

Treading Softly on Tiedemann

Meeting the challenge in Canada's untrammelled playground

SIMON RICHARDSON, *Scotland*

The Combatant-Tiedemann-Asperity Wall is one of the greatest mountain features in Canada. Deep in the heart of British Columbia's Coast Mountains, it faces Mount Waddington across the huge rift of the Tiedemann Glacier. The wall is comprised of a series of great granite spurs and ribs separated by huge couloirs of tumbling seracs. It is reminiscent of the Argentière Wall in the Mont Blanc Range, only it is half as high again and faces south.

The Coast Mountains lie between the Rockies and the Pacific Ocean, stretching for over 1400 kilometers from the Canada-United States border to Alaska. On their western side, they rise directly out of the sea, with steep-sided fjords penetrating tens of kilometers inland. These break up the coastline into dozens of islands and inlets where boat or plane is the only form of transport.

Access may be difficult, but the Coast Mountains' first line of defense is the weather. Almost without exception, the many storms that track onto the west coast of North America hit these peaks first. Throughout the winter months snowfall levels are high, which sustain large icefields next to lush rain forests. The main climbing season is July and August, but even then, the deciding factor between success and failure is nearly always the weather. Accounts of parties tent-bound for a week or more are all too common.

At 4019 meters, Mount Waddington is the crown of the Coast Range and a real climber's peak. The high degree of precipitation and accompanying wind means the 250-meter high summit tower is almost permanently coated with ice and rime. It took more than a dozen attempts before the mountain was finally climbed in 1936 by a difficult and serious route on the southwest face by Fritz Weissner and Bill House. At the time, it was considered the hardest climb in North America. Most ascents of Waddington are now made from the Tiedemann Glacier via the Bravo Glacier/Southeast Chimneys route, which was pioneered by a Sierra Club team in 1950.

The majority of climbers visiting the range focus on Waddington, but across the Tiedemann Glacier lie Mounts Combatant (3756m), Tiedemann (3848m), Asperity (3716m), and the Serras (3642m). These granite peaks are a perfect complement to the icy savagery of Waddington and are the next highest mountains in the range. They are difficult summits to reach, with 1500-meter drops to the Radiant Glacier to the north and the Tiedemann Glacier to the south. Their isolation was summed up by Don Serl after he made a five-day traverse from Waddington across Combatant, Tiedemann, Asperity and the jagged crest of the five Serra peaks in July, 1985, with Peter Croft and Greg Foweraker:

"I had been frightened of what might happen if you get out on top of the ridges of

The Combatant-Tiedemann-Asperity Wall. S is Serra Five. Routes, from left to right: 1. Perseverance (Cusick-Kearney, 2000). 2. Belligerence (Child-Collum-Mascioli, 1994). 3. The Southwest Buttress of Tiedemann (Collum-Gherson, 1983). The South Pillar of Tiedemann (Green-Richardson, 2000). 5. The South Face of Tiedemann (Heerchmer-Serl-Wittmayer, 1976). 6. The South Buttress Integrale of Tiedemann (Diedrich-Nelson-Ruch, 1988). 7. The Southeast Ridge of Asperity (Hesleden-Richardson, 1997). DAVID KNUDSON

Tiedemann or Asperity or Serra Four or Five and the weather goes really bad. You're traveling pretty light, and it's 5,000 feet down on either side to the glaciers to get off... and technical terrain all the way." (Scott, Chic. *Pushing the Limits*. Page 256.) Fifteen years on, the traverse of the highest peaks in the Waddington Range is considered to be one of the most spectacular mountaineering outings in North America south of Alaska and the Yukon.

The 1500-meter-high Combatant-Tiedemann-Asperity Wall, which rises above the Tiedemann Glacier, is the technical showpiece of the Coast Range. The wall stretches from the icefall below the Waddington-Combatant col for three kilometers to the long Southeast Ridge of Asperity. The scale is huge. The wall contains some of the longest technical alpine routes in Canada and has been climbed less than a dozen times.

