



AAC Publications

The Obvious Line: Uli Biaho

Trango Towers Group, Baltoro Muztagh, Pakistan

THE WOUNDED, BUT surviving, tiny taxi entered the Koritko driveway in Rawalpindi close to midnight. Kim Schmitz, a tall, lean mountain guide from Lake Tahoe and I had hardly extricated ourselves before Andy, our host, slammed a cold Heineken into our hands and welcomed us to Pakistan. Hugs and kisses from Kathy, his wife, and their kids, confirmed the invitation. As we had planned months before, our teammates, Bill Forrest, owner of Forrest Mountaineering in Denver, and Ron Kauk, one of America's top rock climbers, had already arrived.

Our enjoyment was only temporary. For the next seven days, we turned Rawalpindi inside out to accomplish the numerous tasks each expedition must do before departing for its objective. Our Western impatience seemed a punishment as each of our assigned tasks took hours or days longer than necessary.

Six of us boarded the crowded, camouflaged C-130 army transport prop-jet at the Islamabad airport just as the sun, a shimmering orange orb, slowly ascended, heating the already oily, early morning air. In addition to the four climbers, Kerry Koritko, Andy's fifteen year old son and Captain Jubran Afzal, our proud, but competent liaison officer, would accompany the expedition to Base Camp.

Skardu, breezy with clear skies, has changed little over the centuries. The single jeep track and copper telegraph line are the only indicators of subtle modernization. Along with three other expeditions, our team jeeped through downtown Skardu, a four-minute ride, and up the narrow, rocky road to our hotel. Within hours, porters had been hired, equipment and food packed into 55-pound porter loads, porter food purchased and the District Commissioner visited. A day and a half later our jeep skidded to a halt at Bongla, a desolate, dusty roadhead where the roaring Braldu enters the upper reaches of the Shigar River.

The twenty-five porters hired in Skardu were waiting patiently for our arrival. Captain Jubran efficiently assigned loads, added five additional porters and we were on our way to Dasso, four miles up the gorge. For the next seven days, we sweated along dusty trails, camped among Balti homes, and lived a nomadic life of movement.

We reached Trango Base Camp on the seventh day. Never had I seen the air so clear in the Karakoram. Even Gasherbrum IV, towering above Concordia twenty-five miles east, drew our attention whenever the Trangos, directly above us, became too awesome to view.

Filtered yellow light inched its way over the Great Trango Tower as I awoke, dressed and began the cooking chores. Slowly, the inviting hum of the stove brought the others from their bags into the cool of morning. Stripped to shorts and tennis shoes, five of us sought the easiest path through the glacial debris to Uli Biaho's base to pick the perfect line on the unclimbed peak. It was easy.

A 2500-foot narrow glacial gully ended in a steep, open cirque below the pyramidal east face—a moderate, but dangerous approach. From left center, at the lowest point of the face, rose a continuous crack system slightly leaning right, eventually breaking the summit ice mushrooms 3500 feet above. Here was the "Obvious Line".

By seven A.M. the next morning, Ron and I were breaching the lower gully, still shadowed low, but spewing rock from sun-warmed ice far above. Our foray ended early.

"That was a damn big rock, John!" Ron said.

I watched it bounce, shattering ice on its quick descent to the bottom. "Oh, it's only a loner," I replied uneasily.

A low pitched whine, broken by an occasional crunch of ice belied my previous observation and we retreated without haste.

Kim, Bill and I carried heavy loads to the base of the wall the next morning, Ron having second thoughts about entering the "war zone" of the gully again. Dirty glacial séracs on the right side provided enough protection for a safe ascent early in the morning. I led the occasional difficult pitch, several offering short sections of 70°. Anxious to start the route, Kim and I waded through deep, wet snow surrounding the base of the wall and led the first two pitches of the route. The taste was honey. Deep cracks, bulging holds, small stances periodically spaced for belays, even occasional icicles to wet our throats. We descended late in the afternoon when rockfall was minimal.

Another carry halfway up the gully the next morning brought us within one day of beginning the actual ascent of the wall. My back had been wrenched severely the day before and, fearing total immobilization, I stayed below. The others returned to the cache at the gully's base as rain fell. Billowing black clouds were obviously a prelude to several days of bad weather, so Kim, Bill and Ron scurried for Base two hours away, leaving me at the cache with food, bivy sac and stove to recuperate from my back injury.

