The Learning Process

Living the dream

IAN PARNELL, England



Julian Cartwright on Mt. Hunter at the base of the second rock band, day 3, with the crux ice pitch visible above. IAN PARNELL

The year 2000 was my chance to live the dream, to quit my job and head to the hills. In Britain, we have what I believe is the finest grant funding system for mountaineering in the world. The British Mountaineering Council administers government funding and the Mount Everest Foundation provides support from resources collected from the publicity following the 1953 first ascent of Everest. Together, they encourage small exploratory expeditions, and, with the typical British shoestring budget (and if one ignores the prohibitively higher Himalayan mountains), it is usually possible to get half your trip's costs covered. With this support and a winter of overtime at work, I was able to scrape together the pennies for my summer in the mountains.

Before this year, I had only been on one expedition, a visit to the Karavashin area of Kyrgyzstan which, together with a few lessons on El Cap, had wetted my appetite for the bigger walls. This year's plan involved three trips to very different mountains, each of which would push my wall skills in very different ways.

The ethic linking each was to maximize the adventure. To my mind, bolts completely

defeat the challenge of mountaineering; the only time a bolt kit was taken was in Greenland, where I managed to take it out of the haulbag and hide it. On that trip, we climbed capsule-style, fixing four ropes, and in India, we had two 60-meter ropes for our planned capsule-style attempt. For Alaska, our only deviation from pure alpine style was a portaledge; we opted to both squeeze into a one-person ledge, a decision we would later regret.

The following memories of what became an extraordinary year are very much my own personal reflections. These three trips were made with a wide range of friends who represent an extraordinary collection of talented British climbers plugging away in some of the more adventurous corners of the world.

ALASKA: MOUNT HUNTER. THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS.

The north buttress of Hunter surely must be nirvana for hard mixed climbing. Some of the steepest rock and ice in the Alaska Range—and all that history, seeping through the perfect granite. I had to keep pinching myself because, on my first trip to the mountains, it really looked like we might complete our own route on this sounding stone of Alaskan climbing.

My last lead had started with a neat little section of strange ice stuck in blobs to the face before I tension traversed to a thin crack. Here, the free climbing had quickly given way to aid beneath a choking veneer of ice. The only worry had been swinging through a roof. Beneath it loomed a huge snow mushroom that threatened the belay below.

Jules Cartwright, my partner, could do little but count lucky stars across the Arctic sky. He'd already dealt calmly with an amazing goulotte of inch-thick ice. The confidence gained from seeing Jules in his element and in control doing the business 50 feet out from his runners was palpable. Now Jules was back in aiders, hanging out against the perfect alpine blue sky as the rock began to overhang. Could life get any better?

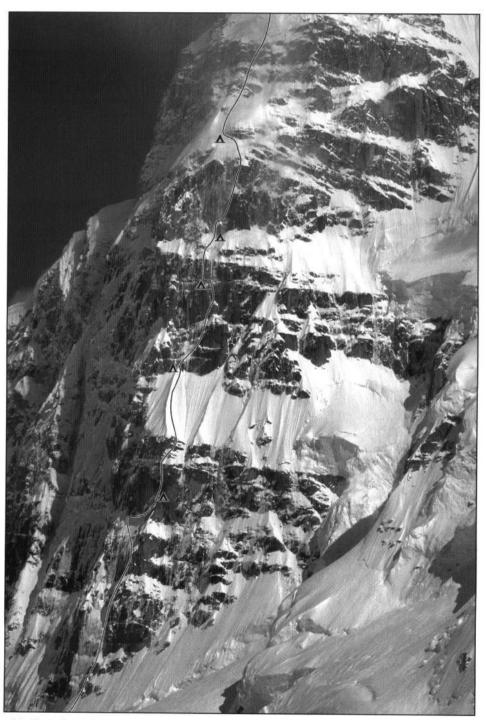
Bang! I was folded in half. The force pulled me down hard onto my anchors, as I felt squeezed into the snow.

"Clip in, Jules!" I cried out, desperately knotting the rope as I fought to stay conscious.

