The North Face of Jannu

"It was like war, with teammates returning from the route as if from a battle. Jannu was showing its character." Nepal.

Alexander Ruchkin

The north face of Jannu. All photos courtesy of the Big Wall Russian-Way team.

Just two days after arriving at Jannu Base Camp on April 5, Alex Bolotov, Sergey Borisov, and Gennady Kirievsky began to work the bottom part of our route. We would use a trio of three-man parties, and our leader, Alexander Odintsov, planned to join us from time to time. Relieving each other, members of our team moved up quickly, setting up intermediate camps, with the vanguard changing when the following group approached. We gathered as a whole team only at the end of the expedition.

The first thing we had to do was renew last year's fixed ropes (in 2003 we had been defeated

at 7,100 meters because of bad conditions). It's obviously dangerous to rely on worn-out ropes; therefore we climbed with our ice axes, gingerly using ascenders on the old ropes. There was very little snow on the route this time, and we found that last year's belay/anchor stations had deteriorated badly.

At the beginning of the route we had to pass quickly across the avalanche cone. Huge seracs fell from above, sometimes 20 times per day. Such blocks of ice broke into fine pieces and scattered over the whole cone. Also, on the bottom part it was necessary to carefully pass shattered rocks so as not to drop stones on those below.

Our safest camp was located at 5,600 meters, where rockfall and avalanches didn't touch us. We set up two big tents on a rocky ledge, where it was possible to rest before the next day's effort. A plateau at 5,700 meters was studded with crevasses, but we found the way between them and marked our path with wands. Fog and clouds came often at this altitude, and it was easy to lose the way and plunge into a crevasse. But our red wands led us in the right direction.

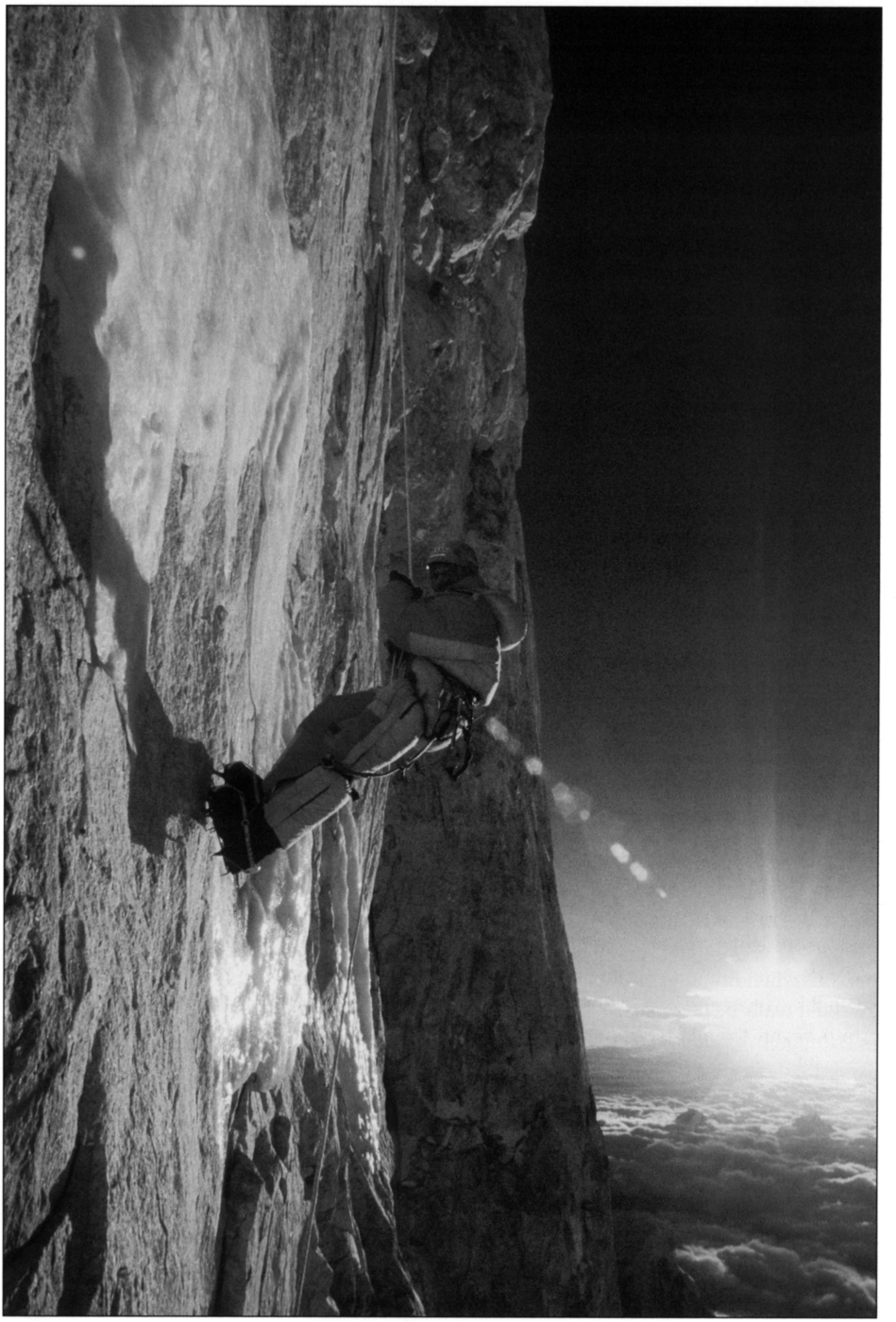
The nearness of the plateau, a windless corner, and the sun all combined to warm the ice, so our ice screws often melted out. The ropes, by contrast, melted five centimeters into the ice. Climbing the fixed ropes, I pulled out anchors seven times, and once fell four meters, but I was still hanging on the rope since the rope was melted into the ice. Belay anchors based on ice screws were also not reliable, and our troubles went on and on. I was lucky to survive.

