



Satisfaction: Five Epic Expeditions and Finally Success on Gasherbrum I's Southwest Face

Pakistan, Karakoram, Baltoro Muztagh

IF ONLY I HAD KNOWN how much time, sacrifice, sorrow, and disappointment it would cost me to finish a new route on Gasherbrum I, never would I have started down this road. But I am not a Sibyl, an oracle, and actually it is better this way, because if I saw the negatives ahead of me it might paralyze my forward progress, which is certainly undesirable. What if, instead, we just see the future in bright colors and then tackle impediments when they occur? In this way we can enjoy every new day, because we never know which might be our last.

In 2007 I saw the Beautiful Mountain for the first time—that is the rough translation of Gasherbrum from the Baltí dialect. At that time I was not focused on Gasherbrum I but on the west face of her sister mountain, Gasherbrum III. But G-I became my lover at first sight. Since then I've done five expeditions to Gasherbrum I with the goal of making the first ascent of the southwest face. [In 1983, Jerzy Kukuczka and Voytek Kurtyka (Poland) climbed the southwest face to the final rock band, then moved right and followed the south ridge to the summit. In 2008, Viktor Afanasiev and Valery Babanov (Russia) climbed the left side of the southwest face to a col at 7,200 meters, then followed the southwest ridge to the summit. The complete southwest face remained unclimbed.] All in all, my time on this mountain has totaled eight months, with each expedition so epic as to cover at least a chapter of the whole book.

Let me skip right into the last sequence of the drama. It was the summer of 2017, and Zdeněk "Hook" Háek was my latest climbing partner for the steep face. After four consecutive days of climbing and bivouacs, now at 7,800 meters, every move we made represented sheer toil. The massive rock barrier at the top of the face rose in front of our eyes. Our observations through binoculars had suggested there were ice gullies promising easier progression toward the summit. We had hoped for something other than rock climbing at this altitude. However, the reality surpassed even the most horrific dreams. The snow that promised easier climbing was like cotton candy over rotten rock—a frightful combination, but retreating 2,500 meters would be next to impossible. We knew there was no option but up. Occasional snow flurries filled the air. Luckily, the usual strong wind was not blowing. Considering the altitude and the setting, the weather actually was not that bad.

The next pitch took me really a long time, at least in my view. I even had to take off my gloves and hide them inside my down jacket to proceed, climbing with bare hands. I could not feel my fingers, but I did not care about that. At this altitude you have to make a sequence of a few quick and precise moves, then catch your breath before continuing. You cannot get into oxygen debt or you might lose control over your body or even lose consciousness. This would result in a fatal fall—perhaps for both of us, as the protection between us was very poor.

The day's summary was not really encouraging: a mere 80 meters gained during 12 hours of climbing. I managed to drive in a relatively good piton and shouted to Zdeněk to follow me. It was about time to find the bivy spot, but there was no good place for the tent. There was no choice but to dig into a tiny ice slab on a rocky balcony with a 70° slope. After endless chopping of ice, we managed to pitch our tent and take shelter in this tiny, airy house. With no need for words, we started to make dinner. This was our third day high above 7,000 meters, which takes its toll. Inside the tent at last, I started to recall other desperate moments on this face. My first attempt, with Zdeněk Hrubý in 2009, was like a Hollywood horror movie in my memory.

Zdeněk and I had solved the first crux of the face, the rock barrier at nearly 7,400 meters, blocking the way from the broad couloir on the left to the central snowfields. His health problems began at the next bivouac. It was impossible to know at that time he was about to experience the bursting of a gastric ulcer and massive internal bleeding. I still cannot comprehend the miracle we were about to fulfill. Zdeněk had to rappel a 200-meter rock band while vomiting and suffering terrible pains. In the ice couloir he was forced to rappel full pitches, place ice screws, and wait until I downclimbed to his stance. This continued for nearly 1,700 meters. We had to bivouac in a serac cave before we reached the glacier at the foot of the face. After a dreadful march across the rugged glacier, he was finally evacuated from base camp by helicopter two days later.

I was left at camp without a partner, still with some time before leaving the area. So I took advantage of the situation and climbed the classical route (the Japanese Couloir) on the completely abandoned mountain. This was my first time to look around the lonely Karakoram from Gasherbrum I's 8,068-meter summit.

