

# A Soviet First Ascent in the North Cascades

ALEX BERTULIS

*... when tied to the same rope, there  
is more than one bond that transcends  
language, culture and ideology.*

WHEN the Soviet team arrived in Seattle, we met them, for the first time, during a luncheon in the Plaza Hotel. I arrived a little late and at first glance I could not be sure which of the fifteen persons at the table were the foreigners. A series of introductions by Pete Schoening and a round of handshakes quickly acquainted me with the Soviet guests and some of the Northwest hosts.

About a week later, after a Northwest tour that included an ascent of Mount Rainier, water skiing on Lake Washington and a visit through 37 departments of the local Sears and Roebuck store, I was advised that, as a finale, our guests would be interested in a "hard first ascent" in the North Cascades, but one that involved no more approach difficulties than driving up in a car and marching off the roadway to the first pitch! Well, accessibility is not exactly what the North Cascades are famous for but upon viewing my slides of a 2300-foot, nearly vertical, buttress that was still unclimbed, the Soviets admitted that the two-hour hike to its base would not be objectionable.\*

Early in the morning of September 10, the "North Cascades team" (Vitaly Abalakov, Vladimir Shatayev, Vyacheslav "Slava" Onishchenko, Valentin "Valia" Grakovich, Anatoly "Tolia" Nepeomnyashchy, Sergei Bershov, all of the USSR and Nina Cvetkovs, Mike Helms, Jim Mitchell and I) drove over to the east side of the Cascades, sailed forty miles up Lake Chelan, drove ten more miles over an old mining road in a "wilderness taxi," and after a three-mile hike, arrived at the "Bonanza base camp" on the north shore of Hart Lake (3935 feet) still early in the day.

After a refreshing swim in the ice-cold waters of the lake (the Soviets never lost a chance to "skinny dip" in any body of water they happen to encounter), the rest of the afternoon was spent sorting out food, gear and tactics for the climb. American freeze-dried food, nylon down gear and "rip-stop" nylon tents impressed the Soviets very much. The Soviet

---

\* The north face of the southwest peak of Bonanza (at 9511 feet, the Cascades' highest non-volcanic mountain).

hardware collection included many innovative designs (mostly by Abalakov) for both rock and ice climbing. Most of their pitons were titanium, which combines the strength of steel and the light weight of aluminum. The drawback of titanium pitons is that they deform quicker, during repeated use, than pitons of chrome-molybdenum steel.

Starting early the next morning we ascended the steep rock and heather terraces to the 7100-foot pass between North Star and Bonanza Peak in about two-and-a-half hours. It was a perfect autumn day. As we reached the pass the north buttress of the southwest peak of Bonanza came into close view. Slava studied it for a while then, gesturing, asked me where the route was? There was no apparent fault system that indicated that the buttress would even "go." I responded, "The route is where you make it. I wish you luck!" I gave them one more opportunity to make it a team of four (Onishchenko, Bershov, Grakovich and Nepeomnyashchy)\* but they all insisted that I must climb with them.

As we roped up at the base of the buttress, I was startled to see Slava and Sergei put on petit galoshes that stretched tight over their bare feet! Sergei took the first lead up a narrow chimney and proceeded up the broad face above while Slava belayed. Tolia informed me that I would be on the end of his rope with the privilege of cleaning all the pitches. Valia tied a prussik near the middle of the rope and often climbed simultaneously without a real belay, even over F9 terrain!

As we proceeded upwards, the climbing remained demanding (F7-F9). Sergei and Slava were well ahead and could be seen maneuvering under some major overhanging headwalls. Tolia often remarked to me that he would certainly prefer his gloshe now instead of the conventional climbing boots he had on. Valia, a very strong climber who did not enjoy following as much as he does leading, started shouting up at his compatriots that in his opinion they should be attacking the headwalls directly (with aid) and be done with it! I (politely) squelched his vocal efforts and said, "Give them a chance; they may see something we cannot." My words were prophetic. Sergei and Slava, far from encountering insurmountable impassés, reached a sloping ramp that cut diagonally across the crest of the buttress (from east to west) circumventing two of the headwalls. It was an unexpected and important key to the route!

The next few leads involved some of the hardest that I have ever witnessed under alpine conditions: three consecutive pitches of F10 and sustained F8 and F9. As we reached our bivouac ledge, I learned that Sergei did almost all the leading. His stature as USSR rock-climbing (speed) champion is well earned, I thought.

The setting sun silhouetted the mountains of the Olympics and Van-

---

\* Shatayev remained in camp with fever. Abalakov explored the North Cascades via its beautiful valleys.



PLATE 28

*Aerial photo by Alex Bertulis*

**Southwest Peak of BONAZA PEAK.**  
The first ascent of the 2300-foot buttress  
followed the left skyline.

PLATES 29 and 30

*Photos by Michael Helms*

The "Abalakov Cam" is cut from an industrial flywheel (one-fifth section). It is designed to fit and lock in a wide range of crack sizes without adjustment. The cord produces a rotational force on the nut to lock it in the crack.





couver Island while hot food and liquids were shared. Songs, jokes and stories abounded late into the night. The spirit was contagious and our language differences presented no barrier. We were all slipping off into sleep when the resident "snaffle hound" (Pika) started scavenging through our utensils for dinner leftovers. Anchored loosely to some pitons I remained still and semi-awake as the familiar commotion continued close by. Suddenly, I felt this "monster" running over me! When his feet hit my face I jumped up yelling and cursing. My Soviet buddies thought I had been "attacked by a bear" and my description of the beast supported that impression. A "bear hunt" failed to produce a quarry. I lay back down to sleep with my hammer at hand, just in case. More jokes, at my expense, kept us awake a while longer.

By late the following morning we had surmounted the final headwalls of the buttress and were jubilating on the summit. I asked Slava, who had done some of Europe's hardest climbs, what his impression of the route was? He said that "some of the climbing was very hard and some not so hard, but if the weather had become bad it would have been very difficult to escape the face." Having experienced September blizzards in the North Cascades, our predicament on the face would have been unpleasant, indeed, if the weather had broken. A quick descent over the numerous glaciers and cliffs of Bonanza's 5000-foot south face brought us hot and thirsty to Base Camp and another, most refreshing swim in Hart Lake.

\* \* \*

In cleaning the many pitches (22) I was impressed at the Soviet's expert approach to "clean climbing." During this climb over a hundred chocks, nuts, wedges, etc. were placed for protection whereas only six (knifeblade) pitons were used. Two (titanium) pitons were placed in such difficult (desperate?) positions that I was unable to remove them (as future parties will probably be happy to discover).

By far the most impressive item that the Soviets had was the "Abalakov Cam." This most effective anchor is as ingenious in design as it is simple to use. Almost every belay on this climb was safely and quickly secured by one "Abalakov" rather than several conventional nut and chock placements. This cam is easy to make and Mr. Abalakov expressed the hope that it would be produced in this country without patent restrictions.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Cascade Mountains, Washington.

NEW ROUTE: North Face of the southwest Peak of Bonanza, 9511 feet, September 12, 1975, NCCS VI, F 10.

PERSONNEL: Vyacheslav Onishchenko, Valentin Grakovich, Anatoly Nepeomnyashchy, Sergei Bershov, USSR and Alex Bertulis, USA.