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An even score

Greg Child's 1983 trip to the Karakoram left him with a chaotic collage of experiences—from the exhilaration of a first ascent of Lobsang Spire to the feeling of hopelessness and depression from losing a friend and climbing partner. It also left his mind filled with strong memories—of people, of events and of mountains.

Of the images of mountains that remained sharply focused in Child's mind, the most enduring perhaps was not that of K2 or its satellite 8000 m peaks. It was of Gasherbrum IV, a strikingly symmetrical trapezoid of rock and ice that presided over Concordia at the head of the Baltoro Glacier (see image 25.1). Though far less familiar than Ama Dablam, Machhapuchhare or the Matterhorn, it is undeniably one of the world's most beautiful mountains.

Child said:

After Broad Peak I'd promised myself I would never return to the Himalayas. It was a personal, emphatic, and categorical promise. It was also a promise I could not keep. Again and again the symmetrical silhouette of a truncated, pyramidal mountain kept appearing in my thoughts: Gasherbrum IV. My recollection of it from the summit ridge of Broad Peak, and Pete's suggestion to some day climb its Northwest Ridge, remained etched in my memory.¹

Gasherbrum IV offered a considerable climbing challenge in addition to its beauty. Remarkably, the peak had been climbed only once—in 1958, by its North-East Ridge by Italians Carlo Mauri and Walter Bonatti. There are at least two reasons for its amazing lack of attention. The first is its height. At 7925 m (or 7980 m, according to some surveys), it was just short of the magical 8000 m mark. Anyone attempting it would have to endure virtually all the dangers and hardships of climbing one of

1 Child, G. 1988, *Thin Air: Encounters in the Himalayas*, Patrick Stephens, Wellingborough, England, ch. 15.

the world's highest peaks but without the glory of attaining an 8000 m summit. The second reason is difficulty. Gasherbrum IV is unrelentingly steep from any angle; there are no straightforward, technically easy routes of ascent or descent.

Going after something like Gasherbrum IV, however, even though he had not yet summited an 8000 m peak, was in keeping with Child's philosophy of climbing big mountains: 'I'm not so interested in climbing mountains because they're the highest or because they're 8,000 metre peaks. The important thing is the route, the line on the mountain. It could be a 6,000 metre mountain, it could be an 8,000 metre mountain.'²

The line Child chose for Gasherbrum IV—the North-West Ridge—was classic in its simplicity, directness and steepness, but, not surprisingly, it had not gone unnoticed by other climbers visiting the Karakoram. In fact, in 1984, a year after Child was in the region, an American team made an attempt on the North-West Ridge. They fell short—reaching 7300 m—but they got far enough up the route to determine that it was consistently serious and technically difficult.

One of the American climbers on that 1984 expedition, Geoff Radford, had met Child and was keen to have another go at Gasherbrum IV when Child suggested a trip for 1986. The pair formed the nucleus of the primarily American team, assembled through their contacts within the climbing community of the United States' West Coast.

Joining Child and Radford were Tom Hargis, a mountain guide from Seattle; Steve Risse, the expedition doctor; Andy Tuthill, who had climbed with Radford on Denali and Aconcagua; and Randy Leavitt, a rock-climbing mate of Child's who was a relative newcomer to alpine climbing and who had not done any high-altitude mountaineering.

Gasherbrum IV, with only one ascent, had proved in the past to be an exceedingly difficult and elusive objective, so Child knew that the team, to have any chance of success, would have to be an exceptionally strong one. To complete the team, Child needed what he called a 'secret weapon'—a climber or climbers of unquestionable strength and endurance—and for that he turned to his native Australia and to the potent climbing partnership of Tim Macartney-Snape and Lincoln Hall.

The Macartney-Snape/Hall team was an obvious choice. They had just capped their illustrious Himalayan careers with the first Australian ascent of Mt Everest, in 1984. Not only was the Everest ascent a milestone in the newly emerging history of Australian Himalayan climbing, it was a remarkable ascent by any standards of Himalayan mountaineering.

