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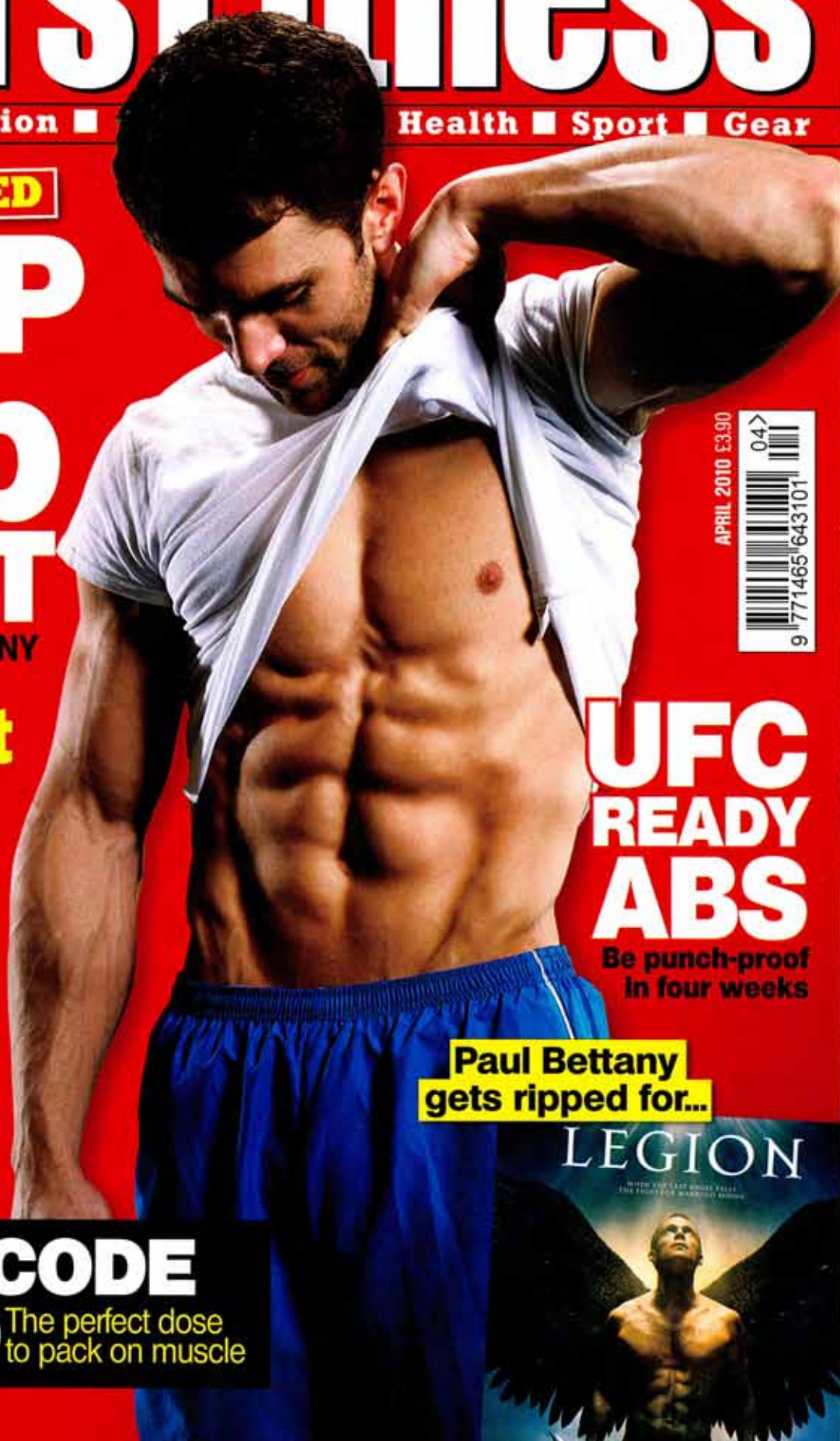
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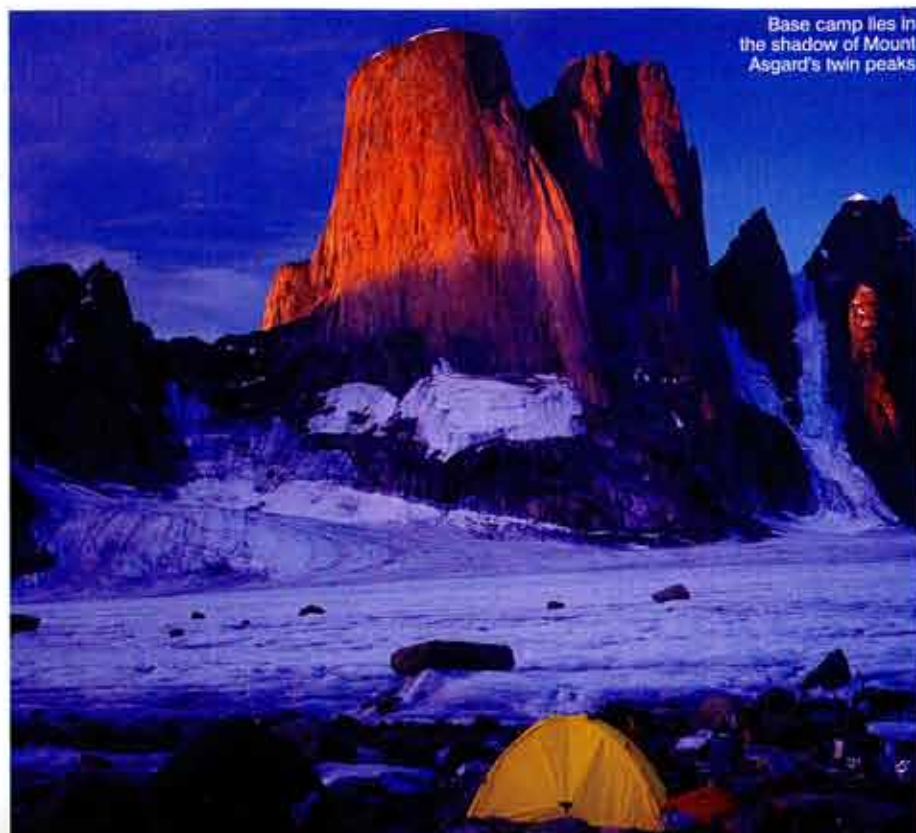