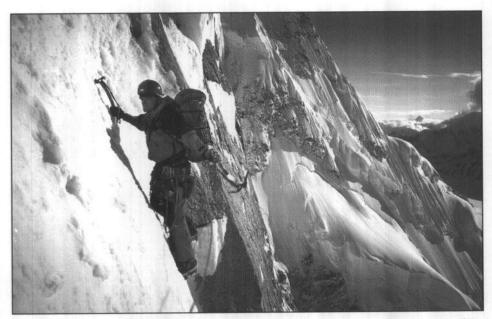
It's funny how life's path can suddenly twist, but three days up Hunter, and now with fractured ribs, things were looking a lot more serious. I looked up; Jules hung next to the remaining half of the snow mushroom that he'd accidentally touched. The look in his eyes spoke volumes. After five years of oh-so-close attempts in the mountains, he knew that our Alaskan dream was close to the breaking point. As I slowly accustomed myself to a shallow breathing pattern, I felt the same desire quietly return. The climb had changed. Jules would have to lead all the hard pitches. I was gutted, having relished the prospect of pushing it further on lead. Instead, I rationalized that my role now was to focus my efforts on breathing and moving up, whichever way I could.

Three days later and 500 feet higher, the pain had subsided to a background hum—that is, until one of us shifted his weight at the bivy. Oh, why had we brought a single ledge? We had been trapped head to toe for 45 hours in our cradled shelter, Jules's feet tenderly perched atop my lumpy rib cage. While the spindrift avalanches intermittently darkened the walls of the flysheet, we eked out our packet of sugar-coated cookies and recalled the amazing climbing below.

I would eventually spend a day and a half at the "rib-tickler stance" as Jules struggled with the hardest pitch of the route. Time-consuming, awkward, tied-off aid invention led to within 15 feet of easy ground. Here, though, lay a nightmare slot: perhaps 12 inches wide, flared, and coated in verglas. Jules tried everything, including trying to aid off axes in a quarter inch



Mt. Hunter's northwest buttress, showing The Knowledge (Cartwright-Parnell, 2000). IAN PARNELL



Julian Cartwright on day 3 in the middle of the second rock band, following a traverse to the "Rib Tickler" stance. IAN PARNELL

of ice. I gauged each attempt by an imperceptible creep of rope before a flurry of expletives and the inevitable crunch of ribs as the ropes came tight at the end of another fall.

We had spoken to Mark Twight at base camp, who told us that only fools risk falls in the mountains. We began to feel like court jesters as we eventually notched up about seven. Jules couldn't quite explain what happened to finally get him through the nightmare pitch, but with all his expletives it could only be dubbed "The Scream."

By contrast, the third rockband approached perfection. The initial pitch involving mixed climbing, at times overhanging, to a pendulum to a hanging tongue of water ice, Jules stretching to a hanging belay as I began simulclimbing. The final pitch had looked blank from the base camp telescope, but sealing the name "The Dream," a perfect A1 crack cleaved the smooth headwall.

Now, at our junction with the *Moonflower*, we waited for the storm to clear. The day before, we had been joined by Koji Ito and Hiroyuki from Japan, who had battled through the spindrift of the *Moonflower*. Unable to speak in the storm, we could nonetheless feel the spiritual bond grow. We were amazed at their stoicism: in their fragile hammocks, they considered retreat, but, seeing us stay put, decided to hang in as well.

As conditions improved, we set off for the Bibler-Come-Again exit. We had planned to cache gear at the Cornice Bivy and make a dash for the summit before rappelling the *Moonflower*, but now our personal summit became the Cornice Bivy itself as we waded through three feet of avalanche-prone snow over black ice.

How do you describe those summit moments when shared dreams are realized? We had few words at the time, but the sense of relief in knowing that we had been able to grasp our slim opportunity was obvious. So, too, was our pride in our route, *The Knowledge*, which called on our entire combined mountain skills, plus a few new ones invented on the spot.

GREENLAND: THE THUMBNAIL. FRAGILE MOMENTS

Most climbs' final pitches ease back, rock replaced by scree slopes with the summit usually a nondescript hump. The Thumbnail was different. Leaning out from the final steep layback, my hand curled around from the vertical to a square-cut ledge. My head broke through into the blinding sunshine as I pulled up onto the summit ridge from the shade of the northeast wall. Feeling like a fish on dry land, I staggered around the table-width ledge, heading for the high point. As I reeled from the sunshine and the surprise of the horizontal, I glimpsed at my altimeter and almost fell back down the final pitch. I squinted again: 4,490 feet! After all the talk, perhaps we really had climbed the world's biggest seacliff.

