

Absolute Zero on Longs Peak

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N MARCH OF 1980, inspired by who knows what Bonatti, Messner or Kor epic, I set out for the 2000-foot east face of Longs Peak alone. The mountain wasn't impressed with my dreams of grandeur. After 600 feet of arrogant thrashing, I was stopped cold. In the end I barely escaped after a 50-foot free fall and an avalanche-plagued retreat. Humbled and awed, I limped back to the sanctuary of the society that had forced me onto the mountain in the first place.

Three years later, I was still smarting from my duel with the icy wall. Time had dulled my fears of spitting rocks, ripped protection and avalanching snow. The freezing bivouacs and sudden storms were warmed by my burning pride. Another round was in order.

Using the gift of unemployment, I was able to wait and watch as the weather showed a pattern. Wanting every advantage possible, I preyed upon technology's latest. I borrowed, bartered and finally bought what my meager savings could finance. The lithium, titanium and molybdenum helped hone the positive mental edge I needed. Training was pointless. Getting cold would only disillusion me. One shot, provisioned for ten days, was it. There would be no third attempt.

By mid-January 1983, losing all reasons not to go for it, I did. Fortunately for my burdened shoulders, my cousin Todd was in town along with my friend, Mike McCarron. Both agreed to play porter for me. They were the final advantage I needed for the odyssey to come.

Thanks to Rocky Mountain National Park's infamous wind, the approach trail was clear or hard-packed snow. During mid-morning I meandered my way up the trail. My sea-level cousin and overloaded friend were left to find their own anemic pace. By the time my "Sherpas" joined me, I had excavated the bulk of our new lodgings at 12,000 feet. The torturous loads were not in vain. Evening passed as we indulged in the luxury of a well stocked cave.

The next day the warmth of our bags and my last assured comfortable morning convinced us to arise at a most civilized hour. After a warm breakfast, I left my companions to their thoughts and reintroduced myself to the mountain.

PLATE 35

Photo by Mark Wilford

East Face of LONGS PEAK from frozen Chasm Lake.



Since the day's climbing would be fixing ropes, I left all bivouac gear behind and carried only technical equipment.

The first pitch was moderate except for the initial moves. Getting established on the rock was more akin to swimming than climbing. Every time I tried to exit from the steep snow slope onto the rock, the miserable white stuff would collapse. After much plunging, I resorted to a graceless dog-paddling technique. It worked. The remaining climbing followed a vertical crack via free moves and easy aid moves. I was grateful for the casual climbing. It allowed me to scrub my rusted aid techniques as well as to evaluate my solo belaying systems, although a little more exposure to the forgotten maneuvers would have been nice. The next pitch was the technical crux of the whole climb, an A4 traverse to the left.

From my bolt-anchored stance, I leaned out precariously. The first placement was a blindly slotted knifeblade. The hammer's tone indicated a solid pin, and so I high-stepped in my aiders. The next few placements were thin but solid. Gradually the hairline crack arched up and joined a suspect, horizontal expanding flake. I placed one good angle and then turned to my supply of Friends in order to avoid finding out just how expanding the flake really was. After 20 feet of horizontal leap-frogging, I found the flake made a right-angled vertical rise. Back in the top steps of my aiders, I probed around for my next placement. Using both hands I attempted to place a nut high up in the crack above. Wrong-sized nut! I leaned back down on my last piece. As I stooped down, I waited for my daisy chain of carabiners to take my weight. Cruising at 32 feet per second squared, I realized they had not. Fifteen feet down, I stopped. My heart was lodged in my throat. My mind quickly found a positive side to the flight: the belay system worked. Recomposed, I continued. The flake soon ended at a blank face. From here a pendulum would be necessary to gain a ledge system 15 feet to the left.

As I pondered this high-wire act, I looked down to my cohorts. I spied my cousin poised at the base of the North Chimney, a steep gash in the rock filled with snow. Just after I spotted him, he set out to break downhill speed records in an impressive glissade. Control soon fell prey to gravity and he began a spectacular display of cartwheels and somersaults. By some stroke of luck, he shot between two outcrops of boulders and off a small cornice into a mound of powder. Luckily neither he nor our two Nikon cameras and three lenses needed a rescue.

