

THE FIN WALL

Exploring a little-known Alaskan giant.

FREDDIE WILKINSON



The Fin Wall in the distance, at the head of the upper Yentna Glacier. The federal wilderness boundary lies 12 miles from the wall, and planes may not land inside, so the team had to shuttle loads four miles to establish base camp.
Freddie Wilkinson

Paul didn't even turn off the engine. The plane just sat there waiting, humming along in the silence of the Yentna Glacier. Ben Gilmore, Peter Doucette, and I stumbled around in the 50 mph backwash, awkwardly tossing duffle bags, skis, and tins of fuel into a pile on the wind-cupped glacier. When we were done we stepped back and raised our hands at the distant visage behind the Plexiglas window. If all went well, he would return in 20 days' time to retrieve us. The engine revved, the plane chattered forward, and a minute later we were alone. Fifteen miles up-valley, the Fin Wall waited.



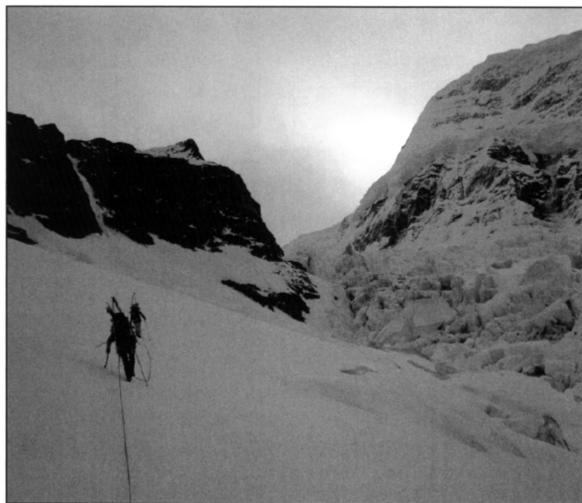
For years I'd heard rumors from veteran Denali guides of a stunning alpine project that lurked just beyond the southern flanks of Mt. Foraker. I looked at the area on a map: It's a convoluted region, with broken glaciers that allow scant landing opportunities. Intrigued, I arranged a private fixed-wing tour of the area in 2006. After flying for three and half hours up and down the spine of the Alaska Range, I had confirmed two facts. One: The Fin Wall was some badass shit. Two: Accessing the wall was going to be a royal pain.

The Fin Wall sits at the head

of the Yentna Glacier. The Denali National Park wilderness boundary, running a direct course from the summit of Mt. Russell to the summit of Mt. McKinley, bisects the Yentna approximately 12 miles below the wall, and commercial plane landings are prohibited inside this line. Six miles below the wall, a massive icefall rips across the glacier. Beyond, several miles of serac- and avalanche-threatened terrain must be crossed to reach the start of the climb. The wall itself comprises some of the most outrageous alpine topography I'd ever seen. Sandwiched between the southwest buttress of Mt. Foraker and the high ridgeline that separates the Yentna from the Lacuna Glacier, it is a tight alpine coliseum of 4,000-foot granite walls that converge at their base into an area about the size of a football field. A final colossal serac threatens this same area. A team must pass under this final danger and cross the bergschrund to reach the relative safety of the wall.

At first I was appalled by the approach. But the more you look at something, the more you appreciate its possibilities rather than its limitations. Climbing in the Alaska Range has changed over the past decade. With better communication, extensive air support, and several new guidebooks in print, there's been an increased interest in summits beyond Denali, and areas like the Ruth Gorge, the Tokositna Glacier, and Little Switzerland have exploded in popularity. These days there's a decidedly urban feel to climbing in the range. It's rare to have an area to yourself—normally there are friends to pass the time with in base camp, and accurate forecasts to decide when to launch on your climb. All this has helped make Alaska an accessible training ground for American alpinists, something we've historically lacked. But with the change, it's also important that we keep exploring. We need to find new venues—places that will remain wild for the next generation.

I drew in a proposed line and sent an application to the Mugs Stump grant committee, taking care to crop out that icefall in the bottom of the photo. If they really knew how dubious the approach was, I thought, they might not want to waste their money on us. Michael Kennedy's unexpected call arrived over the winter; now we were obligated to at least go take a look.



