Skiing the Karakoram High Route

GALEN A. ROWELL

MY EXPEDITION DREAMS have almost always failed, not in the field on some windswept ridge where the elements proved too strong for human powers to overcome, but around a campfire in the Sierra or the desert where an idea flickered out with the embers. The pattern has been nearly always the same. Random talk of mountains and people becomes specific. An image of a light, self-contained expedition to the Himalaya forms. Just good friends and good climbing. Big efforts with oxygen and lots of porters are out. The magnet is that time on the mountain, working together toward a meaningful goal, isolated from the rest of humanity and any need to depend upon it for success or enjoyment.

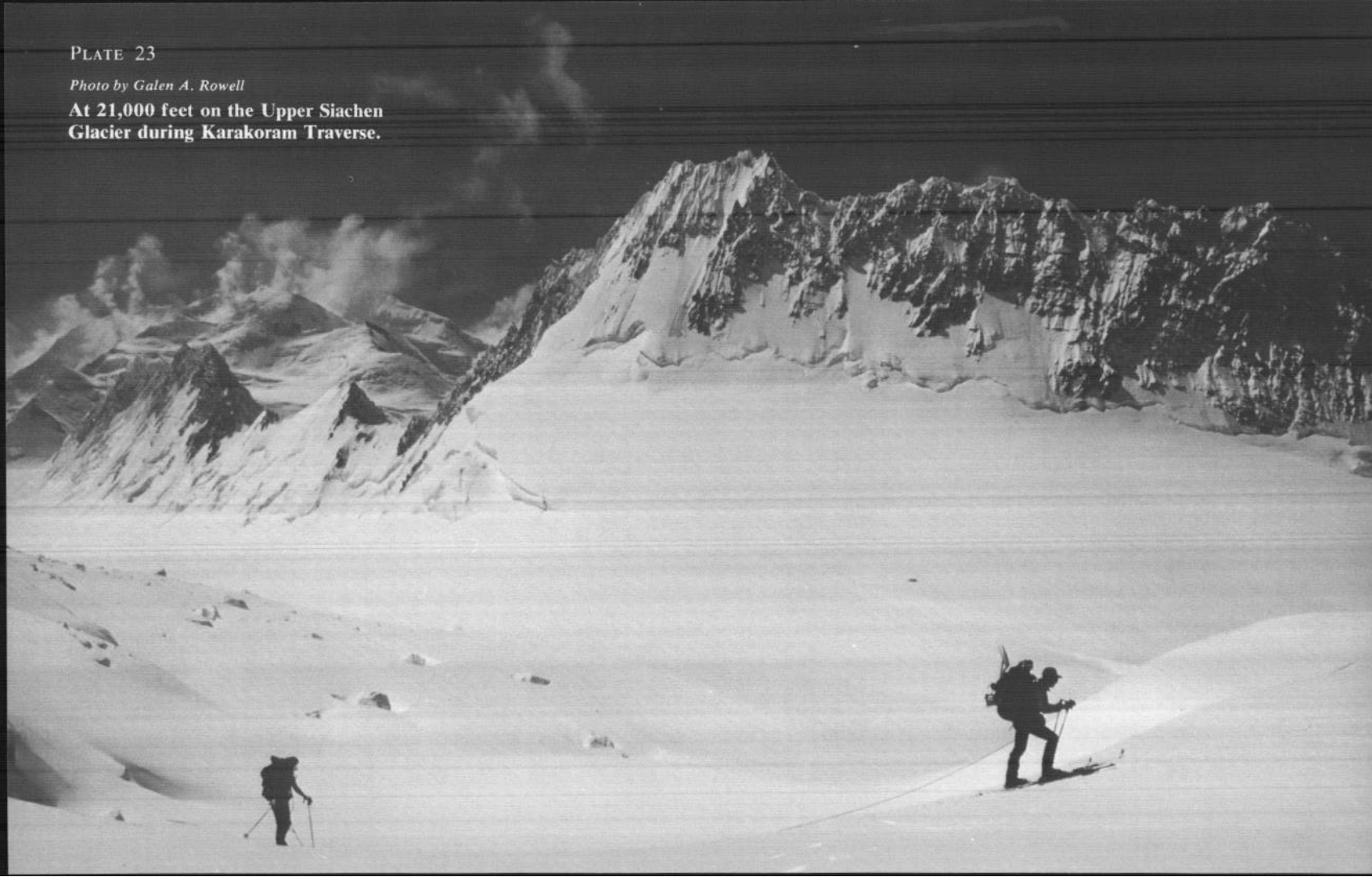
The magnet has an opposite pole with an equal force that intrudes on the best laid plans. The bold outlines of all Himalayan climbing expeditions include a lot of time in the mountains that is not one's own. The shorter and more efficient the climb itself, the greater the proportion of time spent in the lowlands dealing and living with a basically unwanted caravan of men and supplies. Where air-drops, vehicle access, or pack animals can be utilized, it is still possible to climb without coming face to face with one's own hedonism, but in the Himalaya, where each hour of mountain pleasure can be equated to days of toil by hired hands, the dream around a campfire is never fulfilled by reality. When the embers go out, they leave a subtle division of minds. On the one hand are those who will not compromise their ideals. They stay to pursue simpler goals in accessible ranges. On the other hand are those like myself, who sell their dreams short for a little instant gratification and experience.