Four years later, Zdeněk and I began our expedition season by completing my longtime project on the northwest face of Talung, near Kangchenjunga. It was a great climb that made it onto the red carpet at the Piolets d'Or in Chamonix. If only these happy times could have remained, but they did not. A month after Talung we were at the foot of Gasherbrum again.

Suddenly the noise from boiling water and flaring flames disturbed my recollections. Once again I missed the right moment to switch off the stove, and hot water bubbled up from below the lid and onto my sleeping bag. Damn it...but this happens. The sleeping bag was damp anyway—the vapors inside had frozen to the bone in my backpack, and now I warmed it up with my body. We call this a “Priessnitz pack.” [In the early 19th century, Vincenz Priessnitz popularized a treatment for various maladies that involved wrapping patients in wet bandages and then bathing them in cold water.] **It simultaneously shows the glory and misery of a climber's life.**

I put a teabag in the pot and added a spoonful of sugar from our thinning supplies. Our dehydrated stomachs received the first drops of badly needed liquid. The instantaneous relief was replaced by suffocating coughs. Sounds even worse than those of a tuberculosis ward—in this case the highest in the world, without a doubt. A new dose of snow for our fast-boiling pot took me back into my reveries, observing the melting snow crystals on Hook's hand after he'd dug into the white powder outside of the tent. We resembled two unhappy rooks on an airy perch in deep, deep frost.

It is unbelievable what a human body can withstand in adverse conditions. We already had lost many kilos, first from our fat reserves—not very big at the time, really—followed by our muscles. Literally we ate ourselves alive. At high altitude the opponents are predefined and expected—the cold, the lack of oxygen, the daily multiple marathons of cruel toil, the lack of sleep (if any), the stressful concentration on thousands of steps, the threats from avalanches or falling rocks or weather. Also there remains the question of whether the chosen route may even be climbable—or at least climbable by us. Strangely enough, as you get closer to the summit, the exponential curve of adversities gets ever steeper. Everything costs more energy the farther and farther you get from the point of safe return. Despite this we are still able to fight and chase our goal. The human body is just a perfect machine, provided one's head will not quit.

It was like a bolt from the blue. Just a slight outcry and then silence again. I looked below and saw Zdeněk's body gathering speed over the ice slopes. One hit on the rock, another in an ice gully, and then it was just a lifeless body falling lower and lower. It seems strange, but very pragmatic ideas went through my brain immediately: Zdeněk is dead—what will happen to me? It was 2013; we had reached 7,000 meters. Now I was hanging from an ice screw next to another screw on which a half-opened carabiner still rocked and swayed. The biner was supposed to be clipped to Zdeněk's rappel rope. But there was neither a rope nor my friend. What exactly happened was not the issue—all that counted was what would happen next. We did not take a second rope, and all the gear was gone with my partner, who was already more than a kilometer below me. I had no choice but to try downclimb if another obituary note was not to

be issued today. There was no time to wait, as the sun would turn to the face soon, releasing more falling rocks. I began to climb down toward Zdeněk.

For Hook and me, the fifth morning on the face was pretty much in line with the previous ones. Climbing close to our limits, combined with suffocating with every move from lack of oxygen. According to the forecast, we needed to make it over the summit this day at any cost. A spell of high wind with more snow was supposed to arrive from India to the south. We would be slightly sheltered from the wind beyond the crest, on the northwest slopes of the mountain.

Time passed so fast, yet we climbed as if in slow motion. Dusk approached and Hook shouted at me through the roaring wind that there was no way upward. This woke me from my lethargy. How could there be no way? For God's sake, we had to get up this, otherwise we were dead alive! I reached his stance and continued up the loose rock above. I had managed to climb some ten meters when suddenly I felt that nothing was holding my hands and feet. The next moment my apprehension had come true and I started falling. Then the rope tightened and a big rock that I had grabbed rolled over my thigh. A camming device in the crack had saved our expedition. My leg was OK—just the Gore-tex pants torn and our rope disclosing its inner threads. Otherwise, nothing serious.

All this prompted me to continue with the resolute moves of a machine, the whole pitch nearly unprotected. After fixing the belay station, I shouted at Hook to follow as the sun set, giving the wild scenery a purple tint. An endless carpet of lower summits stretched around us. At this moment I realized we were above the rock barrier, and also that a bivy at 8,000 meters was inevitable, with tough weather coming the next day. We would not make it over the summit today.

