From Mountain 111

TEARS FOR TRANGO

by Dag Kolsrud

Like so many other projects, the idea of the North Pillar of Great Trango Tower was conceived at home in the living room. The spark was kindled by a silhouette photo of the pillar in the centrespread of *Mountain 49*. During the autumn of '83 we formed a team: Stein P. Aasheim, Hans Christian Doseth, Finn Daelhi and myself. A formal application with a cheque for $400 was sent to the Ministry of Tourism in Islamabad, and after the usual interminable problems with gear, sponsorship and logistics, we finally left for the mountains in June 1984.

During preparations we frequently discussed the question of sponsorship, of selling ourselves and the expedition to industry to realise our aims. With our academic background the possibilities of self-finance were small, but then our ability to keep the moral question on a theoretical level was correspondingly greater! However, the seeking of sponsorship was instructive and gave us some knowledge of the psychology of the business world, and the hard work of preparation taught us a lot about co-operation and made us feel closer to each other, both physically and mentally.

Our negotiation of lowland Pakistan was comparatively painless, despite the usual inroads with bureaucracy, the ravages of illness, and a hair-raising bus journey. Eight days after our arrival in Pakistan, the four of us trudged into the mountains along the wild, grey glacier river of Braldu, along with Ragnhild Amundsen, Iver Gjelstenli and Haavard Nesheim (who were to climb the American Route on the same mountain), our Liaison Officer Zamir, 30 porters each carrying 25 kilos, and the "slave-driver" - the porters' skilled chief and leader, Sirdar Issa.

The approach took seven days, through dangerous and unpleasant terrain; up and down along loose valley sides, partly along the wide, ice-cold Braldu river and partly across gravel-covered glaciers.

The view from the valley bottom was limited for most of the approach, but on the penultimate day there opened up from the end of the Baltoro glacier a most awesome panorama. Colossal granite massifs reared up in front of us and above them slim spires pierced the sky. Far away at the other end of the Baltoro glacier, we could see the brooding forms of enormous 8000m snow covered giants.

We erected base camp in a small, flat, sandy hollow between moraine ridges and the mountainside, with a clearwater stream just a couple of hundred metres away, a view towards Masherbrum in the south, and the summit of the North-East Pillar of the mountain to the north. We paid off the porters and quickly fell into the routine of base camp life, frying our bodies in the morning sun before quickly diving for down jackets as the sun disappeared behind Trango.

We knew little about the pillar, and had planned our climb with no more than three or four photos (taken from a distance, and showing only the upper part) to help us, and some quick phone calls to foreign climbers who had knowledge of the Trango massif. Yet already on the approach we discovered

Above: *The author contemplates his bedtime drink suspended above the aweful abyss. All photos Kolsrud collection.*

Opposite: *Hans Christian Doseth bat-hooking across to the bottomless crack on the headwall of the North East Pillar of Great Trango Tower.*

Left: *Hans Christian Doseth arranges his Walkman prior to the hooking session across the headwall.*

Opposite Top: *The climbing was dogged by uncertain weather. Doseth is seen starting out on the upper part of the route, which involved a detour to the right.*

Opposite Bottom: *Climbing on the lower buttress was often in meltwater runnels, which forced the team to use aid.*

our first mistake when climbers on their way out told us that the pillar faced not towards the Baltoro glacier, but almost away from it. We were very glad to find this out at this stage, otherwise we would have been a rather confused and worried gang, searching on the wrong side of the mountain!

The morning after we arrived at base camp, we anxiously plodded for almost an hour across the stone-covered glacier between Trango and the Cathedral massifs to take a closer look at the route. What if it turned out to be quite different from our expectations? But no, not only did it meet our expectations, it exceeded them. From a distance of one kilometre several crack-free sections remained unsolved, even with the aid of binoculars. We took photographs and eagerly discussed the size of the climb, and the time required. Whilst we were doing this, the sun disappeared from the pillar - it was one o'clock.

After a few days of acclimatisation, we started ferrying all the gear up fixed ropes to a large snowfield, which stretched several hundred metres further toward the foot of the pillar. From this point we estimated that the climbing would progress slowly enough for us to acclimatise as we gained height. From what we could see, there would be a lot of aid climbing, and we had come prepared with a large amount of equipment: two double Gramichi Cliff Dwellings (Portaledges) which would provide shelter, 6 ropes, 20 litres of paraffin (in case we had to melt all the water we needed), food for four for 20 days, and at least as many kilos of 16mm film and photo equipment, in addition to the climbing and bivouac gear.

We stood at last, with all our gear at the foot of the Pillar, feeling as well prepared as we might when confronted with 1.5 vertical kilometres of granite. But our broad climbing experience, from the Troll Wall and El Capitan to the Himalaya, made us feel competent to face most things. With this official attitude, we pounced on the first pitches and moved up to what was to be our third camp above the ground. It got steep up there for the last few pitches. To start with there were easy angled slabs and the gear had to be jumarred up on our backs in several stages. It was a relief to change over to hauling. We hung our Camp 3, made from Portaledges, in the bottom of a several hundred metre long crack system on the right side of the pillar front. We were very tired but glad to be in vertical surroundings. The climbing had been more or less free, with a little aid on wet rock up to the cracks we were hanging in.

Further up the crack there was a lot of free climbing at VI+ with some aid sections necessitated by melt water in the crack. The line was continuous and elegant, the rock of the best granite - an aesthetic pleasure indeed. Unfortunately, the good weather didn't last and showers moved in, but the temperature stayed over 0°C and there wasn't any wind.