My solution to this eternal conflict is as simple as it is absurd. If the root of the problem is all that gear needed to climb a mountain, why climb a mountain at all? With this non-objective firmly in mind, I organized the 1980 American Karakoram Traverse Expedition. Our goal was to traverse the highest range on earth, the Karakoram Himalaya,

PLATE 23

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

At 21,000 feet on the Upper Siachen Glacier during Karakoram Traverse.



across northern Pakistan from the Indian border three-fourths of the way to Afghanistan. We would follow the greatest of all the world's high routes, an esthetic line over four of the largest glaciers outside the subpolar latitudes. This pathway of ice doglegs from glacier to glacier, yet in an overall way it follows a remarkable east-to-west trend through the very heart of the range. From the high perspective of satellite photos, the blue glaciers rest on the tawny landscape like long beads strung on a loose necklace. In the winter and spring however, all is hidden under a white blanket of snow. After the shortest days of winter were past, but long before the snow melted from the highlands, our four-man expedition would set out on Nordic skis with small sleds. We hoped to become the first expedition to move through the heart of the Himalaya under its own power, and to capture something of our elusive dreams.

On March 27th we began our 285-mile traverse from the village of Khapalu at the confluence of the Shyok and Saltoro rivers. Ten porters were hired to take us to the snowline, from where we would strike out on our own, with just one food cache in the village of Askole, a short distance off our route between the Baltoro and Biafo Glaciers. Otherwise, we would travel entirely above human habitation. Each man would have 120 pounds. We could find no way to go lighter. Besides food and survival gear for weeks of sub-zero living, we needed considerable fuel to melt all our water needs, climbing gear to traverse the south face of Sia Kangri at 22,500 feet between the Siachen and Baltoro basins, durable ski equipment, and ropes for protection against crevasse falls.

We offered a full place on the expedition to a Pakistan Army Liaison Officer who was experienced in ski-mountaineering. If a man without such experience was assigned, we offered to bring him to the United States at our expense for training. Unfortunately neither of these offers were filled. A fine young officer, Captain Masood Khan, volunteered for the expedition under the assumption that he would be skiing while porters (all expeditions have porters, don't they?) carried the loads. I also offered a place on the expedition to Pervez Kahn, an old friend who had been with several mountaineering expeditions as well as George Schaller's wildlife trips in the Karakoram. The two Khans, unrelated but of similar 130-pound stature, lacked the ski experience and brute strength of the American contingent. Although they worked selflessly to get the expedition off the ground, I was faced with the difficult decision of requesting that they meet us in Askole by traveling in the lowlands. Their disappointment was at least equalled by their sense of relief at not having to haul nearly their own body weight with them for the coming month.

Our foursome consisted of Dan Asay, Ned Gillette, Kim Schmitz, and me. We set off up the Bilafond Glacier, feeling very alone as the Khans and the porters retreated the way we had come. Here just a few miles from the Indian border we planned to cross the 18,000-foot Bilafond La and follow the Lolofond Glacier to its juncture with the Siachen. It

