
Climbs



Jim Curran *Trango Tower* 2005
Oil on canvas
Private collection

STEVE HOUSE

Pure Alpinism on the Rupal Face

I don't know how long I slept on the bus roof. The rough road woke me to the realization of how uncomfortable I really was. I got up to shift my position. When I raised my head I saw a big mountain. At first I saw only the base. Then I looked up, head bending back to behold the summit. I shivered with happiness, excitement, and relief. Before me was Nanga Parbat.

Diary entry for 30 June 1990

Nanga was my first love. And like any first love I was innocent of what she would demand of me in time. I worked to make myself worthy of her. I would travel around the world many times in hopes of gaining her favour. I climbed many mountains for her.

I began my third trip to Nanga Parbat by recruiting alpinist and fellow mountain guide Vince Anderson. Seven expeditions to Pakistan have taught me that a wet springtime usually means a wet summer. We set our sights on early September, a traditionally dry time between the departure of the monsoon and the arrival of autumn.

Due to the cost of a permit for an 8000m peak we also needed a larger group. A little asking around and I found two Americans, Scott Johnston and Colin Haley, who were interested in sharing expedition expenses and making an alpine style attempt on the Schell Route. Perfect, since this was the same route Vince and I would acclimate on.

Total expense for the four of us was less than US\$ 10,000 plus airfare. We would pay for our expedition from our own pockets. No sponsors means no obligations. Not having obligations to make a movie or provide an internet reality-show would allow us to concentrate on climbing the Rupal face. Vince and I agreed that anything less than 100 percent of our concentration would carry the Rupal face across the line of the possible to the impossible.

On 30 August, a month after we'd arrived in base camp, the barometer rises to a new high and the clouds begin to disperse. By starlight we watch as the seemingly impermeable mist disappears and slowly reveals the great wall. We make a phone call to a meteorologist in the USA. He dives into the computer models and comes back to us confident that a strong high pressure system is building.

31 August is clear all day, for the first time. Snow avalanches roar down the face all day. We wait. We are acclimated, rested, and packed. The first day of September dawns clear and we're already a few hours into the climbing.



50. Nanga Parbat's Rupal Face showing the House-Anderson route and bivvi sites. (Steve House)

The wall is great, but it is not steep; at least not on the first day. The ropes stay in the pack and we climb more than a thousand metres to a rimaye below the first major difficulties. The sun is strong and snow avalanches continue all afternoon. Several times we have to cross their paths, pretending to time them as we race across.

The second day starts early. Well before dawn we cross another rimaye and front-point up the first gully, which turns out to be the wrong one. Down-climbing, we return almost to our starting point before locating the correct goulotte. I'm in the lead, unroped. But icy conditions force me to stop, build an anchor, and take out the rope.

Vince leads out. Steady and solid. He carries the light 10kg pack and I follow with the heavier 18 kg rucksack. We climb five pitches to the crux headwall. First light is breaking over Vince as he heads up into the crux pitch. Thirty minutes later he finally finds a good piece of protection, just below the crux moves, and lowers back to me. It is too difficult and too

steep to climb with the rucksack at this altitude. Energized, I rush up, fresh and without any extra weight. The pitch is steep and the protection very minimal; it is physically and psychologically demanding.

The rest of the day goes quickly and easily. We make our bivouac in a safe place with several hours of light remaining.

It is dark when we awake and start off. Today promises to be a long one. The wall is steep now and places to bivouac are difficult to find. Our worries are temporarily suspended in the grandeur of a sunrise that neither of us will ever forget. K2, Broad Peak, the Gasherbrums, Masherbrum, K7, and K6 are all visible on the horizon as another perfect cloudless day dawns. We climb for hours on the 50-degree névé. Conditions here, at nearly 6000m, are close to perfect.

After four hours of soloing I place a screw in an ice-filled crack, take off my pack, and flake out the rope. Vince racks, ties in, and leads off. From here our route deviates from my 2004 attempt. Now we will head up the central pillar on the face. This climbing is fun. Good quality rock, secure gear, and delicate veins of ice lead to the icy prow of the pillar.

Now we switch tactics. We climb with running belays, one screw on the rope between us. Conditions continue to be excellent. Every five rope-lengths we take the packs off, eat, drink, and change the lead. Morning turns to afternoon. Clouds boil up and the sun disappears behind the peak. In the shadow we climb on and on.

When darkness comes we are forced to belay individual pitches. The ice is steeper and harder now. Our muscles are tired and our picks seem dull. I lost count of the pitches we climbed today at around 30. Now I lead off, heading up and right, looking for a spot to bivouac. I'm tired and know that now I must focus. I must be at my best. Mental energy drives each kick, each swing is directed with care.

Picks are twisted into cracks. Pitons are hammered home. Front-points mount rough edges. I have to pull and pull hard. The climbing is steep and mixed. I traverse past a bulging block, around into a corner, and stem my way to the top. With weak arms but a determined mind I swing my tools into the 60-degree ice at the end of the pitch. I set up the belay, yell for Vince to start climbing, and slumped in my harness I dry heave (vomit) for five minutes.

