



SO CLOSE.

After 40 years of attempts, it seemed like the North Ridge of Latok 1, one of alpinism's greatest challenges, was finally going to be climbed.



FACING PAGE: The upper one-third of the immense 8,500-foot North Ridge of Latok as it appeared during its first attempt, by Jim Donini, Michael Kennedy, George Lowe, and Jeff Lowe in 1978. FACING PAGE LOWER: Donini in a snow cave at the final bivy, just below the high point of the '78 attempt. The four were now out of food and nearly out of fuel. "As you can see," says Donini, "the climb had taken a toll on us. Jeff is semi-conscious in the sleeping bag to my left." ABOVE: Alexander Gukov receives emergency medical treatment by the B3 helicopter crew of Pakistan's 5th Army Aviation Squadron after a high-altitude rescue following the death of his partner Sergey Glazunov. BELOW: George Lowe on a rope fixed on the headwall directly above the snow cave during the '78 attempt. "We had been in the cave for a couple of stormy days," says Donini, "and were going for the summit during a brief lull in the storm. Our climb ended a couple of pitches higher when the storm renewed, and Jeff collapsed on the last belay ledge." LEFT: Aleš Cesen, Tom Livingstone and Luka Stražar after summiting Latok 1 via a variation of the North Ridge to the south face.

SO FAR.

Then came a near miss, tragedy and a roundabout summit that may have kept the prize in play.

By Michael Wejchert





BY THE TIME THE TWO EUROCLAIR B3 helicopters thundered up the Choktoi glacier toward Latok 1 in the Karakoram of Northern Pakistan, the world had heard about the stranded Russian alpinist, his missing partner, and how unlikely saving him would be.

The marooned climber, a 42-year-old Russian named Alexander Gukov, was on hallowed alpine ground. Latok 1 remained unclimbed from its north side. He had not moved for six days, enduring a hell of spindrift avalanches, hunger, exhaustion, and isolation. His partner was dead. Gukov's friend, Anna Piunova, the editor of the website Mountain.ru, had received his

distress call from a satellite texting device six days earlier: *"I NEED HELP. EVACUATION REQUIRED. Sergey fell. I'm hanging without any gear."*

THE B3 PILOTS, PART OF PAKISTAN'S 5TH ARMY Aviation Squadron, were growing accustomed to mountain rescues. Of 44 expeditions to the mountains of Pakistan in the summer of 2018, 17 called for helicopter evacuation. But if the pilots' experience saving alpinists was increasing, so were the odds against them.

Their machines, stripped to the last kilogram, strained against the thin air of the Latok cirque. Hovering at 6,200 meters

was testy enough for a B3. But using the helicopter to save someone was riskier still. Because of the craft's size—a veritable hummingbird compared to larger helicopters like a Black Hawk—lowering a rescuer on a winch was impossible. They'd have to dangle a makeshift cable, a "long line," and pray their human target, starving and exhausted, was alert enough to clip himself in. A single miscalculation or swing in the wrong

OPENING SPREAD PHOTOS: MICHAEL KENNEDY (LEFT TOP), ALES CESEN (RIGHT TOP TWO), ALL OTHERS JIM DONINI. FACING PAGE: ALES CESEN. RIGHT PAGE: JIM DONINI, MICHAEL KENNEDY



"I NEED HELP. EVACUATION REQUIRED. SERGEY FELL. I'M HANGING WITHOUT ANY GEAR."

direction would crash one or both helis.

Heaped onto the physical risks of a high-altitude rescue were the bureaucratic hurdles of the task. The Army had neither the resources nor the personnel to undertake the nimble helicopter maneuvers commonplace in the Alps, and hardscrabble alpinists can rarely cough up enough cash for a hefty rescue tab. The Russian embassy had become directly involved. After multiple flights and attempts from Skardu, the rescue attempt was turning into a costly nightmare, and time was running out. For military pilots in a country at war, pulling a man off a ridgeline, even one of the world's most revered ones, was a lot to ask.

RESCUE OPTIONS ON LATOK 1 USED TO BE simpler: Your fellow alpinists saved you, or no one did.

In 1977, an American climber named George Lowe spied a photograph of a striking ridgeline on a mountain in Pakistan that rose 8,500 feet—a spine of granite and ice flutings—off the Choktoi glacier. The mountain was unclimbed. When he unearthed the photograph, Lowe was fresh off a trip to Alaska, where he'd climbed two new

routes on Hunter and Foraker. Both ascents cemented his reputation as one of the world's most forward-thinking alpinists.

Lowe had two companions in the Alaska Range: his cousin, a blond alpinist named Jeff Lowe, and Michael Kennedy, the young, humble editor of the nascent *Climbing* magazine. All three were among the best climbers in the United States. George's 1974 route, with Chris Jones, on the North Face of North Twin in the Canadian Rockies was lauded as the most difficult climb in North America. Kennedy was a talented rock and ice climber who had just completed the now-classic *Ames Ice Hose* in Colorado with Lou Dawson and Steve Shea.

While George's cousin Jeff performed masterfully on any medium, it was on ice that he excelled. Jeff Lowe took the horrifying, dangerous spectacle of climbing ice, and over a 40-year career, would infuse in it a grace that would not have existed without him. His deft skills and inventive presence reverberate in the techniques and equipment winter climbers now employ as a matter of course. He and Mike Weis had ascended the vertical spill of *Bridalveil* falls outside Telluride, Colorado, in 1974, perhaps the trickiest ice

FACING PAGE A Pakistani Army B3 helicopter hovers near Alexander Gukov just moments before his rescue. THIS PAGE LEFT: The dream team of 1978: Michael Kennedy (standing), Jeff Lowe (right) and George Lowe. They are at the first bivy after 18 hours of climbing, having started at midnight. The fine weather would deteriorate into a six-day storm the next day. BELOW: Kennedy leads an 800-foot traverse about a third of the way up the ridge. BOTTOM: Jeff Lowe and Donini ferry loads up fixed ropes. The team of four climbed capsule style, with two leading and fixing ropes while two humped gear.



