

# Moran's South Buttress in Winter

## A bird's eye view of obsession

RENNY JACKSON

MARCH 5

From our warm and sunlit belay ledge, Mark Newcomb and I had a great view as Hans Johnstone easily ascended the steep crack leading up and around to the Double Pendulum Pitch on Mt. Moran's Direct South Buttress. As we prepared to jumar the pitch, I heard a thunderous roar behind us to the west and watched as a huge wet slide broke loose from the lower south slopes of Thor Peak and barreled over several fairly large trees on the canyon floor. The panorama of steep, double-corniced ridges and fluted, snow-encrusted summits reminded me of Alaska as I gazed out upon this wild portion of the Teton Range.

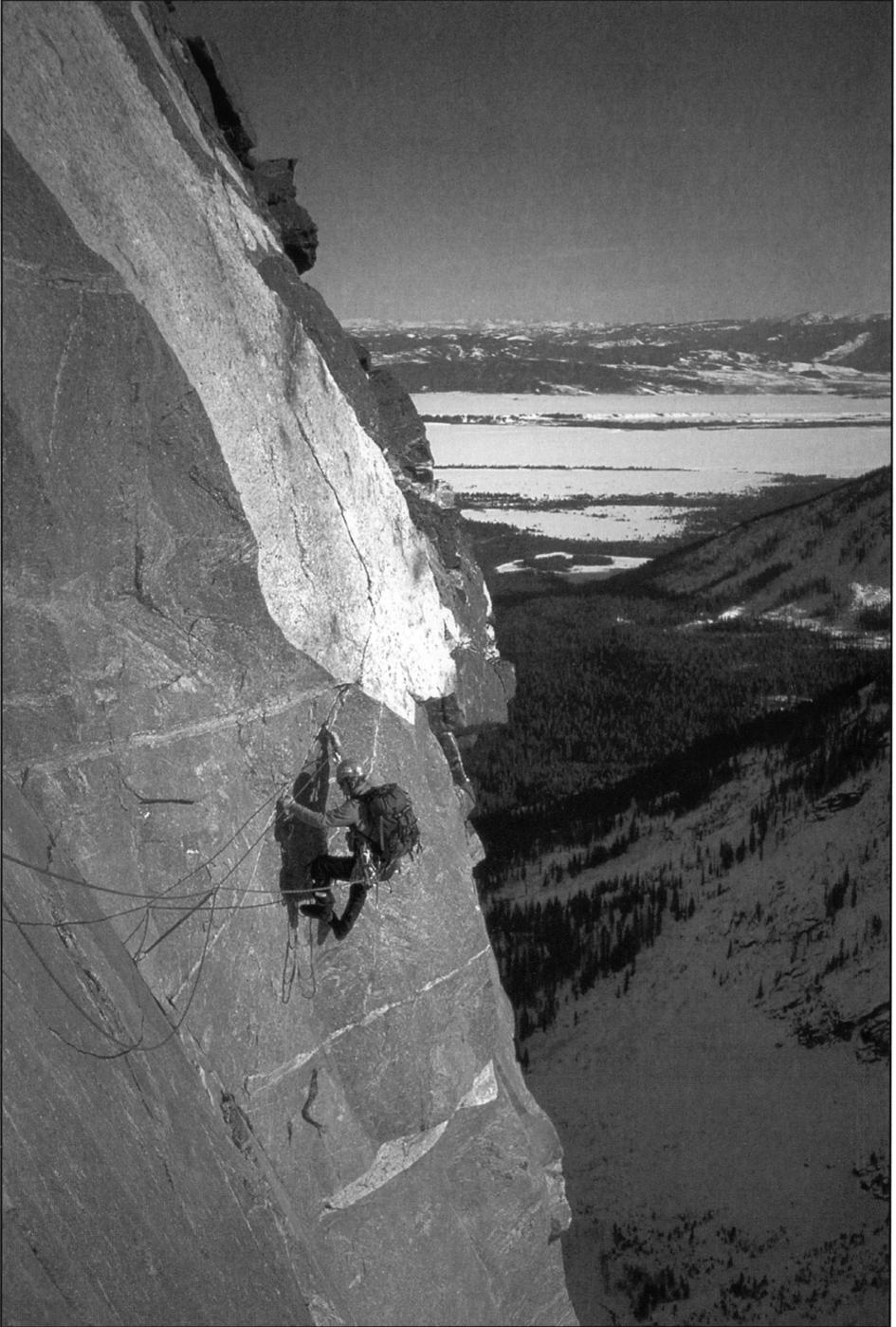
We had set out at 4 a.m. that morning from the Taggart trailhead and had traveled by snowmobile ten miles north to String Lake. Here we abandoned the noxious beast and began skiing by headlamp along the shore of String Lake past thin sections of ice and some open water. Once on the frozen surface of Leigh Lake, we were able to easily glide for two and a half miles over to the mouth of Leigh Canyon, arriving as dawn broke. We cached our skis a few hundred feet above the floor of the canyon and punched steps up to the ramp that would take us to the start of the climbing.