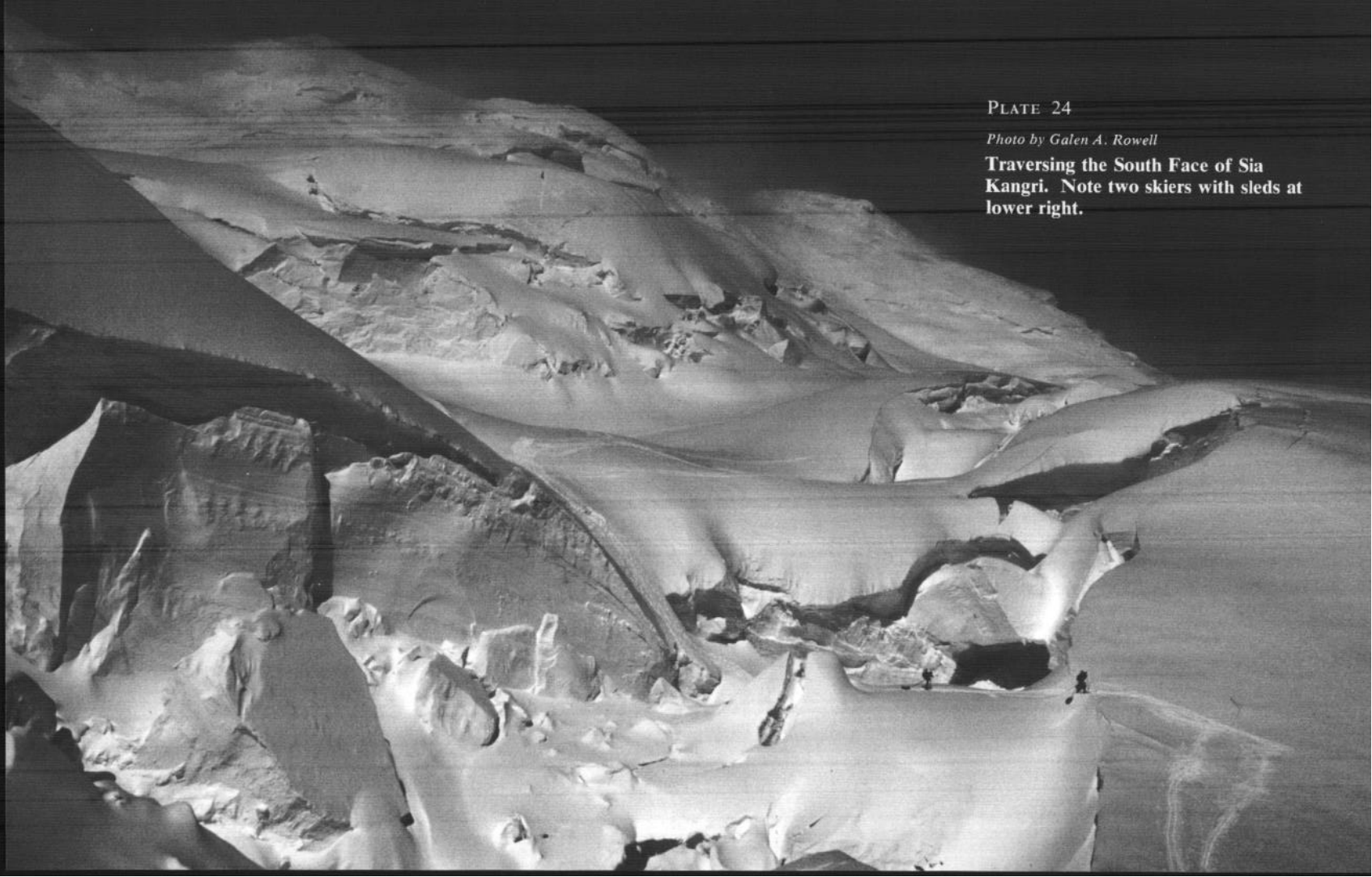


PLATE 24

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

Traversing the South Face of Sia Kangri. Note two skiers with sleds at lower right.

had proved politically impossible to begin in India on the snout of the Siachen itself.

The conditions were extremely gratifying. No one had been on these great glaciers in winter and we had been given every conceivable prediction. One geographer told Ned to expect unconsolidated powder several feet deep at high altitude. What we found was a steady, firm surface. It was too cold to form a crust, yet windblown enough to allow the leader to break trail almost as fast as the others could follow.

Cold was our enemy on the Siachen. The basin of over 400 square miles of gently sloping ice was a perfect trap for temperature inversions. In the populated Saltoro Valley the temperature never dropped below 20° F at 11,000 feet, but at 16,000 feet on the Siachen we found ourselves trying to pass a −25° F night with light sleeping bags rated above zero.

For me, the greatest hardship of travel to this point was not the huge loads or the icy winds, but the simple act of rushing out of the tent with full bowels on that coldest dawn. My hasty motions dislodged hoar frost from every panel of the dome tent, dusting Kim and me with a thick layer of ice. For the first time in decades I thought about the old crystal paperweight that used to sit on my father's desk. When I was a child, I turned it over in my hands and watched artificial snow fall on the hapless figure inside. I used to imagine how small, cold and insignificant that little man felt in a hostile world beyond his control. On the Siachen, I became that little man.