IN 1978, NO AMERICAN TEAM POSSESSED MORE KNOW-HOW OR COMBINED SKILL.

climb in North America at the time. In 1975, he'd teamed up with Weiss again and tiptoed his way up the *Grand Central Couloir* on Mount Kitchener in the Canadian Rockies.

The trio of Kennedy and George and Jeff Lowe made a 1977 Alaska trip that didn't go as planned. The climbers were 4,000 feet up a new route on the north face of Hunter when a cornice collapsed, and Jeff broke his ankle. They self-rescued and flew the injured Lowe off the glacier. George Lowe and Kennedy returned to finish the route in two and a half days. Next, they completed the first ascent of an even more ambitious line: the *Infinite Spur* on Mount Foraker. For all of them, the trip galvanized their belief that difficult, technical routes could be completed at high altitude with a small team.

They headed to the Karakoram in 1978 to attempt Latok 1. With them was a fourth alpinist: a wiry, ex-Special Forces medic named Jim Donini, who'd been pursuing his own vision of climbing, first in Yosemite and then in Patagonia, where in 1975 he, John Bragg and Jay Wilson made the first ascent of Torre Egger. Though Donini hadn't roped

up with Kennedy, and had only done a few minor routes with the Lowes, he had agreed without hesitation to join them.

All four climbers were at the forefront of American climbing, which had traditionally lagged behind Europe in techniques and standards. Yvon Chouinard, who'd boosted difficulties in Yosemite in the 1960s, had improved on the original Scottish ice-climbing tools and brought them stateside, where ice climbing immediately progressed by leaps and bounds. Young rock climbers, imbued by the "clean climbing" revolution, pushed standards to 5.12. Kennedy, Donini and both Lowes contributed to rising standards and to improvements and innovations in gear. In 1978, no American team possessed more know-how or combined skill.

Latok 1 jutted out of a compact cirque of some of the most convoluted mountain terrain on earth. The ridge is 8,500 feet high—nearly three times the size of El Cap. Bivouacs would be difficult to find on the steep, complex upper mountain. The few teams that had explored Latok and its

surrounding peaks offered little inspiration. Japanese and Italian climbers had made three attempts, all from the southern side. In 1977, Doug Scott broke his leg and ankle rappelling from the first ascent of the Ogre, a neighboring peak. His injuries precipitated a nightmarish crawl down the mountain. As he and his teammates continued their descent, Chris Bonington broke his ribs in a second rappelling mishap.

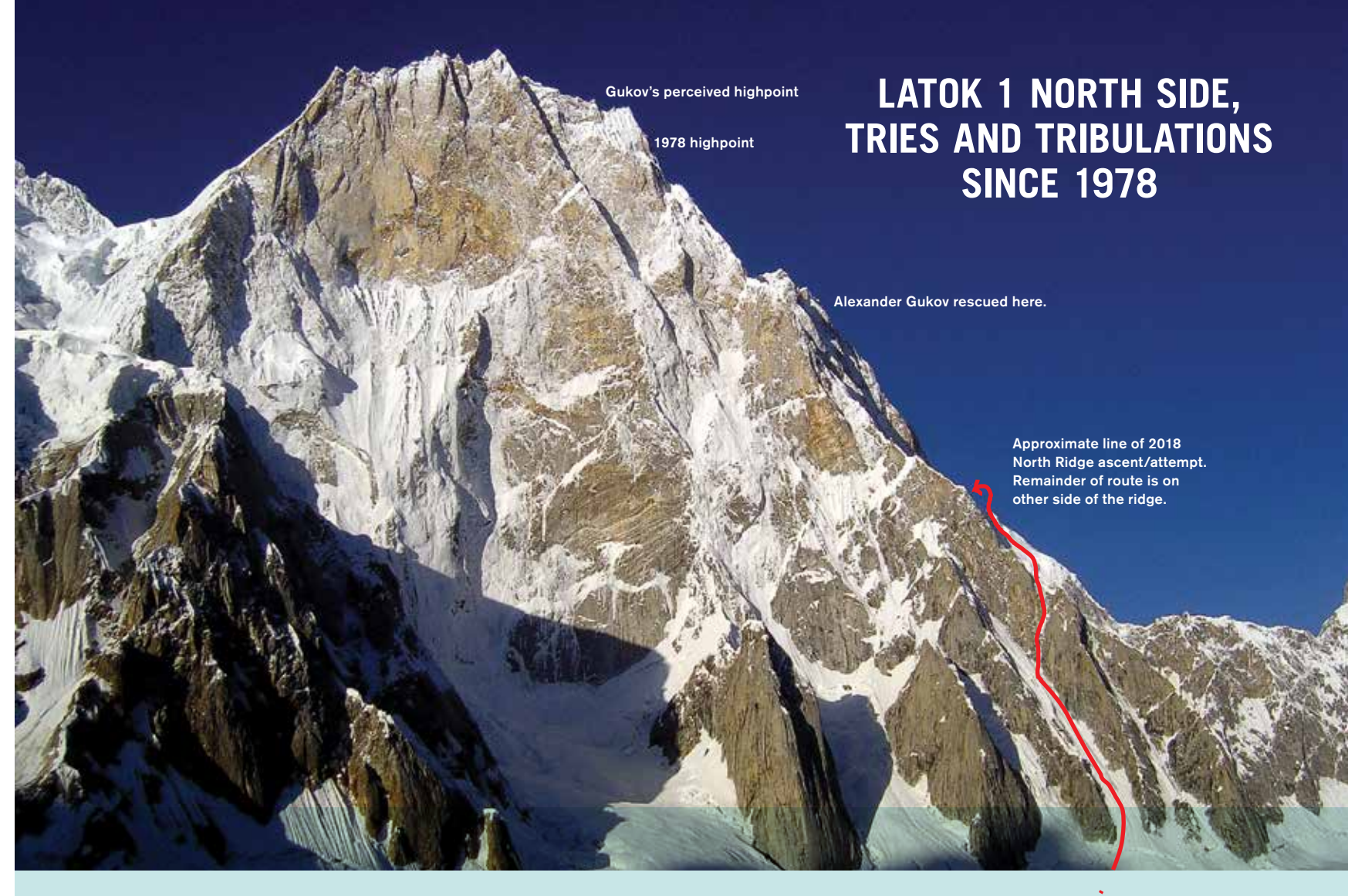
While the British Ogre team had climbed in old-school expedition style, the American quartet decided to approach the route capsule-style, taking eight ropes to allow for movement in between camps if need be. Still, they would be alone on the mountain, operating autonomously and never returning to base camp. For the era their approach was bold and uncompromising. Weight—as much as it could be, given the equipment of the day—was pared to a minimum. In the end, they brought 17 days' worth of food and fuel. Their combined equipment clocked in at 300 pounds.

