

Mount Robson's Emperor Face

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THE real key to climbing the Emperor Face was making a firm decision to try, regardless of the obstacles that nature and our imagination might place in our path. Once we were on the climb and especially when high on the face, the climbing was in one sense easy—because it was within the realm of our capabilities and level of determination, and in another sense as difficult as any climbing we had ever done. For me, while climbing on a hard climb, like the Emperor or the first free ascent of the Diamond, my mind moves into a very special niche that is normally most difficult for me to reach. Instead of feeling that I am pursuing a craft or exercising a particular technique, it becomes possible for me, sometimes, in some very special places to transcend my ego, my learned skills, my hopes, fears and expectations, and simply climb. It is nothing more than “sleeping when tired; eating when hungry.” (Ma-Tsu, died 788) At such times I am able to climb much better than usual, and fortunately can most often muster this frame of mind on serious climbs where it is most needed. For me, the Emperor Face of Mount Robson was such a place.

When I first saw the face, I was totally awed by it. It was the biggest face I had ever seen, much larger than the Eiger and unbelievably, still unclimbed, fully 40 years after the first ascent of the Eiger. I made several unsuccessful attempts to climb the face in 1976 and 1977 and felt determined to give it a good try in the summer of 1978. After an unsuccessful attempt on Mount Logan's Hummingbird Ridge, Terry Stump (more commonly known as Mugs) and I decided to spend all summer if need be in the attempt. Desires were only whetted by our recent failure and the two weeks of rainy weather spent under the face. Finally a day dawned with broken clouds and the promise of clearing weather, and we moved up to a high bivouac on the lower snow slopes of the face. We had already climbed over 3000 feet of easy snow and rock, and had what we guessed was 5000 feet to go. Because the only feasible routes through the lower rock bands are in drainages that immediately start avalanching in any storm, it is essential to move quickly through this section. But it is also necessary to carry a full nailing rack for the increasingly steeper and difficult climbing above. We had 25 pitons for the upper section and

eight days' food to give us the time to deal with whatever difficulties we might find.

At first light the next day, we started third-classing diagonally up and left across several thousand feet of 45° water ice and soon reached the first rock band where we roped and moved up and back right towards the center of the face. The climbing alternated between excellent 60° ice and thin ice running down over steps of rock, mostly vertical and 60 to 100 feet high. The climbing on these sections was the most difficult ice climbing I have ever done, and the protection was limited to an occasional poor knifeblade or tied-off screw. The first day on the face we were able to reach a good bivouac site on a snow rib almost exactly in the center of the face. Besides being a luxurious lying-down bivouac, it was also the high point that Pat Callis and Jim Kanzler had reached in their attempt some years ago. They had reached this point, higher than anyone else, in three days and then retreated off to the side in an epic adventure.

The next day every other pitch was extremely difficult. I led a number of pitches of vertical thin ice mixed with an occasional rock move, and Mugs had the opportunity to climb through an overhanging headwall on loose blocks. We were prepared to start the nailing whenever necessary, but ice runnels kept leading us up the center of the face until we were under the final overhanging headwall, looking for a bivy site in a world of vertical rock and high-angle ice. We chopped two small seats out of a patch of 70° ice, and as we settled down for the night, it started to snow. Within minutes the first powder-snow avalanche poured down over us. It was quite frightening at first, but once I realized that they weren't going to push me off as long as I stayed awake, it all became better, just one more in a long series of "bad bivouacs." The next morning Mugs led up the steep ice to the final headwall, and I set off on a very slow and complex nailing pitch. A row of tied pins, a little vertical ice climbing and then back onto another tied-off knifeblade. Halfway out I lowered off and cleaned the pitch, and once again started on my slow way, cleaning off ice and snow, looking for one more placement. Nuts were useless, and I was thankful for the thousands of pitons I had pounded in the past, making this nailing almost comfortable. At the top of the pitch I ran out of ice and good rock, and set off free climbing for thirty feet of vertical, loose, snow-covered rock with no protection. As I neared the top, one of my crampons slipped off a hold and I quickly mantled onto an axe placed in mush—that caught on something and stayed in long enough to get me to a belay stance. From that point on our minds were mush, as we knew we had done the climb and we grumpily moved up the snow-covered slabs of the North Face. A tunnel in the cornice let us through onto the ridge where we spent the night. The next morning we debated whether or not to go up the ridge to the summit, but as this would have meant crossing over the mountain and spending several more days, we

decided to descend the south face back to our camp, which we reached that day.

What had been vital was to climb the face, and going to the summit was no longer important, probably in part because I had already stood on that summit.

What did seem important was the heights to which we had already pushed ourselves and the freedom we had found there. But this freedom is a transitory thing, and for this reason there is always a next climb, for each one is only a stepping-stone along the path.

"If he is irresistibly driven towards this goal, he must set out on his way again, take the road to the artless art. He must dare to leap into the Origin, so as to live by the Truth and in the Truth, like one who has become one with it. He must become a pupil again, a beginner; conquer the last and steepest stretch of the way, undergo new transformations. If he survives its perils, then is his destiny fulfilled: face to face he beholds the unbroken Truth, the Truth beyond all truths, the formless Origin of origins, the Void which is the All; is absorbed into it and from it emerges reborn."

—Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Mount Robson, Canadian Rockies.

NEW ROUTE: Emperor Face (James Logan, Terry Stump), third week of July, 1978.

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