2 G. Child in Baxter, C. 1990, 'Child's play', *Wild*, no. 37 (Winter), pp. 58–63.

Unfortunately, Hall decided not to join the expedition. In his place, Macartney-Snape invited fellow Everest summiter Greg Mortimer, who was, Macartney-Snape said, ‘the only other person available I would have considered climbing with’.³ Just a few months before the expedition was to begin, however, Mortimer was forced to withdraw after he had earlier agreed to join the attempt. The combination of Child and Mortimer thus would not be formed for another four years, but when it was, some spectacular things happened in the Karakoram. For 1986, however, it was only Macartney-Snape from Australia who was able to join his compatriot and the American members for the trip to Gasherbrum IV.

Although Child and Macartney-Snape were both at the forefront of Australian high-altitude climbing, they had never met. It was testament to their mutual respect that Child issued the invitation to join the Gasherbrum IV expedition, and Macartney-Snape accepted, before the pair had a chance to meet.

The Karakoram was not the easiest region of the Himalaya for a climber to lead his first big expedition in and the Gasherbrum IV trip turned out to be a baptism of fire for Greg Child. Problems arose almost immediately when a particularly aggressive Balti forced his way onto the expedition as sirdar, or leader of the porters and local staff.

He was one of those people who looked vaguely familiar and Child had the distinct impression that he had seen the tall Balti before. Furthermore, he had a distinct feeling of distrust and unease about the man, but since he could not link those suspicions with anything substantial, he reluctantly agreed to hire him.

It proved almost instantly to be a mistake. The sirdar rapidly turned the newly hired porters against their employers and excessive demands were being made even before the first load was shouldered. Child and his colleagues had the rare experience of being hit by a porter strike even before the march to base camp had begun!

It was only when a Basque climber, also at the trailhead at Skardu, warned Geoff Radford about the Balti that the penny dropped for Child. The man’s name was Sher Khan and he had been the sirdar for a Basque expedition to K2 in 1983—at the same time Child had been in the area with Scott’s expedition to Lobsang Spire, Broad Peak and K2. Child had seen Sher Khan when he met the Basques and was amazed at their stories about their wild-eyed sirdar.

Sher Khan, it seemed, was a religious fanatic. He apparently forced his porters to whip themselves to atone for their sins—as though carrying loads up the rugged Baltoro for Western climbers was not punishment enough—and flogged their backs with ropes and branches. He turned on his employers as well and when the Basques refused to cave in to his extravagant demands for extra equipment, he stirred up the

3 Macartney-Snape, T. 1986, ‘Gasherbrum IV’, *Wild*, no. 22 (Spring), pp. 48–54.

porters to threaten the climbers with staves and rocks. At one point, the enraged Baltis, whipped into a frenzy by Sher Khan's religious fervour, had the Basques backed against the wall of the Braldu Gorge. Last-minute intervention by the expedition's liaison officer rescued the situation.

When Child realised who the tall Balti with the crazed look in his eyes really was, he devised a clever plan to get rid of Sher Khan. Faced with a contract requiring stringent behaviour, which was to be lodged with the Pakistan Ministry of Tourism in Skardu, Sher Khan was happy to take a day's wages and disappear. Child was rapidly acquiring the skills needed to be a successful expedition leader.

Like most mountaineers in the Karakoram, Child, Macartney-Snape and their colleagues heaved a collective sigh of relief when they finally arrived at base camp, on the West Gasherbrum Glacier, and watched the porters disappear back down the Baltoro Glacier. Now they could concentrate on climbing and they would get plenty of that on the imposing Gasherbrum IV.

