



AAC Publications

Trango Tower, Eternal Flame, First Free Ascent

Asia, Pakistan, Baltoro Muztagh

In 1989 Kurt Albert, Wolfgang Güllich, Milan Sykora, and Christoph Stiegler climbed one of the most beautiful routes in the world: Eternal Flame on Trango Tower. They aided only four pitches, climbing approximately 80 percent of the route free on compact, orange-colored splitter cracks, with difficulties up to 5.12a. What a milestone! The fame of Güllich and Albert, and the pictures from their ascent, made the Eternal Flame one of the most desirable high-altitude rock climbs in the world.

In 2003 Denis Burdet, from Switzerland, free-climbed two of the four aid pitches, with difficulties up to 5.13a. A big step, but the 10th pitch with its bolt ladders still hadn't been freed, nor had the pendulum of the second pitch, with 4m of featureless granite. Another small piece was added to the mosaic in 2005, when Spanish climber Iker Pou found a possible solution to the problem of the 10th pitch. He discovered a variation to the right of the bolt ladders and top-roped all the moves (up to 5.13b), but bad weather prevented him from redpointing the pitch.

Now it was our turn. On July 24 photographer Franz Hinterbrandner, Mario Walder, my brother Alexander, and I arrived at base camp beside the Trango Glacier. Until then conditions had been pretty bad, and tons of snow lay in the high Karakoram. But we were unbelievably lucky with the weather. After 10 days we were able to establish Camp 2 at the Sun Terrace, the huge shoulder at 5,500m, below the main headwall on the south face. Our curiosity dragged us onto the face above the same day. We wanted to know what secrets the second pitch held. As we had been told, the granite of the traverse was indeed featureless. But there was another chance. From the beginning of the pendulum, we climbed straight up along thin cracks for 30m and then traversed left through nearly vertical but featured slabs toward the crack system of Eternal Flame. We named these two pitches Come on Baby and Light My Fire, with difficulties up to 5.12a.

After that bad weather came in, and we rested in base camp. After we'd hung out for three days, our meteorologist from Innsbruck, Karl Gabel, announced perfect weather for the upcoming week. We wouldn't get a better chance. At 3 a.m. on August 11 we set off, and six hours later we reached our Camp 2. After a short break we continued climbing. From then on, Mario would climb ahead of us, fixing the rope for Franz to film and take photos. (We didn't repeat any pitches or stage any climbing for photography.)

Alexander started up the easy first pitch. Our goal was to free-climb as a team, swapping leads, without any falls by the leader or second. After repeating the new pitches to bypass the pendulum, we climbed another short crack pitch, Come Together, with which we rejoined the original route. We continued climbing until we had completed three more pitches, and then melt-water flowing down the rock finally stopped us.

The next day, as a warm-up, we climbed the ropes we had fixed the day before. Then we continued up an icy 5.11a to reach the 10th pitch. Here, Iker Pou had top-roped a slab traverse, a hard boulder problem, and an ice-covered crack. It was a good idea, but his variation is only feasible in certain conditions. Four meters farther to the right, however, we discovered a trace of a crack, which, after 20m, led into the upper, drier part of the Pou variation. We named the first pitch of our variation Wish You Were Here and the second Burn for You, both 5.12d.

Day three: perhaps summit day? The first three pitches followed ideal jam cracks. Then came

disenchantment: a slightly overhanging finger crack, perhaps only 15m high, but extremely thin. (Denis Burdet graded it 5.13a.) Only after an intense boulder session were we able to crack this hard nut. The following 5.12d double-cracks pitch finished us off completely. With some effort we both were able to free it, but we had to postpone the summit for another day. "Hey, what's the rush?" we thought. "According to Gabel, the weather should hold for another two days, and he's always right!"

After two 5.11 cracks the next morning, August 14, only easy ground remained below the 6,251m summit. Soon all four of us were there, surrounded by the giants of the Karakoram, overwhelmed by the great adventure we'd just experienced.



Getting wide on Eternal Flame.



Leading Eternal Flame.



Taking a quick break to chalk up on Eternal Flame.



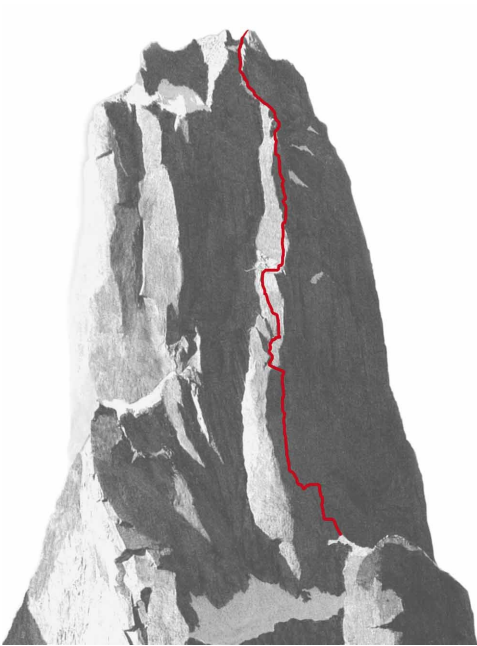
Safety first.



Hand jamming on Eternal Flame.



The Great Trango Tower.



Eternal Flame's line on The Great Trango Tower.

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