

# The North Face of Mount Brussels

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DANE WATERMAN AND I had met only a week before beneath the 5000-foot north face of North Twin. Both of us had come to the Canadian Rockies planning to climb that face. In separate attempts, both of us had failed. Now our last chance to climb something satisfying that summer had arrived. Dane would soon embark on a 21-day solo trip, and my flight home to Colorado left Calgary in five days. Holed up in the rain near the Columbia Icefields, we debated objectives.

Dane proposed Mount Brussels, an elegant rock tower in Jasper National Park with only two routes, both hard. Brussels was in one of the few areas of the Rockies Dane had never visited. As a rock-jock on my first trip to Canada, I was eager for anything. Sight unseen, we made the unclimbed north face our goal and urged Dane's wheezing pickup north along the Icefield Parkway.

Thunderheads rumbled as we left the road at four P.M. Though we blitzed the 11-mile approach, it was dusk and time to camp when we reached the 3000-foot scramble that leads to the north face.

That evening we reconnoitered the crossing of Fryatt Creek. Staying dry meant a tightrope walk on a mossy log half submerged in the deep, churning water. Prudence dictated a daylight crossing. We discarded our planned three-A.M. start. A hard rain shower drove us to bed early.

An hour before daybreak we were up and packing under inky, starless skies. At first light we teetered across the log and headed up. Charcoal clouds brooded low overhead. I expected a deluge at any moment.

At timberline the clouds lifted, giving us our first glimpse of the north face. We paused, surprised, and studied it eagerly. The steep upper wall was split by several prominent dihedrals. It looked feasible to reach them via a broad, lower-angled trough on the left side of the face. Access to the trough, however, was barred by a large roof 200 feet off the ground, and the wall beneath the roof was nearly featureless. Our rack—



PLATE 67

Near the top of MOUNT BRUSSELS.



PLATE 66

Photos by Glenn Randall

Waterman on the last F9 pitch on the  
North Face of MOUNT BRUSSELS.

six pins, 15 nuts—made finding a free climb imperative. The face vanished into the murk again. We slogged on up for a closer look.

At the base Dane dug his watch out of his pack and checked the time. Ten A.M.! What an hour to start an unclimbed north wall! I eyed the thick mists and then our “bivy gear”: Dane’s characteristically dilapidated rain pants and my patched Gore-Tex bibs. Still, it wasn’t pouring yet. I began exploring the gray, frigid limestone directly beneath the large roof for a way through the blank section.

Each hold was suspect, and even those that thumped solid were often brittle. I moved with tedious, constant care. My protection pins bottomed and my nuts were behind loose blocks. Only one nut protected me on a F8 section from a 130-foot ground fall. I climbed another 40 feet and the blank section was done. The large roof was 30 feet above. I used both hands on the hammer to drive three dubious pins for the belay.

A clammy mist engulfed us as Dane began an end run around the right side of the roof. A rain drop splashed on the sleeve of my anorak.

“I’ve almost got it,” Dane yelled down after 120 feet. Moments later both feet came flying off the rock as his footholds shattered. Loose blocks held his last protection 10 feet below. “Watch me,” he yelled, feet scraping. I held my breath. He struggled left into a shallow dihedral and sought vainly for protection. The occasional rain drop had become a steady drumbeat on my anorak. I examined the anchor again, hoping Dane had something good in somewhere. Another 30 feet of hard climbing and the pitch eased. Dane found a rare set of good anchors as the shower slowed, then stopped.

More rain looked likely, but neither of us mentioned retreat. Two moderate, zig-zag pitches up the trough’s unreliable rock went by slowly. At the top of the trough we got our first close-up look at the upper dihedrals.

We knew immediately we had a problem. Neither of us felt capable of free-climbing the crackless, overhung corners, and aiding them looked desperate. We began scrambling left in search of a way to continue free-climbing.

Near the left margin of the face we spotted another pair of dihedrals. Climbing them free looked formidable, but at least they contained cracks. We traversed further and discovered that our ledge system continued to the regular route, where a few rappels would allow us to escape. We faced a dilemma.

