

# To Thalay With Love

*Through the shale band on Thalay Sagar's north face*

BY ANDREW LINDBLADE

I woke from a dream like a frightened child, startled, thinking I was safely home. The skitter-scatter of falling ice on the ledge brought me back to reality. We were at 21,100 feet, waiting for a storm to ease; I had been drifting in and out of sleep.

Athol Whimp handed me a brew. Staring at the stormfly, I noticed my gloves hanging from a strap, frozen as if in rigor mortis by the deep cold night. I quickly unclipped them and thrust them under my legs. As my hand passed the hanging stove, its luxurious warmth served as a distinct reminder of a world left far behind. We had cast out from the ground several days back, hoping to climb the north face of Thalay Sagar directly through the notorious shale band to the summit. We talked about our progress. We were both keen to get higher and see the headwall at close quarters for the first time.

The two of us had attempted a line on the 4,950-foot face in 1996. Extreme cold and constant spindrift avalanches finally forced us to retreat from 21,500 feet. Down in Base Camp after our descent, Athol said he was coming back in '97. I stared into the cooker flame, nursing frostbitten toes that luckily had escaped circulatory shutdown. I admired his fortitude, and hoped I would want to return as well. But sitting there, I was immersed in doubt.

We went to Mt. Cook, New Zealand, in late June, getting in a couple of fine routes and a -15°C night out with no gear on the summit. After two weeks, we walked back down the Hooker Glacier, battered artillery in our packs and hammered toes in our plastics. Deep inside, I struggled with Thalay. Did I really have what it would take to succeed on the north face? We had been whipped there in '96; I remembered the desperation of staring up a massive wall that moved rapidly in and out of storm as we rigged the abseil that sealed our failure. I suffered from a lack of belief in myself.

How easily fooled one can be; how quickly the memories become devoid of pain. Back in Melbourne, the dreary weight of winter made the flanks of Thalay Sagar seem like a shimmering paradise. Running through the dark streets of the city at night, I realized that I really did want it. The desire had been moving through me ever since we walked out of base camp. I just hadn't tuned into it, letting graver concerns—like dying—dominate my mind instead.

July, 1997. As I approached Base Camp, the north face appeared over the top of the moraine wall. My eyes zoomed straight to our proposed route up the face's central couloir. Kitty Calhoun and Jay Smith had reached 20,900 feet on this line in 1996. It had been Kitty's second attempt; in 1986 she and Andy Selters spent eight days in their ledge at nearly 21,000 feet before abseiling off, starved and debilitated. Walking toward Base Camp, the sounds of the shifting glacial rock underfoot punctuated my tiny presence. Higher above me, in Base Camp, Athol and Patricia awaited my arrival. It felt strange, like amplified *deja-vu*, to be back.

We studied the north face through binoculars, formulating various strategies for our ascent while we acclimatized. Every time you looked up, a foreshortened Thalay looked back. During sunset, the roaring orange light would pick up detail on the face that was totally invisible at other times. Sometimes the shale headwall a kilometer above our heads looked so close

*The north face of Thalay Sagar, showing the 1997 Australian line.* JAY SMITH

you could touch it. At other times, as I walked up the glacier with another load, I'd look up to see the north face looming high above, and be struck with the sensation that we actually might stand up there on the summit snows, two little black dots in their own crazy world.

We adapted more to the thinner air each day. Patricia, the expedition doctor, took daily stats on our respiration, pulses, and blood pressure, and prepared little medical emergency bags for us in case things went ballistic on the face. From the latter half of August through the first ten days of September, the monsoon adhered to its daily cycle, snowing nearly every day—a good thing, considering we were still acclimatizing, carrying equipment up, and fine-tuning our personal gear. Some mornings were deliciously snap frozen; on others, we sank knee-deep. In between getting the 300 pounds of equipment and supplies up from Camp I, we read and threw laps on Patricia's walkman. We drank like fish. Took our Diamox. Slept. And waited.

