

TESTIMONY of Marco Confortola on the K2 events from July 28th to August 5th 2008.

On July 28, my expedition team mate, Roberto Manni, and I leave K2 Base Camp and we go directly to Camp 2.

On July 29, we are stuck at Camp 2 due to bad weather.

On July 30 we leave for Camp 3.

On the morning of July 31st, we leave for Camp 4 opposite the K2 "Shoulder". We reach the Koreans, Go and Kim, who are waiting under the last slope before Camp 4. We drink and eat something with some other climbers then I start out towards Camp 4 with some Sherpas, porters and climbers. A Nepali Sherpa named Cirin, another Nepali Sherpa who I think was with the Korean expedition, and I reach Camp 4. When we get there, I see a yellow tent on my right. I go towards it, expecting to see the Dutch climbers. Instead I find Monsieur Hugo with another climber and a porter. I speak with them, they offer me some tea and then I go back to Cirin and the other Sherpa. Together we start to prepare the places for our tents. I take a bundle of flags that I had in my backpack and I climb about 100 meters up towards the shoulder, where I place the flags to facilitate the next day's climb. On my way back down to Camp 4, I see some other climbers arriving from the Abruzzi Spur and one coming from the Cesen Route: Pemba Girgi, the Sherpa from the Dutch expedition. My partner Roberto arrives then too. Later, Wilco, Cas, Ielle, and Gerard, all members of the Dutch expedition, show up. We help each other clear tent sites, set up tents, and prepare for the night. Around midnight I hear movement; some of the climbers are leaving to climb the Bottleneck.

On August 1, at 3:00 a.m., I set out towards the summit of K2. Roberto was still in the tent. I left because I felt cold. After a few hours, we all find ourselves climbing in a line towards the Bottleneck. I don't recall at what time, but one climber, for reasons that were not clear, fell for 400 meters and stopped on the left side (looking down from the top) of the Bottleneck couloir. We waste a lot of time – at least an hour and a half – in various safety manoeuvres, readjusting screws and repositioning ropes. We continue to climb, and after a few hours we complete the traverse and the final steep slope, reaching the plateau above the ice cliff. I see the summit of K2 and other climbers in front of me.

Near the top, I remember some climbers already coming down, including the Koreans, while I continued climbing up. On the summit, I meet Wilco, Gerard and Pemba who are going down and Cas who waited for me at the top. It is 6:45 p.m. August 1 and I am the last climber to summit. Cas takes some pictures of me, then using the satellite phone, I call Miro Fiordi, general director of the Credito Valtellinese Bank, my biggest sponsor on this expedition, to inform him that I summited without oxygen and am on my way back down.

It is already night when I start down with some other climbers. I reach 8,400 meters and decide to stop there because the visibility is bad and I don't feel safe continuing. I call Agostino da Polenza, an Italian expedition leader and friend, on my satellite phone. I inform him of the difficult situation and my decision to stop. We agree to speak again in the morning.

Near me, Gerard "Jesus" stops as well and we dig two small caves in the snow. We don't have any camp materials for the bivouac but we try to face the night as well as possible. Later in the night, the leader of the Dutch expedition, Wilco, joins us. At the first light of dawn, Wilco starts to descend in front of us, and a little later we follow him. Gerard and I reach the steep part and see three climbers hanging from the ice cliff by their ropes; all 3 are alive, and we begin rescue manoeuvres. I recognize the Korean expedition leader by his camera, a German Rollei, and one of the Korean team's Sherpas. The other one may have been Pack, a Korean climber, but I am not

sure. All 3 of them are in very bad positions, hanging head down. While Gerard holds the head of the expedition leader, who is in the vertically highest position on the serac, I descend towards the other two climbers. I see oxygen cylinders in their backpacks and look for their oxygen masks to help them breathe, but unfortunately I cannot find them. I take a knife from the climbing harness of the climber in the middle and find a small yellow “Grivel – Evo model” ice axe in the snow, then climb back up on the serac near Gerard. I start ascending to the right above them all and use the knife to cut about ten meters of rope. I return on the vertical side with Gerard and the Korean leader, then use the yellow ice axe to anchor the rope and descend towards the Korean leader. I tie the rope around his waist using another small rope. While I am doing this, Gerard leaves his position and starts to climb towards the top of the serac. I call him many times but he doesn’t respond. Assuming he went to take a pictures of the rescue operations, I watch him move out of sight. I then continue my rescue operations, lowering the Korean leader about ten meters closer to his team mates. I block the descent and go down near them too. I place one of my ski poles under the arm of the Korean leader so that he can stay in a sitting position. I move closer to the second injured climber and, with some trouble, am able to move him into a safe position from lying to sitting. I take off my right high altitude glove and put it on the left foot of the third climber who lost a boot. I see a radio microphone hanging from the Sherpa’s jacket so I descend about fifty meters in the couloir to find the radio. I climb back up, turn it on and call the Koreans, asking for help. I think it is two Sherpas who answer and say they will come to help. I inform them about the injured climbers and myself. I am very tired and, after securing the three climbers, I start down.

