

Mascioli's Pillar

A tribute to a climbing friend on the south buttress of Denali

BY STEVE HOUSE

Thin evening shadows stretch out before us as we ski up the Kahiltna Glacier. The tip of Mt. Hunter glows red above and The Great One holds her usual massive presence. The night is so still that skiing feels like swimming; we leave a wake of cool air as we travel.

My thoughts turn to our friend Steve Mascioli, who was killed on Mt. Hunter only a few days earlier. The peaceful moments found on journeys like this are part of what Steve loved about Alaska's mountains. The good memories of him propel me up the glacier to our camp at the head of the east fork of the Kahiltna Glacier.

Midnight is the appointed departure time for Steve Swenson and me, but the "great whiteness" has been hanging over us for two days. Dutifully, we unzip the tent: foggy. Groggily, we crawl out when, as if responding to our curses, the cloud lifts and the slender profile of the Radio Tower—what we will come to call Mascioli's Pillar—stands before us.

After a two-hour approach ski, Steve is busy stretching out the rope for six easy ice pitches. With his block complete, I hand him the pack and lead up steep blocky 5.9 rock, ending on a beautiful foot-sized perch. The next pitch gets a bit harder; grabbing the gear speeds me past an awkward exit move and we're onto the first icefield.

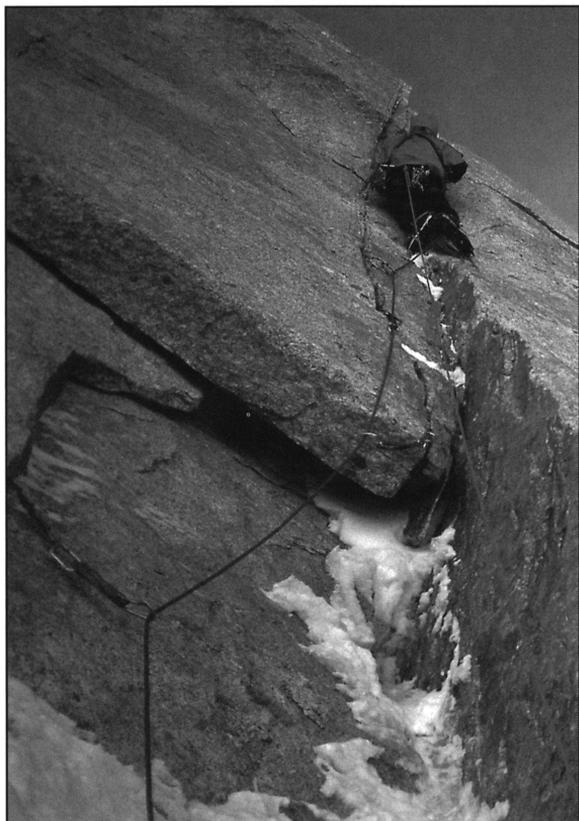
On our first attempt, we had worked to the left here and followed a crack system that ended with a rotten chimney and a giant roof. This time, we stay to the right edge of the icefield for two long pitches. This leads to a short snow gully below steep, polished granite. The rock is split by a six-inch ice-filled crack that bisects a small roof. Above the roof, ice clings in patches to a shallow dihedral. I tap and grunt my way up the narrow but thick ice. The roof responds to long reaches off the tools and careful crampon work on thin rock edges. The ice takes a good spectre just before it thins out.

Forty feet higher, the ice is reduced to snow crust and the rock turns mealy. A patch of snow reveals a bottoming crack and some protection. Careful climbing leads to a secure belay on a huge block.

Steve follows with wild abandon; he and the pack soon are at the belay. It's still my block and I lead another steep ice pitch that would be a proud WI6 at any ice crag. Now we cruise up snow gullies, work over short rock steps and through drifts of powder. We search for a small break in the angle where we can sit and take our bivy break. We've timed our start so that after 14 or 18 hours of climbing we are high on the pillar during the warmest part of the day. This allows us to eat, hydrate, and nap with just a down jacket. The one pack we have weighs less than 15 pounds—supplies for two for 48 hours.

We dig out a cramped spot where we can both sit under a rock overhang. We brew and try to nap, but even after a big pot of soup, Steve can't sleep, so after a three-hour break we pack up and get on our way.

Steve leads another ice-filled chimney. On the second pitch the ice tapers out and he does some spectacular stemming to a belay in a large peapod. The chimney pinches off above us, and Steve breaks out onto the face to our right. The 5.8 traverse is exposed; even a small pack gets in the way. But the steepest part of the pillar is below us and the route takes on a gentler character, meandering up ice ramps with short rock headwalls, all the time working



Steve Swenson on pitch eight. STEVE HOUSE

back to the center of the pillar. The headwalls provide many shorter sections of 5.10, which help ward off the chill of a clear Alaskan night.

The twentieth pitch is no different, except that I find Steve standing on moderate ground, the rack set in the snow. We untie and scramble up a bit higher. We're at nearly 16,000 feet atop the south buttress. We poke around, but it seems that there really isn't a summit here, just the end of the difficulties.

Worn through by the cold, we gingerly work back to the packs. Even our shells creak in the cold. We set the first of five rapels; keeping to the center of the pillar, we're able to locate the rotten chimney that thwarted our first attempt three weeks earlier. Now we can reuse most of our anchors, and we speed down familiar terrain. In two hours, we're over the 'schrund and at our skis—30 hours and 30 minutes after we left them.

It is two weeks later, and I'm standing in front of a crowded room in Bellingham, Washington. We're here to remember Steve Mascioli, and it is my turn to speak. Looking into all the faces, my strongest memory of Steve is his presence on that recent evening. The seamless snow is crossed by shadows in the alpenglow—and the mountains are stretching skyward toward infinity.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: The Alaska Range, Alaska

NEW ROUTE: Mascioli's Pillar (Point 15,840' on Denali's South Buttress) (Alaska Grade 6, 3,840'), June 15-16, 1997, on Denali (20,320'), Steve House and Steve Swenson