We positioned ourselves well for launching up the face, fixing about 650 feet of line onto the icefield from a gear cache just above a 'schrund. Camp II sits on a small plateau at the edge of an icefall. The slopes between Camp II and the icefield are avalanche-prone; Jay and Kitty had been hit there while making their final abseils off the face in 1996. We met up with them on the debris the following day; they were very pleased to be alive. The slopes had ripped early this season, too, and gradually were loading up again with more and more snow. It was with committed resignation that we went up and down this section.

On September 11, we scampered down to Base Camp in swirling snow and poor visibility. The following morning dawned fine; we headed back up again, relaxed and certain. This was it—time to get the runs on the board. Patricia walked with us to the corner, where we hugged her goodbye under a serenely beautiful sky. I could see the concern in her eyes. I turned and drifted away as she said goodbye to Athol. Soon I heard Athol's ski poles on the moraine, and we cruised across, roving through the glacial desert, then up the ridge toward Camp II.

"We smoked that," said Athol as we pulled into Camp II. It was comforting to know we were well acclimatized and very fit on the day before the big effort.

When the sun began to get dim on September 13, we mobilized. At 10 p.m., we arrived at the beginning of the icefield at 18,700 feet and erected the ledge. Lying back after a hot brew, we listened as the sporadic showers of ice and spindrift fell down the face, delivering glancing blows to the ledge. We were fixing line up the final section of the icefield the next day when a piece of falling ice slammed into my left jaw with fierce intensity. It felt as though I'd been decked by the school thug. As I jumared up toward Athol, the pain gradually turning numb, I had the thought that my boyhood dreams of being a soldier were finally being fulfilled on a frozen wall in the middle of nowhere.

Leading up the final 300 feet of the icefield, my throat felt like it was cut inside, and with a mouth devoid of moisture, breathing was painful. I pulled up to meet a smooth granite wall, black and white dots glittering over a yellow blankness. I dropped down slightly and followed the toe of the wall, patiently trying to find a crack to make an anchor, scraping wherever a seam looked likely. "Fuck this," I grumbled, pulling my hood over my helmet as a shower of loose, snowy crystals made their way down the wall. Eventually, a slight fissure in the rock yielded a thin, tapered slot, good for a knifeblade. The placement was okay, but I was concerned about the rock. Together with my tools, it would have to do.

Athol jumared up, and I looked into the couloir as far as I could while catching my breath between hauling stints. Then, like a car-crash dream, it felt as if we were really doing it, slowly leaving earth, gaining momentum, moving through space. But, of course, it was nothing like space; and with a big rack to cover the options for the unknown headwall, a ledge, food and fuel, and the cold, we couldn't move like we would in the Alps.



*Andrew Lindblade at the top of the icefield at 20,000 feet. ATHOL WHIMP*

After a brief pause at the belay, Athol moved up, following the toe of the buttress for as long as possible before heading out on steep, unconsolidated snow over hard ice. He ran it out at least 150 feet before getting a screw in at the beginning of the steeper bulges. By carefully tracking the thicker ice, he avoided bottoming his tools on the granite. From my frigid, semi-hanging stance at the toe of the buttress, I watched him tie a screw off and abseil as the evening shadows lengthened.

It was a still, clear evening as we abseiled to the portaledge. Small, low clouds drifted slowly across from the Jogin peaks, evaporating by the time they reached us. In the morning we drank coffee and hot energy drinks, then dressed one after another in the 'ledge and began jumaring and hauling, throwing our body weight onto the anchor to bring up the ledge and haul bag.

We climbed on two 300-foot 8mm statics, which minimized anchors and the time it took to get them. Anchors were proving tiresome work; it often would take as long to get one in as it did to lead a pitch. Promising seams would blank out, and decent cracks always belonged to loose flakes. But eventually, after patiently scraping and searching in the right places, a placement would reveal itself. In one spot, under a build-up of ice, we found a fixed stopper from Jay and Kitty the year before.