The peaks of the Siachen were bleak and foreign. Visions of the bulky Teram Kangri group blended with glimpses of the tilted strata of Saltoro Kangri, which looked as if it had been transported from the Canadian Rockies and set on a base higher than its old summit in order to reach 25,400 feet into the sky. Farther up the glacier were the graceful white teeth of Hawk and Ghent, the pyramid of Sia Kangri, and a distant hulk that I soon realized was the only landmark I had seen before. Hidden Peak thrust its 26,470 feet far enough above the summits ringing the Siachen basin that it remained in constant view, a beacon to guide us toward the Baltoro.

Our travel up the glacier was ritualistic rather than eventful. We gained about a thousand feet each day, spending only about five hours out of twelve actually skiing. Two hours were used to break camp, and two more to set it up. Frequent rest stops ate up another three hours. Our effort was not much greater than with lighter loads. We just moved far slower with 60 pounds on our backs, 50 on a children's roll-up vinyl sled, and 10 more in a reversed fanny pack.

On the afternoon of April 12, we reached the Siachen's end. Even though our maps had warned us of what was coming, we were surprised to watch our gentle plateau disappear beneath our feet into a Grand Canyon-sized chasm. A mile vertically below us was the head of the

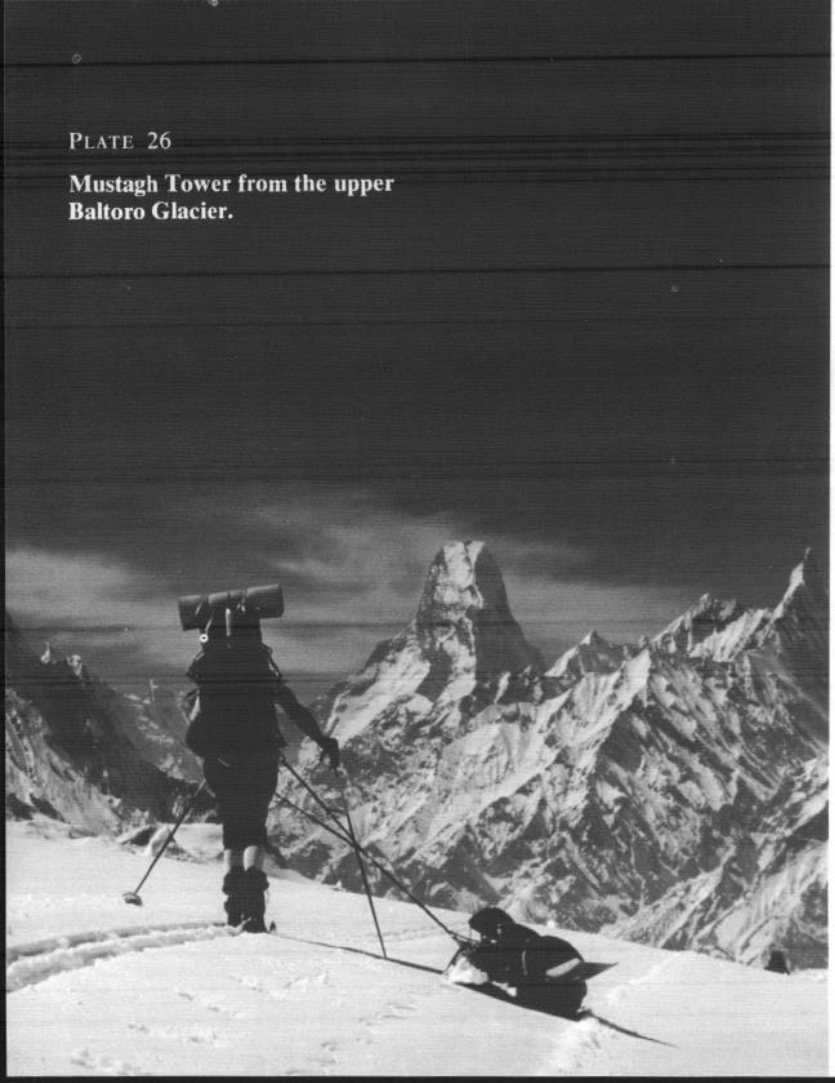


PLATE 26

Mustagh Tower from the upper Baltoro Glacier.