The only break in the wall is the wide Asperity Couloir, which leads up to the Tiedemann-Asperity col. In 1947, Asperity was the highest unclimbed peak in provincial Canada. On August 13, Fred Beckey, Harry King, Francis Magoun and Graham Matthews climbed the couloir to reach the col, and then continued up the icy Northwest Ridge to the summit (IV 50°, 1500m). Their round-trip time of 15 hours from a camp on the Tiedemann Glacier south of the Serra Peaks was remarkable, and the climb has yet to see a repeat. Glacial recession and break-up of the slopes below the couloir makes the route inaccessible most summers, and in recent times the Asperity Couloir has only been traveled in descent after climbing a route on the south side of Tiedemann.

The Combatant-Tiedemann-Asperity Wall was first breached in August, 1976, when Don Serl, John Wittmayer, and Doug Herchmer made a leap into the unknown with the bold ascent of the South Face of Mount Tiedemann. Serl had become fascinated by the broad couloir that cuts through the center of the face during an attempt on the northeast spur of Waddington the previous summer. From a camp on the glacier below the face, they worked up the crevassed snow slopes to enter the couloir before bivouacking in a bergschrund at half-height. The next day they finished the couloir and climbed six pitches of steep mixed ground through a barrier wall to reach the 300-meter-high hanging icefield in the upper part of the face. They then climbed a mixed corner and traversed right to reach an ice gully cutting through the headwall. Here the weather turned poor. They reached the summit in the teeth of the storm and immediately set off back down the route. Having survived a couple of tumbles on the descent, they arrived back at their snowed-in bivouac site well after dark.

With the isolated exception of Beckey, Fuller, Liska and Patterson's 1965 East Spur route on Waddington, the South Face of Tiedemann (IV/V 5.7 A1 45°, 1400m) was the first time a long technical route had been climbed for its own sake in the Coast Mountains. Until then, most climbs were done to reach a summit by the easiest route. Tiedemann was Don Serl's first major new climb, and since then he has become the preeminent mountaineer in the Coast Mountains. He is renowned for routes climbed in light and committed style, and the South Face of Tiedemann set the tone for future climbs in the range.

The traditional approach to the Coast Range Mountains is by a long bushwhack from the coast. Alternatively, it is possible to fly in by floatplane to one of several lakes at the east side of the range and walk in from there in a couple of days. Both options involve several days' load carrying at either end of the trip, which severely limits the amount of food and equipment that can be taken and cuts into the climbing time. In 1979, White Saddle Air Services set up a helicopter operation at Bluff Lake just to the north of the main Waddington Range. This provided direct access onto the glaciers below the peaks, and long technical routes in the Coast Range became a realistic possibility.

One of the first parties to take advantage of the helicopter approach was a Seattle-based

team of Jim Nelson and Bill Pilling, who landed on the glacier below Mount Tiedemann in August, 1983. They were astonished by the potential for technical routes and the quantity of unclimbed south-facing granite. Nelson and Pilling immediately set their sights on the huge South Buttress of Tiedemann. This enormous ridge is 1600 meters high and nearly two kilometers long. It is the dominant feature of the wall and is guarded at its base by the imposing 600-meter-high Tiedemann Tower. Understandably daunted by the scale of their objective, Nelson and Pilling spent a long day climbing the south face of the tower as a reconnaissance. The resulting 5.9 climb, which has been repeated several times, is now recognized as a fine route in its own right.

A couple of days later they set off up the buttress itself, but they avoided the initial section by starting up the Asperity Couloir to the east and climbing up to a deep notch behind Tiedemann Tower. They continued up the crest of the Second Tower and followed the easier-angled crest above to reach a snowfield. This led to a narrow snow, ice and mixed gully that bypassed the imposing

final buttress on the right, and they reached the summit ridge in deteriorating weather at the end of the third day. Secure in their little bivouac tent, they sat out the storm for the next 36 hours, and on the fifth day they set off up the east ridge in improving weather. Two hours later they were celebrating the first ascent of the South Buttress (V 5.9 A2 WI3, 1600m).

“At the summit the storm still has not completely quit. Bill produces a couple of cigars and we spend over an hour searching for surrounding summits as the clouds slowly retreat.” (“1600 Meters” by Jim Nelson, *The Canadian Alpine Journal* 1985, pp. 51-52.) As the weather cleared they carefully retraced their steps to the tent and then descended the east ridge and Asperity Couloir to the glacier.

