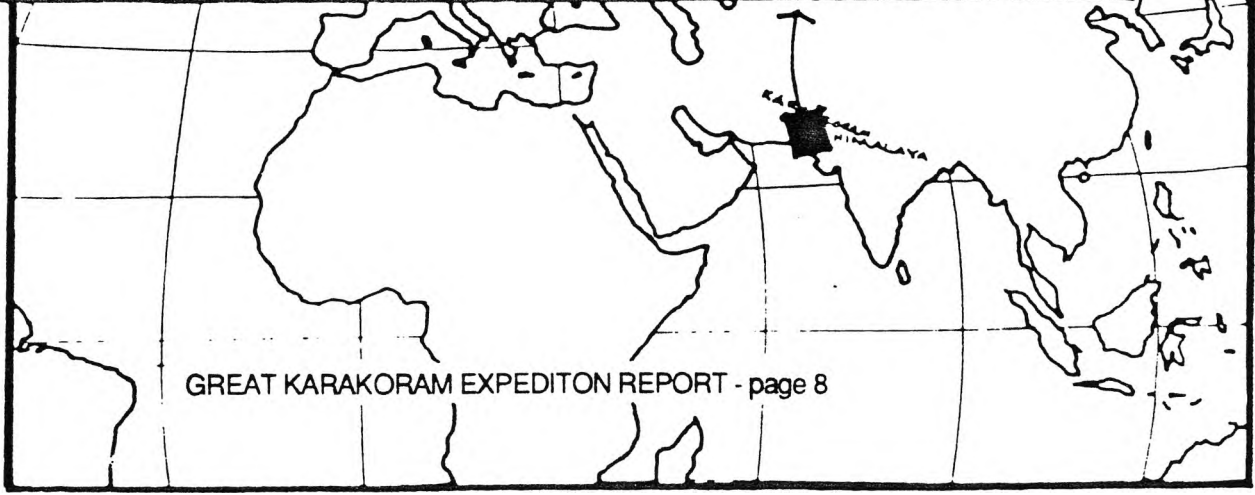
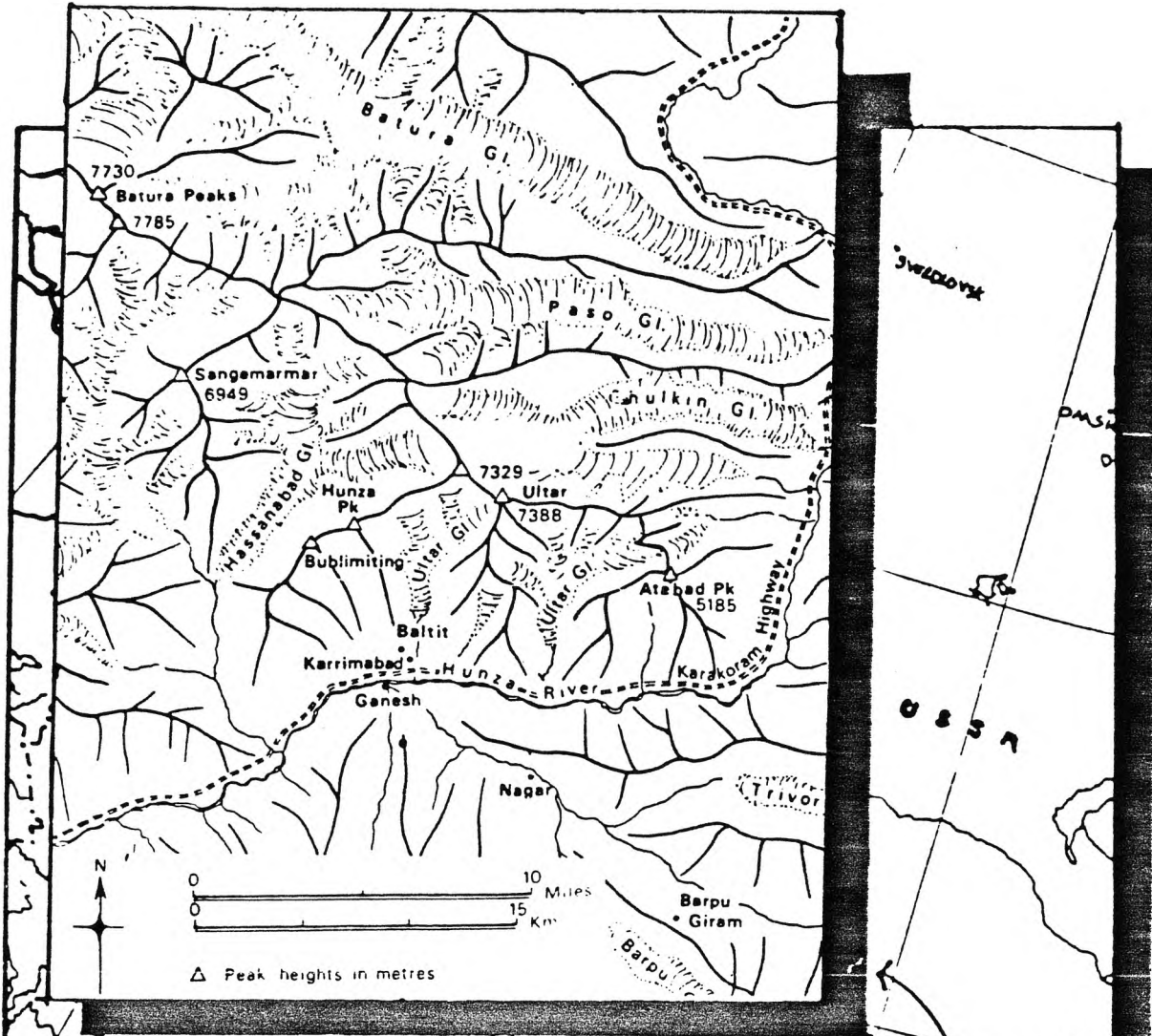
Climbing in the Himalayan region since 1980. First Ascents include Jitchu Drake (6800m) in Bhutan, Golden Pillar of Spantik (7050m) in the Greater Karakoram, and Kangchuntse West Face (7640m), Nepalese Himalaya. Author of "Elusive Summits".

