

# **K2** AGAINST ALL ODDS

**Extended Version**

**On 31st July 2008, a total of 32 climbers from seven expeditions attempted to reach the summit one of the most dangerous mountains in the world - K2. Known as the 'Savage Mountain', this majestic peak would claim the lives of 11. The story of those fateful days is told here.**



# A Journey Into Oblivion

The following pages summarise the timelines and actions leading up to the disaster and are interspersed with the accounts of some of those who climbed the 'Savage Mountain' during those fateful days in August 2008.

K2 is located on the Pakistani-Chinese border. It has one of the highest fatality rates of any mountain in the world. Approximately one in four climbers does not make it back alive. One of the challenges of K2 is its sustained technical difficulty; the face of K2 is characterised by 45+ degree angles with a rocky and icy surface, combined with sudden life threatening changes in weather conditions. The danger of the final passage is characterised by a serac (originally from Swiss French sérac), an enormous block of ice towering over the only path the climbers can take. The serac may topple with little warning.

K2 is most often attempted in the style of climbing known as siege-style mountaineering. This involves setting up a fixed line of stocked camps along the mountain route. These can be accessed at the climbers' convenience. This is in contrast to Alpine style climbing where climbers carry all their food, shelter equipment etc. with them. Siege style is also characterised by the use of fixed ropes, and climbers (along with the porters they frequently employ) will travel up and down the route several times in order to fix ropes and to set up camps. Alpine style disregards the use of porters and camps, with climbers usually climbing the route only once in an intense, continuous push.

In June 2008, at the foot of K2, around 120 climbers prepare the route up to Camp IV and ready themselves for a summit bid. The weather, however, does not allow a final push to the summit for weeks to come.

## **Wilco van Rooijen** **Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"We had decided to be the first expedition that season, arriving in May, establishing the camps in June and finishing the project to summit K2 before the end of July. Our first summit attempt at the beginning of July was not successful because there was just too much wind, but we hoped to make another attempt the following week. By then, however, the weather was really bad with heavy snowfalls. At the end of July, we climbed directly to Camp II then on to Camp III, where we spent an awful night because of a big storm. It was a really close decision whether or not to go back and quit the expedition, as we had agreed originally not to climb in August; statistically it's the month when accidents happen. It was another three weeks before we could make our second serious summit attempt, leaving from Camp IV. It was originally planned for the end of July but then, finally, for the first of August, even though we had said previously we would not climb in August. We decided that, due to the three weeks of waiting in July, this would be our last push and we would go ahead even though it was August."*

In late July 2008, seven expeditions and one solo climber commenced their final ascent. The names in bold are of those who summited:



## **Norwegian K2 Expedition 2008**

**Cecilie Skog (leader)**

Rolf Bae

**Lars Flato Nessa**

Oystein Stangeland

## **Norit K2 Dutch International Expedition 2008**

**Wilco van Rooijen (leader)**

**Cas van de Gevel**

**Gerard McDonnell**

Roeland van Oss

**Pemba Gyalje**

Jelle Staleman

Mark Sheen

Court Haegens

## **Italien K2 Expedition 2008**

**Marco Confortola (leader)**

Roberto Manni

## **Serbian K2 Vojvodina Expedition 2008**

Milivoj Erdeljan (leader)

Dren Mandić

Predrag Zagorac

Iso Planic

Shaheen Baig

Mohammed Hussein

Miodrag Jovovic

## **2008 American K2 International Expedition**

Michael Farris (leader)

Eric Meyer

Chris Klinke

Frederik Sträng

**Chhiring Dorje**

Paul Walters

Chris Warner

Timothy Horvath

## **South Korean K2 Flying Jump Expedition**

**Kim Jae-Soo (leader)**

**Go-Mi-Sun**

**Kim Hyo-Gyeong**

**Park Kyeong-Hyo**

**Hwang Dong-Jin**

**Jumik Bhote**

Chhiring Bhote

'Big' Pasang Bhote

**'Little' Pasang Lama**

Lee Sung-Rok

Kim Seong-Sang

Son Byung-Woo

Kim Tae-Gyu

Lee Won-Sub

Song Gui-Hwa





## French-Led Independent K2 Expedition

**Hugues d'Aubarède (leader)**

**Karim Meherban**

Qudrat Ali

Jehan Baig

Nicholas Rice

Peter Guggemos

Page 04

## Basque Independent Climber (Alpine style)

**Alberto Zerain**



The planned ascent

**July 31<sup>st</sup> after 05:30**

**The Summit Attempt Is Set For August 1st**

A weather window opens. On July 31st 2008, a total of 32 climbers assemble at Camp IV to commence their final ascent of one of the most dangerous mountains on earth – K2. The teams arrange to have an Advance Team pave the way for the following mass of climbers. It will set off before the rest of the expeditions, leaving on July 31st at 22:00 from Camp IV. The strongest climbers from each team will advance into the Bottleneck, a narrow, 91 metre vertical passage, and on into the Traverse, a 100 metre section that runs horizontally alongside the foot of a towering icefall – the Great Serac. They will establish a lifeline of fixed ropes, and bamboo sticks to help orientation through the Bottleneck and Traverse.





*"We discussed plans with the Koreans, with the Italians and with the Serb climbers. It was actually a good meeting. We were convinced that our arrangements were good; some teams would bring the ropes, some teams would bring the sticks to show the route to the summit and some teams would connect the sticks with some very lightweight fishing lines, so we would always find our way back to Camp IV. We also emphasised that it was very important for every team to give its strongest climber to the Advance Team, which would leave Camp IV a little bit earlier, breaking the trail so the rest would be able to follow and not lose too much time."*

**Chris Klinke**  
**American 2008 International Expedition**

*"There was a team meeting at Base Camp to decide how we were going to move up the mountain. We all agreed that in the next weather window we would climb as a group and coordinate our efforts. So it wasn't seven separate teams making the attempt, we were trying to act as one team moving up the mountain. We each donated different equipment, we selected roles and we decided who was going to fix ropes from Camp IV to the summit through the Bottleneck. The person selected for that task was a Pakistani [Shaheen Baig] who had summited K2 before and who was in charge of the rope fixing."*

**Frederik Sträng**  
**American 2008 International Expedition**

*"Thirty-two climbers are assembled. The spirit is high. There's a great feeling of gratitude, comradeship and togetherness. It feels like we are a team even though we are actually separate expeditions, with people from Serbia, Holland, Norway, UK, Australia, South Korea and me, the one Swedish guy. We had been helping out for the last month, putting up the route, and now we're pitching our tents. A shadow soon falls over us as the sun drops slowly below the horizon. There is not a single cloud in the sky. The weather is perfect and there is a sense of anticipation in the air. The mood is good and people are saying they feel much better than expected. The snow conditions are perfect, meaning that the snow is firm and the avalanche danger very low. The winds are not at all strong and have settled. Many of the climbers had been afraid of the winds but now the forecast is good weather for tomorrow, our summit day, August 1st 2008. Everyone has pitched their tents and has made sure that they're secured and fastened – even strong winds could not rip the tents apart."*

**July 31<sup>st</sup> after 22:00**      **The Plan Changes**

At Camp IV, despite their excitement at the prospect of reaching the summit of K2 the next day, the climbers try to get some sleep. The calm is suddenly broken by a disturbance among some of the climbers. Despite the agreed 22:00 deadline, the nominated leader has not yet arrived. Feeling unwell, he has remained at Camp III. Time passes and those members of the Advance Team who have arrived make preparations to pave the way for the following climbers. The leader of the South Korean Flying Jump expedition, Kim Jae-Soo, believes that he should lead the Advance Team because of their equipment and their experience. The Advance Team sets off, already considerably late.

**Wilco van Rooijen**  
**Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"Mr Kim, the Korean expedition leader, said he felt it was very important that he, as a climbing leader, should also be nominated the managing leader [of the Advance Team]. We all said that he had not cared about the plan we had discussed in the meeting. The problem started because Pemba, our Sherpa, and also all the climbers, were asking how late we would start and did we have all the materials here in the camp. But the climbing leader, who was also the managing leader [Shaheen Baig], was actually too tired to do anything and just stayed in the tent, not communicating. This meant Pemba was taking over the role of the climbing leader and was actually going to all the other teams, asking how they were and was everything okay."*



*"We should have started out around midnight but at 00:30 a.m. there was actually no movement in the camp and we asked ourselves what we were going to do. An hour later, the first party and the 12 climbers in the trail breaking party, were starting out and the rest would follow."*

## August 1<sup>st</sup> after 02:00 The Ascent

It is in the early hours of August 1st, a clear, moonless night. Alberto Zerain – a Basque alpine climber – sets off from Camp III and reaches Camp IV just two hours later, climbing without supplementary oxygen and with minimal equipment. Without having to rely on a mass of climbers, Sherpas and high altitude porters, he had left Camp III oblivious of the change in plans unfolding higher up the mountain. The summit peak is still hidden in the darkness, but the weather conditions are excellent.