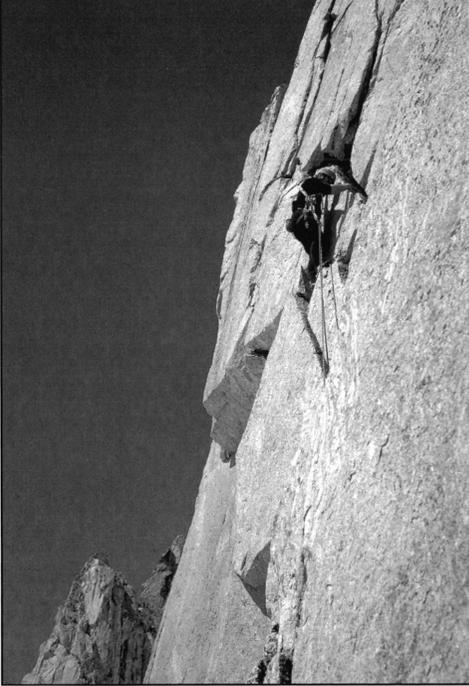
A few days later, Greg Collum and Chuck Gerson added a companion route by climbing Tiedemann’s Southwest Buttress (V 5.8 50°, 1450m). Their route starts up a narrow snow gully to the left of the South Face Couloir, continues up a dike to a snow patch and climbs steep granite above to reach the hanging icefield high on the south face. Excellent mixed climbing up the final gullies through the headwall led to the summit on their third day. They descended by following Nelson and Pilling’s tracks down the east ridge and the Asperity Couloir.

The Seattle team was elated. In just over a week they had climbed two of the longest possible technical routes in the range.

Nelson returned five years later in August, 1988, with Carl Diedrich and Jim Ruch to climb the complete south buttress. During a superb four-day spell of weather, they linked the



Climbing the final gully on the first ascent of the south face of Tiedemann. DON SERL



Jim Elzinga on the crux pitch of the Tiedemann Tower, the first tower on the complete South Buttress of Mount Tiedemann. DON SERL

Tiedemann Tower with the original route and then finished up the crest of the final buttress. This upper buttress provided over a dozen magnificent and exposed pitches in the 5.9 and 5.10 range with only a move or two of aid.

“The rock was superb, with an abundance of knobs and crystals, each belay was secure and comfortable, and the tremendous exposure added a surrealistic quality to the whole affair. Several times the route appeared as if it might fade into unclimbable smoothness, but prudent route-plotting found the way.” (“Goose Stepping on Tiedemann” by Carl Diedrich, *The Canadian Alpine Journal* 1989, pp. 18-20.) The weather broke as they reached the summit and they descended to a tent platform on the east ridge before down-climbing the Asperity Couloir on their fifth day.

The route had been well worth going back for. Nelson, Diedrich and Ruch had climbed the longest and most aesthetic line on the wall in the purest of styles. Today, Tiedemann’s South Buttress Integrale (VI 5.10 A1, 1600m) is recognized as the premier technical route in the Coast Range. The South Buttress, including Tiedemann

Tower, has been repeated only twice, both times with a finish via the 1983 couloir, but the superb final pillar has not yet been reclinbed. It holds its place as one of the world’s great alpine routes.

In 1994, the spotlight fell on the great southeast pillar of Combatant. This had been eyed for several years, but the combination of poor weather and logistical complexity had defeated previous attempts. In late August, Greg Child, Greg Collum, and Steve Mascioli helicoptered to near the foot of the buttress with multiple haul bags and full big wall gear. The buttress is guarded at its foot by a 500-meter vertical tower named The Incisor. This took four days to climb and involved difficult free and aid climbing. The team then ferried their equipment for two days across the horizontal pinnacled crest of The Jawbone to reach the east end of the shelf that cuts across the south face of Combatant from the Waddington-Combatant col. They spent two nights there sitting out bad weather before making a lightweight dash up the final 400-meter pillar to the top. They descended back to their bags that afternoon and the next day moved all their gear to the Waddington-Combatant col for a chopper pick-up. Although there was some discomfort that the capsule-style tactics were in conflict with the alpine-style approach that had been adopted elsewhere on the wall, the 36-pitch *Belligerence* (VI 5.11 A3+, 1200m) was a superb achievement and is by far the biggest technical route ever climbed in the Coast Mountains.

