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# Men's Journal

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SPECIAL REPORT

## The Knee

How to Build, Protect & Rehab Your Most Critical Joint

Make the Perfect Burger

## Bruce Willis

When to Hold On, When to Let Go — Lessons of a Happy Man

## Tiger, A-Rod & the Worst Egomaniacs in Sports

by MATT TAIBBI

EXPEDITION

Climbing Borneo's Forbidden Chasm

GEAR

UPGRADE YOUR HOME

From a sexier stove to a smarter workbench

**OUT OF THE ABYSS**

Jimmy Chin, 800 feet above Low's Gully, with about 1,500 feet to go to reach the summit of the Donkey's Ears



Men's Journal EXPEDITION

# BORNEO'S FORBIDDEN CHASM

Climbing's elite headed to the jungle island in search of a bold way to the top of Mount Kinabalu. They had no idea how hard it would be just to find the bottom.

by MARK SYNNOTT photographs by JIMMY CHIN



**Summit Showers** Just below the top, the crew worried that this upper gully would flood.

**The Crew** The team battled overhanging rock for days.

**Camp** Several nights were spent on the wall, about halfway up the route.

**Low's Gully** The climb began at the bottom of the world's deepest slot canyon.

**W**

HERE'S YOUR HELMET?" "Uh, I don't have one," Alex replies, looking me square in the eye, without apology.

"What do you mean? You forgot it back in camp?"

Before I finish my question, I know the answer.

"Uh, no. I mean I didn't bring one on the trip."

"Intentionally?"

"Sort of."

We haven't even begun our ascent of the 2,500-foot face that rises out of the depths of Low's Gully in northern Borneo, and it's already clear that sharing a rope with Alex Honnold will test all the habits I've accumulated over a 25-year climbing career. I counted on this, of course — it's why I invited him. I didn't, however, foresee being cast as the overly cautious authority figure or that Alex would decide all on his own that my expedition was helmet-optional.

Three days in and he's already dubbed me "Mr. Safety."

Honnold has turned the sport of rock climbing upside down with a series of free-solo — or ropeless — ascents so far beyond the realm of what was considered possible (or sane) that people at first didn't believe him. Many are calling the 23-year-old the best climber of his generation, and they may well be right. He's certainly one of the boldest climbers I've ever



met, but to Honnold, and most people who take extreme risks for a living, the idea of a small slip is totally abstract. I'm guessing that he hasn't given quite as much thought as I have to little things like getting hit by a rock while not wearing a helmet.

I watch as Honnold grabs onto his first handhold and starts up the pitch. I'm immediately struck by the way he moves — fast and confident. The pitch culminates with a large roof that forces him to hoist himself up using the protection he's placed into the cliff instead of the rock itself, but he does it while hanging by his arms only, ascending pull-up style. I call up to offer some advice on making it easier. He's laughing. "I want to do it the hard way," he yells back. "So I can get more of a workout."

I can't help but recall the times in my own climbing career when I'd bend over backward to make my life as difficult as possible, just for the hell of it. Obviously, I still have a little of this inside me or I never would have talked four other guys into rappelling into the world's deepest slot canyon, just to climb back out. But, at 40 — and as a father of three — I've gained some valuable perspective. Watching Honnold as he reaches the first belay is a stark reminder of how much I've reeled things in.

The next pitch is my lead. As I'm getting into a good rhythm, I look up to find several big, loose rocks blocking my path. I'd like to avoid them, but the walls on either side are crackless and covered in lichen. I feel around for handholds, but they're worthless. Honnold is shouting up at me, telling me to just go for

ANTHONY LAJUTH / TIGERLINE NEWS GETTY IMAGES



**UP THROUGH THE JUNGLE** The author enjoys the relatively easygoing tourist trail before having to set up base camp on a precarious ridge above Low's Gully. Opposite page: Luggage is divvied up in Kota Kinabalu.

it and climb around them without inserting a new piece of gear into the rock to protect against a potential fall. My gut tells me that if I do that, I'll *definitely* fall. So I carefully slide a small camming unit into a tiny crack at the base of the block, then give it a little tug.

Bad idea. The block shifts and a basketball-size chunk comes loose, slamming into my shoulder as it rockets down toward Honnold at the belay.

"Rock!" I yell. Honnold nonchalantly leans to the side, and the rock sails safely past him, then explodes into the base of the gully 200 feet below.

My body is shaking with adrenaline as I inspect the damage. The rock tore through my jacket and two shirts. In all my years of big-wall climbing, it's the first time I've pulled a big block onto myself, and for a brief moment I wonder if playing it safe means losing my edge. Honnold and I share a look, but nothing is said.