Two years after Zdeněk's death, I was back with Tom Petreček, climbing in freezing cold by headlamp to minimize the danger of the nearly two-kilometer couloir above us. Climbing at night gave a false feeling of safety, as the threat above was not visible and the frost made the rock more solid. Despite that, it was imperative to be fast and decisive. As soon as the sun returned to the face, about 10 in the morning, it became a shooting gallery of falling stones.

Toward the end of the next day, 200 meters of hard mixed climbing led us to the col that joins the plateau and the final rocky headwall. The weather forecast seemed to be positive, and we fell asleep with this happy thought. However, in the morning we woke to a blizzard that endured for six long days. We were trapped. There was no chance to continue up, and the way down was blocked by avalanches. After all those days and nights in a tiny bivouac tent, we abseiled down and reached base camp 11 days after our departure.

How could I know that my fourth attempt, together with Ondra Mandula, the following year, would resemble the real Dante's inferno? This time we reached 7,750 meters, only to be trapped at this altitude for seven nights! We finally reached base camp after 14 days, having stretched food and gas supplies that were barely sufficient for nine. It was not a surprise when I removed my boots and found severely frostbitten toes. The ensuing three-day journey back to civilization did not help my condition, resulting in the amputation of parts of a few toes.

Day six on the face, July 30, at just below 8,000 meters, started out very windy. While we were packing the tent, the temperature dropped far below -20°C, and Hook and I had not even reached the open summit crest. Anyway, we had no choice but to start climbing.

The terrain was not really difficult, and we climbed unroped. The wind beat us with great brutality. For a time, Hook and I lost sight of each other. After about half an hour of navigating between rock spires, we met again at the summit of Gasherbrum I. This was my second and surely the last time to be here. Freezing smiles in front of the camera. We looked like fish fillets in a freezer. Only a few words to exchange, mainly concerning how we would descend through the worsening weather as fast as our condition and the snowpacked terrain would allow. Pure intuition helped us find the way down through the white inferno to Camp 3 above the Japanese Couloir. Hook disappeared from sight for a

moment, but shouts and whistles helped us find each other.

The next day was as beautiful as one could imagine, but rappelling and downclimbing the avalanche-prone Japanese Couloir cost us some more nerves. No wonder that not a single expedition was successful on the route that year. Nonetheless, we had to get down the couloir to reconfirm our existence yet again. Hook belayed as I tried my luck in white powder up to my waist. A horrific 600 meters, where any move might set off an uncontrolled ride. These lines confirm that we successfully reached the Gasherbrum La and, after one more bivouac, returned to base camp the next morning, eight days after leaving.

Five expeditions and five epic chapters on the southwest face of Gasherbrum I. A route that even Jerzy Kukuczka, Wojciech Kurtyka, Valery Babanov, and Viktor Afanasiev did not complete. Compared with those legends, we were just luckier, I reckon.

Summary: Alpine-style first ascent of the complete southwest face of Gasherbrum I (a.k.a. Hidden Peak, 8,068m), by Zdeněk Hák and Marek Holeček, July 25 to August 1, 2017. The two summited at approximately 1 p.m. on July 30 and descended by the Japanese Couloir on the upper northwest face. The ca 2,600m route, named Satisfaction!, was graded ED+ WI5+ M7.

About the Author: Czech climber Marek Holeček was born in 1974 and wrote about the first ascent of Talung's northwest face in AAJ 2014. He has dedicated this ascent to the memory of Zdeněk Hrubý.

This article was translated from Czech by Zbyšek Česenek.

Images



Day five on the southwest face, about 7,900 meters. The climbers hoped to reach the summit this day but climbed only 150 meters on this difficult terrain, forcing another night on the face.



The fifth bivouac on the southwest face.



Looking up at the headwall at around 7,750 meters on the southwest face of Gasherbrum I.



Ondra Mandula at the first crux of the route, at 7,400 meters, in 2016. On this attempt, he and Marek Holeček were trapped for seven nights at 7,750 meters before retreating.



Zdeněk Hák (left) and Holeček on the summit. "We looked like fish fillets in a freezer."



Holeček (left) and Hák back at base camp.



The alluring headwall on Gasherbrum I: It took three days to climb this final 250 meters. [



Marek Holeček on a small belay stance on Gasherbrum I.



Following a steep pitch high on Gasherbrum I's southwest face.



Zdeněk Hák on the summit of Gasherbrum I.

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