My own involvement with the Coast Range began in July, 1997, when Dave Hesleden and I landed at Sunny Knob, a tiny oasis of heather on the north bank of the Tiedemann Glacier below the Serra Peaks. Back home in Scotland, I had been inspired by pictures of Waddington's icy summit tower and accounts of climbing the South Buttress of Tiedemann. It wasn't difficult to convince Dave that this was a place we should visit. We were not disappointed; for climbers brought up on the crowded mountains of Europe, the vast emptiness of the Coast Range was a revelation. The potential for new climbs seemed enormous, and it was as though we had stepped back in time 60 years to an undeveloped Alps.

After a lucky break with the weather and a quick dash up Waddington, we turned our attention to the mountains on the north side of the glacier. Without question, the South Buttress of Tiedemann was the plum line, but the descent down the Asperity Couloir looked dangerous and avalanche-prone. A safer bet looked to be the descent from Mount Asperity down the mixed gully system on its east face, so we turned our attention to the unclimbed southeast ridge. This huge feature is comprised of four main towers separated by deep notches. In alpine terms, it was reminiscent of the North Spur of the Droites, only half as big again.

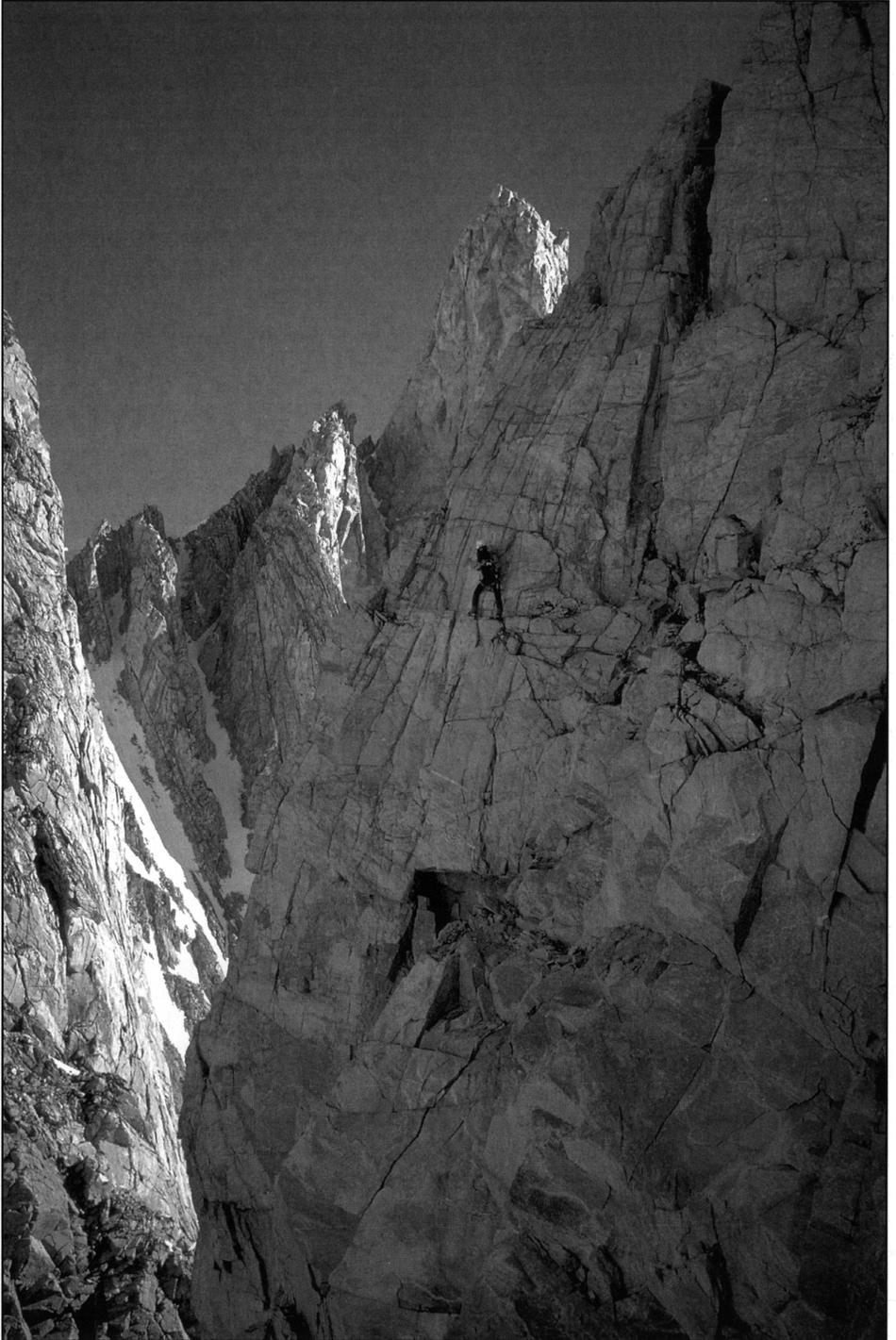
We left camp early and spent a long day climbing the first two towers to bivouac beyond the second notch. The next morning started with some mixed climbing up a gully system on the left flank of the third tower, followed by a long, narrow, horizontal crest to reach the fourth and final tower. The line we had spotted from below was steep and blank, but it was flanked on the right by a subsidiary ridge. A granite staircase of perfect rock led us skyward until we were below the final headwall. Steep and smooth, it looked as if we had reached an impasse, but a narrow ramp led right. Two more pitches, and we were on the top of the tower looking across onto the summit snow crest.