**Find out how inside**

# STORMING ASGARD

**For British climber Leo Houlding, completing one of the world's most remote and dangerous climbs wasn't enough – he decided to jump off the mountain as well. *MF* finds out why** >

Words Joel Snape Photography Alastair Lee



Base camp lies in the shadow of Mount Asgard, a 2,015m Canadian peak containing some of the most technically difficult high-altitude routes in the world.

A few weeks before Leo Houlding's attempt to free-climb Mount Asgard, a 2,015m Canadian peak containing some of the most technically difficult high-altitude routes in the world, the 29-year-old British climber's plan hit a snag. Due to increased polar bear activity, the local park rangers decided to introduce a ban on storing food in the area near the peak – which meant they removed 500kg of freeze-dried supplies that Houlding's team had cached along their planned route.

This was a serious setback. The team calculated that, rather than the week they had allowed, it would now take three weeks to make the walk to the peak since they would have to carry fresh supplies along with all the other kit necessary. But to Houlding, the solution was obvious: cut out the first part of the journey and parachute into base camp instead.

'I trawled the internet, found a company that could charter us an aeroplane, then bought some parachutes on eBay for about \$50 [£31] each,' says Houlding. 'We didn't know whether we'd get the all-clear to jump until the day, and we had to re-rig the parachutes a bit to make them work, but we knew it'd work in principle and the pilot was really cool.'