**B**EFORE I LANDED IN KOTA KINABALU — OR KK, AS THE locals call it — my idea of Borneo was pretty much the common caricature: a primitive jungle island crawling with hungry cannibals with bones stuck through their noses. To the rest of Asia, it's actually a popular beach-vacation destination, and while cannibals do still exist in the country's most remote pockets, every year hundreds of tourists, mostly from Japan, trek to the summit of the very mountain we came to climb. But at 13,500 feet, Mount Kinabalu is one of the tallest in Southeast Asia, and there's another, far more forbidding side to it: Low's Gully is a deep, 10-mile-long rift that slices into Kinabalu's north face, having been scooped out by massive glaciers 10,000 years ago. It is also prone to devastating flash floods and known to the local Kadazandusuns as the "revered place of the dead."

As a starving professional climber, I rely entirely on sponsors like the North Face to fund my expeditions; the more bizarre the proposition, the more likely the funding. Borneo, I thought, was sure to be hiding one of these rare gems, and research immediately pointed me toward Mount Kinabalu. But info on the gully itself ranged from nonexistent to downright scary.

I soon learned that only three parties had ever successfully descended Low's Gully, and the first to try it, a 10-man British Army expedition back in 1994, turned what was supposed to be a six-day training exercise into a 31-day fight for survival. The epic is documented in a book called *Descent Into Chaos*. "Back in Kevin's cave, morale sank," the author writes. "Thoughts turned to loved ones at home who might never be seen again.... Of one thing, thankfully, they were not short, and that was water — one of the sources of their misfortune."

As far as I could tell, only three parties had ever climbed the sheer walls that rise out of its depths, and one spent a month just looking for the way down.

The first person I invited on the expedition was Conrad Anker, a fellow member of the North Face climbing team and arguably the most experienced and talented adventure climber in the world. At 47, with 44 expeditions behind him, Anker probably has the most finely tuned mountain sense of anyone I know. Anker, in turn, suggested we invite Honnold, and I have to admit that I was apprehensive at first. Over the years I've done just about all of my trips with older, more experienced guys, and I've always been wary of going on big expeditions with people I don't know. But Anker had just

returned from climbing El Capitan with Honnold, where they had completed one of Yosemite's hardest free climbs, and he had been immediately seduced.

"Honnold could be our secret weapon," Anker suggested, selling him as a young, fearless gun to send out on the sharp end of the rope when we silverbacks are all tapped out and a tough pitch needs to be fired. "I guarantee you'll learn a lot from climbing with him." Anker has a well-deserved reputation for having a brutal and tireless work ethic in the mountains, and there aren't many who can hang with him. If nothing else I was curious to see what Anker saw in him.

Honnold's steep rise to fame began with what will probably go down in history as the best rookie season ever in Yosemite Valley. He kicked off his soloing binge with the 1,000-foot crack-climbing test piece known as Astroman, then the infamous Salathe Wall on El Capitan. As people were still trying to figure out where this kid had come from, he took things to another level altogether, with a free-solo ascent of Zion National Park's Moonlight Buttress — a 1,200-foot monolith rated 5.12d that culminates with a searing



fingertip layback nearly 1,000 dizzying feet off the deck. Until then it was considered big news when someone made it with a rope; no one had ever free-soloed it. Some consider Honnold's climb the boldest ever.

Before all this, Honnold was an engineering student at the University of California-Berkeley. But college life didn't suit him, so he dropped out and moved into his car. I'd seen a photo of him and his van in *Climbing* magazine. The interior was spartan: some bins filled with climbing gear, a plywood bed, shelves filled with books — many about atheism. It was in this van that Honnold plotted his climbs and from which he suddenly emerged as the world's best free-soloist. But he'd never been on an expedition before.

Honnold was the first to arrive in Borneo, and when I showed up at the hotel at midnight, he was asleep. I sat down, popped open a bottle of duty-free vodka, and was just taking my first sip when he staggered out of his room in his boxers — lean, of average height, with

**TEAM BORNEO** The crew had about 75 years of climbing experience among them, yet learned a lot from 23-year-old rookie Alex Honnold (above, third from left); Honnold uncoils a rope in preparation for the big climb out of Low's Gully (right).



## THE GULLY TRANSFORMED INTO A RAGING RAPID. NOW THERE WAS NO WAY OUT BUT UP.

short black hair, his eyes deer-in-headlights huge. I offered him some vodka, but he declined, saying that he didn't drink. In fact, he'd never had a buzz of any kind, he admitted, apart from adrenaline. In the U.K., where he had recently spent a few weeks ticking off a slew of its hardest routes, they nicknamed him "the Monk."

The next day we were joined by the rest of the team: Anker, Jimmy Chin, and Kevin Thaw, all North Face climbers with whom I've shared more than a few epics. "I can't believe we're doing this again," a bemused Anker announced as he walked into the hotel.