Three days later we were together again and a team of four once more. Ron had come to grips with his deep feelings of doubt about the route and my back was again mobile. We began the ascent of the gully early and were at the base of the wall by mid-afternoon. Exhausted and worried about avalanche danger, we put off retrieving the loads left halfway up the gully several days before until the next morning.

With all the loads retrieved, Ron and I jumared the two fixed pitches and began nailing new ground early the following morning. Two more long pitches of perfect cracks went smoothly before we descended to help Kim and Bill haul the 300 pounds of gear. Hauling was the crux of the climb. Days later we would still be breaking blood vessels and pulling muscles to body-haul the three 100-pound loads even though the vertical, smooth walls made hauling technically easy. Countless curses and wishes floated up the face as the haulers envied the leaders progressing easily up the faultless crack system.

We gained ground sloth-like, but never faltering in our determination. Our two teams worked independently of each other, acting on their own intuition as to bivouac sites and belays.

The two teams, Kim and Bill, and Ron and I, alternated between leading and hauling. While the lead team would continue in the afternoon, the haul team would pick a reasonable bivy spot and arrange for cooking and sleeping. Ledges were small, boot-size and awkward, reserved for cooking chores and to relieve ourselves. Sleeping room was out of the question. Only three bivy ledges on the entire wall were suitable for one or two people to sleep on.

The semi-loose, blocky nature of the lower pitches changed dramatically as we entered a sweeping corner on the third day. Vertical inch-cracks broke a wide expanse of granite above our bivouac perched beneath the corner. Nailing was a pleasure unhindered by roofs and blank walls. The blitzkrieg of loose rock and ice pitched off by the leaders, ropes, haulbags and natural causes had us ducking for over-head protection, but it only added to the atmosphere of total commitment.

Steeply coned and fluted "Bat Ledge", a snowy set of bat wings seen from the valley floor, provided a protected bivy for two nights. While Bill recuperated from loss of electrolytes and dehydration, Kim, Ron and I broke free from cumbersome haul bags to fix three pitches above.

Although snow had fallen three nights in a row, the days dawned cloudless. Masherbrum, lost behind a vertical pillar to the south, broke free, exposed for the first time as we climbed higher. Ron finished the third and last pitch messing with an angry off-width corner which slowed him to a crawl. We rappelled to Bill, sleeping below on "Bat Ledge", as the sun set on the Trangos.

Sunshine and warmth splashed the mornings as we leaned out over our hammocks to greet the day. Ridiculous dreams of a life we were no longer a part of made way for thirst, sore muscles, bloody hands and hunger. Bill had miraculously recovered although I had been convinced we would have to lower a dead man that morning. Eagerly, we left our ledge for an undetermined home above. While Bill jūmared and rested, Kim, Ron and I hauled and started leading above our high point of the day before. Kim's lead over small, rounded overhangs ended on a 30-foot long, one-and-a-half-foot-wide, down-sloping ledge. Ron and I finished two groove-and-corner pitches above while Kim and Bill pounded out four holes for hammock bolts on the blank wall.

Thunderheads marauded about the Trangos and Baltoro as we set our hammocks, cooked, and worried about the weather to come. A bolt of lightning introduced a nightmare of thunder and storm followed by the soft patter of wet snow on our bags.

As if the storm would go away by our hiding, we draw-stringed our bags shut and lay motionless throughout the night. No one dared attempt to find his hammock fly for fear of getting wetter and colder by movement. Bladders were forced to painful proportions until a semi-dawn appeared and confidence in movement returned with the light. As the light penetrated the thick, boiling clouds, radiant heat began melting the plastered snow and ice from the walls, bombarding our already iced-up bags.

Potholes of sunlight broke through the mass of clouds, warming us, drying our bags and clothing. The world was tormenting itself in storm, yet we seemed detached from the violence as if behind a glass bubble. Towards afternoon the storm rejuvenated and continued its efforts to discourage us thoroughly. Now, with hammock flies in place, we were secure and slept peacefully, but for the occasional crack of thunder.

