

Bear Mountain's Forgotten Face

ALAN J. KEARNEY

FIVE MILES south of the Canadian border in the North Cascade Mountains rises one of the largest rock walls in the Pacific Northwest. Though Bear Mountain appears as a minor peak on the map, its seldom viewed north face is nearly a mile in width and rises 2500 feet from the glacier at the head of Bear Creek.

On July 14 and 15, 1967 Fred Beckey and Mark Fielding climbed the upper part of the north buttress which they reached from a steep glacier left of the buttress. (*A.A.J.*, 1968, pages 67-72.) In September of 1977 friends and I completed a new route on a large buttress northwest of the Beckey-Fielding route and on that trip I spoke with the mountain softly of plans to return soon. In two-and-a-half days of September, 1980, Bobby Knight and I completed the ascent of the entire north buttress.

We strolled upwards through old growth stands of hemlock and mossy turf which soon gave way to subalpine fir and steep slopes of huckleberry. The Chilliwack River became nothing more than a faint whisper far below. At a col where the broad ridge joined Bear's northwest side we stashed extra food and descended to the route's base, carrying only essentials. As we crossed beneath the buttress of 1977, the awesome apart from the bulk of the face, accentuated by a gully on the west and north buttress gradually came into view. The huge shaft of rock stood a large, glacially carved recess on the east. The sculptor who shaped the mountain did so with proper lighting in mind; with the onset of the sun's rays the form and texture of the rock came to life.

With an ice-hammer and crampons I surmounted several ice bulges, danced across loose blocks of ice choking the moat and delicately climbed upward on the rounded holds of glacially-scoured rock. After gaining a good ledge, I checked Bobby's progress. With his pack, he was moving slowly. On the third toss he grabbed the end of the 7mm haul line and scrambled up the ice and rock with the help of a belay. What I was really belaying was not Bobby but the pack, which we later christened the "pig"; Bobby could climb the pitch without any problem. Before dawn we had

stuffed the large pack with three days' food, a small stove for melting snow, a lightweight bivy tent and the usual hardware. When the overweight, rotund and out-of-shape pig was not getting a free ride, we simply tied our spare line to its snout and persuaded it upwards.

The dihedral loomed upward for 300 feet and was topped by an improbable roof. Quickly I slipped into rock shoes and began stemming my way up. Hands fitted perfectly into a solid crack and methodically I climbed on, placing nuts when necessary. Between my feet the dihedral diminished and I began a fist crack, breathing harder. The crack widened and flared, but I exited to the right on face holds. Contemplating a loose block, I made several aid placements before free-climbing onto a small belay ledge. I knew I was not dreaming now as the wall grew around me and I became part of it. Bobby was up quickly and into the lead in the twinkling of an eye.

Why was Bobby taking so long to set up a belay? Upon arriving at his shaky belay, I saw the problem. We were trapped in an alcove of loose flakes; despite careful handling of the rope, a rock had clobbered the rope, putting a small hole in the sheath. We taped it up to prevent fraying and crossed our fingers. Exploring the right side of the roof, I found only moss-filled seams and no holds. To our left was the only possibility. Flakes stacked like cards led to a chimney and out from the roof. In the fading light I led an awkward layback to a hanging belay. Bobby came across on tension, nudging the pig along. Realizing our route traversed much further to the right, I left a nut and carabiner behind and lowered myself to the tiny ledge, our home for the night. Faint wisps of high cirrus colored by the dying alpenglow indicated a brewing storm. We worried about water. The only source was a large snowpatch halfway up and if there were no drips, we would have to waste time melting snow to fill the five quart bottles. Anxiety and an uncomfortable ledge produced fitful sleep.

Bobby traversed up and right as the warmth of morning activated aching joints. Amid a jumble of blocks and with the help of a pin he finally secured a solid belay. We scrambled across the talus of the snowpatch after several easier pitches. With luck Bobby filled all our bottles in thirty minutes from a good sized drip.

I gazed upward at the slender triangle of the buttress where it merged with the sky. The pedestals of rock resembled a stack of spears all piled in a corner. Now 1400 feet above the glacier, I felt really committed to the climb and at the same time happy about our progress.

A large pedestal rose vertically above a talus-covered ledge. Which way should we push the route? I explored to the right and discovered enormous shattered blocks of granodiorite heaped loosely on debris-strewn ledges. With great care I retraced my moves back to the belay. On the pedestal's left side a perfect dihedral with a hand-and-fist crack shot up for 130 feet. Rock shoes slid nimbly into the crack as hands

twisted and expanded, forming superb jams in the vertical slot. The really good things in life seem to last only an instant and in my excitement the long crack had already ended.

Higher still, cracks and ramps deposited us on a wonderful series of ledges large enough to lie down flat and spread out our gear. The pale orange peaks turned lavender as we sat down like two kids in a tree house to a feast to consume most of our remaining weight.

I thought of Fred Beckey and Mark Fielding thirteen years earlier bivouacking two pitches above where we were. Fred wrote: "A few dozen miles away were the outposts of civilization, and not much farther, the frenzy of freeways and cities. Yet here no man-made sound could be heard or light seen—just a blackness with stars, and the fantasy of a dark wall." *

Sleep ended with angry clouds racing across the jagged tops of Bear, Redoubt and the Twin Spires. Rarely are the high cirrus wrong in what weather they foretell. Nervously we gobbled breakfast from the comfort of our sleeping bags and crammed the pig full.

After leading across face holds and up an awkward hand crack, I finished my pitch on a spacious ledge below the chimney and off-width crack that had given Mark Fielding trouble in 1967. With chocks for protection and good crack technique, Bobby overcame the crux. Near the top of the buttress, I climbed upward over lichen-covered rock to a small stance where the spinelike face was barely twelve feet wide. The exposure was incredible as I peeked into the huge recess on the east and a deep gully on the west.

The summit appeared and disappeared into clouds as fog and sun played hide and seek. Bobby's lead coaxed him up one of the most spectacular sections of the climb. With the delicacy of a small bird walking up the back of some huge monster, he followed a single thin crack for a full rope-length. His dance ended on a stance a stone's throw from the route's end.

The mist was upon us and I walked across a long narrow ledge and up to a large step just below the last eighty feet of the buttress. All too soon it was over. An anticlimactic lead on moderate rock left us standing on the top of the buttress with an easy walk to talus slopes. "Time to wake up," I say to myself. "This dream has ended and it is time to chase after another one."

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: North Cascade Mountains, Washington.

NEW ROUTE: Bear Mountain, 7942 feet, via the entire North Buttress, September 9 to 11, 1980 (Alan J. Kearney, Robert Knight).

* Quoted with permission from *The Challenge of the North Cascades* by Fred Beckey, Seattle: The Mountaineers.