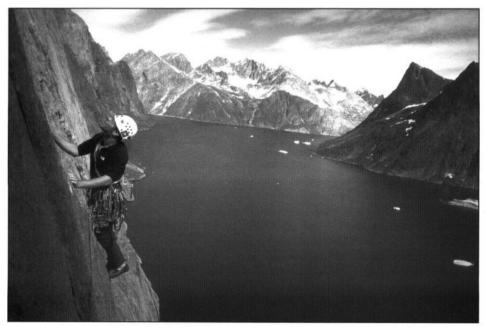
Things hadn't all felt that good, though. Eighty feet up pitch 13, things had looked very bad indeed. Why was it always the thirteenth pitch? Up until I met the flake, the pitch had been a dream: rock of the purest gold, locks and jams straight in and biting. It is very rare to get perfection, especially with 2,000 feet of air calling out beneath you.

But then, there was the flake, the height and width of my front door and half the thickness. A gentle tap confirmed it was only attached at its top edge. Nasty! If the flake went, I'd be squeegeed against the rock; if I survived that, the ropes would be guillotined, and then I'd never feel their reassuring tug at the end of my fall.

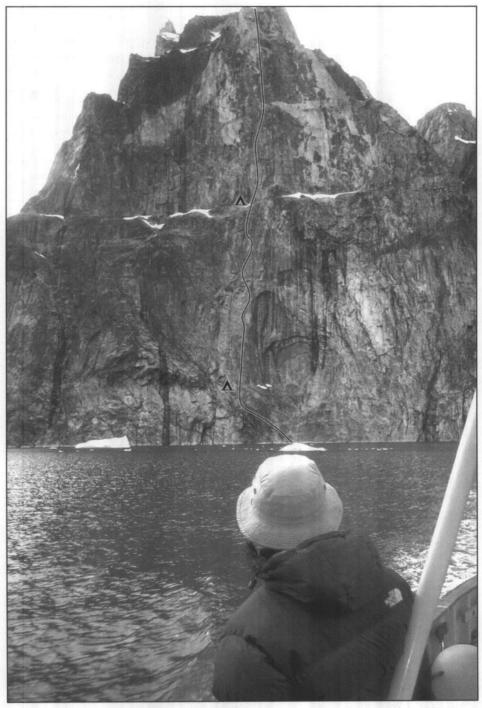
I looked around for alternatives, but, with not another ripple in the sea of granite, I was paying a high price for perfection. It was up or give up. I had to at least put up some sort of battle, even against the teetering Goliath of a flake.

Holding my breath, I gingerly gripped either side of the flake and inched my way up. Maybe this will actually work, I thought as I reached the halfway point.

Crack! A line ran horizontally through the stone above my fingertips and I began to fall



Gareth ("Gaz") Perry on an E3 pitch on the second day of the climb, high above Torssukatak Sound. IAN PARNELL



The 4,500-foot east face of Agdlerussakasit, a.k.a. The Thumbnail—the largest sea cliff in the world? IAN PARNELL

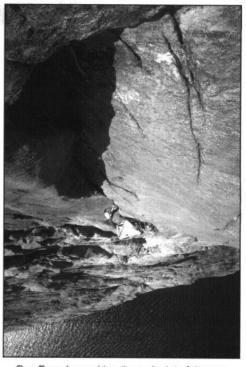
backward, hands and feet on either side of my tombstone. Six inches out from the cliff, the flake miraculously stopped. Like a rusty hinge, the top four-by-three-foot section sagged against its soon-to-be divorced other half. Luckily, the laws of physics had broken down: balance for this moment had the better of mass and momentum. I recoiled from this chaos theory, shaking my way back to solid holds.

Frantic instructions and pleas were made to the crew below, cowering beneath the haulbags. As I hyperventilated, the emergency planning filtered through my brain on automatic. Make myself safe: equalize gear. Move ropes; move belay and belayers 30 feet. Shrapnel: protect bodies with haulbag.

When the flake went with a little teasing, it was a ship-sinker. It looked like the base of The Thumbnail was under fire, the fjord peppered with fountains of impact.

Darkness had crept in during the excitement, and I lowered off through the smell of sulphur. The scar left behind would prove on the morrow to be the crux of the route, but at least today I had made progress. No one would get chopped on this pitch now.

