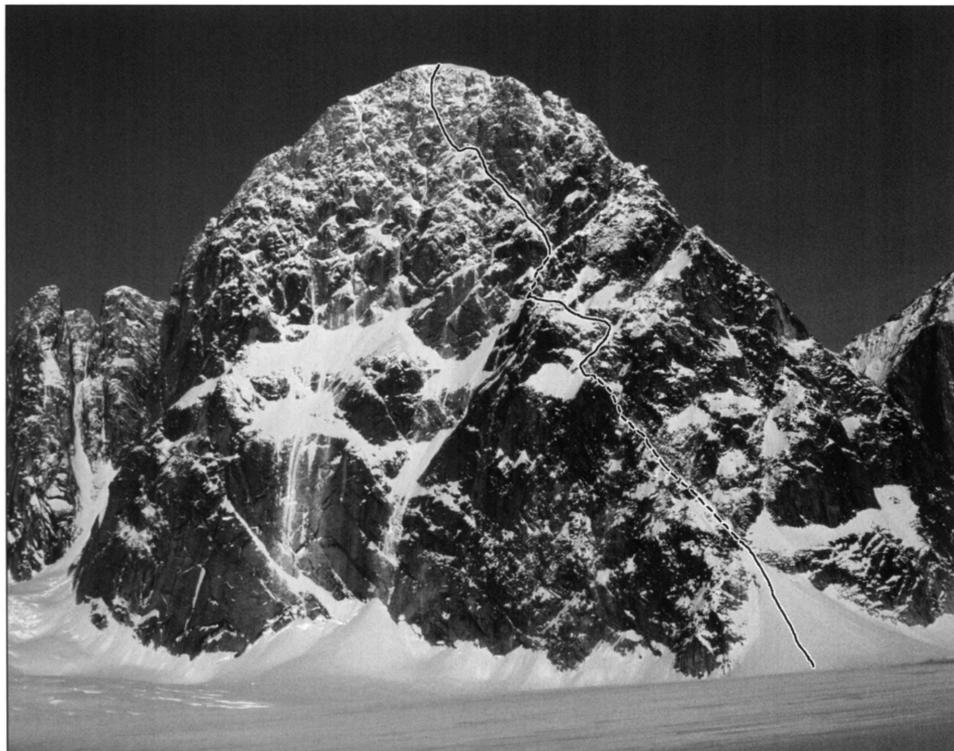


GORGE PLAY

Three first ascents in the Great Gorge of the Ruth Glacier.

TATSURO YAMADA



The zigzagging line of Seasons of the Sun, the new Japanese route up the southeast face of Mt. Bradley. The east buttress (Jöchler-Orgler, 1987) of Bradley is the right skyline. Several routes ascend the steep south face on the left. *Yusuke Sato*

In March 2007, Fumitaka Ichimura, Yusuke Sato, and I made a one-day ascent of a long, classic alpine route on Mt. Hotaka in Japan's Northern Alps, as preparation for a climbing trip to the Alaska Range that was near at hand. During this climb, I found my skills lacking and felt diffident about climbing with two of the greatest alpinists in Japan. As we hiked back to the parking lot in the twilight, I confessed that I had decided not to go to Alaska with them. Yusuke said, "Come on! Don't worry about such a stupid thing. Climbing with three people simply will be more fun than two. So, please, come with us!" Fumitaka agreed with nod. What lovely people

they are! I felt my courage return, and my mind turned toward Alaska again.

On April 7 we flew into the Great Gorge of the Ruth Glacier with Talkeetna Air Taxi. We had become friends with pilot Paul Roderick during a trip the previous year to the Buckskin Glacier. Now he told us, "Mt. Church's north face is unclimbed. Someone has to do that...you guys should. We are watching what you do. Hah-hah-hah!" Then he flew away.