LEFT: George Lowe belays Kennedy after the 800-foot traverse. MIDDLE: George Lowe, Kennedy and Jeff Lowe chop bivy ledges in the ice. "We went for six or seven straight days with ledges too small for tents," says Donini. "Luckily the weather held for that period." RIGHT: Kennedy on jumars at about the halfway point with the Ogre 2 and the Ogre in the background.



JIM DONINI (ALL)

MICHAEL KENNEDY



1978 The Americans Jim Donini, Michael Kennedy, Jeff Lowe and George Lowe attempt the North Ridge, climbing capsule-style and spending 26 days on the route. They reach a high point of about 23,000 feet.

1979 A Japanese team led by Naoki Takada makes the first ascent of Latok I, via the South Face. After a lengthy siege and fixing much rope and three camps on the rock buttress left of the couloir between Latok I and Latok III, six members reach the top on two separate days.

1982 The British climbers Martin Boysen, Choe Brooks, Rab Carrington and John Yates attempt the North Ridge twice, the second time to a high point of about 19,000 feet.

1986 The Norwegians Olav Basen, Fred Husoy, Magnar Osnes and Oyvind Vlada attempt the North Ridge, fixing at least 600 meters of rope and reaching a high point of about 21,000 feet after 18 days on the route.

1987 The French climbers Roger Laot, Remy Martin and Laurent Terray fix rope on the first 600 meters of the North Ridge and, encountering heavy snow, turn back at about 19,700 feet.

1992 Jeff Lowe and Catherine Destivelle (France) try the North Ridge, encountering huge snow mushrooms on the route. Carol McDermott of New Zealand and Andy McFarland, Andy MacNae and Dave Wills of Great Britain reach about 19,300 feet on the route during two attempts the same summer.

1993 The Americans Julie Brugger, Colin Grissom and Kitty Calhoun and Andy DeKlerk of South Africa attempt the North Ridge, turning back at about 18,000 feet in the face of bad weather.

1994 The British climbers Brendan Murphy and Dave Wills try the North Ridge, reaching a high point of about 18,300

feet on their second attempt.

1996 Murphy and Wills return, reaching about 20,000 feet before a dropped rucksack forces retreat. Two subsequent attempts are thwarted at 19,300 feet by poor weather.

1997/1998 The Americans John Bouchard and Mark Richey attempt the route three times, the last with Tom Nonis and Barry Rugo, reaching a high point of about 20,000 feet. Unlike previous expeditions, they report high temperatures and dry conditions, with "considerable melting and rockfall from high on the face." They follow the rock pillar from the bottom of the route, finding superb climbing up to 5.10. Bouchard, Richey and Lyle Dean return the following year for another attempt, but never get on the North Ridge due to bad weather.

2001 Stein Gravdal, Halvor Hagen, Ole Haltvik and Trym Saeland of Norway reach about 20,500 feet after 15 days on the route.

2004/2005/2006 The twin brothers Willie and Damian Benegas of Argentina try the North Ridge three years in a row. The first two years they encounter much snow and bad weather during their attempts in June and July; they find drier conditions in August 2006, but a major storm stops them at about 18,000 feet.

2006 Maxime Turgeon and Louis-Phillipe Menard of Canada attempt the futuristic North Face, retreating from 17,400 feet in the face of dangerously warm conditions. They turn their attention to the North Ridge, but are turned back at a similar altitude by deep, fresh snow covering the previously dry rock.

2007 Mark Richey, Steve Swenson and Doug Chabot attempt the north ridge but are turned back by unconsolidated snow. Josh Wharton and Bean Bowers sit out 42 days of storm beneath the north side of the mountain.

LATOK 1 NORTH SIDE, TRIES AND TRIBULATIONS SINCE 1978

2008 Wharton and Whit Magro visit the Choktoi glacier. They attempt the ridge but are turned back by a spindrift avalanche and poor snow conditions.

2009 Wharton, with Colin Haley and Dylan Johnson, attempt the north face and gain the ridge at one-third height. They bail because of snow conditions. Two Spanish alpinists, Alvaro Novellon and Oscar Perez, also attempt the North Ridge, reaching about the same height as the Americans. Perez is tragically killed on Latok II.

2010 Giri-Giri boys Fumitaka Ichimura, Yusuke Sato and Katsutaka "Jumbo" Yokoyama are turned around at half-height on the North Ridge: more bad snow.

2012 Wharton and Nate Opp arrive to attempt the North Ridge, but do not leave base camp; Wharton teams up with Kyle Dempster and Hayden Kennedy to climb a new route on the Ogre.

