



## AAC Publications

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### Talung

A Favorite Partner, A Final Summit

**It is no surprise** that success comes only after years of gathering experience from previous failures. Nor is it any revelation that a suitable partner is crucial to climbing success. Since I have never been a focused climber—I love climbing of all kinds—I know that I have been very lucky to find the right partners and friends for each of my undertakings. Partners who aren't afraid of failure. Who can share the good and the bad.

Despite an age gap of nearly a generation between us, Zdenek ("Zdenda") Hruby was perhaps my greatest high-mountain climbing partner. He had vast experience on many 8,000ers, combined with truly unbelievable stamina and stubborn perseverance. However, our first attempts at big new routes were not successful. In 2009, on Gasherbrum I, we failed after reaching 7,500 meters in alpine style, when Zdenda was stricken with a ruptured ulcer. After the epic retreat, I managed to salvage some exciting memories of the mountain with a quick solo ascent of the Japanese Couloir, after all the other expeditions had gone home. Next followed an Andes expedition, but our proposed new line up the south face of Aconcagua turned out to be impossible due to extremely risky conditions on the face, and so Zdenda and I enjoyed pleasant rock climbing in Argentina.

In 2011 we spent another summer together, attempting our next great dream climb, a new route on the Rupal Face of Nanga Parbat. This time rockfall injured Zdenda's hand and prevented him from climbing. I attempted a solo ascent but was stopped by a snowstorm at 7,300 meters. Our partnership seemed to have had little luck so far, but I knew we would get our chance.

In 2012 we returned to Nanga Parbat with a plan to pitch a tent below the summit on the Kinshofer Route, on the Diamir Face, where we would descend if we were successful with a Rupal ascent. We were quite surprised by the huge quantities of snow on the Diamir Face that season, and what was expected to be a mere warm-up turned into a desperate fight for every meter! Without previous acclimatization our progress was rather slow, and there was nobody else on the wall so we had to get through the deep snow ourselves. We had enough supplies, though, and after seven days of suffering we made an obvious choice right below the summit. We would skip the Rupal attempt and try to summit Nanga from where we stood at the moment. Despite the adverse conditions, we reached the summit on day nine of our alpine-style climb, returning to the green meadow below the Diamir Face after 11 days.

Finally Zdenda and I had achieved a great summit together, and this cemented our desire to try more climbs. We also agreed that it was time for another destination besides the Karakoram. I had two unfinished projects in Nepal. The first was Kyashar, a mountain whose south face I had already attempted three times, and which was finally climbed in the fall of 2012 by a Japanese team, following nearly the exact line I had in mind (AAJ 2013). The other option was Talung.

My first encounter with the north-northwest ridge of Talung was back in 2004, with Tomas Rinn. Conditions on the mountain that fall were just fantastic. The rocky barrier at the start of the pillar was interlinked with steep ice gullies that led toward a sharp arête, which continued to an upper headwall. Our progress through the technically difficult lower section was very fast, and we reached nearly 5,900 meters on the first day, but an icy wind blowing harshly around the ridge caused severe frostbite in my toes at a hanging belay. We were forced back down after just one bivouac. In 2008 I planned to return to Talung, but there was not enough money after two previous expeditions that

year. Despite these difficulties I knew I'd be back. I tend to return to unfinished projects, provided the line has not been climbed by someone else. In this way the project ripens.

Arriving in Talung base camp on May 1 was like rekindling an old love affair. At the head of this breathtaking amphitheater is the south face of Kangchenjunga, with the sublime Kumbhakarna (or Jannu) on one side and Talung on the other, its sharp ridge splitting the Yalung Glacier like a knifeblade. Truly an uplifting setting.

After acclimatizing on the original route on the west face (AAJ 1965) up to 6,700 meters, it soon became crystal clear that conditions on the north wall were totally different from those we'd seen nine years earlier. Now there was no ice on the lower rock wall. I walked up the glacier to the foot of the pillar with binoculars and watched for hours as the sun slowly circled around the mountain. At last I was able to piece together a line on the north face, to the left of the sharp north-northwest ridge. Steep, icy slopes in the lower part led to a rather unclear upper headwall, where narrow, twisted ice grooves might let us reach the summit slopes. I was so excited with the new line that it helped overcome the disappointment of not being able to finish the original project. It was true that the upper section had not revealed bivouac sites or emergency escapes from the climb, but these were just minor problems, impossible to be solved down on the glacier. The only way was to climb and see for ourselves.

