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# Damp Days on the Lalidererspitze

GEOFF HORNBY

When Hias Rebitsch finally completed both halves of the long-fancied and often-tried direct line up the Lalidererspitze North Wall, it provided Austria with one of its hardest and most striking lines. Vertical for over 750m, it looms provocatively over the Falken Hut built on the Spielissjoch. The first ascent of the route was carried out in two halves. In July 1946 Rebitsch, with Kuno Rainer, traversed in at half-height from the Auckenthaler route and then climbed direct to an exit just below the summit on the NW ridge. Rebitsch returned in September of the same year with Sepp Spiegl and climbed directly from the base of the wall to the beginning of the direct finish; he then called it a day. It was not until the following year that Hermann Buhl and Luis Vigl came to the Karwendel and seized the opportunity to make the first continuous ascent of this plum line.

I first heard mention of this route whilst discussing objectives for a summer's climbing in Europe with the late Dave Newsholme. The idea faded until I read Buhl's *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage* and came across the account of his ascent. All I needed was a partner to go and I was set.

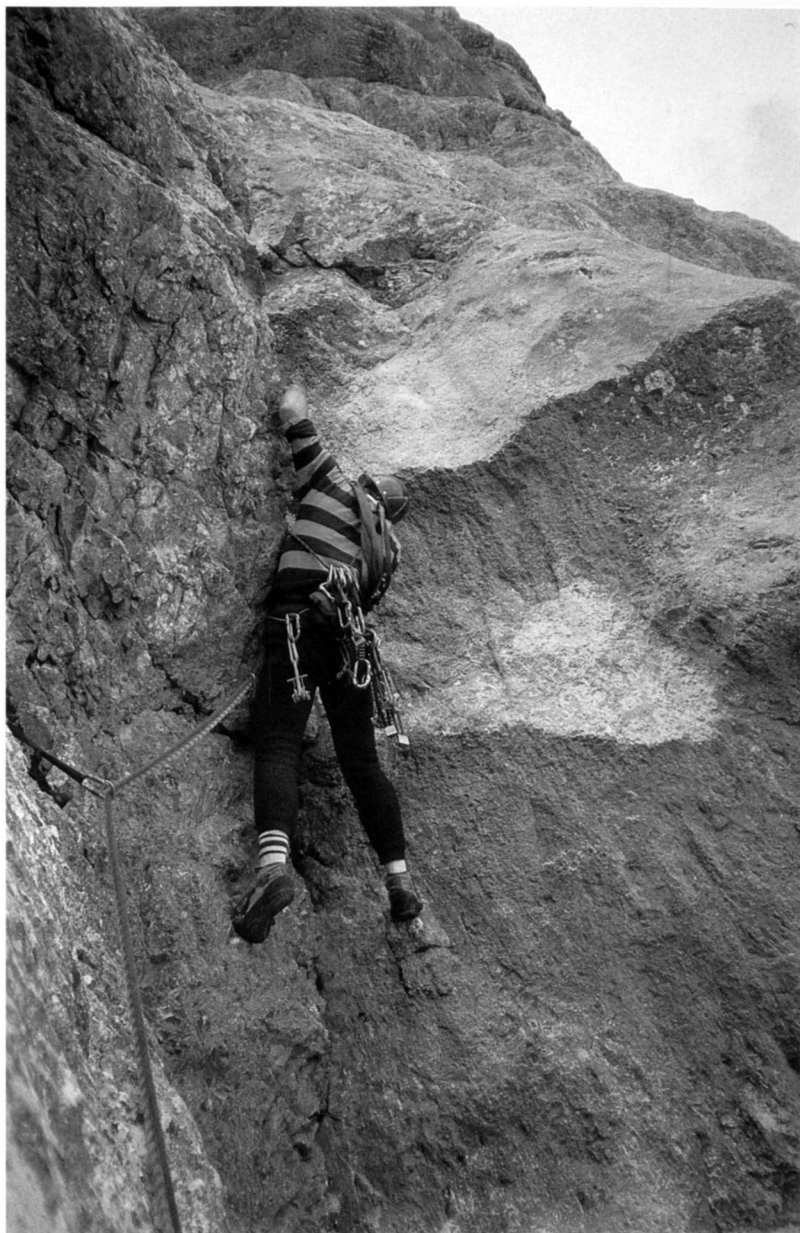
The first week of July found me sitting in a bar at Munich airport with Rob Neath and Steve Briggs. We had five days to kill and the plan was hatched.

Access to the Spielissjoch is via the toll-road to Eng. From there a three-hour stroll up through farmland and wooded hillsides brings you to the base of the great Laliderer Wall. This wall is 3km long and allows the prospective climber an hour or so on the trail to come to terms with its sheer enormity. The Lalidererspitze is the most westerly peak along the wall and is undoubtedly the main attraction in the area.