Their approach to climbing Gasherbrum IV, like that of many modern Himalayan expeditions, was a hybrid one. Camps and fixed ropes were established lower on the mountain and a high camp was used to launch an alpine-style attack on the summit. Their route led first up the glacier to its head and then up a moderately steep couloir to a gap at the lower end of the North-West Ridge, the site of camp two. Camp three and the end of the fixed ropes were located at nearly 7000 m on the ridge itself (see image 25.2). It was at that point that the real difficulties on the ridge began—and continued virtually without respite to the summit.

The climbing and establishment of the first three camps were done in bursts, interrupted by long bouts of bad weather. Even when the weather was reasonably agreeable, the conditions were harsh. The temperature on a sunny day on the West Gasherbrum Glacier, where the climbers were toiling with loads to camp one, was the highest that Macartney-Snape, a veteran of seven previous expeditions, had ever experienced in the Himalaya. Higher on the mountain, he endured some of the most vicious storms and the coldest conditions he had ever been subjected to.

During one of those storms on their first trip to camp three, Child discovered just how difficult and awkward even the most basic bodily functions could be at high altitude.

On the third storm-bound day in the snowcave I develop an unpleasant accompaniment to cold feet: swelling bowels. Try as I may to put it off, after some seventy hours I have no choice but to relieve myself. I look up and burrow headfirst out of the snow-clogged exit to emerge in a maelstrom of blasting snow and wind, with a wad of toilet paper streaming in one gloved hand. Unzipping zippers, I shed layers of pile and Gortex. The wind, thick with spindrift, makes it impossible to breathe. Snow quickly fills my pants, my goggles ice over. To execute even this simple, urgent business proves out of the question. In no small distress I burrow back into the cave.

'Can't do it! Too windy out there,' I report to Tim.

'Oh dear,' he replies.

'But I still have to go. Look, sorry about this but I'm going to have to settle this in here.'

'Oh no!'

I grab the shovel, fill it with snow, drop my pants, squat astride the shovel, and commence the awful deed. The stench is spectacular. Tim retreats into his sleeping bag and emits strangled gasps of protest. Finished, I zip myself back into my windsuit, crawl back out [of] the cave with the shovel at arm's reach, and then pitch the shovel-load over the West Face. The gale atomizes the turd and broadcasts it in equal amounts over China and Pakistan.

Back inside the cave I pant breathlessly. It is the most exercise I'd had for several days. Tim slowly pokes his head out of his sleeping bag, as if emerging from a bomb shelter after a nuclear explosion.⁴

After a spell at base camp forced by bad weather, Child and Macartney-Snape again found themselves in the snow cave at camp three. Radford, Hargis and Tuthill joined them. It was now mid-June; time was getting on and the climbers knew that the next spell of good weather, which appeared to be upon them now, would be their best chance to climb the mountain. Any further delays and their supplies would begin to run low, their bodies would start to deteriorate more rapidly and the expedition would start the exponential slide to an unsuccessful conclusion.

Their plan was straightforward. Using camp three as a staging post, they would climb as high on the ridge as possible in a day, set up their three tents and the next day go as lightly as possible in a push for the summit.

Gasherbrum IV, however, like most difficult Himalayan peaks, was not amenable to such precise planning. It would prove to be an exhausting and very risky objective, one that Macartney-Snape would later dub 'harder than Everest'.⁵ It would severely test Child's judgment, on the first Himalayan expedition after the tragedy at nearly 8000 m on Broad Peak, and it would challenge even Macartney-Snape's legendary strength and endurance at high altitude.

Even with the aid of some fixed ropes left by the 1984 American expedition, the going above camp three was slower than they had hoped. Much of the problem was caused by the first of the rock bands that guarded the upper reaches of Gasherbrum IV's North-West Ridge. The obstacle was overcome late in the day when Macartney-Snape circumvented the last bit of steep rock by leading up a steep ice gully

⁴ Child, *Thin Air: Encounters in the Himalayas*, ch. 17.

⁵ Macartney-Snape, T. 1987, *Harder Than Everest*, Film, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney.

threatened by 30 m ice pinnacles. Camp four, just above the rock band, was only 7300 m or so. That left a long way to go on the summit day, with much of it over very difficult terrain.

