



PEOPLE + CULTURE

Remembering Those Lost on the Savage Mountain

BY VANESSA O'BRIEN | [AUGUST 30, 2016](#)

Remembering Those Lost on the Savage Mountain

BY VANESSA O'BRIEN | AUGUST 30, 2016

K₂, the killer mountain, has been given its nickname for a good reason. For every four people who have summited, another one has died. I have been to the mountain twice in as many years, most recently last month, and both times not one member of our party reached the top. The weather gods, notorious for spite, closed the peak down like the lid on a box. Perhaps they were angry about the 49 summits in 2014.

At the bottom of K₂ is something called the Gilkey Memorial, testament to those who tried to conquer K₂ and paid the ultimate price. It's named after Art Gilkey, who suffered thrombophlebitis (blood clots in his leg), followed by a pulmonary embolism. His fellow climbers, including Charlie Houston and Pete Schoening, wrapped him in a sleeping bag to bring him down the mountain, **an effort that led to perhaps the most famous belay in history.**

While resting at the sleeping bag at camp, Art was swept away by an avalanche. Years later, his teammates would claim Art's disappearance saved their own lives, as lowering him was virtually impossible. His remains were discovered 40 years later, in 1993, at the base of the south face of K₂.

How Gilkey died, although tragic, was not unique. The top top causes of death on K2 involve falling (33 percent) and avalanches (18 percent), while disappearances are the third (16 percent). In fact, it was avalanches that resulted in the end of the 2016 climbing season.

Like most mountains, K2 is non-discriminatory. People with 27 distinct nationalities have lost their lives there, with Pakistan, Russia, Spain, South Korea, the USA and Nepal representing 53 percent of all deaths.

Statistics tell just one side of the story. To get the other, it's worth a visit to the Gilkey Memorial itself. As a climber, it's important to me to pay tribute to those that came before me, men and women who risked and lost their lives, often with with less-sophisticated equipment, simpler clothing, and very little insight into weather forecasts. So many of them were true pioneers, breaking trail for us who came later, and even in their deaths they have lessons to teach, and for which we must give thanks.

The first time I visited the Gilkey Memorial, it left a big impression on me, so much so that for my second visit, this year, I wanted to do more than light candles, so I contacted two climbing historians–Bob Schelfhout-Aubertijn and Eberhard Jurgalski–to find out exactly how many people had lost their lives on K2. That number is 84.

Our task, then, was simple: to ensure that each of the 84 names had a dedicated plaque at the Gilkey Memorial. I solicited help from Major Sohaib and Flight Lieutenant Rahim Anwar, liaison officers from the Pakistan Air Force, and Di Gilbert, the leader of the 2016 K2 British Team. Even with help, executing the task was a challenge. Duplicate plaques, team commemorations, and foreign language inscriptions delayed our efforts, as did high winds and heavy snow. Eventually, we did complete our tally and found that there were 20 missing names across 13 nationalities dating back 37 years:

Mohammad Ali, Pakistan, 1986

Juan Apellaniz, Spain, 1994

Rolf Bae, Norway, 2008

Igor Benkin, Russia, 1996

Daniel Bidner, Sweden, 1993

Mihai Cioroianu, Romania, 1999

Daniel Culver, Canada, 1993

Javier Escartin, Spain, 1995

Michelle Fait, Italy, 2009

Klaus-Dieter Grohs, Germany, 2003

Alfred Imitzer, Austria, 1986

Muhammad Iqbal, Pakistan, 2002

Reinmar Joswig, Germany, 1993

Ali Kazim, Pakistan, 1979

Peter Mezger, Germany, 1993

Nima Nuru I (Nima Norbu), Nepal, 2007

Alan Rouse, UK, 1986

Hannes Wieser, Austria, 1986

Wojciech Wroz, Poland, 1986

Yukihiro Yanagisawa, Japan, 1982

The hardest part was finding plaques to match those at the Gilkey Memorial, which are predominantly round and silver in color. I could not find them in Skardu or Islamabad, so I turned to Sher Khan, a guide at Nazir Sabir Expeditions for advice. He explained that the plaques at the Gilkey Memorial were metal plates, engraved using a piton to punch details about the climber once they went missing or were found dead. Members of the expedition would then take the plates to the Gilkey Memorial before they left. He suggested we head to Rawalpindi, the famous military city located in the Majha region of Punjab, Pakistan, to source similar plates, as it was from there that all early expeditions departed for K2.



O'Brien and Sher Khan sourcing plates in Punjab. Photo by Sultan Khan.

Khan was the perfect person for this mission. He narrowly escaped being murdered during the 2013 Nanga Parbat massacre, something too painful for him to speak about, even today. It didn't take us long to find metal plates that were light and nearly indestructible to last in K2's unpredictable weather. Like the modern battery-operated candles we placed at the Gilkey Memorial, these plates would likely be modernized with engraving rather than punching. But the look and feel would remain the same. Mission accomplished—sort of.

There is just the matter of returning the plaques to the Gilkey Memorial, as we finished the engraving after we'd left the mountain. I can't think of a better team to do this than perhaps the next expedition to K2. Any team heading up next is likely to try to break K2's reputation as the only 8,000er never summited in winter. And any team that can accomplish that will surely have enough stamina left to hang 20 plaques at the Gilkey Memorial.

Top photo: Di Gilbert and the author inspect names at the Gilkey Memorial by Lt. Fahad Ur Rehman.

For more reading on K2, check out the following books:

Buried in the Sky, by Peter Zuckerman and Amanda Padoan

K2: Life and Death on the World's Most Dangerous Mountain, by Ed Viesturs

The Last Man on the Mountain: The Death of an American Adventurer on K2, by Jennifer Jordan

No Way Down: Life and Death on K2, by Graham Bowley

One Mountain Thousand Summits, by Freddie Wilkinson