Our "secret weapon" when the going got tough, it was of course Ben who was



Ben Bransby working the redpoint of the crux pitch. Ian Parnell pulled off the flake, rapped, and in the morning finished the pitch via some aid. Gear was left in situ. Gareth Perry jugged the lines; Bransby fired the pitch (5.12c) on his first try. Gareth Perry

called up to deal with the flake pitch after I'd pried open the door. Twenty years old and on his first expedition, Ben rose to the challenge. With few holds left to play with, Ben did what he does best: he began improvising. A flared hand-fist thing, a knee bar in the blank groove, a foot slightly shaking out on an invisible smear, and he was at the top of the scar. Another shake ran up through his body; with one hand palmed on nothing as far as I could see, he made a hurried lunge for proper holds. That hasty slap betrayed a hint of desperation, but the flash was in the bag. Ben had found the key to The Thumbnail.

As I lay on the summit with my head dangling over the edge, the memories of the last five days' climbing kept flooding back. I watched Matt making his way up the final few feet of the wall. Matt had been a tower of strength, leading the other crux pitches. A "veteran of gnarl" with ten years of expeditions to cold and suffering, he was reveling in the fun of The Thumbnail.

Gareth ("Gaz") was at my side now, raving. This was his first expedition, too, and his first summit. There's something unique about a really good summit, and Gaz was fully tapped into that feeling. His ear-to-ear grin soaked up the energy rising up the vertical mile from the water below.



Ben Bransby on the summit ridge of The Thumbnail. IAN PARNELL

Together, we crowded around the summit point and fired up the radio. We knew Sandy and Ben's dad, Matthew, had made the effort to climb a small mountain behind base camp to see us top out.

"I'm sorry to report the climbing is over," I sighed across the airwaves. "We can't go any higher. We've reached 4,490 feet on the summit of the biggest fucking cliff in the world!"

Screams of shared elation beamed across the fjord from their summit two miles away.

I handed the radio to Ben. I knew there were few parents as proud as Matthew. I let them share their moment as I psyched up for what would be a long descent. I took one last look around the 360-degree view stretching 200 miles out onto the ice cap. Beyond words, above all the pain we had left below, this answered all the questions, all the whys. This was the moment.

Back at the half-height ledge, I lay exhausted on my portaledge. The 16 abseils into the night had taken its toll on all four of us, but it was the thought of the morning radio call that was really sapping my energy. I knew I had to make that call, but the strange events last evening had my mind working overtime: a single powerful spotlight below at base camp, the sound of motor boats echoing around the fjord, and no one answering the evening call. I didn't want to make the connection, or be the one who brought the horror of what might be happening below up to us on the ledge.

I forced myself to click the switch. The radio crackled into life and a faint voice came through. Sandy's voice was quiet and distorted; maybe the radio was going wrong after all? I fiddled with the controls, hoping for a technical let-out, but Sandy's words still echoed through hollow.

"Are you safe ...?

"Er Yes."

"...Matthew?"

A pause. The walls began to close in. The huge fjord suddenly felt claustrophobic; my

mind froze while everything seemingly rushed by.

"Dead Matthew's dead."

"Just give me a moment," I whispered.

I dropped the radio. There was absolute silence as I stared out toward infinity across the early morning cloud inversion, the sea and sky unable to meet. Older, I turned to Ben, but he already knew, the tears streaking his face.

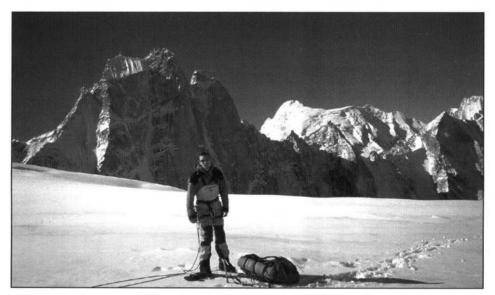
Back home, we tried to make sense of Matthew's abseiling accident. No mistakes were made; it was just simple bad luck. This life of mountains we have chosen at times feels too cruel. Together, we tried to share the load of Ben and Matthew's family's grief. Little things; we hoped they helped. And we remembered Matthew, the eternal enthusiast always exploring, looking for adventure and fun.

All of us were soon climbing again, and in two weeks I would be off to India. We couldn't really explain why. But the darkness that overshadowed everything about The Thumbnail Expedition began to lift. We remembered that summit and its fragile moment.