The next morning, the five climbers faced difficulties almost immediately on leaving the tents (see image 25.3). They were climbing extremely lightly, with two stoves, some packets of noodle soup, some teabags, a few cakes of chocolate and a couple of sleeping-bags and foam pads for the intended bivouac on the descent. They had a close scrape with an avalanche-prone slope that cracked but did not slide, some heart-stopping solo climbing on steep, exposed ice slopes and technical rock climbing up steep, smooth bands of marble—climbing that would have been challenging at sea level on a sunny day.

Macartney-Snape described the physical effort it took to cope with such climbing at 7500 m:

It's like running a 100-metre dash perpetually. You are always operating with a severe oxygen debt.

You feel very lethargic. When you sit down, you want to go to sleep. You have to force yourself to do anything. In conditions like these, the good weather and beautiful views high on a mountain are something to be feared. They draw you up. You find yourself on the summit at the end of the day facing a dangerous descent in the dark.⁶

The Australians and Americans found themselves in just such a situation high on Gasherbrum IV. By 4pm, they had just surmounted the last of the technical difficulties but they were still below the northern, lower summit. There was no way they could climb to that summit, traverse the 400 m to the main summit and return again before dark.

They had left even the meagre bivouac gear they had been carrying below the last rock band in an effort to make a last-ditch dash to the top. Radford, plagued by a broken crampon, had already turned back. The other four climbers were faced with a nasty choice: retreat to the safety of the tents below and virtually concede defeat or risk a night out at nearly 8000 m with no bivouac gear. A wrong decision in a situation like this is what often costs climbers their toes and fingers, and sometimes their lives.

For two people, the decision was clear. Andy Tuthill thought the risk too great and had no trouble deciding to retreat. Macartney-Snape, on the other hand, was determined to climb Gasherbrum IV and knew, from his previous experiences high on Himalayan mountains, that he would survive the night.

⁶ Ibid.

Macartney-Snape said:

I decided quickly to bivvy out. For me psychologically, to descend would have meant defeat. I was reasonably sure things would be OK. We had to find a place out of the wind and maintain a positive attitude.

It's always exciting to bivvy out on a mountain. But to do it at 26,000 feet [nearly 8000 m] with no gear is really exciting! In a perverse way, I was really looking forward to it. I tend to be optimistic. I guess I don't have the imagination to realise what could happen to me. Andy did.⁷

The decision was more difficult for Child:

We have nothing but the clothes on our backs. No water, food, or stove. I'd read long ago about Hermann Buhl sitting out a night just below the summit of Nanga Parbat. It seemed to me then something only a superman could endure or a madman conceive. I'd also heard the separate tales of Nazir Sabir and Jim Wickwire, both of whom had sat out nights near the summit of K2. Nazir had suffered memory loss for months. Jim's bivouac had cost him a piece of lung when fluid had frozen in his chest. And there was Bonatti and Mahdi on K2. Even with an oxygen cylinder, Mahdi had lost his feet. A bivouac here would be harsh, but at the same time I felt that our chances were good; the weather was clear, and we still had some strength left. Instinct condoned the idea, the ambition put words in my mouth.⁸

Child decided to bivouac. As he put it, 'Our own private epic began to take shape.'⁹ Joining Child and Macartney-Snape on the impending epic was Hargis, who, despite a lung infection and the resulting violent bouts of coughing, was determined to get to the top.