From the end of the fixed line at 20,000 feet, Athol led up steep polished ice occasionally spread thin over granite. The haul bag and ledge hung next to me. At the end of the pitch, as Athol hauled, I helped the bag and ledge as they caught against the ice, untwisting the haul line from the other rope.

It was good to move, even if it was desperately hard work. The cold in the couloir had a great sense of permanence about it, and we crawled into the ledge at 20,500 feet on our third night like two dogs chained to our kennels during a long winter. We called this site Camp Nothing. Cold, dark and eerie, there was nothing there for us.

The next morning, after the usual three hours of melting ice and drinking, we packed the



*Looking down on the portaledge camp in the upper couloir (ca. 21,000').* ATHOL WHIMP

ledge and headed up. We were positioned at the base of the steepest section of the couloir. Athol craned his neck and studied the line before moving up on his front points, his movement focused and committed. Within a few meters the couloir went vertical, and he grappled with rotten ice, getting only poor screws for protection. I could sense him gritting his teeth, fighting his way up a seemingly endless vertical ice ribbon, his tools occasionally blowing out on the rock at the ribbon's edge.

Finally, he spied an anchor on the left wall of the couloir. A delicate few moves left and he clipped in. As I jumared the pitch, I unweighted the rope to unclip from several sideways-tensioned pieces. A swing followed the unclipping, then another; I couldn't see anything; spindrift avalanches blasted down the couloir, creating their own vicious vortexes of wind. Somehow, eventually, I joined Athol at the anchor.

We hung there, waiting for a break in the storm. Every time we thought it'd clear up, it got worse. We shivered and beat our hands, adjusted our feet (though there's only so many ways you can put your front points in), and shook the spindrift build-up off our one-piece suits. Our hoods were up, and as I briefly glanced at Athol, I saw a determination and calmness in his eyes that I had seen before. It lent me a sincere confidence, and I burrowed my head into my shoulders. There was a lot of kick in us yet.

When things settled down a bit, Athol headed off, valiantly tackling the fluted pillars of ice that guarded the final run to the end of the couloir. My thoughts turned to Kitty and Jay higher in the couloir as I looted a couple of biners stamped "KC" and "JS" that were clipped to two ice screws. In the ledge that night, we looked at the faded, stamped impressions of their initials, marveling at the fact that there were at least two other people we knew who were

crazy enough to come up here. We added ice to the pot, piece by piece, hoping they were sitting in warm cafes and climbing in the sun somewhere in America.

By the end of the day, we had established the ledge on two ice screws at 21,100 feet. We were wasted and drained by a day of being avalanched; we both nearly passed out with the first brews in our hands. We fed ice to the pot in a bid to keep drinking, and snacked on Power Bars. We couldn't muster the energy to eat anything else. We woke to the sound of spindrift ripping down the face, then drifted off to sleep again. We drank more, and, half-asleep, waited for the weather to clear.

That afternoon, we fixed 300 feet up the ice—and found ourselves at the end of the couloir. We were both slightly intoxicated as we hung on the anchor at 21,400 feet, the immense shale headwall spread out above us, the sun just dropped over the horizon. What an outrageous sight! The whole place was going off, the way mountains do, and up here, with the headwall and summit within some sort of reach, all we wanted was more good weather. We cinched our suits snug, and rapped to the portaledge.

Athol brought out a black-and-white photo of the face, and as we lay in our bags, he made calculations about our altitude and how far we had to go. Based on our progress, we thought it looked pretty good—but never underestimate a mountain. We arrived at the 21,400-foot anchor the next day and anchored the portaledge, then followed with a big brew session, chocolate and some energy bars. While Athol was sitting back in the ledge admiring the view of Base Camp and beyond, a lone rock hurtled down from above, went through the open door of the ledge, and scored him in the leg. After a pain-induced expletive, we both made the observation that he was lucky not to have been hit in the head.