INDIA: THE ARWA SPIRE, A SIMPLE LESSON

A female friend of mine back home had suggested that male mountaineers, obsessed with tales of macho survival, always exaggerate their expedition writings. Of course, I knew she was right, but nevertheless, at the moment, I couldn't help feeling like I was being buried alive. Suspended in my portaledge, 800 feet up an unclimbed peak in the Himalaya, I knew that I was not in excessive mortal danger, but my dreams for this expedition seemed crushed.

You've seen the cover of last year's AAJ, with its perfect granite pinnacle of Arwa Tower. Well-hidden behind that is something even better. Back home, my partner, Kenton Cool, and I had spent hours scouring our photocopy of the elusive Arwa Spire, tracing and retracing a seemingly invisible line: imaginary seams connecting blurs we hoped were corners and dust specks that might be flakes. We filled the gaps with self-belief, eventually persuading our-



The Arwa Spire, object of Kenton Cool's desire. The northeast ridge rises from the left. IAN PARNELL

selves we could manage the hardest, most direct route on the mountain: the central pillar of the north face.

Kenton had reality from the previous year's expedition, when Mick Fowler and Steve Sustad climbed the Tower, to base his belief on. I had my two successful expeditions thus far to inflate my ability. Now, listening to the rhythm of the snow avalanching over our suspended cocoon, the joyful naïveté of those evenings' planning seemed far away, replaced instead by the brutal truth that we were about to "fail." Even crueler was that we knew the line probably does go.

Our taste of the technical delicacies the day before included thin ice, tension moves, topstep-teetering aid on axes, and crampon-scraping Scottish mixed. But we were only just beginning to nibble at the base of the real meat of the Tower. Twelve days in and at least another nine to the summit. We just didn't have the time—or did we?

The spindrift spilled in under the flysheet, drifting over my down bag. I paid it little heed; there wasn't much melting going on at minus 20.

A decision had to be made. Continue to the last days of our trip and see if we could beat the race of time to the summit, or retreat now and save ourselves for an attempt on the much easier but quicker left-hand colouir? To add impetus to our decision, I had been unable to keep what little food I had eaten in for longer than a few minutes. With no warning, my guts took their revenge at least four times a day. Kenton laughed—it was usually him who was ill on these trips—but I worried about what affect this inability to take on energy would have another nine days up this tower.

"It's better to make decisions while you can, rather than try to rationalize when the body and mind are truly breaking," I told myself.

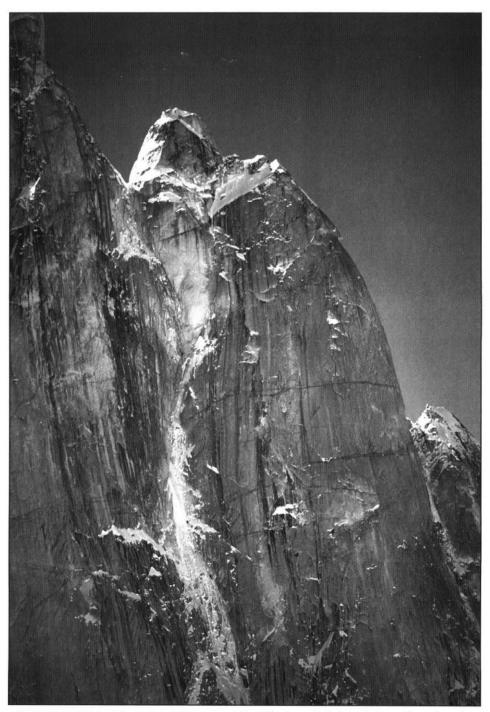
The pain and struggle of the last two weeks to get to this point made the right decision a hard one to make. We'd spent nine days just reaching the base of the tower—nine days hauling 200 pounds of gear through thigh-deep snow on a mere 40-degree slope, or stumbling head over heels as our haulbags took us crashing amongst the moraine boulders. Often, we would end up side-by-side on all fours, our lungs clawing for the thin air, alternatively cursing and laughing in despair at the stupidity of the game we'd set ourselves.

Down on the glacier, our backs to the wall, we weren't talking. There was little to say. It was depressingly easy to descend in minutes the first pitches that had taken us days to climb and haul. My mind was blank, my soul empty as I wandered in zigzags, the horizon blurred. As long as it was downhill, away from these mountains, I didn't care.

