



Vanessa O'Brien

# Remembering the Gilkey Memorial

*“Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.” - Emily Dickinson*

“K2, the killer mountain, has been given its name for a good reason. For every four people who have summited, another one dies. I have been to the mountain twice in as many years, most recently last month, and both times not one of us reached the top. The weather gods, notorious for being spiteful, 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 is

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.

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 three causes of death on K2 involve falling (33%), avalanches (18%), and disappearance (16%). In fact, it was avalanches that resulted in the end of the 2016 climbing season.

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

Statistics tell one side of the story. To get the other, it's worth a visit to the





Vanessa O'Brien (left) and Sher Khan of Nazir Sabir Expeditions (right) source metal plates for engraving in Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Gilkey Memorial itself. For me, as a K2 climber, it's important to pay tribute to those that came before me. These men and women risked their lives with less sophisticated equipment, simpler clothing and very little insight into weather forecasts. They were

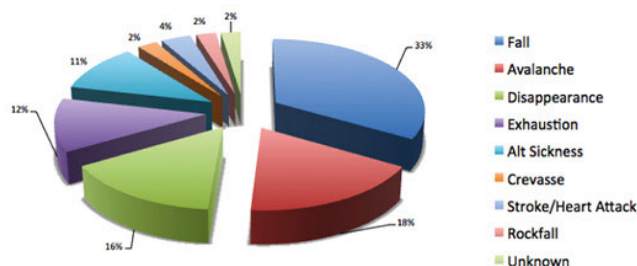
on K2 fearing for their lives, wishing death would come as they winced in pain. The lucky ones never knew what hit them. Poor Art Gilkey left a trail of blood in his sleeping bag avalanche that could lead one to believe his departure may not have been as

The Gilkey Memorial had left an impression on me from the previous year, so much so that this year, I wanted to do more than light candles. It's a sobering thought that any of my climbing colleagues or indeed myself, could end up here, too. 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 was simple - to ensure that each of the 84 names had a dedicated plaque at the Gilkey Memorial. I solicited help in the form of Major Sohaib and Flt Lt Rahim Anwar, two liaison officers from the Pakistan Air Force and Di Gilbert, the leader of the 2016 K2 British Team.

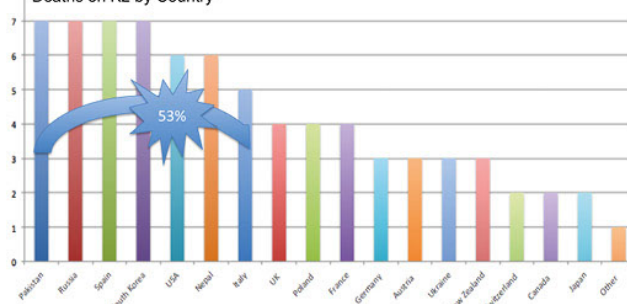
Executing the task involved a bit of a challenge. Duplicate plaques, team commemorations and foreign language inscriptions delayed our efforts, as did high winds and heavy snow. Eventually we did complete

Causes of Death on K2



Data Source: Eberhard Jurgalski at 8,000ers.com

Deaths on K2 by Country



Other represents one death in each of the following: Mexico, Romania, Iran, Norway, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Serbia, Kyrgyzstan and Ireland. Data Source: Eberhard Jurgalski, 8,000ers.com

true pioneers, breaking trail, and have lessons to teach posthumously. I suspect there are those who died

swift and pain-free as his teammates hoped.

our tally in order to confirm that there were 20 missing names across 13 nationalities dating back 37 years.