We set out to fix line up to the shale band that afternoon. Earlier, Athol had fixed 150 feet up a snow ramp from the portaledge. From this point, I climbed toward a huge hanging granite tower. It was classic alpine terrain under a dark blue Himalayan sky: I moved up and slightly left on unconsolidated snow over hard ice, hoping a small gully higher up would give us an entry onto the tower. I was keen to get Athol's opinion. After reaching the end of a fantastic mixed gully, I tied the rope off on a pin and two friends and yelled for Athol to jumar.

When he joined me, we quickly decided on the best line to take. I headed off again, trying to move as fast as possible, while the sun dipped toward the horizon. I tackled a steep section of iron-hard ice, my legs screaming for it to relent. I felt utterly exhausted. A slight rest at the beginning of the ramp leading up the back of the hanging tower was cut short by the dying light. I had to move. I swung my left tool high and landed it in thin ice, the tip hard up on the rock. I couldn't get it any higher; an overhanging wall on the left prevented me from standing straight. Suddenly, as I struck a calculated blow with my right tool, it glanced off the granite, leaving my arm feeling flimsy and pathetic, and the rest of me hideously nauseated.

"Slow it down, Andy," I told myself. My crampons were scratching on the rock as I somehow managed to get a friend in a crack on the left. In the suffocating confines of the corner, snow fell in my face as I scraped around for a crack to torque a tool in. I stepped up high on my right points, waiting for something to blow out.

Finally, I slammed in a couple of friends and tied the rope off. As I began abseiling in the darkness, I looked down the vaunting abyss of the north face and saw the yellow dot of Athol's headlamp growing smaller as he descended to the portaledge.

We were at the top of the fixed line by 10 a.m. When I arrived at the anchor, Athol was racked and ready to go. He made the first few moves, his feet on solid granite, his hands on loose, slate-like shale. He soon realized he needed to cross at least two steep gully systems to gain the line leading to the final corner system. I could hear his crampons scrape over the rock as small layers of ice gave way. After negotiating some very loose, grim terrain with inad-

quate protection, severe rope drag forced him to belay. I started jumaring under a cloudless sky, my shivering slowly giving way to the generation of body warmth. The temperature hovered at about  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ ; even with chemical warmers in our gloves and boots, we were still freezing cold.

Athol was already shivering when I joined him at the belay, and keen to keep going. I handed him the rack as we traded words about our progress. Neither of us had the energy to say much. Athol moved into a delicate tension traverse and loose, unpredictable dry-tooling, eventually landing at a stance. The next few moves were truly horrible: An undercling on a loose block with one hand allowed him to reach high with the other before gaining a small corner in which he torqued both tools to move up. It was with luxurious relief that I heard him yell, "safe!" He had dealt with the 300 feet in one pitch—the most awesome display of climbing I'd ever seen. I knew that with that much rope out we must be very close to the snowfields.

I jumared fast, slowing down a bit for some tenuous freehanging moments with the rope over layers of breaking shale. By this stage, the ropes had taken a hammering, and I noticed as I slid the jumars up that we were into the core at a couple of spots. I pulled over the lip to see Athol with a smile on his face standing at the best belay on the wall. As I stood trying to get my breath back from 300 feet of flat-out jumaring, Athol was already away, negotiating the final chimney. We were keen to top out before dark.

We climbed the summit snowfields while snow fell in isolated patches, swirling around us at random and sliding down the snow cap in loose sheets. The world dropped away; we knew we would do it. Athol took my hand as I stepped on top, and I felt an enormous love and respect for him. We stood on the summit at 5:45 p.m., barely able to smile, snapping photos in the fading light, watching the streams of evening sunlight and fields of weightless, falling snow as they moved in and out of the beautiful scene.

We put on insulated jackets under our suits, inserted fresh hand warmers in our gloves, and started down. At the first abseil anchor, we rigged our headlamps and began descending through the inky darkness. By 10 p.m., we were inside the portaledge brewing up, swearing like crazy, immensely relieved we'd done the job. We could hardly believe our luck at not getting a rope stuck. We talked about how we'd rip through the abseiling and be off the wall the next day.