**I**CAN'T BELIEVE I'VE BEEN HERE FOR A WEEK, AND ALL I've done so far is pack and repack bags," complained Honnold during the three-hour drive to the park entrance.

"Get used to it, Alex," replied Anker, matter-of-factly. We'd been festering in the tropical heat for seven days, and Honnold, in particular, was starting to lose it. In addition to the usual logistical

hassles of a five-member team in a foreign country, we had to sort out the permits to make the climb, which I hadn't been able to do before landing in the country. Because of the international press coverage (and inordinate cost) of the 1994 rescue, it's now almost impossible to get permission to go anywhere near the gully. Even by the time we arrived at the park entrance, we still didn't know if they'd allow our expedition to happen. We decided to wing it.

Finally, on the afternoon of our eighth day in Borneo, we set off from park headquarters with 20 local porters, with permission to "recon" the route. The trail was muddy and narrow, twisting and winding its way below waterfalls and along spiny ridges bordered with wind-stunted trees and colorful pitcher plants.

The porters led us up a steep and slippery slab toward a thin col between two rock pinnacles. Of course, the skies had waited until we arrived at this, the sketchiest section, to unleash on us. When Chin and I finally crested the col at sunset, after 6,000 feet of elevation gain from the trailhead, we found Anker and Honnold sitting next to our small mountain of luggage in the rain. There wasn't a lick of horizontal ground anywhere, and we were perched on the spine of a rocky ridge in a range famous for spectacular electrical storms. This was where we would spend our first night on the mountain.

The following morning, Anker and I got up early to start scouting for the descent route into the gully. When I was researching Low's Gully, I discovered that two other expeditions — British and Spanish — had done what we were attempting, and we had fragments of intel from those trip reports. Ten years earlier, the Spanish team spent two seasons pioneering a rappel route into the gully, then forging a line up a stunning big wall back out. The British followed shortly thereafter, with another new line on the same cliff, and we were hopeful that at least one of the expeditions had left behind anchor bolts from their rappel into the canyon. Nonetheless, finding two tiny steel bolts among the vast gray jumble of rock would still require a lot of luck.

As we scanned the ground, we hadn't realized that

the upper reaches of the cliff we came to climb had been revealed across the misty 1,000-foot gap. We stood face-to-face with our wall, its spire rising like something out of a Tolkien story from deep inside the seemingly bottomless chasm. It was a clean, unbroken, 2,500-foot sweep of golden-orange granite, streaked with tiger stripes of white, green, and black. Meanwhile, Anker remained tuned in to our surroundings. "Got it!" he yelled, from a small ledge hundreds of feet below.

For the next two hours, we slowly worked our way into the abyss. At one point we touched down on a small patch of hanging jungle, which we had to bushwhack across. It had been eight years since anyone had stepped foot on this ledge, but within seconds Anker unearthed an old trail, which led right to the next set of bolts. I had anticipated that the descent into the gully would take a couple of days, but with Anker in the lead, we had it sussed out in less than three hours.

(continued on page 102)

The bottom of the canyon was only 30 feet across, covered in green water-polished stones and trickling with a small clear stream. We wasted no time in plotting our ascent, craning our necks up at what appeared to be thousands of feet of overhanging rock. The angle seemed to ease for the final 500 feet, then culminate in a cloud-piercing pinnacle. It would require a capsule-style ascent — fixing ropes to a point on the wall where a camp could be established, then moving the ropes up and repeating the process. Once we found a sheltered spot for a portaledge camp, everyone would move up to the hanging bivvy. The hope was that we could complete the climb with four or five nights on the wall.

**AFTER JUST TWO DAYS OF WORKING OUR** way up the route's lower section, I was in awe of Honnold's focus. He never seems to tire out, and he has an uncanny sense of exactly what will work and what's going to cause a fall. He's amazingly savvy for a climber his age.

A thousand feet up, the cracks we'd been following petered out; the next system was hundreds of feet away. We had hit the crux of the route as Honnold was trying to climb across a long section of blank, dubious-looking gray-and-black granite. There were just enough holds for him to climb it, but there weren't any cracks or crevices into which he could slot a piece of protection. The only way to provide any security at all was to drill a few holes for bolts.

Honnold had never placed a bolt.

On overhanging rock, the only way to get your hands free for drilling is to suspend yourself from a tiny piece of metal the size of a thumbnail called a hook.

Honnold had never placed a hook.

"Is it normal for it to flex?" he called down, sounding nervous, as he dangled 30 feet above me with nothing but a quarter-inch of chromemoly between him and a huge fall.

"Perfectly normal," I yelled back.

Truth be told, I was more scared than Honnold because I knew that on the off chance the hook did blow, he'd fall 60 feet, right onto the spot where I had my belay set up. I just kept reminding myself that he wouldn't be considered the best free-soloist in the world if he didn't have a cool head in situations like this. With the hook in place and a bolt secured, he set off again, confidently navigating another 30 feet of overhanging rock.