The storm was gone the next morning. Masherbrum glowed a fiery orange and sparkled in the sun. Warmth returned each minute, awakening our determination which had hibernated with immobility. Although we were floating in our hammocks and were soaked to the skin, thirst was foremost in our minds.

Breakfast was simple and short. Kim and Bill disappeared above, leaving Ron and me to pack and haul. We quickly overtook them in an effort to stay warm, but found ourselves hanging in slings, freezing for the next several hours.

"John!" Kim yelled, "we haven't found a place to bivy!"

"Leave your ropes fixed and we'll return to the last ledge one pitch below!" I yelled in reply.

Quickly, Ron and I lowered the haul bags a pitch to the last small ledge and began setting up a place to cook and hang hammocks. Kim and Bill retreated to our claustrophobic home as dark overtook us. Late into the night I melted ice and fed our hungry crew.

How incredible our world looked from the "tenement house," our four-story hammock home on Uli Biaho. Some lukewarm chocolate washed down the dry granola before Ron and I departed for the top

of the fixed lines stopping at times to help haul the bags to keep Kim and Bill close behind. Kim had started a nasty, overhanging corner pitch the previous night and it was left to me to finish the hoarfrosted fiend off. An airy belay situated over 2500 feet of space was a prelude to thin nailing above. I continued Kim's scheme of alternating rock pins with tied-off ice screws, but thin placements they were. To avoid thinning ice and thinner cracks, I risked possible rope drag and nailed up and left which left me precariously perched on an icy ledge without suitable anchors. The scene was desperate. My rope drag was pulling me off, pin selection was nil and I couldn't find a crack for anchors. With apprehension, I bludgeoned the tips of two angles into a blade crack and yelled to those below, "Come on up!"

Ron appeared as if from a well as a snowstorm hit full force, limiting our sight and sound from those below. We welded several more anchors into the rock before calling for Kim. Hauling became a tug-of-war. The three of us worked for hours to raise the bags while Bill waited below, freezing with inactivity. Toward dark we were together once more racing with the night to accomplish the tasks of making dinner, melting water and hanging hammocks. The summit looked deceptively close. We decided to go for the top the following day, leaving the haul bags and bivouac gear below.

I placed myself in an awkward peg-leg stance early the next morning to begin the cooking chores. The sub-freezing cold knotted my fingers as I worked relentlessly to unclog the MSR stove of carbon. Once freed and fired, the stove reciprocated by warming my frozen hands and feet, while melting ice to wet our ever present thirst. The seemingly lifeless bodies above and to the side began to move, showing an occasional glaring, sore eyeball peering from the cavernous opening of a tightly shut sleeping bag.

Although our muscles were sore and our hands were swollen, we gripped our jümars with the strength of fear as we ascended the three fixed lines Ron and I had led the previous afternoon. We were all perched on a snowy pedestal as I led off, chimneying over and through a plug of wind-packed snow to a thin 100-foot traverse across an ice-choked, foot-wide ledge. Cramponless, I climbed between the overhanging wall and large ice and rock horns perched to my fall side. Jamming and chimneying between a gigantic icicle and rock horn, I overcame the last desperate obstacle to a small stance below a seemingly perfect and dry crack system.

Kim took the lead, nailing and free climbing easily to a good ledge. As Bill and Ron caught up, I aided over a rounded roof and up one-inch cracks to another wide, semi-flat ledge. The route above leaned toward the valley floor.

"Go ahead, Ron," I coaxed. "That corner was made for you."

Laden with iron, Ron inched up the overhanging corner in a crack that wasn't made for anyone under ten feet tall. Ugly mixtures of stacked bongs held just long enough to move up, then collapsed. The vile eight-inch crack took hours of time, and years off Ron's life. Minutes later it was forgotten for the seven-inchers above. Kim and I each led another long pitch occasionally stacking bongs and placing them lengthwise. I finished hanging from poor anchors after using up my rack on the pitch below and freeing a crackless three-foot-wide, iced chimney.

It was now six o'clock. Our view above was blocked by a car-sized cork of ice choking the steep-walled gully we were now in. A bivouac was imminent if we were to continue. Ron's idea of the outcome was obvious.

"What's it like to have frostbite, John?" Ron asked casually. "This climb means a lot to me, but could I still climb 5.12 without toes?"