An impenetrable icefall six miles below the Fin Wall required a devious approach; the team ascended the couloir above the climbers, and then raced under a serac-topped wall to reach the upper glacier and the base of the Fin. *Ben Gilmore*



The trip was a chance to climb with two heroes of mine. I could only dream of doing a big Alaskan first ascent when I first met Ben Gilmore and Kevin Mahoney as a rookie guide in New Hampshire. When Kevin scaled back his expeditioning to concentrate on his guiding career and family, Ben and I made seasonal pilgrimages to Patagonia and Alaska. He's an utterly selfless individual, strong, quiet, and slightly prone to brooding: the perfect balance to my mouthy, wise-guy optimism. Kevin originally had planned to join us on the Yentna, but a ski guide's exam interfered. Because of the Fin's remote location and the complex glacier travel necessary to reach the wall, we knew we'd have to find a third partner. Enter Peter Doucette. Peter had never been on a major alpine climbing trip, but he has all the credentials of a New England hard man: born and raised in Whitefield, New Hampshire (north of the Notches), learned to climb on Cannon Cliff, and quietly tearing it up around the White Mountains since he was a kid. We knew he would be solid.

And now here we were, camped just before the wilderness boundary. The Yentna had an entirely different feel from any other spot I'd visited in the Alaska Range. Snaking moraine crests of sedimentary stone traced the boundaries of the valley. The frontier peaks to the west were cobbled together from a jaundiced yellow rock reminiscent of the Canadian Rockies or the Himalaya. The eastern ridgeline was snowier and composed of the more typical, battleship-gray granite of the Alaska Range. The next day, Ben, Peter, and I shuttled loads four miles up glacier and settled into a comfy base camp built into the lee of a moraine, about two miles below the icefall. Our elevation was 5,250 feet.

Ben was lying low with the flu, so Peter and I left in the morning with vague intentions of climbing the peak right behind base camp—the easiest, closest objective we could find. This unnamed summit was marked at about 8,900 feet on the Talkeetna D4 USGS map; having found no signs or record of a previous ascent, we took the liberty of dubbing it “Rogue Peak.” The northeast face was mainly steep snow with a few rocky sections and one M5-ish chimney pitch. Descending a gully on the south face, Peter kicked off a captivating slab avalanche that prompted a quick tutorial in advanced alpine tactics.

Peter: “Err, this snow is pretty sketchy, maybe we should take our time and start rappelling?”

Me: “You're totally right, man, but if another one like that comes down on us in this tight gully, it'll kill us whether we're on rappel or not! Let's coil the ropes and downclimb—it'll get us out of here faster.”

Peter good-naturedly shrugged, coiled the ropes, and began down-soloing without comment—proving just what a cool-handed fellow he is.

We arrived back in camp around suppertime and were pleased to discover that Mr. Gilmore was beginning to feel better. After a day of rest, the three of us left to explore the vast knife-edge ridge of summits that dominates the northwest fork of the Yentna, a group of peaks so inspiring and just plain manly that we had taken to calling them the “Mantoks.” We followed a thin, aesthetic couloir up to the northernmost major summit (the north summit of Mantok 1, 9,300 feet). The terrain was relaxed and thoroughly enjoyable, with only a short mixed step that warranted breaking out the rope.

Of course, all three of us knew that we were just pud-knocking on these two climbs compared to our main objective. The day after we climbed Mantok 1, we went to take a serious look at the icefall. I wouldn't say that travel directly through the icefall is impossible, but it looked pretty dubious to us. The slopes on the right-hand (east) side of the icefall were even worse, with

multiple stacked serac features that were active daily. But there was a final option: the slopes to the left (west) side of the icefall. Though they would be highly avalanche-prone in bad weather, at least no major seracs loomed above. A rockband barred the way, but it looked like a hidden couloir might provide easy passage through it. Though the upper glacier looked as gnarly in person as it had in the photos, we had yet to see any catastrophic serac avalanches up there. Gradually, we convinced ourselves we could slip underneath the looming frozen sentinels. We packed food and fuel for four days and set the alarm for 3 a.m.