On May 14 we loaded our packs with gear, food, and cooking stuff for eight days. The weather forecast seemed promising, with stronger wind gusts anticipated around May 18. This hinted at some wild moments up high, as this was just the time we planned to reach the headwall. We set out for advanced base camp at 5,400 meters, and dusk charmed us with a breathtaking show as the last sunshine touched the upper rocks of Kangchenjunga. There was scarcely any wind.

May 15 began with the roar of an avalanche at about 3 a.m. This didn't encourage us to leave our warm sleeping bags, but there was no choice—one shouldn't miss an opportunity in the mountains. The lower wall went quickly, and around 9 a.m. the real difficulties began as we bypassed several seracs on old, very steep water ice. We had to fight for each meter; each ice axe and crampon placement required at least five blows. After 14 hours of physical devastation, our day ended at a bivouac site at 5,900 meters.

After the strenuous efforts of the previous day, we got a later start the next morning. Though the ever-present hard ice continued, some lower-angle sections gave us the chance to sink our boots in snow and relieve our calf muscles a bit. We stopped around 4 p.m., finding a good tent site in a hole in a serac at 6,300 meters.

On May 17 we approached the upper headwall and were thrilled to discover that the tiny gullies I had seen through binoculars appeared to hold reasonable mixed climbing. The terrain was quite hard to protect, but the rock seemed relatively solid and our progression was not too slow. After 15 hours we dug a small platform for the tent at 6,700 meters. It was snowing lightly and spindrift poured down the wall. We had to get up twice during the night to clear off the tent.

All next day we followed narrow ice gullies through the headwall. While crossing a ledge, I accidentally kicked off a rock and watched it fall onto Zdenda and break his helmet into pieces. "Zdenda, are you OK?" I shouted. I could not hear his answer over the strong wind, but I could see him shake his fist at me. Alright then, he is alive, I noted with relief and continued climbing.

At 7,000 meters we struggled to pitch the tent behind a rocky spur in strong gusts of wind. My mouth was completely dry, and my whole body felt wasted. Zdenda fought relentlessly with the hard ice to level a platform. My few weak blows with the ice axe made only a modest contribution.

"I will help you, Zdenda, in a moment, just give me a little rest."

"No worries, you are leading the whole thing, take it easy," he responded. Though the rising hurricane carried his words into Sikkim, I felt a rush of love and gratitude for my friend. I was totally ruined. Inside the tent, our stiff bodies slowly warmed, with hot soup soothing our dry mouths. The wind bent the tent sideways, but it seemed to ease during the night.

When I finally managed to fall asleep, feverish dreams brought me back to the slopes of Mt. Meru in India (AAJ 2007). Honza Kreisinger and I were on the final slopes, where the snow was like a whipped frappe? Neither crampons nor axes could find solid placements, and it felt like we slipped backward with every move. It was our tenth day on the wall. Honza was suffering behind me, unable to help with a single move. In my dream, I thought, *We have to reach the summit today.* Right at this moment the slope turned into a sandy seabed. I sat and watched sunlight streaking through the water. Bubbles rose from my aqualung. I spat the mouthpiece out of my mouth, gasped, and woke abruptly.

Jesus, Talung! Unlike Meru, there was no way back down the face we'd just climbed. No matter what, we would have to climb over the summit the next day, and this night at 7,000 meters would have to be, by any definition, our "last bivouac."

The sun shone in the morning, and we could see beyond Jannu to the distant silhouette of Makalu in the west. We packed up and crossed the upper icefield toward the top of Talung. I led onto the sharp summit ridge, the other side falling to Sikkim. My nightmare of unstable snow did not come true, and we gained height quite rapidly on the hard-packed surface. Around noon I reached the summit and captured a few moments with my camera before thick fog completely covered the world. Zdenda arrived on top in dense, white darkness.

