

The Granite Towers of the Arrigetch, Brooks Range

JEANNE BERGEN

GRANITE towers and spires with clean, sweeping faces — on the order of the Bugaboos or Logan Mountains — are rare. Virgin granitic groups of this type are an even rarer phenomenon, a mountaineer's daydream.

Late in 1962 we read Robert Marshall's *Arctic Wilderness*. It concerned a group of men who had wandered all over the unexplored Alaskan Arctic in the 1930's and stumbled across rugged granite peaks which stabbed the skies like outstretched finger-tips. The Eskimo name for the range was Arrigetch, and it lay in the west central Brooks Range, some 100 miles north of the Arctic Circle, bathed in continuous sunlight during the summer months. After a study of the one photo of the peaks which appeared in the book, it did not take us long to form an expedition.

Research showed us that the mountains were only seven to eight thousand feet high, but valley-to-summit relief was several thousand feet. Though none of the peaks had been climbed, the region had been visited at least three times: in 1911 by Philip Smith, a geologist; in 1931 by Robert Marshall; and in 1962 by Thomas Hamilton, also a geologist.¹ All three parties had used the Arrigetch Valley for access from the Alatna River. They reported sheer-walled granite towers rising from small glaciers, complex valleys, and steep passes. The combination of firm, virgin granite, super-remote wilderness, and endless daylight excited us to a high degree.

The 1963 *Brooks Range Expedition: Arrigetch Peaks*, impressive of title, was rather small in scale. It was originally composed of two Bergens (Brown and me), two Casses (Buck and Louise), and Chuck Loucks. At the very last minute I was unable to go, reducing the ranks still further, but the other four roared off from New York in a Northwest jet on June 28, 1963. They met their bush pilot, Andy Anderson of Wien Alaska

1. Tom Hamilton returned to the Arrigetch in 1963 shortly after our group had departed.

Air Lines, at Bettles Field, 200 miles northwest of Fairbanks. Buck and Brown flew out with Andy in the Pilatus Porter to drop the fifteen boxes of food and equipment near a good base-camp site if possible. About an hour after leaving Bettles they were high over the Arrigetch Peaks, heading into the steep-sided horseshoe of Valley 46-62. (On the advice of Tom Hamilton, our party decided against using the Arrigetch Valley for access.) They could see what appeared to be fine scree cascading down from the granite faces to a high, level moraine rising above the valley floor and forming a plateau on the north side of it. Andy felt that the boxes, if dropped onto the scree, would roll and bounce down to the moss-covered plateau. They made a pass over the slope, Andy opened the bomb bay, and the boxes tumbled towards earth. They seemed to drop for a long time before disappearing.

Three days later, after being flown to Lake Takahula, the nearest landing spot, and having struggled with loaded Keltys for 50 hours through thick alders, over sharp, loose scree, through hordes of mosquitoes, and across glacial meltwater streams, they finally reached the point over which they had released the drop. Three more days passed, and not one box could be found. The "fine scree" materialized into boulders of grand proportions. Food ran out and appetites were keen. Finally the group had no choice but to turn around and go back the same way it had come in. Their hunger and bitter disappointment were made more acute by having to turn their backs on the tantalizing granite towers.

Although Andy was not due for three weeks, they managed to flag him down with shiny pots and a steel mirror when he happened to pass over Lake Takahula on another mission five days later. Thus all four made it safely back, but the expedition was a dismal failure, notwithstanding a couple of minor first ascents made in the Angayachum Range during the next two weeks. By the end of the summer, reunited, we all agreed that we must go back; the 1964 Arrigetch Expedition was already in the planning stage.

* * * *

This time, besides the original five, there were also Robley Williams, a friend of Buck's, and Michael and Sally Westmacott, both with extensive climbing experience which proved invaluable. We divided into two groups of four each. Brown, the Casses, and Robley constituted Group I and were flown to Takahula by Andy on June 21; they then proceeded to retrace the long and rugged route into the Arrigetch. Three days later Andy appeared in the Porter, his wheels skimming the crests of the moraines, and deposited our boxes one at a time in a neat heap on the valley floor. A week later Group II arrived at Base Camp, having

had our introduction to alders, underbrush, talus, and streams. The steep ups and downs of the walk in tended to disguise the fact that there were only 1200 feet of elevation difference between Lake Takahula at 800 feet and Base Camp at 2000 feet. It had been hot as the sun revolved silently in the sky, always above the horizon — something which took us several "nights" to get used to.

After our arrival it rained intermittently for three days, but we were glad to rest. Early the second morning we were awakened by someone lurching against our tent. Brown pulled open the sleeve door and looked squarely into the eyes of a very hungry grizzly bear. Statistics say that 50% of the time a grizzly does not attack, but the sporting thing about them is their unpredictability. Brown shouted to Buck, who had brought in a 30-06, then sped out of our tent and over to the Cass's. Almost immediately four rounds were fired into the air; the noise was supposed to frighten the bear away. It did not. We all emerged in various stages of dress, or undress, and began banging on pots and pans with spoons, still trusting in the theory that bears do not like noise. This one was unmoved. We knew that he wanted our food and would be a permanent fixture if we did not remove him. We did not want to abandon the Arrigetch—again. If Brown took a shot at him, however, we risked wounding him and having ourselves and our camp torn apart in a matter of minutes. Suddenly and unexpectedly the rifle cracked, and the bear dropped in mid-stride; Brown had killed him with the first shot.

