

Rick Allen 1954 - 2021

On 25 July 2021 a series of avalanches swept down the east flank of K2 taking the life of Rick Allen. In an instant, Britain lost one its finest ever mountaineers.

Rick was born in London on 6 November 1954. His father introduced him to the Scottish hills with ascents of Schiehallion and Ben Nevis. When Rick joined the University of Birmingham Mountaineering Club his rock climbing took off. Although Rick was a fledgling climber his determination instantly shone through. He quickly became proficient on rock and then developed a strong interest in winter climbing. He made ascents of *Castle Ridge* and *Tower Ridge* in 1975 with Robin Walker, and the following winter climbed *Point Five Gully* with Jim Fotheringham and Chris Duck.

Rick had a strong attraction to wild places and he became a regular visitor to the Alps completing many of the Chamonix classics. His finest early ascents were in the Bernese Oberland where he climbed the east-north-east ridge of the Lauterbrunnen Breithorn and the *Welzenbach* on the north face of the Gletscherhorn with Chris Duck in 1978, both big, demanding routes that are now rarely climbed. Further afield, Rick climbed the west ridge and *Diamond Couloir* on Mount Kenya with Roy Lindsay in 1980. Later that year he visited Nepal where made the first ascent of the west face of Tharpu Chuli (Tent Peak) in the Annapurna Sanctuary.

Wild places also set the theme for his new routeing in Scotland. This often took place in the most inaccessible and serious of locations such as A'Mhaighdean (Scotland's remotest Munro), Ladhar Bheinn, Beinn Lair and Beinn a'Bhuird. Rick's finest contribution was the first winter ascent of *Raven's Edge* on Buachaille Etive Mor with Brian Sprunt in 1984, a spectacular route now recognised as one of the finest mixed climbs in Glen Coe.

In 1982 Rick visited the Himalaya for a second time on an expedition organised by Roy Lindsay when he made the first ascent of Kirti Stambh (6271m) in the Gangotri region of India. Climbing with longstanding partner Ernie McGlashan, the pair backed off due to dangerous snow conditions, but after the slope avalanched, Rick went back up and continued alone to the summit. During the trip Rick met Nick Kekus and two years later they visited Nepal and climbed a new route on the 2,500m south face of Ganesh II (7111m). They reached the summit on the ninth day in a storm and spent three days descending the face. Their route was a magnificent achievement, and although it was largely ignored by the mainstream climbing press, it made a big impression on the upcoming generation of British alpinists. A benchmark had been set. If your new route was not climbed in pure alpine style and did not take at least 12 days, then you weren't really trying hard enough.

Rick's ability to acclimatise and perform strongly at high altitude was extraordinary. This became apparent on Mal Duff's expedition to the north-east ridge of Everest in 1985 when, climbing solo, Rick reached the expedition's high point at 8,170m. The remainder of the 1980s were taken up



On the summit of Nanga Parbat after climbing the Mazeno ridge.



Back in base camp, Sandy Allan and Rick Allen celebrate their epic ascent, already one of the climbs of the century.

with another trip to the north-east ridge of Everest and Makalu. Neither were successful due to difficult snow conditions, but once again Rick reached over 8,000m on both mountains, confirming his strength at altitude.

In 1991 Rick went to the Tien Shan and made the first British ascent of Khan Tengri (7010m), and the following summer he visited Tajikistan and the Fann mountains, and made the first ascent of the difficult east ridge of Chimtarga (5489m) with Doug Scott and Russian climber Sergei Efimov. This was a significant turn of events because Sergei invited Rick to join an all-Russian expedition to Dhaulagiri (8176m) in 1993. The seven-man team were successful in forging a difficult new route up the north face. This was Rick's first 8,000m peak and an astonishing achievement on a gruelling and technical route. Rick learned to speak Russian before the trip and calmly adapted to their diet; the main sustenance on the seven-day ascent was cabbage soup.

In 2000 Rick climbed Everest with a commercial expedition. Rick's success was well deserved after his previous strong performances on the north-east ridge, but Rick soon realised that large organised expeditions were not where his heart lay. Rick moved to Tajikistan in 2006 where he climbed extensively, especially in the Fann mountains. Details of his ascents are incomplete since Rick did not leave a comprehensive chronology of his ascents but in 2006 he made the first British ascent of Pik Karl Marx (6736m) and the first ascent of the north ridge of Pik Ovalnaya (5780m) with Phil Wickens (see T Sparrow, 'Top Marx in Pamirs for AC Climbers', *AJ* 2007). In 2008 he made the first British ascent of Pik Korzhenevskaya (7105m). There isn't space here to detail this, but his long and impressive fell-running record undoubtedly helped keep him fit for the mountains. He once beat Pete Livesey in the Ben Nevis Race.

Rick's pairing with Sandy Allan was the defining climbing partnership of his life. In 1986 they made a brilliant five-day new route on the south face

of Pumori (7161m), a beautiful pyramid near Everest, and worked powerfully together the following year on the north-east ridge of Everest. Two years later they climbed the north face of the Eiger. In 1995 they joined an expedition to attempt the huge and unclimbed Mazeno ridge on Nanga Parbat (8126m), the longest ridge of any of the 8000m peaks. They were unsuccessful but in 2009 returned and climbed the mountain's Diamir face. This was Rick's third 8,000m peak, and two years later, he made it four by climbing Gasherbrum I (8068m).