2014 Alex and Thomas Huber plan on attempting the wall but don't due to the uncertain situation in Pakistan. Luka Lindič, Luka Krajnc, Martin Žumer, and Janez Svoljšak attempt their version of the North Ridge—the line Cesen, Strazar and Livingstone will climb in 2018—but bail due to a dropped tent and poor snow conditions.

2016: Thomas Huber, Toni Gutsch, Sebi Brutscher, and Max Reichel, accompanied by Jim Donini and George Lowe, (who intend on climbing new routes on 6,000 meter peaks) travel to Latok. They become immersed in the tragic search for Kyle Dempster and Scott Adamson, who are missing on the Ogre II, and never set foot on the mountain.

2017 Anton Kashevnik, Valery Shamalo, and Alexander Gukov attempt the North Ridge, reaching higher than anyone apart from the 1978 American attempt.

—Michael Kennedy and Michael Wejchert

BACK AT THE SNOW CAVE, JEFF LOWE'S FATE REMAINED UNCERTAIN. NONE OF THE OTHER CLIMBERS COULD COUNT ON HIS SURVIVAL.

"Each day," Kennedy wrote in a 2007 *Rock and Ice* article about the ascent, "one pair would lead and fix ropes (the fun part); the other two would follow on jumars, carrying the loads."

"Quit was not in their vocabulary," Donini says, speaking of his three partners. "Day after day, they just kept going and grinding it out." The first part of the ridgeline consisted of sunny rock climbing. "It wasn't unusual to climb in a T-shirt during the afternoon," Kennedy wrote. But as the climbers reached 18,000 feet, a storm rolled in and pinned them for three days. When it cleared, they continued upward. As the team gained ground, the temperatures grew colder, and they encountered more ice and mixed climbing.

Finally, on their 19th day on Latok, the four climbers arrived at a shoulder 700 feet from the top. Kennedy and Jeff Lowe fixed two pitches before rappelling to a snow cave at the shoulder. The men were tired and hungry but elated. From the looks of it, another pitch or two led to easier terrain. From there, the summit of Latok 1 stretched across a ridgeline, within grasp.

But in the morning, Jeff Lowe felt sick. He and Kennedy had been ill on the approach to the mountain, and it seemed that the high altitude, exhaustion and lack of water had reinvigorated Lowe's symptoms. The climbers decided to wait another day in the cave, gambling with the weather. It didn't pay off; they awoke to six inches of fresh snow and an even sicker Lowe. But after so many days on the mountain, the team was aching close.

As Kennedy recalled in 2007: "Jeff felt worse, food and fuel were running low, and the storm showed no sign of dissipating. Decision time. We headed up."

Clearly suffering, Jeff Lowe followed as best he could. Up until now, the situation hadn't seemed dangerous. But above the fixed lines, his three partners grew far more concerned about his condition. Though the summit was a mere 500 feet higher, they decided to retreat. By this time, the climbers had

operated in such sync with one another, had surmounted so many days of uncertainty, that the decision simply made itself.

"Partnership is the single biggest consideration in alpine climbing," says Donini. "The four of us really got to read each others' minds." He remembers the moment: "We didn't say a word. We just started down." In his article, Kennedy acknowledged a brief exchange with George Lowe before they fixed the first of some 85 rappels.

Back at the snow cave, Jeff Lowe's fate remained uncertain. None of the other climbers could count on his survival. "Coughing and feverish, aching to his very soul, he was shattered to the point where we feared for his life," Kennedy wrote.

The men were all starving and exhausted. They were also alone and nearly 8,000 feet up the most serious climb of their lives. As they struggled to get down to a cache of food, they made an open bivouac 1,500 feet below the snow cave. With his comrade's condition worsening, Donini feared he'd wake up next to a dead body. "I didn't think he was going to survive. Jeff willed himself down that mountain." After three days of illness, Jeff's condition miraculously improved. Twenty-six days after leaving base camp, the climbers staggered back toward it. Their cook had given them up for dead.

"It took me half a year to recover from Latok," says Donini. "If we had summited in 1978, it would have been just another Himalayan climb. Instead, it created this 40-year story."

The following year, though a Japanese team climbed Latok 1 from the more gently angled and largely snow-blanketed south side, no one had forgotten about the North Ridge. Over ensuing years, with each successive team that threw itself at the ridge, the climb bolstered its reputation. The undisputed heavyweight champ of alpinism, Latok 1 beat back all comers. The allure didn't rely solely on the climbing itself: Latok's status rose due to that of the American team that had gotten so close.

A list of subsequent attempters reads like

a who's who of mountaineering, or an invite to a Piolet d'Or ceremony: Mark Richey, John Bouchard, Kitty Calhoun, Catherine Destivelle, Thomas Huber, Josh Wharton, to name a few. Most parties were stymied by a large amount of unconsolidated snow or the Choktoi's legendary bad weather. By 2018, no one had matched the 1978 high point.

High-altitude mountaineering is chock-full of stories of gravely ill climbers, of decisions that weigh human life against the odds of success. Most end bitterly. Some even end up in courtrooms. Fingers are pointed, blame

UPPER: Jeff Lowe semi-conscious in the snow cave below the high point. LOWER: George Lowe in storm on one of the first rappels in the 85-rappel, four-day descent.



JIM DONINI (BOTH)

SHAMALO LOST ALL HIS TOES AND PARTS OF HIS FINGERS. KASHEVNIK LOST SOME TOES TO FROSTBITE. GUKOV VOWED TO RETURN.

is cast, partnerships end. But—from an outside perspective—at least, the Latok team presented a unified front. The bond the four alpinists had forged on the mountain grew. The significance of the 1978 attempt wasn't washed away by speed records or fast repeats or by petty bickering. The story lost none of its weight. Their remains climbing's most elegant failure.

