

# Hyperborea, West Face of Asgard's North Tower

NOEL CRAINE, *Alpine Climbing Group*



OUR EXPEDITION WAS ORIGINALLY composed of Britons Simon Yates, Keith Jones, Paul Pritchard and me and American Steve Quinlan. We were on Baffin Island in Arctic Canada. We hoped to do a new climb 200 meters to the left of Charlie Porter's route on the west face of the north tower of Asgard.

In Pangnirtung we hired a skidoo and skilled driver to pull five people and all our gear over the fjord ice to the start of the Weasel Valley. The walk-in started on May 30, first almost 30 miles up the Weasel Valley, then up the Caribou Glacier for three miles and the Turner Glacier for another two or three. It was hard work relaying three times. Thirteen days of effort got us our first sight of the mountain.

Base Camp was a small hole in the snow. A tarpaulin stretched across the top provided a roof, and boulders a degree of wind protection. A mile away across the flat glacier rose the twin peaks of Asgard. The gigantic, sheer west face appeared out of drifting clouds, occasionally catching errant rays of sunshine. It looked large, and in our naïve enthusiasm, climbable.

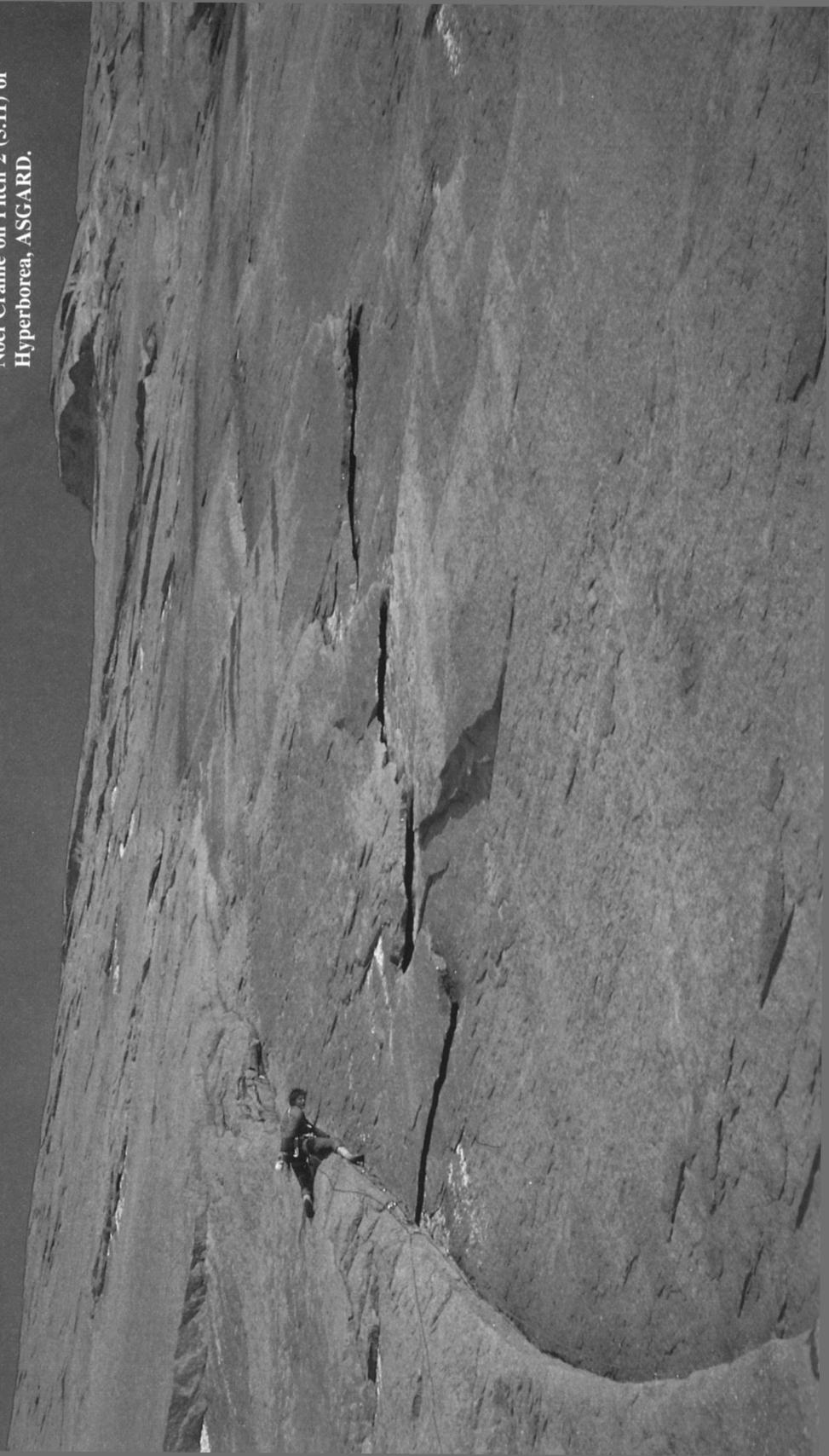
The base of the west face of the north tower was guarded by a 500-meter-high snow gully. We kicked, dug and waded our way up a third of the gully before we decided that to go on would only invite an avalanche. Two days of continuous snow and wind at Base Camp convinced us that the gully was to be out of the question for a while. Food was disappearing at an alarming rate. Yates and Jones were committed for work reasons to return to Britain towards the end of June. On the third day, the weather cleared and Pritchard and Jones approached the gully, where they found the snow even deeper and more dangerous. A communal decision was quickly reached: to return to Pangnirtung for more food and supplies, a healthy 130-mile round trip. For Yates and Jones, it would sadly be the end of their trip.