### Alberto Zerain Basque Independent climber (Alpine style)

*"I spent that day alone [at Camp III], drinking water and with the tension that exists when you know that you will face an important challenge as in that case, especially if you are alone. So I did not know what time to start going. I was caught between two different hypotheses. The first one was about the people who seemed to have everything settled, organised. Those people had been together, acting as expeditions, talking amongst themselves about attacking the mountain all together. So I thought I had two possibilities for facing that challenge: by myself or being, in a way, inside the group that in some way I would come across on my way to the top. Anyway, for me the most important thing was the most dangerous stretch of the climb. The last major obstacle was a narrow 'couloir' known as the Bottleneck and it would be difficult to climb it with so many people. It would be difficult to be the one who takes the reigns of the group. It would be difficult to be the one who opens up that stretch. There were, undoubtedly other well-known and good climbers that would be able to do it."*

### Cas van de Gevel Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

*"Leaving later than expected, let's say at 02:00 a.m., going up the first part was not very difficult. There were many people together – I do not know exactly how many but something like 17–20. Some were returning early; some were going on. We were also telling our team that for everybody going up it was their own day. There would be no need for explanations if they wanted to return as it was just not possible to discuss things like this, as they could be far away from each other. Anyone wanting to go back should just turn around and go back down to Camp IV."*

## August 1<sup>st</sup> after 05:00 Preparing The Shoulder

The Advance Team is busy positioning bamboo poles with red ribbons to guide any climber back to Camp IV if visibility deteriorates. They soon realise that there are fewer poles than anticipated but quickly brush the problem aside. The mass of climbers is already on the move and the Advance Team needs to work on getting the safety of a single line of bolted ropes in place. This fixed rope will assist the climbers in the exposed areas of the Bottleneck and Traverse, which has angles of up to 70 degrees and a towering balcony serac. Many climbers have been saved from being swept away by being attached to such a fixed rope.

### Frederik Sträng American 2008 International Expedition

*"Marco Confortola from Italy has put up bamboo sticks for the first 100 metres on the Saddle [The Shoulder leading towards the Bottleneck], marking the direction we will follow the next night. That provides an indication of the right direction. Once dark, it's going to be difficult to navigate on the broad, vast Saddle that leads us towards the summit. Each of us has a different task and those tasks have been appointed to us."*





**Norwegian 2008 International Expedition**

*"The plans for the ropes were really detailed. The plans for fixing the ropes on the last day were really detailed and had been planned at Base Camp. Every single rope that we brought up for the last day had a specific purpose and a place where it was to be used."*



Looking down the Shoulder. At the far end one can see Camp IV (Alberto Zerain)

**August 1st after 05:30 Surprise**

The long line of climbers makes its way up the Shoulder, a broad, shallow-angled hump thickly covered by ice and snow, following the line of bamboo poles. The climb is not challenging but suddenly the climbers stumble across the first ropes fixed by the Advance Team. This is a surprise; the ropes seem to start far too soon. It is generally assumed, however, that the Advance Team has plenty of spare rope to fix the more demanding stages, in particular for the Bottleneck and the Traverse.

**Wilco van Rooijen****Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"We followed the rest but I think it was an hour or more later, so we were pretty late. The sun was coming up on the horizon and in a few hundred metres we saw that the first trail breaking party had stopped. We wondered why because they should have already been in the Bottleneck and the sun was rising."*



*"So then I went on but the strange thing is that I had already seen the ropes on the very first part and that is not exactly what had been planned. Because our team took 400 metres of rope, the only rope that was taken up, I figured that some other team must have taken more ropes with them and decided it was okay to start fixing. I thought okay, maybe it is even safer that way."*

**Lars Flato Nessa**  
**Norwegian 2008 International Expedition**

*"We started out in the dark and soon realised that some of the ropes were fixed pretty much at first ground – actually in the really early stages of the Shoulder. We thought it was a little early but that maybe there's some crevasse or any danger that we can't see in the dark and that that was the reason they put up these ropes."*

**August 1<sup>st</sup> after 06:30    The Danger Zone**

The sun rises. In front of the climbers the awesome sight of the Bottleneck is revealed. Above the Bottleneck the Great Serac, a glacier of ice and snow, towers over the climbers. In the past, icefalls here have led to casualties and fatalities. In the increasing light of day, unusual cracks become visible and it is important that this danger point of the overhanging icefall is passed as quickly as possible.

**Frederik Sträng**  
**American 2008 International Expedition**

*"People had spoken about their fear of the Bottleneck. It has a well-deserved reputation. It really is Russian Roulette. Icefalls in the Bottleneck can be triggered by small, small forces which can cause this huge overhanging 80m high serac to crash. People have died before in the Bottleneck. Once through the Bottleneck and Traverse the route to the summit is open but there's no way you can avoid this part, this tricky section – you have to climb through it."*

**August 1<sup>st</sup> around 10:00    A Traffic Jam**

Light on equipment, Alberto Zerain catches up with the Advance Team midway through the Bottleneck. Below, climbers are clustered together, making slow progress in moving outside the realm of the Great Serac. The view is not what he expected. They are scarcely moving and each individual climber's pace is dependent on the one ahead of him or her.

**Wilco van Rooijen**  
**Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"A Spanish climber suddenly appeared. He came from Camp III. He had never been in the meetings and he didn't use Camp IV. He came from a nearby mountain called Broad Peak. He had climbed this mountain and was therefore acclimatised. He was very fast, so he did not use Camp IV and came straight from this other mountain, climbed to Base Camp and I guess then to Camp II and Camp III, where he got some sleep. Then, I think he started climbing in the night to Camp IV which he reached just as we were waking up. And by then this guy had already started his summit attempt!"*

**August 1st around 10:30    The End Of The Rope**

The Advance Team, with the rest of the expeditions close behind, frantically fixes ropes. Suddenly, they stop. They have run out of rope, and they have not even reached the end of the Bottleneck or the following treacherous stage





of the Traverse. Having run out of lifeline, they ask the climbers at the back to cut the ropes they have already fixed and hand them up to the Advance Team. Precious time passes and the risk of having to descend in darkness becomes more and more inevitable.

### **Wilco van Rooijen** **Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"... finally we reached the trail breaking party and we heard that the ropes were finished. That made sense because they had started fixing the lines very early, actually too early, where the gradient was not very steep. When we had discussed this at base camp Mr Kim, the expedition leader of the Koreans, said that the lines needed to be fixed here as well because in 2004 somebody fell from there [The Shoulder] to the South Face and through the Base Camp. He died of course. We had told Mr Kim that we didn't have enough rope to fix that part but that there should be no problem climbing there because it is not very steep terrain and that the rope was needed for the upper part, which is very difficult. However, Mr Kim [who took over the leadership of the Advance Team] told his Sherpa to fix ropes to the lower part as well and that is where it went wrong – right at the beginning."*

*"... so it was very frustrating and a big disappointment. All the climbers were thinking this could cost us a successful attempt and wondering whether to quit the expedition from that point. But of course, after three months of work, you convince yourself that with this kind of weather there will be enough time. It would be a tough job but we would have to go back to cut the lines and to bring them up because we would definitely need them in the Bottleneck."*

### **Cas van de Gevel** **Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"We were going on but there was a problem higher up as there were no ropes left to fix. People were coming down to ask for ropes. We were descending a little bit, taking all the ropes which were already fixed lower down. We were giving them to one of the Nepalese boys to take higher up. That is how fixing the lower part of the Bottleneck took much longer than expected."*

### **Chris Klinke** **American 2008 International Expedition**

*"At the point I reached the bottom of the fixed lines I was getting indications from the Norwegians that I needed to cut the line because they were running out of fixed line at the front. I do not know whether it was Lars or Rolf but one of the guys sent down their knife for me to cut the lines, which they then started pulling up."*

### **Frederik Sträng** **American 2008 International Expedition**

*"There's a problem here – people are coming up to us asking where the ropes are. Suddenly we're out of rope. We're asking around in the camp in the middle of the night, weren't you supposed to carry the ropes? Where is this guy who was supposed to carry this and that? Suddenly there are people missing. There's been no warning; there's been no sign or notification that responsibility for the essential gear needed to climb the route safely, up and down, had been given to another person. Suddenly we were missing several hundred metres of rope, ice screws, snow bars and the vital and very essential bamboo sticks that are crucial for making a visible route and direction for the first 800m between Camp IV and the rock band on the couloirs towards the Bottleneck. Without those bamboo sticks I won't be able to attach the fishing line that I have with me. Fishing line is used as a guiding direction in case we're coming down from the summit in dark."*



## August 1st between 10:00 and 11:00 First Doubts

With the delays and limited progress, the climbers could be forced to return through the Bottleneck in the dark. Although eager to reach the summit some climbers make the decision to turn back and descend to Camp IV. Even so, one of the largest groups of climbers ever seen on K2 continues its ascent.