Already it was four P.M. An immediate retreat would mean a warm bed, a hot supper—and failure. A serious effort to continue would cost us a night out, which would be certainly cold, perhaps wet. A restless breeze was tearing holes in the clouds, but neither of us would yet predict clear skies all night. We watched a sunbeam play for a moment on a peak across the valley, each of us thoughtful.

"I think the climb will go," I said finally, "and I guess I'm willing to pay the price." Dane smiled. The prospect of a bad bivouac didn't seem to faze him at all. "Let's do it," he said.

As I racked up for the next pitch a broad hole in the clouds floated past, giving us a few precious minutes of warmth. The first fifty feet were a delight: solid rock, the first we'd seen, and protection you could tether the Queen Mary to. Then both walls of the corner bulged past vertical. The crack widened to off-width. For ten minutes I tried to jam it, anxious to avoid laybacking the smooth bulge in mountain boots. Finally I realized I had no choice and committed myself. My boots felt like ankle weights. I heaved myself over the last move and yelled down jubilantly to Dane, "That might even be F10!"

The second dihedral looked nearly as formidable as the first. Dane tried it but soon retreated. "I'd really like to lead it," he said, "but it would take me forever." He handed me the rack and I set off. Jamming, bridging, loose blocks—my God, is this climb ever going to relent? Almost out of rope I reached a small ledge and leaned back for a look. The steepest rock ended only 30 feet above.

"We've about got it," I yelled down. The sun appeared again, low over Mount Fryatt. I reveled in the warmth.

Dane ran out the rope on easier ground. We needed a bivouac site urgently now. Twenty feet above his head I reached a ledge with steep rock above. To my right the ledge first narrowed to footholds beneath a bulge, then widened to a comfortable platform. I started toward it.

A large, loose boulder sat just beyond the narrowest part of the ledge. I stretched one foot past it delicately, my body in precarious balance, and discovered a smaller boulder beyond. It looked solid enough to stand on. I tapped it gently with my toe. It began to move. I tried to trap it with my foot, but the larger boulder had come loose too. Together they began to topple off the ledge. Dane was directly below. Desperate, I tried to deflect one, either of them, but they brushed my leg aside like a reed. I shouted too late. The smaller rock caught Dane squarely on the helmet with a crunch like a dropped melon, then battered his shoulders and bounced into the void. I was thankful that the larger missed by inches, or I might have had a body on my hands.

"Don't fall, Glenn, don't fall," Dane moaned, half-conscious. He buried his face in his hands and sagged onto the anchors at his foothold belay. I could not see his face.

"I'm sorry, Dane," I said, but the words seemed empty. I swore bitterly at myself through clenched teeth.

"Give me five minutes," he said. "I'll be OK." I waited silently. The sun vanished below the horizon and I shivered. I dared not risk further rockfall by continuing to the platform. When Dane could belay again I traversed left and up onto a badly sloping shelf. It would have to do.

Leaving Dane to get settled on the shelf, I scrambled up a short way and discovered we were only 100 feet below the summit. The realization brought no joy. I returned to Dane. Hungrily we swallowed supper: a hunk of cheddar, a chocolate bar, a sip of water. The cold deepened.

Toward three A.M. a stiff breeze sprang up. My shivering became constant. Dane lay still, his back turned to favor his bad shoulder. An hour later a glow on the eastern horizon set my hopes alight, but the strange and flickering colors did not foretell sunrise. It was the aurora borealis, the first I had ever seen.

At dawn we headed for the summit. Though Dane's neck and shoulders had stiffened, he could still climb, but with pain. We third-classed the final shattered ridge and hunkered down out of the wind behind the summit knoll. The rising sun was turning the last tattered storm-clouds to gold. To the west the tangled icefields and dazzling summits of the Clemenceau group rose, a five-day approach from any direction. Even weary with cold and hunger I longed to explore them. I had to smile at myself. Was I happy? I did not know. I filled my eyes for the last time and we headed down.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Jasper National Park, Alberta, Canada.

ASCENT: Mount Brussels, 10,370 feet, first ascent of the north face, NCCS IV, F10, August 16, 17, 1979, by Glenn Randall and Dane Waterman.

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