In Pangnirtung, we ate and ate again, said farewell to Yates and Jones and attempted to recover. Our numbers now diminished to three, but we gained one more climber in the form of Jordi Tosas, a Catalan, who had been attempting to solo a route on Friga from the Parade Glacier but had lost all his equipment in an avalanche. On June 21, we took a boat, weaving through the ever-

PLATE 15

*Photo by Paul Pritchard*

Noel Craine on Pitch 2 (5.11) of  
Hyperborea, ASGARD.



changing pack ice, back up the fjord. Despite rain, we were reestablished in Base Camp by the 27th. The gully was now at least climbable or swimmable.

We fixed the upper 400 meters of the gully and over a couple of days made a comfortable snow-hole Advance Base below the base of the wall. The line was complicated; features would have to be connected and the climbing was going to be very difficult. On June 29, we started the first pitch and climbed two more the next two days. The third day took us another 80 feet up the face. The ensuing days saw a mixed bag of snow and sunshine. We adopted a shift system and attempted to have a pair climbing in every possible break of the weather. Skyhooking above poor blades, RURPS and copperheads at midnight added a surreal aspect. The climbing was magnificent. Features connected themselves in unlikely sequences to give outrageous pitches in positions of awesome exposure.

Our target for the first week was a prominent groove system at half height. Eventually we reached it and established a portaledge camp. It was necessary to haul a huge blue bucket containing water there, as the wall was so steep that it collected little snow. Cooking was a problem. Pully lines between portaledges allowed brews and food to be passed between them.

After a trying lead on hooks, poor blades and wonderful birdbeaks by Quinlan, some dramatically ineffectual pendulums to skyhooks by me, some stoic leading by Pritchard and a big effort by Tosas, we found ourselves 200 meters above our portaledges. One long, hard pitch remained to an easing of the angle. We would do this pitch and go alpine-style for the top. The steep pitch was hard and at 7:30 A.M. on July 10, we were poised on the lip of a roof looking straight down 2500 overhanging feet to the snow slope and up 900 feet to a final skyline that we hoped was the summit. The climbing remained challenging. Ice-choked cracks guarded the finely featured buttress. Straight-forward but cold aid saw Pritchard to the start of the clean rock. He released a constant stream of ice, snow and muffled sound as he ascended a water-worn groove. The next two pitches gave exciting free climbing. Pritchard led a steep clean pitch up a vertical wall to an airy perch. We joined him. It was close, maybe half a pitch to the top. The final chimney soaked me in meltwater. Moss filled my clothing and face. A final snow bash and we were there.

The next day and a half were spent descending the face, stripping down the ropes and portaledges. Advance Base was reached at midnight. Exhausted, we collapsed in our tents at Base Camp at seven A.M.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Cumberland Peninsula, Baffin Island, Canadian Arctic.

NEW ROUTE: Asgard, North Tower, via West Face, 200 meters to the left of the Charlie Porter Route, May 29 to June 15, 1994. Summit reached on June 10, 1994 (Caine, Pritchard, Quinlan, Tosas).

PERSONNEL: Noel Caine, Keith Jones, Paul Pritchard, Simon Yates, *British*; Stephen Quinlan, *American*; Jordi Tosas, *Spanish*.