### Chris Klinke American 2008 International Expedition

*"When I looked at my watch and saw it was close to 10 o'clock I realised that, at the pace we were going and if everything worked perfectly, we would summit just before dark. However, on our descent, we would have to enter the Traverse and the Bottleneck in the dark. This was a very scary prospect because the entrance to the Bottleneck is actually a very narrow corridor that is hard to negotiate. You are looking at a field of white trying to pick out one little feature but if you go too far to the right on the way down you hit an avalanche slope. Too far to the left and it is serac, cliffs and crevasses. Going the wrong way would be very dangerous and if the winds came up it could blow our tracks away in about 10 minutes."*

### Frederik Sträng American 2008 International Expedition

*"We can't climb this mountain safely – that's what the voice in my head kept saying. I said to Eric, let's go down to Camp IV and wait for the others. Let's get prepared for the worst. At that time, I didn't know how true those words were. We got back to Camp IV, the sun was up and extremely hot. In fact, it was so hot that we were in our tent in only T-shirts and underwear."*



The Bottleneck. The Great Serac towers over climbers making their way through the narrow gully (Alberto Zerain)





*We put our down suits on top of the tent to get some shelter but the inside of the tent was crazy and staying outside was dangerous because of the ultra violet radiation. We're drinking and monitoring the radios; there is no communication whatsoever. We told Base Camp we had abandoned our summit attempt and that we would rest there and be available in case others needed our assistance."*

## **Eric Meyer** **American 2008 International Expedition**

*"The timeline was particularly disturbing. Knowing that while we might summit in daylight, we'd be descending the route almost completely in the dark, upping the risk enormously in an area notorious for ice falls. It just spills down. Knowing how many climbers have been killed in the past in the Bottleneck, everything about it just seemed wrong."*

### **August 1<sup>st</sup> after 10:30**      **The Mouth Of The Traverse**

The first climbers reach the diagonal passageway. Alberto Zerain moves ahead and takes over fixing ropes. Below, the ascent through the Bottleneck has come to a standstill.

## **Alberto Zerain** **Basque Independent climber (Alpine style)**

*"I went on watching the other people in the expedition and the Sherpas, who were ascending behind me. I could see them farther away and slower with the passing of time. I looked not only at what I had behind me but also what was about to come; that was what I considered to be the key part of the route –;that is the Traverse ..."*

### **August 1st around 11:00**      **The First Casualty**

Nervous about the slow progress, some climbers unclip from the safety of the anchored ropes and free-climb, attempting to bypass the single line of climbers. Among them is the Serb, Dren Mandić, waiting nervously at the top of the Bottleneck. In order to allow Cecilie Skog to pass him, he unclips himself and leans slightly back. Suddenly he slips and without the safety of the fixed rope, he tumbles down the Bottleneck.

## **Wilco van Rooijen** **Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"Suddenly, we heard a scream and looked around. It was very strange – one second you thought you could give your hand to save him and the next he was gone, falling down 300-400 metres. And of course it is a shock because everybody is there waiting, under pressure, in the queue in the Bottleneck and you see the first victim falling. Of course this is K2, but it was a really stupid accident, and we didn't know why he unclipped from the line. "*

*"We discussed what to do – it was late, we had had the first accident, we were in a queue here, was it smart to go on? I had a discussion with Pemba and Gerard and actually I said to Pemba, 'Listen it is a good day, we have time enough if we are patient and we can move on and reach the summit without any problem.' Gerard in particular was hesitant but we convinced the others that because the weather was good, we had the whole day and if we could speed up, it wouldn't be a problem and hopefully, Dren would be the last victim of the season."*





The Traverse. A challenging passage because of its rocky and icy surface (Alberto Zerain)

## August 1st after 11:30

## One Of Many Rescue Attempts

The Serb climbers, Predrag Zagorac and Iso Planic, followed by Muhammad Hussein, turn around and head towards Dren. The summit attempt by the Serb team is aborted and preparations are made to rescue their colleague. Frederik Sträng, having returned to Camp IV sees a body tumbling down the Bottleneck. He prepares himself to treat an injured climber and rushes towards the spot where Dren came to a standstill. Jehan Baig follows him to provide assistance.

### **Frederik Sträng** American 2008 International Expedition

*"It is Cecilie Skog who is crying out a couple of times and we know instantly that something very bad has happened. We rush out of the tent, and I take my camera trying to zoom in and identify what's going on. We're expecting either an avalanche or serac fall, or that someone has fallen. Roberto from Italy is moving up to us and he gestures with his fingers, rolling them to illustrate someone falling. Eric is trying to communicate with Chhiring Dorje on the radio. After a while Chhiring answers our calls and he says that one of the Serbian climbers has fallen. And we can now see that from where we're standing, but he stands up so is still alive. Very soon after we negotiate with the Base Camp to get their approval to make a rescue attempt. While the [Base Camp] administrators are making their decision, I'm packing one oxygen bottle with mask and regulator, water, some chocolates, some basic first aid kits, sleeping pads and some ropes to carry him down if necessary. We get the signal to go and then I start rushing up, climbing very fast towards the spot. During this time Eric is coming with more medicines and moving behind me, much slower. I am using Roberto's radio but unfortunately this radio isn't compatible with Chhiring's radio, so it's difficult to communicate and in fact I don't get any messages at all."*





Frederik Sträng reaches the group of Serbian climbers, huddled around an apparently lifeless body. Dren Mandić has succumbed to his injuries. Predrag Zagorac, Iso Planic, Frederik Sträng and Jehan Baig decide to slide the body of Dren down the slope, attaching it to a line of roped climbers. Suddenly, the body of Jehan Baig bounces into the back of Frederik. With Jehan still holding onto the rope in bewilderment, his weight threatens to drag everybody down the steep shoulder with him. Frederik urges him desperately to let go of the rope, which he does, but he quickly begins to slide again. In disbelief, Frederik watches Jehan approach a drop of three hundred metres before he vanishes from sight.

### Frederik Sträng

#### American 2008 International Expedition

*"...About 50 metres from the spot where Dren Mandić ended up, I can see four other people standing around dragging a body down the mountain. I get up to them very quickly, explain who I am, what I have heard and ask them what the current status is. I soon see it is too late, Dren is dead. He died of head injuries when he fell. One of the Serbians explained what happened and I am actually filming this because I want to have the evidence about what we did, how and why. They are asking me to help them carry the body down and I think this is a stupid idea. He is dead and there are better things to do, like safety first, but they are really trying to push me. I told them fine, we will do it but only if we are capable of doing it."*

*"Four of us try to take him down, two on each side of the body held in a rope with a loop. Hand over hand, we slowly make our way down. Soon after, Jehan Baig from Pakistan is very close to me all the time, which is kind of frustrating and irritating as it is dangerous because if he falls, I fall. So we stop a couple of times. At one stage Jehan falls with his entire weight on my back, forcing me forward, almost losing the grip of the rope and Dren's body. Jehan then slides on my right, losing his footing and then he stops. He holds on to the rope with his left arm, his ice axe is dangling from his right hand. He does not make a sound – not one single word – he just collapsed. We are screaming out for him to release the rope. What he is doing right now is risking the lives of the entire group. The rope is around my knees taking Jehan's entire weight, plus Dren Mandić's dead weight, and I can feel that I am sliding, almost falling. The two Serbs on my left struggle to carry the weight of Dren Mandić and Jehan. Jehan is not responding and just hangs there like a lifeless glove. Then suddenly he releases the rope and starts sliding down the mountain – we scream out 'stop, stop', encouraging him to use his ice axe but he's making no effort at all – nothing. He just starts falling, first on his back and then flipping over because his crampons get stuck in the ice. Now he's moving down on his chest head first. His rucksack comes loose, as does his ice axe and glove. He is getting dangerously close to the edge, free falling for a couple of hundred metres. We are screaming out 'stop' and as he passes Eric, he is just a couple of metres away from him but there's nothing anyone can do to stop his fall. At one stage we think that the Shoulder itself can save him because it slopes towards Camp IV but then we realise that the direction he is going is just a couple of metres too far to the left. Before we know it he's fallen out into the sky and he is gone."*

### Eric Meyer

#### American 2008 International Expedition

*"We retreated and we were already back in the tents when the Serb fell. While I was putting together some medical supplies to take up there, Frederik got the jump on getting going and caught up with him and said he was dead. He kind of made this decision on his own at the behest of the Serbians who had descended to bring the body back down to Camp IV. In retrospect the intentions were good, obviously. It is just that the execution was faulty. You had a couple of people who were pretty badly impaired physically, trying to lower a body down an icy slope. That is when the Pakistani lost his footing, just slid off the mountain. That pretty much just put a huge damper on our enthusiasm for the summit."*



The attempt to bring down Dren's body is now abandoned. Further up in the Bottleneck and Traverse, more climbers decide to abort their summit attempt. These are Jelle Staleman, Nick Rice, Roberto Manni, Chris Klinke and Oystein Stangerland. Despite the tragic circumstances and painfully slow progress, the rest of the climbers press on.