By 2012, Rick, now in his late 50s, and Sandy had accumulated a significant amount of high-altitude experience and decided to return to Nanga Parbat and try the Mazeno ridge one last time. The 10km route had been attempted many times since the 1970s and was one of mountaineering's last great problems. To gain the main summit you have to traverse the eight Mazeno peaks – all over 7,000m – to reach the Mazeno Gap. An alternative strategy was devised where a team of six – Rick, Sandy, the South African Cathy O'Dowd and Lhakpa Rangdu, Lhakpa Nuru and Lakpa Zarok from Nepal – planned to traverse the ridge together providing more firepower for the summit push.

In the event, it took this strong team nine days to reach the Mazeno Gap, and after a failed summit attempt, only Rick and Sandy had the physical and mental energy to try again. As Cathy and the three Sherpas made a difficult descent of the dangerous *Schell* route, Rick and Sandy set off with minimal supplies for their summit bid. Deep snow meant it took two days rather than one to reach the top but it was the descent down the *Kinshofer* route where their troubles really began. Poor conditions that year meant that all teams had given up the on the Kinshofer so there was no trail in place, and they were unable to light their stove to melt water. The epic three-day descent in extreme avalanche conditions while being exhausted and dehydrated is one of mountaineering's great survival stories, described so memorably in Sandy's book *In Some Lost Place* (2015).

Rick and Sandy's 18-day traverse of the Mazeno ridge was widely acclaimed as one of the finest Himalayan climbs this century and hailed as the most important British success in the high Himalaya since Stephen Venables' ascent of Everest's Kangshung face in 1988. Rick and Sandy were awarded a Piolet d'Or but Rick was a humble man: rather than putting the trophy on display, he used it to prop up the creaking bookcase in his Chamonix flat.

Rick remained focused on big mountains and was determined to continue climbing them in good style. In 2017 he attempted a futuristic new route on the north-west face of Annapurna with Felix Berg, Louis Rousseau and Adam Bielecki. They were unsuccessful but came away with an ascent of Tilicho (7134m) as consolation. Later that year Rick climbed the two highest peaks in the Rwenzori mountains of Uganda with Mike Lean: prized and rarely climbed summits. In 2018, Rick climbed Broad Peak (8047m), his fifth 8,000er, although success was overshadowed by a 'rescue' aided by a drone.



Rick Allen climbing the Chardonnet in 2017. (Simon Richardson)

I've written about Rick the climber and the qualities that made him so successful: drive, skill, experience and an exceptional ability to perform at altitude. This was the Rick I knew best. But there was far more to Rick than mountaineering. He was an outstanding engineer and had a glittering career with Texaco culminating as safety manager for the huge Gorgon Natural Gas Project in Australia. Rick was also extremely generous. His first marriage to Alison ended in tragedy when she died of cancer in 1999. Rick remarried Zuhra in Tajikistan in 2006 and gained a step daughter Nazira and step son Farrukh. Sadly, the marriage did not survive, but Rick took on the responsibility for Nazira and Farrukh's education, funding them through their degrees. Rick was

proud of their achievements and was delighted to walk Nazira down the aisle at her wedding in 2018.

But most of all it was Rick's faith that drove him. He recently attended a two-year course at the All Nations Christian College in Hertfordshire and supported Mhoira Leng' work with the Cairdeas Palliative Care Trust in Uganda. On his final expedition to K2 he was raising money for refugees and children in Myanmar.

Jerry Gore, Rick's expedition partner on K2, wrote movingly about the aftermath of the avalanche. 'Pakistani guides Arshad, Shah, Waqar, Rizwan and Ahmed were at camp two when they got the news. They all knew Rick – he was a sort of legendary grandfather in these parts – and they came rushing down the mountain to help. We found Rick late that night and buried him the next morning. We stood together in the shadow of K2 with prayers in different languages and religions filling the air. It was a moment of total unity, and a good way to say goodbye to a Scotsman who loved these mountains and the people who call them home.'

This tribute has been hard for me to write. Rick was a close friend, and we had been climbing together for nearly 40 years. A few summers ago, we climbed a new route on the Grande Fourche in the Mont Blanc range. We expected to complete the route in a day and were travelling light, but we were caught in darkness near the summit. Despite a good weather forecast it rained through the night and we shivered and cuddled our way to a long-awaited dawn. Rick had survived two open bivouacs high on Nanga Parbat, so I was determined not to be the first to complain. Needless to say,

Rick remained infuriatingly cheerful all night and did not comment once about our situation. When we were safely down in Chamonix the first thing he did was take me to buy a new bivouac sack.

Rick Allen led an extraordinary life. He was one of the world's finest mountaineers and touched the lives of many. His bold alpine-style ascents in the high Himalaya will be remembered for generations. His final resting place, with the mighty K2 as his headstone, could not be more fitting.

Simon Richardson

Sandy Allan writes: Rick was a great friend and loyal companion to me. His death on K2 in an avalanche was untimely but K2 base camp is a suitable resting place for my good, respected and tenacious mountaineering companion. We were the best of friends and on our 8,000m climbs shared the same determination and commitment. We both had a high allegiance to the ethics and the art of mountaineering. We climbed worldwide together, sharing some outstanding adventures. He was a loyal, generous and trustworthy climbing partner and is sorely missed.