It wasn't possible to set up a tent on the icy ridge at 6,500 meters; instead we had to set up a portaledge at about 6,675 meters on the rock. The weather was unpredictable, turning bad regularly every time we began to work on the route, and we had to "swim" in the snow like fish going against the current. In this way we won pitch after pitch.

On April 23 we reached 7,000 meters. Higher, we set up a portaledge just under a vertical wall. There was too little space to relax and have a good rest after the work. Terrible winds almost destroyed the poorly fixed portaledge, breaking the tubes, which could not be fixed. The heavy, wearisome work and struggle against a vertical wall had began.

To reach 7,000 meters from base camp we had to climb three days by fixed ropes (52 pitches), carrying the necessary equipment, meals, gas, etc. It took us more than three hours to pass four vertical fixed ropes above 7,000 meters, with 10- to 15-kilogram loads, when we were already tired after the three-day ascent. To reduce the time on this part of the route we set up a portaledge at 7,200 meters. So we reached the bottom of the vertical wall in four days. But further progress was agonizingly slow, with some days showing zero gain. Some of us became very nervous when Bolotov's group, on a windy day, climbed only five meters of very difficult rock. Would it really be possible to climb the wall, which looks like El Capitan in its length and steepness, but above 7,000 meters?

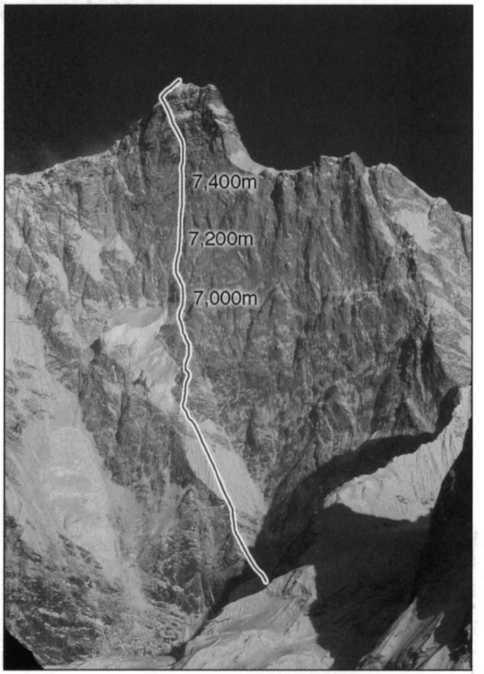
I'll describe a typical morning up high. You get up at 5 a.m. on the portaledge. You have to force yourself hard to begin moving. All occurs slowly at this altitude, and you can almost watch the brain's impulses go down the nervous system and make the fingers move. The organism —like an old computer—thinks slowly and takes time to understand commands. It really needs a new processor! You melt ice, making water for breakfast, and drink, drink, drink. It's impossible to drink enough. Then preparation during a whole hour, and finally at 8 or 9 you leave the portaledge, hanging in space on the vertical wall. There is nothing to step on, only air. You are connected to the rope by two ascenders. The cold at once envelops you; it's everywhere and you find yourself suddenly in an unreal world. Most of the ropes don't touch the wall's surface, so you expend a lot of energy.



