



AAC Publications

Purgation

Exploration and Intrigue in Nepal

Two thousand feet above the glacier, and moments before the screaming started, I felt the ice give way under my foot. I saw, as if from a distance, that my leg was swinging backward into space the way climbers' feet do in videos, with ropes clipped through draws connected to bolts. But my ropes were not clipped to anything for at least 20 feet, and below that not much more.

I remember the feeling of that foot cutting, and a sound like a war coming out of me. I remember stemming wider, my frontpoints searching desperately as the frozen rot fell away. I remember the weight of my body on my arms, the feel of the snow separating as my pick raked through what was not ice. I remember the moment of deciding that although I did not trust that anything would hold, I would have to trust, and that although I did not believe in any real way that I would get through, I would get through. I remember the feeling of pulling over, and of another scream, different this time. I remember thinking that I should place a screw, not because I was going to fall, but because I could. I remember keeping Scott's ropes tight as he climbed with both of our packs. And then when he reached the belay, and I saw my face reflected in his, I remember the feeling of snapping in two.

I had never cried on a mountain until that day. If, like all things, we are defined by our boundaries, there must be something universal about the desire to find them. And yet I suspect there may be something wrong with those of us who have to know exactly where they are. The story I came to tell was that by the time I realized I was committed I couldn't back off, but the truth is I had no intention of backing off. As the tears melted the spindrift on my wind-reddened cheeks, I knew that I had done a terrible thing, and yet I knew as well that I wouldn't regret it. I cried because I had found what I was looking for.

I had only met Scott Adamson once before last spring on Alaska's Buckskin Glacier. Friends in Talkeetna had said someone might be out there, and that the guy was alone and he might be crazy. As it turned out, Scott was not alone, and as far as I could tell he was not mad. Once my partner, Geoff Unger, had to pull out of our planned new route, after one attempt, thanks to an injured elbow, Scott and I got to know each other in a hurry as we clawed our way up the east face of the Mooses Tooth. [See report [here](#).]

Though we knew we had shared something special, we parted ways with no plans to climb together again. With the support of a McNeill-Nott Award and a Mazamas Alpine Adventure Grant, I planned to return to Nepal that fall with Geoff. He and I had been partners for years, and in the fall of 2012 we'd made an attempt on a 6,589-meter peak in the Lunag Massif, a group of mostly untouched peaks northwest of the Khumbu. Unfortunately, in June, the same injury that had brought Scott and I together on the Mooses Tooth found Geoff pulling out of the trip. I knew that Scott already had plans for Pakistan, but after the tragedy at Nanga Parbat I thought it was worth a shot. I called him and got about as far as "Do you wanna come..." before he said yes and let me tell him where we were going.

We were hoping to try a line on Ripimo Shar, but agreed to stay flexible. While the peak that Geoff and I had attempted was on my radar, it was far from our first choice. We hadn't intended to try it in

2012 either, but with the dry conditions that autumn it had been the best thing going. After our attempt, I learned that the mountain had supposedly been climbed in 2009 by a party led by Swiss guide Stéphane Schaffter, and had been named after the expedition's sponsor. Those familiar with the area had serious doubts that this ascent had actually happened, but no real proof to the contrary.

After not having seen each other since the Buckskin, Scott and I met in late September and spent a few days packing gear. We were both aware that, despite having done one of the biggest climbs of our lives together, we had very little idea of who the other was. All we really knew was that when it got heavy we could count on each other, and that we saw eye to eye when it came to important things like spooning, booze, and coffee. On our way to the airport, I made a phone call and found out we were on the same flight as my friend David Gottlieb, who had been a mentor before my first trip to Nepal. We realized our itineraries lined up perfectly, and we decided to share a base camp with David and his partner, Chad Kellogg.

From Kathmandu, Chad and David headed for the Rolwaling while Scott and I caught a flight to Lukla. Our plan was to acclimatize in the Khumbu and meet at base camp, but unusually lousy weather kept the passes snowy and everything cold and wet, including us. After an abbreviated acclimatization trek, on October 10, Scott and I set camp at 5,050 meters near the confluence of the Nangpa La and Lunag glaciers. We still weren't sure of our plans, but we thought we'd start with one of the peaks that originally had drawn me to this area. There are a lot of bigger lines than the southeast face of Lunag West (6,507 meters), but there aren't many more obvious or prettier lines, with a couloir that splits the face from glacier to summit ridge.