### Cas van de Gevel

#### Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

*"There was some talk at the top of the Bottleneck, especially between Pemba and Gerard, about whether we should carry on. They sounded a little bit like a couple arguing. Marco was saying, for example, let's go on; it is a beautiful day and, as we had said, it was everyone's own decision whether to go on. The technical difficulty of 8,000 metre peaks is less most of the time but the views when you get above all the mountains are very beautiful as you get higher and higher. That is the attraction for people to keep on going."*

### Jelle Staleman

#### Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

*"Because I was the youngest in Base Camp and the one with the least experience, I had already decided that I didn't want to descend in the dark. However, because we had to pick up the ropes, it took us four to five hours longer than we planned and that meant I would have to descend in the dark. Actually, that was the biggest reason – I just thought I was not experienced enough to descend in the dark but there was another reason. What happened as well was the result of the altitude, I was just falling asleep sometimes – just standing and falling asleep. Not for hours but just for a minute. That tells you that your mind is affected by the altitude. When I was awake, I really felt I could still think properly and also talked with Cas a little bit and Gerard. I did not think I was thinking strangely, but I realised that something was not normal. Those were the reasons for me to turn around. And when I turned around, I wondered if I had made the best choice when I was so close to summit."*

### Chris Klinke

#### American 2008 International Expedition

*"I come to the conclusion that it is not safe for me. I talk with Wilco, I talk with Chhiring and I make the decision to turn back. I tried to talk Chhiring into coming back with me but he says 'No, no I go on.' At that point I said 'Make sure you have your radio on.' I gave him extra batteries for his radio and I turned around and descended."*

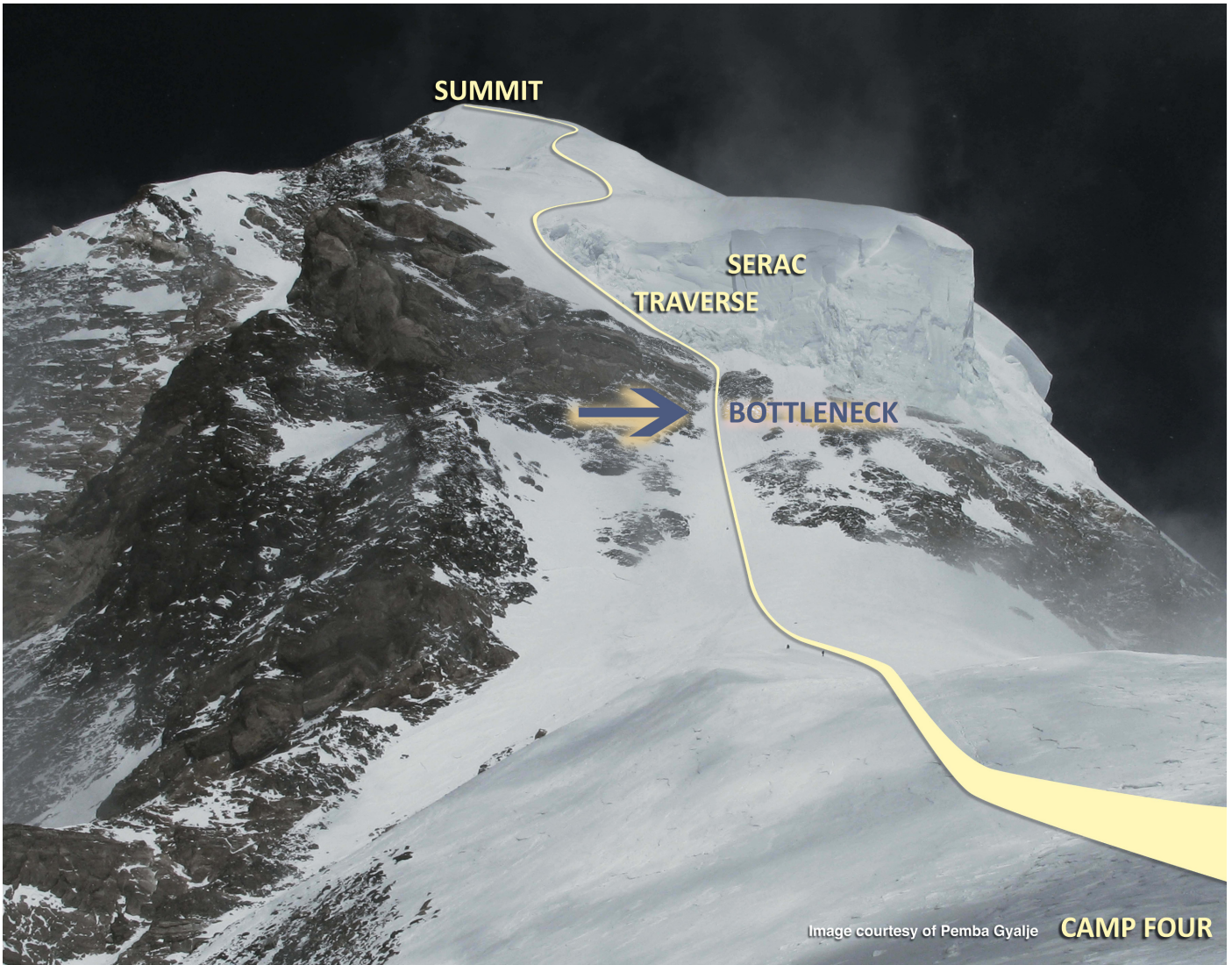
## The Story So Far

Thirty-two climbers set off from Camp IV to summit K2. Ahead of them are the two most challenging passages, the Bottleneck and the Traverse. Climbing in a single line below the Great Serac, it is of utmost important that they climb fast but carefully to clear the section where an icefall is possible.

To speed up the passage through the Bottleneck and the Traverse, an Advance Team sets off to prepare the ascent with bamboo sticks and a fixed line of rope. The Advance Team, however, starts fixing ropes too soon, unaware that they may not have enough rope to secure the more challenging corridors towards the summit. The ascent comes to a standstill because ropes from the lower sections of the Bottleneck need to be cut and brought up to where they are needed.







Ascending through the Bottleneck

Some climbers impatiently unhook themselves from the safety of the fixed rope and try to free climb their way up, with tragic consequences. A climber from the Serbian team – Dren Mandić – slips and falls down the rocky and icy surface of the Bottleneck. The recovery of his body jeopardises the lives of the rescuers and claims the life of Jehan Baig.

The delays in fixing ropes and the overall slow pace in progressing up the Bottleneck make a descent in darkness inevitable. Some climbers have realised that such an undertaking pushes risk beyond the manageable. Yet most of them see their goal – summiting K2 – as still within reach.

## August 1st after 14:00

## Climbing The Traverse

All summiting climbers have finally entered the Traverse. Some have been climbing for more than 12 hours. The pace remains painfully slow. Rolf Bae mentions that he is having problems and, further ahead, Karim Meherban is also concerned about the condition of his leader, Hugues d'Aubarède.





**Jelle Staleman**  
**Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"There is no written or unwritten rule to say that you can or can't descend in the dark. It is not like that, but it comes with experience too. The more experience you have the stronger you are, the better you are in your head. In my opinion it is a bit more dangerous to descend in the dark, but it is everybody's own decision."*

**Lars Flato Nessa**  
**Norwegian 2008 International Expedition**

*"We all wanted to do the Traverse beneath the glacier as fast as possible, to minimise the risk of getting caught by an ice avalanche. On our way through the Traverse we discussed, both internally in the Norwegian team and also with the international climbers, if we should continue after the Traverse. We asked each other how many hours we would need from the top of the Traverse, and to the summit. Also, if it was safe to continue. Rolf decided he would not like to go on for the summit because he was not 100% that day. He was not feeling sick or suffering symptoms of high altitude sickness. It just was not his best day on the mountain. So he decided he wanted to finish the Traverse, and then wait for me and Cecilie after the Traverse."*



It is late. The expedition is on its way through the Traverse (Chris Klinke)





## August 1st around 14:30 Time Is Passing

Alberto Zerain, the Basque independent climber, has been spearheading everybody, fixing ropes on his way through the first sections of the Traverse. He is concerned about the overall pace of those following him.

### Alberto Zerain Basque Independent climber (Alpine style)

*"The infamous ascent had already started with two people that had died, which I did not know at that moment. I should have guessed that something was wrong but I did not think it was that bad. I was waiting on the other side of the Traverse for a long time below the serac. It was really long."*

## August 1st after 14:30 Light At The End Of The Tunnel

The first climbers reach the snowfield leading up to the summit.

### Lars Flato Nessa Norwegian 2008 International Expedition

*"I left the [emergency] rope after we'd finished the Traverse. I wanted to pick it up again when we started on the Traverse on the way back. That was because we wanted to have a kind of individual rescue plan if something happened to the ropes, in case some other climbers caused a situation that could leave us alone out there. We wanted to have a plan B."*

*"We had agreed on staying together, which meant that we should stay close to each other – so that we could speak all the time. We could ask each other questions and see if our climbing partners started to get any symptoms of high altitude sickness or any other kind of trouble."*

## August 1st around 15:00 The Summit

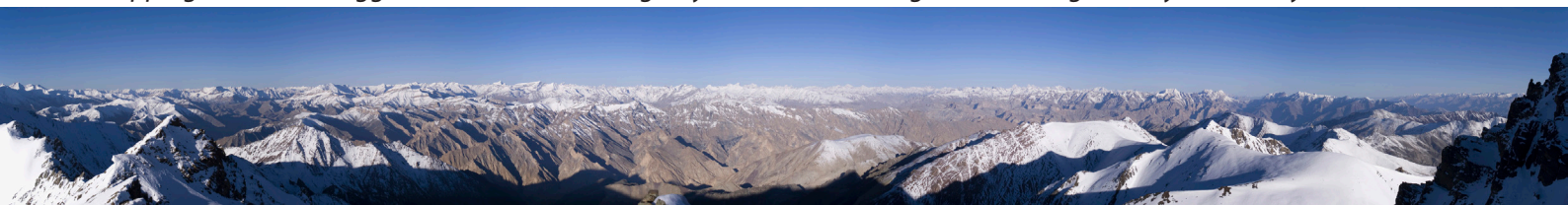
Alberto Zerain reaches the summit of K2 at around 15:00. He knows he is late and he turns around quickly. On his way back, he sees other climbers passing him, still full of excitement. The summit of K2 is in their grasp.