The relatively thin snowpack to which we clung collapsed several times as we ascended, sending shock waves over an expansive area. Snow stability had been atrocious throughout the winter in Jackson Hole, and this was the first wake-up call of the trip. I thought about the vast snowfields high above our heads that would be our descent route and silently hoped that we would find stable conditions.

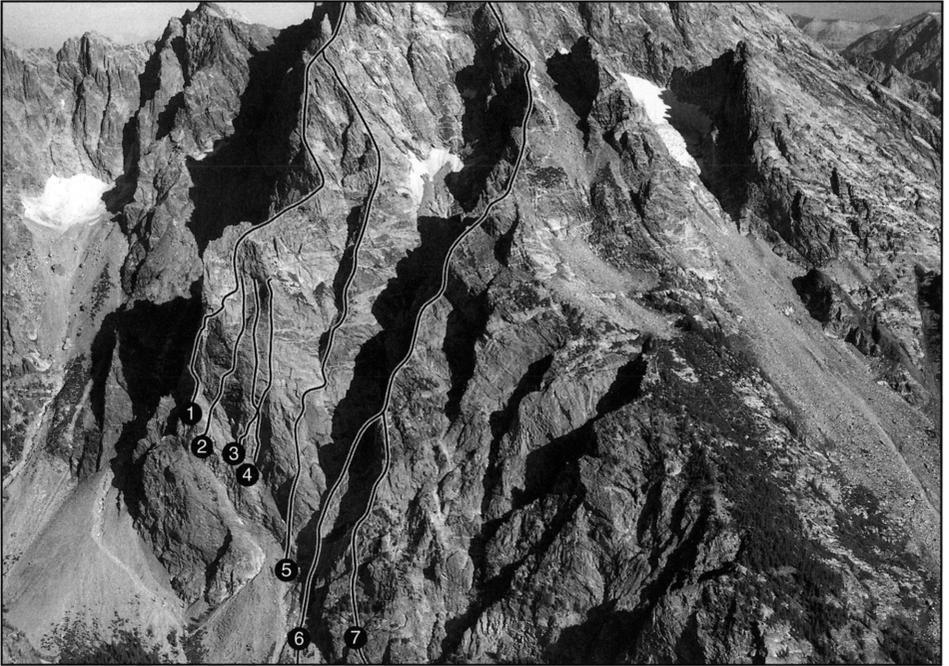
At the end of the ramp, we found the cache that Hans and I had left a few weeks prior on a failed attempt and reconfigured our loads. After a brief stop, we continued around to the exposed western side of the buttress on a gradually steepening ledge. A brief clattering noise announced the departure of a beautiful bighorn ram, not overly concerned with the three unusual creatures invading his domain.

I led off for the first block of three pitches that brought us up into the sunshine and onto a large ledge. After switching double boots for our one set of insulated rock shoes, Hans took off toward the crux pitches of the lower buttress. By 5 p.m., Mark and I were following the remarkable hand traverse that led into a large, snow-filled bowl.