The Great Gorge is one of the deepest and narrowest valleys in North America, yet the glacier surface is vast. We put base camp in the very center of the gorge, and then started wandering around every clear day to check out virgin lines in the basin. Over the next several weeks, after two failures on the west face of Peak 7,400' and the north face of Mt. Church, due to hard spindrift and the difficulty of the climbs, we made urgent attempts during any breaks in the bad weather and succeeded on Mt. Bradley, Mt. Church, and Mt. Johnson by new routes.



Yusuke Sato leads the M6 second pitch of Season of the Sun on Mt. Bradley. The team fixed this pitch and returned two days later to climb the face in 15 hours. *Tatsuro Yamada*

SEASON OF THE SUN

For hours we studied the southeast face of Mt. Bradley, clutching at straws. Finally we figured out one possibility on the east end of this massive, unclimbed mixed wall. Our line seemed to be a pretty complex but quite efficient way to reach the summit.

On April 20 we went to scout the initial Entrance Gully, which starts with a 300-meter snow slope. The gully ended with 60 meters of steep and thin ice along an overhanging rock corner. Yusuke cruised this M6 pitch, with a few good cam placements in a roof crack. We gained the top of the Entrance Gully, where it fuses into a ridge from the left. Then we fixed a rope on the M6 pitch below and headed back to our base camp for a rest day.

On April 22 we left base camp at 2:20 a.m., ran up the Entrance Gully, jumared our fixed line, and then jumped into the unknown. We snaked our way up the wall, trying to find the correct line by connecting snow patches on rock slabs, in order to reach an obvious couloir at one-third height. This long snow couloir led to the upper gully system much more easily than we'd expected from the bottom. We felt good about the weather. No cloud, no wind, and the southeast-facing wall received plenty of sunlight. We felt no cold as long as we kept moving, even with only an undershirt.

In the upper part of the face, the line got narrower and steeper, yet we kept up the speed. After negotiating a few technical pitches at M6R and WI4R, we were just below the summit

cornice. We angled slightly to the right and found a single easy passage through the cornice. Right there was the summit. It was 6 p.m., the finish of a 15-hour climbing marathon. The pure pleasure of adventure filled our faces and minds.

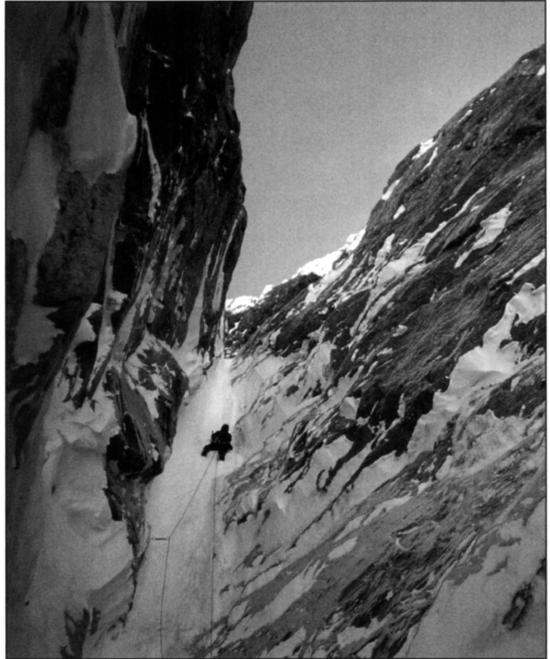
Unlike in a real marathon, we still had to think about the descent. The route was too complex to rappel. So we descended the west ridge toward the other side of the mountain. Luckily it allowed us to walk most of the way, with only few rappels, down to a plateau of the Backside Glacier at midnight. The joy of climbing in Alaska is the very long daylight, although it squeezed all our energy. We had no strength to dig a bivy site. We nestled into our sleeping bags and just lay on the snow. *Zzzzz...*

On April 23 we walked a long way back to the Ruth Gorge by crossing 747 Pass between Mt. Dickey and Mt. Bradley. The soft snow didn't allow us to go fast. We reached our base camp just before 6 p.m.

