

The Golden Pillar: Spantik

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IN THE HEART of the Karakoram, in the ancient Mirdom of Nagar, lies a little known mountain. Although the Karakoram Highway passes no more than 20 miles from it, the peak is not visible from the road. Yet, from Nagar the mountain is striking. On the Skardu side of the watershed, the peak is called Spantik*. (This may be a Balti name. I have not been there.) According to some sources, the peak is also known as Yengutz Sar, but this is clearly erroneous as the peak cannot be seen from the Burushaski-speaking Yengutz Har Valley (Valley of the Torrent of the Flour Mills).

The first Westerners to attempt the mountain were the Americans Fanny Bullock Workman and her husband Dr. William Hunter Workman. In 1906, they laboriously climbed the Chogolungma Glacier, taking in the peaks of Chogo and Lungma on the way to the plateau, about 1000 feet below the summit. Their name for the mountain was "Pyramid Peak." The Workmans' effort was not bettered till half a century later when in 1955 West Germans Reiner Diepen, Eduard Reinhardt and Jochen Tietze made a successful ascent by the Chogolungma Glacier, possibly following the route pioneered by the Workmans. The Germans used the name of Spantik.

On the north side of the mountain, a large monolithic pillar catches the evening sun and gives the mountain its Burushaski name, Ghenish Chhish, which means Golden Peak. The Golden Pillar is marble. The rock is crystalline, almost sugary in parts, but generally sound. It is the *coup de grace* of a vertical outcrop of metamorphic limestone, which leapfrogs the glaciers from above the village of Hoppar. Looking out from high on the pillar, we were able to see the cream-yellow rock arcking from glacier to glacier for 15 miles, like a series of rainbows.

The Golden Pillar is the clear, unavoidable challenge of the mountain, soaring from the glacier for 2200 meters. The summit is about 300 meters higher and set back, perhaps, three kilometers from the pillar. We had seen the pillar in 1984 while attempting to climb Bojohagur Duanasir, a 24,045-foot

*The name is indeed Balti: *Spang* = grass and *tik* = place. The German linguist Wilhelm Kick, who has studied the place names in the Chogolungma valley, explains that the name apparently came from a grassy slope on the southeast spur of the mountain; the name then was transferred to the peak itself.—*Editor*.

(7329-meter) mountain directly above the Karakoram Highway. We failed to climb the peak alpine-style while Japanese made the first ascent, using five camps and several kilometers of fixed rope. Despite differences in attitudes, when Phil Butler and I met them on Day 10 of our gruelling 14-day climb, they offered us food and had kind words about our effort. The 1984 Bojohagur expedition was a North London Mountaineering Club affair and it was much the same team that, having seen the Golden Pillar in 1984, knew it would have to return. Even though Golden Peak was on the horizon, it was clear that something remarkable, even very nasty, decorated its north face.

In England, further enquiries revealed little of the mountain's history. From Poland the encyclopedic Zbigniew Kowalewski sent us photographs taken from Kunyang Chhish. Nazir Sabir, Doug Scott and Tadeusz Piotrowki (who perished during the awful summer of 1986) all kindly donated "front-on" prints, which all but persuaded us to cancel. At the same time we began to compare the pillar to the Walker Spur, just a little higher, and perhaps a bit harder. During 1986, the team jelled. It was to consist of Bojohagurites Phil Butler, Mick Fowler, Dr. John English and me, with two new members, Liz Allen and Bruce Craig. Mick's father George Fowler, our liaison officer Dr. Iqbal Ahmed and our Nagari cook Rajab Zawat completed the expedition.

We established Base Camp at 4000 meters at a place known to locals as Suja Bassa on July 14. The march from the roadhead at Hoppar had taken five days, though it could easily have been done in three. The porters originally wanted to take six, but we compromised on five and a goat. (It is "traditional" for expeditions to give their porters a goat.) Visitors to this region should note that the daily rate of pay is not excessive, but the "traditional" day stages can be as short as one-and-a-half hours. This makes Nagar the most expensive region in the Karakoram for expeditions. We found the Hoppar men honorable. Having struck a bargain, they invariably stuck to it.

We made a dump of gear at 4500 meters two hours above Base, directly across the small Golden Pillar Glacier from the base of the pillar. From there we could see that the pillar was divided into four sections. First, a 400-meter pinnacle, the First Tower, barred access to the long serpentine snow arête. The arête ended in a small step which led to the third section, a tiny hanging glacier. The fourth part was the point of the exercise, a 1200-meter wall, a great spear thrust into the sky.