Mike Mikhailov at 7,300m on his way back up to "ABC."

The steep 700-meter granite wall would be a problem at low altitude, but it was much harder above 7,000 meters. To climb it we had to use our whole arsenal of techniques and equipment, and we looked like soldiers with lots of ammo. We could hardly move our bodies with all the hardware draped on us. And in the thin air we climbed slowly, centimeter by centimeter, solving difficult problems, like in a labyrinth, to find an optimum way, using barely visible cracks.

All cracks ended at a smooth, steep wall, and we had to use tiny curved nuts and copperheads pounded into shallow holes. Together with Mike Mikhailov, I climbed three and a half pitches up the face in four days. Nick Totmjanin and Mikhail Pershin ascended to 7,200 meters to relieve us—a kind of vertical changing of the guard.



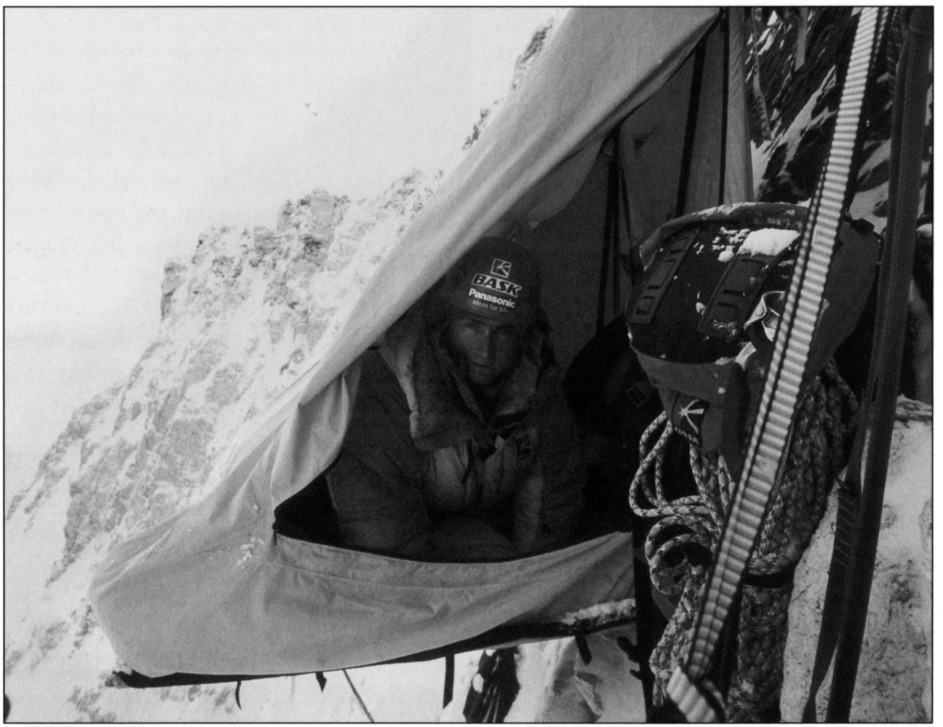
The north face route, showing camp locations. ABC was at 7,400m.

We acclimatized slowly, and all of us had bad coughs. The doctor, as meticulous as a prison guard, watched over us. Having thus received medical treatment, and having had a rest, having rehydrated, we went back upward. Meantime, Pershin and Totmjanin climbed two more ropelengths up the wall.

Five pitches of vertical terrain used up precious time needed for climbing further. So we moved the portaledge from 7,200 meters to 7,400 meters, and it became our Advanced Base Camp, where it would be possible to go to the top and back. It was only necessary to surmount the last 310 vertical meters.

The wall began to present surprises and provide work for our doctor, Mikhail Bakin. First, because of overwork, Pershin had a detached retina; he went down, almost blind. Second, while descending on the last rope, Totmjanin was hit by a stone, which broke his glasses and injured his head and a finger; his helmet had saved him and he remained efficient. Bolotov's group began to fall apart on the second day of work above 7,500 meters. A falling stone punched through Serguey Borisov helmet and into his head. A few hours later Alex Bolotov broke a rib after falling at an overhanging section. Their group went down, and the doctor surpervised by radio as Gennady Kirievsky treated the patients at Advanced Base Camp. It was like war, with teammates returning from the route as if from a battle. Jannu was showing its character.

On May 19 our group carried loads to the portaledge at 7,400 meters. Dmitry Pavlenko went down to 7,000 meters to rest a day and return with additional equipment. Mikhailov and I remained in the portaledge, hoping for further progress. The weather had turned bad and covered us with snow, and we had constantly to dump it from the portaledge so as not to be torn from the wall. The next day the weather had not improved, and we had to climb in a snowstorm.