In the ensuing decades, Latok's difficulties grew with climate change and the fickle weather of the Choktoi. Always a steep, imposing line, it's now subject to horrible, unconsolidated snow: the culprit that turns back most suitors. Josh Wharton, who has made multiple attempts on the mountain, wrote in 2012: "It's my feeling that global warming, and increased snowfall in the Karakoram, has made the North Ridge impassible without a sustained siege attempt."

THE YEAR AFTER HIS NEAR-MISS ON LATOK 1, Jeff Lowe travelled to Ama Dablam in Nepal to film a documentary for ABC. Unsatisfied



after the official shoot had ended, Lowe lingered at the base of the mountain before launching up the southwest face alone. Over two days, he tiptoed up glassy ice, climbed M5 ropeless, headed upward in a storm. While ordinary climbers dreaded entering the netherworld of complete commitment, Lowe relished it.

It would be impossible to characterize Lowe's climbing, or attempt to enumerate his achievements. You could throw all sorts of words at a typical Jeff Lowe winter route. But, for those who have shaken their way up them (or tried to), blunt descriptors work better: desperate, scary and hard. Aid climbs in Zion, ice routes around the lower 48, punctuated by climbs and attempts on mountains like Ama Dablam, Nuptse, Taulliraju, the Eiger. When a piece of equipment didn't fit his vision of alpinism, he'd design a better one. He invented a version of the modern crampon and had a hand in designing some of the earliest leashless tools.

Lowe's climbing career may have brimmed with success, but his personal life was often



torrid. The writer Pete Takeda, a friend and climbing partner of Lowe's, wrote in a 2008 *OutsideOnline* article that "Lowe's genius ... hasn't always translated to success in daily life. ... [H]e's churned through three companies and two marriages, alienating friends and business partners over deals gone bad."

Lowe had married his first wife, Janie, in 1982. His daughter, Sonja, was born in 1988. But after his outdoor-clothing business, which he named Latok, went bankrupt, and after an affair with the French alpinist Catherine Destivelle, Lowe's world outside of climbing began to crumble. By 1991, the 40-year-old, nearly broke, figured a reckoning with a massive, dangerous mountain was the only way to restore his sanity. Over 13 days, he launched up the North Face of the Eiger, climbing a new route that shot straight up the mountain: a vector. Alone, self-belaying on difficult, improbable terrain, and with a storm coming, Lowe was forced to abandon his rope and pack, soloing the final pitch. A helicopter scooped him up in the nick of time; a breach in style for the alpinist. Rescue notwithstanding, the climb was a watershed moment.

"I experienced what I think was an opening up of my consciousness to a true reality: deeper than one I had known before then," Lowe reminisces in a documentary named for his Eiger route: *Metanoia*. "I came home to the same problems that existed before I went up. But I had a different perspective."

For the next 10 years, Lowe kept pushing standards. He published how-to books and videos on the sport and is often credited with launching modern sport-mixed climbing with the first ascent of Vail's *Octopussy*, an M6 where he used ice tools to hook out a horizontal rock roof in 1994. Lowe, quite simply, coaxed climbing from its anarchic early form to a communal, viable sport.

But in 1999, he began to notice chronic pain and loss of motor function. He was ultimately diagnosed as having a neurodegenerative disease similar to ALS. Lowe went from climbing to walking with a cane. He went from a cane to a wheelchair.

To his teammates, the optimism and drive that had kept Lowe alive during his illness on

FAR LEFT: Alexander Gukov was obsessed with the North Ridge of Latok 1. In 2017 he attempted Latok 1, climbing to within 300 meters of the 1978 American high point. He returned in 2018 with fellow Russian Sergey Glazunov (right), and the two started up the North Ridge on July 13.

ALEXANDER GUKOV COLLECTION

ALEXANDER GUKOV COLLECTION



LEFT: Glazunov rising from the bivy on the North Ridge the morning of July 16. RIGHT: Gukov in the lead the morning of July 17. He and Glazunov swung leads in blocks, both taking lead falls, an indication of the route's difficulty. On July 19, the two climbed to a snow platform at 6,800 meters, 100 meters higher than Gukov's previous high point. Glazunov and Gukov were pinned here in a storm for four days. They ran out of food, but when the storm abated, continued to what they thought was the summit of Latok 1.

Latok 1 now carried him through the greatest challenge of his life. "I saw the same sort of toughness," Donini says. "He didn't fall into feeling sorry for himself; he didn't bemoan his condition. He dealt with it." The illness galvanized his relationships, including with his daughter, Sonja.

While declining in health, though unable to revisit the alpine experience in body, Lowe reached out to countless alpinists who now chased the same dreams he'd sought for decades. And that—perhaps as much as the ridge itself—drew climbers to Latok 1.

ONE OF THE ALPINISTS OBSESSED WITH THE North Ridge was Alexander Gukov. Originally from St. Petersburg, Russia, he worked as a chief mate on an LPG oil tanker, spending much of his time on the sea, pounding out miles on the ship's treadmill to prepare for alpinism. When he visited the mountains, he did so with a determination that garnered results. In 2015, he won a Piolet d'Or for his and Alexey Lonchinskii's route up Nepal's Thamskerku.

In 2017, he attempted Latok 1 with two companions: Anton Kashevnik and Valery Shamalo. For 15 days the three forced their way upward, often in horrible conditions, reaching 6,700 meters: 300 meters shy of the 1978 attempt, and closer than any other team had come to summiting. Echoing the American predicament of 39 years earlier, they reached a shelf and figured they were

about three days away from summiting the mountain. Valery was ill. "We didn't want to die of hunger and fatigue," Gukov wrote. "Every day [Valery's] health was getting worse—we had to go down."

On the retreat, the team grew colder and more exhausted. Shamalo contracted pneumonia. Their toes were freezing. By the time they reached the glacier, they were a hobbling, frostbitten rabble. "But we felt we were heroes," Gukov stated in the *American Alpine Journal*. "We didn't need helicopters—we would walk out." Shamalo later lost all his toes and parts of his fingers. Kashevnik lost some toes to frostbite. Gukov vowed to return.