That didn't mean it was going to be easy, though. The problem was that we were aiming to land on a glacier full of crevasses, and we were trying to recce a decent spot to land at 100mph from 150m up. We were in a plane, not a helicopter, so we knew that it wouldn't be able to pick us up again if anything went wrong, and the air drop was pretty theoretical because normally only the UN and the SAS do that sort of thing. But

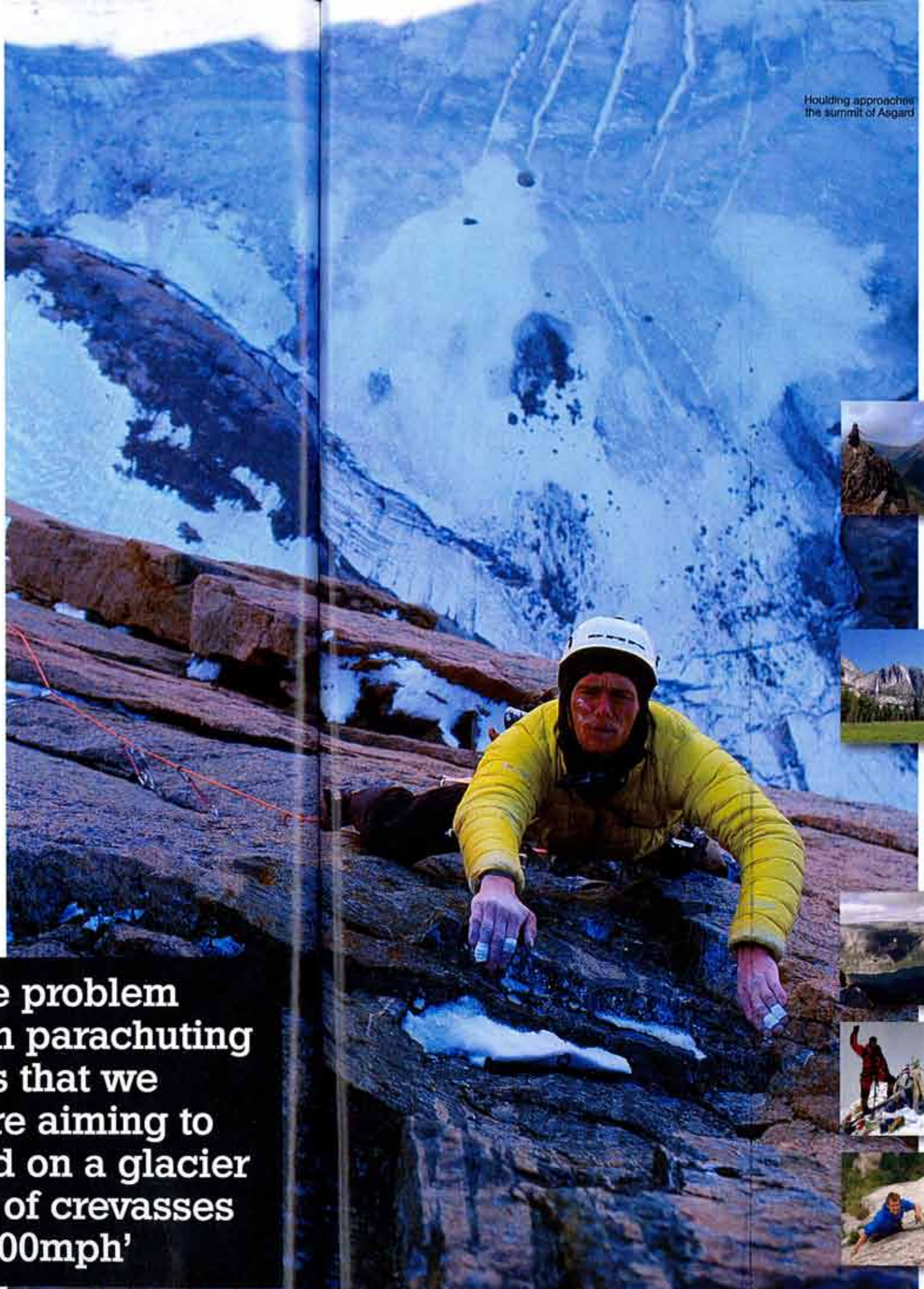
we pulled it off – we went up above Asgard, fell right past the tower we were planning to climb and landed at the base. It was so perfect it was like a Bond movie. But real.'

