

The Southeast Face of Proboscis

Technical Climbing in the Logan Mountains

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“PICK an objective that you feel will contribute something to the development of American climbing, gather the strongest group of technical climbers available to do the job and the AAC will back the venture.” This was the invitation offered me by the Council of the American Alpine Club as part of a program of vigorous encouragement of modern technical climbing in North America.

Picking the objective was perhaps easiest. Yvon Chouinard's lead article in the 1963 *American Alpine Journal* suggested that as most of the classic lines in Yosemite Valley had already been completed, the climbers, trained in the most demanding area in the country, should turn to the challenging routes in the high mountains. Now this project was to provide the means for the best American climbers to attempt the biggest wall they could find in a remote area. Obviously the Logan Mountains in the Northwest Territories of Canada offered both huge rock walls and an extremely remote location. One particular part of the area had even been given the intriguing name of “Cirque of the Unclimbables.” We would go to the Logan Mountains.

The next question was who would “we” be. Although I had never met him, I was well acquainted with Royal Robbins by reputation. For those less well informed on the latest goings-on in technical climbing I shall simply say that Royal is now and has been for some years one of the finest American technical climbers. As much as any one person can be, he is responsible for its present high level. Royal indicated that he was interested and recommended Richard McCracken. Another Yosemite climber of proven ability, Dick had done amazing ascents in the Valley during the spring. Layton Kor had also been issued an invitation almost as soon as the venture was under way. When he accepted, the team was rounded out. Layton is surely one of the most astonishing climbers anywhere. His tremendous reach and energy combine to permit him to climb some of the most difficult routes in the country with incredible speed. His technical proficiency is combined with an appetite for the most difficult climbs that can only be termed voracious.

We decided to convene in Boulder, Colorado, make our final preparations there and head north. When I arrived in mid-July, the first difficulty soon presented itself. Although we had counted on making the trip to

Watson Lake, Yukon Territory, in two vehicles, one was clearly too decrepit to make the trip. We faced the unpleasant and chancy proposition of crowding the four of us into the interior of my aged Volkswagen sedan, piling 700 pounds of gear on the roof rack and hoping for the best. We finally got started on the evening of July 21, shock absorbers fully compressed and tail pipes dragging. After a nightmarish interlude of enforced immobility, sleeplessness and incipient mechanical breakdown, we creaked into Watson Lake four days later.

The next morning found us flying north in a BC-Yukon Air Service De Havilland Beaver. After three hours the towers and spires of the Cirque of the Unclimbables loomed up. A five-minute swing through the area revealed what we had expected. The southeast face of Proboscis was the most impressive high-angle face. The next few minutes found us landing and unloading our gear from the aircraft. From now on we would be completely on our own for three weeks with no possibility of outside contact. If we ran into trouble, we had to be prepared to handle it ourselves. After our spectacular aerial view of the wall, this was a sobering thought, but the practical problem of transporting gear to Base Camp required our entire attention and left no time for moody speculation.

It took a couple of days of thrashing through swamp, stream and blow-down, varied only by an endless grind up scree and talus, to establish Base Camp on a meadow at the base of Mount Sir Harrison Smith. The weather, up to now cloudy and threatening, closed in with both snow and rain, but Royal and Layton were soon scampering around the meadow in the wet, looking for interesting boulder problems. Since even these can become dull in time, three days later we packed up again and headed for a break in the cirque called "What Notch", which would take us to the base of the wall. Several hours later we were looking up the face we had come so far to climb. And it was spectacular!

It seemed as if an ordinary mountain had been sheared in half. There appeared to be a crack system almost directly in the center of the wall, which towered two thousand feet above our heads. The prospect of being the first to do such a face and by the most direct route was most intoxicating. Since it continued to storm for the next several days, we had a chance to work off both the intoxication and the hangover, crouched in a makeshift cave and trying to catch a glimpse of the route between breaks in the clouds. On the third day, July 31, as it was apparent that our supplies of food and patience were not sufficient to wait out the weather in our uncomfortable bivouac quarters, we trekked back to Base Camp to await a break in the weather.

In a more determined mood we found ourselves on August 3 once more at the base of the wall. In clearing weather after a bad night and a stormy morning, we quickly sorted our gear and made last-minute decisions about what items of personal equipment to take. Layton made a fatal

choice. Early in the spring he had ordered a bivouac hammock from Germany. No sooner had the group gathered in Boulder than he began to describe the torments that Royal, Dick and I would suffer when forced to bivouac on a featureless wall with slings cutting into feet and back, while he would be suspended in perfect comfort, enjoying our travail. However, close examination of the wall for several days had convinced my companions, the most experienced technical route finders, that we could arrive at a broken section near the middle of the wall at the end of the first day. Therefore Layton left his little perlon hammock behind.