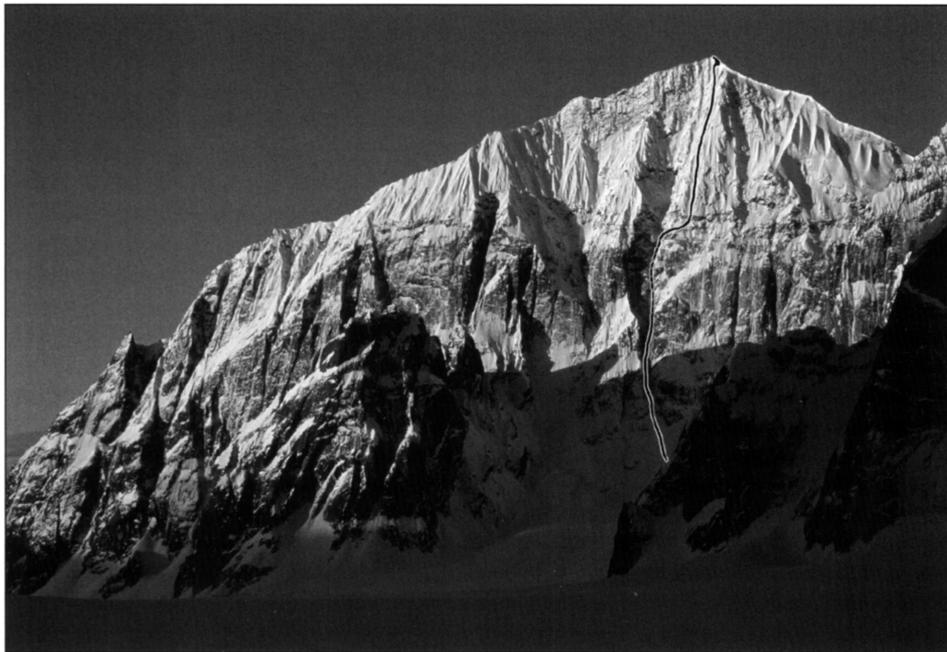
We were celebrating our first success on this trip, enjoying the taste of victory and sake, when someone called to us. I looked outside of our tent. A man was standing there, and he said in calm tone, "My partner died just now, so please lend me a radio to call for help." He pointed to the northeast buttress of Mt. Wake, next to Mt. Bradley. The victim was Lara-Karena Kellogg. We were not acquainted with her, but I believe that we shared a similar attitude about climbing, and so I knew I had the chance to fall into a similar tragedy. To carry on in my climbing life, I need to find a meaning for death in mountains. It's a part of climbing, also a part of life. After pondering this throughout the night, I felt more confident, inspired by Lara Kellogg's soul, which had never stopped climbing until the end.

MEMORIAL GATE

We wanted revenge on the central gully of Mt. Church's north face. It was obvious, beautiful, and, unbelievably, unclimbed, so it roused our enthusiasm. This time we had perfect weather, so we wouldn't be hit by spindrift. We knew everything about the route up to our retreat point. We left our base camp at 1:30 a.m. and ran through the crevassed glacier to base of the route. We deposited our snowshoes and started climbing at 3:30. We lunged straight into the narrowing gully, toward the steep part halfway up. Last time we had reached this part in heavy snowfall, and a wall of vertical soft snow had repelled Fumitaka's struggle. He confronted it three



Fumitaka Ichimura leads a typical steep snow pitch on Memorial Gate, the first route up the north face of Mt. Church. See page 1 for a closer look at the difficulties on this route. *Tatsuro Yamada*