Three years before, Alex Lowe and I had reached this same spot and enjoyed a comfortable night. On that failed attempt, the full-on winter storm that we awoke to sent us scurrying down the standard ten-rappel descent route. This time, Hans, Mark, and I climbed a few more pitches on the crest, which led to an outstanding bivouac site among the pinnacles near the end of the first tier of the ridge. As we settled into our sleeping bags, the nearly full moon that slowly climbed into the night sky brightly illuminated our windless aerie.



*Hans Johnstone on the aid crack following the Pendulum Pitch. The team linked these two pitches together. MARK NEWCOMB*



The lower 4,000 feet of Mt. Moran, showing 1. Direct South Buttress (V 5.8 A1 or 5.12-, Decker-Emerson-Ortenburger, 1953). 2. South Buttress Drifter (V 5.10c, Beyer, 1998). 3. Whirl of Hate (VI 5.10 A4, Beyer, 1999). 4. South Buttress Right (Dornan-Swedlund, 1961). 5. The Blackfin (IV 5.8 A1 or 5.8, Dornan-Ortenburger, 1960). 6. Staircase Arête (III 5.6 A1 or 5.8, Dornan-Read, 1959). 7. Southeast Ridge (II 5.4, Cropper-Dietschy, 1957).

LEIGH ORTENBURGER

The primary impression conveyed by Mt. Moran, an impression that is solidly reinforced when one attempts to climb the peak, is one of massiveness. When viewed from the northeast, Mt. Moran is easily the most dominant peak of the Teton Range. Rising majestically above Jackson Lake's Moran Bay to the north and Leigh Lake to the south and measuring over three miles wide at its base, the peak rises to a singular, flat-topped summit that encompasses some 15 acres of highly sought-after, mile-high real estate.

After the Grand Teton was climbed in 1898, Mt. Moran was the second of the Teton peaks to attract the attention of mountaineers. The attention was perhaps accelerated by the March, 1918, issue of *Scientific American* that contained this tantalizing sentence: "The summit has never been attained and probably never will, as the last 3,000 feet of the mountain are sheer perpendicular walls of rock." Spurred on by the doomed prophecy, LeRoy Jeffers, a mountaineer well-known in his day, reached the lower north summit of the peak on August 11, 1919, at 9 p.m. in a sleet storm. Because of the weather and the lateness of the hour, Jeffers descended without walking over to the higher main summit, which was climbed by a party of three other climbers on July 27, 1922. Jeffers returned with a partner on August 6 that year and reached the main south summit, only to find that he and his partner had made the second ascent of the mountain.

Like several other peaks in the range, Moran affords no really easy route to its summit. Of

the approximately 31 routes that have been thus far discovered, there exists a wide range of difficulty, from the moderate northeast ridge that Jeffers pioneered to the difficult rock climbs that Colorado climber Jim Beyer has recently established. Perhaps the most well-known and the most sought-after climb is that of the Direct South Buttress, a vertical mile of climbing that rises in three tiers from the floor of Leigh Canyon directly to the summit plateau.

The first ascent of this route was made nearly 50 years ago on August 29-30, 1953, by climbing rangers Richard Emerson and Donald Decker, along with Teton historian and Exum climbing guide Leigh Ortenburger. A month earlier, Emerson and Ortenburger, joined by fellow climbing guide Willi Unsoeld, had established the Direct North Face finish on the Grand Teton. On that climb, Emerson had freed the Pendulum Pitch at 5.8, a level of difficulty that was a very high standard for the time. The first ascent of the Direct South Buttress was unusual among other climbs of the period in that significant blank sections were climbed using direct aid techniques. Given the fact that the only type of protection available at the time consisted of a few different sizes of pitons, it is amazing that this first ascent crew was able to engineer its way across the Double Pendulum Pitch without resorting to the drill. After its first ascent, it remained one of the most difficult climbs in the United States.

