

# A Return to the Kichatnas

ANDREW EMBICK *and* ALAN LONG

*"I want to do a climb that takes the ultimate—and still succeed."*

—Royal Robbins in *Mountain* 18.

*Embick begins:*

AFTER last summer's climbs in the Kichatnas (see *American Alpine Journal*, 1977 and *Climbing* Jan.-Feb. 1977) Mike Graber went back to the eastern Sierras, Dave Black and I returned to medical school, and Al Long rejoined his computer. What remained in Alaska and in our minds was a flying buttress of nearly perfect Gothic proportions. A cleanly sculpted pillar of granite rose from an icefall of the Sunshine Glacier at the 5500-foot contour and sharpened to a gendarme-studded ridge leaning against the central rib of the grey mass of the east face of Middle Triple Peak. An icefield lifted the 8835-foot summit head and shoulders above the flanking bulks of North and South Triple Peaks.

The vision of the unclimbed route was compelling and the decision to return almost automatic. Finding a fourth to take Dave Black's place was hard; we looked for someone balancing amiability and competence, fanaticism and equanimity, boldness and care. Those qualities are hard to combine but George Schunk had them all and was properly unconcerned about escalating in one step from an easy Grade V in Yosemite to an Alaskan VI.

Logistics were easy; we'd been there before and calculated the rations which would keep us going during a climb and permit rest-day orgies of almost *cordon-bleu* character. Graber's recollection of a possible pass between the Tatina and Sunshine Glaciers convinced us to airdrop a Base Camp to a team who'd been given a day's head start to ski from a landing on the Tatina. Scrutiny of blown-up photographs had revealed a possible crack line up the pillar but no ledges. A descent route might exist off the side of the ridge to the hanging glacier to its north.

Our plans worked. We did not have to wait for weather in Talkeetna, and the pass was skiable in its entirety. Though Doug Geeting's bombing

PLATE 16

*Photo by Andrew Embick*

**Aerial view of the East Buttress of  
MIDDLE TRIPLE PEAK, Kichatnas.**



runs were made at 700 feet and 70 miles per hour in the tight cirque, only a few bags of rice were broken in the airdrop. There was a crack line to follow after Mike imaginatively linked skyhook and rump moves to pass a thinly-split overhang 40 feet above our start at the toe of the pillar. We spent the second day in brilliant sunshine, encircled by great grey rock walls and hanging ice which at intervals rumbled earthwards. We were touching the warm, nubby skin of the grandest mass of rock I'd ever known, immersed in air and half dancing, half flying upwards, shirtless on belays. Wearing EB's I entered a nearly vertical dihedral and emerged 160 feet higher breathing deeply the essence of rock climbing.

On the third day we jumared ropes already disturbingly abraded, simultaneously losing touch with the ground and watching a storm begin. The sky turned grey and snow began to fall. Al and Mike swung leads for 28 hours on slush-covered rock as George and I shivered and withdrew into ourselves, hanging in slings between welcome bursts of effort jumaring and hauling. The axes we were saving for the summit snowfield came unhooked in the night and were gone. When George and I took over, it was to add two more pitches. The last, led by George, was a huge roof I struggled to clean, which extended the nonstop push to 34 hours and a bivouac at the top of the pillar.

The fifth day was alpine: gusty winds and fog, glimpses of distant glinting sunlit peaks, rock and snow and ice-filled cracks, and unlikely *à cheval* moves on a knife-edge. George found another semi-sheltered patch of snow to excavate for a bivouac and we continued, fixing two pitches to the base of the final rib. I was shattered by the first lead, the hardest of my life. With voice contact almost nil in the howling wind, unable to anchor and with rope-drag I knew would not permit the climbing I had to do, I was lowered to a ramp below the ridge crest. I pulled in 50 feet of rope and began nerve-rackingly hard hand-jams and knee-locks in an ice-filled crack. Numb toes tried to feel through boots and supergaitors for nubbins from which I'd chipped the *verglas*. I used my teeth to hold gloves as I left behind protection I'd been afraid to pull on. The two pitons I'd saved fitted the crack that I reached as the rope ran out.

The bivouac gave us views of nothing. Fog obscured nearby peaks and rime collected even under overhangs. Snowflakes blew upwards and in the morning we looked like dead, spindrift-covered bodies in the winter trenches of a nameless war.

Leaving behind our bivouac gear, we set off for the summit, guided more by recollection of route photographs than by what we could see. We usually aided anything harder than F7 though George showed his usual disregard for conditions and when Al was leading, the rope went out as if he was climbing a ladder. Stark, chilling, and awesome, the rime-encrusted final rib reared up to the vertical, split cleanly by a seven-

PLATE 17

*Photo by George Schunk*

**The 4100-foot West Face of  
MOUNT AUGUSTIN.**



inch crack we luckily were able to avoid. Our world had no clearly defined limits. We were intermittently enveloped in cloud and the wind came from every direction. Withdrawing inside a parka hood and feeling the warmth of breath on my face instead of stinging pellets or freezing vapor was happiness, comfort, and security. Jumar teeth and everything else became coated with ice. It was dismal.