### Houlding pattern

This was a typically head-on approach from Houlding, a climber who's made a name for himself as one of the sport's wild men. He's probably best known to the British public for his famous tum in *Top Gear* when he climbed to the top of a cliff face in France's Verdon Gorge, beating an Audi driven by Jeremy Clarkson. You may also have seen the 2003 documentary *My Right Foot*, which followed his rehabilitation from a 20m fall down the face of Patagonia's Cerro Torre. He has also retraced pioneering climber George Mallory's route up Everest, for a film project narrated by Alan Rickman. 'When I was a kid, *Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves* was my favourite movie and Alan Rickman's Sheriff was the best character, so just hearing him say my name was pretty awesome,' says Houlding with a grin.

Among climbers, though, Houlding's simply known as a fantastic talent. After taking the sport up alongside his father when he was only ten years old, he was clambering around his school buildings and hitchhiking to prime spots in the Lake District by 13. At 16 he was British Junior Indoor climbing champion. Since then he's achieved things that at one time were thought impossible, >

**'The problem with parachuting was that we were aiming to land on a glacier full of crevasses at 100mph'**



Houlding approaches the summit of Asgard

## HOULDING ON

Britain's wildest climber talks us through the highlights of his career

### 1980

Houlding is born on 28th July. 'I'm a typical Leo,' he says, 'in that I hate being shit at stuff. And I was shit at school sports.'

### 1990

Houlding's dad takes him climbing for the first time. 'I loved it,' he says. 'From then until I was 16 I was out three times a week, I've got really strong fingers from that.'

### 1995

Houlding tackles a route known as Lord Of The Flies on Dinas Cromlech, Snowdonia (left). The climb is rated a brutal Extremely Severe 6 6a. Houlding does it aged 15, at 2am, after last orders in the local pub, with a headtorch.

### 1996

Houlding is named British Junior Indoor Climbing Champion. He still climbs indoors these days. 'You have to, to stay fit,' he says. 'And some of the UK's walls are really impressive.'

### 1998

Houlding and friend Patch Hammond become the first Britons to free-climb El Niño (left) on El Capitan in Yosemite, Houlding's first major wall.

### 2002

Houlding suffers a badly broken ankle during a 20m fall. He's forced to take a year off climbing. 'It was a bad decision to make that climb,' he says. 'But I can safely say I would not be where I am today had I not made that bad decision, and I'm thankful I did.'

### 2005

He returns to Yosemite to tackle the Half Dome and Freerider routes on El Capitan in under 24 hours. 'Yosemite is like Neverland,' he says. 'And the rangers will never catch us.'

### 2006

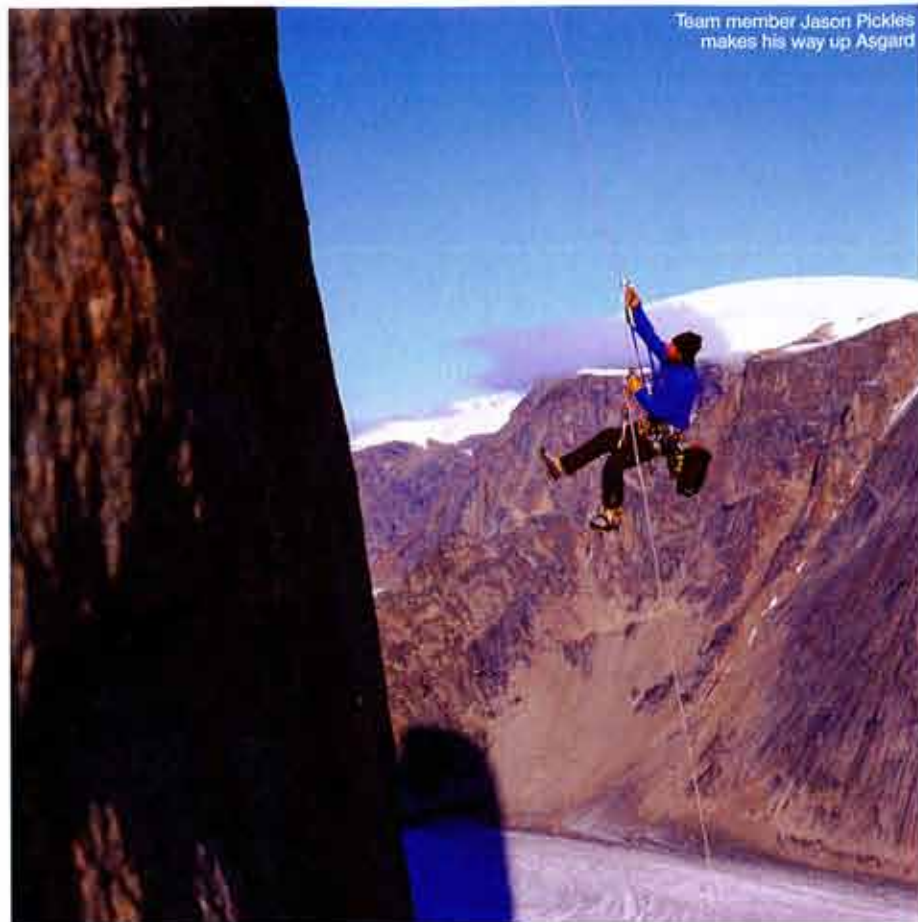
Houlding makes the first ever base jump descent of Naranjo de Bulnes (left), one of the highest peaks in the Picos de Europa, Spain.