Surprisingly, winter climbing in the Teton Range is a phenomenon that is still in its infancy. Not too many years ago, a few tenacious mountaineers realized the untapped training potential that winter ascents of these peaks offer. The requisite skill and experience necessary for challenging ascents in the great mountain ranges of the world can certainly be developed in this conveniently accessible arena. However, amazing as it may seem, not very much winter climbing occurs here on an annual basis. The high peaks, with their mantle of 300 to 500 inches of winter snowfall, are serious business indeed. The summit of Mt. Moran has only been attained a handful of times. Most climbers are no doubt confounded by the relative isolation that these peaks in the northwest corner of Wyoming enjoy. Then there is the additional problem of hitting the combination of stable weather conditions and low avalanche hazard at exactly the right moment.

Traditionally, the winter season has been defined as the period between December 20 or 21 (winter solstice) and March 20 or 21 (vernal equinox). Climbing during this "official" winter period has a deservedly harsh reputation. Over the course of several winters, there are many periods during which you simply cannot go up into the heart of the range safely. Local climbers enjoy the luxury of being able to take advantage of quick access with a better understanding of how conditions have developed during the course of a given winter. Even with these advantages, though, few climbers find themselves in a position in which they can drop everything and launch when the so-called "window of opportunity" opens up.

This, then, is a story of persistence, multiple partners, several failed launches spread out over a period of five years, and ultimately, obsession. As climbers, we are well aware of the process by which one can become obsessed with a particular sequence of moves, a single- or multi-pitch route, or a specific mountain peak or summit. A boulder problem, a red-point, or a Himalayan summit are all examples of common obsession.

For me, and for a handful of others, this fixation eventually coalesced into the first winter ascent of the complete South Buttress of Mt. Moran. The inspirations for this preoccupation were the first winter ascents of Moran's *Staircase Arête*, South Buttress Right, and the initial portion of the Direct South Buttress that were accomplished by the strong team of Jack Tackle and Alex Lowe in the mid- to late-1980s. As often happens, as other mountaineers

became infected with the idea, the Direct South Buttress gradually evolved into the Grail of winter climbing in the range.

In the early 1990s, spurred on by the Lowe/Tackle ascents, visiting Alaskan mountaineer Joe Reichert and partner focused their attention on the Direct South Buttress. They reasoned that the easiest way to approach the peak was via snowmobile over the ice of Jackson Lake. A short ski trip then led from the southern end of Bearpaw Bay to Leigh Lake, which in turn provided access to Leigh Canyon and beyond. Once on the buttress, their climb was marked by bitterly cold temperatures and short, January climbing days. By the end of day two, they had made the second ascent of the initial buttress and continued to the end of the horizontal section, thus completing the first third of the ridge. A wild storm blew in the next day, forcing them to dig a snow cave to weather it out. With no let-up in sight, they decided to bail the following morning, becoming the first to utilize the old descent route to the west.

After Joe's climb, it occurred to me that this was the route to try in the winter. After all, it at least faced south, unlike other prospective first ascents that were north-facing and bitterly cold. The first person I managed to talk into trying the climb was Doug Chabot, a climbing partner from several previous El Cap adventures. Starting out late and arriving near the base during the warmest part of the day a few years ago, we were met with a huge airborne avalanche sailing out of the notch at the top of Laughing Lions Falls. Doug, being the director of the Gallatin Avalanche Forecasting in Bozeman, had no doubt expected this sort of activity. I, on the other hand, considered this to be an inauspicious omen as I sprinted out of the runout area. Sure enough, the following day, we rappelled off in rapidly deteriorating conditions.

The next portion of the saga began with one of my most feared and yet now-treasured phone calls.

"Renny! This is Alex! Let's go climbin'!"

Casting terror aside, I agreed to go. After all, who wouldn't take a swing at the Buttress with the Michael Jordan of the climbing world? Besides, Alex had just had knee surgery, so I thought that there might even be a chance of keeping the lad in sight during the approach.

I thought that I had it made this time. Together we would put the route to bed. But it was not to be.