We could hardly see the tips of our noses as we began the descent. I rolled snowballs down the slope so their tracks would help us find the way through the diffuse light. Right before dusk, in what felt like a miracle, we rappelled from a serac to reach the bivouac site at 6,600 meters we had used during acclimatization. In the morning we continued down Talung's original route, avoiding seracs and crevasses all the way to the talus. Around 1 p.m. we reached base camp, where our porters were waiting. We packed the next day and, though very tired, happily started toward home.

Nobody could have foreseen that Talung would be our last summit together. Fate had been so generous to us, and then it took back what was given with no mercy. The first is so easy to accept automatically, but the second is very hard to cope with, and the memories leave deep scars that will never heal.

One month after our return from Nepal, Zdenda and I set out for another unfinished project: our new route on the southwest face of Gasherbrum I, which we had tried back in 2009. Everything went so smoothly at first. We warmed up on the normal route with a fast ascent to Camp 3 at 7,000 meters, where we deposited a tent for the planned descent. Then we moved over to the glacier below the southwest face. The five-day forecast was favorable enough, so we started climbing. The initial steep gully was nearly bare of snow this year, but the ice was good enough to enable fast progression. We reached the hanging serac at 6,800 meters and bivouacked right below it.

The following day, at a belay stance, Zdenda made a fateful mistake. Without a clear reason or a single word, he started to slide down the icy slope. He did not stop falling for a kilometer. Now my own life was at stake, as Zdenda had taken the rope and most of our climbing gear. I felt surges of shock and hysteria. The idea of downclimbing the whole face, moving backward like a crayfish, seemed like downright nonsense. But there was no choice. With one axe I hit the ice 40 centimeters below the belay stance, then kicked a foot to place a crampon, and then swung the second axe and kicked with my other crampon. Mechanically, amid a Russian roulette of falling rocks, I repeated these steps. After seven hours, it was finally possible to turn toward the valley and finish the last steps to Zdenda's body. There were no surprises. I had seen what was inevitable from the first moments of his fall.

These lines were written on board a tiny yacht bouncing through the stormy Drake Passage, en route to another adventure in Antarctica. Zdenda and I had planned this trip five years earlier, and ever since we'd looked forward to virgin peaks and new lines. Whatever ideas you have, fate sometimes has other plans in store. But no more sorrow—life goes on and we need to pursue our dreams. Zdenda would have done the same without hesitation.

## **Summary**

Alpine-style first ascent of the northwest wall of Talung (7,349m) in the Kangchenjunga Himal, Nepal, by Czech climbers Marek Holecek and Zdenek Hruby, May 15–19, 2013. The route gained about 1,900 vertical meters, with ca 2,500 meters of climbing distance (WI6 M6+). The two men descended to the south and west, mainly following the route of the 1964 first ascent, and returned to base camp on May 20. They named the route Thumba Party after the traditional Nepalese drink made from fermented millet.

## **About the Author**

Born in 1974, Marek Holecek has done big-wall and alpine first ascents in the Karakoram, Himalaya, and Andes. He lives in Prague.

Editor's note: Zdenek Hruby, age 57 at the time of his death, was president of the Czech Mountaineering Association, and was a distinguished figure in both his climbing and business lives. He had climbed eight 8,000-meter peaks as well as other summits throughout the world. Hruby had served on the boards of several of Czech's largest companies and as the nation's deputy minister of finance.

Translated from Czech by Zbysek Cesenek.

## Images



Marek Holecek leads iron-hard ice during the first day on Talung's north face. Fourteen hours of sustained ice climbing gained the first bivouac.



The northwest side of Talung (7,349m), seen from Kangchenjunga. (1) Thumba Party (Holecek-Hruby, 2013). The climbers descended to the west, near the right skyline, with one additional bivouac. (2) Attempt on the direct north-northwest ridge to 5,900m (Holecek-Rinn, 2004).



View over the fog-covered Talung Glacier to Jannu (7,710m).



Mixed ground high on the face.



Holecek and Hruby in a summit white-out.



Time for a thumba party!



On the summit icefield at 7,100m with a view into Sikkim. The foreground ridge leads to Kangchenjunga South.

## Article Details

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