

# The Tragic Tale of K2 and the Ill-Fated 1939 Expedition Led by William Lowell Putnam

Standing tall among the majestic peaks of the Karakoram Range in Pakistan, K2, also known as Mount Godwin-Austen, is the second highest mountain on Earth. Known for its treacherous nature and steep slopes, it has earned the reputation of being one of the most challenging mountains to climb. In 1939, the unfortunate expedition led by William Lowell Putnam only further confirmed the mountain's lethal nature.

Before diving into the ill-fated attempt at conquering K2, it is crucial to understand the background and motivations that drove the American-led expedition. William Lowell Putnam, an experienced mountaineer and the president of the Harvard Mountaineering Club, dreamt of being the first to reach the summit of K2. With an undying passion for mountaineering and a deep sense of adventure, he assembled a team of seasoned climbers in hopes of achieving this significant feat.

The expedition began in May 1939, as Putnam and his team set out to conquer the unconquerable. Battling harsh weather conditions, treacherous glaciers, and extreme altitudes, the team meticulously made their way towards K2's majestic peak. However, little did they know that these adversities were just the beginning of their perilous journey.

## K2 and the 1939 Tragedy

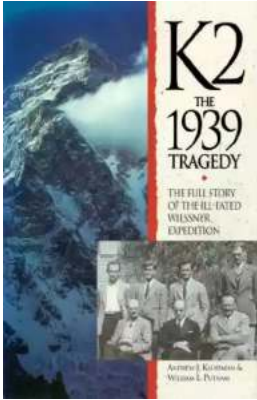
by William Lowell Putnam(Kindle Edition)

★★★★☆ 4.3 out of 5

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As the team progressed higher, they encountered the notorious "Bottleneck" section, a narrow ridge that was infamous for its susceptibility to avalanches. It was here that tragedy struck, forever etching this expedition into the annals of mountaineering history.

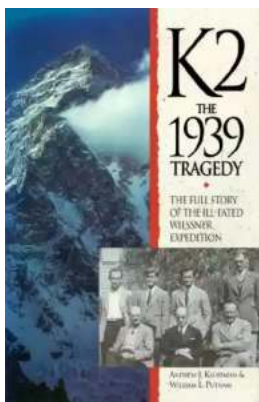
A violent avalanche swept through the team on June 19th, 1939, taking the lives of four climbers: Art Gilkey, Robert H. Bates, Charles S. Houston, and Willi Unsoeld. The desperate surviving members battled against the odds to descend from the treacherous mountain, but the expedition was ultimately deemed a failure.

The tragedy of the 1939 expedition had a lasting impact on not only the mountaineering community but also the close-knit group of climbers involved. William Lowell Putnam, haunted by the loss of his teammates, declared that he would never venture into the mountains again. This devastating loss also catalyzed important discussions regarding safety measures and the use of proper equipment in mountaineering expeditions, ultimately leading to advancements in climbing techniques and protocols.

Over the years, K2 continued to attract daredevil adventurers, yet its treacherous nature remained unchanged. The mountain has been successfully summited by many climbers since the ill-fated 1939 expedition. However, the tragedy serves as a constant reminder of the unforgiving nature of these towering giants and the risks involved in pursuing such monumental feats.

Despite the failure to conquer K2 in 1939, the expedition led by William Lowell Putnam left an undeniable mark on mountaineering history. It stands as a testament to the dedication, bravery, and sacrifice exhibited by those who dare to challenge the limits of human potential. The memory of those who lost their lives on that fateful day serves as a somber reminder of the price some pay to push the boundaries of exploration.

As we cherish the achievements of modern mountaineers who conquer the tallest peaks, let us never forget the tragic tale of K2 and the ill-fated 1939 expedition led by William Lowell Putnam. Their story is a remarkable testament to the indomitable human spirit and the relentless pursuit of conquering the unconquerable.