Success and security are conflicting goals on any climb and uncertainty about their relative priority is at the core of the mountaineering experience. Such uncertainty intensifies on a big wall in Alaska. As I huddled, though, the fears both real and imagined which had plagued me for months began to evaporate. The weather was the worst any of us had seen in the Spires, but we were continuing the climb and it wasn't going to kill us. That realization came to me and freed my limbs, warmed my body, and opened my mind to the beauty around us. It ended the conflict I'd been feeling between self-preservation and teamwork. We spent little time on the summit and saw as little as we'd seen last time: nothing. But it was good.

Only the descent remained. If we could keep our concentration in the face of fatigue and avoid mistakes we'd get down. Strung with a mass of expendable hardware, I led rappels past mushrooms of rime, dangling and happily bashing in anchors and dropping from stance to stance. We spent another night at the bivouac we'd left almost 40 hours before and on the eighth day continued rappelling, using our only uncut rope, a single-strand, squashed-flat 9mm.

Then we were down. No climax is unending though ours had been long. In sunshine, resting later, the intensity of the climb faded and memories became more selective. I had the recurring thought that in good weather, wearing EB's, the whole route, all 28 pitches, would go free. An Alaskan peer of Yosemite's Salathé Wall? Perhaps.

*Long continues:*

Gliding out of our Tatina camp with "snow slog" and "1500-foot avalanche slope" ringing in our ears, we left Andy for the northeast face of Flatop Peak. Twelve noon, a perfect alpine start. We skied past buttress after gorgeous buttress in Flatop Cirque, granite sculpted into fantastic patterns of cracks and sunlit slabs.

Imagine these rocks in the Valley—there'd be a hundred routes in here! A broad couloir arched up right to a col on the north ridge, leaving only a steep snow slope and short rock band to the summit plateau. We left our egos in the bergschrund and cramponed up the 45° slope. North Triple evolved into a stunning presence as we rose, its west face glistening tantalizingly through a notch in Mount Neveragain.

"I think this corned beef is spoiling—we'd better finish it off."

"Yeah, these chocolate bars too."

"Al, are you planning to lead this whole climb, or what?"

"Well, it *is* my birthday."

In crampons we scabbled past an F8 bulge, belayed from a shaky snowflake, and the climb was over. The views were amazing. We'd never before had a clear summit day in the Spires. George bummed a roll of film and shot it all in ten minutes.

"Is there anything you can't see from here?"

"Nothing worthwhile, for sure."

What does it take to make a perfect day in the mountains? You need the sunshine, the route, the mountain, the mountains, the laughing, the joking, and the skiing, but it has to come at the right time, too. Flattop was between the Middle Triple memories of the wind, the cold, the rime on everything, the icy beards, the sleepless nights, the arguments—and the Augustin anticipation: visions of dangerous icefalls, steep couloirs, and huge cornices. Flattop was an island of refuge in the emotional storm—our perfect day in the mountains.

Flattop was also a turning point, marking a new start to the expedition. The next morning we said goodbye to Andy, crammed our gear into the plane, and moved to the Trident Glacier (Glacier #3 on Dave Roberts' map, *Summit*, June 1968). Augustin towered impressively between the left and center forks, rising more than 4000 feet above the glacier. The peak was plastered—more terrifyingly alpine than any other mountain in the Spires. "Well, there's a route." Mike was gazing up at the west face, the biggest in the Kichatnas. We followed his finger through an icefall, jumped three bergschrunds in the central snowfield, wriggled through a narrow slot into the final couloir and sprinted for the summit ridge. Snow and ice all the way.

"What do you think?" asked Mike.

"I'm really scared of it," I answered.

"Well, you wouldn't be scared if you hadn't already decided to do it. You'd just call it suicide and forget about it!"

