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# Annapurna Test 88

*(Dedicated to the memory of Jerzy Kukuczka)*

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Mountaineering is an extremely hazardous sport and only the lucky should involve themselves. Too many first-rate climbers perish in the mountains for there to be any doubts about the inherent risks. Almost all climbers have epic tales to tell about friends who have lost their lives in pursuit of the ecstasy and elation that accompany success on high peaks.

The story of our expedition to Annapurna I South Face in 1988 is just one more in the list of epics. My motive in writing about it, however, is that expeditioning raises important questions of morality and ethics in climbing. On Annapurna I found myself faced with an extraordinary dilemma, when I had to decide between my instincts and my unspoken but ever-present obligations towards the other members of the expedition.

It could be said that such a conflict is rare, since rescue or assistance above 7000m are unusual and not to be relied upon, but on Annapurna I was faced with what I regarded briefly as an impossible choice. Alone and unprepared, I went to the aid of members of a summit team and faced what I felt would be probable death. What was proposed seemed, frankly, suicidal. The alternative was to obey my strong instincts for self-preservation and decline to help, offering absolutely any excuse for escape down. If I had done this I would never have been able to face my colleagues again, and certainly my expeditioning career would have been at an end. I would have saved myself, but would have lost my self-esteem. In the event there was no choice and I held on to my dignity, but I feel very fortunate to have survived the experience.

## **14 October, Camp 1, 5800m, Annapurna I South Face**

I emerged from my tent at 6.30am to watch the world's premier mountaineer, Jerzy Kukuczka ('Jurek'), the expedition 'director', and his Polish compatriot Artur Hajzer ('Elephant'), climbing the S face to the E ridge, on their new route to the E summit of Annapurna I. It was a beautifully clear sunny morning as they made their ascent, which required the utmost commitment and high technical expertise. Despite the difficulty, they were progressing well.

We had previously seen the bottom section of this new route on the extreme right of the S face; it was guarded by enormous hanging ice-cliffs deluged by an avalanche. This had led the rest of the expedition to choose an alternative route to the E ridge which ascended the W flank of Tarke Kang (Glacier Dome, 7142m). We then planned to join the Loretan route to the west of the summit of Tarke Kang, where the ridge descended before joining Annapurna I below Roc Noir (7500m).

Later that day Janusz Majer, the expedition 'leader', Phil Butler ('Lobby') and I climbed from Camp 1 to Camp 2 (6700m), in order to establish the alternative route. On reaching Camp 2 we could see that Jurek and Elephant were almost at the E ridge. There had been a storm since our last visit and we spent the day digging out the battered tent and attempting to fix the broken poles. At this altitude such exertions took their toll and the next day we decided to rest, allowing the three behind to catch up. We therefore worked on the site until the arrival of our Californian friend Steve Untch ('Lunch without the L, sir'), Francisco Espinoza ('Pancho') of Ecuador – an extremely gifted and experienced Andean climber on his first Himalayan expedition – and Ramiro Navarrete, Ecuador's leading mountaineer who had been promised a new house if he succeeded in climbing yet another 8000m peak. They pitched another tent and, after a long discussion, it was decided that Janusz would join them and proceed the next day to Camp 3, leaving Lobby and me to descend to Camp 1, ostensibly to pick up more gear and then, hopefully, to follow the others up after a couple of days, at least as far as Roc Noir.

Around midday we heard the good news on our radio that Jurek and Elephant had reached the E summit and were on their way down.

Next morning Lobby and I slept in while the others prepared for departure. It was again clear and sunny, but extremely cold, and inside the tents we were registering  $-25^{\circ}\text{C}$ . At 7am we got up to photograph the other four as they left, and we then began leisurely preparations for our descent. This took longer than usual as Lobby was feeling tired and ill. Before our departure, however, we were amazed to see Steve, the strongest member of the ascent group, returning. He told us that the stumps of a couple of his toes, amputated after his ascent of Xixabangma (8027m) in 1987, were starting to freeze, and he had felt it prudent to return. The three of us therefore proceeded down to Camp 1 where we all spent the night before Steve continued disconsolately to Base Camp – his climbing ended, he thought, for this expedition.

Later that morning Lobby explained reluctantly that he felt his condition precluded any further ascent, and he would therefore have to follow Steve. After he had departed I spent the day in Camp 1, contemplating my options and waiting for Jurek and Elephant to come down from their successful ascent. By the time they reached Camp 1, I had decided to stay up. I informed them of my decision before they continued down, and they were pleased. Everyone other than the three going for the summit would otherwise have been in Base Camp. Although we had radio communication, my descent would have left the three very vulnerable so high on the hill.