We climbed with two leading and two hauling, moved camp, filmed and/or had a rest day. We fixed ropes and stretched them between camps either as high as they would reach or to a suitable new camp site, then moved ourselves, with the luggage following. It was rather like a large caterpillar. On some days we made good progress, other

GREAT TRANGO TOWER

North East Pillar

The line of the Norwegian route is marked.

Great Trango Tower (centre) rests amid an ocean of perfect granite. With recent developments in the Chamonix area in mind, perhaps this area will become a Himalayan crag climbing ground.

days only one and a half pitches. While we were on the lower pillar it rained every day, which soon slowed us down.

We set up Camp 4 at the top of an enormous detached flake with big blocks and a cornice. From here we traversed over to the left side of the pillar and the exquisite Yosemite-style cracks ended. Camp 5 was suspended on top of another detached flake above some slim diedres.

The rock steepened and became rougher as the route followed a defined melt water line falling from the great cornice at the foot of the upper pillar. We were trapped by an enormous diedre which unfortunately offered wet, dirty and undefinable technical climbing. Leading up to Camp 6 were some pitches of A3/4, and as they were situated right in the middle of a stream they took most of a day each and necessitated the considerable use of skyhooks and copperheads. The last part of the lower pillar was made unpleasant by large amounts of water, and sludge slides coming from the cornice, but at least it wasn't dangerous.

After 11 days and 25 pitches, we finally stood atop the rotten snowfield and gazed up at the near vertical headwall. The snow provided no shelf; it just lay there over an easy angled but sharp ridge where the lower pillar and headwall met. The flanks of the ridge plunged steeply down on both sides into avalanche gullies and icefields.

We had reckoned on a week for the lower pillar, but changing conditions and weather, inefficient organisation of gear and tasks, and the rigmarole of filming had slowed us. Maybe we had underestimated the mountain a bit too, even if we had been able to do the lower part in half the time with better conditions and less baggage.

The headwall looked terribly steep, and we estimated it to be about 500 metres high with at least 15 pitches. This allowed for a detour to reach the diedre/chimney and crackline which fades away about 150 metres above the snow ledge.

It took us four exhausting days and five pitches to reach the crack system. We arrived there by climbing in a bow out to the right and back. Two good peg cracks petered out and from there hooking, drilling and pendules to the right led to an Africa-shaped flake. There then followed some bat-hooking up to the left, broken by a Thank God Ledge and an expanding flake which brought us to the foot of the crack. During the last bout of long and heavy drilling, only Bruce Springsteen's *Working on the Highway* pumping in our ears from the Walkmen kept us going.

Gradually it became clear that we were running out of time. Our food supplies were rapidly dwindling despite a starvation diet, and by the time we reached the crack we only had enough left to last four people for four days. There was still a long way to go, over unknown ground, and it could easily take four days to reach the top with at least three days to get down. Abseiling would be the only method of retreat if we wished to recover all the gear, including the photographic equipment and all the exposed film. Prospects for success looked dismal.

I had hinted earlier at the possibility of two of us descending with as much gear as possible, thus giving the two remaining more chance of reaching the top. It would be better for half the team to reach the very top than for all of us to make it only 90% of the way.

Still, it's one thing to acknowledge a concept intellectually, but quite another actually to put it into practice. Of course nobody was keen to return, and we discussed the matter for a couple of days. In the meantime we continued, and the crack opened to an offwidth of such difficulty that lack of protection and general exhaustion made it impossible to free climb. In addition, the ropes were stretched out, and if someone was going to turn back it had to be now, before we moved our camp upwards. With no other fight than that of personal internal conflict, between one's own desires and ambitions and a wish to be back on the ground with all its comforts, we reluctantly came to a unanimous decision. Stein and I returned early one morning, while Finn and Hans moved the camp up the fixed ropes. It was a sad moment, even though it helped to see the other two continuing high above us. We got down in the evening of the second day and staggered wearily into base camp to gorge ourselves.

Through binoculars, we saw Hans and Finn reach the top five days after our descent. We had followed their progress thoroughly towards the top, and they'd

made particularly good progress over the last two days. Our exultation that day was great, and we lit an enormous bonfire after dark as a signal of joy in addition to the torch messages we sent every night. We were pleased that our split-up had achieved results. I had every faith in Hans and Finn, but even so I was impressed by their achievement, especially in view of their hunger and exhaustion.

During their days up to the top we photographed and filmed them, and from base camp we could see them abseiling from the upper part of the headwall before they disappeared out of sight behind a shielding ridge. We agreed that Stein should leave in advance for Islamabad, whilst I went over to Urdukas to do some filming and photography. We expected the summit pair to be down on the evening I returned to base camp, eight days after we had split up. They did not come that evening, and by the morning after they had vanished without a trace. Careful investigation with binoculars pointed to an accident, and that they must be lying out of sight by the foot of the pillar, or in a crevasse. On the evening of the eleventh day I reached Skardu in an exhausted condition with a letter from our Liaison Officer saying that a helicopter had to be put at our disposal.

The authorities would not grant me a helicopter inspection, as this was only given to transport the sick and injured, and not to search for corpses. It was not till after I had made contact with Stein in Islamabad and the Norwegian authorities were informed about events, that things started moving. Because of friction between civilian and military authorities and a lack of helicopters, it took three weeks to get two flights into the mountain. On the first trip I pinpointed the bodies of Hans and Finn by the foot of the pillar, together with sacks and gear. But ten days later, when the second flight was organised to take them out after requests from Norway, bad weather and an avalanche had swept away all trace of them except for a few bits of protection, pieces of rope and the Norwegian flag.

We began to realise that there was nothing more that we could do. The experience, achievements and victory had become quite meaningless and could give no comfort.