"Relax, Ron," I replied. "We can fix the three hardest pitches and relead the others when we come back up tomorrow."

When Kim arrived the decision was unanimous. We would return the next morning. A bivouac in sweat-soaked clothes this high and in subfreezing temperatures was too risky.

We retreated to camp and arrived in the dark. At mid-night I crawled into my bag and hammock after spending hours rehydrating the team and melting water for our bottles. No one seemed hungry.

Four hours of semi-rest was all we could afford. We repeated four of the pitches of the previous day, jumaring three others fixed with rope. Our high point was reached around noon. Ron was ready to belay when I reached the top of the last fixed line. What we could see didn't look good.

Overcoming the cork of ice immediately above our belay was primary. Aiding a thin crack for ten feet got me to a snow shelf which held my weight only long enough for me to gain small holds alongside the block of ice. Burrowing like a badger, I surfaced near the lip of ice after using the melt space between the rock and ice. Fearing the whole block would break loose and take Ron with it, I quickly moved to its back side, mantled an overhanging chockstone and reached reliable ground. Without crampons, I moved up the ice-encrusted, rocky gully to a perfect alcove and belay.

Ron appeared quickly with my crampons and several ice screws. We had agreed in camp below that I would lead any ice pitches above to save time and weight of excess ice climbing gear. I gingerly moved away from the belay, hoping the 80° sugar ice I was on would hold. It did. We were on the blocky, ice-encrusted ridge below the summit making it awkward and difficult to move quickly. Rounding a rib of rock, then dropping into a gully, I was confronted by a mushroom of ice the size of a large house overhanging my exposed position. Suddenly the climb didn't seem worth the risk. Not wishing to annoy this monster rising above me, I tugged noiselessly on the rope for Ron to follow. He was at my side within minutes, obviously distressed with the situation above.

Taking the ice screws and a small rack, I chimneyed between two icicles before mantling onto sun-decayed ice below the monstrous block. Forty feet above Ron, I knocked loose a 30-pound chunk of ice which homed in on him, bruising his shoulder severely. Ron was hurt and scared. He yelled and threatened to go no further, but later deemed it safer to go on.

The only feasible route looked the worst. Dead center beneath the gigantic, narrow-footed ice mushroom was a twelve-foot-high keyhole that opened to the other side. I led through this then up and left onto a steep, glassy slope of ice. I was already seventy feet out and needed to reach a corniced crest directly above. Alternating ice hammers and crampons, I moved across the water-ice slope, stopping once to place one of my two ice screws. I topped the rotten-iced ridge as the rope ran out.

Only Ron had to jumarm through the keyhole then up the steep ice unclipping the one screw. Kim and Bill followed on the haul line I had pulled through and dropped straight to them. When Ron arrived, I stomped up an easy snow gully another pitch, while Kim and Bill surmounted the ice below. One more steep snow pitch brought me to the summit snowfield where I belayed Ron. It was four o'clock.

Exhausted, dehydrated and gaunt, we assembled on the summit to snap a few pictures, revel in the sun's afternoon warmth and enjoy a few minutes of the horizontal. Bill hugged us and cried, reflecting the emotions we had carried with us for the past nine days on the wall.

The hardest moment for us all was to turn our backs on the sun and enter the cold, hostile world below. Fifteen rappels took us back to our high camp just as vision became impossible. I melted ice until late into the night before calling it a day.

For the next two-and-a-half days we descended, camping one night each at "Four-bolt Ledge" and "Bat Ledge" before reaching the foot of the wall. Although exhausted, we set each of the 34 rappels with patience and concentration. The climb wasn't a success until we all reached the bottom safely.

Several hours after the last rappel off the wall, we were down the ice gully heading back to Base and home.

Summary of Statistics:

Area: Karakoram, Pakistan.

First Ascent: Uli Biaho Tower, 19,957 feet, via the East Face. 34 pitches climbed alpine style, June 24 to July 5, 1979. 10 nights spent in hammocks for two or more of the team.

Grade: VII, F8, A4 (First Grade VII completed by Americans).

Personnel: John Roskelley, leader; Ron Kauk, Bill Forrest, Kim Schmitz.

Images

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