Clemenceau's Northeast Arête

GRAY THOMPSON

MOUNT CLEMENCEAU is the fourth highest peak in the Canadian Rockies. Like Mount Robson, it is a massive and complex peak, isolated from neighboring summits on all sides by low-elevation drainages and glaciers. Unlike Robson, it is visible from no highway, rarely climbed, and a four- to five-day approach from the nearest roadhead. From all directions, Clemenceau is one of the most imposing and majestic peaks of the Rockies. Yet until this summer it had been climbed only by two routes that thread up the complex and challenging, although not difficult, west face.

On the northeast side of the mountain, like the right arm of a throne, is a curving arête which descends steeply from the summit for 2000 vertical feet eastward. It then turns abruptly to the north to continue downward at a lesser angle for another 5000 feet where the ridge ends in a steep limestone wall just above Clemencau Creek. This wall forms the lowest defense of the east side of Clemenceau. It is breached in only a few places by small drainages cut by meltwater from the snowfields and glaciers above. The lower 2500 feet of the arête are rocky as only the Canadian Rockies are: tan, rust and black fossiliferous and fissile limestone ledges, cliffs and scree slopes. The upper 4500 feet, however, are of snow and ice; séracs, double cornices, gargoyles. Single cornices, thirty and forty feet thick and layered with the snow and wind of decades, overhang the steep slope of the north face by ten and twenty feet. The upper eastward-trending portion of the arête consists almost entirely of a combination of cornices which mostly overhang the north face, and are of great steepness on the opposite windward side. In both scale and detail, this northeast arête resembles the great ridges of Robson.

I first learned of the northeast arête when Fred Beckey called one evening during the winter of 1974 to propose an attempt. By the time we got together on the Clemenceau Glacier in late July of the following summer, we had a strong party. Fred, John Rupley, Clark Gerhardt and Greg Markov had flown in by chopper from Mica Creek. Dougal McCarty,

Ed Flood and I made a six-day approach on foot, with trails for only the first half day. The approach itself was a major effort. The first obstacle was the crossing of the Athabasca River, too high to ford, two hundred feet wide and foaming with white water. After several false starts, Dougal, clad only in his boots and a swami belt to which he had clipped one end of a rope, made a running start down the rocky bank, slipped and fell into the river. The nearly freezing water gave him the energy to thrash across, washing only a few hundred feet downstream before he got his footing in quieter water near the opposite bank. We had run downstream even with him holding the other end of the rope, so now we had a rope across the river. Rigging a second rope, we floated our packs, gear and clothes across in garbage bags. By then, all three of us were standing stark naked save for boots and swami belts. I had visions of a party of girl scouts on a day outing, suddenly appearing. The crossing took us a good part of two days.

The second part of the approach carried us two days up the Chaba River, which joins the Athabasca at the crossing. At first we tried to stay dry, but that involved bushwhacking in the dense woods. Finally, we began wading in the Chaba, sometimes up to our waists, and walking on the flower-covered gravel bars characteristic of braided proglacial streams the world over. This quickened our progress tremendously.

At the headwaters of the Chaba River, we climbed onto the Chaba Glacier and spent a day climbing northward to its highest point, where we left the Chaba/Athabasca drainage by climbing to a ten-thousand-foot col. The col separates the Arctic-headed Athabasca system from the Pacific-flowing Clemenceau Creek/Wood River/Columbia River system. In perfect weather from the col we had a full view of Clemenceau and the northeast arête. The summit of Clemenceau was five miles away, but Clemenceau Glacier and Clemenceau Creek 5000 feet below lay between us and the peak. Two days early for the rendez-vous with Fred and company and charmed by the wildness of our surroundings, we stayed up there until we heard the chopper come in on time, then tumbled down for the rendez-vous on the glacier.

The next day, all seven of us climbed through one of the small drainage breaches in the lowest part of the east wall of Clemenceau, and up to a very large flower-covered alp below the northeast arête. The following day, we left the alp by headlamp and climbed a 1500-foot ice face which led us directly to the beginning of the ice-and-snow portion of the arête. The lower part of the ridge was easy travelling. By mid-afternoon, we were about 500 vertical feet and probably a quarter of a mile from the top, each thinking that we had it made and feeling good about doing such an elegant route so quickly.

