

# Under Pressure on the Devil's Thumb

MARK BEBIE

*Put all thine eggs in one basket, and—watch that basket.*—Mark Twain

NUMEROUS SNOW-AND-ICE PEAKS come to mind in the 1000-mile chain of summits that make up the “panhandle” of southeast Alaska. One rock peak particularly captures the attention of pilots and climbers: Devil's Thumb. Although easily visible from the coastal town of Petersburg, this massive spine of granite is thoroughly locked into the white wilderness of the vast Stikine Icecap. This peak, among many others nearby, will provide opportunities for wilderness alpinism well into the next century.

Near the end of April, Bill Pilling and I board the Alaska Ferry in Bellingham and two days later disembark in Petersburg. The slow pace of the journey impresses upon us the great distance to Alaska, and the extent and beauty of the region we are about to visit. Clearcuts remind us that “progress” reaches even these remote shores. Will these hillsides ever be less scarred than they are now?

Proverbial Alaskan hospitality greets us at the ferry terminal. Dieter Klose and his wife Kay share their roof with us for the night along with large helpings of pie and ice cream. Dieter has summited on the Thumb twice, and being the only climber in Petersburg, he is especially starved for conversation and eager to listen to our plans.

Despite rain during the night, Devil's Thumb is clearly visible in the morning. Our frenzied dash to the waiting helicopter is momentarily interrupted by Kay's adding five pounds of halibut to our supplies. That will taste good! All our gear and food are somehow squashed into Temsco Helicopter's Hughes 500. We could never figure out whether our pilot, “Doc,” loved flying more or keeping us off balance with his constant clowning and joking. We were glad to see that he is all business when it comes to flying.

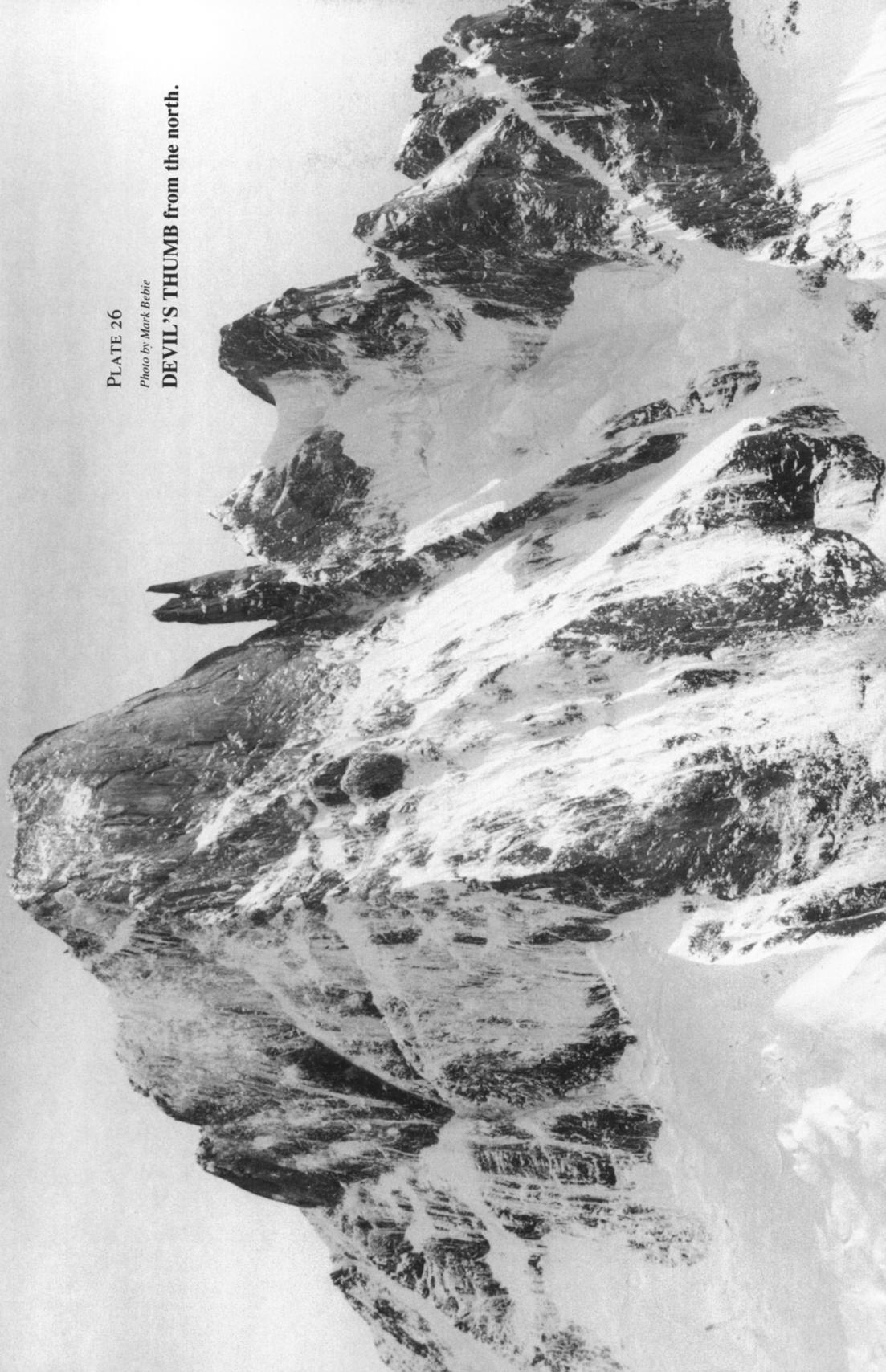
As we approach the Thumb, I am surprised by the lack of snow on the peak. Jon Krakauer's slides showed much more when he made his solo trip here in 1977. “Doc” leaves us on the large plateau southeast of the Thumb, and we spend the first days ski touring, gazing up the peaks and down into the swirling mists of the witches' caldron.