The three climbers found just enough snow below the north summit to dig a rudimentary snow cave. It was essential that they shelter themselves from the life-threatening icy gales that gusted across the top of Gasherbrum IV. As Child helped dig out the shallow cave, the reasons for his decision to risk the night out became more clear:

Framed in the entrance to the cave is Broad Peak, where Pete [Thexton] had died and where he still lay. It is almost three years to the day since our struggle to get down the mountain. As oxygen starved as my thoughts are, the essence of my reason for returning to the Karakoram falls clearly into place, as never before. It seemed that finishing that idea I had shared with Pete, to climb Gasherbrum IV, would close a circle, would somehow set a cruel score a little more even.¹⁰

7 Ibid.

8 Child, *Thin Air: Encounters in the Himalayas*, ch. 18.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

Like nearly all high-mountain bivouacs, the night in the tiny, cramped snow cave passed excruciatingly slowly. ‘I was the only one with a watch,’ Macartney-Snape recalled. ‘After what seemed an eternity, we all had a guess at the time. We thought it was somewhere between midnight and 2.00 a.m. It was 8.30 p.m.’¹¹

It was a long, long night, as Child recalled:

My shivering gradually becomes a low wail that sounds very much like someone in constant pain. I begin to think about the pain we are feeling now, the pain of cold. What is it like, how to quantify it? Like having a tooth pulled without an anaesthetic, all day... Tom coughs again. Something like a pale green, blood-spattered tadpole flies out of his gullet, hits the wall, and freezes solid. He retreats into himself and takes on the countenance of a zombie... As we sit shivering, a state, neither sleep nor wake but more like a sedative overdose, full of strange, restless dreams, carries us into our own worlds.

As 22 June dawns, sunlight creeps into the snowcave and onto our stiff, hurting bodies. A minuscule veil of frozen moisture momentarily clasps my eyelids together, then releases. We look at each other. Faces are puffed and bloated with mild edema. Capillaries bulge red and angry on our brows. Lips and noses look like peeling sausages. Icicles hang from beards and noses. I recognize none of this ugly crew.¹²

Fortunately, the fine weather held and the three climbers miraculously survived the night with no frostbite. They slowly readied themselves for the day’s climbing, crawled into the sharp, cold breeze and began the traverse across the summit ridge. By 10am, they were on the summit of Gasherbrum IV. Their risky decision to endure a bivouac high on the peak had paid handsome dividends. They had become only the second team ever to stand on the summit of Gasherbrum IV (see image 25.4).

The drama was not quite over, however. As Child and Macartney-Snape were reversing the traverse back across the summit ridge, they nearly met with disaster when the latter tried to remove a piece of protection they placed in the rock on a difficult section of the ridge.

‘[T]he momentarily incomprehensible sight of Tim’s ice axe and the piton flying through the air, then jangling down the rocks, wrenches me to attention,’ Child vividly remembered:

I look across to see a red blur—Tim—cartwheeling backwards over the West Face. He seems to fall in slow motion. I haul in a yard of rope. Still he’s falling, 40, 50 ft, dropping down, swinging like a pendulum towards me. The boot-axe belay seems a token gesture, a text book theory incapable of holding a fall. I await a grand tour of the 10,000 ft [3000 m] West Face.¹³

11 Macartney-Snape, *Harder Than Everest*.

12 Child, *Thin Air: Encounters in the Himalayas*, ch. 19.

13 *Ibid.*

The grand tour never came. With the help of the rope fortuitously hooking over a tiny knob of rock, Child's shaky belay held. There were, however, moments of extreme anxiety as Macartney-Snape's full weight came onto the rope and Child realised he could not hold it for long.

A final option comes to mind as I feel the outline of a pen-knife in my pocket. I'll have to make a choice about this soon, I tell myself. The idea is horrible to contemplate, but as more and more rope slips through my hands, I find myself thinking with the cold practicality of Clint Eastwood. But the rope moves. I cast the knife out of my thoughts and pull the rope in, and in, and in. Tim appears. Feathers fly out of his ripped down suit. He looks as if he's been blasted with buckshot.¹⁴

The rest of the descent was thankfully uneventful (see image 25.5).

The Gasherbrum IV ascent was a real gem, another landmark for Australian Himalayan mountaineering. Out from under Scott's tutelage, Child put in a masterful performance—from the early planning phases through to the bold drive up the taxing North-West Ridge to the summit. For Macartney-Snape, it was another stunning success to add to his growing list of Himalayan achievements.

