

# The Ship's Prow Solo

Learning to breathe on Baffin Island

by Mike Libeck



On the frozen ocean near the Ship's Prow. MIKE LIBECKI

*May 6, 1999, 4:27 a.m. It has been 17 hours since the violent wind started its attack. I can't sleep. I lie on the frozen sea ice. So far I have fixed three pitches in between storms. I can't concentrate on this novel. I can't even hear the bell signal system for the polar bears anymore, ringing like a frustrated alarm clock over in the cook tent.*

*The wind's attempt to destroy my tents and freeze me continues and seems to be getting stronger. I wonder if the poles in my tent are going to break or if the seams are going to rip open. Did I secure my tents well enough? Are my fixed ropes being slashed? The attack of the wind is so incredibly loud and violent, it sounds and feels like a parachute has been constantly opening since the start of the storm. I tried my communications radio: only static, no one to be heard. Breathe in—"the time iss... ." Breathe out—"nowww... ." Don't worry: what happens, happens.*

Off the coast of Baffin Island, just north of the Clark and Gibbs Fjord in the mouth of Scott Inlet, lies a small dot of land known as Scott Island. At its northernmost point is the aptly-named Ship's Prow. Just less than 2,000 feet high, this overhanging wall of granite rises directly out of, and over, the frozen ocean. For three years it had enticed me, but the opportunity to climb it only arose after other Arctic plans fell through.

In the spring of 1999, two partners and I had planned to climb what is possibly the biggest, most demanding wall on Baffin Island—almost 5,000 feet of north-facing sheer granite. We had planned to travel to this wall by traditional dog sled, something no climbers we were aware of had done here before. At the last minute, due to lack of funding and other technicalities, both partners suddenly withdrew from the expedition. Rather than give up, I decided to go solo.

The original objective had to be replaced with one that was more realistic for a soloist, especially because I had only a few days to plan my journey to go completely alone. Given its hold on my psyche, the Ship's Prow was the natural choice. I planned to climb its north wall. The ascent would entail an extraordinary 50-day adventure of harsh Arctic weather, complete with dog-sledding over the frozen ocean and hunting seal with the local people.

I arrived in Clyde River on April 23, early enough in the season for the dog teams to have plenty of time to travel on the six-foot-thick sea ice. Upon my arrival, I joined Jaycko Ashevak, his nine-year-old grandson Benji and Imosy Sivugat, the three Inuit guides who would escort me to the base of the Ship's Prow, roughly 150 miles away. We visited the six unsheltered pens that contained a couple of hundred dogs out on the open snow. Together, we fueled the dogs with raw seal meat, their main staple. They would pull our qamutiiks (long sleds used for hunting) on the journey—no small task, as each sled required 17 healthy, well-fed dogs to pull the hundreds of pounds of gear and food I brought for the climb.

After feeding the dogs, we waited for just more than a day while they digested their food and slept. I came to learn that the dogs live in their pens 365 days a year without shelter. Even more interesting, they are only fed every two to three days, no matter the situation.

The four of us traveled over the frozen ocean for the next several days. The surface ice and snow resembled shavings of glass, reflecting little sparkles of light that shone at me from every direction. It was like being inside a snowy Christmas ball decoration, the kind that you shake to set in motion all the little glittery snowflakes.

In the Arctic morning twilight of our fourth day, the distinct point of the Ship's Prow came into view through the fog. We were now just a day away from the wall. We set up camp after 14 hours of travel just as the temperature plummeted to  $-22^{\circ}$  Fahrenheit.

The next day, instead of immediately taking me to my goal, the guides wanted to take advantage of the unusually clear and cold weather to hunt for seal. I was invited to join them and gladly accepted. It was a welcome interruption to the daily routine. It also allowed me to stall for time: in just a couple of days, they were going to drop me off and leave me alone for five weeks. I must admit, I was a little nervous about being alone out here. It didn't help that they mentioned there was a 50-50 chance of a polar bear coming to see what I was up to or how I tasted.

Four days became six as we hunted, ate seal and bannock (local homemade bread) and took care of the dogs. At feeding time, we watched the 51-strong pack devour ten seals in just minutes. The dogs consumed everything except the blubber, which is too tough for them to chew. They even crunched down the bones. Blood and guts flew everywhere while we drank tea and watched the ten-hour sunset roll across the horizon.



The next afternoon, after a week or so on the sleds, we reached our destination. While I set up base camp, my Inuit friends left to go back to Clyde River. As I watched them disappear around the corner of the Ship's Prow, I was instantly slapped in the face with utter solitude and total silence.