Eighty metres of traversing later and I'm in a perfect bivvi cave. Vince crawls in. We're both stupid with exhaustion. He starts the stove and I begin to dig a place for the tent. Midnight finds us in our sleeping bags and eating the daily meal of dried potatoes and soup.

Sunshine fills the tent with warmth and the night's frost is soon melted and dripping into our faces. I start the stove, already thinking about the day ahead. Above us is a section of the wall that might be unclimbable. Our photos do not reveal a solution to this section. Through the binoculars it appears steep and impenetrable. If we can't climb this section it will be impossible, or at the very least epic, to descend the 3000m of wall below us

with our small rack of gear. I worry that the climbing could be difficult and slow here at 7000m. A few hard pitches could take all day. One bad bivouac could drain us completely.

We are committed. We are beyond the reach of any help, necks firmly positioned in the noose. But I have a feeling, an intuitive notion that we will find a way through, a raw confidence that we can climb whatever we come across. Maybe it is just a hope. Some would call it vain recklessness. But uncertainty is a crucial ingredient to our journey. Without uncertainty we have no adventure. If not for true adventure we wouldn't have come here. But now we must simply climb. We ascend easy névé towards the start of the rocky wall. I am in a hurry to see the terrain that will determine our fate. All I see above is steep, snow-covered rock. There must be something else, a weakness in the citadel. I rush, but the altitude checks me to a slow pace. Patience, I say to myself, patience. At the base of steep rock I hack out a ledge and remove my pack. There is only one more possibility; one small section of the wall that we haven't been able to see. Now we have to rest, drink, and eat. The tension is tight and we hardly speak.

As soon as I can, I shoulder my pack and head off, traversing straight to my right. Slowly my eyes gain access to a hidden corner. The most beautiful ice rolls upward in a frozen cascade. I holler back to Vince and start up the ice. Fifty metres later I'm smoked, having just soloed ice to 90 degrees with a backpack. My enthusiasm might have been the end of me, and Vince. But now I place two ice screws and lower the rope to my patient, understanding partner.

Pitches of excellent ice follow one after the other as we race darkness, looking for a place to spend the night. Just before dusk I belay Vince up and warily float an idea. 'What about up there?' I point to the corniced crest of the pillar. 'I could lead a pitch to the crest and maybe we could find a spot to chop a ledge. It'd be easier than trying to dig into this.' I kick the steep, ancient ice at our feet. We can't see any better options.

'Alright. I'll belay,' says Vince. And I'm off; climbing quickly, focused on not making any mistakes. 15m above my last ice screw I plant my right tool firmly in the ice and start chopping at the cornice on my left. 'If I can just get on top of this thing,' I think, 'maybe we can find a good place to bivvi.'

Finally, with a notch chopped into the cornice, I swing my leg up and start to pull myself over. The cornice breaks and I swing back, falling onto my right tool. The cornice crushes Vince.

'Fuck. Shit. Ohhhhhhhh,' he cries.

I get my left tool in again and swing up onto the ridge crest, standing in the place where the cornice broke.

'Are you okay?' I yell down.

'I'll be fine,' Vince replies, but his voice does not sound fine. But what else can we do? I continue along the ridge for 20m where I find a solid bit of rock and build an anchor by the light of my headlamp.



51. Steve House and Vince Anderson at the base of the Rupal Face on the first morning of their climb. (*Steve House*)



52. Looking down the Rupal Face on the morning of Day 3. (*Steve House*)



53. Vince Anderson soloing on Day 3, a couple of hours above the bivvi spot. The pair had just crossed an area threatened by séracs – note the scoured ice behind Anderson. (*Steve House*)



54. Anderson climbing one of the first pitches of the central pillar proper on Day 3. For most of the day the pair climbed on running belays, switching to full belaying after dark and climbing on until midnight. *(Steve House)*



55. Anderson higher up on the pillar on Day 3. 'We've been simul-climbing and I'm out of gear so I'm belaying Vince to me to make the transfer.' *(Steve House)*



Left

56. 'We worked really hard to get good bivvis each night where we could lay flat and have a proper sleep. This shows the extent to which we went to accomplish that goal. It was exposed, but without any wind or weather it was quite a comfortable night's sleep. Good view too.' (*Steve House*)

Vince is bruised. The biggest piece of the cornice missed him, but a smaller piece hit him squarely in the shoulder. We carefully arrange the anchor and begin the task of preparing the bivouac. It is a small perch and we are glad not to have to weather any storms here. Its precariousness really hits home next morning as we prepare to rappel back to the main line of the route. Yet it was plainly the only place to set up the tent and it was fortunate we followed our instincts to its sanctuary.

It is day five and we're above 7000m now, climbing slowly. Our intention is to have an easier day and find a good bivvi as early as possible so that we can eat, drink, and rest before the summit attempt tomorrow. At around 7400m we find a snow arête. I recognize the place as we have now rejoined my 2004 attempt with Bruce. We quickly excavate a tent platform and begin the job of taking care of ourselves.