Slowly, however, my perceptions began to clear. Whether it was the rhythm of our retreat march or the very emptiness of my heart at this moment, I didn't know, but I was struck by the beauty of everything that surrounded me. The glacier was a bowl filled with light dancing amongst ice crystals in the air. It ran in rivulets of melt channels across the frozen ice that pooled at the base of giant mushroomed erratic boulders perched atop plinths of ice up to 20 feet above us. As the melt increased, we splashed amongst jagged penitentes, the glacier surface fractured into sharp waves frozen at their crest.

Each way I looked, another wonder reached my eyes, lifting my spirits. I had stumbled into nature's secret gallery of treasures. Even the terminal hours of moraine displayed their own delights: an iron ore infusion scored fire through rock, banding golds, siennas, and crimsons, gilding the monotonous grays. I was too tired to laugh, to dance, but I felt like a child discovering reflections in water for the first time. Each turn brought new discoveries.

Head-torches left amongst the equipment pile at the spire's base, we pressed on into the night, balancing the sound of rushing water to our left with the rough touch of granite boulders.



Al Powell and Dave Wills on the right-hand couloir of the Arwa Spire's north face. Above them lies the shield of overhanging rock that turned them back. IAN PARNELL

Sometimes we misread our Braille and fell, splashing to our knees, but we could sense we were getting closer to camp. The giant silver disc of the moon suddenly burst through, bathing the valley in icy light. Something glinted at the bottom of the valley, and we could hear our friends once again. We had made it: we were back home.

Three days later, we couldn't find any more excuses. Our companions, the albino twins Andy and Pete Benson, had crashed into the dinner tent the night before. Big smiles cracked their sunburnt faces: they were victorious from success on the Northeast Ridge and the first ascent of the Spire*. Excitedly, they retold tales of wild climbing and aiding to the summit in a snowstorm.

The lift for the rest of us was palpable. Inspired by their efforts, Kenton and I joined Al Powell and Dave Wills, who had also been forced to retreat from their route, the right-hand colouir of the north face. Whereas we retreated from low down on our line, Dave and Al's attempt had been even more heartbreaking. Climbing in the boldest of lightweight alpine styles, they forced difficult mixed climbing and tenuous thin ice three quarters of the way up the mountain before reaching an impasse at an imposing shield of 120-degree overhanging rock. They had hoped for good granite, but this headwall proved to be a giant pale rock scar riddled with unclimbable rotten stone. Unable to find the merest hint of a ledge, the pair had been forced to carve one-cheek scoops from the ice for a couple of precarious bivis. These cold icy perches had taken their toll, particularly with Dave, who had contracted a nasty hemorrhoid, sympathetically named "Emma" by his teammates.

It was a rather impaired four who made the return trek to the base of the Spire. At least this time we were armed with a significantly better knowledge of the approach, and managed in a long day the struggle with haul bags that had previously taken over a week.

Any advantage we might have felt we had gained was steadily eroded by the onset of winter. The snow fell heavily as we retraced our steps across the glacier and the temperatures dropped even further. Our second-choice line of the left-hand colouir steadily became more lethal, ready to spring on any unwary climbers wandering into its avalanche-laden trap. So our eyes turned to the ridge, squinting to catch signs of the Benson brother's first ascent.

Awaking after a frigid, restless night, we moved slowly and clumsily, our clothes cracking in -25-degree temperatures. Another perfect clear alpine blue sky offered hope, but Emma, Dave's unwelcome growth, had grown even worse. Dave reluctantly had to pull out of the climb.

The first pitches of any big climb always seem to be the crux to me. Retreat is still possible and the rhythm of ascent has yet to be established. On the dark, shadowed ice up to the ridge, the doubts surrounded me like clouds. Al and Kenton, however, seemed full of energy, surging up toward the sunlight breaking over the crest of the ridge. Their enthusiasm pulled me along, and, as the sun's rays hit my face, I felt a release of pressure. Above us snaked the perfect alpine ridge. All our obsessions with the north face and the "hardest routes in the Himalaya" evaporated as the heat of the morning sun filled us with energy.

We had decided to move together as a trio on one rope, and everything seemed to click. We were no longer hauling, wading, or plodding but finally moving, really moving in the mountains. And fascinating movement it was: at one moment teetering on our front points above 2,000-foot drops, the next swinging wildly around hanging arêtes, our mitts full of granite, our axes biting into pure ice or torqued in tiny cracks. I was beginning to remember what mountaineering should be all about.