After letting out the necessary slack for a pendulum, I lowered myself into shooting range. A few short swings later I latched onto a flake system just below the ledge I wanted. From there I had to free-climb the ice-filled flake until I reached a stance 20 horizontal feet from my pendulum point. The search for protection was on. With one hand I let out more slack and edged my way along the snow-packed ledge. With grim consequences for failure, I left the ledge system and face-climbed to a thin crack above. The crack recognized my position and offered me a small pocket. Giving thanks, I overdrove a bugaboo pin.

PLATE 36

Photo by Tom Wilford.

**Second pitch (A4) of Grey Pillar on
Longs Peak.**



The remaining climbing followed the crack system upwards and ended at the base of a large, overhanging dihedral. After a much involved cleaning job of the zig-zag pitch, I called it quits. Leaving my gear at the belay, I tied the ropes together and rappelled down to dinner.

Like a bear before hibernation, I gorged myself on our exaggerated food supply before I fell into a comfortable sleep. Tomorrow my friends would be gone and I could talk to the mountain about our topics.

The time had come. I broke out of our underground igloo to find a crisp, windy morning. After enough coffee to wake the dead, I shook my way through the morning chores of snow melting and gear packing. Eventually the inevitable beckoned. I made my way back to the strand I had spun up the vacant wall. My companions and I parted under good cheer and best-of-luck wishes.

Jümaring the 8mm and then the 9mm lines was strenuous and awkward at first. Gradually I fell into a slow but efficient routine. The continual movement warmed my body and raised my morale. Back at my high point, I was faced with the task of reracking gear and arranging ropes. From this point on, I would lead with a small pack containing food, water, camera and wind gear. While cleaning a pitch, I would wear a larger pack with the remainder of my bivy gear. The 8mm rope would be used only to rappel down pitches. Having double and triple checked everything, I started the ominous pitch up the overhanging dihedral. The climbing started out as easy, thin-crack nailing. After 30 feet in the corner I was forced onto the overhanging left wall. The climbing remained easy except for the contortions dictated by the steep face. The best aspect of the pitch came soon after I finished it. The freedom of jümaring and cleaning the wall made up for any inconvenience met while leading it.

After a short break I investigated the somewhat rotten flaring cracks above my stance. After 50 feet these cracks reached a short roof and made a decaying path out it. This obstacle was the most intimidating of the climb so far. Hanging from upward-driven pins, I reached the lip. Rotten flakes and ice stuffed the crack above. Trusting Friends in the expanding mess, I moved over the lip onto a slightly less than vertical face. From here the climbing went smoothly up an easy crack system. The continual climbing and cleaning assured constant warmth.

The start of the sixth pitch offered a deceptive view of the remaining climb onto the large ledges of Broadway. Easy slab climbing appeared to be all that was left. After 130 feet of moderate free-climbing, the icy tongues of the Broadway snowfield licked down on me. The verglas-coated, boiler-plated rock offered few cracks. What cracks there were had been infested with ice. At 150 feet I found myself nowhere. My lead line had run out and I had at least 20 feet to go, or 100 feet if I fell. I tied the 8mm trail rope onto the lead line and gave myself the extra 20 feet. The belay stance finally showed itself at a large block, precariously frozen to the slope. Light was waning. After collecting all my equipment, I began to work my way up the frozen slope in search of a bivouac. One hundred feet later I found a suitable ledge. The roar of my stove talked to

me as its flickering flame tickled the much needed water out of the snow. My dehydrated body greedily sucked down a variety of jello, coffee and hot chocolate concoctions.

Morning broke cold and clear. High above on the Diamond the sun played about with the ice and rock. It stayed only long enough to tease me and then left for warmer playgrounds. Morning's light had lifted night's veil from the towering wall to reveal a most intimidating proposition. A thousand feet of vertical rock followed by a descent of the ice-smeared north face awaited me. To continue or retreat? Descent from this point would be reasonable and quick. To venture higher would only complicate a retreat. Despite logic, I would go on.