Among the many routes to choose, we decide on the northeast face, and by climbing it, we'll feel out the conditions expected on other routes. After viewing the route through binoculars, we spend a day resting and packing.

PLATE 26

*Photo by Mark Bébie*

**DEVIL'S THUMB from the north.**



At midnight, we rise as the northern lights glow dimly in the northeast. By the time we are ready to leave camp, the entire sky in all directions is bright green. As clouds sometimes become familiar objects in the mind's eye, I pick out an eagle with a 100-mile wingspan in the shafts and curtains of this fantastic display.

By four A.M., Bill is leading the first pitch in the couloir that was the scene of Jon Krakauer's second attempt on the face. The obnoxious spindrift seems to be a feature of this initial couloir. However, we are lucky to have less of it than Jon did. On the fifth pitch, Bill leads onto the right-trending ramp. Here the ice becomes spotty, but this only increases the quality of the climbing. As one moves between holds on a rock climb, we move about as the ice patches dictate. It is also comforting to be placing rock gear at regular intervals. The ramp ends too soon, and we move horizontally trying to find a way through the steep headwall above us. On my next lead upwards, I have to down-climb half a rope-length to the last good cracks to set a belay. Bill's lead ends at a poor belay, and, as Murphy's law would have it, my next lead is the crux pitch. I methodically clear snow off the rock, uncovering edges for my front points, and I inspect everywhere for cracks. I must not fall, so progress is slow. The pitch ends in a small pocket of hard snow, and I take great pleasure in the effort required to force a picket in halfway. Bill easily gains the hanging ice face and, as darkness falls, we top out onto the east ridge. The wind chills us. We debate an unplanned bivouac versus rappelling down the southeast face toward camp. Once we are in our warm sleeping bags, we are glad we made the effort to descend.

The weather remains fair, and despite protests of rest for the weary, we set out to finish our climb to the summit. We quickly ascend the 1946 route to the crest of the east ridge, which coincides with our descent route, and we pick up our rappel stations along the way. On this upper east ridge, the rock is excellent. We climb on knobby faces, around towers, up zig-zag cracks and across a horizontal knife-edged section to a notch. The higher we go, the more the snow covers the rock and rock shoes give way to boots. With ideal conditions, the climbing would be about 5.6, but we feel it is 5.8. In a gathering storm, we quickly move across the nearly horizontal summit ridge and remain on the tiny summit only long enough for a few photos. Three rope-lengths back along the summit ridge is the notch where we begin eight rappels down to the snow shoulder. Occasionally we find a rappel station, but mostly we set them ourselves. By the time we reach camp, the storm is furious.