^{*}While the climbers had no doubt that the summit they reached was the highest of the two, photos of the Spire studied after the ascent indicated that the West Summit might actually be higher. The Spire awaits a future ascent to determine conclusively which summit is highest.—Ed.



Kenton Cool (left) and Al Powell at ca. 5300 meters on the second ascent of the northeast ridge.

IAN PARNELL

The highlight for me came at the penultimate pitch, 3,000 feet above the untrodden Southern Arwa Glacier. Here, in a heavy snow storm with white-out conditions, the Benson brothers had been forced to aid a narrow crack as they raced the deteriorating conditions in their bid for the summit. As I was the supposed aid-climbing expert of our little team, I assembled a mixture of slings into foot loops and set off, unsure of how hard it might be.

At first, for speed, I free climbed the initial groove, tentatively reaching around for the aid crack. My fingers sank in to a perfect jam, and I leaned out to see the purest fissure slicing toward the summit. Furthermore, though I was higher than I'd ever been before, my lungs seemed to forget the altitude as jam followed jam. My plastic boots skittered at times across the hard granite, but protection was perfect. It seemed in the snowstorm the brothers had missed this classic HVS and opted for a thinner seam farther right. Kenton and Al were soon whooping their way up this alpine treat before we raced up a final crack toward the summit.

The brothers had mentioned that the final summit block had proved interesting. A smooth crackless standing stone, perhaps 15 to 20 feet high, protected Arwa's highest point. I tried every trick in the book, but despite half an hour of effort, we shared the same highpoint as the Bensons. Back in Britain, this last monolith would offer a fine E5 6b (5.12) outing, but at well over 6000 meters and in plastic boots, we accepted our limitations and celebrated at its base.

We absorbed a cloudless view across the Gangotri, the Nanda Devi sanctuary, and a thousand unclimbed peaks toward a huge mountain that must have been Dhauligiri hundreds of miles away on the horizon. With the help of my friends, I'd forgotten the pain and struggles of the days before. The quest for difficulty had been replaced by a lesson in simplicity. Working together with friends, I had learned again the joy of the mountains.

POSTSCRIPT

The year ended as strangely as it had started: *The Knowledge* was selected as one of six nominees for the Piolet d'Or. Medals in mountaineering don't really make sense to me, and I was tickled when I heard that we were in the running, but dropped because we didn't go all the way to the top of Hunter. I can't think of a sillier reason to summit.

What was fun, though, was doing a presentation at the awards festival. Neither Jules nor I speak French, so we opted for an illustrated "musical" approach. I hadn't been sure how the nosebleed-techno of Johnny Violent would go down, but after blowing out the bass in their speakers and getting the more enthusiastic audience members off their seats, punching the air, and before giving away the tape to last year's winners, I felt I'd found my international reward for a mad, mad year.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREAS: Alaska Range, Alaska; Torssukatak Sound, Greenland; and Garhwal Himalaya, India

New Routes and First Ascents: *The Knowledge* (Alaskan 6, ED4 5.7 A2++ WI6, 1200m) on the north buttress of Mount Hunter, May 25–June 1, Jules Cartwright and Ian Parnell. The East Face of "The Thumbnail" (E6 6b or 5.12c, 31 pitches, 4,490'), the first ascent of Agdlerussakasit, July 28-August 4, Ben Bransby, Matt Dickinson, Ian Parnell, Gareth Perry (other expedition personel: Matthew Bransby and Sandy Ogilvie). The Northeast Ridge (TD+ WI4 5.9, 2000m) of the Arwa Spire (6193m), October 11, Andy Benson and Pete Benson. Second ascent: October 16, Kenton Cool, Ian Parnell, Al Powell. Also on expedition: Dave Wills.

Ian Parnell, 32, has been climbing for 13 years, the last five of which have included a greater interest in the mountains. His first expedition was to Kyrgyzstan in 1999. Working as a freelance photographer for the last three years, he has managed to combine six months' work and six months' play. He has established 150 new routes in the United Kingdom, mostly on the sea cliffs of the southwest. To maximize adventure, he has never placed a bolt ("and I don't intend to start"). He has tried his hand at most bits of climbing, including eight walls in Yosemite (including *Wyoming Sheep Ranch*). His future plans are to move fast in the mountains, simplifying the equipment to intensify the experience.



Ian Parnell. GARETH PERRY