The worst possible scenario then occurred. A short time after our foiled attempt, Alex and I learned that another team of strong local climbers—Hans Johnstone, Kent McBride, and Norm Larson—was on the route. To make matters worse, the weather was really good, with high pressure forecast, warm temps, and clear skies. I spent the weekend pacing, mumbling to myself, and generally worrying that the group was going to bag the climb. As it turned out, they stalled part way up the initial buttress and retreated.

A short time later, I ran into Hans at the local climbing gym and suggested that we join forces. He agreed, and the final two-year portion of the quest began.

**T**he dictionary refers to the peculiar malady of obsession as the complete domination of the mind by one idea or the compulsive preoccupation with a fixed idea, often accompanied by symptoms of anxiety. It is the anxiety component that most affects the mind of the obsessed (me, in this case) and those around him or her. The dates of the winter solstice and vernal equinox became well-defined boundaries for the time period during which the climb had to be accomplished. The anxiety built as the solstice approached, while the passing of the equinox brought with it an overwhelming feeling of relief.

The 90 torturous days that lay between these two dates were a chaotic time for all of those directly affected. Impact to immediate family members (namely my wife Catherine and my

daughter Jane) was perhaps most apparent. Work schedules had to be totally changed when the high pressure window was imminent and baby sitters had to be contacted, sometimes in the middle of the night, in order to be able to launch.

A huge reliance on various friends was also painfully evident. One of the most unfortunate in this category was Jim Woodmencey, a local meteorologist and heli-ski guide. I must admit that one time I actually called Woody from the top of El Cap's Boot Flake via cell phone for a weather forecast before committing to *Tribal Rite*. This was simply due to the fact that he is that good at what he does. At any rate, the obsessed in this case did indeed have a far-reaching effect on those around him.

### MARCH 6

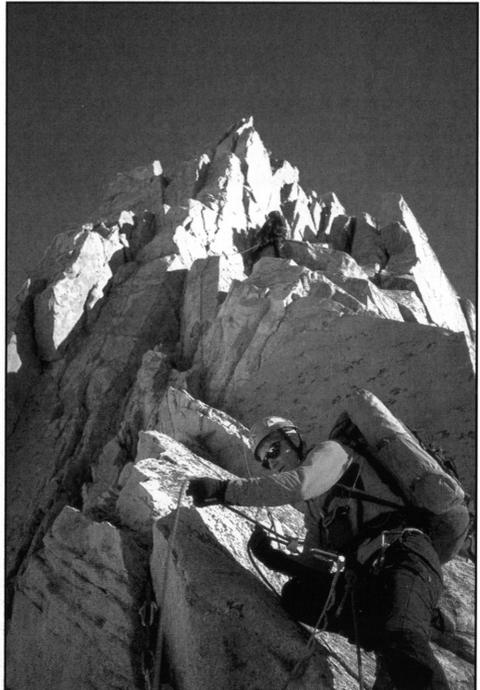
We awoke to cloudless skies and continued on up toward what appeared to be a particularly difficult pinnacle that we climbed via clean 5.8 corners on its south side. Another pitch up a slot chimney brought us to a point where we could at least see what we were up against: more of the same, with two or three spires to get around. We decided to rappel off to the east so that we could bypass these difficulties via snow gullies.

Around noon, we found ourselves at the end of the horizontal ridge crest. At this point, a somewhat complicated descent that utilizes two steep couloirs to the west is possible. Based upon Joe's idea years before, this is what we planned to do.

Accordingly, we cached all of our bivouac equipment and struck out for the summit, which was now located nearly 2,500 feet above our heads. For the next several hours, the three of us continued, belaying occasional pitches but mostly scrambling up the snow- and ice-covered terrain. The loose, faceted snow on the east side of the crest provided the incentive to stay as close as we could to the ridge crest, where we could scratch our way up on rock.

As the shadows lengthened across the white surface of Leigh Lake far below, we arrived at the base of the final tier of the ridge. We were at the intersection of the upper portion of the ridge and the final escarpment that rises nearly 1,000 feet to form the summit plateau of Mt. Moran. In order to save time, we opted for a steep, snow- and ice-filled couloir, and quickly gained about 300 feet of elevation.