In 2018, he partnered with a brilliant 26-year-old named Sergey Glazunov. Sergey and his brother Evgeniy had completed some of the most difficult climbs in the mountain ranges of the former Soviet Union. Initially, both brothers intended on joining Gukov on Latok, but Evgeniy dropped out. (Three other Russians—Victor Koval, Konstantin Markevich and Alexander Parfenov—would also be on the Choktoi. They intended to try a line on Latok's north face.)

ON JULY 13, GUKOV AND GLAZUNOV STARTED up the North Ridge. The next day, a strong team of three alpinists—Aleš Cesen (the son of the late Tomo Cesen) and Luka Stražar from Slovenia and a Welshman named Tom Livingstone arrived in base camp, where

they watched the progress of the two Russian teams already on Latok 1.

Over the first four days, Gukov and Glazunov regained Gukov's high point from 2017. Conditions were much drier. While rockfall and avalanches sometimes rattled past them, they felt safe enough on the ridge. Both men took leader falls—an indication of the difficulties of the climbing. Although they'd never roped up before as a team, they felt strong, willing to hang it out there. "Our styles were absolutely different, but we came together quite well," Gukov says. "I liked his frankness. He sincerely said what he was thinking about." The satellite tracker they'd brought—essentially a Russian version of a Garmin inReach—had powered down on the first day, and Gukov turned it on to manual mode to preserve the battery. As such, they made sparse communication with the outside world, though Glazunov's wife, Nina, texted them forecasts every day. They were also running low on food. But both men were used to the delicate rationing that happens on alpine climbs.

On July 19 the pair reached a snow platform at 6,800 meters; 100 meters higher than Gukov's high point. A storm swept over the mountain, pinning the climbers until the 22nd. By the time the skies cleared, Gukov and Glazunov had just one freeze-dried dinner left to share.

They had a frank discussion about their chances. Though the weather was marginal, both men still wanted the summit. Glazunov



LEFT: The immense North Face from a low perspective, showing the complicated terrain and the various hazards including seracs and avalanches. This view also reveals how the North Ridge is actually a series of rock spurs separated by couloirs, and that while the Russian route and the one taken by the Slovenian/Welsh team are largely on the right side of the ridge, they are still technically on the north side of Latok 1. ABOVE: Luka Stražar and Aleš Cesen enjoy dining accommodations the afternoon of the third bivy during their successful bid to climb Latok 1.

convinced Gukov to push for the top without any bivy gear.

Cesen, Strazar and Livingstone followed the team's progress through binoculars as much as possible. "We simply shook our heads, and thought they were pushing too far, at too high an altitude, for too long," Livingstone said in an interview with *Rock and Ice* in August. The Slovenian/Welsh climbers weren't the only ones showing concern. Koval, Markevich and Parfenov, the three other Russians, had hit by rockfall on the north face and retreated. They'd lost some of their equipment. Now, back in base camp, they wondered how their friends were faring in the clouds, 7,000 feet above.

On the summit push, Sergey Glazunov took the lead (the men had been leading in day-long blocks), and he and Gukov continued climbing in the gathering storm. According to Gukov, his satellite tracker clocked them at 6,980 meters at 2:40 p.m.—165 meters from the true summit of Latok 1—before the battery froze. By 4:00 Gukov realized they'd be caught out at night in the storm. In front, Glazunov wove his way through Latok's convoluted snow structures. In the gloaming and swirling clouds, neither knew where they were. At 7:00 p.m., far past their turnaround point, Sergey stopped, perched atop a snow mushroom.

"It's Latok 1!" Glazunov cried down. They'd done what 40 years' worth of attempts had not: climbed the North Ridge to the top.

The day felt bittersweet. "We did not hug one another and enjoy ourselves on the summit as we had meant to," Gukov wrote later. But there was something else, too. Though Glazunov had been certain he'd stood on top, Gukov, who hadn't climbed up to Glazunov because Glazunov had been unable to find an anchor, had his doubts.

As they rappelled back to the snowy ledge, neither could know exactly where they'd turned around, and Gukov grew convinced they'd only climbed to the high point of the North Ridge. (Though the top of the ridge is only 95 meters lower than the summit, it is separated by hours of traversing.)

The pair retreated into the darkness. Sometime in the wee hours of the 24th, Gukov and Glazunov reached their snow platform again, though Gukov has no memory of how the day passed, perhaps due to the trauma of the following one or the exhaustion that already plagued both men.

Back in Russia, Anna Piunova was worried. She hadn't heard from the climbers in days. Nor had Koval and his team. Piunova requested a flyover, initiating a series of phone, satellite and radio calls that bounced across two continents, the logistical hassles of

getting two B3 helicopters out of Skardu and to Latok base camp.

Pakistan, unlike Nepal, lacks a privatized rescue service; there are too few climbers and not enough mountain tourists. Instead of being covered by a global-rescue insurance platform, climbers are asked to make a \$12,000 security deposit to a third-party entity called Askari Aviation, which then involves the military; officers are hesitant to take money from climbers. In an army roiling with corruption scandals, taking foreign cash is risking a court-marshal.

To make things more complicated, the 5th squadron had had a busy year. In January, Elisabeth Revol, a French high-altitude mountaineer, became stranded on Nanga Parbat when her partner, a brutally tough Pole named Tomasz Mackiewicz, died high up on the mountain. The resulting rescue involved world-class alpinists supported by the 5th squadron, who eventually reached Revol, but were criticized for being slow to act and for not flying high enough.

"There was so much negative publicity after the Revol rescue," says Shamyil Sharafat Ali, a Pakistani climber based in Paris who acts as a liaison between journalists and Askari Air. When the crew of two B3s—Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Anjum Rafique, Major Fakhar-E-Abbas, Major Abid Rafique and Major Qazi Muhammad Mazhar ud Din—flew up past the resounding walls of the Latok cirque, they were, in essence, on a risky PR mission.