On July 19, Fowler and I made a preliminary reconnaissance of the approaches to the pillar. It took three days to reach the hanging glacier. Meanwhile English and Allen made a start on the Descent Ridge. They were stopped by deep snow and indifferent weather, but not before they had climbed the initial 400-meter Prominence, a sort of pyramidal tower. Butler and Craig inspected the Yengutz Pass, which had not, so far as we knew, been crossed. This initial flurry of activity was followed by attempts on the pillar or on the ridge which failed in appalling weather.

On the evening of August 5, Fowler and I walked to the gear dump, knowing it was our last chance to try the route. Fowler, a Civil Servant, was

A black and white photograph of a steep, rocky mountain peak. The rock face is highly textured with vertical fissures and ledges. A dark, vertical shadow runs down the left side of the peak. A thin black line, representing a climbing route, is drawn vertically up the center of the rock face. Small white triangles are placed at various points along this line, indicating specific climbing stations or anchors. The top of the peak is partially obscured by a dark, overcast sky.

PLATE 4

Photo by A.V. Saunders

The Golden Pillar—SPANTIK.

due back at his desk on the 23rd in 18 days' time. If we allowed ten days for the climb, he would just make it. We had packed and repacked after lunch, shouldered the enormous loads and wordlessly began to walk. The weather was variable in the extreme. There was even a minor snowstorm while we climbed.

During that night, we climbed the 1000 meters to the hanging glacier and spent the remainder of the 6th praying for good weather. On Day 2, we were fortunate and by starting at four A.M. were able to climb ten pitches of slabs and walls to reach the Amphitheater by five P.M. It was important to get there as there would have been no possibility of finding a bivouac ledge on the slabs.

We had thought, when we started, that the main difficulty of this day would be the little walls which crossed the slabs and a larger wall which barred access to the Amphitheater. In fact, we found the reverse was true. There was no ice on the rock, and the blank-surfaced slabs offered precarious climbing with no protection. The walls, however, contained cracks which could be cleaned of snow to hold the occasional runner.

On Day 3, the weather was not so kind. We stopped at midday for a brew which became a bivouac, as it began to snow heavily. We had climbed out of the Amphitheater by a system of steep chimneys and grooves. This was one of the few parts of the route we had not been able to examine with binoculars and so from a route-finding point of view, we had passed one of the two cruxes. This day also included some of the most technically demanding climbing. The first pitch out of the Amphitheater was a groove with an overhanging section. Mick managed to place two wobbly pegs above his head and then began to swear loudly and forcibly. He could not, it seems, clip into the pegs because the sling was stuck under his hood. The belay was on black shale and Mick was grinning like a cat with two tails as he pointed to the shale chimney that continued in the direction we wanted to climb. It looked as if it were coated in inches of thick, inviting ice, but it was deceiving. The pitch was horrible: verglas on shale fragments.

Although it snowed overnight, the next morning brought visibility, if not clear skies. As the mists receded, we recognized the features that would act as landmarks. It was enough to go on with. We began to follow lines on the right wall of the pillar. By midday, we reached a large flat ledge, the top of a giant jammed block. There we made tea and relaxed until it occurred to us to look up. We were completely surrounded by overhangs. Fowler led an aid pitch to gain the lowest of a series of ramps. The lower ramps led to a shield, which was the other area of uncertainty for us. From Base Camp there had appeared to be no line around this feature, but a hidden chimney revealed itself at the end of the ramp. Because it was blank-sided and there was no belay at the top, I had to belay Mick by wedging my body across the chimney and asking him not to fall.

I do not remember having a more miserable bivouac than the one we had that night. We were benighted and there was no ledge, nor even the possibility of cutting one on the thin ice. We used the tent as a hanging bag, inside of



COLOR PLATE 5

Photo by A.V. Saunders

The Golden Pillar of SPANTI.K.

which Mick spent the night in his harness, while I stood in my rucksack. It snowed all night.