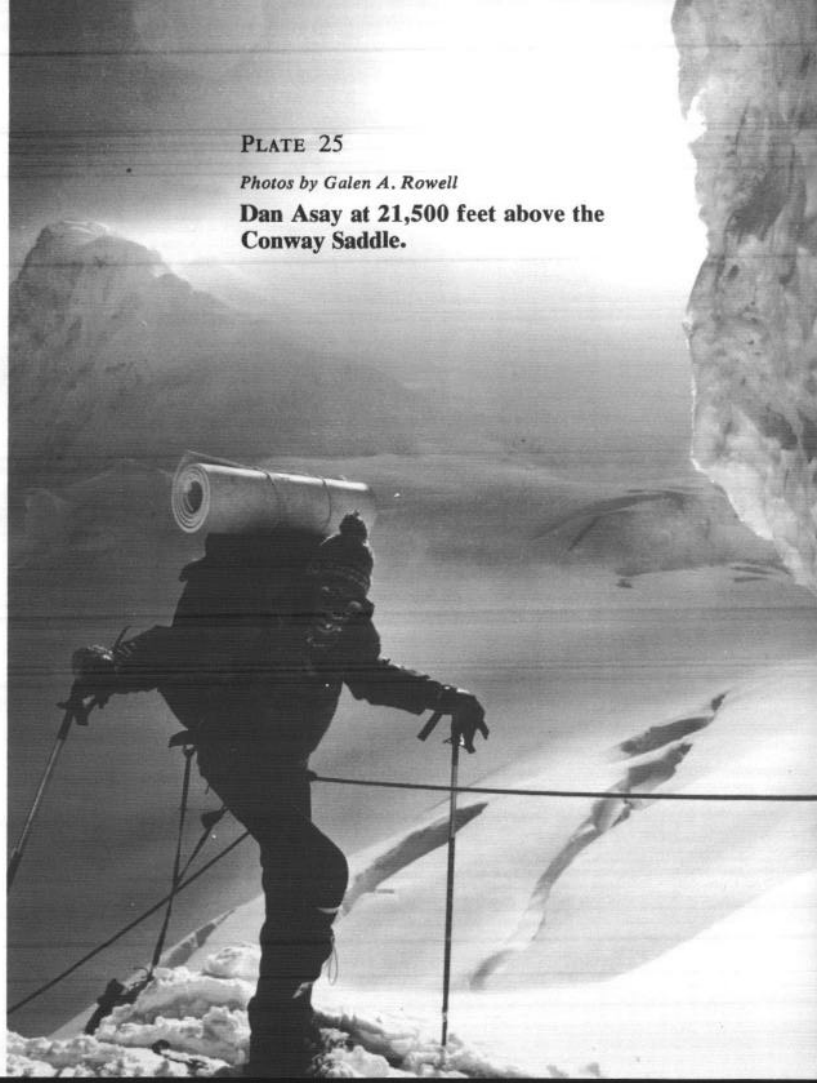


PLATE 25

Photos by Galen A. Rowell

Dan Asay at 21,500 feet above the Conway Saddle.

Kondus Glacier, and just a mile and a half across from us was Conway Saddle, hanging into space like the opposite abutment of a collapsed bridge.

Here was the gap that had stopped the Workmans and other turn-of-the-century explorers from traversing between the Baltoro and Siachen basins. Not until 1979 was a crossing finally made, and then by a fully equipped Japanese expedition with 116 porters that had just made an ascent of Sia Kangri.

We planned to follow their same route, traversing the south face of Sia Kangri between 20,500 and 22,500 feet. I had applied for our expedition before the Japanese completed their traverse, and the Sia Kangri route was only one of three passages I considered. One was the Kondus Saddle between Chogolisa and the Baltoro Kangri. Another was a traverse into Conway Saddle from the Kondus Glacier by way of the Sia La. The fact that the Japanese had made the Sia Kangri traverse with full equipment and portage in summer did little for my confidence that we could follow the same route on Nordic skis in winter conditions. Ned was convinced that we would find easier going than on our Nordic circumambulation of Mount McKinley, and his hunch proved to be right.

It took three days and several rappels to make the mile-and-a-half traverse, but the true story was in what it didn't take. We never switched to our crampons, and we never encountered hard ice except going down on rappel. The route just opened up in front of us as we went. Each portentous obstacle had a reasonable alternative, hidden from view until the last moment.

Both Kim and I had been to the Baltoro region on two previous expeditions. We began to see familiar landmarks in the distance. Mustagh Tower loomed into the golden light of dawn from the same horrendous perspective made famous by Vittorio Sella's 1909 telephoto. The Trango Towers were profiled through Conway Saddle on the last morning of our traverse. Then came the Gasherbrums, I, II, III, and IV, filling the western sky. We had hoped for a view of K2 or Broad Peak, but they remained hidden behind the greatest row of lesser peaks on earth, all four Gasherbrums being among the seventeen highest mountains.

