

# Logan Mountains

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SNOWFLAKES drifted slowly upward, shimmeringly evanescent in the sun. Lines of clouds, some dark and ominous, had marched toward us all day, but many had turned away before enveloping us, and the occasional dustings of snow we received were soon melted. The horizon became more and more distant as we gained height in the great corner, and more of the myriad of peaks surrounding us became visible. A golden eagle passed silently by us in mist and sunbeams. The threatening weather and an unknown descent route added urgency to our efforts but on belays eyes and thoughts turned to the rough, clean granite studded with feldspar crystals; to the scores of unclimbed peaks around us; and to the glaciers, wild ridges and deep valleys we would have to cross on the walk out. Twenty miles to the north were Mounts Sir James MacBrien and Harrison Smith, and twenty miles beyond we could see the Stoneflower on a good day. Our route lay on the 1200-foot northwest face of the fin-like peak we called "Scylla," and the bulk of the Southern Logans, including Mount Nirvana, Mount Savage, and massive Thunder Dome, was hidden by the great wall.

Below the glacier and its jumbled moraine our tents were pitched beside a beautiful jade-green lake, in a meadow of grass and moss and flowers, studded with boulders fallen some time past from the peaks of the cirque. Two days before, Todd Thompson, Al Long and I had tried to start this route, but numb, unfeeling hands on that cold morning, a loose handhold which sent Long flying, and a wet, mossy and repellent corner combined to send us back to camp. Under the guise of making an inventory of our remaining food, we ate lunch from breakfast to dinner. Todd and Al were to go out when George Schunk came in and we packed gear to fly out with them in the helicopter.

Today was the last day before Al left for his lab in Cambridge and Todd headed back to his bank in Panama. Todd wasn't feeling well, so it was just Al and I who hopped on familiar boulders around our lake and trudged up to the base. One route was obvious, and led directly to the summit: a huge corner, which steepened slightly at the top to vertical. I wondered whether there was a crack in it, and both of us wondered about the weather. Since our arrival, we'd been able to climb only every two or three days, and during the month we were in the cirque the warmth of summer progressively faded. During the walk out, on August 11, ten inches of snow fell behind us. Almost never were there two good days in a row, so we quickly concluded that our original am-

bitions (and accompanying piles of gear) were unrealistically large. The biggest walls were on peak 37 (all numbers refer to Buckingham's map, *A.A.J.*, 1966 and *C.A.J.*, 1971) and were about 3600 feet, but they were unappealing and would have forced complex and indirect routes up subsidiary spurs and over and down towers flanking the summit.

The haul bags, the hammocks, the bashies and the bolt kit never left camp, and when Thompson and Long did bivouac, they were on the flank of peak 37 close to the top of a beautiful, thousand-foot tower we called "Calypso." They had begun by climbing ropes left on the first three pitches during our retreat in the rain two days previously and had pushed the route all day in a cold rain which began soon after they were on new ground. When darkness made route-finding too hard they stopped, sans duvets, and waited for dawn, clothes wet and snow falling. The new day and a descent much easier than expected gently released them.

. . . gently, but with fingers which were numb for several days. Al's healed more quickly than Todd's and I recovered from a mysterious illness in time to go with him on a day which held for us all the reasons we go to the mountains. A couloir led up from the glacier which tumbled from the flanks of Nirvana and its outliers, but it led up out of sight between the great grey walls and towers of peak 37. No other route on the mountain looked reasonable and "Hydra," as we called it, was so clearly the greatest prize in the area that we didn't want to leave without at least making an attempt. Back in Boston, Bill Buckingham and Lew Surdam had shown us spectacular photographs taken when they were the first to visit the cirque in 1965 and our impressions then and now were that any route would be problematical at best.

I was still weak and not very fast on the approach, but we had eaten and departed within twenty minutes of waking. A sleepy look out the tent at three A.M. generated a startled exclamation and then awe at the spectacularly clear sky under which a light dusting of snow made the summits gleam far above us. Our packs were ready from an abortive try the day before when we'd gotten only a couple of hundred yards out of camp before it began to rain. Today, we were driven by the frustration of staying in camp and led on by the beauty of the peak.

