

# A Few False Moves

In early August, after 11 climbers died on the world's second-highest peak, people wanted to know: Has the Everest circus migrated to K2? MICHAEL KODAS pieced together the events from eight of the survivors and has a straight answer: Sort of.

By Michael Kodas

**THERE MAY BE NO MORE DANGEROUS PLACE** to watch a sunset than the top of K2. But on August 1, before all hell broke loose on the world's second-highest mountain, the weather was so calm and clear that some of the 18 climbers who'd summited that day spent up to an hour and a half taking it in. On the summit was Wilco van Rooijen, the leader of a Dutch expedition, who survived the ensuing ordeal and who remembers seeing tears in the eyes of a teammate who ultimately did not: Gerard McDonnell, an Irishman who'd lived and climbed in Alaska for the past decade. Both men had been seriously injured by rockfall on previous K2 attempts, but now they'd made it together. Celebrating with them, taking photographs and calling loved ones from their sat phones, were Dutchman Cas van de Gevel; Pemba Gyalje Sherpa, of Nepal, who had accompanied McDonnell up [Everest](#) in 2003; and Hugues d'Aubarede and his Pakistani porter, Karim Meherban, both members of a French team. Between 7:30 and 8 P.M., Marco Comfortola, the leader of an Italian team, also reached the top.

Beneath them all, bathed in twilight, sprawled Pakistan's Karakoram Range—including Gasherbrum I and II, the world's eleventh- and thirteenth-highest mountains, and Broad Peak, the twelfth-highest. Below the 28,250-foot summit of K2, a team of three Norwegians were on their way down, moving slowly into a treacherous portion of the upper slope known as the Traverse. The Traverse is a wildly steep slope with an unstable 200-foot-tall glacier towering above it and thousands of feet of certain-death falls yawning below. After it plays out, the route descends into the Bottleneck, a narrow, 60-degree couloir. Both the Traverse and the Bottleneck are exposed to icefall from the glacier's hanging seracs.

At the front of the Norwegian group was mountaineer and polar explorer Rolf Bae, who'd turned around just shy of the top because of altitude sickness. Behind him on the rope were his wife, Cecilie Skog, and teammate Lars Naesse, who'd both reached the summit. Skog was several yards behind Bae when she heard a loud crack, followed by a palpable rumble from the darkness above. In an instant, her husband's headlamp vanished under a massive icefall. She and Naesse played their own thin beams over the debris but saw nothing but shredded ropes. They knew that Bae was gone.

Behind the Norwegians, 14 others found themselves stranded on the wrong side of the Traverse. Their fixed lines were badly damaged and their supplemental oxygen—which nine of the 14 relied on—was already running low. Things were bad, but they were about to get a lot worse. By the next day, a third of the nearly three dozen mountaineers who'd started toward the summit on August 1 would be dead.

In the immediate aftermath, news outlets and commentators quickly made comparisons to the infamous 1996 Everest disaster, chronicled by Jon Krakauer in *Outside* and later in his bestselling book *Into Thin Air*, which brought to light a growing industry of commercial guides and underexperienced climbers at the top of the world. *The New York Times* wrote of the K2 tragedy that “the presence of hired high-altitude porters on some of the teams raised questions about whether some of the expeditions might have been commercial, guided efforts.” The insider newsletter *Expedition News* published a story headlined, “The Everestification of K2.” And Tyrolean climbing legend Reinhold Messner scorned the victims’ “pure stupidity” in the German media.

Meanwhile, ExplorersWeb.com countered that such statements weren't warranted, and that all of the dead on K2 were, in fact, experienced mountaineers with substantial high-altitude résumés. None of the [climbers](#) caught up in the disaster were on commercially guided expeditions.

Who was right? Two months after the debacle, it seems clear that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Direct comparisons between Everest and K2 are a mistake—the mountains are just too different—but it's obvious that grave mistakes were made in both instances: on Everest by experienced guides leading guided groups, on K2 by groups of experienced climbers. And though K2 is too difficult and dangerous a mountain ever to see Everest-size crowds—which these days can mean hundreds vying for the summit on a single day—the world's second-highest peak is suddenly facing its own crowding problem. The difference is that on K2, a few dozen climbers is all it takes to create a murderous traffic jam.

**THERE ARE ABOUT TEN ROUTES** to the top from K2's 16,750-foot base camp, but most expeditions make their way up the Abruzzi Spur, a series of steep ridgelines on the southeast flank. Several dozen successful teams have also taken a more direct ridgeline, the Cesen Route, on the south side of the peak. Both approaches stop at three camps en route to a shared camp four, situated at 25,000 feet on the mountain's prominent shoulder. In August, the seven teams were divided between the two routes, with

most ascending the Abruzzi. Above camp four, some three dozen climbers merged into a single narrow column.