The second team was not expected back in Camp 1 for a couple of days, and my thoughts therefore turned to soloing Tarke Kang. I was glad to have the Annapurna Sanctuary ostensibly to myself. It was on Fluted Peak, dominating that part of the area, that my friends Jane Richmond and Trevor Pilling had last been seen 10 months earlier. It was as if I was in their presence, and this feeling was accentuated by the incredible beauty of the place. I felt a sense of elation at my solitude and spent much of the next two days in idle absorption.

Once back in Camp 2, on my way up to Tarke Kang, I heard on the radio that Ramiro had reached the E summit and that Janusz had got within 10m

before being beaten back by a fierce wind. Pancho was 100m behind and had been similarly defeated.

In Camp 2 I spent a sleepless night and then rose early next morning to prepare for my ascent. It was again a beautifully clear and calm morning with perfect visibility. Once outside the tent, therefore, I was not too surprised to hear distinct but unintelligible shouting. It did not sound distressed and I was excited at the prospect of meeting Janusz, Pancho and Ramiro later in the day. Since their summit call we had had no radio contact, but it was assumed that this was because of a frozen battery.

In order to return from the Tarke Kang summit in time for their arrival at Camp 2, I set out as briskly as 6800m would allow. The higher I climbed, the more I could see of their descent route, and I expected to see them soon. An hour after leaving I managed to raise a typically hung-over response from Base Camp on the radio and briefed them on my plans. Two hours later I was still climbing in beautifully clear conditions, although the wind had started to rise very slightly and, as had been the daily pattern, a few clouds were coming up from the Modi Kola. I was beginning to wonder why I had not seen the others descending to my left. I could see almost all of their descent route and it was obvious that they were not on it, nor could I see any tracks in the snow. I continued to climb. After another hour I reached the first of the three summits and, deciding that the middle summit was the highest, I climbed it. The view was stupendous: Tibet and China to the north, India and Pakistan to the south and west, and the mountains of Nepal stretching to the east. I felt tremendous.

Once I had descended out of the wind, the entire route from Camp 3 to Camp 2 was visible. But there was no sign of life. Suddenly full of apprehension, I got out the radio and called Base Camp. Elephant answered. He suggested that something must be amiss and that maybe I should go across to Camp 3 and check things out. To me this seemed a suicidal idea. I reminded him that he had thought the ridge between Tarke Kang and Roc Noir, below which Camp 3 was situated, was one of the more treacherous parts of the route – and he had crossed it roped up with Jurek. He was now suggesting that I should solo it despite the dangers which, as I had already pointed out, were heightened by fresh avalanche tracks across my path. He became more urgent and suggested that I had certain responsibilities. Jurek then broke in, speaking passionately. He pointed out that I was one and they were three, and he wanted to know who had spent the previous night in Camp 3. I conceded and closed the radio down. I was absolutely horrified. How could I have agreed to probable self-destruction? Even if I reached the other side I had no gear for survival, and I would be too exhausted to return to Camp 2 that day. The wind was now definitely rising. I called and asked to speak to Lobby, but I realized that there was nothing he could say. How could anyone help with such a dilemma? I just had to go.

I set out full of apprehension, a feeling that was strengthened when I soon came upon a double cornice, my first serious objective hazard. I couldn't work out its configuration but started to cross gingerly. Suddenly I fell through the crust, up to my armpits. I thrashed around trying to get an axe in. It refused to bite, pulling instead through the crust to the soft snow beneath which kept collapsing around me. After a terrifying 10 minutes of frantic effort, I eventually

managed to extricate myself. Once out, I lay beside the huge hole gasping for breath, taking another 10 minutes to pull myself together. I called Base Camp again and informed them of my terrible fright, telling them that I would be calling every 10 minutes from now on. If something happened there was nothing they could do, but I wanted them to know where I was. Without really thinking about it, however, I immediately adopted a more aggressive approach to what had previously terrified me. The ridge which I had to cross required a traverse along a 100m line, about 10m below its summit. The rising strength of the wind helped to press me towards the slope, making it a little easier, and I ignored the 1000m of air directly beneath me. An hour later the worst was over.