The next 36 hours are Hell. In 50 miles-per-hour winds, we struggle to keep a roof over our heads. We are hardly in control. The tent fly rips; the tent collapses under the weight of the snow; there is too much digging and running around. Climbing is trivial compared to this. The morning of the second day brings a break in the storm. We shovel snow, dry everything and shovel some more. For eight more days, we are tent-bound in "moderate" winds and falling snow. Every break in the storm has us bounding outside to exercise, get more food and work on the tent area. But most of our time is spent reading books and



COLOR PLATE 6

*Photo by Mark Bebie*

**Pilling following on the Quartz Pitch  
on the SOUTH PILLAR of the  
DEVIL'S THUMB.**

listening to the local radio station KFSK, where we learn more than we could ever imagine about the cultural activities and economic issues of Petersburg and the State of Alaska.

At long last, the weather forecast is for four days of good weather. In two hours we are on the rock of the approach spur to the south pillar. The climbing is easy with a few fifth-class pitches at the end. On this spur grows an unbelievable collection of lichens, mosses and flowers—an alpine tidepool. We fix rope on the pillar and then spend an hour stomping out snow at the base of the rock only to find more rock. We finally make a bivouac site out of a snow arête 100 feet down from the crest. In the morning, clouds begin to form as we ascend, and we abandon the climb as clouds thicken. The Petersburg forecasters maintain their optimism as snow begins to fall.

After hiding for two days in Base Camp, the forecast is now for five days of good weather. Should we trust them? Retreat has proven easy, and so we hope for the best and begin our second attempt. We use the same tactics as before and happily settle into the bivouac site early. The next day dawns clear. Generally on the buttress crest, we meander up the coarse-grained and well-fractured rock. After their 1973 climb, Chris Jones and George Lowe wrote about the Chamonix-like granite. They couldn't have been more accurate. With a couple of hours of daylight remaining, we arrive at the biggest ledge on the route so far. I try to fix a rope above, but all cracks blank out and I descend. One obviously large, pointed rock ruins an otherwise perfect sitting bivouac. But that is a small concern since the skies stay clear and windless. Frederick Sound and the lights of Petersburg are visible to the west, and the Stikine Icecap with its many horn-like peaks spreads out at our feet in the moonlight. Such a vista I promise never to forget.