With the sun shining and conditions looking prime, we packed up and set out across the four-and-a-half-mile mess of moraine and glacier that David and Chad had dubbed the Hellplex. The way was stacked with loose boulders separated by man-eating gaps, an undulating mess of rocks and tarns strewn across a moonscape of blue ice. We stashed gear for an advanced base camp under a giant boulder and headed back. David and Chad had arrived, and we got our first forecast of the trip: "heavy snow." During the next 72 hours, our camp was blanketed with more than four and a half feet. Since we had cached our only shovel at ABC, we spent our days digging out our tents with plates. On October 20, after days of digging and watching avalanches rake the walls around us, and after climbing a nearby 5,777-meter acclimatization peak, Scott and I cursed our way back through the Hellplex.

The line on Lunag West is like a giant hourglass, with mostly moderate climbing and what looked like a few hard pitches in the middle. It's the peak's only obvious weakness, but has the downside of being a garbage chute, with everything that falls off the sunny upper walls funneling straight into the choke. As we stumbled through the dark on the morning of October 22, the question looming in both of our minds was whether we'd find those hard pitches in good enough shape to climb. As we sped up the lower apron and into the amphitheater that forms the base of the hourglass, we saw with a mix of relief and trepidation that the streaks were ice but they did not look friendly. We were entering a potential shooting gallery as soon as we committed to the sinister black curtain, but we felt willing to climb and hope.

Scott dispatched the 100-meter flow in one long pitch, bringing us onto a snowfield below a second narrows. Our stomachs were in knots thanks to the gut-rot that comes of ramen, nerves, Cipro, altitude, and the occasional volleys of rock cascading down the couloir. Climbing as fast as we could, we raced through a few pitches of ice and mixed and managed to get as far from the sunny walls above as possible. I took a rock in the boot, and Scott took one in the arm, but both of us were just glad that they weren't bigger.

That evening and all through the night, if either of us had any questions about our partnership, they were answered. Although both of us had led hard pitches in Alaska, I came into the trip knowing that Scott was a far better climber than I was. I had given him the first hard lead of the route, certain he

would be faster. Now, as I led toward a break in the flutings that guarded the summit ridge, stretching each pitch to make the most of the waning light and our meager rack, I was ready to hand over the lead again. But when Scott arrived at the belay, I could see that wasn't going to happen. I made sure he was clipped in properly, got out our headlamps, and took us to the ridge on one of those leads that are impossible to grade and embody the difference between the crag and mountains. We were met by a dim view into Tibet and a howling wind determined to blow us off the ridge or freeze us to it. Lurching toward the summit, we found a crevasse where we could get out of the wind and brew up.

All of a sudden it was my turn to need. As we sat on our packs, I shivered and struggled to eat and drink while Scott shouldered the work of melting snow and coaxing his partner back to life. We had no bivy gear, and we still needed to summit, reverse the ridge, and rappel through the night to avoid the morning's rockfall. By headlamp and moonlight, Scott led up to the top, which we reached at midnight, then led most of the rappels on the way down as I fought just to stay awake, clean the backups, lock my carabiners, and hold on. We stepped back onto the glacier just as the sun crept over the sleeping giants of Everest and Makalu, and staggered back to our boulder camp 26 hours after we'd left it.

After a week of rest back in base camp, we again crossed the Hellplex, amazed that time had only made the trail worse. We were headed for the same route that Geoff and I had attempted a year earlier, the northeast face of the 6,589-meter peak that Schaffter called Jobo LeCoultre. We had reached a bivy at 6,150 meters, just below a headwall, before freezing toes sent us down. Knowing that our first day would be our best, Scott and I planned to put in a big effort and try to get through the savage drips guarding the headwall and onto the upper mountain. If we could do that, we might be able to find a bivy at about 6,275 meters, leave the tent and sleeping bags on the ledge, summit, and make it back to the bivy again.

We left ABC on a cold Halloween morning, and despite howling winds the skies were clear and we felt good. We climbed over the 'schrund and through a few easy pitches, then battled snow until we could gain a rib below the upper face. In my orange belay jacket we joked that I had dressed as a pumpkin for the occasion. We took a break in the warm sun, and then I led straight up into the headwall.

Below the crux curtain, I placed two bad screws and downclimbed to the belay. The ice was completely rotten—it had only looked decent from below because the spindrift that had been pummeling us all day had also filled in the holes in the ice. I decided to hang my pack and try again. I headed back up and got sucked left toward a seam where I thought I might get gear and good hooks for my tools. It turned out I couldn't get either, and before long my leg was swinging, and then I was screaming, and pulling the lip, and building the belay, and keeping the ropes tight for Scott as he followed.