The mountain did not give in that easily, however: the adjoining ridge thinned to a sliver of rock with smooth vertical walls on either side. At its narrowest point it was split by a sharp, deep notch. Outflanking it would have involved many abseils and a loss of precious height. While I cursed the obstacle, Dave quietly came up with the answer. From a high anchor, he pendulumed across the gap and set up a tyrolean traverse for me to follow. The way was now clear to the summit ridge and a bed for the night.

The third day dawned fine yet again, and we eagerly scampered up easy mixed ground and along a fine snow arête to the summit. Spread out before us lay Waddington, Munday, and peak after snowy peak stretching into the horizon below a deep blue sky. But this was no place to celebrate success; we now had to find a way down. During our ascent, the Asperity Couloir had avalanched, which made us question the safety of our proposed descent down the similar gullies on the east face. Weighing up the options, we decided to repeat the second half of the 1985 Waddington Traverse over the Serra peaks to reach the Upper Tellot Glacier.

To start, we had to climb Serra Five, which is regarded as the most difficult summit in the range. On the small, exposed summit we found the register in a film canister which showed we were the fourth party to climb the peak, but our delight was soon tempered by the nightmare series of blind, free-hanging abseils from poor anchors into the forbidding Four-Five Gap. We put the tent up on a snow crest beyond Serra Four that night and continued the traverse the next day over Serra Three, reaching our base camp tent late that evening with over 100 pitches of technical climbing behind us. The first ascent of the Southeast Ridge of Asperity (VI 5.9 A1 WI3, 1400m) may have been the prize, but the commitment of traversing over the lonely and spectacular Serra Peaks resulted in a mountaineering adventure that neither of us will ever forget.

Last summer I returned to the Coast Mountains with Doré Green to try the south pillar of



Dave Hesleden on the first ascent of Asperity's Southeast Ridge. SIMON RICHARDSON

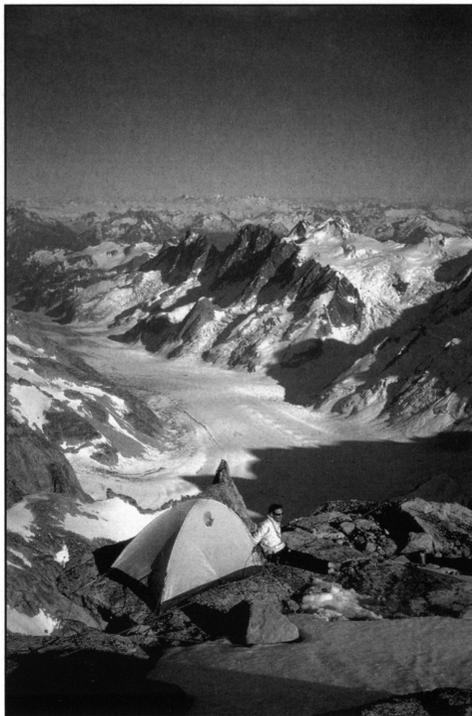
Tiedemann. This great pillar of compact granite rises directly below the summit between the narrow, slanting gully taken by the lower section of the Southwest Buttress and the broad couloir of the South Face route.