BY THE TIME THE SKIES CLEARED, GUKOV AND GLAZUNOV HAD JUST ONE FREEZE-DRIED DINNER LEFT TO SHARE.

ON THE MORNING OF THE 25TH, AS GUKOV and Glazunov resumed their rappels down the North Ridge, they heard the drone of helicopter engines echoing across the Choktoi glacier. It must be for the North Face team, they assumed, thinking of Koval, Markevich and Parfenov. But the helicopters were hovering nearby, at 6,380 meters: the B3s were coming for them. The pilots had landed at Latok 1 base camp and picked up Victor Koval to act as a spotter. In the DSLR images Koval took from the helicopter, a single figure in red leans out on the ridge, waiting to rappel. It must be Gukov; Glazunov is nowhere to be seen, probably a ropelength below, tucked behind a small chimney. The man in red is tiny against the vast, complex sea of snow and granite they are descending. It is around 9:00 in the morning. Though only hundreds of meters from the pilots, the man in the photos is tethered to another world.

When he realized what was happening, Gukov waved off the helicopters. All the same, the pilots threw the men a stuff sack

with food and fuel. In an action that probably saved his partner's life in the coming week, Glazunov managed to grab the bag from his perch. The men continued down.

At around 1:00 in the afternoon, Glazunov rappelled off a v-thread backed up by an ice screw. The rope went slack. Gukov, hanging on the anchor and unable to see Glazunov, waited and waited, but there was no response. He fixed a rappel, leaving the screw (his last) and lowered himself to check on Glazunov. His young companion was gone. Somehow, Glazunov—and the team's remaining rack—had fallen off the ridge. A single piton was clipped to the end of the ropes. Either Glazunov took himself off rappel and slipped, or was constructing an anchor that failed. Either way, Gukov was by himself with one ice screw and one piton. He ripped off his pack and pulled out his satellite device, which had just two percent battery power remaining. He fired the text to Piunova, pressed the SOS button, and tried to remain calm. Using some 6mm cord that had been

attached to the food bag, he lowered himself to a marginal snow ledge and set up the tent to wait for help.

A GARMIN INREACH, THE AMERICAN EQUIVALENT of Gukov's tracker, weighs seven ounces. (A new model clocks in at a skimpy four.) The battery lasts for about a week; longer if it's turned off between texts. It can send an SOS message as well as pair with a smartphone for texting. Alpinists are now connected to the outside world in ways that the 1978 Latok team couldn't have imagined.

This spring, as I grunted my way up a mixed pitch on the Eye Tooth in Alaska, my phone kept buzzing. My fiancée—in the throes of graduate school in New Hampshire—wanted to know where I'd put the printer ink. The reality of my surroundings didn't mesh with what the screen was telling me, but I loved it: seven ounces of home, thousands of feet off the glacier. Die-hard old-schoolers can grumble



LEFT: Day two, at about 5,800 meters, Stražar encounters mixed terrain in the middle part of the North Ridge. BELOW: Stražar making a short traverse below a mushroom ridge at 5,700 meters.



ALEXANDER GUKOV COLLECTION; TOM LIVINGSTONE

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Livingstone works around snow mushrooms on the North Ridge. The Slovenian/Welsh team never intended to climb the North Ridge, rather were committed to the “cleanest line up the mountain,” and after starting Latok 1 from the north, moved onto the south side at about two-thirds height because doing so made the most sense to them.

While rescuers had bandied around the idea of flying a team of alpinists to base camp, or using the ones who were there, climbing up to Gukov would have been suicide. The mountain was alive with avalanches and spindrift. Forty years of the world’s best alpinists had failed making headway on the North Ridge. To try and lower a dying man down its labyrinthine flanks was a near-impossible task. “For us, it was never a possibility, never a real consideration,” says Cesen.

FROM PARIS, SHAMYL SHARAFAT ALI POSTED

rescue updates online. The pilots could sometimes make it to base camp, but were usually turned around due to bad weather. On the 28th, three days after Glazunov’s death, Gukov’s text messenger died. The last of the food the pilots had thrown Glazunov was gone. By the 30th of July, he’d been stranded for five days in an unrelenting storm, bracing each time the spindrift avalanches washed over his tent.

Finally, on the 31st, the weather broke. One real chance existed to save Gukov before he succumbed to exposure, hunger and fatigue. After a brief stop in base camp, the two helicopters flew up to 6,300 meters to reconnoiter Gukov’s position. His orange tent was so awash with snow they barely saw it at first. The pilot of the lead B3, Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Anjum Rafique, decided to try one maneuver—they’d have just enough fuel, which they’d pared down to increase flying efficiency in the thin air. For 15 tense minutes, they watched as Gukov tried to clip a cargo sling to his harness. Finally, he managed the task. The second helicopter gave the O.K. on the radio and Rafique pulled away. But Gukov was so exhausted he’d forgotten to unclip from his own meager anchor. For an impossible second, the B3 engaged in a deadly tug-of-war with the mountain. As the anchors gave way, Gukov, dangling like human flotsam, was whisked into the cold, clear sky.

In a photo taken as the pilots touched down, Gukov looks skeletal, even through

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in chat rooms all they want. Future climbers aren’t going to be less connected, and the device doesn’t make the mixed pitch easier or the load lighter. It doesn’t make the avalanche danger any simpler to predict. But now, an option apart from tragedy exists for climbers like Gukov, who find themselves in dire straits.

Still, it’s hard not to ask the obvious questions. Though many of the hypotheticals aren’t new, they’re becoming a norm instead of an exception to the rule. How do climbers calculate the risk of killing someone during their own rescue? Is it worth risking extra lives to save one already imperiled?