A quick descent...nearly

Tim Macartney-Snape

[W]hen I reached the piton which was the only device attaching both Greg and I to Gasherbrum IV I began taking it out with a zeal fired by impatience. Greg was belaying me with the rope running round the shaft of his ice axe which he had firmly embedded in the wind-packed snow. 'I've never put too much faith in these things,' he commented on the belay, in the slow deliberate speech of high altitude, 'but I suppose it's better than nothing...'

The soft steel piton stuck in its crack with the stubbornness of chewing gum when it sticks to your foot on a hot summer's day. The ice axe was not designed as a hammer, and even though mine did a good job of hammering loose the piton I had a hard time. With both hands I finally placed the pick of the ice axe in the eye of the piton and pulled vigorously sideways on the shaft. The levering action worked, and the piton flew out with a jerk that upset the delicate footing of my crampons. First the points of my right crampon skidded over the sloping ledge they had been perched on and the momentum swung my body around so that now my right foot began to pivot and then slither. I began to fall. It has always seemed unfair that whilst oxygen diminishes with altitude, the force of gravity seems to remain the same; and so with the full force of the Earth's gravitational pull I began accelerating down the West Face, bouncing off rough protrusions of rock. The greatest adjustment one makes to the limitations of altitude is to slow down the pace of everything to such an extent that even one's concept of time slows down. Now the speed at which everything was happening to me came as a numbing shock. Looking back on it all, I can understand why there have been so many incidents at high altitude were simple falls that could have been arrested have ended in tragedy. Not that I could have done anything to stop myself. My only hope was in Greg, and my mind was occupied solely with the question of if and when he was going to stop me. My axe temporarily snagged on a rock and was torn from my hands.

14 Ibid.

I fell faster. The thin green rope finally pulled taut and I came to a halt. I was breathless, tufts of down drifted out from tears in my down suit, and my ice axe was gone. 'Thanks Greg', I bleated hoarsely between breaths. But he did not hear, an anxious call came down from him. He had visions of having to cope with a seriously injured companion. What could he do? Nothing much. Serious injury in that place would almost certainly have meant death, as it was hard enough getting one's own able body back down. Although we climbed as a team, each person took ultimate responsibility for himself. This thought struck home hard as we both pondered the situation. However, my strength flooded back and I was able to put Greg's mind at rest by climbing back up to him. I had only fallen about 20 metres. 'I don't believe it, these belays actually work. I even had time to pull in some slack. Are you okay?' Greg seemed as nervous as I; but then he was tied to the other end of the rope.

From 'Gasherbrum IV', *Wild*, no. 22 (Spring 1986), pp. 49, 53.

He has proved that he is without peer among Australian mountaineers in determination, strength and the ability to function at extreme altitudes; and, indeed, that there are very few mountaineers anywhere in the world who can match his incredible drive and willpower in the most desperate of situations. Combining those qualities with Child's consummate skill in all phases of climbing and his own remarkable determination formed a team that the world's most difficult 'nearly 8000-er' could not repulse. Their success was made even sweeter by the dogged push to the summit by the ailing American Tom Hargis, an effort reminiscent of the outstanding mental and physical stamina that would carry Pat Cullinan to the summit of Everest two years later.

Child, however, was not quite through with the Karakoram for 1986. In true Doug Scott fashion, he had planned multiple objectives for the trip. He, Hargis and rock ace Randy Leavitt wanted to climb Nameless Tower after they had finished off Gasherbrum IV. Although it suffers from having been named by a person with either a total lack of imagination or an extremely subtle sense of humour, Nameless Tower is the most stunning—and probably the most daunting to climb—of any of the majestic Trango group of granite towers.

