This month’s essay deals with the life of Walter Bonatti, one of the greatest Italian mountain climbers, and certainly one of the greatest mountain climbers of all time worldwide. He became a hero to Italians, many of whom had not even been born before his retirement from climbing at the age of thirty-five. He was famous for his climbing panache; he pioneered little-known and technically difficult climbs in the Alps, Himalayas and Patagonia. His life of climbing was not without controversy, yet he overcame the negativity of that controversy ultimately to win the support and loyalty of his fellow countrymen. Following his retirement from climbing in 1965, he began new careers as a photojournalist and as an author.

Walter Bonatti was born on June 22, 1930 in Bergamo, Lombardy. His father was a fabric merchant and he moved his family to Monza, a town near Bergamo on a tributary of the Po River, when Walter was a young boy. Walter began participating in gymnastics with a sports association in Monza, and became an accomplished gymnast. The physical strength and balance that he developed during his work as a gymnast would prove to be critical skills for him when he became a climber.

He spent much of the period of World War II out of harm’s way on his uncle’s farm, yet even from some miles away it was impossible to escape the din of the attritional Battle of the Po River in the spring of 1945. Soon after the battle, he walked to the battlefield and saw the destruction of human life and burned-out vehicles that lay along the banks of the river. It was then that he said he decided the river offered no escape from the carnage, and seeing the mountains that stood above the river, he felt that they would offer escape because of their majesty and grandeur and he decided to make climbing mountains one of the ambitions of his life.

At the end of his secondary school years, he took his final exams but did not pass. However, he needed to get a job since World War II had just ended and it was very hard to find steady work. He began to have hopeless feelings about his life as a diploma-less worker, so he decided to continue his education in order to finish secondary school. During the days he worked at various manual jobs, while in the evenings he attended night school. At this time, he spent weekends in the mountains where he felt freedom and accomplishment, and found it hard to return to work and school during the rest of the week. Finally, he took his final tests again and received a diploma, and found work as an accountant. However, he soon realized that mathematical/business problems were not for him and that his life was connected to the mountains. Required military service intervened and changed his whole attitude about himself and what he wanted to do with his life. For his 15-month tour of duty in the army, Bonatti
fortuitously was assigned to the Alpine regiment and for four days each week, he trained men to climb. That left the other three days for him to head off into the mountains for his own climbing.

In the summer of 1948, prior to his stint in the army, the 18-year-old Bonatti had begun climbing in an intensive way. One of his first climbs had been the north face of the Grandes Jurasses, a mountain in the Mont Blanc massif, on the boundary between Haute-Savoie in France and Aosta Valley in Italy; it was only the fourth ascent of that mountain up to then. He also had begun climbing that summer in the province of Lecco, Lombardy, primarily on the Grigna, a rocky mountain with two peaks located in the Bergamo Alps. Two years later, he made the first solo ascent of the Grand Capucin, a red granite pinnacle in the Mont Blanc massif. In less than two years since he started climbing, Bonatti had gone from a complete unknown to one of the most celebrated climbers in Italy.

Following his military service in 1954, he became a mountain guide in Courmayeur, an Alpine resort in northwest Italy, at the foot of Mont Blanc, where he continued his mountain exploits. Bonatti had limited financial means and these first climbs were done with very basic equipment, including pitons that he manufactured himself.

In 1954, he became an obvious selection for the Italian assault on K2 in the Karakoram Range of the Himalayas, which is located on the Pakistan-China border. At 28,251 feet, it is the world’s second highest mountain after Mount Everest (at 29,032 feet). Experts say that while K2 is lower than Everest, it is steeper and more dangerous, with more intense, inclement weather. Thus, it is a more difficult mountain to climb than Everest. At age 24, Bonatti was the youngest participant in this expedition, organized by Ardito Desio; it was the first team in history to climb the mountain.

**K2 Controversy**

Desio chose his protégé Achille Compagnoni and Lino Lacedelli to be the climbers to reach the summit of K2. Desio chose Compagnoni because of his leadership qualities and hardiness; Desio considered him a man of iron will. They reached the summit on July 31, 1954. The phenomenal feat helped restore Italian morale after defeat in World War II, but it sparked allegations of sabotage as another pair of climbers, Bonatti and the expedition’s Pakistani mountain guide, Amir Mahdi, dueled to reach the summit. Bonatti was the youngest and in the best physical condition of the climbing expedition. He probably could have reached the summit without
supplemental oxygen. However, he and Mahdi were given the task of carrying oxygen tanks up to Lacedelli and Compagnoni at the last camp, Camp IX, for a final summit attempt. Unbeknownst to Bonatti and Mahdi, however, Compagnoni had decided to move Camp IX to a higher location than previously assigned. Bonatti and Mahdi eventually reached a point close to the new Camp IX at 26,575 feet, but by this time night had fallen and Mahdi’s physical condition began to deteriorate rapidly. Bonatti knew that he and Mahdi needed the shelter of a tent to survive a night at this altitude without risk of frostbite or worse. However, the newly placed Camp IX tent lay on the other side of a dangerous traverse across icy slopes. Bonatti saw that Mahdi was in no condition to climb further or make a return to Camp VIII, and they were reluctantly forced to endure a night out in the elements at −58°F without a tent or a sleeping bag. The two men had to spend the night digging out their snow hole that they used for some (inadequate) shelter. By morning, Mahdi had lost fingers and toes because of frostbite, while Bonatti was lucky to have survived the terrible night unharmed. Compagnoni later gave the explanation that his decision to change the originally agreed site of the camp was to avoid an overhanging ice ridge, but Bonatti accused both climbers (and the facts would later give him reason for the accusation) to have deliberately changed the location either to kill Mahdi and him or to exclude the possibility that they could join in the final summit ascent. As Bonatti described it: “It may sound far-fetched, but they were terrified we were in such good shape that we would be able to accompany them to the summit without using oxygen.” This would have detracted, of course, from their oxygen-assisted summit conquest since making the ascent without oxygen would be considered a greater feat.