Stephen Sustad (USA)

Born 27 March 1960: Carpenter.

Climbing in the Himalayan region since 1980. First Ascents include Rimo 2 (7373m), and Kangchuntse (with VS). Has played a major

part in expeditions to Everest (8848m) and K2, summited on Garhwal Shivling (6543m) and Broad Peak (8047m), and on Makalu (8481m), climbed an audacious new route to within 200 metres of the summit.



BUREAUCRACY

PERMISSION

For 1991 the last date for submission of applications to the Embassy of Pakistan was 30 October 1990. The procedure and amount of Peak Fee are set out in the "brown book" of regulations and rules for mountaineering in Pakistan. The book is available from the Embassy of Pakistan in Lowndes Square, London. It is very important not to leave applications to the last minute, as the Embassy staff are often overworked, and if the application and peak fee do not meet the deadline, the application falls.

VISAS

These cost us £30 each for a single entry. Anyone wishing to cross the Kunjerab Pass for a day or two in China MUST have a double, or Multiple entry visa. Again it is important not to leave this task to the last minute, allow 4 weeks from application to receipt of Visa.

PAKISTAN

Once in Pakistan, the main elements of bureaucracy were in dealing with;

- (1) the Helicopter Bond. This \$4,000 returnable deposit must be made at a specified bank in Islamabad. It will be called on in the event of a helicopter evacuation. We used a local agent, Nazir Sabir, who for a small fee put up the bond for us. This was very convenient and is to be recommended. The agent must first of all be satisfied that sufficient insurance exists to cover the bond.
- (2) the Environment Bond. A \$1000 deposit, returnable on certification by the Liaison Officer that the expedition has left the base camp in an environmentally acceptable condition.
- (3) the Environmental fee. \$200 non returnable fee, supposedly for environmental works.
- (4) Liaison Officer. He must see that the equipment and clothing brought out for him is satisfactory. (Full list in "brown book"). He will help an expedition where necessary, with local purchases, and act as interpreter. Captain Amer Ali, our LO, was quite saintly in his forbearance of us.
- (5) Insurance for local staff, and LO. A very modest policy must be taken out in Islamabad, the LO will help with this if necessary.
- (5) Briefing and debriefing. These are meetings with the Ministry of Tourism. The first takes place when the formalities outlined above have been completed. The entire team is expected to be present, as they are for the debriefing at the end of the expedition.