At half past midnight the alarm goes off. Vince immediately starts the stove and we begin the wait. I stare at the flame, willing it to burn hotter. Ironic how the more you need things to work well, the less well they work. The altitude takes its toll on the mechanical as well as the human.

At 3am we are tying into the climbing rope and I am leading off. One hundred metres of mixed climbing starts our day, pitches that would be enjoyable at a lower altitude but here it is difficult to make even the easiest moves. At the top of the rock we tie the climbing rope and most of the gear to a big boulder, continuing with one rucksack and a 5mm static rope for rappelling. We also carry food, water, and clothes. The one without the pack breaks trail.

The couloir we are following steepens and the snow starts to get deeper. Soon we are wallowing like buffalo in the deep, loose snow. I am worried about the stability of the slope. Vince says that he wonders how long we can work this hard at such an altitude. I feel my hope of a few hours ago slipping away. The dream of completing the route and standing on the summit of Nanga Parbat seems so distant now, and we're so close.

We both go quiet. Some mutual signal of determination passes between us, unspoken. I push the snow down with my ice tools, push it down again with my knees, then stomp it with a foot until I can raise myself up a few centimetres. Sometimes I fall back, but slowly I make progress. After five minutes, I step aside and Vince has his go. For over two hours we work like that, one behind the other.

Eventually the sun starts to colour our rarified world. I look down and see that two and a half hours have gained us only 60 metres. Impossibly slow. But we work on. Maybe because we know the day is young; maybe



57. The welcome at Tarshing, the village at the roadhead. Several hundred schoolchildren lined the path. (Steve House)

because we have come too far, worked too hard, been too lucky to throw it all away now. I'm comforted by our determination but see the summit as something well beyond the line of impossible.

With the sunlight I notice a different texture in the snow near the rock wall on my left and move towards it. With one crampon scratching for edges on the rock and one in the snow, I start to make faster progress. Soon we have gained another 60m and the snow supports our steps. We are happy, however any confidence we had that we would easily reach the summit has been shaken. With few words we continue trading the work of breaking trail toward the top of the Rupal face.

At 7600m plus I'm stripped to my shirt and sweating. I'm not wearing gloves or a hat as I work steadily up toward the top of the wall. I can smell the summit now but it still seems impossibly far. We're both tired and Vince especially is sleepy. But there is no place to sit or rest. The wall drops away below us for almost 4000m. We are surprised to be able to look directly down on base camp, another world away.

The wall breaks like a four kilometre-high wave of stone and ice. The transition is indescribably sudden. I step from the steep snow couloir over

a ridge and I can see down across the top of the Merkl gully. My gaze travels over to Nanga Parbat's Diamir side and the mountains beyond her northern flank. I am washed by a sense of relief. It is as if I've been kept in a small room for many days and suddenly I've stepped outside. I'm in a place with planes other than the vertical.

Above us is a complicated array of gullies, pinnacles, and false summits. We scrape out a place to rest. To take advantage of the break I remove my socks and hang them on the rucksack. It has been very warm and my sweat has soaked my socks; I am worried about the cold afternoon and night ahead.

When I ask how he's doing, Vince just holds his fingers like a pistol and points it to his head. I laugh. If he still has his sense of humour then he is still in good enough shape to climb. I, though, am feeling good. I've eaten and had water and my strength is still holding out. When we start again we notice that our pace is slow and our altimeter is reading only 7700m. Hopefully it is wrong. We want to be on the summit by 2pm and now I realize how much the deep snow set us back. But the weather is good; clear skies, no wind.

At 4pm we crest a false summit and see, finally, the true summit. We both sit on a big flat rock. It is the first place we are able to sit and relax without a belay in six days. Vince lays back and soon starts sleeping. I put my dry socks back on. That finished, I shake Vince awake and follow him as he starts off up the last 50m of our dream mountain.

Never have my last steps to the summit of a mountain been so emotional. The light is low and the massive shadow of Nanga Parbat is cast far out into the valleys to the east. My crampons crunch into the summit névé, Vince follows just a few paces behind. I kneel in the snow just a metre below the top. After all I've gone through to reach this point: the lifetime of devotion to alpinism, the physical work to make myself strong enough, the psychological journey to discover if I am courageous enough, the will to see it all through. Now it seems almost sacrilegious to step onto the summit.

A few moments later Vince arrives. I stand to face him. As he approaches I take one step backwards onto the summit of Nanga Parbat; Vince joins me in an embrace. Tears well up in the corners of my eyes. They freeze and fall to the snow at my feet, becoming part of Nanga Parbat, as it became part of me so many years ago.

Summary: An account of the first ascent of the central pillar of Nanga Parbat's Rupal face in pure alpine style by Steve House and Vince Anderson, 1-8 September 2005 (VII, 5.9, M5X, WI 4, 4100m). The two Americans were awarded the 2005 'Piolet d'Or' for this exemplary climb.