I remembered a day in high school when my biology class tried a small experiment to demonstrate the sense of hearing. We closed our eyes and, without making a noise, just listened. We heard breathing, cars in the distance, the air conditioning, maybe a bird singing outside. That first night at camp on my own, I did the experiment again. Silence. For the first time in my life, I heard no wind, no people, no voices, no cars, no airplanes, no animals—nothing. In the end, in a great meditation, I could hear only one thing: my pulse. I was literally alone, at a place on Earth that is still truly wild.

I quickly fell into a well-remembered rhythm of duties that would allow me to survive in this environment and climb this amazing wall alone. I started melting snow, setting up tents, sorting gear and scouting the wall. I had forgotten how much I enjoyed tending to camp and chores, and work reflexively became play. But as much as I embraced my temporary home, the seriousness of the project I'd undertaken slowly sank in. The once gray, dismal wall of the Ship's Prow now radiated neon-peach in the alpenglow, the overhanging objective peering down upon me with a bright invitation for its first ascent. Beneath the magic glow, I was reminded of the task I would attempt to claim solo and hoped that somewhere on the wall hid a weakness that would be my route to the top.

To get a better perspective of the wall, I walked a couple of miles out over the frozen ocean, crossing two sets of polar bear tracks on the way. (I patted my 12-gauge loaded with slugs as I stepped over the tracks.) Looking back toward Scott Island, I spotted what looked like a clean line just a couple of hundred yards to the right of the Prow's point. At least 70 percent of the route would be overhanging. With capsule-style climbing—alone—2,000 feet would turn into 30,000 feet of ascent due to the necessary hauling, fixing, jugging and cleaning of all the pitches.

I prepared myself and my gear to spend the next few weeks climbing the wall. As with chopping my iceberg chunks into fist-sized pieces (a perfect fit for my hanging stove), I did as much on the ground as possible to make it easier for myself later on. Meanwhile, as expected, the weather changed for the worse. On the way to Base Camp with the Inuit, we had had remarkably stable weather, but now the temperature dropped and the snowfall was steady. These changes weren't of enormous concern, but they were accompanied by a violent, relentless wind that stormed through camp like a herd of elephants. Unable to sleep through the constant battering wind and worried that the tents wouldn't hold, I nervously scrawled in my journal with stiff, frozen limbs. Aside from the wind, this little book and my novels were my only companions.

*May 6, 1:16 p.m. The wind has gotten worse. I must admit, I am quite concerned. Meditation helps, but it doesn't mean that my tents aren't going to rip apart at any moment. The wind blows so hard that the tent ceiling reaches down and scratches my sleeping bag.*

*A huge explosion just came from my cook tent; the main vestibule on my cook tent was ripped away, and now the fragile door to the tent is all that defends its inner peace. At least I secured the tents well, using ice screws to lash them down to the frozen sea. I just got into*



Looking down on wall camp, with the Base Camp tents visible on the sea ice below. MIKE LIBECKI

*my bivy sack; in case the tent rips open I shall go into the fetal position, wait, meditate, and hope that I don't freeze.*

*Still only static on my communications radio. I am definitely on my own. More M&Ms. My thermos is empty. Good God, I wonder how my fixed ropes are. I wonder if the cook tent is ripped open. Breathe in—"the time iss...." Breathe out—"nowww...."*

The violent, angry wind lasted for 43 hours, during which time I did not sleep at all. When I went outside to check my cook tent for damage—and for needed liquids, hot liquids—I walked against the wind at a 45-degree angle, as if trying to hold up a wall against the wind (80 m.p.h.? more?), to get to the tent 15 yards away. My fingers were numb by the time I got there. Just the vestibule had been ripped away; the inside was still protected. I managed to make some hot chocolate and fill my thermos.

Before the treacherous wind started, the sea ice had been covered with snow. Now, blue sea ice surrounded me. All traces of snow had been scoured and blown away. The only snow to be found were three-foot ramps that were crafted around my tents by the wind.

Several days later, I finished fixing about 1,000 feet of rope. After rhythmically moving up and down the first five pitches to haul gear and take photos, I finally set up my first portaledge camp on the wall. I then retreated to Base Camp for several more days of rest and warmth to let the remnants of the stormy weather settle. With not much else to do—all of my gear had been sorted, organized and repaired—I read the last two of my paperbacks in restless anticipation.