Once on the other side I began to look for Camp 3, which was partly hidden by some very nasty-looking seracs. I eventually spotted the blue Gemini and, as I approached, I saw the amazing sight of my friend Janusz sitting in the doorway, grinning delightedly but with blood all over his face. He just sat there looking very pleased as I approached the tent.

We exchanged greetings. (The Poles love greetings!) Inside the tent, as I knelt down, I could see a body in a sleeping-bag. It was breathing irregularly. 'Who's that?' I asked. 'Pancho,' Janusz replied. 'Oh,' I said, 'How is he?'

'He's had an accident,' said Janusz. I had already guessed that. By now I could see his badly swollen face and could smell a strong, disturbing, odour. I asked Janusz if he was unconscious. He said no - he was only sleeping, as they had been forced to bivouac the night before, high on the summit ridge.

My thoughts naturally turned to Ramiro. Janusz said that he was almost certainly dead, but did not explain exactly what had happened. In what could only have been in hallucination, Janusz had been convinced that he had seen me or Jurek, he wasn't sure, beckoning him down the summit ridge. He had followed with Pancho behind him. Ramiro, however, had chosen not to be directed in this manner and had decided on an alternative line. Janusz, on reaching the spot where he had seen the apparition, found the beginning of the fixed rope.

Once Janusz's face had been wiped clean I discovered that the blood was coming from his gums. They had been lacerated from eating ice and had bled into his beard, which he had then rubbed on to his face to make a grotesque mask. I called Base Camp. I had not reported back since my scare on the cornice well over an hour before, and they were understandably relieved to hear from me. I explained the situation and Jurek asked to speak to Janusz. After they had spoken for five minutes in impenetrable Polish, Janusz announced that we were to go down immediately. This utter lunacy was more than I could countenance. I took the radio and forcefully explained that there was no possibility whatsoever of returning across the ridge that day and keeping them both alive, let alone myself. An afternoon storm was brewing and it was already snowing lightly. There would have been absolutely no chance of reaching Camp 2. I explained that I did not think Janusz was fully *compos mentis* and that Pancho was in no state to move. They believed that moving down would improve Pancho's chances of survival, but I disagreed and told them that he would never survive a descent that afternoon. They had to accept this. Janusz then asked me for gas cylinders. It transpired that the early-morning shouting had been to

request more gas and sleeping-bags, as well as some food. Of course, this had been completely lost on me. I had been climbing solo in the expectation of returning to Camp 2, and I had travelled as lightly as possible. We therefore had only two sleeping-bags between three, and less than half a cylinder of gas – a woefully inadequate amount, especially as we were all badly dehydrated.

By now Pancho was awake and talking rapidly in Spanish. I examined him as best I could. His hands were badly frostbitten and he had no use of his fingers or thumbs. He had also lost his spectacles though, on closer examination, his facial injuries were fairly superficial. He complained of internal pains, but there was nothing that I could do. He had apparently fallen 30m down a slope, missing gaping crevasses on either side, miraculously bouncing the right way each time. From the first-aid kit that Jane Richmond had given me the previous year I took a temgicisic tablet (a strong analgesic) and told Pancho with exaggerated mime (he spoke no English) to put it under his tongue and not to swallow it. Despite the language barrier he continued to talk volubly and, to my consternation, immediately swallowed the tablet. I then gave Janusz – still sitting there looking bemused – some painkillers which made him feel better. He soon cheered up and started brewing a small, inadequate drink. It was the most we could afford under the circumstances. We knew that in our position a serious, prolonged change in the weather spelt certain death, and we had to be frugal with our paltry gas supply. Later, and with great difficulty, I succeeded in getting Pancho properly into his sleeping-bag, only to have him fighting to get out again in order to have a pee. He struggled to the door of the tent which I unzipped for him, and he then unceremoniously urinated all over Janusz's rucksack.

It was an extremely uncomfortable night with the three of us squashed into what I would regard as a comfortable one-man tent. An inch of hoar-frost on the inside meant that any movement was met with a shower of ice particles. Having no sleeping-bag I spent the night sitting up, rubbing my steadily freezing toes while the other two slept fitfully. My new Asolo expedition boots had let me down. Next morning was hell. I had to put on Pancho's boots and crampons for him, and he was the only member of the expedition who had ancient strapped ones. It took me ages and my hands froze.