Two hours later he reached the shelter of a small roof, 150 feet above me. It was, hands down, one of the best leads I'd ever witnessed. Honnold later named it the "Emily Pitch — Beautiful and Intimidating," after well-known climber Emily Harrington, of whom he was a little enamored. In the small world of the climbing community, everything gets around, and he knew that Harrington would eventually hear about it (and she did when we told her). I wished I'd thought of that when I was single.

Anker was right. I was learning things from Honnold. Well, not so much learning from him as relearning. He brought something to

the expedition none of us had anticipated. Every jaw-dropping lunge, every inhuman pull, even every rookie mistake — it all rekindled the fire that we had had back when we were his age. And it showed me, at least, that the fire was still there.

Later, as we settled into our sleeping bags on the portaledge, Honnold needed to get something off his chest.

"You know, I'm kind of feeling like a pansy," he confessed.

"How so?" I asked. "You just did the sickest lead I've ever seen."

"I know," he replied, "but it scared me. I shouldn't have gotten so scared."

**AFTER OUR FIRST NIGHT ON THE CLIFF,** WE woke up to clear skies, high above the clouds of the jungle lowlands. But our weather window was short-lived. Anker, Thaw, and Chin had set off up a series of free-hanging ropes that were set the day before to push the route ahead, while Honnold and I dropped down to free-climb more of the route. (By reascending sections that had before been gained only with the help of gear like hooks and bolts, we could deem our ascent "free," as opposed to "aided.") By 1 PM, a cloud had boiled up from the gully below, and soon everything — the rock, the rope, my eyelashes, the rim of my hood — was coated with tiny droplets of water. Then something eclipsed the sun and suddenly everything went dark.

The squall came in from the north, driving the rain hard into our faces. Massive waterfalls were now pouring off the cliff, and the gully below started to roar as it transformed into a raging rapid. Even if we had wanted to bail, there was no way out but up. Above, I could hear muffled yelling, followed by an alarming amount of rockfall. Anker was somewhere above us doing battle in the chaos.

Honnold and I retreated to our portaledge to find that our rain fly had a few holes and our beds were filling up like bathtubs. Sitting on my helmet, I bailed as fast as I could, but there was little I could do to stop the stream of water pouring through. Honnold had already climbed into his sleeping bag, which was now soaked. Mine was still safely tucked away in its drybag — a fact I was happy to share with my shivering friend.

The big question on everyone's mind was whether we could dash to the summit before the following day's afternoon downpour. Without the protective overhang of the lower wall, we were sitting ducks if a storm arrived. In fact, the final pitches of the climb follow a big gully that clearly serves as a drainage system for the entire top section of the peak. Drowning, not falling, would be our biggest concern.

But the weather cooperated, and we woke up to conditions that were just right for making some real progress. Once we had breached the overhang, the rock morphed from orange and white to dark gray, from smooth to some of the most prickly rock I've ever climbed. The holds were suddenly huge, weirdly shaped cobbles that we call "chicken heads." Best of all, the climbing was suddenly easy, so easy that I could enjoy a magnificent view to the

north, where Low's Gully snakes toward the sea. If the weather held, we were just a day away from the summit.

More often than not, the top is anticlimactic — you're so completely frazzled by the time you get there that all you can think about is getting down as soon as possible. Not this time. When I topped out around 2 PM, mantling over the lip into a round of high fives, it was one of those rare summits when we had the time and weather to actually savor the moment. Instead of hastily setting up a rappel and getting the hell out of there, we settled down into the rocks and simply sat back to enjoy the view. It had been about two years since I had personally succeeded on a big expedition objective, but the familiar euphoria came flooding back.

Sharing a rope with Honnold had caused me to think a lot about what I was like at his age. I was never anywhere near as talented as he is, nor as bold, but I did have a youthful hunger, and my tolerance for risk was more than a little excessive. Watching Honnold reminded me that climbing without risk isn't really climbing at all.

Looking over at him, I couldn't help but wonder if he understood the arc that, as climbers, we all seem to follow. If, having spent a week hanging out with a bunch of old-timers, he understood that he would have to accept that if he was going to climb as hard as he does now his whole life, and live to tell the tales, he would need a little bit of luck. "I'm like you guys," he told me later. "I totally want to die a grandpa, some old guy playing cards with the kids. I'm sure I won't want to push myself like this when I'm 50."

Now I've got kids of my own waiting for me to return from expeditions like these, and there's a line I just don't cross anymore. The problem is figuring out where that line is at any given moment. Honnold is one of the brightest climbers I've ever met. If nothing else, he knows that climbing is the kind of sport that will sort you out, one way or another. ☺

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