We worked in two teams. While one leader climbed and his teammate belayed, the other team would haul equipment, food and water on fixed lines using Jümar prusik handles. Royal and Dick drew the first half of the wall, where Layton and I would haul. After two pitches of moderate difficulty, Dick engaged in unpleasant nailing in a chimney where ice-water ran down his sleeves, a veritable freezing waterfall. At length he arrived at a stance, brought Royal up and fixed ropes for Layton and me. As Dick's pitch had slanted upwards, we two were faced with a diagonal prusik. Here I discovered a disturbing tendency on the part of the Jümar devices to slip off a diagonal line. Finding myself hanging by only one handle with close to fifty pounds hanging from my waist, I rapidly placed several old-fashioned prusik knots on the rope as insurance. Meanwhile Royal was encountering very difficult direct-aid climbing. As the wall steepened, the crack, which was so encouraging from below, got worse and worse. Clouds appeared and the temperature dropped. Forced to considerable ingenuity in placing pitons that would hold his weight and slowed by the cold, Royal made haste slowly. When he finally decided to belay in slings and bring Dick up, we noticed that it was getting late. Layton preceded me up the fixed line, and by the time I had arrived, everyone was preparing to bivouac in slings, one above the other like pictures on the wall. When Layton discovered a parallel crack system that would have made his sojourn on this steep, featureless wall comfortable if only he had the hammock, his cries of anguish alone made the bivouac bearable for the rest of us. It snowed continually that night, but the wall was too steep to catch it.

When morning finally came, we were only too eager to get climbing. Royal led off, but as the crack got worse and worse, his progress became slower and slower. At the end of the 150-foot line he placed a bolt and brought us up. The crack was still shallow on the next lead and Dick had to tie off every piton. It was still relatively early in the long sub-arctic day and a strong wind cleared the sky temporarily. Hanging in my slings watching Dick's colorful blue figure struggle high above our heads on the overhanging wall, I felt very much at peace. Then I noticed Royal nodding while he belayed. The warmth of the sun was putting us all to sleep. Dick struggled on and finally reached the ledges we had expected

to get to the first night, and soon we saw that they would have offered only a very uncomfortable bivouac at best. Layton started up a chimney. It was the first time that our feet had been out of slings in more than thirty hours. Climbing at top speed, Layton finally managed to reach some ledges below yet another overhanging section of the wall. After assiduous digging and scraping, we were able to enjoy the utmost in bivouac living that night — lying down.

It stormed most of the night, but we were protected by the overhanging wall above. Royal and Dick had done their turn; as Layton and I prepared to tackle the first pitch next morning I noted smirks of satisfaction on their faces. Layton led off and finding the crack receptive, he quickly ran out the full length of rope. On the next pitch the second piton pulled out. Without much help from friction, I was unable to stop the fall before my left hand had been pulled rather messily through carabiners. Layton finished the pitch, but as my hand had stiffened, Royal came up to switch leads with him. The difficult direct-aid leads gradually gave way to mixed fifth and sixth class climbing. One final lead of fifth class brought us to the top at eight P.M. Wearily we dragged ourselves to the summit and on down to hunt for a reasonably comfortable bivouac spot. We finally settled for a cramped, sloping ledge under an overhang. Royal and Dick produced their *meta* stove and brewed tea from melted water, which partially quenched our thirsts and let us doze fitfully.

During the night it had stormed once more and we found the going very slippery as we picked our way down the route that Buckingham's party had used in the first ascent of Proboscis in 1960. (*A.A.J.*, 1961, 12:2, pp. 312-314.) However some six hours later we arrived once more at the base of the wall and that evening finally reached our Base Camp.

Next morning I staggered out of the tent, awakened by a strange noise. A helicopter was hovering high above the meadow! Though 150 miles from the nearest habitation, a completely equipped survey party had moved into the area while we were on the wall. Their hospitality was boundless. They fed us magnificently while we waited out bad weather and even gave Royal a lift down from the meadow in one of the 'copters.

We placed 251 pitons and two expansion bolts, spent three days on the wall and had three bivouacs. We feel that this is one of the most difficult *technical* rock climbs ever done under remote alpine conditions, as well as one of the most elegantly direct routes that one can hope to climb. Its difficulty was NCCS IV-8-A4.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Logan Mountains, Northwest Territories, Canada.

ASCENT: Mount Proboscis, August 6, 1963 — First ascent of southeast face and second ascent of mountain.

PERSONNEL: James P. McCarthy, Layton Kor, Richard McCracken, Royal Robbins.