The three of us wandered up to the Falken Hut in driving rain. Our hopes of starting up the route the next day receded as everything we were wearing gradually became sodden. However, it gave us a morning to scramble along the scree-slope beneath the wall and find the start.

Back at the hut we ran into one of Austria's top young rock athletes doing the dishes. He informed us that we had chosen a nice route but that it had a lot of E2 on it. Armed with this awesome piece of information we retired for the night.

Dawn found us stamping around and massaging cold hands at the first belay point. The plan was to take it in turns to lead three pitches each, and so Steve took over the sharp end. His leads were all airy gangways and steep traverses split by short technical walls, never very hard but then never well protected. Rob took over for the strenuous crack-line that led to the huge yellow roofs. Nasty awkward climbing, up hanging grooves and cracks, left us all feeling pumped out. Up to this point we had all felt quite pleased with our progress and, with the security of the climb, we had experienced no rock-fall danger and the belays had all been sound; but things were to change.



36. Steve Briggs leading 6+ rock on the wall.

My first pitch was the key to passing the overhangs. Originally a tension traverse, it now goes free with hard face-moves across a steep slab. I completed the pitch and was assembling the belay when a wheelbarrow-full of limestone bricks bounced down the slab and came whistling past my head as I hugged the wall. The whole atmosphere changed. Rob and Steve scuttled across and I was rapidly dispatched up the front-face of the adjacent White Pillar in search of a sheltered spot. The top of the pillar was devoid of any belay and a braced position was the best that I could muster. However, a hard face pitch above brought me to the security of a large flake. Time was pressing: we had climbed nine pitches and we knew we had at least another 15 to go.

Above was a two-pitch chimney system up the side of the huge Grey Tower. From the ground it appeared to be a solid pillar of limestone, but close up it was a shattered pile of blocks with a very short life-expectancy. Steve made a couple of blinding leads to another belay-less stance on top of the tower. The first lead above was a case of 'get those pegs clipped quickly, Steve' because this was getting a little bit wild.

Once over the bulge we found ourselves in the water-worn groove that is in common with the Auckenthalerweg. One pitch up this, and the groove was shut by a huge chockstone. Rob led up the left-hand wall and had just clipped a half reasonable peg when a clatter announced the arrival of rock-fall. One chunk caught Rob between the shoulder blades and we froze in fear of his falling.

This was the point where the second half of the route broke out to the right and then headed directly for the summit. A full rope-length around ribs and bulges led to a basin in the middle of the wall. From here we could see, not only the rest of the route up, but also the brewing storm-clouds away to the south: time for haste. Two easy pitches led to the base of the next feature – the Great Pillar. Now it was my turn again to make the trail. Beautiful climbing at HVS standard for two pitches up a corner system restored some of the interest but did nothing to relieve the tension. As the other two arrived on the second stance the heavens burst. We struggled into our waterproofs and looked around for shelter. Half a rope-length to the left there was a pillar with an overlap above it. Steve led quickly across and we followed, the pitch rapidly turning into a waterfall. It was now painfully obvious that we would be here for the night.

Although we had travelled light we had taken the precaution of including a double bivouac sack in the gear. This presented a problem in that three into two doesn't go, well – not very easily, anyway. The ensuing wrestling match frayed tempers, and in the end we decided that one person would just have to sit outside. The top of the pillar was the size of your average 'MFI' coffee table, so whatever the configuration we all found ourselves overhanging the edge. This didn't seem too serious until a volley of rocks, cut loose by the rain, rocketed past the outer edge like an express train. In the end I opted to be left out permanently and just sat in my harness at the back.

Dawn arrived with a break in the weather, but it was obviously not for long judging by the cloud formations in the distance. Rob pulled over the bulge and stormed up the groove above, horrendous climbing up loose limestone with water pouring down it. This was another key pitch that gave access to the

easier-angled final section which eventually became a race against time. I suppose you could say that we won: we made four pitches before the rain with only three to go – some victory.

Behind the summit lies an orange fibreglass bivouac hut. We staggered in at mid-day, wet, cold and tired. The hut stove produced a brew of soup, porridge and candlewax which we consumed with relish. The enthusiasm needed to step out into the storm and start the descent took a long time coming.

The descent is back down the northern side via the Spindlerschlucht. Given Grade III with seven abseils it seemed like a tough proposition in these conditions. It was an epic in itself, two hours' wandering around the pinnacles looking for the start, and then a horrendous two hours of abseiling through waterfalls and down-climbing streams. We reached the hut just as it got dark, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the warden phone the necessary authorities announcing our safe return. Shortly after, three piping hot plates of pasta appeared and the world seemed a much mellower place again.

Next day it rained again and we trudged out, pleased with our success but with a lot of respect for the Karwendel.

#### NOTE

This is believed to have been the first British ascent of this route. Steve Briggs left the Alps to climb in Kishtwar and is still missing, presumed dead.