### 2007

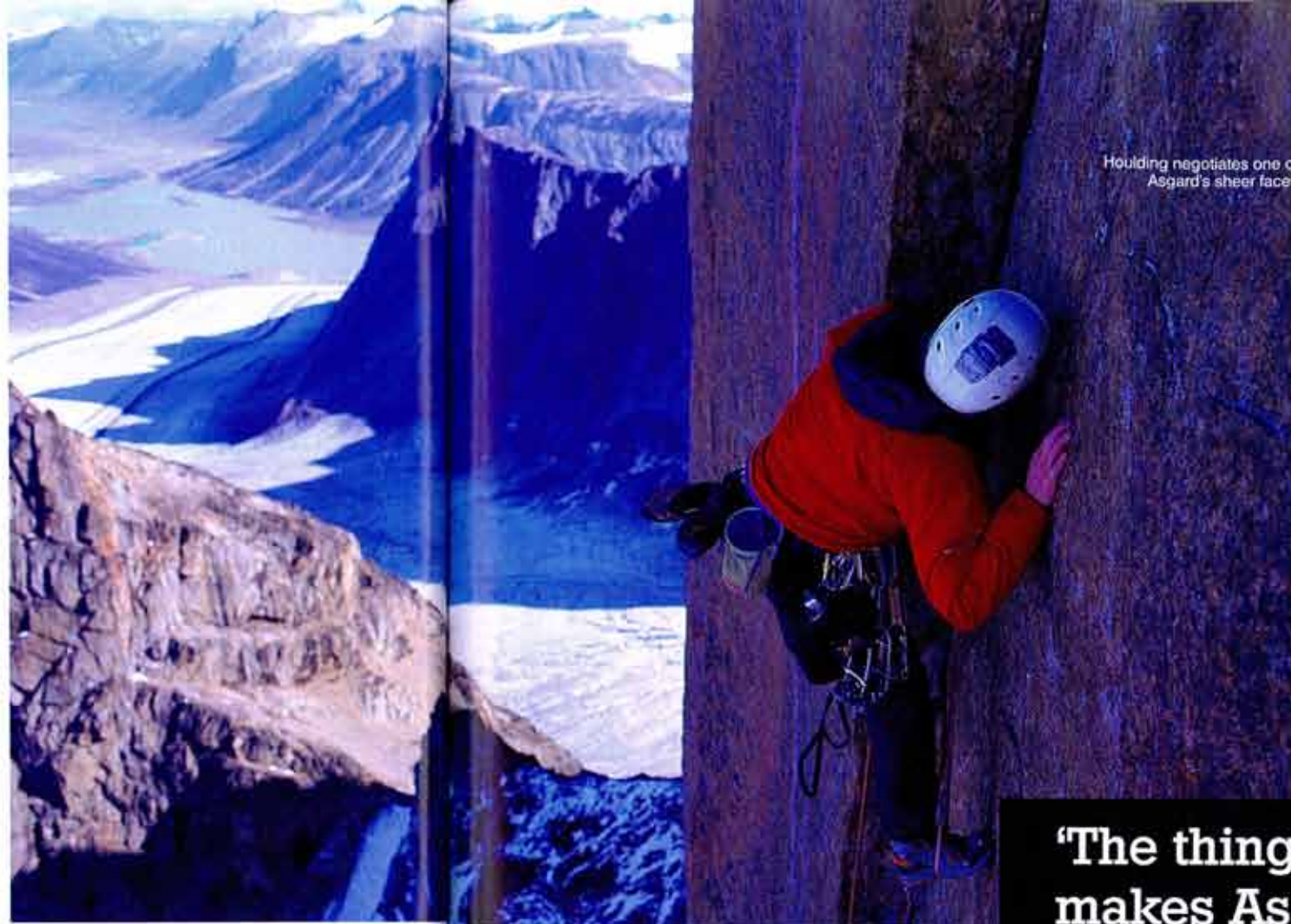
He joins the Altitude Everest Expedition (left), retracing the last steps of George 'Because it's there' Mallory up Everest. 'It's not impossible that Mallory would have made it to the top, but given the equipment he had and the conditions he was facing I'd say it's unlikely,' is Houlding's conclusion.