A word of advice; try to buy new gear for the LO. It has, unfortunately, become a perk of the job for LOs to keep the clothing and non-mountaineering stuff. They can become obstructive if you do not appear to be taking them seriously.

LOGISTICS

RESEARCH

We find the following source material invaluable for this kind of expedition;

(1) The Himalayan Handbook by Joydeep Sircar; Calcutta 1979. A concise survey of Himalayan peaks above 20,000ft. This esoteric volume can be seen at the Alpine Club, London.

(2) High Asia by Jill Neate; Unwin and Hyman 1989. Illustrated history of the 7,000m peaks.

(3) The Trekker's Guide to the Himalaya and Karakoram by Hugh Swift; Hodder and Stoughton 1982, and updated in two volumes in 1990. Hugh Swift died tragically on the steps of a hospital while we were climbing on Ultar. Watch out for the differing local dialects of Burushaski, Swift's is Hunza Burushaski, several mountaineering terms, such as col or pass which is given as Haguts, but the locals in Nagar use the term Duasum, may differ significantly.

There are various maps but the most useful are:

(1) the American Army Map Service "Series U502". We used sheet NJ 43-14 "Baltit" scale 1:250,000, contours at 500 feet, commercially available in colour from Stanfords, London.

(2) Karakoram. in two sheets, published by SFAR (Swiss Foundation For Alpine Research, Zurich 1990). Scale 1:250,000, prepared by the indefatigable Jerzy Wala of Krakow. The back of the map has a gazetteer.

Landsats for the Karakoram exist, and can be viewed at the British Library, Map Library, London. They can be used to gauge the approximate snowline (date appears on photograph, and by a trick of the orbit, all landsat photographs are taken at 10.30 am) and may help in planning route marches.

Photographs: probably the best set of photos under a single set of covers for the Karakoram area is the Polish "Karakorum" 1986, edited by Zbigniew Kowalewski. Well worth a visit to the Alpine Club Library for.

FUNDRAISING

The MEF and BMC grant system is available to those attempting new routes, or significant repeats in the mountain areas. We were fortunate in having material support, and this is acknowledged in the appropriate section. Fund raising remains a major headache to all trying to climb lesser known peaks.

INSURANCE

We purchased insurance via the BMC to cover travel, baggage, medical expenses, photographic equipment, and rescue costs. The certificate should be retained for your agent in Pakistan if one is used, to guarantee the Helicopter bond.

FREIGHT

We found it necessary to airfreight 232kg of equipment and 60 kg of gas (120 cylinders at 30kg plus 30kg packaging). Customs clearance in Pindi costs about £50, and we incurred £50 storage costs in addition. It is important to have several copies of the complete packing list, each item identified, itemised, and weighed. These lists are signed and counter signed by several functionaries in an apparently meaningless round of bureaucracy.

HOTELS

We have stayed in a large number of different cheap, middling and downright overpriced hotels in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. This year we opted for the Hotel Holiday, Rawalpindi, not to be confused with the Holiday Inn, Islamabad. We can recommend the Hotel Holiday. It is conveniently located near the Pearl Continental, and only short walk from the main bazaars. In Besham we were forced to reside for three days at the PTDC motel which is not only expensive, but has, without a shadow of a doubt, the worst food any of us had ever gagged on in Pakistan. In Gilgit we stayed, as usual, at the Hunza Inn. In Karimabad we based ourselves for the duration of the expedition at the other Hunza Inn.

ROAD TRANSPORT

We hired two Hiace 12 seaters from Sargan Services, based at the Modern Hotel, Novelty Cinema, Rawalpindi. They appear to be a Hunza based outfit, who we have used before. This cost us something in the region of £300 for a 20 hour journey, though our price was somewhat complicated by the delay at Besham.

PORTERS

Porters were hardly a problem for our expedition. We hired them for two days at the most, usually for one days work at a time. The rate in 1991 was variable, to say the least. The main trap is not the daily rate, but the number of so called stages a porter is prepared to carry for. The going rate seems to be about £4 per day, but with short stages the daily rate could easily rise to £10.