For three days we vacillated, watching fog play on the glacier and ominous black clouds march past in the afternoons. When our indecision was just about to drive us crazy, we stuffed down one last "carbo load" and took off at midnight. Somehow my eastern ice climbing stories had bought me the lead. We kicked up the avalanche fan and peeked around the corner of a rock buttress. No séracs like this in Huntington Ravine! After milking a little moral support from George and Mike, neither of whom looked as scared as I felt, I charged off up a couloir on the left-hand side of the face, closer and closer to a gargantuan sérac teetering above us. Screwing up my courage, I stepped right up under it but couldn't cross a little crevasse. Mike saved us by finding a way around



PLATE 18

*Photo by Alan Long*

**Mike Graber leading the first pitch of  
the East Buttress of MIDDLE TRIPLE  
PEAK.**



PLATE 19

*Photo by Michael Graber*

**Long jumaring the first pitch of the  
East Buttress of Middle Triple Peak.**

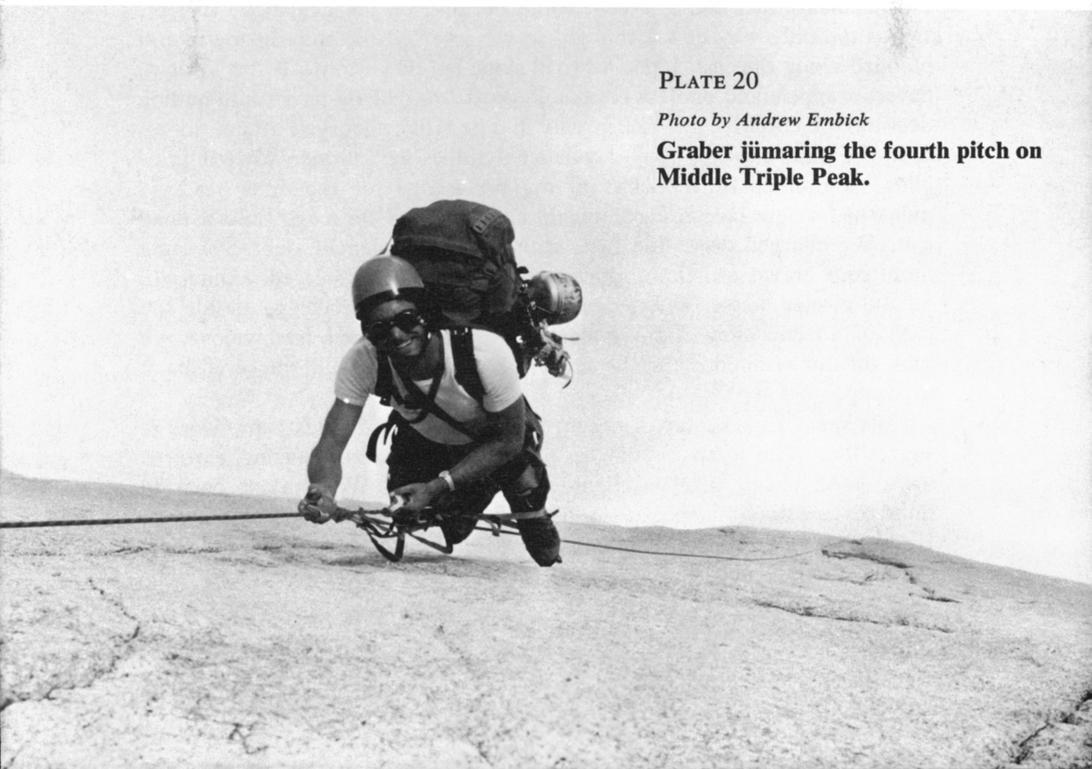


PLATE 20

*Photo by Andrew Embick*

**Graber jumaring the fourth pitch on  
Middle Triple Peak.**

on the rock to the left, and we were past the icefall. Relaxing only slightly, we headed for the next obstacle, a schrund cutting all the way across the face. Water gurgled down the rock buttresses around us, an ominous reminder of the avalanche danger. We climbed a little mountain of debris under the lip of the biggest runnel around and stepped across the gap. A quick shuffle up the side of the chute, a pause to munch some chocolate, and we were off again. George led up an "essence of Mount Hood" snowfield and we passed the last schrund with another high step into an avalanche chute. Mike took over as we entered the steep couloir systems leading to the ridge. Here we were sitting ducks for any ice mushroom or piece of cornice that the mountain might throw at us. Luckily it had gotten bitterly cold. A stiff breeze whipped spin-drift around us, but all the big things stayed in place.

We were making this climb go . . . ticking off the obstacles, putting more and more of the objective dangers behind us. The light of dawn nicked the summit above and spread out in a glowing fan on the glacier below. A bald eagle soared by. The fear and uncertainty we had poured into the climb began to emerge as exultation. On the summit the release was incredible; no longer focused on the next step or the next hold, our perspectives expanded to encompass a fantastic panorama. Concentration gave way to relaxation in the snow and the sunshine, our thoughts drifting beyond the climb and the mountain to gentler places where survival is taken for granted.