It would be a climb in big-wall fashion—bigger than the ascent of Lobsang Spire three years earlier. Whereas Lobsang Spire had been tackled at the beginning of the 1983 expedition, when the climbers were fresh, Child and Hargis were considerably drained from their desperate ascent of Gasherbrum IV. Leavitt too had worked hard on the mountain, climbing to 7300 m in support of the others. Nevertheless, the trio made a valiant effort on Nameless Tower, climbing to within 300 m of the 6237 m summit before being turned back.

Still, the 1986 expedition was a big psychological turning point for Greg Child. He had evened the score with the Karakoram.

Just a year later, Child was back in the Karakoram, trying to go one-up on the massive range. His objective was K2—the world's second-highest peak—and he was part of a very talented team that included Tim Macartney-Snape, the veteran

Doug Scott, Scott's twenty-four-year-old son, Mike, and experienced American climbers Steve Swenson and Phil Erschler. The last was the only climber of the 1984 American Everest North Ridge expedition to reach the summit, a few days after Macartney-Snape and Mortimer completed the first ascent of the spectacular Great Couloir route.

This formidable team aimed to make the first ascent of K2's East Face—and to do it in alpine style. They were destined, however, to make hardly any impression at all on the mountain and to prove once again the old adage that climbers do not conquer mountains; it is the mountain that decides when and by whom it will be climbed. In 1987, weather and dangerous snow conditions proved to be K2's impregnable defences.

Macartney-Snape recalled:

We sat in Base Camp, prisoners of our ambition and the weather. The frustrating thing was that below 7,000 metres the weather was never really that bad. The lashing blizzards of the previous year never came. Instead, we had an interminable succession of blandly bad days, occasionally broken by one and, rarely, two fine days which kept our hopes alive—something like commercial television.¹⁵

The bad weather above 7000 m was putting the upper ramparts of K2 dangerously out of condition. The situation became clear as some members of the team spent a bit of their pent-up energies on a nearby 7000 m ice peak.

Macartney-Snape was not impressed with what he saw of K2's East Face from high on the training peak:

[A]s I examined the vast sloping snow plateau below the summit pyramid through my binoculars, I came to the horrified conclusion that the 500 metre line I was looking at was not a shallow ice cliff but the crown of a giant slab avalanche which must have been ten metres deep at the fracture! The avalanche would have swept straight down our proposed route and across the glacier...I was no longer very interested in the East Face.¹⁶

After a month of such frustrations, Macartney-Snape felt that his 'commitment to life in that other world beyond the expedition'¹⁷ was weakening his resolve and he left for Australia. After his departure, some of the other members, including Child, made three attempts on K2 itself, but in each case dangerous snow conditions and the unreliable weather stopped the climbers. Two of the attempts did break the 7000 m mark, but the summit was still well out of reach. The Karakoram had gone one-up on Child again this time.

15 Macartney-Snape, T. 1988, 'K2', *Wild*, no. 28 (Autumn), pp. 36–7.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

At this stage, Greg Child's Himalayan career had spanned seven years and included four expeditions, with successful ascents of Shivling, Lobsang Spire and Gasherbrum IV. His record contained great variety—in sizes of peaks and nature and difficulty of routes. What it did not yet include was a trip to Nepal, the small kingdom that contained the highest concentration of big Himalayan peaks of any of Asia's mountain nations or provinces. That omission, however, was about to be rectified.

A year after his 1987 K2 attempt, Child again teamed with Scott—this time for an expedition into Nepal. For a first trip into the land of Everest and Annapurna, Child did it right. Not only was he heading for an attempt on Makalu, the world's fifth-highest peak and undoubtedly one of the most graceful and beautiful of the 8000 m mountains, he approached Makalu with surely the most spectacular trek of eastern Nepal and one of the loveliest anywhere in the Himalaya.

Makalu, however, had not been kind to Antipodean climbers. In 1983, Mark Moorhead and Bill Denz—half of a four-man team—were killed in separate accidents on Makalu's West Ridge (see Chapter 19). It was the western side of Makalu that had attracted Scott and his international band of mountaineers, which included an Irishman, two Indians and six more Britons, in addition to Child.