LOCAL FOOD

We tended towards fresh food at our various bases around Ultar. Onions, potatoes, eggs etc. were all readily available. What was perhaps more surprising was that there was a certain amount of

western style "hill food" for sale in Karimabad. It would have been possible, in 1991, to arrive in Karimabad without any provisions at all, and still stock a modest base camp for high altitude climbing.

HILL FOOD

For this we used the usual staples, baby food (or Complan, much the same sort of thing really) soup cubes, instant mash, sweets, and a range of brews, all supplemented with "treats". The average weight of our hill food seems to be about 250gm per person per day. This equated to 1500 kcal per day. It is estimated that the average climber loses between 4000 and 8000 kcals daily. In practice this means we lose about a kilogram of body weight for each day above the bergschrund.

WATER

"Sterilise, boil it, or forget it." essential advice in this area.

MEDICAL PROBLEMS

We had surprisingly few medical problems, considering we had no doctor with us. We had, however, taken the precaution of purchasing at a cost of £135 a very full set of medicines for our first aid kit, together with detailed advice on the use of the stuff.

FILMING

Kees t'Hooft and Julian Freeman Attwood devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to a project to film our expedition. Kees used an Aaton with synched Sony Professional Walkman for low altitude, and high quality shots, while the climbers carried a Sony Handycam (model CCD TR45E) which proved light and easy to use on the mountain.

CLIMBING RESULTS

The team opted for an ultra lightweight approach (see introduction). Because of the proximity of "civilisation" to any route on the mountain, it was decided to do away with the traditional "Base Camp" and only set up camps for short periods. The idea had been to explore the various route on Ultar, then concentrate on one, but the approach adopted permitted us to split into two teams, Jones and Fowler attempting the South Ridge from the village of Baltit, Sustad and Saunders attempting the South East Face via the village of Hametabad.

(1) MICK FOWLER and CARADOC JONES

After acclimatising climbs on Bubli Motin and Hunza Peak(First Ascent) Fowler and Jones set off on 20 August for an attempt to climb the South Ridge, by a variation of the Hasegawa Route.(see introduction). They carried a lightweight rack, and 10 days food, with 10 cylinders of gas. Also carried were a Mountain Gemini Tent and two 50m 8.5mm Joanny ropes. The following report is by Jones.

Day 1

We climbed approx 3000ft. The first 2500ft soloed through a series of icefields on the western (Bojohagur) flank of the South Ridge to the base of a prominent gully leading to the South Ridge, bivouac.

Day 2

The gully was climbed, and the South Ridge followed to the First Gendarme, awkward pitch, bivouac on cornice at top. Approx 1500ft of climbing.

Day 3

Difficult climbing to pass the Second Gendarme. Steep ice led to the Snow Domes where the Hasegawa line was regained. A descent to the First Col and a desperate traverse on the western flank to rejoin the crest to a good bivouac sit after 1000ft of climbing.

Day 4

Rest Day

Day 5

Further ridge traversing and 2 abseils led past a rocky step to the foot of the Summit Tower. At this point the deteriorating weather developed into a full blown thunder and lightning storm. A short retreat allowed a bivouac on easier ground.

Day 6

With dwindling food supplies and continuing poor weather, retreat was forced. An abseil of Day 5 was prussicked on old Japanese rope which, being Kevlar, was naturally recycled into British slings.

Day 7

Descent followed along line of ascent to head of Prominent Gully

Day 8/9

Rest till evening, then approximately 20 Abseils down the Gully/slopes then, after dawn, moving together with some pitches on the linked icefields.

On the afternoon of Day 9 Jones and Fowler met the Japanese team and reached Karimabad after a continuous descent of 30 hours and 11,000ft.

(2) STEVE SUSTAD and VICTOR SAUNDERS

On 1 September Sustad and Saunders left an advance base camp c3900m in the Hidden Valley, to attempt a line on the South East Wall of Ultar, having failed comprehensively to make any impression on the Hidden Pillar. They carried enough gear for the anticipated 40 abseils, a 50m 8.5mm rope and an 80m 6mm rope, to give 65m abseils. In retrospect 6mm seemed too thin for real peace of mind.

Day 1

Starting at 8 pm Sustad and Saunders soloed and moved together for 14 hours over a series of Z shaped couloirs to reach a Hanging Glacier Bivouac c5500m. The heat of the day was spent trying to rest.