We roped up and Hans led back out once again across poorly protected rock toward the crest. On the next lead, Mark and I watched as he started up nearly vertical terrain that would no doubt turn into time-consuming aid climbing. It was 5 p.m., we couldn't see the summit, and I knew that we had several hours of down-



*Renny Jackson takes on the initial pitches of the second day.* MARK NEWCOMB



*Hans Johnstone and Renny Jackson on the push for the summit in the late afternoon on the upper South Ridge. MARK NEWCOMB*

climbing and rappelling to do in order to get back to our bivvy site.

“Should we really be doing this?” I silently asked myself. When faced with the prospect of a night out without bivouac gear in the winter, even obsession has its limits. On the other hand, I could not see getting to this point again—at least, not in this lifetime.

A “*Traverse of the Gods*”-type of ledge continued out to the west. We yelled up to suggest that he investigate.

Hans quickly disappeared from our view and the rope began to pay out quickly. One pitch of rock climbing and then a snow arête led finally onto the flat summit of Mt. Moran. It was 7 p.m., and mercifully there was not a breath of wind.

After much back-slapping, smiles, and congratulations, we prepared for the descent. Four 200-foot rappels brought us to a huge amphitheater of snow bowls and couloirs that forms the major drainage on the south side of the mountain. This whole region was now illuminated by the light of the giant orb of the full moon rising magnificently in the eastern sky. We found that the drainage had conveniently avalanched in a series of large wet slides sometime

during our ascent and now provided a relatively quick means of descent. A few hours later, we collapsed into our sleeping bags.

The complex descent used by the first ascent party in 1953 is now little-known and seldom used. It does, however, provide a relatively quick way of exiting the south side of the mountain. After descending the couloir that plunges steeply down to the west from the end of the first horizontal section of the ridge, one must cross a sharp rib that allows access north to another couloir that then leads without further difficulty down to the floor of Leigh Canyon. Epics have occurred in the past when climbers, anxious to be off the mountain, have opted to continue down the first of these gullies. Leigh Ortenburger, Teton guidebook author, in his own inimitable style, and in no uncertain terms, emphatically describes the area: “No matter what, do not try to continue all the way down the first southern couloir, for it is blocked by huge overhanging chockstones, and terrifying rappels into outer space are required.”

MARCH 7

We awoke to yet another cloudless day and prepared to extract ourselves from the mountain. After plunging down the first couloir, we roped up with Mark in the lead, this time

for a steep mixed pitch leading up to the top of the rib. We rooted around a bit and dug up some rappel anchors that led 200 feet down and into the other couloir.

In another hour and a half, we were back at our starting point, strapping our skis back on. I stood up on my shaky legs, heaved my pack on my aching back, and watched as Hans and Mark, two of the premier skiers of the Jackson Hole area, cranked turns down toward Leigh Lake on excellent corn snow. When I finally arrived at the lakeshore where my friends were patiently waiting, Hans announced, "It looks like pretty good skating from here!" Soon they were two tiny dots as I slowly double-poled my aching body across the frozen surface of the lake. I silently consoled myself with the thought, "I may be slow, boys, but I have the keys to the 'bible."

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: GRAND Teton National Park, Wyoming

FIRST WINTER ASCENT: The Direct South Buttress (V 5.8 A1 mixed, 5,000') on Mt. Moran (12,605'), March 5-7, 2001, Renny Jackson, Hans Johnstone, Mark Newcomb

Renny Jackson's 31 years of climbing experience encompass over 25 years of employment as a climbing ranger in Denali and Grand Teton National Parks. He has participated in five Himalayan climbing expeditions, including the first ascent of the North Face of Cholatse in 1984, and is the co-author of *A Climber's Guide to the Teton Range*. He considers himself lucky enough to live in Kelly, Wyoming, with his wife, Catherine Cullinane, and their daughter, Jane Jackson.



Renny Jackson. CATHERINE CULLINANE