The last day to Conway Saddle was a seemingly endless traverse through séracs and cliffs. Just before sunset only one final barrier separated us from the rim of the Baltoro basin (and imagined security for the remainder of our journey). A short overhang dropped onto a steep snow slope that soon plunged into the mile-deep chasm. I was lowered—pack, skis, and all—from two ice screws. The sled tugged at my waist, and I spent long minutes thrashing my way on my knees to a spot where I could stomp out a platform. Dan followed in nearly as awkward fashion. Kim and Ned planned to lower their packs and sleds, then climb down. Great plan, but almost a tragic end to the trip.

Ned's pack with all his personal survival gear and a stove came unclipped from the rope. I ran for it, stumbled, and missed. Below me, the pack began a straight shot for the Kondus, interrupted at the last moment by Dan's flying tackle. He made a tremendous end-run across the slope, and, without a moment's hesitation, jumped like a lineman for the Steelers on the seventy-pound bundle armored with crampons.

The next day we made a steep but straightforward descent to the Abruzzi Glacier. Dan and Ned turned around to see yet another wild bundle hurtling out of control. Kim's sled shot by at tremendous speed, followed immediately by roaring laughter. Kim, tired of being passed by his sled and tripped by its cords, had purposely let it fly into a smooth basin where it came to a gradual stop. That night we camped opposite the icefall of the South Gasherbrum Glacier, a place made forever mystical by the poetic musings of Fosco Maraini in his classic book, *Karakoram: The Ascent of Gasherbrum IV*.

Karakoram pundits had warned us that the upper Baltoro and Abruzzi Glaciers were riddled with huge crevasses, making travel difficult, circuitous, and dangerous. Early in the year we found precisely the opposite conditions. A veritable highway about two hundred feet wide followed the arcs of the moraines as far as we could see. On either side of this perfect ski path was jumbled ice and rock. Double-poling gently mile after mile, we passed the ridge of Chogolisa where Hermann Buhl met his end in 1957. That afternoon, we touched our first rock and drank our first running water in eleven days.

The weather had been good to us, providing a week of mostly clear skies for our high traverse after only a few mild storms on the Siachen. As we headed down the Baltoro, skies blackened and temperatures soared far higher than they should have for the loss of elevation. We had experienced five straight nights below −20° F, and now we began a longer string of nights over + 20°, a phenomenal shift of 40°. Heat, not cold, proved to be our greatest adversary on the traverse. By nine each morning the hard snow was collapsing under our skis, and with loads still over a hundred pounds, we sank into baseless depth hoar of the worst order.

On the morning of April 18 I awoke just a few miles above Concordia, where the Baltoro and Godwin Austen glaciers join in a great amphitheater in full view of K2. The clouds were lowering quickly, and I asked the others' permission to pack up and leave early. By five A.M. I was gliding easily on the hard surface, remembering a day five years before when I had also been alone on the moraines of Concordia. In 1975 after an attempt on K2 a mail runner had handed me a bulky envelope from my mother in California. It contained my 90-year-old father's ashes. He had died while I was on the mountain, and I left the group that day to release his remains to the winds over a moraine of pure marble. The letter from my mother had compared the tranquility

of his face in death to a fine marble bust, and I felt fortunate to find the same material in its raw state.

The 1980 morning was bleak and gray. My spirits were down until I rounded a corner, and saw K2 for the first time of the trip, rising over a great block of white marble. Tears ran down my cheeks, and I sat down to absorb the simultaneous emotions triggered by memories of my father and the mountain. For an hour the mountain showed its top above the clouds. Just before the others arrived, it disappeared, never to be seen for the remainder of our journey.

Below Concordia our natural path ended. Rivers of melt water sealed us off from the most inviting corridors of travel. The landscape looked as if God's own construction company had torn it up and left it unfinished. Moraine hills marched infinitely in every direction, presenting jagged rocks toward the sun and a marginal snow layer in the shade. It was a skier's Hell.

Day after day we got up at 3:30 A.M., thrashed partly on skis, partly on foot with giant loads, ate the last of our food, and slowed from a peak speed of four miles an hour on the Upper Baltoro to an agonizing four miles a day.

One morning, after eating a gourmet breakfast of soup concocted from the last spoonfuls of instant potatoes, I moaned to Kim, "How are we going to get through this?" He turned to me with a confident Marcus Welby air, and said, "I think I have the answer."