### Alberto Zerain Basque Independent climber (Alpine style)

*"I continued to the summit with no ropes at all. I mean up to the summit because the ascent took me about two hours and a half, I guess. I reached the summit at three, so in fact it was about three hours and a half to get to the summit. It was a difficult, a very difficult struggle against the snow, which was unstable and deep, but, well, once I found the route and went past obstacles I was finally at the top. I sat up there watching the people going up for about half an hour. They were not making progress; they came very slowly. So I thought that they, at least some of them, should quit the ascent, for they would not have enough time. I was really happy up there but of course I did not want to get carried away by my enthusiasm because I knew the descent was going to be complicated."*

### Cas van de Gevel Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

*"I remember seeing Alberto on his way down, he was the only solo climber and nobody in the other expeditions knew that he would be part of the climb. He overtook everybody on the ascent and was one of the first to come down. Everybody started from Camp IV apart from Alberto. He started from another Base Camp and went straight up without much stopping. That is the biggest difference from 'siege style' mountaineering. You travel light and you are on your own."*



## August 1st after 17:30

## A Pyrrhic Victory

The Summit. Pictures are taken, videos shot and climbers embrace each other in celebration. Many look exhausted. Some remain some time at the summit to savour their success in reaching the peak of one of the world's most challenging mountains, K2.

### Cas van de Gevel

#### Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

*"It was very beautiful on the summit... Hugues was there with Pemba, the high altitude porter from Pakistan, then Gerard, Wilco and me. It was a very good moment, which still stays in my mind very much, even though after the summit everything seemed to go wrong. It was very warm, we were holding each other, laughing, talking, everybody very happy. We were looking at the beautiful view, where we saw very deep valleys and very high mountains. We were much higher than all the mountains around us and it was becoming evening time, so the shadows from K2 were very long because of the low sun. The views were really beautiful, magnificent."*

### Wilco van Rooijen

#### Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

*"Looking to the horizon we could see the bending of the earth, so it was really a magical moment and we were crying. It was the most brilliant weather with no need for us to wear gloves. We could phone home, with the satellite phone, and the news of our success after 3 months of hard work was getting around."*

### Lars Flato Nessa

#### Norwegian 2008 International Expedition

*"Pasang and I had a couple of minutes together on the summit before the rest of the South Korean team also summited. Of course it was a relief to get to the summit. But as a climber you also know that most of the accidents, maybe 90% or so, happen on the descent. On the way down, I definitely knew that the worst, or the most dangerous part of the climb was still ahead of me. I knew that it would be dark before I would get back to the camp. I would probably be exhausted. I was in a potentially extremely dangerous situation. So, I did not want to stay up on the summit too long. I really wanted to start on the descent as soon as possible to minimise the risk of descending."*

### Alberto Zerain

#### Basque Independent climber (Alpine style)

*"In general I did not find it difficult on the descent. I have good technique for going down in places which are not so easy but I started to feel the instability of the snow. So that situation made me think again about the people who were still going up because I knew that, if they were lucky enough to reach the summit, they would find it difficult to make the descent. It was a pity because I thought that certain people must be tired. Anyway, there was nothing I could do; I could not oblige anyone to do what I thought. On my descent, I saw them all and they gave me my camera. The one who had my camera took a photograph of me and we shared a couple of words. They thanked me for the opening of that part of the route and all of them seemed to be very glad and satisfied to be there that day. The truth is that it was a beautiful day. At the same time I kept on thinking about them. Time was passing by and they were still going up. Although the weather was perfect I still thought they would not have enough time. They seemed not to be aware of that. I met Hugues d'Aubarède; he took his oxygen mask off and I told him 'Be careful on the descent' I remember. 'Be careful because the snow is not good'; I added. My intention in telling him that was to make him aware of the danger. I added 'Think it over, think it over.' The thing is that you cannot tell them 'Hey, go down.' What was more, the weather helped a lot and besides they were with Sherpas that were organising everything. It seemed they had everything planned and resolved."*





## August 1st around 20:00

## An Emptying Summit

The sun is sinking fast. With the departure of the Dutch team, including Wilco van Rooijen, the summit has been conquered once more. Now, the most dangerous part of the climb, the descent, begins. This is in darkness so that the risk is multiplied. A long line of exhausted climbers now needs to make its way back through a hazardous environment, characterised by avalanches and icefall, in pitch black.

### Wilco van Rooijen

#### Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

*“So we thought okay, going down is just routine. It was late, the sun was setting but we were thinking even in the night we can go down. Always in the winter time in the Alps, in the darkness you go to the last line, you connect to the line and you follow the line back to camp. We made contact with our weather master and he warned us to be careful as most of the accidents happen on the way down. We said ‘yes we know, we will be careful, do not worry.’”*

## August 1st after 20:00

## The Law Of Probability Strikes

The Norwegians, Rolf Bae, Cecilie Skog and Lars Nessa, clip themselves on to the anchored rope leading down the Traverse. While they are making some progress, the Traverse is suddenly rocked by an icefall. Rolf Bae vanishes into the darkness. The Great Serac has taken its victim. Cecilie and Lars realise that the single anchored rope has been cut.

### Lars Flato Nessa

#### Norwegian 2008 International Expedition

*“As I was climbing first – descending first – I attached myself to the rope and then abseiled the first steep rappel. I would guess it was 40 metres or so before a small ice ledge, where I waited for the others. I stopped to put on my head torch. It was darker, and time to use the torch. We also had to plan the next stage. I waited for Cecelia and Rolf on this small ledge. When they got down to me, I asked Rolf if he wanted to continue first or if he wanted me to. He said he wanted to be in the front with Cecilie in the middle and me as the last climber. That way Cecilie and I could help each other; to double check each other’s belay devices.”*

*“We continued and I had my full focus on my own abseil. Suddenly I heard ice falling. It was hard for me to make out if this was an ice avalanche close to me or far away. It could have been on the other side of the valley or it could have been really close. It was hard to work out. Shortly after I heard ice falling I heard Cecelia screaming and calling Rolf’s name. There was desperation in her voice. Something must have happened. I then realised that Rolf’s head torch was gone. I couldn’t see his light anymore. I continued further down, and traversing over to Cecilie where she was standing. I asked her what had happened. She hadn’t seen any ice falling, but she had been pulled off balance by the rope.”*

## August 1st around 21:00

## What To Do

Bewildered, Lars Nessa and Cecilie Skog wonder what to do. They take out some emergency rope and ice screws and scramble along the Traverse, down to the remaining pieces of the fixed line of rope.

### Lars Flato Nessa

#### Norwegian 2008 International Expedition

*“I passed Cecilie and continued in front. After maybe 20 metres I came to an anchor, but on the other side of that anchor curve the rope was cut. It was cut as if by a knife. On the other side of where the rope had been, you could see from the*



snow and the landscape that there had been a really massive avalanche. The forces must have been really, really massive. I immediately understood that Rolf was gone, that he must be dead. Rationally I understood that. It did not affect my feelings at that time, but I understood that he was gone and there was no hope for him. I then decided to turn back, and go back to Cecilie. I told her what I had seen. I also told her that there's not any hope for Rolf. He is gone. And we have to take care of ourselves. Just focus on getting down to Camp IV, the two of us."

"We did not have the fixed ropes any more. There were still probably 50, 60, 70 metres of the Traverse missing. There was a good chance also that the ropes in the Bottleneck were gone because of the avalanche. I took out a rope that I had in my back pack. I had picked it out up above the Traverse. It was between 40, 45 metres and I was up to the last anchor that was left on the Traverse. Then I asked Cecelia to wait for me, where she was. She was, of course, in shock, but she was also rational in what she was doing. Then I started the abseil. I lowered myself down. I also tried as far as I could to traverse to the right. In that way I hoped that I could reach, and recognise the Bottleneck. We were on top of at least a 100 metre high vertical cliff wall. But I hoped, and I thought that we would be able, with the additional rope, to reach the Bottleneck. Then after 30, 35 metres I recognised the structure of the Bottleneck. Here too I could see that there had been a huge ice avalanche. I could not see any traces of our ascent. No ropes, no anchors, no footprints. We realised that the ice avalanche had been really massive and had also damaged the Bottleneck. I stopped in the Bottleneck and called for Cecelia to come down there as well."

"She abseiled down to where I was standing. We could go together on the rope for 10 or 15 metres down the steepest part of the Bottleneck. From there, we could climb facing the wall down to where the terrain was less steep. Cecilie did not have her head torch any longer so we climbed close together. I would climb two or three metres and then wait, showing the way with the head torch."

## August 1st after 21:00

## Signs Of Disintegration

Further up the mountain, climbing down the snowfield, Sherpa Chhiring Dorje tries to keep everybody together and guide them down towards the fixed rope. He is puzzled by events that turn conventional wisdom upside down. Individual climbers wander off, with few signs of cohesion. Jumik Bhote notices that the two leaders of the South Korean Flying Jump Expedition, Kim-Jae-Soo (often referred to as 'Mr. Kim') and Go Mi-Sun ('Ms. Go'), are rushing ahead towards the mouth of the Traverse. As they disappear in the fading light, he is left alone with the remainder of his team, two of whom seem to be increasingly despondent.

### Wilco van Rooijen

#### Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

"For example, when we were on the summit, we were communicating with the satellite phone successfully and the next challenge was to get back to the Base Camp. But the strange thing is, when you head back from the summit, everybody thinks it is just a routine job ... we go back to the last section of ropes, connect, follow the lines and we are back in Camp IV. And everybody knows also that if somebody falls you cannot do anything for him, so there is a sort of gentleman's agreement to go as fast as possible back to Camp IV, because the faster you are, the safer you are..."

