

# Mount Columbia from the North

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THIS spring Toni Hiebeler was in Yosemite Valley with Fritz Wiessner, and knowing that an *Alpinismus* article on North American climbing would result, I was interested to hear what areas Hiebeler was planning to visit. The Canadian mountains are so important in an overall appreciation of American mountaineering that I urged Fritz to take him to the Rockies, and then during a general discussion on the Rockies Fritz enthused over the north ridge of Columbia. "You know, this is such a fine objective, something of the Peuterey Ridge of Mont Blanc, and still unclimbed."

In early August, in the funereal club house of the Alpine Club of Canada, I ran into Denny Eberl and Gray Thompson, who like myself had been washed out of the Bugaboos. Their spirits were not too high, having climbed nothing; but a common interest in Columbia soon fired them up, the sodden Bugaboos forgotten.

Denny and Gray had already been into Alberta by fording the Sunwapta and crossing Woolley Col and needed no persuading not to go that way again. The hike up the Athabaska River caught our imagination as the classic approach, having been used by the 1925 Japanese first-ascent party to Alberta. After two days of fair going, in magnificent scenery, we camped on the river flats below where Mount Alberta should be, were it visible. For our first climb Denny and Gray had the northwest ridge of Alberta in mind. It did not sound too exciting, but there was not much alternative. We toiled up scree to a bivouac near the saddle, and a cheerful note left by a 1963 Vulgarian Alpine Club party: "Go back, go back to the pass, you will all be killed." The next day was miserable; a stiff wind kept us cold all day while we tried the wrong route on Alberta's black and evil rock. Unable to make an adequate belay, I stated that I would rather unrope while Denny attempted an unlikely rib. In the end we gave up, being unequipped for a bivouac and obviously on the wrong route. The effort needed to climb this short section appears out of all proportion to the rest of the climb, which is a monotonous scree slope for thousands of feet — I was happy to leave it.

Back at camp we had our first really fine day and our first view of Columbia, rising 7000 feet from the valley floor, as dramatic as it was ethereal. Having failed to get up Alberta, our plan to attempt Columbia seemed unrealistic to Denny, which he reasoned would be harder. My view was that we failed to get up Alberta because it simply was not worth putting out for; whereas Columbia was a far greater challenge, and we would succeed *because* it was harder and required a real commitment. Unfortunately a bad cold prevented Denny from coming with us, so we said goodbye to him and headed towards Columbia. In indifferent weather we reached the glacial lake at the snout of the Columbia Glacier, and having found no other place to cross the Athabaska River, we prepared to ford the lake — sheer madness, of course. As the rain poured down, Gray impulsively removed his boots and headed for the icebergs in the lake. Up to our knees, and going deeper, we fled to the shore — what a grim scene: we were shivering with cold, our friends on the way home, ourselves awash in rain, miles from anywhere. Unable to face the water, we made the long detour over the tip of the glacier and bivouacked among trees, with a campfire to dry out our clothes. We were now 2000 feet from the start of the climbing. As the weather was still doubtful the following day, we hiked to the beginning of the climb at about 7500 feet, arriving in the early afternoon to bivouac at the first ice slope.

Approaching Columbia we had had plenty of time to work out our route. In the lower half we preferred icefields on the north face to the north ridge proper, where the rock towers were almost certainly of poor rock.

That afternoon we melted water, and the more we looked up the face, the closer the summit appeared, although we knew it was almost 5000 feet above us. Our descent was to be down the south side and over the Columbia Icefields, which we had never seen, apparently a six-hour affair. It looked to me as if eight hours would see us on top, meaning we might arrive back at the Icefields campsite late the same night.

Morning was fine and clear, as we began to front-point up the lowest ice slope, using the odd ice screw, and belaying from rock when we could. No problems here, and at one belay Gray said that he, too, thought we'd be on top within eight hours. Even so, the ice ramp connecting the two icefields still appeared a long way off, and the ice was now not only steep, but extremely tough — the dry summer had left clear, no-nonsense ice.

We now had to get past a sérac, and the most reasonable way was up a vertical ice pitch. Gray denied he had ever done anything like it, while I had to admit that I had once done this sort of thing in winter in Scotland. Full of ambition and the latest teachings from erudite journals, I hoped to

be able to traverse out *piolet ancre*, reach lower angled ice, and front-point across in true textbook style. It did not work out that way, as I was forced to cut hand and footholds, placing and retrieving our three ice screws. About two hours later we had hauled ourselves and our packs up, and it certainly began to look as if we might bivouac on the climb after all. To go as fast as we could we front-pointed up short pitches, placing no intermediate pitons, only belay anchors. And still the ice ramp was a long way off. Not only that, but the ice slopes leading to it had steepened since we looked at them from below.

We now realized that we simply were not about to carry on without step-cutting across this glistening grey ice that blocked us from the upper icefield. Hacking away at the ice hour after hour, I could not help feeling that we were rather *démodé* — surely Reinhold Messner would not stand for this antique nonsense! Looking back at Gray hunched over his ice screw belay, with ice-plastered rock behind, I was reminded of those pictures of Heckmair and party on the Eiger. The climb had that special ambiance of the great alpine north face — a hard, cold, dead place, where no sun shines.

