

# SURVIVAL ON SPANTIK!

By Saad Mohammad

For someone whose father was not in the Navy I still got to spend 12 years at Bahria College and luckily escaped spending another 4-6 years at Bahria University. And although I made some lifelong friends at Bahria College but I would never have thought I that would end up writing for the Navy News. I was never really an ace student, the best grades that I ever scored were securing 6<sup>th</sup> position in class 3, for the first and the last time. I was very fond of participating in extracurricular activities and was part of every Annual Function in one way or the other. In junior school I was part of the choir and was very active in dramatics and sports.

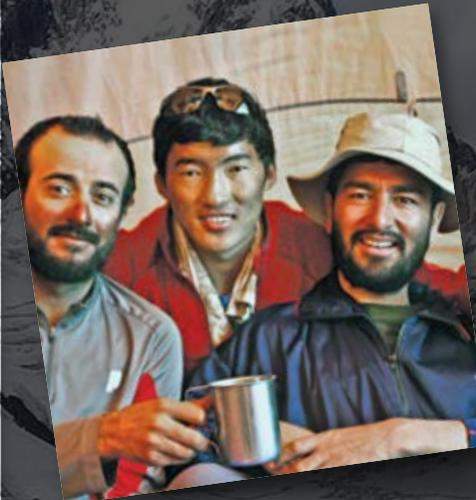
In the later years I went on to do challenging roles at Annual Functions and was part of almost all the sports teams including squash and gymnastics. Adventure sports, however, were something that I pursued outside of my school life. Being a mountaineer and a visual storyteller I am one of few Pakistanis to have successfully reached the summit of a 7,000m peak in the Karakorums and one of select few to have attempted Mt. Everest. In fact I am the first Pakistani to have tweeted from Camp III of Mt. Everest from a daunting altitude of 7,060m above sea level. In 2019 I literally went from making 1 minute videos on my instagram to making a couple of multi-episode adventure TV series for an English news channel in Pakistan. Furthermore I have been producing and posting fresh content on my YouTube Back in 2012, much before I attempted Mt. Everest, I was part of a joint Pakistan-Chinese Friendship expedition which





successfully scaled Spantik, which is a 7,027m peak in the Karakoram Range near Skardu. It goes without saying that it is a majestic peak but this picture essay is not about how we conquered it against all odds but it is a story of how leadership, resilience, compassion and situational awareness helped us survive a snow storm as we lost our way and ended up surviving a night outside at an altitude of 6,300m above sea level in temperatures ranging between  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  &  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  without any shelter. 2012 was the year when the Chinese decided to celebrate 60 years of friendship with Pakistan and a joint expedition to a Pakistani peak and a return expedition to a Chinese peak, the

following year, were part of these celebrations. We welcomed the Chinese team in Islamabad and then left for Skardu, where we spent some time and from here we left for Arandu via the Skardu Shiger Road. Along the way we went through Katpana Desert, Shigar and Hashupa Alchurri before taking the bridge at Hyderabad to cross the river into Tisser Valley. Small settlements came and went by in a blur of green amid the otherwise stark and very rugged landscape. Rickety old suspension wooden bridges are a hallmark of these



areas and are really not meant for the faint hearted. The landscape

from Tisser to Arandu Valley was very green. The jeep track was very rugged but the landscape along the way was soothing to the eyes. There were old walnut trees, some new apricot and poplar trees and a lot of green vegetation in the fields in both small and bigger settlements along the way.

We camped near the village and it took us 2 nights to arrive at the base camp. The trekking days were long and arduous but very rewarding as there was plenty of water along the way and the mini-meadows on the moraine were gardens of pink aromatic flowers with islands of wild bush rose. Along the way we camped at Munn Pi Khorra and Bolo Cho and joined the porters in their song and dance on the second night of our march to the base camp. On the third day of the approach march we left the moraine and entered the Chogolugma Glacier and thus began the day long perilous journey zigzagging through hidden and visible crevasses. We had engaged almost a hundred porters for dropping, camping gear and rations at the base camp. Porter



trains are a phenomenon common on the Baltoro but we were able to witness the same while heading to Spantik Base Camp. The Base Camp was at 4,500m and was perched on a, partially green, rocky terrace at the base of the South East Ridge. A couple of mountain streams provide water and the view of the Chogolugma is quite dramatic from this vantage point. There was an emerald blue colored glacial lake that we could see within the ice mass just below us and as we went higher towards Camp I we could notice the frozen ripples in the main river of



ice as other glaciers fell into it and The last bit of climb on Spantik is like a summit within a summit. We reached the top around midday and must have spent an hour or so before starting to climb down. By the time we got back to the West End of the snowfield it was almost sundown. The Chinese climbers were ahead of us and they were having trouble finding a way down to our ad hoc Camp III. We spent hours trying to find a way down and finally when we descended down I found myself in an unfamiliar area of the mountain. The wind had picked

up and it was snowing again and visibility had reduced to around 30m in the whiteout. We were cold, badly fatigued, hungry and extremely thirsty and it was too risky to climb down. It had been more than 24 hours since our ordeal had begun and all I wanted to do was to sleep but the expedition leader - Col. Dr. Jabbar Bhatti (SSG), who also happens to be my mentor, figured that if we were to survive in such adverse conditions then we would have to make our own shelters – meaning we had to dig snow caves. Col. Bhatti must have been calling out my name for quite some time because when he hit me on the head to wake me up, there was a sense of urgency in his tone. He was like: "Saaaad!" I woke up as if nothing had happened and I was like: "jeeee!" he was like: "you need to keep digging" all the while slowly working on his snow cave. I remember him using the base of his ice axe to dig into the ceiling of his cave and his manner was meticulous, as if he had all the time in the world just to dig a cave. I was too tired and just wanted to sleep but I did whatever little I could and Bhatti saheb kept calling out my name every time I dozed off. The reason being if I had slept out in the open I could very easily have frozen to death. So when Bhatti sb. was done perfecting his cave he woke



me up one last time and told me to get inside this hole in the snow. Last thing I remember before dozing off was that Mr. Bhatti was sitting on the opening of the cave and covering it with a flimsy sheet of emergency blanket, thus improving my chances of survival. I can never forget or repay this ultimate gesture of kindness & selflessness. So yes, we survived the night and we safely got down to base camp eventually but the lesson here is not about survival against all odds but about the expedition leader having the presence of mind to realize that our lives were in danger and if it were not for his compassion & empathy I would not be here narrating this tale. Almost 5 years later while climbing Everest in 2017 Jabbar Bhatti and I were together again, and I, in some way, had the chance to reciprocate what he had done for me on Spantik but that is a tale for another day. ✕✕