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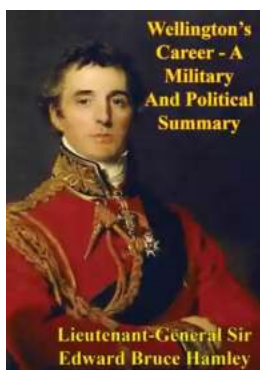
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“... Left alone with no or practically little knowledge of what plans are being held or made for advance has a tendency to place one in the position of ‘sitting on needles’ ... One should not be yanked 4000 or 5000 ft. higher without proper time and consideration for acclimatization. All men are not equal and some can take, others can not! ... Being a member of a drastically unequal party [as] regards age, position and ability combined with experience (and I shall not try to judge my own position) I might say the experiment has been a failure in all except congeniality ...” — From Jack Durrance’s expedition diary, July 20, 1939

The story of the 1939 American K2 expedition is well known among mountaineers: world-class German-born climber Fritz Wiessner and Pasang Dawa Lama came within 800 feet of attaining the world’s second-highest unclimbed summit before turning back for more supplies. Rejoining them on the descent was Dudley Wolfe, who had stayed not far below. Upon reaching the lower camps, the party found them stripped of supplies and deserted. Wiessner decided to descend further to investigate, and left Wolfe behind — alone. Later, unable to descend solo, Wolfe had to be rescued; but the attempt failed, and Wolfe and Sherpas Pasang Kikuli, Pasang Kitar, and Phinsoo died. Initially, Wiessner was held responsible, but in time the blame shifted to climber Jack Durrance and another Sherpa. The disaster was considered one of the worst accidents in the climbing history of the Himalaya. It was also the subject of much speculation for years afterward; in 1961, Italian climber Fosco Maraini claimed it a tragedy “on which no full light has ever been shed.” For some historians, the speculation would not rest. There were too many missing pieces, inconsistencies, and unanswered questions for a disaster of this scale. Unfortunately, reliable documentation was scarce. So was the cooperation of the remaining expedition members, who did not want to rekindle the controversy that arose from the expedition’s failure. They echoed the neutral statement issued by the investigating committee of the American Alpine Club in 1940, which said, in effect, let sleeping dogs lie. When Andrew J. Kauffman and William L. Putnam later began work on Wiessner’s biography, they

found discrepancies in the account of the K2 incident. Intrigued, they dug deeper and began to uncover a larger tangle of events than had been previously suspected. The recent availability of Jack Durrance's own trip diary further enabled them to unravel the events of the ill-fated adventure on K2. *K2: The 1939 Tragedy* retraces the expedition's key elements — the debilitating weather, the personalities and weaknesses of party members, Wiessner's "romantic vision" uncharacteristic of the climbing era — and reveals the steps that led toward catastrophe. This story stands as one of the most dramatic, complex, and instructive in mountaineering history. *K2: The 1939 Tragedy* attempts to balance the accounts of this fifty-year-old saga.



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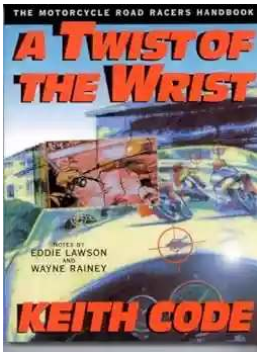
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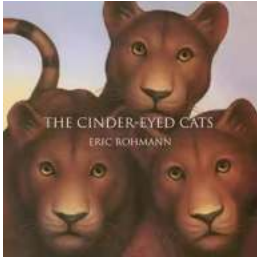
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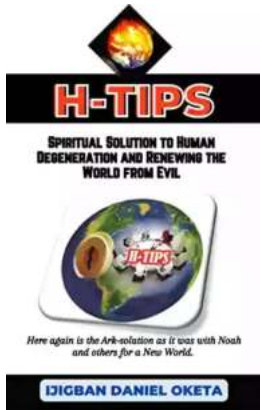
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