Scott took over and led up to a ledge where we hacked out a platform and set up the tent. In the morning I led one more hard pitch before the angle eased and took us into the snow flutings that converged on the summit. Scott took us up a runnel and then fought a section of steep, collapsing snow before he pulled onto the top. When I got there, I found him perched on a tiny rib with his pack hanging off one side as an anchor while he belayed me up the other. We had only shaken hands on top of the Mooses Tooth, but now we hugged and laughed as the wind stung our faces. After another night at the bivy, we descended the following day. We called our route Purgation, a purification or cleansing, which might have referred to my episode on the crux, but in fact meant something else entirely.

When I got back to Kathmandu, I confirmed that Peak 6,589m was at the center of an obscure controversy that began in 2008, when, after four years of effort to open the Lunag area to climbing, Stéphane Schaffter led a team to a virgin peak he called Jobo Rinjang. The plan was to "prepare" a new route on the mountain with fixed ropes in order to return the following year and shoot a film, in

which luminary Nepali and Balti guides Apa Sherpa and “Little” Abdul Karim, together with a team of Europeans, would make the peak’s first ascent. Schaffter had found a backer in the Swiss luxury watchmaker Jaeger-LeCoultre, which had put its considerable financial resources behind the project. Schaffter’s team reached a high point of 6,000 meters on the south face, leaving with 1,000 meters of rope in place and plans to return the next fall. One can imagine his chagrin when, in the spring of 2009, his peak was climbed, in alpine style, by Joe Puryear and David Gottlieb.

In need of a new objective, Schaffter and company returned in the autumn of 2009 to attempt the southwest pillar of neighboring Lunag I instead. After nine days of effort from eight climbers, the team abandoned the wall, citing danger from rockfall. They turned their attention to Peak 6,589m, planning to ascend the left-hand snowfield on the northeast face to a notch in the southeast ridge, and then follow that complex line of snow flutings and mushrooms to the top. From October 19 to 21, a six-man team fixed 900 meters of rope up the moderate terrain of the lower mountain. On October 22, the team later reported, four of the men summited the mountain. But almost nobody believes this happened.

As reported by Lindsay Griffin in the April 2011 issue of Britain’s Climb magazine, the principle point of suspicion has always been the team’s photographs. Despite having both a professional photographer, Guillaume Vallot, and a videographer, Xavier Carrard, the team only released two images of the supposed summit. Now that Scott and I have been there, we can say with utmost certainty that these photos were not taken from or near the real summit. Since the peaks in the background are easily identifiable, it’s clear that the camera is pointed southeast. In light of the claimed ascent from that direction, there should then be evidence of travel, but there is not. Knowing that the top of the mountain is a tiny point, it’s also clear that the photographer would have to be levitating, as the photos are taken from the same level or higher than the purported summit. They’re also pointed in a direction that avoids showing the upper mountain and the nearby peaks of the Lunag and Pangbuk glaciers, as those would provide reference to the actual location of the photographer. Carrard’s video also has extensive footage of the ascent to the notch, but shows the same images of the “summit” curated to avoid the surrounding terrain. [This video can be viewed below.] Furthermore, in photos used in an advertisement seen at a shop in Kathmandu, there appears to be a bivouac platform on the alleged summit. All of this has led to the conclusion that the photos were taken in the vicinity of the notch on the southeast ridge, the team’s likely high point. Wherever they were taken, it was not at the top.

The timeline of the ascent, as Schaffter reported it in AAJ 2010, is also implausible. It took a large team three days to cover relatively easy terrain and reach the ridge, while on the fourth day, Vallot supposedly joined them via the fixed ropes, climbed to the summit via extremely difficult and insecure terrain, and took a few uninspiring and uninformative photographs. The team then descended all the way to the glacier, stripping ropes as they went, before returning to base camp on October 23 and summiting Peak 5,777m on the 24th. Both the difficulties and distances involved make this scenario unlikely.