### Cas van de Gevel

#### Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

"There was a stop I remember, when some people were talking about going left or right and about fixed ropes. I was getting a little irritated about the slow progress. And far, far down I could see lights [of the climbers] and because of the slow progress I decided okay, I will go straight to the lights. That's what I did, not looking anymore what's going on behind me, I am just following the lights. Suddenly I see a fixed rope so I go to it. I look back; I still see the lights and think there is no problem. However, in such a small space it is hard to see if the lights are in front or behind but it should be okay, everybody is moving. Going down is like that at altitude; when you are already so far above that 7,500 metre level you cannot remember everything anymore. That is the thing you have to accept when you are alone in that high altitude."





**Chris Klinke**  
**American 2008 International Expedition**

*"...leaving people behind sounds really harsh though ultimately, you have to make the decision that is best for you personally. You can try and help other people but you can't make them do what you think is right. They are going to do what they think is right."*

**The Story So Far**

The summit is packed with jubilant climbers. They embrace each other and celebrate, exhausted and delighted that they have conquered one of the most challenging ascents in the world – K2. Alberto Zerain, who has reached the summit ahead of everyone turns around quickly because he wants to reach Camp IV before light fades. Others, however, are still in the Traverse or making their way up the snowfield leading to the summit.



Descending through the Traverse



More precious time passes. It is ever more crucial that on the descent, in darkness, people help, communicate and support each other. A curious scenario emerges however. Single climbers wander off to start their descent alone, or in twos and threes. Nominated leaders leave their team members behind. Efforts are made by some Sherpas to keep everyone together and co-ordinate the descent, but to little avail.

Soon afterwards, the Great Serac claims a victim, Rolf Bae. The fixed rope through the Traverse, their single lifeline, has been cut. An emergency rope is prepared, yet this is not communicated to the other climbers.

### **Cas van de Gevel**

#### **Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"But if you need to make difficult decisions or when you see something like somebody falling, then you need to make radio contact. There must be a point where you say 'okay, now it is time to use the radio' but others may think what they are doing is more important. For example, the Norwegians who were fixing the emergency rope may have felt that people coming down behind them would find out the rope is hanging down and they would be okay, so did not make radio contact."*

### **Lars Flato Nessa**

#### **Norwegian 2008 International Expedition**

*"We knew they would be far behind us in the darkness and probably exhausted after a long day. We left it there [the emergency rope] and hoped that they would understand that this a safe rope you can use to pass the rest of the crevasse. But I do not think many used it."*

Oblivious to what has happened in the Traverse, the rest of the summited climbers try to make their way down, their path only lit by their small headlamps.

## **August 1st around 22:00**

## **Making Sense Of The Inevitable**

Eric Meyer and Frederik Sträng – waiting at Camp IV – do not notice the arrival of Cecilie Skog and Lars Nessa. The quietness and emptiness of Camp IV concerns them however, and in particular the lack of radio communication. After the frantic and jubilant exchanges from the summit, radio traffic has been suspiciously quiet. Frequent communication is essential to establish what is happening and to co-ordinate activities in surroundings where visibility is restricted. Despite agreeing on a single frequency, not everybody carries a radio and some handsets do not always work at this altitude. Other expeditions have switched to their own frequencies, and others communicate in their own language. As a result, those who stayed back or are returning to Camp IV, are largely oblivious of the threat that is looming over those still struggling to make their way down in pitch-black darkness.

### **Alberto Zerain**

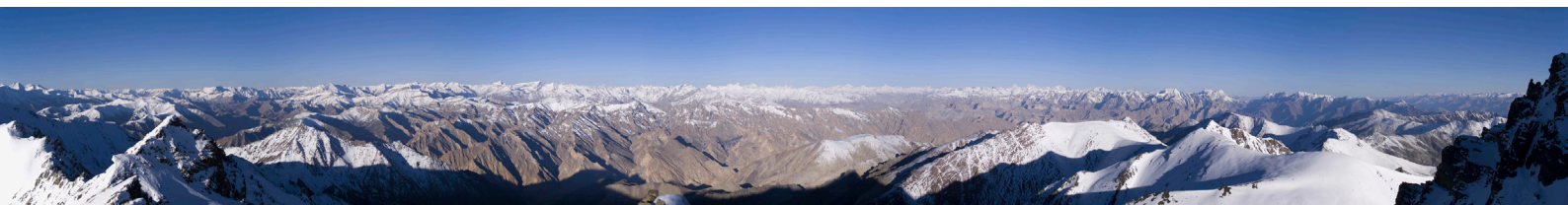
#### **Basque Independent climber (Alpine style)**

*"I stayed in Camp IV for a while and, as I always tell as a joke, nobody said 'hi' to me there. There was an American who was said to be a doctor and I thought he would invite me in for some tea or something but he did not even talk to me; he went back to his tent. I do not know who else was there but nobody talked to me. I was out of my tent for about 15 minutes and nobody asked me anything."*

## **August 1st around 22:00**

## **A Question Of Bivouacking**

On the snowfield leading up to the summit, Karim Meherban and Wilco van Rooijen are desperately seeking a way down. They are lost. They join Marco Confortola and Gerard McDonnell and decide to bivouac – without a tent, sleeping bag, food or oxygen. A few hours later, Karim Meherban stands up and wanders off into the darkness.





*"... we could not recognise anything and we were searching for our ropes but could not find them. I saw this edge and the terrain falling away. I was looking and looking and suddenly I saw two other headlamps in the snow. I went over there and it was Gerard and Marco. I said 'what are you doing here, we have to keep on going down'. But they replied, 'Yeah, we cannot find the ropes, so we have decided to make a bivouac over here.' I tried to energise them saying that we must find the ropes. Marco stood up and together we tried to find the ropes and climb down but then Marco was screaming to me not to go down any further because it is too steep and I would fall. So I climbed up again to search somewhere else and I started shouting to other climbers – the stupid thing was, just a few hundred metres down we could see their head torches. We hoped that if we could communicate with them, they could shout whether to go to the left or to the right, but they didn't react as they were too far away to hear us. So finally, Gerard and Marco convinced me we must make a bivouac because tomorrow we would then find the way down in the daylight. And I thought maybe this is the best solution because it was still a calm, clear night. I was sitting farther away from Marco and Gerard. They were sitting together and I was alone in the snow. We were trying to sleep ..."*

### **August 1st after 22:30                      A Realisation Sets In**

Three Sherpas, Chhiring Dorje, with Pemba Gyalje and 'Little' Pasang Lama, reach the Traverse and arrive at the end of the anchored rope. Chhiring Dorje radios back to Eric Meyer that the rope has been cut. Descending in the dark, exhausted, running out of oxygen, and hindered by a severed lifeline, it dawns on Eric Meyer and Frederik Sträng that they have a critical situation on their hands. The specifics of the unfolding crisis, however, remain unclear. Where is everybody and what state is each of the climbers in? Without such information a rescue attempt from the relative safety of Camp IV will prove to be a shot in the dark. In the meantime, more climbers reach the cut lifeline.

### **Frederik Sträng** **American 2008 International Expedition**

*"Eric and I are in Camp IV waiting to hear any signs of life but there are none whatsoever. It is about midnight when we get a distress call from Chhiring. He talks about ropes that are missing and that they had been avalanched away from a serac fall. So they are on their own. There is nothing we can do because we cannot see anything above us. What we do have is a set of bamboo sticks and we set up a strobe light which is extremely bright. That works as a guiding light for many of the survivors. It is the middle of the night and people are dropping in one after the other. We are giving them water, medicine and something to eat. They are tired, exhausted. Everyone is trying to get a clear picture of what is going on but it is anything but clear. We do not sleep much that night.*

### **August 1st–2nd between 22:30-01:30                      Free Climbing**

Chhiring Dorje, Pemba Gyalje and 'Little' Pasang Lama have noticed the cut rope but fail to detect the newly fixed emergency rope. They decide to short-rope their way through the Traverse. Connected by a six-foot long rope to Chhiring Dorje, any small slip could potentially result in the death of all three. With a sigh of relief, they all make it through the Traverse to reach Camp IV safely. They are met there by a concerned Eric Meyer and Frederik Sträng. Looking up the mountain, the headlamps of the remaining climbers indicate that they are continuing their way down the snowfield towards the treacherous passage below the Great Serac.

### **August 2nd around 00:00                      An Entanglement**

The three South Korean climbers, Hwang Dong-Jin, Park Kyeong-Hyo, Kim Hyo-Gyeong and Jumik Bhote, make their way down to the beginning of the Traverse. Suddenly, they stumble. One Korean tumbles down the short distance towards the steep edge, and disappears. Jumik Bhote and the two remaining Koreans get entangled in the ropes and their fall is halted. Three climbers are now trapped on a mountain, waiting for the others to notice and release them.



## August 2nd around 01:00      A Small Mistake

Cas van de Gevel moves step-by-step along the Traverse where he meets Hugues d'Aubarède. Noticing that he is no longer with his high-altitude porter, Karim Meherban, Cas exchanges a few words with Hugues and then carries on. Continuing downwards, he suddenly notices a body to his left, plunging headfirst into the darkness. No sound, no shout.

