

FENRIS

Notes from a dream fulfilled in Queen Maud Land, Antarctica.

MIKE LIBECKI



The first base camp location, with Ulvetanna in the back ground. The plane is an Antanov II bi-wing single engine from Poland. *Mike Libeck*

Dreams? Goals? Fantasies? These words may sound attractive but they mean absolutely nothing. Zilch. Nada. Zero. At least not without their most important ingredient: absolute, genuine belief. Just as mystery is the most important ingredient of any true adventure, absolute belief is the most important ingredient in fulfilling any real dream, goal, or fantasy.

My patience had wearied over a far-fetched dream that had teased me for many years, but finally last December I looked down from an airplane at the ice surrounding the coldest and

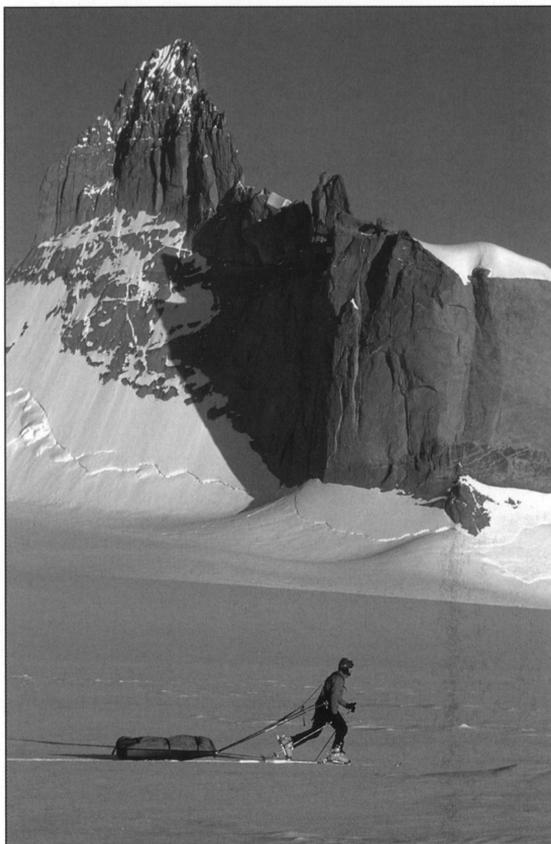
windiest continent on earth: Antarctica. I was about to arrive in Queen Maud Land, which, to me, is the home of the most stunning and unique granite formations on the planet. My original partners had bailed on me, and all financial sources had left open wounds draining me into debt, yet I still would not take “no” for an answer. I knew a solution would present itself, as it always does. Finally, my laughter would echo among the fantastic towers I had dreamed about for so long.

Just a week before boarding the monstrous aircraft on its way to the frozen continent, on a flight I was prepared to take alone, Josh Helling, one of my best friends and climbing partners, finally bowed to the opportunity of a lifetime and acquiesced to the sacrifices required to join the expedition. My friendship and climbing partnership with Josh is unlike any other: respect for one another’s techniques, absolute love of life, trust, safety; and most importantly, our dream to reminisce about our adventures when we get old and wrinkled.

The dove-gray morning sky cried with us as we drove our half-ton of haul bags and ski equipment to the Salt Lake City airport. It was the end of a cold November and winter had already painted the mountains white. Pain wrenched my heart over the coming two-month absence from my family. We said our sweet-sorrow goodbyes at the airport and held tight to the crutch of optimism.

Josh and I were headed for the Antarctic Logistics Center International, or ALCI, a Russian-owned and-operated company in Cape Town, South Africa. They were starting their third year of providing flights to the nearest coast of Antarctica, where Russia’s officially claimed base, Novolazarevskaya, is located. The only communication we had had with ALCI involved necessary permits, finances, and logistics. We had no impression of what to expect from our Russian contact. We knew only that they were going to transport us to the walls we had dreamed of for so many years.

Spider-webbed red eyes—and limp hair oiled with jet lag—showed my haggardness from the flight from Atlanta to Cape Town, the world’s longest commercial run (15 hours and 8,170 miles—a third of the way around the globe). One of the directors of ALCI, Vasily, met us with a firm handshake, a big, friendly grin under piercing blue eyes, and a polite, slightly accented



Josh Helling skiing near Ulvetanna. *Mike Libecki*

English. Less than an hour after arriving in Cape Town, Vasily was debriefing us on the Ilyushin-76 cargo plane we would take to Antarctica and what it would be like when we landed at Novolazarevskaya, better known as simply Novo. We provided our Environmental Protection Act permit and permits in cooperation with the Antarctic Treaty. Many countries have agreed upon such covenants in order to keep Antarctica as pure, preserved, and politically peaceful as possible.