I anchor my ice axe in the ice above the Korean leader for reinforcement and hear a rumble come from the traverse but cannot understand what is happening. Without my right high altitude glove and without my ice axe, I start to descend towards the left of the traverse using a ski pole attached to the fixed ropes. After a few meters, I notice that the traverse ropes are gone. I continue the very dangerous traverse towards the Bottleneck, reaching it with enormous physical and psychological effort. There I find some fixed ropes and descend the couloir. I am nearly at the bottom when I hear another rumble from above and see a small avalanche on top of the ice cliff, cascading over the rocks. I see human body parts and other material emerge from the cascading snow and recognize the yellow “La Sportiva” boots that Gerard was wearing. The avalanche continues towards me, leaving pieces of human remains and climbing material in its wake. It stops just below me to the right. As I continue down towards Camp 4, the weather gets worse and it begins to snow. I notice more climbing material, traces of blood, and sliding tracks in the snow. Dejected and fatigued, I sit down, then lay down, and soon fall asleep.

Pemba Girgi, Sherpa from the Dutch expedition, wakes me up. He insists that I put on an oxygen mask, even if I don’t want to, and urges me to descend quickly with him. After descending about 200 meters, something hits my neck. I realise that it is an oxygen cylinder and that Pemba is trying to protect me with his body as another avalanche passes to our right, stopping not far from where we are. While Pemba takes some pictures of the avalanche, I make out more human remains in the snow. Pemba continues to encourage me to descend. On our way down, we meet other climbers on their way up. I don’t recall who they were exactly, but two of them were for sure Koreans and they asked me about their team mates. I explained that I had left the three climbers in a secure position at about 8,300 meters but had to descend because I had used up all my strength, having bivouacked the night before and spent three and a half hours in rescue operations. They then continued their ascent.

The weather got worse and we met the Dutch climber, Cas, who was waiting for us just before Camp 4. Pemba left me with him, and I believe he returned to look for his expedition leader Wilco. Accompanied by Cas, I reach Camp 4. There I speak briefly with Go and Kim, the Korean climbers, then I go into my tent and fall asleep.

On August 3rd, I wake up late and start my lone descent to Camp 3. After a few hours, I notice there are two climbers coming down behind me. I arrive at Camp 3 and go to a tent, where I drink a Sprite that my team mate Roberto Manni had left me. Looking for something to eat, I find two energy bars in the tent above mine which belonged to Cirin, Sherpa of the American expedition. I eat the bars, return to my tent, and fall asleep again.

On August 4, I start descending towards Camp 2 as soon as I wake up. After traversing on the diagonal from right to left which leads to the Abruzzi Spur, I see and hear a helicopter rising from below. It flies in circles, inspecting the Spur. I continue towards Camp 2 and after making it down the black pyramid, I see three climbers on their way up. I recognize the American climber, George, with two Sherpas from the Makalu valley recruited by Roberto to help me. I ask George to loan me his battery pack for his Thuraya satellite phone so that I can inform my brother Luigi I am still alive (my phone batteries had been dead for a couple of days). We reach Camp 1, where we spend the night.

On August 5, with extreme pain in both feet, I reach Advanced Base Camp with the help of the two Sherpas and George. The Sherpa Cirin is waiting for me there with some American climbers. I eat and drink something and I continue towards Base Camp with their help. Halfway across the glacier, I am met by Mario Panzeri, a well know Italian climber, who offers me a can of Red Bull and Olan. Together we continue down towards Base Camp. Only when I get there, am I informed that many climbers have died.

This is what I remember from between July 28th and August 5th.

Marco Confortola