With cargo loaded and feet cramponed, I left my tiny sanctuary and began the 300-foot traverse across Broadway to the base of the Diamond. After 150 feet of steep snow, I stopped at the beginning of a narrow ledge system. I roped up and left my large pack. Initially the ledge was about a foot wide and covered with frozen snow. As I neared the start of D7, my proposed route, the ledge narrowed and protection became scant. Looking at 40-foot pendulums, I front-pointed across the glazed edges. Just as rope and nerves were running out, I arrived at a stance with fixed protection. The good anchors were heaven to my tiny, tried mind.

D7 offers little resistance but requires persistence and attention. It is basically a vertical line, intersected by many large hand- and footholds. I clipped about every third piece, economizing with A1 protection. Gradually I replaced the gear I had lost lower down from the abundant fixed protection.

The day's climbing melted into the early dusk. Chasing the last photons up the wall, I finally reached an adequate bivouac site. The bivy consisted of a bolt set out on a face, blank save for a small ledge three feet below it. This ledge was the most valuable feature of the site; it lodged the elusive water-bearing snow. After retrieving gear, I set to melting snow while sitting on my hammock and dining on variously flavored hot sugar water. Next came what must surely be the hardest maneuver known to uncivilized man: getting into a sleeping bag in a single-point hammock. The hour was still early and I peered out of my sack down onto the eastern plains of somewhere a million miles away.

My luck was holding. In the morning I awoke again to the sun, but after less than 15 minutes it set for another day. The previous day's easy aid and free-climbing mixture continued. I leap-frogged placements, free-climbed out from protection and practiced other gear-saving moves. Although I was generally warm, my fingers began to show the toll of climbing gloveless in the icy cold. Besides the cuts and bruises from bashing about iron and stone, my fingernails had begun to separate at the tips, leaving tiny sores that seeped blood and pain.

As the day finally yawned, I reached the exit pitch onto Table Ledge. My belay was only 20 feet below it, but it would take three desperate attempts to reach it. The obvious route was straight up, but after 12 feet I backed down because of 5.9 climbing and an utter lack of protection. I turned my attention 15 feet to the right. Standing on the top steps of my aiders, I was able to gaze upon

someone's poor idea of a joke, Table Ledge. Only a most modest dinner could be laid on the ten-inch ice-and-snow-packed ledge. With no cracks above it, there was little chance of leaving my aiders. I retreated again. Dusk was on me. A desperate third possibility loomed out to the left.

I traversed and down-climbed for 15 feet to the base of the final option. Above was a short flake ending, ten feet below salvation, at a blank-looking face. With my rope running horizontal to the belay anchors, I nailed the flake. My last piece was doubtful but I high-stepped onto it anyway. The face wasn't quite blank. I forced a blade placement. The pin put me at chest level with another horror. The ledge had widened at this point to coffee-table size but was veneered with ice. Darkness dared me on. With ten feet on slack I left my aiders and high-stepped onto the narrow skating rink. Cramponless, I kicked and scratched my way leftwards. Not until I had given myself ten more feet of slack did I find the sedation of protection. There was no time to enjoy it. Night was setting in. Gradually, the passage widened and I gently laced my way through large blocks. Finally, with rope running out, I reached the southern shoulder of the Diamond.

There, waiting patiently, was my sanity. Enjoying my long-lost friend would have to wait, however. A pendulum cleaning job was next. I rappelled horizontally across the black depths to my pack and began the last roped climbing of the trip. Jümaring the beast was difficult and treacherous, but I had made it!

I spent the night on a narrow platform fashioned out of small rocks. The wind lashed my exposed camp and the first snow flakes of the climb fell. I cared not. Sleep came easily that night.

The mountain had allowed me passage. Would it be so generous on the descent? I began the slow grovel up the 3rd-class talus slope. After a couple of hundred feet of snail-like movements, I started to wander right, across the top of the Diamond. After traversing across more loose rocks and scree, I reached the north face of Longs Peak. Four hundred feet later, I had safely rappelled the ice-smeared slabs of my last obstacle. Nothing was left but the six-mile hike back to reality.

I no longer saw the mountain as an arch-enemy. Like any other free spirit, it needed sincerity and demanded respect before it let itself be known.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Front Range, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.

ASCENT: A solo winter ascent of the East Face of Longs Peak via the Grey Pillar (5.9, A4) and D7 (5.7, A2) of the Diamond, January 13 to 17, 1983 (Mark Wilford).