Compagnoni also claimed that Bonatti had used part of the oxygen supply that he delivered that was intended for Lacedelli and him to make the final assault on the peak, causing them to run out of oxygen at the crucial moment of nearing the summit. Bonatti disputed this claim, and the photographs, discovered decades later, of the victorious pair embracing at the summit cast doubt on their claims that Bonatti had given them partially-used tanks to exhaust their oxygen supply. They still had the heavy oxygen tanks strapped to their backs, as opposed to easing their load by discarding them if they were no longer useful. Compagnoni lost some fingers to frostbite, but the summiteers were national heroes. The Italian Alpine Club, the official organization for all things mountain-climbing in Italy, lauded their accomplishment and downplayed Bonatti’s arguments.

The disputes dragged on as Compagnoni and Desio traded attacks with Bonatti for decades. Bonatti was finally vindicated in 2004, when Lacedelli broke his silence. In K2: The Price of Conquest, a book he wrote with Giovanni Cenacchi, Lacedelli essentially supported Bonatti’s version of events. He attributed the lack of oxygen in the tanks not to Bonatti’s alleged use of the oxygen, but to the physical exertion of the final ascent, causing the two climbers to use more oxygen than expected. The Italian Alpine Club soon followed suit, and in 2007 published K2: Una Storia Finite (K2: A Finished Story), a revised official account of the climb that accepted Bonatti’s version of events as completely accurate, and thus vindicated him from any wrong-doing.
Understandably, Bonatti came back from the Himalayas feeling somewhat bruised. He became an outcast of the mountain climbing community, who accepted the attacks of Compagnoni and Desio because of their prestigious reputations. In 1955, he tried to organize a solo ascent of K2 without oxygen to put the record straight and win back popular support, but he could not get the backing, so he retreated back to Courmayeur to continue his work as a mountain guide.

Some Later Climbs

One of Bonatti’s most amazing climbs during his career was the ascent over the southwest pillar of Petit Dru located in the Mont Blanc massif of the French Alps in 1955. He had made many attempts to climb it, but he could never conquer the mountain. The problem was the steep, narrow gorge between Petit Dru and the neighboring Flammes de Pierre (Flames of Rock)—the ridge of pinnacles that radiate from Petit Dru. Bonatti said this was for him the hardest gorge to navigate. He had to climb through the gorge in order to start the ascent of the southwest pillar of Petit Dru. He approached the pillar from the end of the gorge and rappelled down the steep rock face, finally making a successful solo ascent of the mountain. It took him five days to complete the climb along this difficult route.

Since Bonatti was living and guiding climbers in Courmayeur, the Mont Blanc mountain group offered a close and challenging climbing venue for him. He made many climbs on the faces and pillars of Mont Blanc and its neighboring mountains. Some of his more important climbs included opening a new route over the Pillar D’Angle on the east face of Mont Blanc called Brenva’s Face. He also made many climbs of other important routes on Mont Blanc’s face, such as Brenva Spur, Route Major, Piore. He also climbed the main ridges, including Brouillard Ridge, Innominata Ridge, and Peuterey Ridge, and developed a new route over the Red Pillar of Brouillard.

At 26,001 feet, Gasherbrum IV is the 17th highest mountain in the world and the 6th highest in Pakistan. Its name means “beautiful mountain” and comes from **rgasha** (beautiful) and **brum** (mountain) in Balti, a Tibetic language spoken by the Balti people living in Pakistan. On August 6, 1958 Bonatti and his partner, Carlo Mauri, on an Italian expedition led by Riccardo Cassin, became the first climbers to reach the summit of the mountain. They went via the Northeast Ridge and the North Summit, requiring them to cross the pinnacled ridge to the main summit. This was considered the crux and the most difficult part of the climb.

In May 1961, Bonatti and Andrea Oggioni climbed Nevado Ninashanca (18,396 feet) and achieved the first ascent of Rondoy Norte (18,993 feet), a remote peak of the Cordillera Huayhuash, both peaks in the Peruvian Andes. They climbed the latter peak by using the west face, a very treacherous and difficult climb that has had few ascents since they accomplished it.