More by happenstance (read: laziness and poverty) than design, we had foregone carrying a sat phone and instead borrowed an FM aviation radio that was good for line-of-sight communication only. Ten days into the expedition we had yet to see or hear a single plane fly over the Yentna, despite perfect flying conditions. But even without a weather report, it was obvious that a system had moved in. When our alarm went off, it was socked in and snowing lightly. We went back to sleep. Muffled booms sounded in the valley above.

Twenty-four hours later, everything was cold and blue in the empty dawn light. We left camp unroped and followed our track to the first serious crevasse bridge at the edge of the icefall. From there we traversed the lower slopes of a 10,300-foot peak, alternatively skiing and cramponing across snowfields and then up a frozen snow couloir as we skirted the western edge of the



At the base of the wall, rockfall penetrated the tent, prompting Ben Gilmore to don a helmet. Then spindrift from the concave face buried the team's shelter. They dug a snow hole and moved in, using the evacuated tent as a storm door, until it was time to climb. *Freddie Wilkinson (2)*



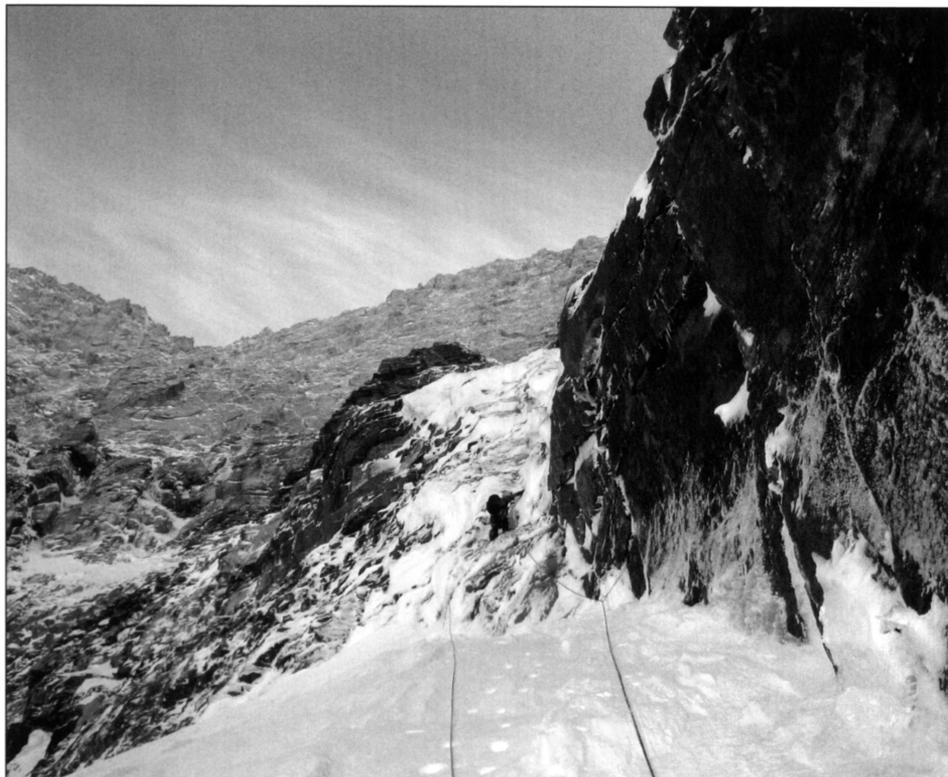
After an all-day approach and a bivouac, the team climbed the Fin Wall in 15 hours, then rappelled from the ridge as a storm approached. They reached base camp 24 hours after beginning the descent. *Freddie Wilkinson*

icefall. Above, we dropped back down to the glacier, put our skis back on, and began purposefully skinning toward the wall.

We had thought we might find a safe camp somewhere on this final stretch to the wall, but we didn't see any Holiday Inns up there—or even a spot where we would have been comfortable pitching a tent for the night. As it was, things were going smoothly and it was only late morning, so we continued skiing, moving closer to the final serac that guards the entrance to the face. We could see a few car-size blocks of debris lying in our path, but several feet of snow had accumulated on top of them. There were no signs of recent activity. After hastily stopping to cache our skis, we silently scurried under the serac and up to the bergschrund.