Cutting leftwards for several hundred feet we were relieved to arrive at the ice ramp. Yet now we could see what we had half expected — that the enormous séracs that fell off the upper icefield threatened this part of the route. They were so big they had to be stable, or so I reasoned, as Gray climbed an icy slot up to the ramp. By now the light was fading, and my next belay was right under the sérac, tied to two hopeless knifeblades. Gray realized that this was no place to hang about as the struggle continued up and out. Some vague rock platforms to the right would have to be our bivouac; it was now almost dark. We kicked the rubble off the ledge, brewed up, and damp from our efforts on the ice wall, spent a cold night.

Over breakfast we ruefully admitted the route had been more than an eight-hour affair, but we agreed that we would be on top by midday. The weather held clear, and a welcome sun reached us as we cramponed up the second icefield, heading for a notch that would get us on the ridge and enable us to see what was in store.

The summit tower and, in front of it, the final tower of the ridge were as steep as we had imagined. We had an idea that they could be turned on the west side, based more on hope than reality, yet the long snow and ice arête leading up to the final tower was as obvious as it was direct. Though at first the snow was poor, where belays were more of a formality than any use, the arête later turned into more hard ice and involved yet more step-cutting. Finally, around midday, we were on the rock, where after a

fashion Gray set up a belay, made of loose blocks. With crampons off for the first time in two days, a fine pitch took us to the crest of the ridge, where we expected easier going. However after a rope-length or two on rotten rock, we came up against the final tower, which looked like the hardest climbing so far. No easy ways appeared here; time was going fast, the summit no longer a certainty that day. Two hard pitches on the very crest of the ridge, a traverse, more pitches and we were near the top of the final tower — yet the weather was worsening, with occasional snow flurries, and the summit no longer visible. Trying to put on speed, I found myself on ice-covered rock with no pitons worth mentioning. Gray was similarly tied to what they call “psychological belays” in instruction books. It just would not go — I hacked larger steps but felt insecure. With the light fading, precious minutes were lost until Gray insisted I put on crampons, which some mental block had prevented me from realizing was the answer. The sloping ledge I reached was on a rib, while around the corner the wind was furious. This looked like our bivouac; and still no view of the summit, as clouds poured off Columbia.

To encourage us our stove refused either to stay alight or once alight, to give out more than a feeble flame. Supper was a bleak affair.

Half awake I sensed that I was getting wet — snow was everywhere, the wind hammering into the bivi sack. Must keep the boots from freezing — God, my feet are getting numb — can’t reach them, bag too tight, I’ve got to rub them, I’ve got to keep them moving. The wind pulls the bivi sack off my shoulders — have to pin it with my arm, my sleeping bag is getting wet — just forget it, it’ll pass. Three o’clock, then, hours later, I look again, it’s three twenty — it’s getting worse — what a damned wind. Suppose it storms all day — have to stay here, can’t possibly make it up and over Columbia in a white-out. How long do Rockies storms last? — not as severe as the Alps Frank Smythe said, but the Icefields make their own weather. Gray’s awake too — at least I’m not the only one. What do you say, baby? No, it’s only three forty-five. Look, I’m going to move over on my side, could you shift a bit? Thanks, yes, a couple of my toes are cold too.

It’s getting light, definitely. Wind seems worse than before. I rub my feet. We’ve not much food, but Gray’s solid, we will be OK whatever we have to do; we’ve been through as bad before. I think of the restaurant in Jasper where the waitress will be saying to her customers, as she did to us a week ago, that yes, it is a lovely day, and will they all have coffee now? Everywhere but here life goes on as usual. On Columbia we face our own version of life. I keep thinking I hear a lull — they get more frequent, then it’s all an illusion as the bivi sack cracks in the wind, and I draw it tighter around me and doze off.

Gray wakes me up — he can see the valley, it's still blowing yet the snow has stopped. There's just one thing to do, make the summit and try to find a way down. Hurriedly we search for our equipment; our boots are frozen but go on somehow. As we sort the climbing gear, Gray's feet become numb — I shout to him over the wind to swing them like a man possessed — a trick we learned in Patagonia — and some warmth returns as I massage them. Gray, we must move, we *must*. He leads off into the wind, I leave our bivi some minutes later, not hearing him. Round the corner the wind abates — it has changed direction since the evening, and we can talk without yelling. Powder snow lies over ice, where continuous mixed climbing takes us nearer the summit we cannot see. Wind and snow race the clouds past us as we peer up at shapes in the mist, climbing just off the ridge crest. Then I sense that we have seen this formation before from below, move left to the crest, and arrive on the flat summit icecap — too happy to realize we have made it. I furiously pull in the rope. It is past midday. We are up, but by no means off. We grope along the summit, with visibility a few feet, then begin to head down, keeping the west flank on our right. We wait for a clearing and get none, but head down anyway. Two hours more and we are on the Icefields, which are now clear of cloud, while Columbia remains aloof and unseen in its own weather.

We did not even make it back to the Icefields campsite that night, but ended up in the dark, wandering on the moraine and found an abandoned shack to sleep in. The climb did not take eight hours, as we had thought, but two-and-a-half days of intense effort, perhaps the finest alpine climb we had ever done. We had a lot to be thankful for.

*Summary of statistics:*

AREA: Canadian Rockies.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Columbia, north face/north ridge combination, August 15-17, 1970. Christopher A. G. Jones, Graham R. Thompson. NCCS V, F7.