### 2009

Houlding completes a historic first ascent of Mount Huashan (left) – one of the most sacred mountains in China – before starting his preparations for Asgard.



Team member Jason Pickles makes his way up Asgard



Houlding negotiates one of Asgard's sheer faces

of Pangnirtung to retrieve spares. While they waited, the climbers warmed up by tackling a route made famous by British Everest veteran Doug Scott. 'The Scott route is 4,500 vertical feet [1,370m],' says Houlding, 'and we did that in six hours. Then we found a place to jump off.'

**Peak practice**

When the whole team met at their intended destination, Houlding's team hit another serious problem. They'd been intending to climb the west face of the mountain, but melting snow had made the route to the foot of the climb dangerous, with tonnes of rock routinely falling down the gullies they'd have to tackle en route. Instead of risking it, the team decided to tackle the northwest face, a much harder climb than the one they'd planned for.

Under the British grading system, climbs are given an 'Adjectival' grade which describes how complicated, dangerous and tiring they are overall, and a 'Technical' grade using numbers and letters which rates the difficulty of the trickiest moves on a route. The hardest route ever rated has been labelled

E11 or Extremely Severe 11.

The northwest face of Asgard contains sections rated E6 6b, or Extremely Severe 6 with chunks of 6b technical climbing. Houlding had been intending to free-climb to the summit, using nothing but his fingers and toes to get to the top with kit only used for safety purposes. The new route forced a rethink.

'Nobody's even tried to free-climb that route before and I can see why,' says Houlding. 'It's blank, it's featureless, there are no continuous crack systems, and the middle thousand feet [300m] is properly overhanging. It's not just vertical, it's solid overhang, and twice the height of Canary Wharf. And just as we got there, the weather crapped out. In the end we managed to free-climb half of the route, but it got

so brutal that we knew just getting to the top was going to be a challenge.'

**Sky's the limit**

'The pitches [sections of climb] were about 40m long - normally a pitch that long would take somebody like me or Stanley no more than two hours, and it might only take 20 minutes,' says Houlding. 'Here they were taking us five hours, so we were only doing two pitches a day. But speaking personally, when shit goes according to plan it can be kind of dull. Complications are what make things interesting.'

As well as climbing for up to 20 hours a day, the team also had to haul their kit behind them using ropes and pulleys. At night they hung their portaledges on the

**'The thing that makes Asgard dangerous is how isolated it is. If you're lucky a rescue helicopter will get to you in three days'**

such as free-climbing Yosemite National Park's infamous El Capitan and Half Dome in one day. For the Asgard Project, he wanted to take everything he's learned one step further.