Everest also has two main routes with four standard camps, but K2 is 20 degrees steeper on average and is located 545 miles farther north. It's 785 feet shorter than Everest, but the climbing is more technical, more exposed to falling rock and ice, and the peak is subject to harsher weather. The result is a mountain that claims many more lives for each successful summit bid. Everest has been climbed roughly 3,000 times, with hundreds of new names added to the list every year. K2 has seen only 299 ascents—and in many years, nobody summits. According to logs compiled by ExplorersWeb, 10.3 percent of K2 summiters have died on the descent. That's more than five times Everest's fatality rate for summiters, 1.82 percent. Among elite climbers, K2 is known as "the mountaineer's mountain." It's also called "the savage mountain."

"K2 is the holy grail," says American Ed Viesturs, who's climbed all of the world's 8,000-meter peaks, including K2, without supplemental oxygen. "A climb of K2 is more important than a climb of Everest. People are willing to push longer and harder for it." The mountain's prestige beckons mountaineers, as does its relative affordability. Since 2003, the Pakistani government has attempted to boost tourism by cutting prices on Himalayan-climbing permits by up to 95 percent. It now costs a mere \$6,000 for a team of seven to attempt the mountain.

Still, there's no evidence to suggest that inexperienced mountaineers are suddenly flocking to K2. The use of hired Nepalese and Pakistani porters—aberrant a decade ago—is becoming more common, but guided expeditions are still rare. (One was there this year, although none of those climbers were involved in the August mayhem.) Everest, by comparison, is dominated by commercial expeditions.

"Commercial climbing has no place on K2 like on easier mountains like Broad Peak, Gasherbrum II, or even Everest," wrote Nazir Sabir, president of the Alpine Club of Pakistan, in an open letter after the disaster.

Which raises an obvious question: How did a group of veteran mountaineers get themselves into so much trouble?

**THE SUMMIT BID BEGAN** with a meeting in base camp in late July, after forecasts had predicted a good weather window on August 1. On crowded peaks, climbers generally work together to improve everyone's chances of reaching the top safely. This year, with ten expeditions on the mountain—including teams from Singapore, Korea, Spain, Serbia, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Norway, and the U.S., as well as a multinational group—communication was especially important.

Van Rooijen, who'd arrived with his Dutch squad several weeks before the other teams, organized the communal effort. Each expedition would be tasked with carrying ropes and other shared gear up the mountain, piling it up at camp four in preparation for the final push. At 10 P.M. on July 31, an advance team—comprising the strongest climber from each expedition—would leave camp four to fix the ropes through the Bottleneck and Traverse. The team would be led by Korean climber Kim Jae Soo, and it included Pakistani porter Shaheen Baig, the only climber on the mountain who'd been through the Bottleneck and knew where to set the ropes.

Shaheen Baig never made it to camp four, however. He turned back sick at camp two. According to Chhiring Dorje Sherpa and Chris Klinke, of the American expedition, when the time came for the rope-fixing team to start working, they discovered that they were short-handed and that some teams hadn't brought enough line. The search for more equipment and manpower delayed the advance team for more than two hours, the first of a series of setbacks that would keep all but one climber out well past dark. With Shaheen Baig out of the picture, fixing the ropes fell to half a dozen other loosely organized climbers who'd learned their skills on Everest, where the presence of so many less-experienced climbers requires fixing ropes on every inch of the mountain. At some point, after they'd begun setting the route at the Bottleneck, they were joined by Spaniard Alberto Zerain—the fastest climber on the mountain, but not part of the advance team—who'd climbed straight through from camp three. Without Baig to direct them, the group wasted line on the low-angle slopes below the Bottleneck and ran out of gear well before the crux. When van Rooijen, who'd set out with the other climbers on their summit bid, arrived around sunrise, he and the others were astonished to find Zerain already there, directing the route setting.

"We had discussed this so many times," he recalls, "what had to be done and who had to take care of this job."

The Bottleneck soon lived up to its name.

Klinke, stuck behind at least 20 climbers, began removing ropes from the lower slopes and passing them up the line. "There was no way we were moving fast enough to summit and get down before dark" he says. "Accidents on K2 happen when people spend too long on their ascent."

Most climbers aim for a time of 10 to 12 hours between camp four and the summit. This year, nobody reached the top in less than 16 hours. Klinke and his teammates, Eric Meyer and Fredrik Sträng, turned back for camp four at about 10 A.M.