Day 2

Leaving the Bivouac at 2 am the team climbed grade 4 pitches and soloed the steepening brittle ice till roping up again began to seem sensible. 2 pitches traversing a beautiful red granite wall led to the base of a large triangular icefield, and a bivouac under a safe serac at c6400m.

Day 3

A rotten snow crest at c.6700 capped the triangular icefield, the crest

led to a steep entry pitch to easy ground leading to the apparently easy East Ridge of Ultar. There was considerable optimism in the party when Saunders broke a crampon, and Sustad an ice axe, and descent was strongly indicated. A retreat to the previous bivouac ensued.

Day 4

The day was spent preparing abseil gear and the descent started at 4 pm. Abseiling and down climbing throughout the night, the base camp at Shokum Shun reached at 4 pm on Day 5.

CONCLUSION

We adopted a small peak approach to this mountain, almost treating it as a trekking peak. We had no long term base camp, but instead based ourselves in Hunza, returning there to recover between bouts of climbing. This approach was partly forced on us by our decision to spend the first few weeks exploring the valleys around, and giving access to Ultar. We do not think that this approach affected the success of the expedition. However, we did find that on a peak of this size our approach had certain drawbacks:

(1) It can be difficult to acclimatise with out enormous expenditure in energy, climbing up to c.6000m and returning to recuperate at 2300m!

(2) It is possible that returning to "civilisation" at such low altitudes can expose the climber to the usual range of Hunza gut invasions.

Against this the benefits appear to be:

(1) Potentially much cheaper (no cook or base camp staff).

(2) Easy flexibility of choosing lines of approach.

(3) Recovery at low altitudes is rapid

I think the final conclusion is probably rather a matter of preference; do you prefer to have loose, unspecific, "go with the flow" planning, or do you prefer the extra degree of control that a fixed mountain base gives.

EXPEDITION LOG

- 19.10.90 Confirmed with Pakistan that Ultar was still unclimbed
- 29.10.90 Application into Pakistan Embassy together with Peak fee, £670.
- 11.11.90 First expedition meeting and newsletter. MEF and BMC grant applications in. Attempts to raise funds.
5. 4.91 Permission received from Pakistan. Note; 6 months lead time.
24. 5.91 Airfreight Gas and some equipment to Islamabad.
4. 7.91 VS,JFA,CJ,SS fly out to Islamabad to deal with bureaucracy and local purchases.
9. 7.91 LO, Captain Amer Ali meets team.
12. 7.91 Briefing meeting, KH arrives and team leaves for Gilgit with 2 Hiace 12 seaters.
13. 7.91 Landslides close Karakoram Highway trapping team at Besham for 3 days. One Hiace goes back to Islamabad, JFA and KH remain with remaining Hiace, the rest of the team walk across the landslides to take public transport to Gilgit.
15. 7.91 Team reunited in Gilgit, and travels on to Karimabad
16. 7.91 First visit to Hametabad to establish route to Hidden Valley
18. 7.91 Team visit to Gourpie, and Sina where the Great Barrier is encountered for the first time.
19. 7.91 Team visits Laskiribasa, can see no route into the Hidden Valley
20. 7.91 return to Karimabad
23. 7.91 VS, SS try to reach Hidden Valley again, CJ and JFA explore the approaches to Hasegawa route on Ultar.
24. 7.91 VS,SS examine passes leading to Baldiate Valley without success.
26. 7.91 Team reunites at Karimabad

27. 7.91 VS, SS with help of a local shepherd, Gulam Rasul, reach the Hidden Valley
31. 7.91 CJ,JFA rock climbing in Ultar Gorge. KH,VS down to Gilgit
1. 8.91 Team visit to Gulkin Glacier to explore alternative
to routes on Ultar.
6. 8.91 MF joins expedition.
9. 8.91 MF, CJ visit Hasanabad side of Ultar to
to successfully climb Bubli Moting and Hunza Peak from
17. 8.91 the North side
10. 8.91 VS,SS,JFA and KH acclimatise on Bojohagur
to
15. 8.91
20. 8.91 MF,CJ set off for Hasegawa route (during the following days they climb a variation of this route to 6500m where in a period of bad weather they are forced to retreat. MF leaves for UK and CJ follows shortly after).
20. 8.91 VS,SS,JFA,KH set off for the Hidden Valley
25. 8.91 VS,SS make first attempt on Hidden Pillar.
to and return to Shokumshun
27. 8.91
1. 9.91 VS,SS attempt to climb South Face of Ultar east of
to Hidden Pillar. 18hrs of abseiling.
5. 9.91
7. 9.91 VS,SS,KH descend to Karimabad, clearing the base camp with 3 porters.
8. 9.91 Expedition closes - MF and CJ in UK; SS,JFA and LO in transit to Islamabad for debriefing; VS,KH remaining behind to visit and film Shimshal.

