

# The Book of Shadows

*The first ascent of the north face of the Trango Nameless Tower*

by ERIC BRAND

When I finally crossed out of Pakistani air space on my way to Bangkok, I was overcome with relief. Our team had completed the first ascent of the north face of the Karakoram's Nameless Tower. The north face was the steepest and most continuous face on the formation, and we had lived on the route for 20 days in a single capsule-style push, standing on the summit on August 4. As a group we had been diverse in age, strength and experience; some of us had climbed together before this trip, and others had not. But although we hadn't always agreed with each other, we had done what we had to do to reach the top.

After a hurried approach, we reached basecamp in late June. Kevin Starr, M.D., 35, and Jared Ogden, 23, a talented climber from Telluride, Colorado, were the first to venture up the snow toward the base of the wall. In the preceding two weeks hot weather had followed two heavy snow storms, and their first 1,500 feet of climbing involved wading through deep slush. Big wet-snow avalanches came down on a regular basis. We told ourselves we would be off the snow by 10 a.m., but more often than not it was noon before we were down. On one occasion, at the bottom of the fixed ropes, I watched as several tons of snow with the consistency of ready-mix concrete poured over where I had last seen Jared. Fortunately he had pendulumed at the end of his rope just enough to get out of its way.

A few days later Jared was back on the sharp end. He had just sunk in a bolt after leading the crux ice pitch when a big wet-snow avalanche came off the main ledge. It swept over him and his belayer, Willie Benegas, a 26-year-old mountain guide born in Patagonia. They both thought they were dead. When I met them on their descent I could see the effects of the near-miss in Jared's eyes, his pupils huge in the afternoon sun.

The approach continued to pummel us. While carrying loads up the initial 1,500 feet one evening I got nailed with small blocks of ice; a few days later a pleasant little waterfall just below the beginning of the fixed lines turned mean, funneling hundreds of pounds of snow, rock, and ice just to my left. I huddled under my pack, my ice axe holding me on the slope. Another evening we watched from advanced basecamp as a giant block cut loose, leaving craters 20 feet across that obliterated our approach tracks. It was clear we had to change our tactics or someone was going to get hurt.

We began sleeping during the day and moving at night. Three weeks



later we finished getting our gear to the base of the rock. We started hauling and pulling our fixed ropes. Our bivouacs on the steep wall above had to have two things: snow and ice to melt for water, and cover from falling ice. Our first bivouac was on a sheltered ledge at the base of the great dihedral. Willie and I hauled while Kevin and Jared pulled our fixed lines from below, clearing the haulbags when they got stuck. By the end of the day we had our bivouac established on the wall.

Jared jumped on the next lead, painstakingly climbing half an A4 pitch that involved thin nailing on loose rock, Bird Beaking, and drilling. The next morning, I continued. The placements, though difficult to make, were generally sound, and as the crack ran out I tried pushing the envelope a little further. A copperhead blew as I climbed high in my aiders, and with many runners on the lower section and a slack belay I fell 30 feet. I climbed back up, managing to finish the pitch despite a damaged ankle.

Two British climbers, Paul Pritchard and Noel Crane, had been slowly advancing up the terrain below us when a heavy snow began to fall. With weeks of avalanche observation under our belt, we knew they were in a bad place. As a storm began raging, we could only shout unintelligibly back and forth. Paul made his way down without incident, but Noel fell 50 feet into a crevasse, breaking through two snow bridges. He managed to extricate himself only to be carried away by an avalanche. We were later relieved to hear on our radio that the pair had survived and successfully returned to their basecamp only to find their bivy had been wiped out. Days later Paul had found little of their gear. Noel, with broken ribs and a partly collapsed lung, soon left for home.

Our party continued its journey up the wall. The next pitch was Willie's. Starting via an incipient seam off a ledge, the climbing began on hooks, Bird Beaks, and other body-weight placements. The seam led past some loose blocks and into a beautiful 5.10 hand crack to finish off the pitch.

We were now in one of the most classic dihedrals on earth: nearly 2,000 feet of continuous climbing, sometimes covered in ice. Much of the credit for reaching this point goes to Willie and Jared, the youngest and most motivated members of the team. The pair would continue to do the lion's share of the leading all the way to the summit.

We had been on the wall for several days. From our bivouac Jared and I ascended to our high point in the great book that was now our home. Jared began free climbing 5.10 in his *Infernos*, but called for his aiders after 40 feet — not because of difficulty, but because his hands were freezing. One hundred feet later, after leapfrogging cams up an expanding flake, he led through a rotten traverse and finished with 80 feet of hand jams. We were losing light, but could see the site for our next bivouac. I set off up a 100-foot A1 crack, sinking in a bolt in the dark to finish off a good day of climbing.

Jared Ogden lowering out from the second bivy.

*Eric Brand*





Willie is a veteran of many El Cap and Argentine horror shows but when he looked up at the pile of stacked blocks that constituted the next lead his concern was obvious. Pillar upon pillar loomed overhead, with room to take pictures in between. Fortunately, time, gravity and ice were holding them all together. Willie delicately free-climbed most of the pitch — another hairball lead under his belt.

We were ready to move our next bivouac to the top of the Killer Pillar. We now had ropes fixed 800 feet above us, but six feet of snow fell over the next five days, pinning us to our bivouac.

Jared and Kevin went up on the first clear day amidst a barrage of slush. Willie and I expected to see them coming down any time. Instead, they reached our high point. Kevin, an experienced alpinist with only a few leads of direct aid under his belt, continued on to lead a pitch of loose rock.