Tiny figures balanced across the stream below camp and jumped and slid down the mossy boulders to reach the goat trail up the moraine. We felt insignificant. John Poizier, our pilot, had been expressive as he described the "great hole" surrounded by rock walls he had set down in with the others before returning to Cantung to pick up Al and me. It was true, we were enclosed on three sides and on the fourth the cirque dropped away to the valley of the Rabbitkettle River. Almost claustrophobic.

When Al and I entered the couloir, rock walls closed around us, quiet, dark and cold. Hard ice lay beneath a thin layer of snow, and we

PLATE 21

*Photo by Andrew Embrick*

**P 37 ("Hydra") from the Southwest.  
Electra Spire on the left.**



climbed on front points, unroped, blindly following upward our passage-way to the sky and marking our gain in altitude by looking across the glacier to peak 34, the "Minotaur." That peak we'd climbed on our second day, finding a classic rock and ice route which by-passed huge rock walls we were to try and fail on later. As the sun rose and grey turned to pink and then to the blue of a perfect sky, towers flanking us shone golden and our eyes lingered on an exceptionally beautiful spire, just left of us as we had begun the route. At the time, it was only one of many possibilities we might try later, but George and I did return to it and in 23 hours of continuous climbing reached the summit and descended. I watched amazed as George, bare skin showing through his thin, tattered sweater, ignored the snow flurries which plastered the rock and weighted our ropes and forced his way up free climbing. It would have been hard even with EB's and sunshine. I was content to jumar, my justification being our real need for haste, only partially redeeming myself on the descent by climbing up to free a jammed rappel. Luckily it was the only one in our long series down the wall. A pitch from this climb, of the tower we called "Electra Spire," sticks in my memory. George had done some intricate aid, then a big tension traverse and set up a sling belay in a steep corner high on the wall. From his belay I led directly up, expecting all the time to be forced into aid because the rock was improbably steep and unbroken. But a single thin crack rose above me and miraculously a profusion of knobs and crystals materialized, creating 160 feet of the climbing we'd come for. The pitch ended at another sling belay, just below a roof beyond which was the summit. When I finished cleaning George's lead of the last pitch, he had already built a cairn and was rigging the first rappel, the last of which brought us back to our boots and ice gear at the bottom of the couloir.

But all that was yet to come, and Long and I left that tower and others below us as we cramponed upwards, emerging into the sunlight on a cornice which overhung the glacier and valley on the previously unseen side of peak 37. We had seen from below a rock pyramid which began where the couloir ended, with little hope that it was the true summit. But now we were almost as high as Nirvana's 9097 feet, and there couldn't be much more climbing. Indeed there wasn't; the rock yielded easily, putting us on top at ten in the morning. The sun shone, there was not a cloud or breath of wind, and though our crackers were moldy we were happy to sit in the sky, to drink the air, and to stay for three hours on top of our world of rock and ice.

A small bottle of cherry brandy was employed in the celebration on our return, but the (just-as-small) bottle of champagne was saved for skills were brought into play then, including some patience during the a success on Nirvana a few days later. A variety of mountaineering slog up the glacier. We used a hodge-podge of implements including rock

hammers, nut prods and 11-point and otherwise deficient crampons to climb the short section of vertical ice at the back of the bergschrund and reached the rock of the north face on which our route diagonalled up and right. On top we found the cairn of Buckingham's and Surdam's first ascent. Around us were the spectacularly wild mountains through which they travelled to reach this mountain and then walk out to civilization. On the descent we made a jump off the bergschrund reminiscent of unwise childhood leaps from roofs into flowerbeds. But the landing was happily soft and we continued down, entertained at intervals by encounters with hidden crevasses.

