

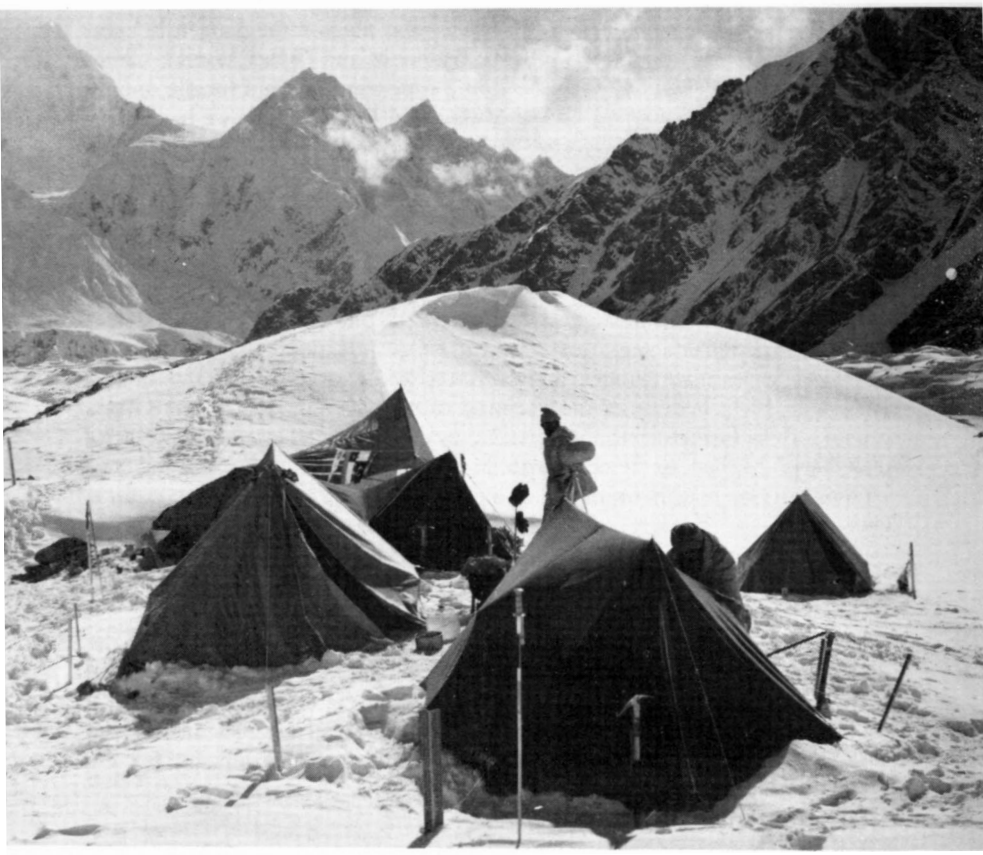
The Chilean Karakoram expedition 1979

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The Federación de Andinismo de Chile, an institution composed of several regional associations and embracing all 58 mountaineering clubs that at present exist in this country, had long considered sending an expedition to the high mountains of Asia. Such plans—and dreams—did not materialize however until 1979, when permission to visit Pakistan was granted, and an objective we had requested, was approved by the government of that country. It was agreed with Pakistani officials that our goal was to be Gasherbrum II (8035m), located SE of K2, and that we were to leave the mountain area before the end of June.

A special committee set up by the Federación had, when permission came, finished all the necessary arrangements and made a final selection of 9 climbers, among the many possible candidates that had been considered. In the selection were: Jorge Bassa, 37 (our medical doctor), Claudio Gálvez, 23, Rubén Lamilla, 45, Claudio Lucero, 45 (deputy-leader), Nelsón Muñoz, 34, Jorge Quinteros, 46, Iván Vigoroux, 37, and Héctor Zúñiga, 38. I, 32 years old, was appointed as leader.

The group arrived at Rawalpindi on 4 April and spent 18 days there on different errands. We were also kept there because bad weather prevented any flight to Skardu. Finally, on the 24th, we arrived at Skardu, where it took us 2 days to hire 130 porters. Our doctor, Jorge Bassa, gave a physical check up to every one of



them; he also, along the way to the mountain, was stopped often to give treatment to different patients. Apparently, this is already a tradition in this area of Karakoram.

On 27 April we left in 9 jeeps. Bad weather made us realize that we could never get to the mountains with all the porters we had hired. We therefore reduced our loads to some 1800 kilos. We had planned to advance some 120km, but bridges had been destroyed by storms and we had to make several long detours. Still, the porters performed very well and we kept at all times excellent relations with them.

On 6 May we entered the Baltoro glacier. We kept then only 30 Baltis. Bad weather delayed us and only 10 days later were we able to establish our Advance Base Camp at 5150m, on the glacier of the Abruzzi. On 19 May we paid off all our porters and from then on we were by ourselves. We had agreed that all the work was to be done by us.