**Happy landings**

'Stanley [American climber Sean Leary] and I thought we could take the new-school techniques that we'd learned in Yosemite to another level,' says Houlding. 'I've been base jumping for five years and I've done about 100 jumps, which isn't a lot - but we were determined to jump from the top of Asgard.'

Their lack of experience wasn't the only problem. 'The other thing that makes Asgard dangerous is how isolated it is,' Houlding says. 'We had a satellite phone and it's in a national park [Auyuittuq National Park on

Baffin Island], but if you're lucky a rescue helicopter will get to you in three days. It's like you imagine the edge of the world to be - this crazy environment from *Lord Of The Rings*, out in the middle of nowhere.'

Houlding, Leary and British climbers Chris Rabone and Jason Pickles made a successful jump alongside most of their kit, but on landing they discovered that their most important parachute load - a barrel containing their climbing gear - had exploded on landing. Their portaledges, tiny tents that can be pitched on a near-vertical cliff face, were wrecked.

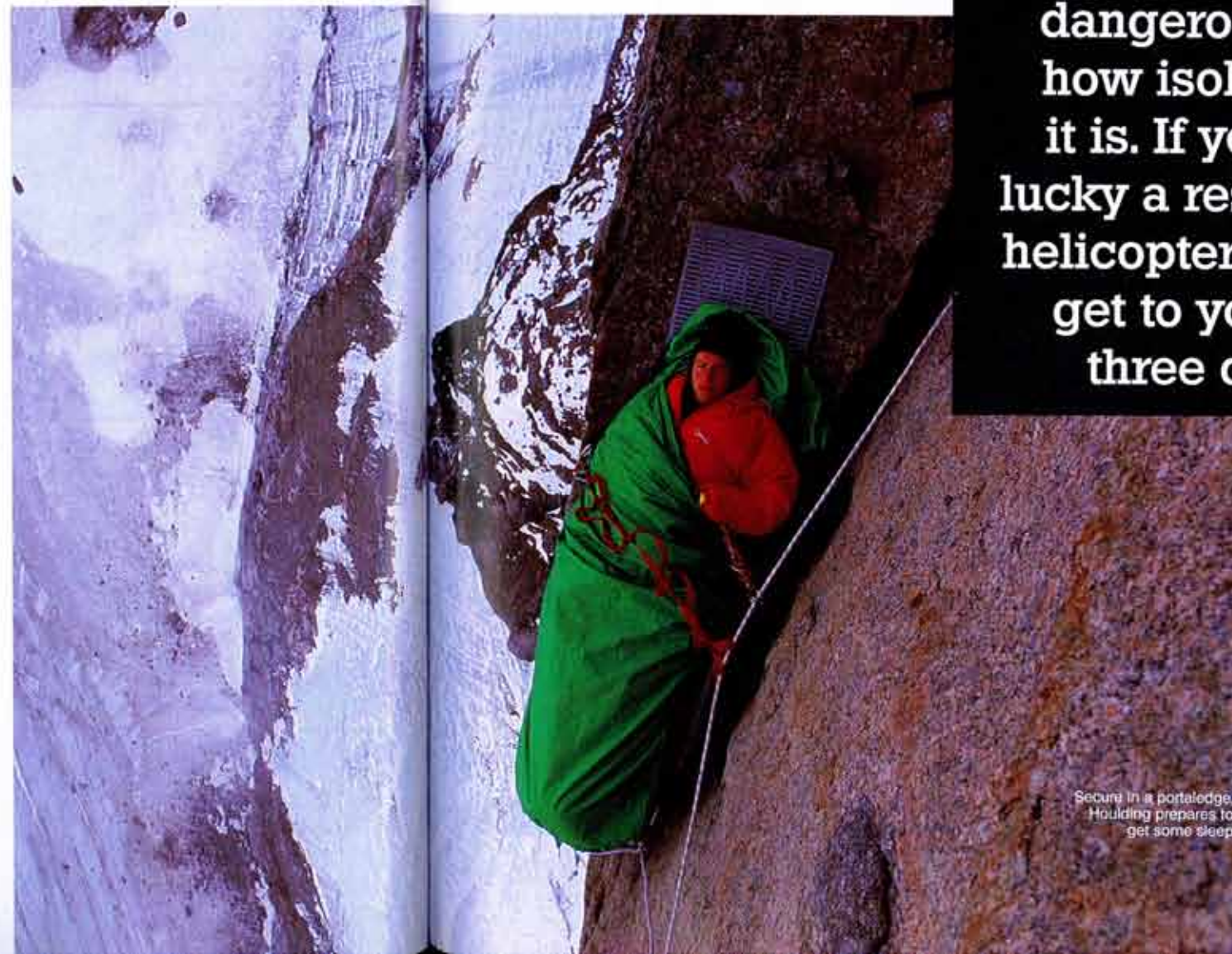
The team was forced to spend two days trekking back to get a message to the camera crew filming the ascent, sending them back to the remote outpost