I've digressed, and also jumped ahead. It would be easy to digress more, to rest-day gorges on pancakes and jam, to the magic-carpet-like helicopter ride in and the four-day walk out, to Todd's relaxed equanimity and Kathy Murray's constant cheerfulness, and to the time we thought we were doing a first ascent and on top found a cairn we ourselves had left a few days before. Images perceived intensely are what remain, not a chronology of climbs. We did other peaks: from Nirvana north are "Charybdis," "Scylla," and at the end of the ridge, "Cyclops," facetiously referred to around camp as "Trundle Butte." "Guardian," just northwest of the lake, lacked a cairn until George and Kathy climbed it on a wet day. "Argus" (peak 42) yielded easily though new snow was being sloughed continuously from the ice we climbed. The summit of "Labyrinth" (peak 43) was a cornice we dared not stand on. The descent was via a couloir we hadn't been able to see from below and by-passed several leads on steep and rotten rock. One lazy day we'd stirred only enough to climb a trio of needles near camp we called the "Eumenides." We didn't manage to try the pair of grotesque and precarious aiguilles which were visible from camp and directly in view from the great corner of Scylla's northwest face. Our climb on that face was the midpoint of the trip. Long and I might have allowed our thoughts to drift in recollection and anticipation had we not been so engrossed in the climbing. I was once forced to lead directly past a huge loose block attached only by a few inches at its upper end. Long drew the last hard pitch of the eleven, devious and problematical face-climbing on fragile nubbins and flakes far above a really lousy collection of small nuts. The summit was the highest point of an almost knife-edged ridge, and in fading light we embraced, at peace. Hopes were fulfilled and tension stilled for long moments before we coiled ropes for the descent.

We reached summits, leaving hasty cairns and some loops of rappel sling and often regretting that we'd marked our presence at all. Some days had perfect weather, but more provided an explanation for how the moss could grow so lushly. Time went to placid, convivial games of Hearts and to enjoying the culinary delights Todd's expertise created. We fed unwanted granola to a resident rodent, read *The Godfather* in

fragments passed in the rain from tent to tent, and (rarely) bathed at high speed in the lake. An incredibly euphoric immersion in Cantung's hot springs was the transition between the wilds and the "real" world, a transition we were not sure we wanted to make but which was eased by rounds of beer with the miners and geologists in the Cantung bar.

*Summary of Statistics:*

**AREA:** Southern Logan Mountains, North West Territories, Canada.

**ASCENTS:** (All first ascents except as noted. Numbered peaks refer to map opposite page 35, *A.A.J.*, 1966.)

"Cyclops" (last peak on ridge going north from Nirvana) via north-west face, July 15, 1975 (Embick, Long, Thompson).

"Minotaur" (Peak 34) via northwest couloir and north face, July 16, 1975 (Embick, Long, Thompson).

"Eumenides" (three one-pitch needles near lake), July 18, 1975 (Long, Thompson).

"Calypso Tower" (a spur on the south ridge of Peak 37), July 17 and 19-20, 1975 (Long, Thompson), NCCS IV, F8, A2.

"Hydra" (Peak 37), July 23, 1975 (Embick, Long).

Nirvana, second ascent via new route on north face, July 26, 1975 (Embick, Long, Thompson).

"Scylla" (second peak going north from Nirvana) via northwest face, July 28, 1975 (Embick, Long), NCCS IV, F8, A2.

"Argus" (Peak 42), July 30, 1975 (Embick, Schunk).

"Electra Spire" (a spire on Peak 37), July 31 and August 1, 1975 (Embick, Schunk) NCCS IV, F9, A3.

"Labyrinth" (Peak 43), August 3, 1975 (Embick, Schunk).

"Warrior" (Peak 44), third ascent, August 3, 1975 (Murray).

"Scylla," second ascent, and "Charybdis" (peak just northwest of Nirvana) both via northeast couloir, August 6, 1975 (Embick, Schunk).

Guardian, second ascent, August 8, 1975 (Murray, Schunk).

**PERSONNEL:** Andrew Embick, Alan Long, Kathy Murray, George Schunk, Todd Thompson.