Mike King flew us by helicopter to Sunny Knob on July 30. An hour later we heard his Jet Ranger's steady throb again as he ferried Alan Kearney and Brendan Cusick to the head of the glacier to attempt a new route on Combatant. In typical Coast Range style, the weather was unsettled, so we spent the first few days studying our route. From steep snow slopes above the glacier, Tiedemann's south pillar rises directly toward the summit. It is topped by the 300-meter hanging icefield in the upper part of the face and the series of exit gullies that cut through the final headwall. The pillar is less pronounced than the nearby south buttress or Asperity's southeast ridge, but it is steeper and has a purity and elegance that we found compelling.

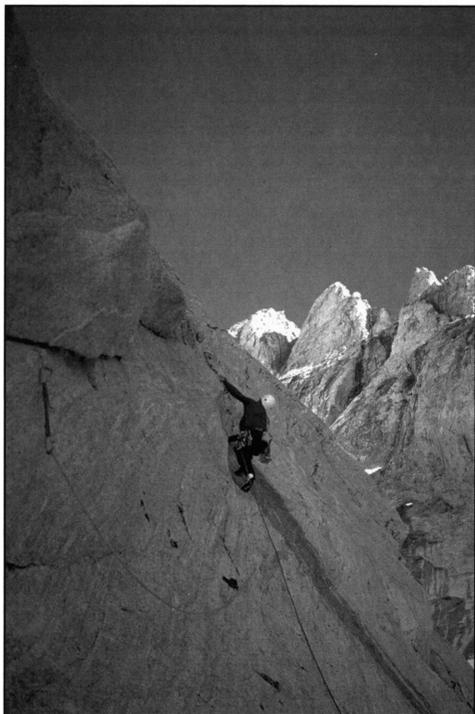
The pillar can be broken into four sections. Above the initial 300-meter snow slopes lies The Apron, a fan of steep slabs that forms the base of the pillar. The Plinth, a steep buttress, then rises to an easing at half-height with a prominent snow patch to its left. The Prow rears up above. This 200-meter-high vertical fin of silver granite was clearly going to be the crux, and we discussed long and hard the best way of climbing it. The only option appeared to be a diagonal line on the steep left wall, but from the glacier we couldn't tell whether this was a band of darker rock or a series of cracks. Above The Prow, the angle eases until the pillar steepens into a series of overlapping boiler-plate slabs that we called The Tortoise Back.

In keeping with the adventurous nature of the area, we agreed to attempt the route in as simple a style as possible. We would take no bolt kit, jumars, or portaledge, and planned to descend the mountain by traversing over Mount Combatant rather than abseiling the route. We knew this approach could severely reduce our chances of success. Our bivouac site choices would be limited, our sacks would be heavy with ice gear, and if we couldn't climb The Prow with our modest free-climbing rack we would have to go down. There was never any question about the style. We were simply following in the footsteps of Serl, Nelson, and Diedrich and giving the mountain the respect it deserves.

At 2 a.m. on August 4, we left our Base Camp tent, walked up the Tiedemann Glacier and wound our way up the initial snow slope past multiple bergschrunds to reach the base of the pillar. At dawn we started climbing a prominent corner on the right side of The Apron. The polished rock down low meant the climbing was more difficult than we expected, and the



Doré Green enjoying a perfect bivy on the first ascent of Tiedemann's South Pillar. The Tiedemann Glacier is below. SIMON RICHARDSON



*Doré Green on the Apron during the first ascent
of the South Pillar of Tiedemann.*

SIMON RICHARDSON

early pitches of hard 5.10 proved to be testing with our heavy sacks. As we gained height the rock became more weathered, and we reveled in a series of 5.9 pitches up the crest. The Plinth now rose steeply above. A series of cracks and corners in the 5.8 to 5.10 range led straight up to the prominent snow patch.