With all of this swirling in my head, I thought I ought to give Schaffter and his partners a chance to defend their claim before publishing news of our climbs. I wrote to the four “summit climbers,” as well as to Apa and Karim (who did not join the climb on Peak 6,589m). Somewhat to my surprise, I received e-mails from Jérôme Haeni and Schaffter himself, while the others never responded. Haeni’s email was brief yet cordial, congratulating us on our climb and telling me to talk to Schaffter, who sent me a lengthy e-mail that ignored my questions and instead assailed Gottlieb and Puryear for climbing Jobo Rinjang before him, and for not giving him credit for opening the area for foreign climbers. Though he did not return my next e-mail pressing the point, one thing is worth noting: **Neither he nor Haeni ever said they climbed it.** [The AAJ requested comments on this story from Stéphane Schaffter. He replied with a brief note in French, saying, in part, “It is evident that the words Chris Wright uses confirm his wish to smear [me]. Personally, I respect his ethical values without respecting his retributive way of selling his exploits. In my response [to him] on 16 November, I explained

that I really have no desire to participate or return to any controversy about this region, for which I have already committed enormous energy over several years.”] **The Nepal Mountaineering Association has suggested the names Pangbuk North and Lunag West for the mountains we climbed, and as they seem fitting, we have adopted them.**

And, for now, that’s where the story will have to end. I will forever remember this expedition not for any controversy but for a few brilliant moments, and as the only one I was lucky enough to share with Chad Kellogg. [Kellogg died just a few months later while descending from Fitz Roy.] I will miss Chad whenever I think about it, though I know his spirit is at peace in the Patagonian night.

Summary

First ascent of Lunag West (formerly known as Little Lunag, 6,507m, Schneider map) via the southeast face, by Scott Adamson and Chris Wright, October 22–23, 2013. The route is called Open Fire (1,000m, V WI5 M3). First ascent of Pangbuk North (6,589m, Schneider map, formerly Jobo LeCoultre or Mt. Antoine LeCoultre), by Adamson and Wright, October 31–November 2, 2013. Their direct route up the northeast face is called Purgation (1,100m, VI WI6+ M6).

About the Author

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Images



Pangbuk North (6,589m; 6,748m HMG-Finn map), with the line of the 2013 first ascent and bivouac site on the northeast face marked. The X marks the likely high point of the 2009 team, which attempted a line left of the 2013 route. In 2010, a French team attempted the leftmost ice sheet, continuing up the southeast ridge to the tower just left of the X. They described the ca 350 meters of terrain above this point on the southeast ridge as looking very difficult and tenuous, with huge snow mushrooms to pass. In the background: Pangbuk Ri (6,716m).



Scott Adamson and Chad Kellogg hike through the Hellplex toward advanced base camp. Pangbuk North is center left, and Lunag West is on the right.



Lunag West (6,507m), with the obvious line of Open Fire splitting the southeast face. The 1,000-meter route was climbed in a 26-hour round trip from ABC.



The author leads into the headwall on the northeast face of Pangbuk North. The crux pitch ascended the steep, rotten ice in upper left.



Scott Adamson nears the top of Lunag West.



Scott Adamson battles a mixed pitch high on Pangbuk North.



Scott Adamson (left) and Chris Wright on the summit of Pangbuk North.



One of the 2009 expedition's purported summit photos from Pangbuk North (then called Jobo LeCoultre).



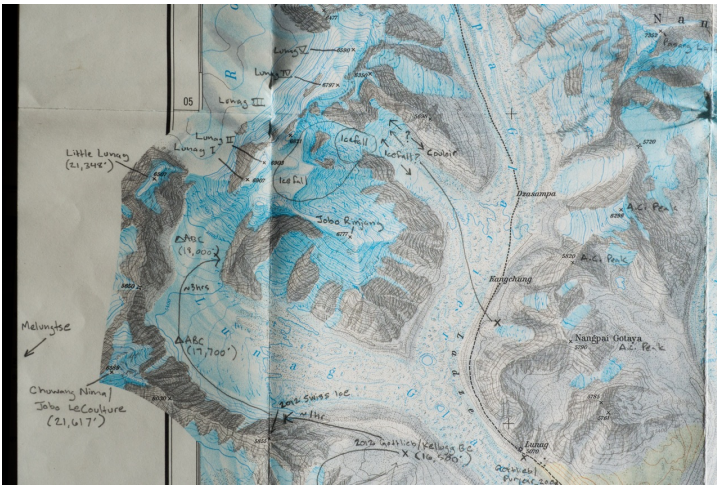
Scott Adamson on the crux of the southeast face of Lunag West.



Wright's tent during the big storm at base camp.



Chris Wright at the tiny true summit of Pangbuk North.



Map of the area and approaches.



Scott Adamson soaking up the sun at Lunag advanced base camp. Pangbuk North behind.



The northeast face of Pangbuk North with the route and bivy marked.



Upper northeast face of Pangbuk North.

Article Details

Author	Chris Wright
Publication	AAJ
Volume	56
Issue	88
Page	64
Copyright Date	2014
Article Type	Feature article