Kim was our medical officer. Although not a doctor, he had a strongly developed historical sense of medication for mountaineering. He knew of a drug that had been developed precisely for this purpose by native people who found it necessary to carry tremendous loads at high elevations with low caloric intakes. Small amounts of this extract from a South American leaf were at one time the main active ingredient of the most successful multinational soft drink until the potential for abuse made it illegal. Propitiously, Kim had been able to purchase an ounce of this material at the Khyber Pass to add to our medical kit.

Kim and I were tentmates and we decided that our medical experiment needed a valid control group. Ned and Dan, unlike us, were not verbal complainers. They were members of the stiff-upper-lip school who never swore when their sleds passed them, nor beat their sleds into submission when they attacked one's feet or became tangled in one's skis. We had been moving at relatively equal rates, and we thought it fitting that the non-complainers should continue unaware.

At noon that day we waited an hour and a half for them. In the evening we waited yet another hour. Sleep, of course, also had to be induced by drugs, but the entire process was repeated successfully day after day until we arrived in Askole about twenty-five pounds lighter than when we began.

After three days of gorging and resting, we set out on the last leg of

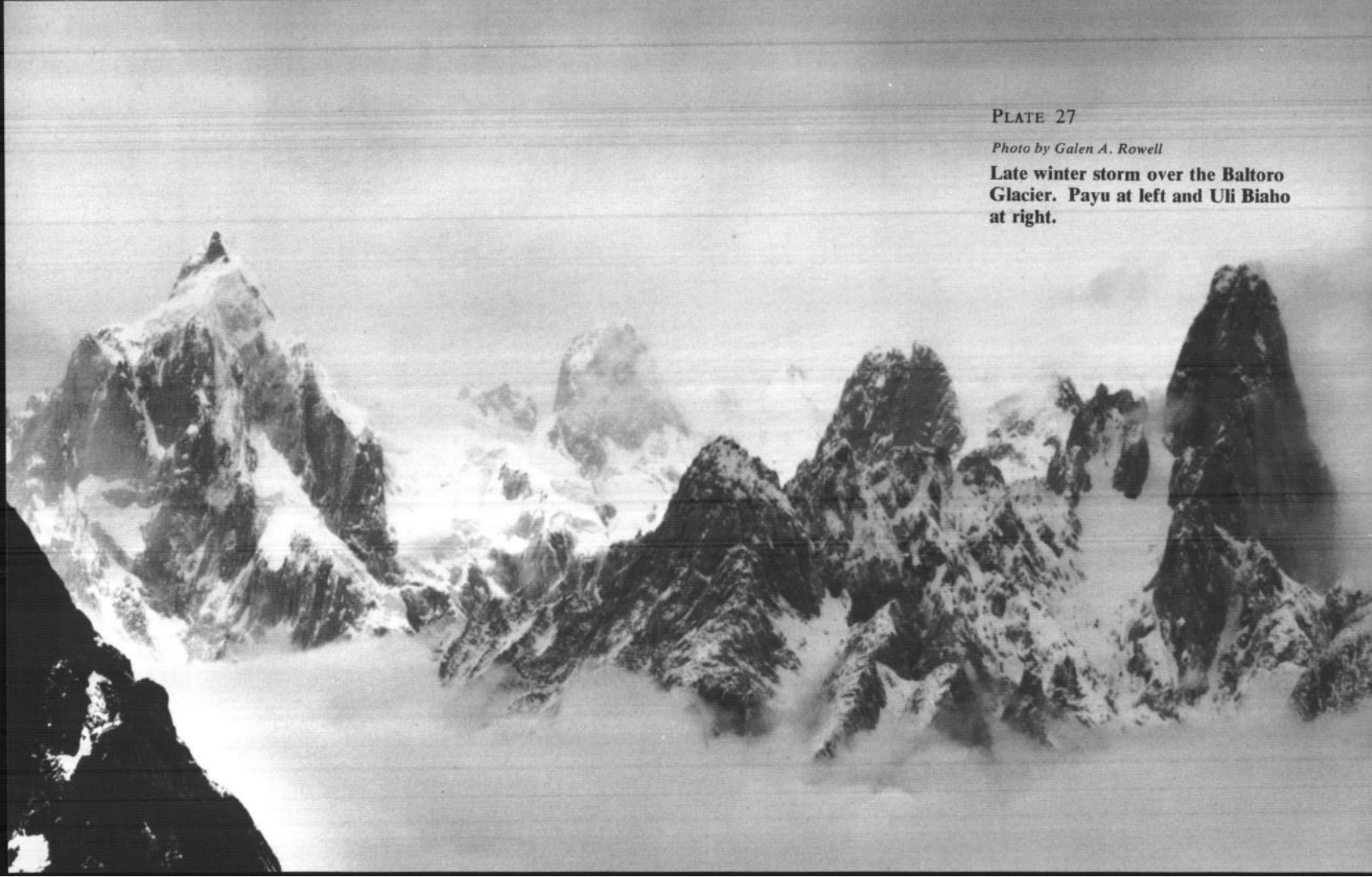


PLATE 27

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

Late winter storm over the Baltoro Glacier. Payu at left and Uli Biaho at right.