On the next morning of the fifth day of being stuck in our portaledges we lay around trying to decide whether or not to move. The storm had cleared, but by the time the ice fall slowed down we were off to a late start. After Willie and I ascended 400 feet we tried to haul all the bags at once. No way, not even up the mostly-overhanging rock. Kevin came up to act as the second dead weight for the hauling system. He looked at the two quarter-inch hand-drilled buttonhead bolts backed up by a number two Camalot.

“Is it safe?” he asked.

We mumbled some assurances and the bags began their slow 400-foot journey toward the belay.

We continued throughout the day and into the night. Jared would come up last, sending off the haulbags, removing the fixed lines, then jumaring with hideous amounts of rope and gear. As I juggled up to the final hauling point, our bivouac, Willie and Kevin were attempting every trick in the book to get the bags to move. I joined them, adding 200 pounds of “dead weight” to the system. It was not until 8 a.m. that we finally got to sleep.

Above this, our second bivy, Willie quickly leapfrogged cams up a wild overhanging crack. Jared went next up an ice-choked crack, first moving right on sketchy pins and hooks, and then returning to the dihedral. I got the next lead, another ice-choked crack. I commandeered Willie’s shiny new ice tool and began bashing away at the crack, searching for a placement and showering Willie at the belay below. At A3+ the climbing was painstakingly slow but steady. As with Jared’s pitch below, I drove pitons straight into the ice.

With the next lead Willie crossed out of the main dihedral into another corner system that would go to the top, requiring everything from thin nailing to hooking on icy rock to climb the A3+ pitch. Jared leapfrogged cams and tied off ice tools up an icy, poorly-protected wide crack that barely accepted even our Big Dudes. Again Willie got another hard pitch. Though

it started well, it soon turned into a long ice-filled crack so wide it wouldn't take any cams. Creative soul that he is, Willie began making single ice tool placements, climbing onto them and from there placing marginal copper-heads and an occasional rivet. As he and Kevin were finishing the pitch, I jumared the ropes, setting equalized rappel slings at each belay to speed our retreat the next day on the way down from the summit.

It was about 5 p.m. when I reached our high point. I decided to stay there and bivvy rather than return to our bivouac. It was a beautiful evening at 20,000 feet, and the idea of spending a night alone, watching the sun set on much of the Karakoram from near the summit, brought me back to why I was there in the first place. I pulled out a stove, brewed up, and slept until cold feet woke me.

At about 4 a.m. Jared showed up. We were on our way to the summit! He took off, leading up the snow above the belay to a four-inch crack. From there he ran out an ice slope to a boulder frozen in the snow. Willie, Kevin and I impatiently shouted up, asking if he saw the top. Yes!

Kevin continued leading up more 70° ice around a corner onto a plateau. The final summit cone of granite was just above us. Willie started racking up for the final lead. He was tired. He had pushed himself hard, especially over the last few days. It seemed right for him to get the summit pitch. He began climbing the snow and ice that led to a line of fixed pitons where our route joined the last 80 feet that other parties had climbed to summit the Tower.

Using the shaky pitons he climbed to within six feet of pulling over the summit platform. First he tried ice climbing to the right; then, he tried to tunnel through an ice cave. Neither proved possible. Finally he got high in his aiders and began to mantel onto the summit, only to be caught by his daisy chain, which he had failed to remove from the final piton. He was caught! Barely maintaining his purchase on a rib of rock, he could not reach down to extricate himself. Earlier that day Kevin had reminded him to bring his knife. Stuck in this precarious spot he found it, cut himself free, crawled onto the summit and fixed ropes for the rest of us. As Jared cleaned the final pins on which Willie had been standing they flew out under his body weight, sending him into space and underscoring Willie's treacherous lead.

On the summit we quickly took photographs. We could see a storm brewing. Willie and Kevin descended with the remaining gear while Jared and I came down later with the ropes.

Early the next morning we began the descent by putting all the gear together. Willie and Kevin went down first and reeled the bags in while Jared and I lowered them 400 feet at a time. Together Jared and I were unable to lift the bags off the belay. Fortunately they were daisied in with a long runner. A swipe of the knife and away they went, pulling me into the wall with

a jerk.

We proceeded in this manner with relative ease until we reached the mixed portion of the climb. It had been snowing on the upper part of the descent. Now it began to rain. The bags had to be separated into two loads. I was forced to rap a tattered haul line to help Willie and Kevin manhandle the bags to the belay, and then reascend to pick up a mass of rope that Jared would have been hard-pressed to descend with alone. We were wet and exhausted and looking at a sleepless sunrise with only a 1000 feet to go. From here the bags could slide down snow and ice. We cut them loose and watched as they came to rest not far from the hiking boots that we had left 20 days before.

I was the last one down. Unfortunately for me, the bags we had cut loose held one of my rappel ropes. I doubled up the remaining 600 feet of rope and started down. The rappel left me right in the middle of a series of crevasses. As it began to rain, the slush avalanches started around me. Towing the rope from my harness, I down-climbed through the crevasses, post-holing into the tenacious, wet snow. I made it to the final fixed line at the bottom serac and was attempting to set up a rappel when an avalanche came barreling down the chute.

“Fuck this!” I yelled, and bailed off, leaving the final section of rope in place. I reached an old fixed rope and rappled to its end as rocks fell down around me. Leaving my figure 8 on the rope, I downclimbed like a hunted animal to the safety of a small overhang that had been our starting point. I felt like I had been chased from the mountain. The Nameless Tower tolerated our presence no longer.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Pakistan Karakoram.

NEW ROUTE: *The Book of Shadows* (VII A4 5.10+ WI IV), July 17-August 4, 1995 (Willie Benegas, Eric Brand, Jared Ogden\*, Kevin Starr).

PERSONNEL: Damian Benegas, Willie Benegas, Laurence Bohn (Base Camp Manager), Eric Brand, Jared Ogden, Kevin Starr.

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