



AAC Publications

Palcaraju Oeste, south face, new route and tragedy

Peru, Cordillera Blanca

In June 2012, Asa Firestone and Gil Weiss traveled to the Cordillera Blanca. During a day trip to scope out conditions on the south face of Ranrapalca, they were enamored by the brilliant flutings on the west face of a sub-peak, Palcaraju Oeste (6,110m), above Laguna Palcacocca. After a warm-up climb on nearby Huamashraju, they returned to attempt a new line on the massive 800m south face of Palcaraju Oeste. During their attempt, they awoke to find a foot of new snow and high winds. An epic post-holing session brought them back to their high point to retrieve gear and bail.

Firestone returned to the States in early July, and Weiss met up with another close friend, talented alpinist and endurance athlete Ben Horne. After a couple of acclimatization peaks, Weiss and Horne made their way back to Palcaraju Oeste for another attempt on the big south face—this time with success. However, tragedy struck when a cornice collapsed on the west ridge descent and Weiss and Horne fell nearly 1,000'. (Editor's note: The route line drawn was suggested by Asa Firestone based on his first attempt with Weiss. The only other reported route on the south face of Palcaraju Oeste is Tempete de Joie (600m, 12 pitches, TD/TD+ 60-75° ice and mixed; Brehedon-Peyronnard, 1999), which is believed to climb farther right on the face and did not reach the summit [AAJ 2001]).

A memorial service for Ben Horne was held in both Virginia and San Diego, and for Gil Weiss in Boulder, Colorado. They left behind hundreds of close friends and a legacy of living life under the philosophy of glorious failure over mediocre success [see In Memoriam].

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THE ACCIDENT:

Overdue on their climb, Firestone contacted Eric Tomczak and Gary Sorenson in Huaraz to discuss arrangement of a search team. Ted Alexander, owner and operator of Skyline Adventure Guides, was tapped to organize the search team. The team consisted of local guides Hector Reyes and Henry Moya, and American climber Eric Tomczak. They reached Weiss and Horne's vacant tent on July 26. For the next several days the team searched the glacier below the climbers' proposed route as well as their decent route, the west ridge connecting Palcaraju with Ishinca. Tracks were seen descending the ridge and disappearing halfway down.

The morning of July 29, Reyes and Moya began climbing the ridge toward the tracks, and Tomczak began searching below the steep south face of the west ridge. A search plane that had been organized by Ted Alexander and the families of the missing climbers flew overhead, but spotted no further details. Tomczak then located Gil and Ben's bodies at the base of the ridge at 11:30 a.m., at which point Alexander was contacted by satellite phone. It appeared to the recovery team that the climbers were descending an unstable section of the ridge when a serac collapsed under the leader. It's presumed that the follower was unable to arrest the fall, and they tumbled over the edge, coming to rest on the glacier below.

In parallel with the valiant efforts of the ground-based SAR Team, an unprecedented rescue effort was being conducted on the Internet. Close friends of Weiss and Horne and part of the Pullharder Alpine Club—Shay Har Noy, Albert Lin, and Nate Ricklin—utilized the crowdsourcing technology of their company, Tomnod, to help with locating the missing climbers. They presented detailed views of recent satellite images of the mountain to thousands of people who combed through these images looking for clues. The climbers' tracks were found leading off the summit of Palcaraju Oeste and

down the west ridge. Although the climbers were not found using this technology, the efforts by Tomnod helped thousands participate in the SAR efforts, centralized a single online location for donations and collaboration to take place, as well as provided key information for the SAR Team on the ground.

Images

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