The 3:30 alarm was greeted with relief. It was Day 5. Looking up we could see the final ramps. When we reached them, they looked easy, but as we climbed, the truth dawned on us. They were covered with a layer of powder snow which, when swept off, revealed blank rock. We could place no runners and the side wall pushed you off balance. We had 100-foot run-outs and lots, and lots of fear. These ramps in turn led to the final vertical book-shaped corner under an ear-shaped sérac. Mick made short work of the difficulties, banging in the pegs with care. (I had asked him not to disturb the sérac above us.) And then we found the snow leading to the plateau so deep that we began to have horrible thoughts of being forced down the way we had come up.

Day 6 was our summit day. At six A.M. we started from the tent, leaving behind all but our clothes and a stove. At 12:45 we stood on top of the Golden Peak. It was August 11. We could see Bojohagur, Batura, Diran, Trivor and other large peaks, but from Kunyang Chhish black clouds were invading the sky. The storm overtook us within the hour. First the electric shocks. We hid, trying to bury ourselves and our axes in the snow. The high winds swept in from the south. We had fears for the tent. We could imagine it flying down to Base Camp. The winds brought drifting snow and a white-out. Our tracks disappeared. We were high on the plateau, surrounded by precipices. After a bit of experimentation, we found that on all fours we could feel the softness of the slope where our tracks had been filled in and so we crawled down toward the tent.

By the morning of Day 7, the weather had regained its composure. It was clear and frigid. Below us a sea of clouds filled the valleys. It was worrying because we could not see where to leave the plateau to find the Descent Ridge. During the climb, we had noted a tongue of the plateau stretching out over the ridge. On this tongue lay some ice blocks, which we referred to as the "Crumbs." After three worrisome hours of crossing the high plateau, with its crevasses large enough to swallow a battleship, we arrived at the top of an icefall. There below us were the Crumbs. The valley fog was receding and the tongue was revealed, but where on the edge of the tongue was the descent? We knew that if we picked the wrong spot, not only would we miss the ridge, but we would also be abseiling over large séracs into space.

In the icefall we made our very first snow bollard abseils, but they led to the tongue, where we found the Crumbs were 40 feet high. Guessing that the ridge would be near the tip of the tongue, we pitched the tent and waited for the mist to clear down to the valley. We made a brew and dozed, mentally tired and needing to get down. At 5:30 P.M., it did clear. We had no *dead-men* for snow belays. We dug a large hole in the soft plateau. I got as deep into the hole as possible and so we had a *live-man* belay. Mick gingerly stepped toward the edge, got on his stomach and crawled towards it. It was an easy cornice. He descended a few feet before coming back to the belay.

"Well, Mick, how is it?"



PLATE 5

Photos by A.Y. Saunders

The Ear Sérac on the Golden Pillar.