The first fatality occurred shortly thereafter, in the Bottleneck. Dren Mandic, a Serbian climber who unclipped from the rope to adjust his oxygen equipment and pass another climber, lost his footing and fell onto Cecilie Skog. The rope stopped Skog, but Mandic tumbled hundreds of feet.

Meyer and Sträng left camp to help but, on the way, received radio communication that Mandic was dead. When they reached Mandic's corpse, hours later, his teammates were trying to lower the body back to camp four. The recovery went wrong almost immediately. Jehan Baig, a Pakistani porter working for the Serbs, toppled onto Sträng before sliding headfirst down the slope. He made no attempt to arrest his fall with his ice ax and tumbled off the mountain. The remaining climbers left Mandic's body and returned to camp four. Up in the Bottleneck, Pemba Gyalje Sherpa, from the Dutch team, was spooked by the accident and the late hour. He advised the climbers to descend, but Marco Confortola gave a pep talk, noting that the first climbers to summit K2, in 1954—Italians, like him—did so at 6 P.M. They all continued up. Zerain, climbing solo ahead of the pack, topped out around 3 P.M. and descended so quickly to camp three that he didn't learn of the disaster until the next day. At 5:30 P.M., Lars Naesse summited with the Norwegians, followed within half an hour by Skog and Chhiring. Five Koreans and two Sherpas working for them reached the top at 5:40 and, according to Pakistani officials, spent 90 minutes there. Just after 7 P.M., about an hour before sunset, Van Rooijen, McDonnell, and the rest arrived. All but Cas van de Gevel, of the Dutch team, had started down when Confortola arrived between 7:30 and 8 P.M.

**ROLF BAE WAS DEAD.** The icefall that killed him also took out crucial fixed ropes on the upper mountain. Skog, Naesse, and the 14 others strung out behind them would have to descend the Traverse and Bottleneck in the dark, with only fragments of ropes to clip into.

After the disaster, several news stories noted that the climbers were "stranded" above the Bottleneck. In reality, the Traverse and the Bottleneck are entirely navigable by an experienced climber with the right equipment. Many earlier expeditions to K2 didn't rely on fixed ropes at all. Instead, climbers tackled the peak alpine-style, ascending and descending while roped only to their teammates. But alpine-style climbing on terrain this steep requires two ice axes, in the same way ice-climbing does. Most of the climbers in August had only one tool each, which made climbing down the dark, debris-strewn slope that much more insecure.

After the initial accident, Naesse removed a short rope he carried in his pack, and he and Skog crept over the icy rubble and descended into the Bottleneck. Higher up, the climbers were still unaware of the icefall. Above the Traverse, Cas van de Gevel came upon Hugues d'Aubarede, sitting in the snow, exhausted. The porter Karim Meherban was missing and would not be found. Van de Gevel passed the Frenchman; soon after, he heard a crash and turned to see d'Aubarede falling into the void.

Elsewhere, at the point where the ropes vanished, Chhiring found "Little" Pasang Bhote, who'd been working for the Koreans. He'd lost his ice axe, leaving him unable to continue without the ropes. Chhiring tied in with Pasang and the two men kicked steps downward with only Chhiring's axe to anchor them.

"Either we live together or we die together," said Chhiring.

Skog and Naesse, meanwhile, had made it through the Bottleneck and reached camp four around 11 P.M. Chhiring, Pasang, Pemba, van de Gevel, and two of the Koreans made it back to camp sometime after midnight. Those in camp could still count nine headlamps above the Bottleneck.

The highest three of those lights belonged to van Rooijen, McDonnell, and Confortola. They'd lost the route above the Traverse because the bamboo wands that should've marked the line—like breadcrumbs—had never been planted. Confortola used his sat phone to call the president of an Italian mountaineering club, who advised him to bivouac rather than risk walking off the edge of the glacier in the dark. Then the phone battery died.

Van Rooijen was determined to keep descending, so Confortola dug only two seats in the snow—one for McDonnell, a jovial, bearded climber he'd taken to calling Jesus, and one for himself. "Stick with me," he told McDonnell. They shouted at one another to stay awake, fearing that if they fell asleep, they'd fall off the mountain. Van Rooijen continued looking for a way down but eventually planted himself nearby.

By the time the sky lightened at dawn, van Rooijen was gone. Confortola and McDonnell began making their way down but soon came upon three Korean climbers—Park Kyeong-Hyo, Kim Hyo-Gyeong, and Hwang Dong-Jin—all dangling from the same rope.