We stopped 50 meters past the 'schrund, kicked out a ledge for the tent, and climbed inside. Things were looking good: It was only midafternoon, and we had plenty of time to rest and psych up for a midnight departure for the virgin face above. While we lay in the tent, a thin mist curled up the valley and it started to snow, ever so lightly. Then it started to spindrift.

Snow began to accumulate between the tent and the inside wall of our chopped ledge with alarming speed. As if to accentuate our vulnerability, a small rock zinged a neat two-inch hole through the wall of our shelter. Soon it was necessary for one of us to be outside constantly, clearing away the spindrift. By now the sun was no longer visible through the clouds and it seemed to



Freddie Wilkinson leads the first pitch of the route: "a bit steeper and bit thinner than I'd expected." *Ben Gilmore*

be snowing harder. Not good. I grabbed the shovel and started digging a cave.

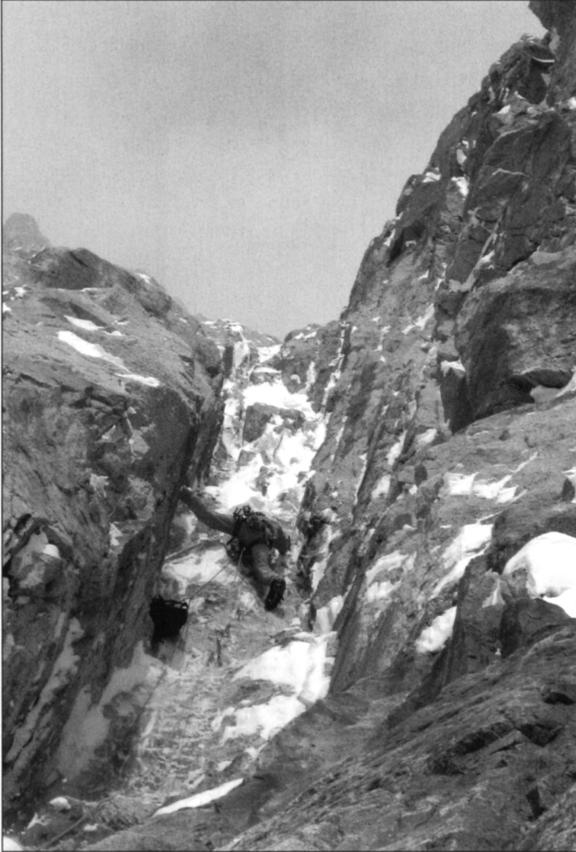
It was late evening by the time we had settled down in our new subterranean bivy. The forlorn tent, ripped and battered, hung over the entranceway to stop spindrift from entering our new home. It was obvious that bivying on the concave face above us would be a bad idea, so we'd have to go for it in a single day. I fell asleep half expecting and half hoping that the weather would still be unsettled in the morning, and then we could retreat.



“It’s totally clear out there.” Ben’s voice stabbed through my damp sleeping bag and belay coat. A minute later I heard the rubberized squeak of the fuel bottle being pressurized, followed by the comforting roar of the stove. It was 4 a.m. We had gotten about five hours of fitful rest.

Buoyed by Ben’s motivation, I readily agreed to take the first block. Our plan was to follow the path of least resistance, zigzagging up and right across the lower face to access a prominent couloir that dead-ended in a steep rockband halfway up. Once we had worked our way through this obvious crux, we planned to follow a hanging ramp up and right to access the final slopes that led to the summit ridge.

The first pitch was a wake-up call—a bit steeper and bit thinner than I’d expected. Above, I led four more pitches of moderate ice before handing over the rack to Peter. His block had some



"Full Gilmore." Ben Gilmore leads the crux pitch of the Fin Wall, after hanging his leader's pack to deal with unprotectable thin ice.
Freddie Wilkinson

engaging routefinding over steep snow and the occasional rocky section. He efficiently led us right into the couloir, and then we simul-climbed into a daunting cul-de-sac ringed by 800-foot vertical cliffs. Miraculously, a perfect mixed chimney appeared in the back of the corner. Ben grabbed the rack and led off.