At midnight on our second day in Cape Town we stood in front of the massive Ilyushin-76. It reminded me of Han-Solo's spaceship, the Millennium Falcon, because of the huge, bubble-like compartment under the nose. In mid-flight we changed into insulated clothing and double-boots for the subzero temperatures that awaited. After six and a half hours, we landed atop the glassy ice covering the tarmac. A frigid breeze and bright sunshine exploding out of the Antarctic azure welcomed us as we stepped onto clear-blue ice.

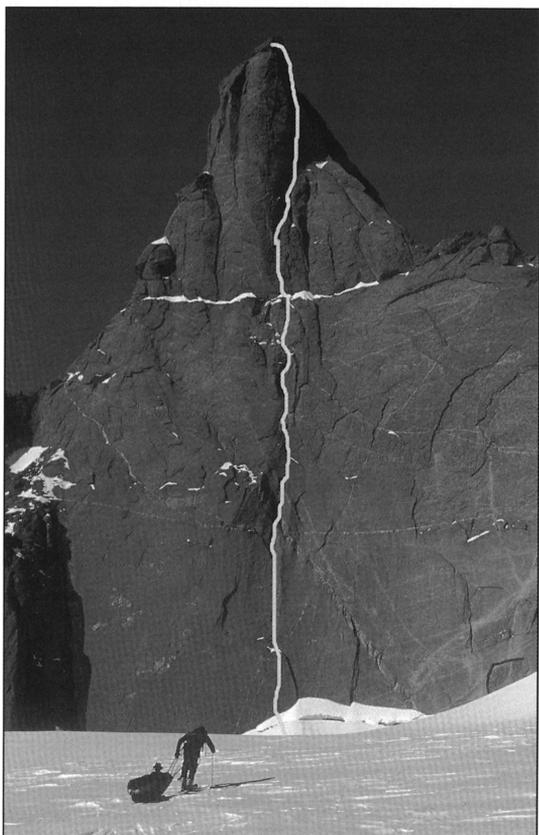
Novo base consisted of about 15 red, yellow, and blue insulated tarp-tent structures the size of my two-car garage. A much larger tent served as a kitchen. Strange wooden structures—fitted with sleigh bottoms—served as homes to the Russian crew who live here during the summer season. Diesel powered heaters ran 24 hours a day in all of the shelters.

We loaded our food, fuel, and gear into an Antonov-2, a small, single engine biplane from Poland. Though it was 30 years old, and somewhat slow, if the engine were to fail, the two-wing

technology would allow the plane to glide to a safe landing. As we rose into the perfect Velvia-blue sky and headed for the dream walls, the tents at Novo looked like candied sprinkles on a white frosting cake. Soon, all we could see were the distant peaks of the Wholthat Mountains and a vast ice desert. Less than half an hour later, enormous summits came into view, looking like gigantic teeth thrust out of the icy plains by the jaws of Mother Earth.

We landed near Ulvetanna, the highest peak in the area and one that proudly dominated the view. I imagined royal trumpets sounding off to announce the presence of the stunning granite towers. We gazed in awe at monumental sculptures crafted by God himself--He must have known how sweet life would be for a human to set eyes upon such fantastic summits.

We created our base camp by carving six-foot-tall ice-block walls that surrounded an area big enough for a sleep tent and a cook tent. We brought two 20-gallon airtight barrels to be used as toilets. To honor and respect Mother



The west wall of Fenris showing the line of ascent. *Mike Libeck*



Quality time at camp in Queen Maud Land. *Mike Libeck*

Earth's last hope of a pristine continent, we planned to remove most of our feces.

Once base camp was established, we set out to explore a specific group of towers in the Orvin Fjella area. This was comprised of steep fingers, fins, and walls of sharp granite in an area of about 140 square miles. Some of these spires rose well over 3,000 feet above the ice, and the individual monoliths appeared to be holding hands beneath the gums of ice that entwine them. We were super-psyched to do a ski circumnavigation of the area and investigate the walls in hopes of finding at least one beautiful crack system. We did not come here to climb a contrived route; we came to this pristine and gracious land to climb natural features and cracks that would make obsessed climbers find frozen drool below their mouths after seeing it.