"All three of them were upside down, hanging," recalls Confortola. "They were still alive, but two of them were in very critical condition."

One of the Koreans could speak but had lost his boot. Confortola put one of his gloves over the climber's exposed foot, and McDonnell held the man up while Confortola tried to lift his teammates. They spent three and half hours trying to free the Koreans but gave up when the glacier let loose nearby and reminded them of their perilous location. McDonnell, perhaps confused by the lack of oxygen, climbed back up the slope toward the summit. Confortola shouted to his friend but couldn't get his attention. Then he heard an avalanche and recognized two yellow boots in the slide.

"They were Jesus's boots," says Confortola. "He was in pieces." Confortola continued down the mountain alone.

Hours later, Pemba, climbing up from camp four, found Confortola asleep in the snow below the Bottleneck and woke him. The Italian was barely on his feet when the serac calved again. An oxygen bottle, knocked loose from above, whacked Confortola's head, nearly knocking him off the mountain.

"But Pemba covered me like I was his baby," recalls Confortola.

Whether in the same icefall or in one just before, Jumich Bhote and "Big" Pasang Bhote, Sherpas and brothers working for the Korean team, were both killed. Jumich had summited the night before but had been delayed by the icefall. Pasang, who had not been part of the summit party, had climbed up to help with the rescue. Confortola and Pemba could see body parts protruding from the debris on their way back to camp four.

**WILCO VAN ROOIJEN WAS ALIVE.** He'd gotten up while it was still dark and somehow survived his solo descent. It was light out, but he was snowblind and had no idea where he was. He didn't have a radio and his stricken eyes couldn't read the display of his sat phone to call for help, though he could trace the pattern of his home phone number on the keyboard. His wife, Heleen, who was caring for their nine-month-old son, picked up back in Holland. She then called base camp, where the message was relayed up to Pemba and van de Gevel in camp four: Van Rooijen was still out there—somewhere.

Early in the morning, van Rooijen had passed the dangling Koreans, who'd waved him off. He'd clipped in to their rope, but it soon ran out. He meandered up and down steep terrain until he found remnants of the fixed ropes hanging straight down over cliffs. He'd clipped into them and worked sideways, like a pendulum, from rope to rope across the Traverse to the Bottleneck. Then he'd down-climbed until cliffs blocked his path.

"It was so steep, and I just sat down," says van Rooijen. "I was too tired to climb up again. I was coming to the end of my strength."

After van Rooijen had called his wife, the team's webmaster, in Holland, arranged a GPS trace of the signal from the sat phone and located the climber between camps three and four on the Cesen Route. He'd overshot camp four altogether.

Van Rooijen hung up with his wife and slept for a few hours, waking to find his sight improved and the clouds parting to reveal a couloir where he could continue his descent. Through the same break in the whiteout, spotters down in base camp saw a man in an orange suit wandering the mountain. They called up to Pemba and van de Gevel, who descended to intercept van Rooijen.

But the sun set again before they could reach him, and van Rooijen hunkered down for his second night out on K2. In camp three, Pemba could hear van Rooijen's sat phone ringing nearby, but avalanche-prone slopes kept him from searching for his teammate. The next morning, van Rooijen followed a ridgeline until he saw tents and climbers, although he didn't recognize the scene as his own camp. Van de Gevel, Pemba, and van Rooijen made it off the mountain that evening and were air-lifted to a hospital in Skardu the next morning. On August 5, aided by rescuers, Marco Confortola hobbled into base camp on badly frostbitten feet. He was the last survivor off the mountain.

**TWO WEEKS LATER,** half a dozen members of the Dutch team sat up front at Gerard McDonnell's memorial service, in County Limerick, Ireland. More than 2,000 mourners had shown up to honor the first climber from their country to summit K2. Musicians played, and doves were released into the cold drizzle. Friends presented the family with gifts, and speakers noted that McDonnell most likely would've survived if he hadn't tried to rescue the dying Koreans.

"It's not just because he wore a beard that he was called Jesus," said Father Joe Noonan in his sermon. But van de Gevel, emaciated by his ordeal and crushed by the sorrow of his teammate's family, saw things differently. "On the mountain there were no heroes," he said, "just an unspoken agreement that you help as much as you can."

Back on K2, it's likely that little will change. If the trend following the Everest 1996 disaster is any indication, the mountain will become only more popular. On Everest, better forecasting and route setting have staved off another day as catastrophic as the one 12 years ago—though not the annual parade of stunts, films, and record attempts. But on a mountain as unrelenting as K2, little can be done to lessen the danger of 30 climbers rushing the summit. That much is simple.