At the Advance Base Camp we were still some 30km from the peak itself. On the 24th we set foot on the southern Gasherbrum glacier.

Then began the hardest part of the expedition. There were 13km of glacier, well broken with crevasses and surrounded with slopes prone to avalanches. The windblasts of avalanches 5km away were still felt in our camp and would leave us and our tents covered with powder snow. But the place was most impressive. We often paused to admire the graceful flutings of the lower Gasherbrum peaks to the S. As for our goal, it was a giant mountain of ice, topped by a dark cone, which we named the *pirámide egipcia* (Egyptian pyramid).

On 31 May we were ready to tackle the peak itself. We had by then covered the glacier route with our equipment and supplies and marked the dangerous spots with flags. We divided into 2 groups. Bassa, Quinteros and Zúñiga stayed in camps between 5000 and 6000m and the others, in 2 rope teams, set out for the summit (Lamilla-Lucero-Vigorous and Gálvez-Muñoz and I). On 3 June we had barely reached a height over 6000m, because we had to advance slowly. We decided then to make a reduction of our loads and set out for the summit with as little weight as possible.

Most of the time we were able to work in the mornings only, because in the afternoon the weather always became unsettled. We were however full of faith and optimism.

We had to choose a route and we finally took the one opened by the Austrians (1956), although introducing a variant on the final pyramid. Gálvez and I went ahead, fixing ropes as we climbed, and the rest followed with loads. In 14 hours we only covered 400m because of the steepness of the face. On the 6th there was a storm and we had to return to the last camp to spend the night. Exhaustion drove Gálvez back; he had to descend with Muñoz from a height of 6900m. The remaining 4 went up again on the following day and we set up our highest camp at 7200m.

A bid for the summit was launched the next day. After long hours of hard work we all reached a height of 7600m and took a long rest. We were practically out of food and it was impossible to reach the top that day, as we had hoped.

To me that was the most difficult moment in the entire expedition, because the final decision was left to me. We were at 7600m, nearly exhausted, with neither food nor liquids, but, on the other hand, only 400m from the top. It was a matter of spending the night there and attempting the summit the next day, or returning. But returning, we knew only too well, meant not to be able to climb again, and fail. On

the 25th the permit for our stay in the mountains would expire and the liaison officer assigned to us had shown to be strict regarding timetables. After much thinking, I decided to spend the night there in a bivouac and attempt the summit the following day.

Our situation was exposed. Had there been a storm, results could have been disastrous, since we were only carrying what we had in our packs. We did have bad weather and wind. We dug a hole in the snow and put our feet into the sacks. Dressed in our duvets, we huddled against one another and thus settled to spend the night. At 7pm there was snow, which continued for a time, but the wind never stopped. On the morning of the 9th, as soon as it dawned, we began to move, but cold and weak as we were, it took us still some time before we could set out for the climb. What bothered us most now was hunger and thirst. One fixed thought however was uppermost in our minds: the sacrifices the Federación had made in order to field a national expedition to Asia had been indeed tremendous and we could not disappoint those who had done so much.

Around 8am we began the final climb, now in 2 rope teams. At a height of 7800m Vigoroux felt too weak to continue and had to descend, accompanied by Lamilla. Only Lucero and I remained. We went on slowly. By 3pm we were on the final ridge. We knew then that the summit was ours. So far we had had good weather in the morning and in the early afternoon, but by the time we were approaching the summit the wind gained intensity and some snow began to fall. The temperature fell quickly. We pressed on, almost like robots. We arrived at the summit at 6pm, with snow and strong winds. All we did on the summit was to embrace, but had no other thoughts than to descend quickly. We took a few pictures but did not film, since our camera seemed to be frozen. We did not spend more than 15 minutes on the summit.

As we descended, the weather improved somewhat, a lucky thing, since we were exhausted and had to climb down carefully. As we went down, the clouds parted and we were now able to see the lower mountains of the immense Karakoram, a wonderful view that had been denied to us from the top.

By 11pm we arrived at our highest camp, where Lamilla and Vigoroux were waiting for us. They thrust into our hands all they had: a cup of coffee without sugar. But we were happy. Only then did we begin to take stock of everything that had happened in the last few days.

The following morning we all descended to the 6000m camp, where the others waited for us. We had some minor frostbite in our toes and our faces were criss-crossed by cracks and sores. But we ate well there, so much so indeed that we became sick.

On 10 June we took all our equipment down and once in the Base Camp, true relaxation overtook us. Our doctor had somehow concocted a drink with alcohol and other items and we then had our first real celebration. Before us was the march out of those impressive mountains, the trek down river, the arrival at the big cities and the final flight back to Chile. But at that moment, watching the lovely ice-peaks of the Karakoram, we could only think about the expedition's achievement. It was our hour of triumph.