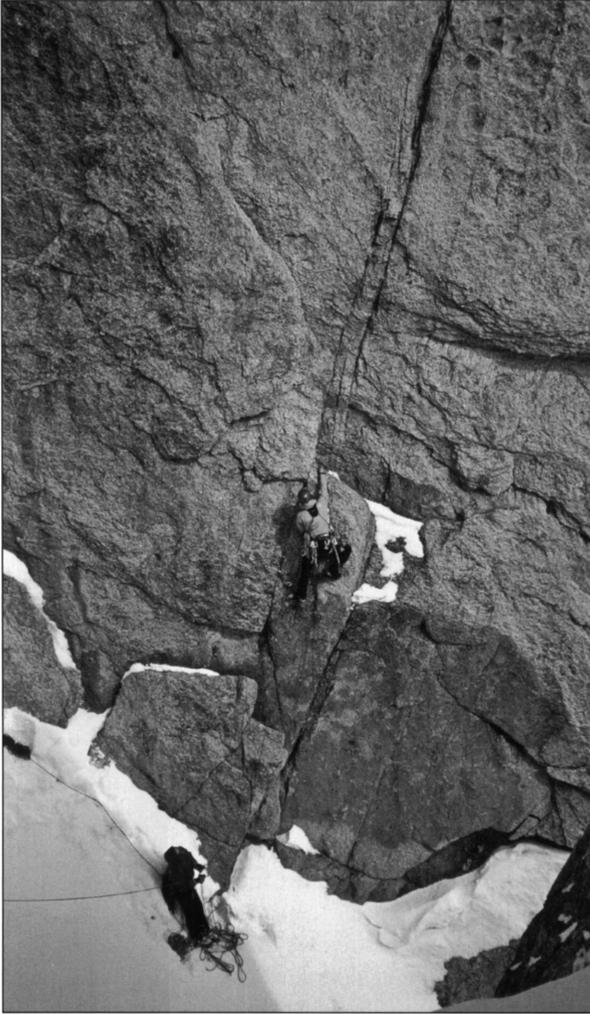
The line couldn't be more compelling on the north face of Mt. Church, but unconsolidated snow and serious spin-drift deterred previous attempts, including the Japanese team's first try in 2007. The peak was first climbed by the west ridge (right skyline) in 1977. *Tatsuro Yamada*

times, and each time he was thrown off, landing nicely on the soft snow slope five meters below.

This time it was my turn. I was eager at first, but soon was embarrassed because I didn't have a clue how to climb the deep, soft snow. I made up my mind to dig away all the snow until something hard appeared. Finally, I unearthed a ragged ice layer five meters up and put in some screws. Of course, they were not worth trusting, but they were better than nothing. I started to crawl up. My struggle to climb 20 meters of vertical snow stretched over two hours, but finally I won. Some cheers rose from my friends below, even though they must have been cold because I had kept them waiting for such a long time. Anyway, I was alive and over the crux. If someone said "do that pitch again," I doubt that I ever could.

Fumitaka then led two more very soft ice pitches. The angle eased and we seemed to have reached the middle of the route. From here we steered to the right to avoid the mixed headwall that waited at the top of the gully. Traversing along a snow band was more unstable than we had expected. The snow layer was quite thin, and our picks and front points scratched on the rock slab, making noises offensive to the ear. After two pitches of traversing, we emerged in the extensive upper snow slope. The summit cornice was close, so we were very excited, but soon we were reduced to torment by a 500-meter-long, snow-covered rock slab. Rarely could we find protection. We continued climbing without any belay, moving together and trying to always keep a few runners between each of us.

We were exhausted when we finally reached the overhanging cornice. Yusuke searched for a long time for a break in the wall, and Fumitaka and I froze as we belayed him. At last we heard Yusuke's laugh and followed his footprints into a hole in the cornice that he had excavated.



Sato begins the crux 5.10 A3 pitch on the west ridge of Mt. Johnson, after completing the Ladder Tube on Johnson's north face and intersecting the Elevator Shaft (Chabot-Tackle, 1995). See *Climbs and Expeditions* for a photo showing the location of both routes. *Tatsuro Yamada*

At the other side of the tunnel, we saw Yusuke smiling as he belayed. Released from the cold north face, we gained the summit ridge at 8:30 and enjoyed some warmth from the sinking sun. Two hundred meters of easy snow ridge led us to the summit. We stood on the beautiful pyramid at 9 p.m.