Mike Mikhailov in the 7,400m ABC.

Our route passed through a wide chimney filled by snow; snow also covered all the equipment and cracks. Everything that accumulated on the wall above was dumped onto us. Whenever the sky quickly darkened it meant that an avalanche was coming, and we had time only to lower our heads. Our progress in such weather was like a turtle's: 30 meters of new ground per day, plus the ascent and descent on the fixed ropes. It took a lot of time to organize intermediate points and belay stations.

Three days we worked in the incessant snow. Mike Mikhailov heroically froze while belaying me practically without movement. In such terrible conditions we managed to win two pitches from the wall. During the fourth day Mike felt symptoms of pulmonary edema, and quickly headed down. It was sad that Mike, after working with me over most of the north wall and climbing almost the entire route, couldn't ascend the last 150 vertical meters. Together we had climbed the most complex and steepest part of the wall, even though he was not fully restored from the traumas received last autumn on Jannu. I never felt comfortable with the altitude, and I had to drive away the idea that I could be the next victim.

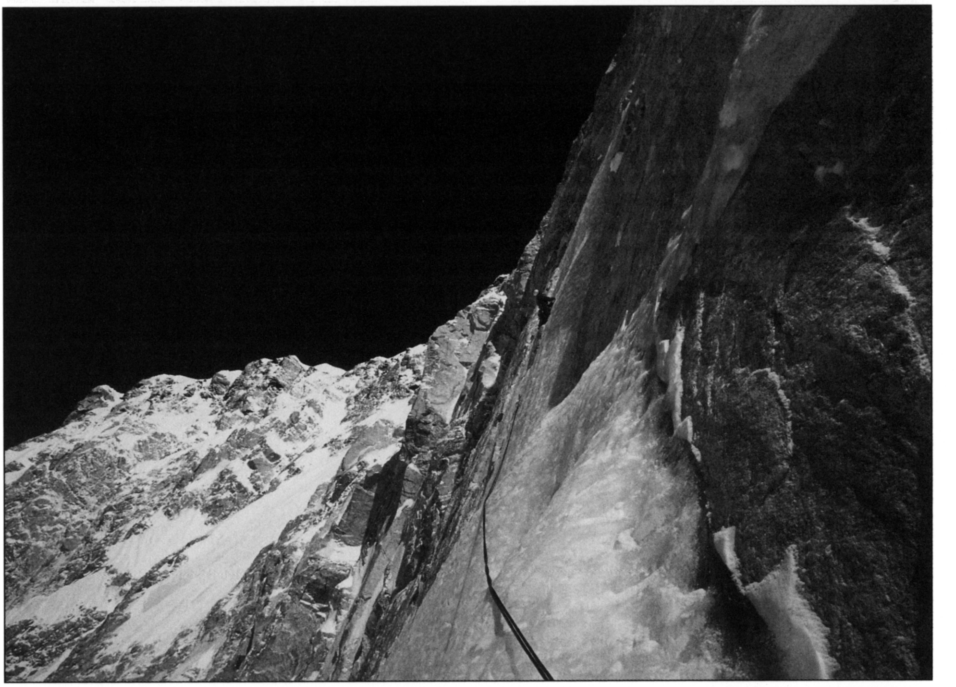
Only on the fourth day did the weather improve, after Mike had gone down and Dmitry Pavlenko had climbed up to my portaledge. It was just in time. I worked as the leader this day, too. Now the chimney angled to the left, in the direction of the ridge, and one of its walls was, of all things, less than vertical, though the rock was shattered. We could now climb faster. Pavlenko took over as leader for the next two days while I belayed him. It was very difficult to find places for the intermediate belay points because of all the loose rock.

We heard every evening by radio that we were close to the summit, that it was only three or so ropelengths to our goal. But the days ran on, and the top—like a mirage—moved further and further away. For equipment we had only the last three ropes and a few pieces of hardware. The steepness of the wall did not allow us to climb without ropes, and reaching the top became ever more problematic. If the angle would allow us to climb free and move connected with only one rope, we would do it. But it wasn't clear how much distance we still needed to climb, how many ropes were required, how difficult was the rock ahead, and whether we would have time to return. I had less and less strength. It was hard to climb the fixed ropes, and it seemed I already knew each section of rock. I was lost with the day count, and I knew the chances that I would reach the top decreased every hour. I had been above 7,400 meters now for seven days.