Early on in the expedition, it was obvious that the West Face of Makalu was out of condition, so Scott and his team eventually settled for an attempt on the original French route via the Makalu Col, a notch in the ridge to the north of the summit. Even before Child had had a reasonable chance on that route, however, a near-tragedy, due to dangerous wind-slab conditions, proved to be a serious blow to the expedition.

Doug Scott recounted:

Alan [Hinkes] and Rick [Allen] continued up to 8,100 m. Al was dubious about continuing. Rick pushed on until he avalanched past Alan, who had let go of the rope as he had a poor belay. Rick went down 500 m over snow and rock. His head was badly lacerated. Al managed to get him down to the Makalu La.

Greg and myself reach Rick there [at 7000 m], after coming up directly from Advanced Base Camp [in a single day, after having descended from 7000 m the previous day!]. . . We thought it prudent to evacuate him by helicopter. He flew away to Kathmandu with wife Alison [they were on honeymoon]. . . Rick luckily made a complete recovery from his head injuries but spent a week in hospital with malaria!¹⁸

18 Scott, D. 1988, 'British Makalu expedition, 1988', *Himalayan Journal*, vol. 46, pp. 139–40.

‘After the drama of rescuing Rick and getting him out by helicopter,’ Child added, ‘the raging winds of October set in and our progress on the mountain ground to a halt. By mid-October we’d quit Makalu.’¹⁹ Again, conditions and incidents beyond his control had cost Child a reasonable go at the summit of one of the Himalaya’s great peaks.

Greg Child is not one to leave an aesthetic, challenging line on a mountain alone after just one attempt. In 1989, he was back in the Karakoram to settle a score again—not with K2 this time but with Nameless Tower. The North-East Face still beckoned after his 1986 attempt with Hargis and Leavitt. This time, he convinced another of America’s many gifted rock climbers, Mark Wilford, to join him in the attempt. Their route, on the same face attempted in 1986, was up 1500 m of steep, difficult rock.

‘We almost climbed it,’ Child said:

but we were on the wall for 13 days, completely alpine style, living in Porta-ledges. It was difficult climbing—some A5 aid climbing, and grade 21 free climbing. The weather was horrendous. We didn’t get up because of the weather.

I think I was more physically and mentally extended then than on almost anything else I’ve ever done. We nearly ‘bought the farm’ on that one; we became hypothermic, and couldn’t Jumar the ropes to get to each other. Both of us were coated in ice and were wet all day. We set up a Porta-ledge in a spindrift storm. The ledge collapsed twice and our fingers were badly nipped by the cold.²⁰

Did a frightening experience like that put Child off another attempt? If anything, it increased his resolve to return and master the challenging route. ‘So close did we get, and so inspired are we by the ground we covered,’ he wrote, ‘that we intend to return in 1990 to complete the route.’²¹

Other events intervened in 1990, however. Greg Child had another Karakoram score to settle: with the king of Karakoram peaks, K2. In 1990, he finally had a chance to climb in the Himalaya with Greg Mortimer, the other member of Australia’s first Everest expedition to have reached the summit. When that pair got together, great things happened on K2, just as the combination of Child and Macartney-Snape had been the driving force for the magnificent ascent of Gasherbrum IV.

Throughout the 1980s, another Australian climber was building up an impressive career in the Himalaya, almost unnoticed in both the Australian and international mountaineering communities. His career would also lead to a major ascent in 1990—one of several remarkable Australian achievements that year on the very highest of Himalayan peaks.

19 G. Child in Baxter, ‘Child’s play’.

20 Ibid.

21 G. Child in ‘Out there’, *Australian Geographic*, no. 18 (April–June 1990), p. 27.

This text is taken from *Himalayan Dreaming: Australian mountaineering in the great ranges of Asia, 1922–1990*, by Will Steffen, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.