We travelled as lightly as possible, leaving behind all unnecessary equipment including the ropes. Pancho asked about roping-up and I pointed out that each of us stood a better chance unroped. The climbing was risky enough without being dragged off by a probable fall by one of the other two. My intention was to cut big steps and holes for ice-axe shafts, back across the ridge. As we were earlier than on the previous day, the ice was crisper, though it was still a time-consuming and exhausting task. But it was the only method which gave the other two a chance. To my great relief, Pancho was able to hold his axes in the palms of his hands without requiring his fingers, and he followed me closely, always waiting 10 or 15m behind each time I stopped.

Eventually, and with great relief, Pancho and I reached relative safety. Janusz, however, was in difficulty; he seemed exhausted and he had stopped moving. After shouting to him I decided to proceed with Pancho, and we left good tracks behind us. It was a good hour before Janusz caught up and I was

very relieved at his sudden reappearance. But then he always was a wily old man of the mountains. Our descent was painfully slow. The storm the previous evening had completely obliterated all tracks, and a new way had to be found down to Camp 2. The seracs below, which could not be seen until we were almost upon them, posed the main difficulty. These great ice-cliffs dropped suddenly from a fairly gentle slope, and finding our way through them proved time-consuming and difficult.

In search of safer ground, I started to descend an ice-cliff towards what looked like a snow-bridge crossing a crevasse at the cliff base. I climbed down, facing towards the slope, using both my axes. On reaching the snow-bridge, still facing inwards, I tentatively prodded behind me with one crampon. Slowly I put more weight on the bridge. It held. I then put my other foot down, slowly placing even more weight on the snow, straightening my arms to hang full-length on my axes. Suddenly, the bridge collapsed. One of my axes pulled and for a brief second I held on one axe only. That then pulled as well as I plunged down into the crevasse beneath me. I dropped about six metres down a vertical ice-wall before my fall was broken by a downward-sloping ledge. My plunge then continued down the ledge, but more slowly. I swung my axe and eventually arrested my fall after another six metres. Large amounts of fine snow cascaded down on top of me and choked me. The axe still held but my rucksack, which I had undone around the waist because of avalanche danger, was now trying to strangle me too. I methodically sorted myself out, terrified that more snow would come down. I could find no footing. Everything I touched with my crampons collapsed into the void, and I did not want to move too abruptly for fear of losing my grip altogether. Eventually, after moments of sheer terror, I managed to find a tentative footing by bridging across the crevasse. I was virtually doing the splits between the two ice-walls, but I could see my position as the clouds of falling snow cleared and there was now more light. Laboriously I started to climb up. In order to avoid the serac above, I needed to emerge from the crevasse on the downhill side, and this started to worry me. I was able to get some leverage on the poor snow above and, to my extreme relief, I eventually escaped on the safe side. I was in an exhausted state and collapsed on the snow, panting, retching and shaking.

Once I had recovered I looked for Pancho and Janusz. To my astonishment I could see them some way off. They had obviously given up on me and were on their way down. I just couldn't believe it. Logic would have told me that there was nothing they could do for me, and that they had no other choice but to press on if they were to survive. At that moment, though, it was difficult to understand, and I was completely dumbfounded. Soon I had caught them up. Exhaustion precluded discussion and we continued onwards. We were making very slow progress and the day was racing past. The terrain was still awkward and dangerous and Janusz twice fell into small crevasses, one of which I had pointed out to him. He attempted to jump across but disappeared up to his waist, frantically swinging his axe before arresting his fall and then painfully pulling himself out. We continued down and eventually used our diminishing battery to call Camp 1 and ask for general directions. Steve and Elephant had left Base Camp immediately it had become apparent that there

was an emergency, and had reached Camp 1 by climbing through the night in record time. Elephant told us that Steve, in a great feat of determination, had continued and powered his way up to Camp 2.

Elephant was unable to help with directions, however, and although visibility was still good we just did not know where we were in relation to Camp 2. Then, suddenly, we heard a voice and could see that it was coming from a tiny red figure way down to our left. We started towards him and I could soon tell it was Steve. After 20 minutes we could make out his shouted directions, but as we got closer a change of wind direction took his voice away and we were left on a very nasty slope with distinct slab-avalanche potential. As we went across the snow was cracking around us, and it was with considerable relief that we reached more substantial ground from where we could see Camp 2 quite close by.

Steve greeted us on our arrival at the camp but, on hearing that we had no sleeping-bags, he explained that he had to go back down immediately, as there were only two in the tent. He had been unable to bring anything up with him, but there was gas and food and we would be OK until the next day. Within minutes he was gone. Our rescue seemed to be retreating in front of us.