our journey. Dan decided to stay behind, partly because of sore knees and partly from a desire to help the efficiency of our travel. Three of us could cut our weight by using one tent, one rope, and one stove. Without the climbing gear or extreme clothing needed for the first leg, we were able to start with a more reasonable 95 pounds each.

We hired nine Askole porters to carry for three days until we could ski on the snows of the Biafo Glacier. Our sirdar was Hadji Ali, who had carried my father's ashes up the Baltoro as a mail runner in 1975. He was an old hunter with a keen eye for wildlife sign, and we were amazed at the profuse evidence of large mammals living above the inhabited valleys. Nearly every side canyon beyond Mango Brangsa at 12,200 feet had ibex tracks in the snow. I counted more than fifty animals in one day. A major recession of the ice had left level, moist moats on either side of the glacier, and these were pocked with the footprints of brown bear, snow leopard, fox, and ibex. Farther up the glacier a lammergeier landed within 200 feet of us, only to soar with its nine-foot wing spread toward the granite faces bordering the glacier.

Here, lining the sides of the upper Biafo, was the greatest display of granite spires in the entire Karakoram, marching up the glacier like organ pipes in an ordered procession of design. Enough major climbs to last several generations were spread around us, untouched and unnamed.

The Bilafond and Saltoro valleys also had considerably more large granite faces than the fabled Baltoro, but for esthetics the Biafo won, hands down.

An icefall at the top of the Hispar La was a non-event, buried so completely in snow that no crevasse problems were encountered. A snowstorm forced us to camp directly on top of the 16,900-foot pass, and when it cleared we were treated to a superb view of the Ogre rising above a cloud bank in the moonlight. The fresh snow gave us sixteen miles of downhill powder skiing the next day. All too soon we were back on mixed ground again as the snow cover gradually ran out.

Just eight and a half days after leaving Askole, we walked into the village of Hispar into the arms of Dan, Pervez and Masood. Two more days of hiking and a short jeep ride brought us to Hunza and the end of our journey.

It would be nice to conclude this account with an image of gamboling through green fields in fabled Hunza, overcome with the sensual flow of returning to the living world. To do so would intimate that we found the dream of the campfires of my youth. What we found at the end of six weeks of the most intense physical activity of our lives was sensory and social deprivation. At our first dinner in a hotel, I said, not really believing it myself, "Isn't it wonderful to return to hot water and cold beer?"

Kim held a thousand-yard start and answered, "The special things I miss are not what we are finding here, but what we've left behind in the

dusty villages and campsites in the snow." We had lost much of our capacity to enjoy not only the wonderful excesses of civilized life, but also the clean, simple emotions of love and beauty that color all heights of experience. Never on a mere peak-climbing expedition had any of us undergone such a shift. Among us were those who found the mountains of the Karakoram undistinguished and our partners little more worthy of intimacy than passengers on an elevator. I believe that we experienced to a lesser degree the same sort of mental and physical trauma that left most survivors of Auschwitz unable to laugh or love for a long time. Dan summed up all our immediate feelings when he told a newspaper reporter, "The trip was hardly enjoyable; it was an accomplishment."

Today, seven months after the expedition, I still feel its effects. I no longer dream of that ideal expedition, "isolated from the rest of humanity and any need to depend upon it." I know the reality, the trade-offs, and the strange mental filtration that has turned it into the favorite mountain adventure of my life. Given another high route of equal caliber, I would travel it again in a similar manner . . . and wait seven months before I wrote an article.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Karakoram Himalaya

OBJECTIVE: An unsupported traverse of the High Karakoram following the Bilafond, Lolofond, Siachen, Baltoro, Biafo, and Hispar glaciers to a maximum altitude of 22,500 feet between March 27 and May 8, 1980 (Asay, Gillette, Rowell, Schmitz).

PERSONNEL: Daniel Asay, Ned Gillette, Captain Masood Khan, Pervez Khan, Galen Rowell, Kim Schmitz.