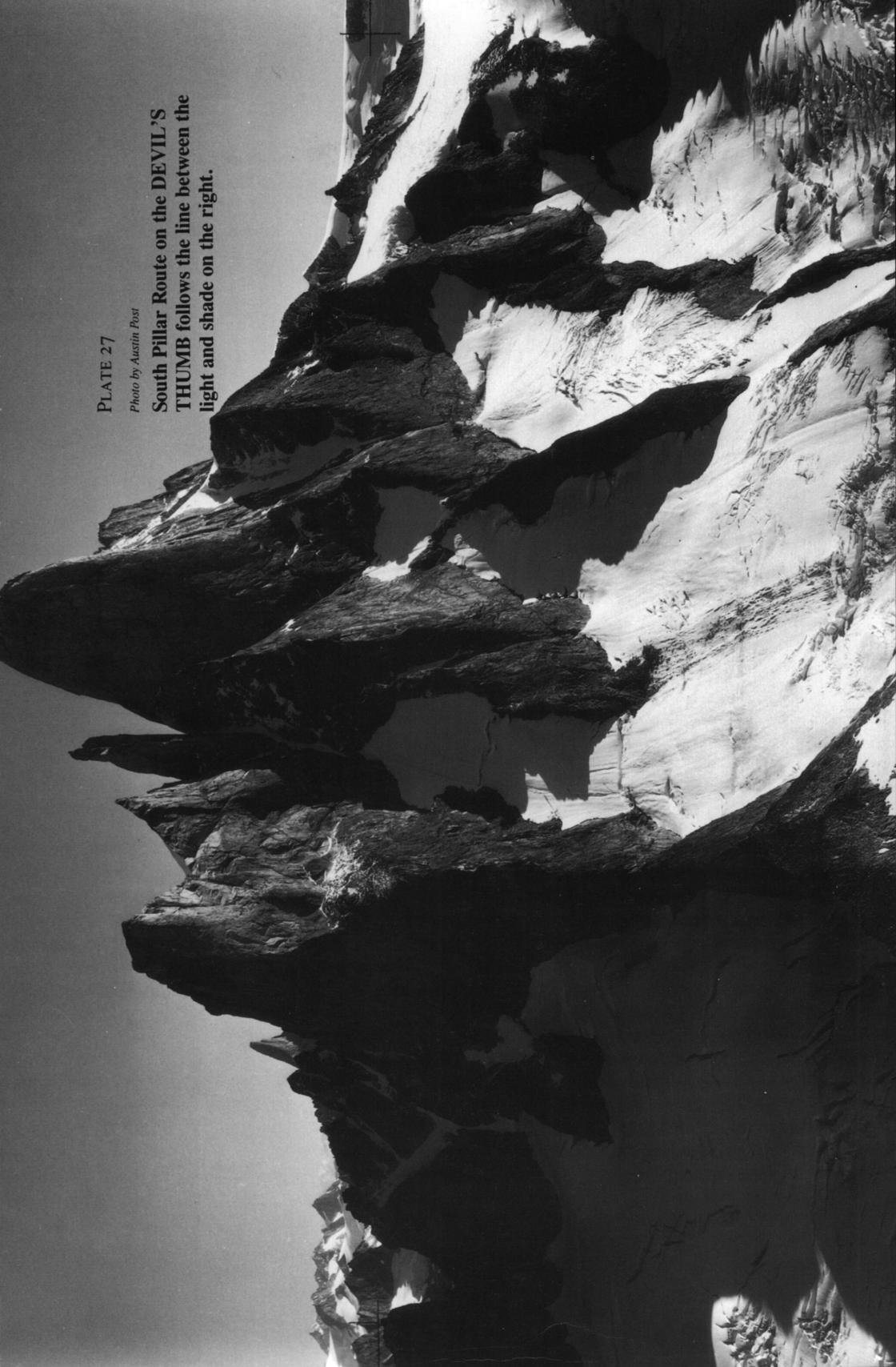
In the morning, we choose a “quartz” ramp leading east. The next pitch looks hard. Bill does a good job leading up and back west to the crest of the pillar, but the gear is spotty and he has tied-off pitons on the traverse. How am I going to follow this with a pack on? And clean the pitons? Bill eventually hauls the pack after I spend too much time dealing with it. Fatigued, I begin aiding the next pitch, but a few tentative free moves reveal the best pitch of the climb—corners, cracks and edges everywhere I need them. The angle lessens. Three easier pitches of dihedrals, ramps and mixed ground put us on the top of the pillar. We spend a few minutes unwinding, opening our senses to more than the next few feet of rock. Climbing any peak in southeastern Alaska, as well as any other big alpine route, has to be done on its own terms, not on some artificial time frame of our making. We feel really fortunate and satisfied to have had enough time and luck with the weather to make this long climb in the most likely ideal conditions.

We marvel at the slow flight of the helicopter, showing us the great scale of the landscape below us. “Doc” is bringing in three from Sitka to attempt the 1946 route. We had stamped out a pickup date and time on the snow, but our hearts sink when he lands right on top of it. He pauses to hover when he takes off and so we hope that he sees it after all. We break the solitude of the newcomers by hollering, and, surprised, they holler back. We pull out the plastic boots and ice

PLATE 27

*Photo by Austin Post*

**South Pillar Route on the DEVIL'S  
THUMB follows the line between the  
light and shade on the right.**



axes and ascend easy snow to the summit area. In two minutes, we have an excellent bivouac site instead of the two hours the night before for a mediocre one.

Clouds build in the morning as we traverse the summit ridge and go down our rappel route to Base Camp, passing the three from Sitka on their way up. We pack quickly, and, as our pickup time passes, we watch the clouds close in. The weather seems too rough for flying now, but more likely, "Doc" never saw our message. Dejected, we smooth out a tent platform since we shall be needing one imminently. Just as we finish, we hear the helicopter. The storm obscures the Thumb as we fly towards Petersburg.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Stikine Icecap, Southeast Alaska.

NEW ROUTES: Devil's Thumb, 2767 meters, 9077 feet, via a new route on the Northeast Face, 500 meters, IV, AI4, 5.7, May 3, 1991.

Devil's Thumb, via a new route on the South Pillar, 970 meters, V, 5.10, A2, May 22-24, 1991.

PERSONNEL: Mark Bebie, William Pilling.