But we were in the Arrigetch to climb, not hunt, and the time had come. It was obvious that our number one objective would be the Wichmann Tower, a mighty spire which dominated Valley 46-62.¹ After a reconnaissance (to examine, among other things, an 800-foot wall which separated our valley floor from the Wichmann Glacier) and a warm-up climb, we struck out for a closer look at the Tower. Five of us — the Westmacotts, Bergens, and Chuck — walked the two miles to the head of the valley and climbed the wall, which turned out to be straightforward, to the Wichmann Glacier. From there we could see the east and north faces of the Tower, with the west ridge on the right skyline. The ridge looked promising, but as a route it would involve a lot of traveling. From our stance—about four and a half hours from camp—one would have to descend a steep wall to the Otto Geist Glacier below, cross it, and ascend a similar wall to the col at the base of the west ridge.

Now, however, we continued on to the very top of the Wichmann Glacier, smack beneath the Tower, crossed its small hanging glacier, and

1. With the exception of the names *Wichmann Glacier* and *Otto Geist Glacier*, all of the names used in this article are unofficial and subject to change. No proposals have been submitted to the Board of Geographic Names at the time of writing.

worked our way onto the rocks of the east ridge. Since today's climb was not intended to be a summit attempt, we turned back after a few rope-lengths. The climbing was becoming difficult, the protection poor, and the hour late. Just then a gigantic chunk high on the west ridge detached itself and thundered down the south face. Great clouds of rock dust boiled up along the entire 3000-foot expanse and the sulfurous odor of shattered rock filled our nostrils. It was the most awesome thing any of us had ever witnessed. We climbed down as rapidly as possible and were back at camp by 11 P.M., relieved to regain the lush moss and grass of the valley floor.

After a rest day the three men of the Tower reconnaissance party added Buck and set off early on the morning of July 9, resolved to reach the summit. The intended route was the long, grueling west ridge. The girls decided not to slow the party by going along and planned to attempt the east peak of the Maiden on the same day. We made our summit easily and returned to camp to wait impatiently for the boys. When they returned at 4 A.M., the sun still lighting their way, we learned that they had not only climbed the peak by the west ridge, but had traversed it, descending the east ridge which we had attempted two days before. Their route had involved some airy 5th class climbing on the exposed north face of the Tower; they traversed onto it to escape unstable rock left from the cataclysm which we had witnessed on the upper west ridge.

The expedition now had three ascents to its credit. In the next ten days we made seven attempts and gained four more summits. Rain made three of the tries unsuccessful; one peak was climbed on the second attempt and one, which the Westmacotts called Sodden Peak, resisted two attempts, gleefully summoning drenching rains both times and hurling down assorted rocks for good measure. Although we did have the occasional storm, our weather on the whole was excellent—in direct contrast to that experienced on the 1963 expedition. The sky was often overcast, but this did not necessarily mean rain. We frequently set out on climbs under the most dubious conditions.

Of the four later ascents, perhaps the most worthwhile both aesthetically and technically was that of the Pyramid. Chuck, Brown, and I climbed it on July 16, after being rained off two days earlier. From camp it took nearly six hours to cross valley, scree, and glacier, gain the col, and reach the base of the steep rock. Here about 200 feet of high-angle F6 climbing, involving an overhang and a spectacular dihedral, led to a great, wide ledge from which ten more rope-lengths of classical easy 5th class faces and laybacks brought us to the summit by eight P.M. In the far north, however, bivouacs are unnecessary, and by two A.M. we were

back at the col and being treated to a breath-taking arctic spectacle. The sun, which had dipped earlier behind the silhouettes of the mountains across our valley, was just reappearing as it circled through the sky, melting the peaks behind us with rosy gold and turning the snow to copper. There was great beauty to behold in the arctic, and we shall never forget the many scenes painted in light and cloud for us by the northern sun.

Now that it was time to leave we felt fit, warmed up, and eager to tackle two spectacular peaks which we had nicknamed the Badile and the Shot Tower. We had looked at possible routes on both. We turned our backs on the Arrigetch regretfully, hating to leave two of the most striking peaks in our valley unclimbed, not to mention the many in adjacent valleys, but nonetheless proud of the climbs we *had* done. We also knew with certainty that these peaks would provide climbers with wilderness steeped in beauty and with challenging and rewarding routes for years to come.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Arrigetch Peaks, Brooks Range, Alaska.

FIRST ASCENTS:

The Citadel, July 5, 1964 (Loucks, B. Bergen, J. Bergen).

Maiden, East Peak, July 9, 1964 (J. Bergen, L. Cass, S. Westmacott, Williams).

Wichmann Tower, July 9, 1964 (B. Bergen, B. Cass, Loucks, M. Westmacott).

Maiden, West Peak, July 11, 1964 (Loucks, M. Westmacott, S. Westmacott, Williams).

Battleship, July 12, 1964 (B. Bergen, J. Bergen, Loucks, M. Westmacott, S. Westmacott, Williams).

Pyramid, July 16, 1964 (B. Bergen, J. Bergen, Loucks).

The Camel, July 19, 1964 (Loucks, M. Westmacott, S. Westmacott, Williams).

PERSONNEL: Brownell and Jeanne Bergen, A. H. and Louise Cass, Charles Loucks, Michael and Sally Westmacott, Robley Williams, Jr.