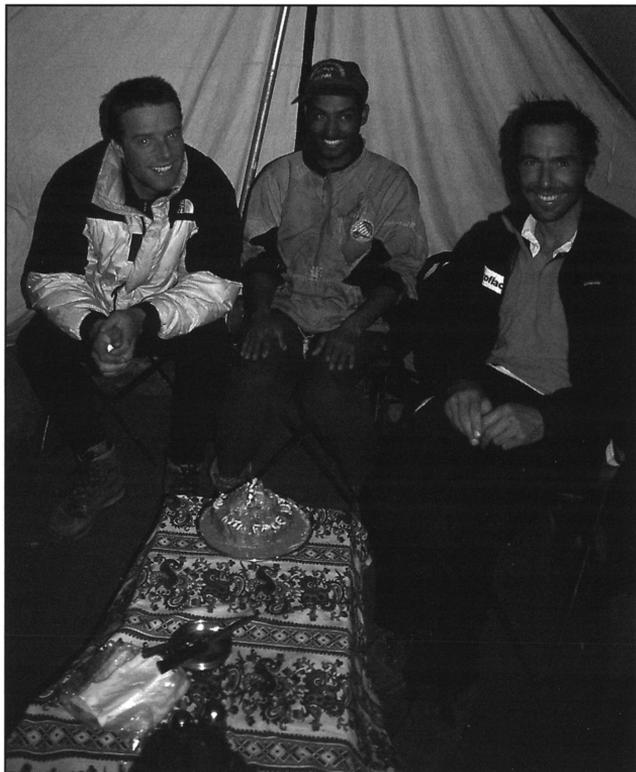
We were abseiling with the haul bag and portaledge by midday—just as a grim-looking storm boiled up on the opposite side of the glacier. A stuck rope cost us at least an hour. Spindrift began to avalanche us in the couloir, slamming us in regular, then constant, barrages. The only consolation was that we were on the way down. At one point, I nearly abseiled past Athol, who was only a few meters away, so poor was visibility and sound. When would the torture end?

As we abseiled and lowered the ledge and haulbag down the icefield and onto the lower snowslopes, darkness bled across the sky quicker than we wanted. We continued down, stripping our fixed line from the face as we went. Several times the ledge and haul bag got tangled in the chaos of rope and darkness. It would have been easy to drop the lot, but we persevered, somehow improvising when the haul bag ended up hanging short of an anchor and we couldn't hear each other, our voices suffocated by the magnitude of the snowfields. We were severely depleted; only a focused effort maintained the discipline and kept our technique wrapped tight as we descended the avalanche slopes. Camp II—and flat ground—was only an hour away.

At 9:30, we pulled into camp, staggering around like drunks. We were hardly able to stand up. I screamed out, feeling as if I were a shadow of my real self. We cranked the cookers full bore and were soon pouring mug after mug of hot liquid down our starving gullets. Even after



*In the shale band's final chimney (ca. 22,100').* ATHOL WHIMP



*Andrew Lindblade, Bell (the cook) and Athol Whimp in base camp after the ascent. PATRICIA GALANOPOULOS*

a week of eating energy bars, it was all we could manage to force down.

We stumbled across the glacier the following afternoon, wondering where Patricia might be, and whether Tristram and Erik had arrived. Then, in the distance, we saw Patricia on the moraine ridge. I dropped back a bit as we approached her. I heard Ath say "yes," and she jumped up and down, hugging Athol, then me.

As we walked the final hour to Base Camp, the mountain was in storm again. I thought of warmth and home, of the people I love so dearly. It brought a few tears to my eyes, but before they had a chance to dry, the wind had picked them up and carried them away.

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Indian Himalaya

NEW ROUTE: The North Face (VII 5.9 WI5, 4,950') of Thalay Sagar (22,650'), September 13-20, 1997, Athol Whimp and Andrew Lindblade

PERSONNEL: Andrew Lindblade, Athol Whimp, Patricia Galanopoulos, Tristram Whimp, Erik Pootjes