Ben had gotten injured the previous winter and had missed out on most of the New England ice season. Nevertheless, he swung his tools confidently and efficiently, as years of experience on this type of terrain in the Alaska Range took over. During the second pitch, he hung the leader pack before committing to a section of unprotectable thin ice. The third pitch featured 30 feet of vertical drytooling right off the belay. Taken together, Ben's block reminded us of Repentance or Remission, the classic chimney routes back home on Cathedral Ledge.

By the time we reached the beginning of the ramp, mild snow

squalls were moving in and out. It was my turn to lead again, and I wearily kicked steps into the clouds. We were growing tired and needed to rest, but with the weather looking uncertain and the hour growing late, I decided to put my head down and punch it for the ridge. I'd focus on reaching the next rock, then catch my breath and begin again. The terrain unfolded slowly, up steep snow and then weaving through some fluted ribs. After a while I couldn't find reliable ice to place a screw, but we just kept simul-climbing up the steep, unending mountain.

Then I noticed that my posture had subtly changed. The angle of the slope was decreasing with each step. I crested onto the ridge at 9 p.m. In the distance a lenticular cap hovered over the summit plateau of Foraker, and a thick bank of clouds seethed to the south. To the northwest it was clearer and I could see the bloodshot Alaskan sun dipping toward the horizon. Ben and Peter joined me, and we put on our puffy pants and got the stove going.

Through the passing clouds, we could see the icfall and our base camp beyond. In the other direction, the summit was hidden from our view by an intermediate shoulder in the ridge. While I cooked, I listened to my two partners discussing the inevitable question of which way we should go.

Reaching the summit of the Fin unquestionably mattered to us. I gauged my weakened legs against the turning weather. I considered the prospect of reversing the approach in a whiteout, with the miles of avalanche terrain we would have to cross under. I thought about waiting out the storm in our snow cave at the base of the face while avalanches roared past, and the 20 or so rappels we would have to establish just to reach that tiny island of safety.

Summits do matter. But they don't matter that much—not to me. We downclimbed and rigged the first rappel.



We skied into base camp the next evening, 24 hours after leaving the ridge. By morning, two feet of snow had fallen on the glacier. It's tempting to believe that the storm confirmed our decision to turn back short of the summit. But who knows? Had we been a little bit fitter, perhaps we could have climbed faster and beat the weather. Maybe braver climbers would have pushed through the tempest and emerged unscathed. When we reached the wilderness boundary two days later, the Fin was still masked in clouds.

Each of us quietly carried impressions of what had happened. Ben confided in me that the expedition would always be a bittersweet experience for him. For Peter, who had had his first taste of hard alpine climbing, the trip was a watershed for previously unknown possibilities. And with some reluctance, after much soul searching, I admit that I am proud of what we did.

It's this uniquely human dimension to alpinism that draws me to the mountains. We'll rarely agree on what we do and why. Not in climbing, not in life. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

SUMMARY:

AREA: Yentna Glacier, Alaska

ASCENTS: First ascent of "Rogue Peak" (8,900'), via the northeast face (3,500', M5), Peter Doucette and Freddie Wilkinson. First ascent of "Mantok 1" (9,300'), via the east-facing All Talk Couloir (2,800', M5), Doucette, Wilkinson, and Ben Gilmore. See Climbs and Expeditions, later in this *Journal*, for photos of these peaks and a map showing their locations. First ascent of the Fin Wall, the south face of the Fin (3,800', Alaska Grade 6 NEI 5+), Doucette, Gilmore, and Wilkinson, May 3–5, 2007. The team climbed the wall to the crest of the southwest ridge of Mt. Foraker at ca 12,900 feet, retreating approximately 400 feet below the summit of the Fin.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Freddie Wilkinson lives with his girlfriend, Janet Bergman, in Madison, New Hampshire. He would like to thank the Mugs Stump Award for its support of this expedition.