As we skied past a huge tower called Fenris, it revealed its perfect, pyramidal west wall and pointy summit that pierced the brilliant blue sky. Not only was the wall itself astounding in its triangular shape, but a system of corners and cracks split the wall perfectly in half. It was an aesthetic, attractive objective for vertical pleasures.

As we progressed among the monumental granite, we were dumbfounded by the grandeur of the unrivaled rock formations. The walls exuded a feeling of holy magnitude. Ulvetanna's overhanging north and east faces sent shivers through my body. Kinntanna, a three-tiered group of spear-tipped summits, bound together like Siamese twins, reminded me of steep mountains found only in fairy tales and legends. The Holtanna massif is another true masterpiece, resembling a massive butterfly with its wings spread. Each wing was a 2,000-foot tower that almost mirrored the other one. The left wing resembled a proudly perched lion glowing with power; the right wing looked like a huge ship's prow with a perfect, vertical skyline. Snow petrels—dove-like birds with small, black onyx eyes—flew around the sharp summits. We continued our circumnavigation back to base camp. The west wall of Fenris and the aesthetic system of cracks that split its face impregnated me with an obsession to climb it. The thought of its luscious long corners teased me. The addicted climber inside me became aroused by the thought of



Snow petrel. *Mike Libeck*

my hands and fingers inside the virgin cracks.

We carved a new six-foot deep weather haven into the mile-thick ice cap near the west wall of Fenris. Several inches of snow fell, followed by high winds and gusts to 80 miles per hour. We started racking gear, sorting food and fuel, and getting ready for our attempt to live in the vertical world. We shuttled loads with skis and sleds to the base of the wall, two miles from our base camp.

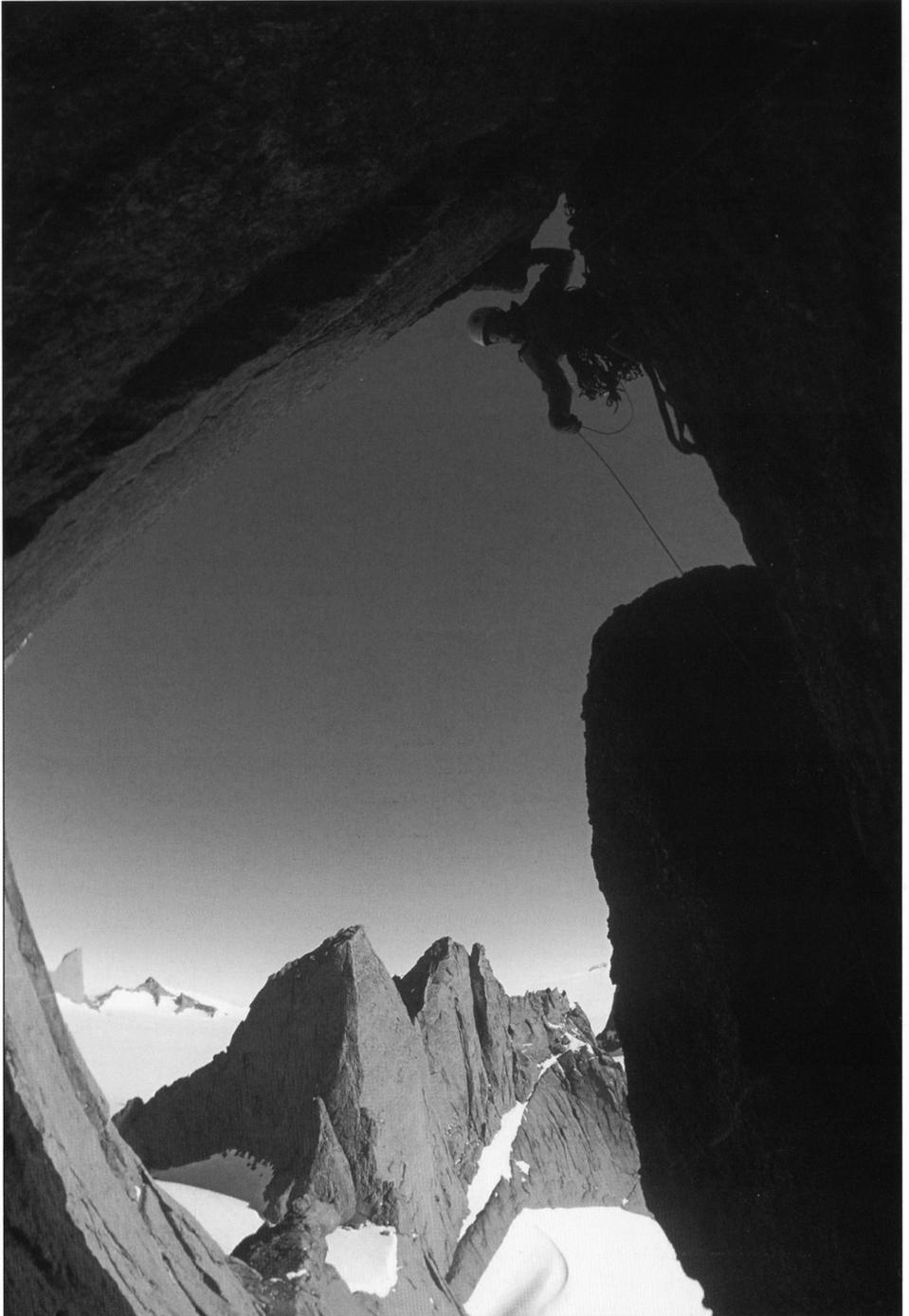
The sky stayed true blue. The 24-hour sun and its ally—the earth's largest ozone hole—relentlessly battled our sunscreen. This day was relatively warm, about 20 degrees Fahrenheit. More snow petrels with their beady black eyes flew above us.