It's possible to walk all the way down this mountain by the west ridge, which was the route of the first ascent in 1977. Passing through the col between Mt. Church and Mt. Grosvenor, we arrived at the base of our route and picked up our snowshoes. It had been a 19-hour round trip.

THE LADDER TUBE

Now only seven days remained in our trip. We decided to throw everything into retracing a legend, the Elevator Shaft, Doug Chabot and Jack Tackle's route from 1995 on the north face of Mt. Johnson. However, when we visited the base of the wall for observation, we found a virgin line immediately right of the Shaft. "How lucky we are!" We changed our target at once.

On April 30 we left base camp at 9 a.m., very late because we were still fatigued from our last two climbs. We approached the base of Mt. Johnson's north face across a badly crevassed glacier. After depositing all our bivy gear, we started climbing our new line. It started with perfect alpine ice, thin but solid, with granite beside the gully to take protection. We enjoyed four nice pitches and then rappelled, fixing ropes on each of the pitches. We had a comfortable bivouac in a snow cave that we'd found during our scout in the bergschrund at the base of the Elevator Shaft.

On May 1 we started jumaring at 2:30 a.m. Yusuke had already started to climb the sixth pitch when the sun came up. Of course we didn't get any sunlight, but we were not cold because

the climbing went so fast, following a continuous ice flow for the first 10 pitches. I worked on the 11th to 14th pitches. The ice got snowy and finally disappeared. Soon the gully ended with 10 meters of vertical rock in a corner without any ice. I dry-tooled it with well-placed cams for protection. I broke the snow mushrooms overhead and topped out on a shoulder of the west ridge, which we followed to the east. Soon the obvious crux of our climb appeared at the col where our route joined the Elevator Shaft. Above was a 100-meter, nearly vertical rock face. Yusuke blasted the first pitch (5.10R A3), and Fumitaka overcame bad snow on the mixed second pitch (5.7). We had just enough time to fix ropes on those pitches and arrange a comfortable bivy at the col before dark.

The next morning, after jumaring the two pitches in the dark, we walked up 400 meters of easy snow ridge to reach the summit by eight. We could see both Bradley and Church, and the other peaks all around the Gorge, an incredible playground. I couldn't believe that we made these three first ascents in just two weeks.

We spent the whole day descending our route, leaving two pitons and about 10 V-threads for rappels. We landed at the base at 3 p.m. and then won our final bet, passing through the ice-fall, which was like Russian roulette. Then we were back on flat ground, though we still had a long way back to base camp. As we walked, I silently thanked Fumitaka and Yusuke. By the grace of their invitation, I had experienced the pure fun of climbing in these mountains. I was like a kid playing in a park with big brothers, trying hard to be their equals. That effort had earned me some benefits, I think. As I trudged along the glacier, my steps were heavy but my mind was skipping toward the future.

SUMMARY:

AREA: Ruth Gorge, Alaska Range

ASCENTS: First ascent of the southeast face of Mt. Bradley (9,100') by Season of the Sun (1,400m, V WI4R M6R), April 22–23, 2007. First ascent of the north face of Mt. Church (8,233') via the central gully; the route is called Memorial Gate (1,100m, V AI4+R/X), April 26, 2007. First ascent of the Ladder Tube (1,000m, V 5.10R A3) on the north face and west ridge of Mt. Johnson (8,460'), April 30–May 2, 2007. All climbs were completed by Fumitaka Ichimura, Yusuke Sato, and Tatsuro Yamada.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tatsuro Yamada was born in 1981 in Saitama, Japan. Since he started climbing in 2001, he has climbed in New Zealand, Canada, the United States, Europe, and Bolivia, where he completed a new route on the south face of Illimani with Yuki Sato in 2006.

In May 2008 Yamada and Yuto Inoue disappeared during an attempt on the Cassin Ridge on Denali.



From left: Fumitaka Ichimura, Yusuke Sato, and Tatsuro Yamada atop Mt. Church. *Tatsuro Yamada*