

The Long Climb

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The first I heard about the Long Climb was in Fort William outside the chip shop. Fort William is Clumber Land. Almost all the buildings have been converted into guest-houses, There are wee shops where you can buy every item of climbing gear under the sun, the pubs showed climbing films on DVD, and you couldn't walk ten feet without seeing a couple of guys with axes on their packs walking up and down. The main function of the town is to act as a decompression chamber for those about to leave or enter the Ben Nevis range.

'A winter ascent of The Long Climb,' said a male voice, and broke me straight out of my daydreaming. 'Mad'

'Sounds it' said another voice, female

'We were on it all day last summer. It was endless. At least E1. Probably harder'

I looked round and saw three climbers. One girl, English and two boys, Scottish. All of them were talking very loudly, so loudly it was like their conversation was aimed more at passers-by than at each other. 'We were on it until six in the evening. Would have stayed longer but a chopper came and lifted us off.'



Gareth Hughes postholing on the approach

It was them. It was all their fault.

This was going to be a long night; I just knew it. We were hanging off a half-driven rusty peg ten pitches up The Long Climb. Pain from the harness shoots up my legs and below my front points is swirling mist and inky Scottish darkness. All ten pitches of it. I now have plenty of time to think about the last sixteen hours. And I can only find fault with three things we did on the day we decided to try the Long Climb in winter: The beginning, the middle and the end.

We set off immediately after breakfast: A bowl of porridge and a banana. The route passed in stages. The first was full of confidence, chatting as we found a climbing rhythm on the easy ground, and making jokes about the conditions. Then, as our arms began to ache and the snow around us became cold enough to cool us down, we stopped talking. By this time, the CIC hut seemed as far below us as the summit was ahead. The jokes about conditions became fears as we met verglassed cracks and I started to doubt that we had the ability to finish the climb. By 6pm the last rays of sunlight were golden upon us and we were about fifty metres below the summit. All our pre-route posturing and bravado had caught up with us now. We had every mistake in the book. And now we're stuck on a face of Eiger-like ferocity in bad weather - over a kilometre off the ground.

If Gareth was worried he did nothing to show it. Nothing was said, but it felt as if mentioning our fears would only make things worse. I couldn't think of anything we could do to make things easier. We'd put ourselves in this situation. All we could do was deal with it. We got the headtorches on and Gareth started a daring tension traverse to try and force the route upwards. He was doing well when his crampon slipped. There was an arc of sparks as he flew 20 feet down the cliff and the ropes twanged taut. 'Hey Gareth, are you okay?' I said, hating the warble of fear that was in my voice.

I lower him down to the belay and we look at each other, our faces pale.

'Well' I say, 'How do you feel about abandoning the rack and abseiling off?'

No way' says Gaz, 'We're ten pitches off the ground and this is the first good belay on the whole route. We start abseiling down the face in the dark...