Josh was victorious on the two-out-of-three rock-paper-scissors for the first lead, and it looked beautiful: a hairline seam that slightly widened with elevation. Josh meandered up an easy ice slope, then delicately tooled his way over a deep cavern/crevasse to a short 70-degree section before he could touch the granite. The start of the paper-thin seam above Josh was several feet out of reach, leaving natural hooks his only option. Josh carefully equalized hook placements on small crystals—was he shivering from the cold or the whipper so close at hand? A fall here would have been serious, most likely throwing him into an ice-cavern's pit of despair. He delicately moved onto the hooks. Compromising with gravity instead of fighting it, he tapped in a few small copperheads, then some assuring bird beaks. Before long, he was in cruise control above the A4 crux. Just a couple days later, we had over 600 feet of rope fixed and were ready to commit to the wall.

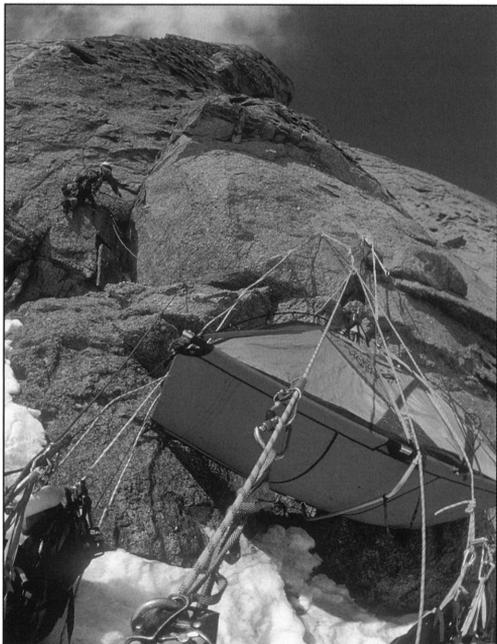
A whiteout took over the camp on the first day of the new year. Rest day. We had packed enough supplies to live on the wall for three weeks—exactly when our Russian friends would pick us up. I yearned to be on the wall, to be cold, enjoying anything warm, and learning more about real appreciation in my fragile body. We packed our final loads of sleeping bags and the precious pee bottle and skied away from base camp toward Fenris.

While we were living on the wall the average temperature dropped to the single digits and below. The frozen onslaught made everything a chore. Every day we reluctantly unzipped our stagnant sleeping bags and started our routine: fire up the stove, melt ice, stir hot chocolate, stir oatmeal, take a shit, and lash on the battle armor for the day's subzero upward progress.

The pitch above our camp looked very wide, very hollow, and very rotten. I started off into off-width cracks. Fortunately, our portaledge camp was underneath an eight-foot roof as I threw off rotten flakes the size of couch cushions, followed by several pillow-sized flakes. I hung on nuts and cams in the back of crumbling off-width cracks. I am sure Josh cursed me with every



Looking out from the icebox bivy. *Mike Libeck*



Josh Helling climbing out of the second portaledge camp.
Mike Libeck

cold, very fast. The suffering freeze we had prepared for arrived just in time to catch us off guard. We shivered in minus 20 degrees. The snowstorm broke into the most amazing light show. Trillions of sparkling ice crystals glittered around us, and I felt like a wizard in a fairy tale too fantastic for this world. Thin black shadows from fang-tipped summits shot across the ice cap. Pink, orange, and yellow ribbons of sunlight gorgeously attacked.