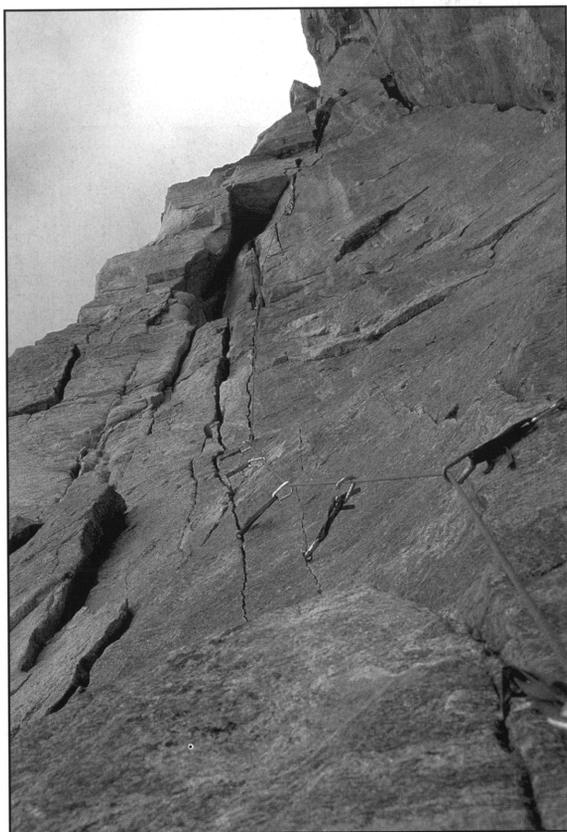
I witnessed the ebb and flow of the sun's movement across the sky. Its golden radiance at midday would become a maroon inferno by evening, entwining aurora purples and paradise pinks. Then, just as it dipped halfway into the ocean's horizon, the colorful light show

reversed itself, and the sunrise again blessed the land with light and warmth. A new appreciation for the cycles of nature grew within me. I felt, as I watched these sunsets, that I was experiencing the natural world at its purest; I thanked God for where I was, for allowing me to experience what I was seeing. I needed to write about this beauty, and the lead in my pencil quickly consumed the paper in my journal.

The weather became good enough to climb again. I hauled the rest of the wall gear to the portaledge and took residence. This contraption would be my home for the next three weeks. It seemed much colder up here—I was more exposed to the wind—and temperatures in the below-zero range were common. As I juggled up the fixed lines, I had to stop and shake my hands and feet every few minutes to get the blood back into them. Because this had to be done the entire time I was on the wall, the process used up a significant amount of time and energy. Cold ate into my fingertips and toes, causing discomfort that would last far beyond the duration of the expedition; even weeks after the trip, my toes were still numb.

Despite the cold, for the next week and a half, the weather favored me and remained stable. Every day, I'd fix one pitch, clean it, set an anchor for the next day, then wake up the next morning and repeat the process. I made steady progress until a heavy, driving snowstorm began just a couple of pitches below the summit. But I continued climbing, and in a few days I finally stood on top. Tired but elated, I snapped a few photos and congratulated myself on another first ascent. But I was also nervous; the snow and wind grew fierce and the temperature dropped. Shivering as I began my descent back to the portaledge, my body froze up like an engine without oil. I quickly rappelled the fixed lines to the portaledge camp, feasted on Clif Bars, beef jerky and hot chocolate, then fell into a deep sleep.

The storm was violent but short-lived, and in two days, thinning clouds revealed the sun once again. Now that the storm was over, I wanted to go back to the summit to see the view I had missed earlier, so I juggled back up the fixed lines to the top of the wall. I spent a couple hours on the summit taking photographs, lost in the view. I marveled as I gazed out over the white-frozen sea. There were icebergs as big as apartment buildings. Greenland was out there somewhere. The sun dissolved into the infinite



*Stellar cracks.* MIKE LIBECKI

ocean. It seemed like only days ago that I was traveling with the dog teams over the sea ice.

Two days later I stood on the frozen ocean, back at Base Camp, pulling the ropes through my last rappel anchor. I still had at least a week before my scheduled pick-up would arrive. Time always seems to go too slow and too fast at the same time. I was pretty anxious to get back to the States and end the worries of my loved ones, who didn't understand why I had gone on this journey alone.

Within just a few days, I found myself at home in a garden with ripe tomatoes and basil. I knew I had to indulge on the fresh pesto while I had the chance, because in just a month, I would be climbing huge granite domes on the other side of the world in Madagascar's warm sunshine.

Why ration passion?

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Scott Island, Baffin Island, Nunuvut Province, Canada

FIRST ASCENT: *The Hinayana* (VI 5.8 A3+, 600m) on the north face of the Ship's Prow, April 23-June 3, Mike Libecki, solo



Mike Libecki

Mike Libecki, 27, has a passion for grassroots, from-the-heart adventure. He satisfies this appetite from a menu of wide variety, such as bike touring solo across Japan, climbing Denali in a week, and big-wall first ascents in the Northern Arctic. A favorite adrenaline-producer is climbing cutting-edge first ascents in remote areas. In the last three years, Libecki has established four first ascents in Baffin Island, one in Greenland, and four in Madagascar. He currently makes his home in Utah.