With his SOS, Gukov inadvertently shifted the risk of his climb to pilots who, until July 25, couldn’t have cared whether Latok 1 even existed, let alone remained unclimbed by its North Ridge.

For days, the weather closed in around Gukov. Aleš Cesen, one of the Slovenians who had arrived in base camp, was waiting for a window for his own attempt. Cesen, 36, is one of Slovenia’s best climbers. No stranger to difficult alpine-style climbing at high altitude, he now watched as the mountain disappeared into cloud.

“Later, Gukov said that there were avalanches around him every day,” Cesen says. “And I believe him, that it was like that. The weather was so bad that the helicopters came every day but couldn’t even see him.”

ANNA PIUNOVA, THE EDITOR OF MOUNTAIN.RU, pushed the Russian embassy to get involved, and the chain of communication grew more complicated still. At his home in Paris, Shamył Sharafat Ali, the Pakistani-born financial consultant, volunteered to relay news to the press and help coordinate the rescue effort. “Anna would talk with Alex,” Shamył said over the phone, “she would reroute it to the Russian Embassy, and Askari would reroute that information to the pilots. For a simple question to come back, it’d take 30 to 45 minutes!” The communication barrier wasn’t the biggest issue. “The area is massive ... and the weather is extremely fickle,” points out Shamył, comparing it to a compact mountain range like the Alps, where helicopter rescues are common. “The kind of climbers Pakistan attracts are coming for the difficulty: harder mountains and harder routes. In terms of rescue, a peak like Broad Peak [which is well-known] is easier than Latok or Ultar Sar.”

With each day of storm, Gukov’s chances of survival decreased. He used the remaining battery to text his loved ones; he vowed to marry his longtime partner if he got off the mountain alive. During the first few days of his ordeal, he drew inspiration from a man who knew hardship well. “When I was sitting and waiting for help after Sergey fell, Anna Piunova sent me a message from Jeff Lowe. He said, ‘I am sure Alexander will be safely lifted off.’ He really gave me more power to survive,” Gukov told *Rock and Ice*.



LEFT: Livingstone at roughly 6,000 meters searches for a passage midway up the North Ridge. Livingstone and team found favorable snow conditions but, due to warm weather, an increased risk of ice and rockfall. RIGHT: Sergey Glazunov (left) with the Russian team that would attempt the north face: Konstantin Markevich, Aleksander Parfenov and Viktor Koval. The north face team would be avalanched off and lose their gear, but survive, and Koval would act as a spotter aboard the Army rescue helicopter to locate Glazunov and Gukov.

layers of Gore-Tex. “He couldn’t even speak on his own, let alone stand,” says Cesen. Another few days would likely have killed him. From base camp, Gukov was lifted to Skardu and then to Islamabad. He had spent a total of 19 days battling on Latok. In an interview from the hospital, he promised he was done with attempting the North Ridge.

CESEN, STRAZAR AND LIVINGSTONE STILL dreamed of their own Latok climb. A fellow Slovenian, Luka Lindic, had attempted a line that shared aspects of the North Ridge but avoided much of its difficulty. After 40 years of attempts, a fast and light climb of a slightly easier route made perfect sense to all three men. Cesen and Strazar had climbed together several times, though Livingstone was still getting to know the Slovenians. He and Strazar had met in Scotland during a winter meet, and the trio had roped up a few times in Slovenia. Still, they shared a vision and commitment to finding the cleanest way up the mountain.

With the season’s relative warmth, the team found favorable conditions—consolidated snow on most aspects. But the temperature was a double-edged sword, and often the climbers moved at night or in the evening to avoid being caught out while the mountain shed snow, ice and rock.

On the first two days of climbing, Cesen, Strazar and Livingstone found bivies just big enough for them to fit—so long as they

weren’t in their tent—hacked into the snow formations. As they gained elevation, the route unfolded: mixed pitches, steep snow climbing, repeat. The grade of pitches felt surprisingly consistent.

“The main crux was on the last day,” Cesen says. “It was really bad weather and a lot of snow. During the night, we were convinced the next day we would have to go down. But in the morning there wasn’t as much [snow] as we thought; the terrain was steep enough it had swept it all away. We changed our minds and said: ‘O.K.’”

On August 9, the trio stood on the summit of Latok 1. Two days later—and seven after they’d departed, they returned to base camp.

Initial online reports stated that the North Ridge had been climbed. By the time the men returned to civilization, most news outlets had repeated the error. The team was quick to correct the media, saying that although they had started up the north side, they had moved onto the south side at about two-thirds of the way up Latok 1.

Yet the question “what was actually climbed,” persists.

“Not to take anything away from either team because what they did was remarkable,” says Donini, “but the Russians may well have reached the top of the North Ridge, but didn’t summit, and as Greg Crouch wrote in the 1996 *American Alpine Journal*, ‘The hardest meter is always the last meter, because you have to get there to climb it ... a few extra hours in the face of an advancing storm can

be the most terrifying hours of your life.’”

Sadly, the need to differentiate the Slovenian/Welsh line from the North Ridge, and the inevitable comparisons to the original route, detract from what the climb was—a difficult, rapid ascent of a 7,000-meter peak in an area legendary for shutting down climbers. Donini notes that some 45 world-class teams have tried peaks from the Choktoi glacier, meaning from the north, and the majority of attempts have been on Latok. Only two teams [on Latok 1 and the OGRE] have succeeded.

“The Choktoi glacier,” says Donini, “is where climbers’ dreams go to die.”

GUKOV RECOVERED FROM HIS ORDEAL AND returned to work on his tanker. Eleven days after Cesen, Strazar and Livingstone returned to base camp, Jeff Lowe succumbed to pneumonia—often the cause of death in patients suffering from ALS or similar diseases—in a care facility in Fort Collins, Colorado. The North Ridge of Latok 1, the route that best encompasses his spirit, still awaits its first ascent: a project for the next generation that was nearly climbed by the last.

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