Treacherous beauty: continuous, loose, and rotten. We agreed that if the leader decided it was too dangerous, the other would not question him. The detached and balanced blocks that looked like they should already have fallen concerned us. With patience and optimism we proceeded higher as the temperature got lower.

Soon we found ourselves hanging in a huge cave we called the Ice Box Bivy. I doubt if the temp ever went above the single digits at any given time inside this dark and dreary cave. It was so cold that our feet were numb as we left the portaledge in the morning.

Josh led the third-to-last pitch as I endured what became the coldest belay of my life. I spent the time jumping, dancing, kicking, and flinging my arms just trying to keep circulation flowing. I will never forget that day: the cartoon-style shivering and chattering teeth, as well as my crazy bargains with God for just a tiny bit of warmth (believe in the warmth...believe in the warmth...). My feet were completely numb for hours. I am not proud that I got my first spot of real frostbite.

My last lead had an awkward squeeze chimney that took everything I had left in me. I had to take off my helmet so I could fit inside before snaking over an overhanging roof to the summit ramp. Josh not only got the first pitch but also the last little summit pitch. The west wall's summit blob was only big enough to straddle like a horse. In contrast to the consistently unstable and

exploding crash of rock, and rightfully so. But it was fucking scary trying to send the huge flakes to the icy ground without slicing open my rope or flesh. Exploding fragments threatened the portaledge and Josh even under the overhang.

We swapped pitches through plenty of rotten cracks, switching from free to aid constantly. Changing into free climbing shoes from double plastic boots was not especially enjoyable, especially at minus five degrees. Having feeling in our toes and feet was just a fantasy (believe in the warmth...believe in the warmth...). We both got our share of frozen, run-out off-widths and squeezes. Challenges came often while trying to feel edges and features with numb feet, as eroding rocks showered the belayer.

Our first small storm on the wall hit us as we finished the last of our double hauls to a big snow and ice ledge halfway up the wall. It went from cold, to really fucking

frigid weather during the climb, we were blessed with a calm, blue-bird summit day. The sun was at its lowest point of the day, changing from sunset to sunrise as it rolled across the horizon, smiling in all its glory.

In my seven-year-old tradition of celebrating Chinese astrology on expeditions, we pulled out our plastic Ram and Sheep masks to celebrate the Year of the Ram on the top of the wall. I thought about my family, my friends, and how important people are in this life. I closed my eyes and digested deep thoughts of how much energy and sacrifice from so many people it took to make this expedition, this summit, and this ultimate reality possible. Appreciating appreciation ruled my psyche.

We spent the last few days on the icecap kite skiing and enjoying our surroundings. Our Russian friends showed up on time and flew us back to Novo. We spent a week there waiting for the 100-mile-per-hour winds to die down so the Ilyushin could land. Bonding with our Russian friends, we spent our last days laughing; eating delicious Russian wieners, cabbage, and kraut; playing board games; listening to traditional Russian music; and of course drinking way too much vodka. Tears fell when we left Novo, and I have a strong feeling that it won't be long before I meet my comrades again.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

Area: Queen Maud Land, Antarctica. Orvin Fjella region of prominent walls and towers.

Ascent: First ascent of the west face–west summit of Fenris. Helling-Libecki Route (2,150', VI 5.10 A4). Climbing dates: December 30, 2003 to January 14, 2004. Expedition dates: November 29, 2003 to February 3, 2004. Josh Helling and Mike Libecki.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Libecki strives to live in the “now” on ultimate expeditions around the world. He currently has 12 more expeditions planned into remote areas on the planet that are home to mysterious, untouched, large rock formations. When not on or planning expeditions, Libecki, 31, spends his time pursuing his passions of writing, photography, videography, presenting his adventures around the country, and spending time with his family. He lives through his belief in the need to follow true passion, and that a positive situation will always present itself while doing so. He often is heard singing, “The time is now, and life is sweet!”

Libecki would like to thank his major sponsor Mountain Hardwear, without which the expedition would not have taken place, and also Black Diamond, Clif Bar, MSR, and Sterling Ropes, as well as the support of his wife, family, and friends.



Josh Helling and Mike Libecki enjoying a Year of the Ram Celebration on the summit of the west wall of Fenris.
Mike Libecki