COST SHEET

ITEM	Projected	Actual
COSTS IN UK		
Flights to Islamabad	2730	2730
Gas, 120x 250gm cylinders	0	0
Freight, Customs etc.	760	885
Hill Food	450	450
Base Tents (Personal, cook, LO, Kitchen)	800	230
Admin and travel costs.	300	300
LO gear	500	300
Insurance for members	550	550
peak fee (£670)	670	670
Visas	125	125
Medical Kit	0	135
UK SUB TOTAL	6885	6375
COSTS IN PAKISTAN		
Road Transport to Baltit	300	402
Hotels, taxis etc	750	421
Local Food	900	301
Porters up	500	474
Porters down	300	249
LO pay	200	217
Cook and assistant	500	0
Insurance for staff	200	200
Environmental Fee /Admin Costs	220	220
Pakistan SUB TOTAL	3870	2484
SUB TOTAL	10755	8859
contingency (approx 10%)	995	0
EXPENDITURE	11750	8859
BMC grant	1800	1800
MEF Grant	1300	1300
Barclays Bank	250	250
Observer Newspapers		500
Member contribution to date	3528	5009
INCOME	6878	8859
INCOME Less EXPENDITURE	-4872	0
Further Income required per member	-812	0

Costs based on 6 expedition members, but not including costs individually absorbed, such as photographic costs and equipment losses. Projected Costs at June 91; Actual Costs at Dec 91.

EXPEDITION CHECK LIST

TRAVEL

passport
visa
Vaccinations
tickets
insurance
passport-photos
cash

BASE

pressure cooker
cutlery
local stoves
pans + kettles
soap + brillo
fuel
Day sack
candles
loo paper
water tabs
maps
laces
pliers/toolkit
books
toothbrush
shampoo
can opener
shirt
jeans
Gortex jacket
Gortex trousers
shorts
joggers
towel
rockboots
chalk
crampon file
plastic bags
spare glasses

BASE(continued)

sun hat
binoculars
polaroid+film
beachshorts
blister kit
base tent
cooks tent
kitchen tent
dining tent
LO tent
tent cord
50m x 5 mm cord
tilley lamps
lamp spares
box for lamp
padlocks
porter bags
foam mattresses
mending kit
carpet tape
medical supplies
water containers
fuel containers
tarpaulin
cotton pit liner
matches
barrels
Spring Balance

BIVI

Karrimat
bivibag
pit
gas stove
gas
paraffin stove
fuel sig bottle
pee bottle

BIVI(continued)

mug
compass
paper+pencil
watch
knife/spoon
lighters
glacier cream
first aid
hill food
altimeter
radios
bivitent
bivibrush
VB sleeping bag

HILL CLOTHES

balaclava
ski hat
vest
thermal shirts
tights
pile salopettes
pile top
fleece top
thin socks
thick socks
v.barrier socks
thin gloves (3)
Mitt system
Polevolt mitts
Overgloves
windsuit
down jacket
down bootees
Yeti gaiters
overboots
boots

CLIMBING

axes+ spares
crampons
Snow stakes
screws
friends
wires/nuts
pegs
krabs
short slings
long slings
snake sling
ab tape
descendeur
harness
helmet
torch
batts+bulbs
jumar
prusik loops
climbing rope
camera
film
rucksack
deadman
axe holders
marker wands

FOOD LIST

1st AID KIT
LO KIT
KITCHEN KIT
COOK'S KIT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The expedition could not have taken place without the generous help of the following organisations and individuals. We thank them all;

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Mrs Rose Sustad
Mrs Nikki Fowler
Mrs Maggie Saunders
Dr Mark Upton
Ms Hillary Foakes
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