### Cas van de Gevel Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

*"I see a light approaching – I am catching up with Hugues, who is at a fixed point. I meet him and we do not talk very much. I ask Hugues how he is and he replies that he is doing OK but as he is going more slowly than me, he asks me to go first. So I pass behind him, go to the next fixed rope and descend in front of him. I follow the ropes and we are going at our own speed. I see Hugues' light behind me and then a moment later he is not there anymore and I am just alone again in the little dark world. Suddenly I see that the fixed rope is finished. I remember from the way up, that there was a rope going from left to right but it is now hanging straight down. So I am thinking something must have gone wrong with the rope and perhaps the next fixed point had got loose and the rope had fallen. Fortunately, two people from the Norwegian team had put up an emergency rope there which they had in their back pack. I was descending that rope very carefully because I was afraid to slip off the end."*

*"I reached, let us say, halfway down the Traverse with the emergency rope and from there on, I left the rope and carried on down. I was climbing down, a little bit at a time with my face close to the ice now when I heard some noises very close to me. I look up and in the light from my helmet I see Hugues, the colour of his suit and things falling headfirst, already at very high speed, over the ice. He is not shouting or making any noise and he is going too quickly for me to do anything. He is too far away – not very far but five or ten metres perhaps. I decide to descend to find out more and to try and make contact by radio so they can send up somebody to look to help him."*

## August 2nd after 02:00      Searching For A Needle In A Haystack

The Sherpas, Chhiring Bhote and 'Big' Pasang Bhote, who are due to commence their ascent that night with the second group of South Koreans, set out into the darkness to look for the missing Koreans and 'Big' Pasang's cousin, Jumik Bhote. Loaded with spare rope, oxygen, food and sleeping bags, they make their way towards the Bottleneck when they stumble across Kim Jae-Soo, the leader of the South Korean expedition, and ask what has happened and where everybody is. Unable to obtain many details from him, the two Sherpas continue moving up the mountain and looking out for the lights from headlamps.

They progress further up the Bottleneck. They hear a desperate plea for help and they stumble across Go-Mi-Sun, the second leader of the South Korean Flying Jump team. Unable to contact the remaining four Korean climbers due to a malfunctioning radio, they return and reach Camp IV at 04:30.

### Frederik Sträng American 2008 International Expedition

*"Early in the morning we wake up, boil more water and supply people with water and food and look at injuries and care for them. We can now say that there are at least four people above the Bottleneck stranded, and there is nothing we can do to help them. They have not been moving since last night. They do not answer on their walkie-talkies. It is up to them now. In fact Base Camp refuses to let us go. They can't allow us to do so because it is too risky."*





## Cas van de Gevel

### Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

*"There were only a few radios – I had one but not everybody did. And it was confusing because the Koreans were speaking on their radios only in their own language and they were also using a different channel from the one that we were using for contact with Base Camp. That channel was working well, except it was difficult to get a very good connection with Base Camp when using the radio in the Bottleneck. From the summit area, reception is very good and from the shoulder, also a good connection. So some people had radio, some people not..."*

## Chris Klinke

### American 2008 International Expedition

*"Both Chhiring and I had a radio, Frederik and Eric both had Sat Phones because, up to that point, Frederik and I had been climbing together and Eric and Chhiring had been climbing together. The thought process was then we would have at least one form of communication if we got separated. But it never worked out – I was able to communicate with Chhiring via radio but I was not able to communicate with Eric and Frederik."*

*"Because no-one had taken ultimate responsibility for the whole operation, no-one was co-ordinating or communicating with all the teams. So when the managing leader got sick he talked with Eric and he did not communicate the fact that he was going down. It is one of those things."*

*"It was assumed that somebody was going to pick up the rope and that arrangements were made for somebody else within their party to carry the rope up, but that wasn't what happened. Or if it was, whoever had that responsibility didn't follow through on it."*

## Lars Flato Nessa

### Norwegian 2008 International Expedition

*"Yeah, we did not have any radios at that altitude actually. So, we did not use radio. We did not speak all the time, but we were able to call each other and ask how are you doing? Are you fine? So, initially we had a deal. We had talked through all this in Base Camp. As we were four climbers, it was not realistic that all four of us could summit. But if we split up, we agreed on two – if someone was going continue we should always be two together. If three wanted to turn back, the fourth had to as well. That way we could stay together."*

## August 2nd around 03:00      So Close Yet So Far

Marco Confortola, Gerard McDonnell and Wilco van Rooijen try to stay awake in their improvised snow bivouac. The lights of Camp IV can be seen and appear to be quite close. All their yelling, shouting and waving of their headlamps goes unnoticed. The three climbers try a final time to attract the attention of Camp IV, without success. They settle down to wait for first light to facilitate their further descent.

## Marco Confortola

### Italian K2 Expedition

*"During the night at the bivouac, we were looking for Camp IV. We went outside. I explained to Gerard that if he slept, he would die. Sleeping is very dangerous. We talk a lot and try to keep awake."*



## August 2nd around 05:00      Going Back

Both South Korean leaders, Mr. Kim and Ms. Go – have reached the safety of Camp IV. With first light, they see their fellow climbers close to the entrance to the Traverse, entangled in ropes. Mr. Kim demands that the two Sherpas, Chhiring Bhote and 'Big' Pasang Bhote, who aborted an earlier rescue, attempt to proceed into the danger zone to start a further rescue attempt. Chhiring and 'Big' Pasang begin packing, planning to go out again.

### Frederik Sträng American 2008 International Expedition

*"The South Koreans sent up some of their Sherpas. They did not come voluntarily, it was an order – this is what you are going to do – go up and save them. I'm sad about their rescue attempt. More avalanches are coming down."*

### Eric Meyer American 2008 International Expedition

*"Even though part of you wants to say 'help the climbers,' you have to be realistic about what your capacity is at that point. No oxygen, no rope. No chance of really bringing someone down who is incapacitated."*

## August 2nd around 06:00      Snow Blindness

At first light, Wilco van Rooijen detects symptoms of snow blindness. He tells Marco Confortola and Gerard McDonnell that he should descend quickly. He soon loses his bearings however and, hampered by deteriorating eyesight and an incoming bank of fog, he struggles downwards, feeling his way. Having left his lightweight GPS at Camp IV he takes out his satellite phone and, unable to read the electronic address book, he dials the only number he remembers – his own. His wife picks up the connection via Base Camp and Camp IV is alerted to locate his position. He does not know where he is and the only option for him is to continue downwards.

### Wilco van Rooijen Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

*"So the next morning when the sun was rising, we saw the terrain but did not see all the ropes. We thought okay, now we start looking again and Marco was looking to the left, I was looking to the right and Gerard was also looking. But we could not find it again. Then we got the feeling that we were probably lost in the mountains – maybe we had chosen the wrong direction but we were convinced that the ropes must be there, because a few hours ago we had left them there."*

*"I lifted my goggles to see a little bit more clearly and that is, of course, why I got some snow blindness because of the bright light. Later on, I felt the beginning of the blindness and at that moment I started panicking a little because I realised that if I really did go snow blind, I had a very real problem because nobody can do anything for you, certainly not when you weigh 80 kilos. You are lost. So I was direct and said, listen guys I am getting snow blindness. I have to go because I have no time to lose. That is what I did, I just climbed down. I did not know where to go really, I just chose a direct line downwards."*

## August 2nd around 07:00      A Gordian Knot

Wilco van Rooijen comes across the three stricken climbers, hanging in the mouth of the Traverse. Given his deteriorating eyesight, he continues his descent. Soon after, Marco Confortola and Gerard McDonnell, making their way into the Traverse, also notice the three trapped climbers. On this steep 30 to 40 degree incline, one South Korean is hanging down head first and the other one is barely alive. Jumik Bhote has lost his boot and a glove, his foot is now exposed to the unrelenting forces of wind and cold. They attempt to untangle the three climbers for three hours – an





endeavour which is both risky and, given the state of the rescuers, a near impossible task. Marco Confortola decides to descend. Gerard remains and looks after the only conscious climber, Jumik Bhote.

### **Wilco van Rooijen** **Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"When I was going downwards, I think half an hour later, I looked to my right and what I saw was shocking – there were three climbers hanging beneath each other on a rope. They did not scream but they were still alive and the last guy asked me if I could get some help. I did not have a clue what happened and did not really realise at that moment that they belonged to the summit party. I wondered where they had come from and I was really, really confused. I said to the last guy, 'I will get some help if I get down but do you have radio?' And he said 'Yes I have radioed already that we need some help and they tried to get some help.' And he then asked me, 'Do you have some extra gloves?' He did not have any gloves left anymore so I gave him some and then I had to go on down because I was trying to survive as well. So I kept my emotions in check and I followed the way down..."*

### **Marco Confortola** **Italian K2 Expedition**

*"We stopped and noticed all three climbers were in bad shape. I looked down and saw a walkie-talkie. I took it and transmitted to Camp IV that we needed help. They responded that they would send somebody up. We attended to the stricken climbers as much as we could but then proceeded down."*

## **August 2nd after 08:00**      **A Lone Figure**

Karim Meherban from the French-led expedition wanders aimlessly along the top of the Serac, zigzagging in pure desperation to find a way down. He wades through thick snow towards the lip of the Great Serac – and then falls.

## **August 2nd after 10:00**      **The Big Picture**

Those who have remained at Camp IV now take stock. Wilco van Rooijen, Gerard McDonnell, Marco Confortola, Jumik Bhote, Hwang Dong-Jin and Park Kyeong-Hyo are still unaccounted for. Eric Meyer tries to contact anyone who is still up on the mountain, trying all possible radio frequencies, but to no avail.