We still needed to get off the mountain. We had already ruled out the northeast face as an ascent route because of the avalanche danger. It was the only way down, though, so we reversed the summit tower and plodded along the east ridge. A broad slope led down towards the Trident. Several rappels and endless breakable crust brought us to a route-finding decision. I couldn't remember why I didn't like George's route, so we followed him rapidly down avalanche gullies and under towering ice cliffs. Reminded by the cliffs of my preference for the other route, I unleashed a few sarcastic comments and whipped the party into a dead run. We charged down the face, stumbling in avalanche debris, skirting monstrous crevasses, sliding down steep slopes, and emerged, exhausted, on the glacier below. After devouring our last chocolate bar beside the path of an enormous sérac avalanche we had watched from above, we took off our crampons for the first time in 24 hours and staggered back to camp.

We spent an easy day skiing up Miranda Peak ( P 7370) on George's suggestion. The intensity of the past week dissolved, leaving carefree days, good cheer, and excellent companionship. We worked hard to finish excess food, then had to trade our gluttony for starvation when Hudson was a week late picking us up. Euphoria supplemented our short rations, though, and the hunger pangs were soon forgotten.

PLATE 22

*Photo by Michael Graber*

**Schunk and Embick at the fourth belay on Middle Triple Peak.**

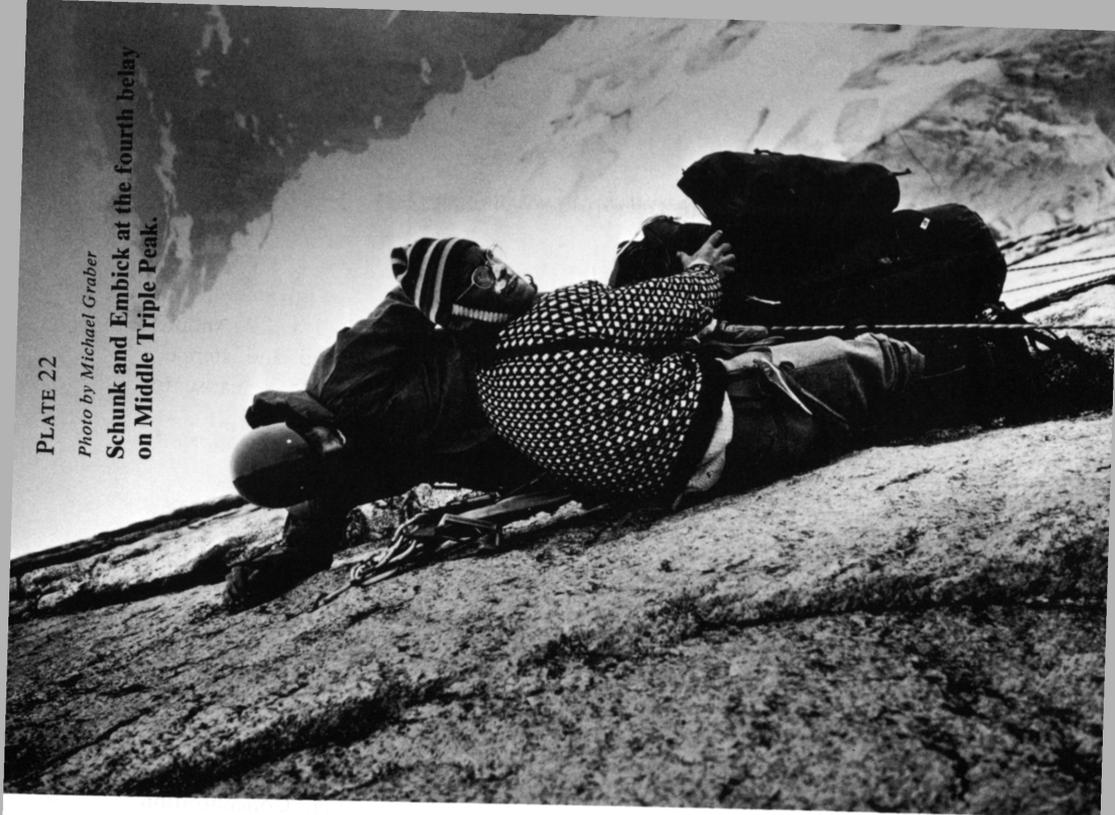


PLATE 21

*Photo by Andrew Embick*

**Long at the first bivouac on the East Buttress of Middle Triple Peak.**



*Summary of Statistics:*

**AREA:** Cathedral Spires, Kichatna Mountains, Alaska.

**ASCENTS:** Middle Triple Peak, 8835 feet, third ascent, first ascent of east buttress; June 2 to June 9, 1977 (whole party).

“Flattop Peak,” 8400+ feet, first ascent, via northeast face and north ridge; June 19, 1977 (Graber, Long, Schunk).

Augustin Peak, 8600+ feet, first ascent, via west face; June 24, 1977 (Graber, Long, Schunk).

P 7370, “Miranda Peak,” first ascent, via south face and east ridge; June 27, 1977 (Graber, Long, Schunk).

**PERSONNEL:** Andrew Embick, Michael Graber, Alan Long, George Schunk.