Looming above us was The Prow. Close up, it looked even more daunting than it had from the glacier, and the vague weakness on the left wall was clearly going to require a significant amount of aid. Our only hope was to make for a huge undercut scoop just right of the crest high up on the right wall and figure out a way from there. But that was tomorrow's problem. After a meal of soup and noodles, we found a narrow shoulder-width ledge, and slept head to toe, perched over a huge drop.

The next morning we angled up and right for several pitches of 5.10, and then Doré crept into the bottom right corner of the scoop. There was a whoop of delight: a hidden corner system led up the wall above! More 5.10 up the corners led to an impasse at a blank section, but a hidden ledge then led out right above a vertical

wall behind a prominent gendarme to easier ground higher up.

We climbed left of a snow couloir to reach the overlapping slabs of The Tortoise Back. As the angle steepened, the climbing increased in difficulty from 5.8 to 5.10 until suddenly we topped out onto the perfectly flat summit of the pillar. We put the tent up here, happy to reflect on the 28 pitches of superb free climbing below. In the Alps it would be unusual to be alone on a route of this length and quality, and here we were with the entire mountain to ourselves. In front of us, the view stretched from Waddington and Munday across to the maze of peaks surrounding Bute Inlet.

It was a windy evening, but incredibly the weather held good through the night and we woke early on the third morning to a perfect dawn. It was time to put away the rock shoes and get out the plastic boots and ice gear. We moved together up crisp névé on the summit icefield and climbed three mixed pitches up a right-slanting gully through the headwall to the summit.

The descent over Mount Combatant took two days. We abseiled down the west face to Chaos Col and then climbed Combatant by its icy northeast face. From here we downclimbed the northwest ridge to the Waddington-Combatant col, and then made a difficult abseil descent down the rock rognon at the head of the Tiedemann Glacier. Here we were delighted to meet Alan and Brendan, who were packing up after their successful ascent of *Perseverance* (VI 5.10c A2/3, 1000m), the prominent pillar to the left of *Belligerence* on Combatant's south face.

Content and supremely happy, we walked down the glacier toward our base camp tent.

The south face of Tiedemann rose far above. Pristine and untainted, the south pillar shone brightly in the afternoon sun.

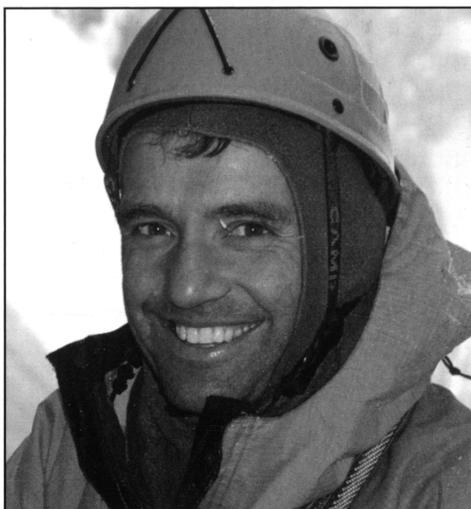
Acknowledgment: The author wishes to thank Don Serl for his help with the historical background to this article. Don's eagerly awaited climbing guidebook to the Waddington Range will be published by Elaho in summer 2001.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Coast Mountains, British Columbia, Canada

NEW ROUTE: The South Pillar (VI 5.10+ WI3, 1400m) of Mount Tiedemann, August 4-7, 2000, Doré Green and Simon Richardson

Simon Richardson is a petroleum engineer with a passion for climbing in wild places. He was born in 1960 and lives in Aberdeen, Scotland, with his wife, Christine, and children Ben (9) and Suzie (7). He enjoys looking around new corners and has made first ascents of over 100 Grade V winter routes in the Scottish Highlands and is co-author of the Ben Nevis guidebook. Climbs further afield include several new routes in the Alps such as the South Pillar of Freney Direct on Mont Blanc, first ascents of 6000-meter peaks in the Himalaya, and a 12-day alpine-style traverse of Alaska's Mount Hunter via the South Ridge—although he is just as happy halfway up a remote Scottish sea stack, in a wetsuit, on a cold summer's day!



Simon Richardson. CHRISTIAN BECKWITH