After a fall, Houlding's torn hands threatened to end the climb



The team's climbing nuts show signs of hand use



Secure in a portaledge, Houlding prepares to get some sleep

Made it! Left to right: Pickles, Houlding, Chris Rabone and Sean 'Stanley' Leary celebrate at the summit



**'It was harder than Everest – so tough that it was weird being in charge. If you make bad decisions, people die'**

rock, roped themselves in and slept on the cliff face. They melted snow in pans for water, and cooked and ate their meals perched on narrow ledges. 'It's amazing how much you need to survive in life that you don't think about,' says Houlding.

A severe frost set in, freezing the ropes and making it difficult to touch the icy rock with numb fingers. Houlding's team switched to aid-climbing, hammering pegs into the mountain and hanging from them, but they had barely enough kit. Houlding took a tumble when he was just 75m from the summit after a tiny climbing aid known as a Skyhook gave way. Although his rope held, his hands were torn, and for a while it looked like the climb was over within sight of the top.

'It was way harder than Everest – so tough that it was weird being in charge,' says Houlding. 'My contemporaries, these people who are as good at climbing as I am, and who I respect, were saying, "What are we gonna do, captain?" and if you make bad decisions, people die. Having their trust was an amazing thing.'

### Long way down

In the end, Houlding's damaged hands couldn't stop him from getting to the top. And the exciting part was only half over: with wingsuits rigged to go, he and Leary

were ready to jump off the top. 'It's such a weird feeling,' says Houlding. 'The thing about a big cliff is that you never unclip from the rope, so it's trippy when you do. I had my last carabiner sticking out of the flies of my wingsuit, and when I unclipped it I wasn't attached to the mountain any more.'

Watching Houlding fly on the Asgard documentary is exhilarating, and the whole film shows some of the hardest, grittiest technical climbing on video. But does Houlding worry about how far he's pushed himself, and how much further he can go?

'It does worry me a bit, yeah,' he concedes. 'To get the same sensation of accomplishment and get that cutting-edge feeling, you have to keep bettering yourself. Going to Yosemite still blows my mind, but it's not quite the same. You want it to be as hardcore as possible without anyone getting hurt – and we were right on that fine line.'

Still, Houlding has only one serious regret about the climb. 'When we jumped off the top, Jason, Chris and [director of the documentary film] Alastair Lee had to come

down with the gear, which took them another 36 hours,' he says. 'In some ways it was my most anti-climactic base jump, because as team leader it felt wrong to abandon the guys up there.' They couldn't have made the documentary *and* jumped as a team, because the kit requirements did not allow it. 'Flying with your kit isn't easy – you either have to throw it off with a parachute, or put it down your pants, wrap ropes around your legs and stuff the cargo down your wings, which alters the dynamics of your flight.'

Which is why Houlding already knows what his next mission will be. 'There aren't many top-level big wall climbers who are also decent base jumpers, because you need to have done about 200 skydives before you even think about trying it. And most base jumpers can't deal with crevasses and avalanches. But I'm going to put together a team who can do it. That's the next mission. Everybody flies.' □

Leo Houlding is sponsored by Berghaus. The Asgard Project is available on DVD at [theasgardproject.com](http://theasgardproject.com).



To watch footage of Leo Houlding in action go to [mensfitness.co.uk/links/leohoulding](http://mensfitness.co.uk/links/leohoulding)