Our progress affected our teammates, several of whom began to ascend toward Advanced Base Camp. If we couldn't make it, some of them might have enough equipment and a chance to summit. But we still had a tiny chance, too.

The next day we planned our summit bid. Dmitry and I arose at 3 a.m., with the wind rattling our portaledge. We melted snow and hoped that the weather would calm down. Dmitry left the portaledge for five minutes and returned absolutely covered in snow. Avalanches fell from the wall like white rivers.

Our private space—1x2 meters in a portaledge—differed much from the world of stone and ice outside. We were separated by only a thin layer of fabric, but it saved us from the wind, cold, and snow. Our fragile world was easy to destroy. The huge mended hole in the ceiling and floor was a reminder of the stone that had flown through the portaledge. Dressed in all our



Alexander Ruchkin at 7,100m re-climbing old ground from 2003.

The summit of Jannu, at last.

equipment and ready to leave at any minute, we waited nearly four hours in the bad weather—and finally understood that we would not have enough time to make the summit.

We slept all day—if that qualifies as rest at this altitude. The sky cleared, and there appeared a chance to leave the next day. Borisov and Kirievsky waited at Camp III at 7,000 meters, ready to relieve us on the route, and Totmjanin and Bolotov had reached Camp II at 6,700 meters.

On May 26, at 2 a.m. and already on autopilot, in a half-dream state, we began to prepare breakfast: soup and tea. I was going to climb as the leader, not because I would like to be first to the top, but to do my best, and to blame only myself if we didn't summit. We left the portaledge at 5 a.m., deciding to go without packs, instead hanging all the equipment on ourselves. We dressed in down jackets over the down one-piece suits and did not regret this, because it was very cold. The wind increased as the morning progressed. The ascent to the end of the fixed ropes took three hours, and soon I was going up the final terrain.

There was no time to dig out a chimney that was completely filled with snow, and when my inside leg slid out, I searched for another place and ascended there. It was too cold for gloves, but impossible to work with equipment using mittens. Hands freeze 10 times faster working with metal. I constantly shook my hands trying to warm them.

I climbed two technically simple mixed ropelengths with difficulty, having to rest after each step while trying to extract enough oxygen from the thin air (we did not take supplementary oxygen). Where was the top?

Concentrating our last forces, wading to our waists in snow and rolling in it as in a bog, we floated slowly upward. Finally, a steep firn slope led to the summit ridge. Even our crampons refused to hold because they had been so worn down during the climb on the wall.

I was not sure that the top was close. After a lot of days I had ceased to hope, and only having looked around did I understand that the snow peak on the right was Jannu's summit. At 3 p.m. I reached it.

On the horizon I saw Makalu, Lhotse, and Everest. The valleys below were shrouded by clouds, and only the 7,000- and 8,000-meter giants were floating like ships on an ocean of clouds, and I together with them. I shouted from happiness that we had climbed Jannu's north face. I set up a belay station and awaited Dmitry, who ascended by the fixed rope. There was no place to stay at the summit; I had to cut down the top with my ice axe, and we sat as on a horse. The wind beat on my face, burning it. We had climbed Jannu's north face! We embraced and soon headed downward.

Sergey Borisov and Gennady Kirievsky had ascended to the portaledge, where they met us. I felt symptoms of pulmonary edema by evening, and the doctor ordered me down; Gennady helped me, at night, down to 7,000 meters. At this camp there was oxygen, and it saved my life. Next day we continued to descend, and our teammates began to ascend to Advanced Base Camp; on May 28, Borisov, Kirievsky, and Totmjanin climbed to Jannu's summit.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Nepal, Kangchenjunga Himal, near Singalila range
ASCENT: Jannu (7,710m), north face, 72 vertical pitches, 3,250m, ABO+, VI A3+. Summit climbers: Dmitry Pavlenko, Alexander Ruchkin; May 28, 2004: Sergey Borisov, Gennady Kirievsky, and Nick Totmjanin. Leader: Alexander Odintsov. Other climbers: Mike Mikhailov, Mikhail Pershin. Doctor: Mikhail Bakin.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alexander Ruchkin, born in 1963 in Kazakhstan (then USSR), is Russian and lives in Saint Petersburg. He started climbing in 1985 and works as a guide and organizer of expeditions and tourism. He is married, with two children. His big climbs include a new route on Big Sail Peak on Baffin Island, winter ascents of No Siesta on the Grandes Jorasses and other Mont Blanc massif testpieces, the Troll Wall in Norway, and various new routes on Ak Su in Kyrgyzstan.

GRANTS: This climb was sponsored by Panasonic and BASK.