By noon, most of the climbers at Camp IV decide to descend to Base Camp because of their deteriorating condition. Only a few, among them Cas van de Gevel and Pemba Gyalje, stay to wait for their friends to return. Any help at Camp IV for those that are still high up on the mountain is gradually diminished. Pemba Gyalje sets off into the Bottleneck, supporting the rescue efforts of Chhiring Bhote and 'Big' Pasang Bhote. They have already made their way back to the end of the Bottleneck.

### **Cas van de Gevel** **Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"Next morning we started looking for people and contacting Base Camp because, for us too, everything was very unclear at the beginning. I saw someone falling down the Bottleneck, and I saw Hugues falling, that much was clearer. But for the rest, I see that morning that there are no other climbers from my team."*



## The Story So Far

The climbers weigh up their options. They could bivouac just below the summit or take their chances entering the Traverse and Bottleneck in darkness. Those staying on the snowfield are exposed to sub-zero temperatures and are ill-equipped without spare food, oxygen or sleeping bags. Those who make their way into the Traverse need to pay extra attention given the limited visibility. Unaware of the fixed emergency rope, some climbers attempt to traverse to the Bottleneck in a free climbing manner. A slip, or a wrong move is something the mountain will not forgive. It is not long before Hugues d'Aubarède vanishes. He becomes the fourth victim that day.

It gradually dawns on those who have returned early to Camp IV, and to those who have proceeded further down, that something is wrong. They are trying to establish the whereabouts and condition of each missing climber. After the jubilant exchanges at the summit, however, communication has died down. To make matters worse, some radios do not work, others have run out of batteries and some teams have switched to a different frequency or have resolved to talk to each other in a language incomprehensible to those wanting to help.



The fog of war





**Eric Meyer**

## **American 2008 International Expedition**

*"The cohesiveness that we had discussed in terms of teamwork and all that unravelled pretty quickly on the descent. I think it is interesting how some of the teams really split up, really fractured."*

As a consequence, rescue efforts are haphazard. Sherpas who are still fit enough to make a second journey into the danger zone put themselves in danger by going back up in to the Bottleneck, in the hope of finding someone they can help.

### **August 2nd around 12:00**

### **From Bad To Worse**

The two Sherpas, Chhiring Bhote and 'Big' Pasang Bhote, move further into the Bottleneck as they notice a climber, Marco Confortola, crawling on his hands and knees. They ask Pemba Gyalje, who is at Camp IV to look after him, so they can climb further up. 'Big' Pasang moves ahead of Chhiring and, from a short distance, he see some figures, among them Jumik Bhote and Gerard McDonnell.

Pemba is closing in on Marco Confortola at the lower section of the Bottleneck. He provides him with oxygen. Suddenly, the rumble of a massive icefall catches his attention. He frantically drags Marco out of its path. He cannot fail to notice bodies being swept along in the wake of the avalanche. Pemba rushes towards a lifeless bundle of not one, but two climbers. It is 'Big' Pasang Bhote and Jumik Bhote. Both rescuer and rescued have perished.

### **August 2nd around 15:00**

### **In Pursuit Of Order**

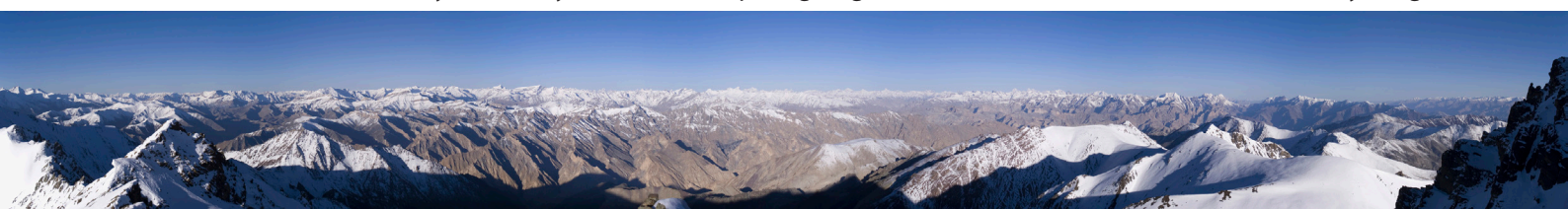
At Base Camp, Chris Klinker and Roeland van Oss are collating information about those returning to the safety of Base Camp. They also take stock of who is presumed dead. The recent massive icefall took the lives of the entangled South Koreans, Jumik Bhote and Gerard McDonnell, as well as one of the rescuing party, 'Big' Pasang Bhote. Chhiring Bhote miraculously survived.

One climber is still not accounted for: Wilco van Rooijen.

**Wilco van Rooijen**

## **Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition**

*"There was little chance that this was our route as it had been completely destroyed. I could go down a little bit further with this short rope but then it would run out again. I had to climb down without a rope and eventually I came across the Traverse and finally under the Bottleneck. And after that the terrain was not that difficult anymore and it was a big relief for me that my chances of surviving were improving. Then I had the next problem. I was on the shoulder and did not know which way to go because the shoulder is really huge – if I went to the left I could end up in China and to the right back to Pakistan. But even to the right the terrain is vast and you have many choices of ways to go. In the meantime the weather had changed and there were clouds hanging around K2. They were not clouds of bad weather, just condensation clouds, but with these you cannot see very far so it is very difficult to make a choice where to go. Finally, I chose one direction and started out because the only thing, almost a mantra in my head, was that I have to get down. It doesn't matter which way – I need oxygen and if I have oxygen, my whole situation will improve and I can make all the choices I want but I have to go down, it does not matter which way. I carried on down and then again I was in a place where I could not go down any further because there were all black rocks and it doesn't make sense anymore, either to the right or to the left. This was the first time that I thought maybe I was trapped. And it was also the first time that I took my satellite phone and phoned home to my wife and 7 month old child. My wife was speechless and I told her that I was lost on the mountain and that I was trapped and could not go any further. And of course she knew already that something must have happened because there was the awful night without any news and she tried to give me energy. She was asking if I was sure I was not climbing on the Chinese side and finally she said you have to keep on going and this is what I said to her, 'Listen, everything will*



*be alright and I will call you back in 24 hours.' But of course it was a stupid promise because two hours later it could have been over."*

*"And that night I had really strange hallucinations – I was thinking that I was sitting beside a dead person, there was a corpse lying there but I didn't have the guts to go to it nor to take a photo. I knew I was still alive but because there was a dead person there, how long would I last before I was also dead? So it was really a strange night but the next morning when the sun was rising, I had to make a choice which way to go because again I could go over the glacier with the risk of falling in a crevasse, or I could also climb over a ridge. This ridge took a lot more energy and I also didn't know how this ridge would end."*

## August 3rd around 05:30 Two Figures

Wilco van Rooijen spends another night in sub-zero temperatures. At first light, Cas van de Gevel and Pemba Gyalje manage to locate him. They bring him to Camp IV and then, facing extreme difficulties, on to Base Camp. The last of the survivors finally makes it back.

### Wilco van Rooijen Norit K2 Dutch 2008 International Expedition

*"I saw a tent and two people, one in a blue down suit and one in an orange down suit and if I had been thinking clearly I would have known immediately that it was Pemba and Cas because Pemba was the only one in a blue down suit and we were the only ones in the orange down suits. But I was confused and I didn't remember them nor recognise them but I was moving towards them. Because, of course, when you see other human beings you think okay, I have to go there because they can save me. Then when I was only 50 metres or so away, suddenly I saw it was Cas and then of course we hugged each other and started crying and he told me that he didn't believe that he would ever see me again and stuff like that. At long last you feel you are saved, you are still at 7,000 metres but you still have a long way to go. They gave me oxygen, food, drink etcetera and they told me what had happened and that Gerard had probably not survived."*

## August 4th Against All Odds

A sombre mood descends on Base Camp. Two days before, 32 highly experienced and technically skilled mountaineers set off from Camp IV to reach the summit of K2. The Savage Mountain kept 11 in its grasp. Is this just an unlucky occurrence or did the climbers collectively push the element of risk beyond the manageable?

It dawns on everybody that this climb is unlike any other. People do die in such environments. Climbing K2 remains a high risk undertaking. Before Base Camp is left to its surrounding elements, the Gilkey Memorial, which is positioned near the camp, receives 11 additional plates to commemorate those who lost their lives in August 2008. Eleven highly experienced mountaineers died within a period of 48 hours. Three others were seriously injured. It is the worst single accident in the history of mountaineering.

### Alberto Zerain Basque Independent climber (Alpine style)

*"There were too many human errors. The ideal thing is that when you are at K2, you can manage, you know what you have to do and everything is going fine. In this case I think there were too many human errors and then they were also unlucky because they were too long in a place where they shouldn't have been. Many people were lucky, I mean being a survivor in K2, there are many survivors and there are 11 people who died and there are many people who survived who were in danger, in real danger..."*





## The 2008 Fatalities

**Dren Mandić**

**Jehan Baig**

**Rolf Bae**

**Hugues d'Aubarède**

**Karim Meherban**

**Gerard McDonnell**

**Jumik Bhote**

**'Big' Pasang Bhote**

**Park Kyeong-Hyo**

**Kim Hyo-Gyeong**

**Hwang Dong-Jin**