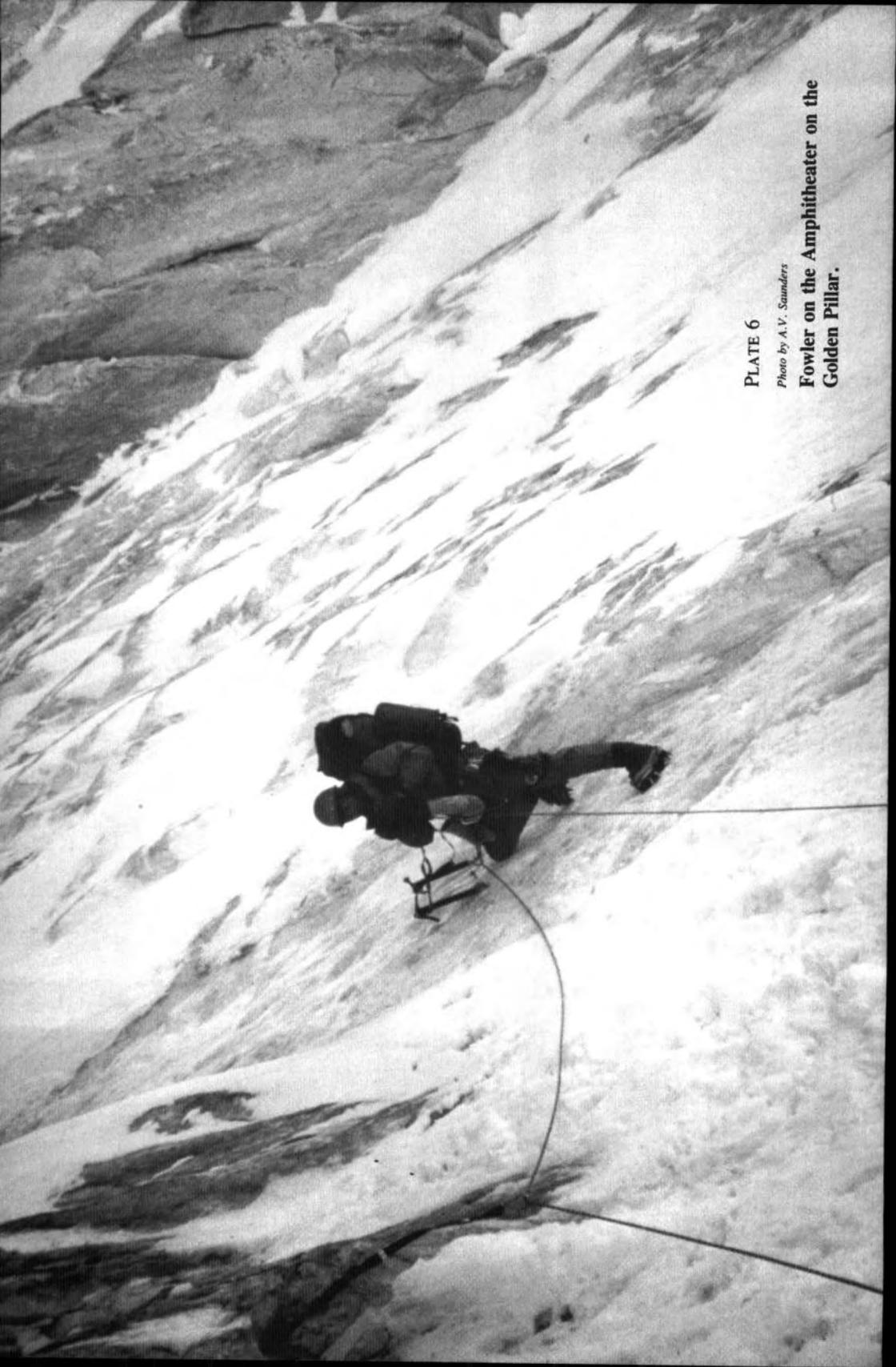


PLATE 6

Photo by A. V. Saunders

Fowler on the Amphitheater on the Golden Pillar.

"You try," was all he said.

I looked over the edge of the cornice and saw the Descent Ridge snaking down to the Prominence. Surely we were going to survive this climb. Already I had begun to debate the value of it all. What is the point of mountaineering? It seemed to me in that moment that the nature of the goal did not matter. Are we driven to reach goals but can learn no lessons from them? There is no pot of gold, only the rainbow.

"I suppose it's because we live in an achievement-oriented society," I said to Mick. He looked at me as if I had just announced I was stark staring mad.

In the tent we discussed our plans if we could get down safely. Over to the north, I could see the Yengutz Har Pass. I decided that after a few days' rest I would try with the others to cross that pass. Fowler said that if we could get down the next day, he would walk out to Hopper the following day, take a jeep and bus to Gilgit and hope to catch his plane to London from Islamabad on Sunday.

"Why the great rush?" I asked.

"Because it means by Monday the 16th I shall have parked those Civil Service shoes under that Civil Service desk and saved a whole week of annual leave. Know what I mean, Vic?" He tapped the side of his nose.

Iqbal, Butler, Craig and I did eventually complete the traverse of the pass. It took us four hard days for the round-trip, much longer than anticipated. We had made the mistake of selling our rope in Hispar and then descending the Hispar Gorge on the wrong bank. We found ourselves soloing across difficult rock-climbing ground without a rope above roaring Hispar River. The other three showed great patience, waiting for me, tired and emaciated.

As for Fowler, I don't know where he got the energy, but he caught the flight. By Monday morning, 9:30 sharp, those Civil Service shoes were under that Civil Service desk.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Western Karakoram, Pakistan

NEW ROUTE: Spantik or Ghenish Chhish, 7027 meters, 23,055 feet, Northwest Pillar, Summit reached on August 11, 1987 (Fowler, Saunders). (Fifth ascent of the peak.)

PERSONNEL: Anthony Victor Saunders, leader, Elizabeth Allen, Philip Butler, Bruce Craig, Dr. John English, Michael Fowler, George Fowler, liaison officer Dr. Iqbal Ahmed.