In February 1965, a century after the first ascent on the Matterhorn, Bonatti tried with two companions to climb a new, direct route on the north face of the Matterhorn, but the team was turned back by an intense storm. Retreating to the valley below the mountain, Bonatti considered
his options. Since his two companions had to leave, he decided on February 18, 1965 to make a second effort to reach the summit alone. It took him five days of strenuous climbing, but he finally reached the summit. He became the first person to make a solo climb in winter via a direct route over the difficult north face of the Matterhorn.

There were many other climbs Bonatti made but to discuss all of them would be beyond the scope of this essay. Shortly after his climb of the Matterhorn, Bonatti announced his retirement from professional climbing at the age of 35 and after only seventeen years of climbing activity. He did so as one of the greatest climbers in history.

### A Second Career

Retiring from climbing at a fairly young age, Bonatti had to find something else to engage his energies and interests. He spent the next 20 years working as a photojournalist for the Italian weekly magazine, *Epoca* (Era). His articles followed his interests in traveling off the beaten track exploring unusual places all over the world, often accompanying exploring expedition groups. Following are some of his most notable trips he chronicled in *Epoca (adapted from a list in Wikipedia.com)*:

1965: Alaska to explore the Pribilof Islands;

1966: Uganda and Tanzania to ascend the Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and the Ruwenzori, and track the 1906 itinerary made by Prince Luigi Amedeo, Duke of the Abruzzi. He crossed a wild jungle of 1200 km (746 miles) solo;
1967 and 1973: South America to explore the Orinoco and the Amazon Rivers;
1968: Island of Sumatra to study the behavior of the tiger and establish contact with the Sakai, a population of aboriginal people originally from Malaysian jungles;
1969: Australia to explore the Center of Australia and Lake Eyre;
1969: Marquesas Islands to replicate the jungle trip made by Herman Melville. He found the same locations described by Melville and proved that the original story was true;
1971: Cape Horn;
1971: Argentina to climb Aconcagua;
1972: Zaire and Congo to climb the Nyiragongo Volcano;
1974: New Guinea to establish contact with some local tribes;
1976: Antarctica to explore the McMurdo Dry Valleys with a team of scientists;
1978: South America to locate the sources of the Amazon River;
1985–1986: Chile to explore the Southern Patagonian Ice Field.

As you can see by this listing, he continued his personal drive to attempt new and difficult explorations.

In addition to his magazine articles, from 1961 through 2010 Bonatti also authored fourteen books on the subject of mountain climbing. Most of these were translated into several languages. His most famous was published in 1998, The Mountains of My Life, an autobiography dealing with some of his most prestigious climbs.

**Honors and Awards**

*Cavaliere di gran Croce dell’Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana* (Knight Grand Cross of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic), awarded in Rome on December 2, 2004. (Bonatti later refused the honor since it was jointly awarded to Compagnoni. His dislike of his fellow-climber on K2 still upset him 50 years later).

*Commandeur de l’Ordre National de la Légion d’Honneur* (Commander of the National Order of the Legion of Honor) awarded in Paris June, 2002 for saving the lives of two French fellow-climbers in a disaster in the Alps.

*Piolet d’Or* (Golden Ice Axe) *Lifetime Achievement Award*, the first time the award was made, awarded in 2009. (After Bonatti’s death in 2011, the Piolet d’Or prize for lifetime achievement was renamed *Piolet d’Or for Lifetime Achievement, Walter Bonatti Prize*.)
Death

Walter Bonatti died alone of cancer in Rome’s Gemelli Hospital on September 13, 2011 at the age of 81. He was survived by his partner whom he had met in 1980, Rossana Podesta, an actress who had played the title role in the 1956 action-drama Helen of Troy. The hospital management did not allow Ms. Podesta to spend his final hours with him because the two were not married. His funeral took place on September 18, 2011 in Lecco, a city in Lombardy about 30 miles north of Milan and at the foot of the Bergamo Alps. He was cremated and his ashes interred in the Porto Venere Community Cemetery in the Province of La Spezia of the Liguria Region.

Legacy

Walter Bonatti believed in the purity of mountain-climbing—to accomplish the most difficult climbs with minimal equipment. He did not believe in drilling holes for expansion bolts. He was way ahead of his time insisting on climbing without supplementary oxygen at high altitudes, and he pioneered new routes climbing solo. That is what was so outstanding about him, that he accomplished cutting-edge climbs with far less. He pioneered Alpinism in the Alps and elsewhere, the pure experience of Alpinism.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

Crace, John. “Rocky Life of a Mountain Man.” The Guardian.com website, June 30, 2010;
FamPeople.com website;
Findagrave.com website;
SummitPost.org website;
Wikipedia.com website

Photos are CC, Public domain
Giorgio Lotti (Mondadori Publishers), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
L. Besson, Assent Route, CC BY-SA 2.0 FR, via Wikimedia Commons
Alex Saunier, The Matterhorn, CC BY-SA 2.0 FR, via Wikimedia Commons

Special thanks to Andreas Utendörfer, Bavarian Alpinist.