The three of us were exhausted. Pancho's fingers looked terrible; the blisters of the frostbite had more than doubled in size. He also seemed very disorientated and it was difficult to communicate with him. Janusz seemed relatively all right physically. He was very tired but could rely on the depth of resources at his disposal. I was relieved to see that he was now fully *compos mentis* and set on survival. For myself, I was exhausted. The incident in the crevasse had forced me to dig very deeply into my own reserves. I was also extremely dehydrated and couldn't feel my toes in my right foot. No amount of massaging brought back any sensation. We put Pancho in a sleeping-bag and I climbed into the other, giving Janusz my bivi-sack and duvet. He was quite content to eat my treasured stash of marzipan and brew. Then, after taking one of my Tremalzipan, he slept soundly.

Next morning had us rested. Pancho seemed more distant but was apparently still able to understand what I required of him, and he had stopped asking about Ramiro. I put on his boots and crampons again and tried to explain that I would help him down the fixed ropes. I couldn't quite think how I was going to do this, as parts of the ropes hung almost free. My fears soon proved unfounded, however, as again he seemed to retain all his technical ability and was able to use the palms of his hands to grip the rope after I had attached his descendeur. The problem came at the bottom of the first stretch of rope. A deep crevasse required a very athletic leap which in our state was obviously impossible. I had tied some spare rope on to the bottom of the fixed rope, and this enabled us to cross the crevasse with some degree of security. But, when Pancho reached the knot joining the two ropes, everything halted. How on earth could he take off his descendeur and reattach it without the use of his fingers? He worked it out, though. He pulled up the end of the rope and with his almost useless hands threaded it through his figure-of-eight descendeur. It was simplicity itself, yet his mind seemed a million miles away. We then worked our way down slowly. Even though we were descending, we had to stop and rest

frequently, sometimes after only six strides or so. Eventually, however, we could see Steve in the distance on a plateau. He had brought the medical oxygen cylinder with him and had set it up. We still had to get to him, as he needed to conserve his own strength and could not approach us. After a tremendous effort we finally reached him, and at last I felt that I could hand over responsibility for Pancho to his friend Steve.

With the others following behind more slowly, I then continued down to Camp 1 where I met Elephant who told me that we were to proceed straight down to Advanced Base to see the doctor, Lech. As it would soon be dark, I departed again immediately the others arrived at Camp 1, hoping to get through a dangerous section before nightfall. I succeeded in this, only to be faced with the badly crevassed glacier which had changed out of all recognition since I had crossed it almost two weeks earlier. After getting lost several times, I eventually arrived at Advanced Base, Lech's head-torch having guided me on the last stretch. Several hours later the others arrived, and next morning we continued down to Base Camp. Unsurprisingly, I felt badly in need of a rest, although no more so than Pancho. However, the next day the porters arrived and we broke camp. It took us five days to reach Kathmandu, stopping only to eat and sleep. Pancho was able to walk only on the first day and it became apparent that he would have to be carried. Two extra porters were hired to take it in turns to carry him down in a specially-constructed basket which they carried on their backs.

From the time I set off from Camp 1 to Tarke Kang I had not had a single rest-day until reaching Kathmandu 10 days later, but I felt tremendous.

Janusz was met on the walk out by Sofia, his beautiful wife, and his condition then improved exponentially.

#### *Pancho's Hands?*

But Ramiro was never seen again. The last photograph which I took as we recrossed the ridge descending from Camp 3 shows Pancho tired and resting behind me. In the background rises the E ridge of Annapurna I and a small blue shape marks Camp 3. Below this, an indistinct red dot can just be discerned. It may be a blotch on the film, but Ramiro was dressed in red and it might be him.

On the way down, I became aware that all the radio conversations had been recorded by a Polish television crew making a film about Jurek. This disturbed me more than a little, as I wondered just how studied the responses had been from Base Camp in our radio conversations. I have yet to hear the tape, but it will certainly be fascinating to hear myself *in extremis*.

This is my story of the expedition — my epic. Every member has his own story, though. When Jurek was asked by his Swiss publisher, Juliusz Komarnicki, about me, his answer was: 'Henry. Oh, he just climbed as high as he was able, and then climbed down again.'

Six weeks after returning to Europe, Janusz asked me if I would like to join him and Elephant in trying a new route on the W face of Everest. This time I hesitated before saying yes.