

*Howse Peak, East Face, M-16.* On March 23-27, Barry Blanchard, Scott Backes and I climbed a new route that follows the exciting-looking ice formations on the east face of Howse Peak in Alberta, Canada. The route consisted of about 15 pitches and we ended at the top of a striking couloir, some distance below and to the south of the summit.

The adventure began with a three-hour ski approach. We soloed up about 1,000 feet of steep snow and easy ice to the base of the first difficulty, a WI6 pitch that Scott led. This pitch introduced us to the unique brand of "snow-ice" that we would find on much of the face. This material, while fairly good for climbing, was bad for protection and anchors, which caused us to use rock gear almost exclusively throughout the climb. We climbed some fourth-class snow and ice to the base of a WI7 pitch that spindrift erosion had left overhanging and concave. The first night was spent in a narrow, two-pronged snow cave of the "torpedo tube" variety that Barry, Joe Josephson and I had perfected three years earlier on Robson.

The second day we climbed only five pitches, of which one was very difficult. I led that pitch in three and a half hours. It consisted of an easy mixed traverse to a very narrow, thin, steep and delicate ice runnel with reasonable rock gear every ten feet or so. We bivouacked in a second, somewhat longer torpedo tube two pitches above that crux.

The next day it was snowing considerably and the face was running with spindrift all day. We waited it out in the cave. The morning of the fourth day we saw stars at 6 a.m., but by the time we were out of the cave at 8 it was snowing and avalanching again. After a brief trip back into the cave to discuss options and eat the last of the food, we decided to go for it with minimal gear because we knew the major technical challenges were behind us. The weather improved briefly and Scott led the incredibly spectacular "Peruvian Traverse," which climbed horizontally for 800 feet in and out of snow runnels and ridges. The traverse ended above the couloir that George Lowe had incorporated into his variation of the Northeast Ridge some 30 years earlier. We rappelled into the "Lowe Couloir" and left a rope fixed there for our return. We then climbed approximately five pitches of entrancingly beautiful grade 2 and 3 ice to the top of the couloir.

The exit from the couloir was blocked by a large cornice, but a traverse out and under it looked feasible. After some discussion of whether to exit the face and traverse the peak, or reverse the route with rappelling, we decided to rappel. We quickly made eight or ten 100-foot rappels and, combined with some down climbing, regained our fixed rope. During this descent we heard a helicopter, and with Barry's VHF radio we were able to talk to the park wardens, who had been concerned about us being on the face during such weather. We assured them we were OK and on our way down.

After Scott re-led the Peruvian Traverse in reverse, we were on our last rappel to the snow cave when the hazard caught up to us. Scott was inside the snowcave and I had just arrived and called "off rappel" when a cornice or snow mushroom from the face collapsed and hit Barry. Barry was clipped into a screw in the snow-ice, which was tied to a piton driven just underneath a small overhang. When Barry was hit with the snow blocks, the ice screw pulled out and he was swung below the piton. This probably saved his life, since more snow came down and continued to work him over. He lost his pack and had snow forced into all the openings in his clothing as he got repeatedly pummeled. It took me some time after the snow had subsided before I contacted Barry. He slowly rappelled down under his own power. When he arrived at the cave he was quite shocked, sore and scared. Inside the cave he got into a sleeping bag with Scott and a hot water bottle, which I used the last of our fuel to make. After an hour, we were able to ascertain that his injuries were in fact mostly minor, with his chief



The east face of Howse Peak, showing M-16 (Blanchard-House-Backes, 1999). STEVE HOUSE

complaint being a sore and unflexing right knee.

The next morning the storm had subsided and we began our rappels at first light. I led first, Barry came second with help from Scott and Scott rappled last. Sometime during the first rappels, Barry called the park wardens on his radio to ask for assistance on the trip from the base of the face to the car, a distance of six miles in variable snow conditions. By late morning we had gained the lower part of the face when we heard the helicopter approach. Barry's radio was no longer working properly because it had become wet during his accident. We had no way to communicate with them and a park warden named Mark was soon getting slung onto the face. When he came in, we clipped him to our final rappel anchor, a spare pick driven behind a flake. Solid, but unconventional. Mark assumed that we all wanted to go out but upon explaining the situation to him, we decided it was best for him just to take Barry out and allow Scott and me to continue under our own power to the roadhead, which is what we did.

That day was not without significance as it was also Barry's 40th birthday and his wife Catherine had planned a wonderful party with nearly 100 people in attendance.

We named the route *M-16* in reference to its difficulty and seriousness and in allusion to Barry's experience of being "under the gun," and also partially in objection to the "new" sport of mixed climbing on bolted crag routes, which alpinists have been doing for centuries, just not at the crags and without the bolts.

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