The good weather had continued and the sun had been out since early morning. Greg led quickly up and disappeared around a corner onto a long southeast-facing slope, staying away from the cornices that overhang

the north face. We had been moving very rapidly, but soon the rope stopped paying out. The slope wasn't all that steep above. With Clark still belaying Greg from where we stood, Fred followed Greg's footsteps around the corner to see what the holdup was. Soon Fred's rope stopped, and he brought Rupley up. Then I went up, and finally Dougal came leaving Ed and Clark below belaying us. No one up there was saying anything, but we were all probing with our axes and picking up handfuls of snow and feeling it, trying to look calm but knowledgeable. Somebody finally said, "This stuff looks real crummy!" The rest of us chorused, "Yeah. Just what I was thinking." We were so impressed that all of us had independently concluded that conditions had become dangerous that we immediately decided to retreat. On our return down the ridge to the alp a large section of cornice collapsed in front of us and we started several small to medium snowslides confirming the validity of our decision to retreat.

In the following few days, we all hiked around to the west side of Clemenceau and climbed it by the normal route. From the top, we looked down and could see how close we had been. As it turned out, the major difficulties had been ahead of us.

Four years later, in 1978, I returned with Tony Qamar and Paul Jensen to try the ridge again. We reasoned that if we had bivouacked on the first attempt when the snow became soft, it would have set up at night and we could have cruised on to the summit easily. That was our plan this time, but ten straight days of rain and snow got us no further than the col between the Chaba and Clemenceau.

This past summer, with enough intervening time to forget the misery of the previous trip, Paul and I decided to try it again. Our friends from previous trips had other commitments, but we talked Tobin Kelley, Jim Wilson and my partner from years past, Denny Eberl, into it with stories of the beautiful approach and elegant ridge.

Traveling as light as possible with 50 to 70 pounds each, and making full use of our experience of the approach from past trips, we made a fast trip in. We were camped on the alp beneath the arête on the fourth night. The rapid approach had been tiring, but the good weather was holding. Early the following morning, by headlamp we began the ice face. It was in poor shape. Heavy snows of the previous week had only partly avalanched, leaving a mess of snow runnels and ice patches. Tobin had to chop laboriously through a big cornice at the top of the face because I had carefully measured out my pitches so that the last one would be his. We were all on the ridge fairly early in spite of the difficulties on the face. The snow on the arête was in good shape. We shortened the ropes and hurried up the lower part of the ridge, trying to get as high as possible before the sun softened the snow.

By mid-afternoon, we were at the high point of the earlier try. The snow was becoming poor and avalanche probability increasing as we

topped a steep section to find a large, flat, protected area on the otherwise exposed ridge. It was in the right place and on schedule. We bivied there. As the sun set, it quickly became cold; just what we needed for good conditions the next morning.

It was well below freezing and past daybreak when we began climbing again. The difficulties produced by the gargoyles, cornices and increasing steepness slowed us considerably relative to the day before. Although it had frozen during the night, the deep snow was not well consolidated nor completely stable. All five of us roped together on three full ropes for added safety. Coming up last after Paul had led a hard pitch, I rounded a corner to look up in horror at all four of them laughing and eating candy bars sitting on top of a 25-foot-thick cornice that overhung the north face by at least twenty feet. Not having the nerve to join the party, I waited below grumping and grousing until Denny led off and we got the whole rope stretched out again.

Imagine a knife-edged snow ridge with a fifteen-foot vertical step on the edge of a cornice overhanging the north face. Denny led this with extreme delicacy, hand-packing each step until it seemed solid enough to stand on. With all five together on three ropes, I thought of Tom Patey's definition of a rope as a device "that guarantees that no man falls alone." Denny topped the vertical section and moved quickly out of sight on a lower-angle section. Then the rope stopped and nothing happened for ten minutes. Impatiently I arranged a prusik to keep a snug rope between us, and climbed the crumbling vertical section to see what the delay was. Denny was perched in the middle of a steep, unstable slope on the windward side of a cornice. Reacting more to the difficulty and danger of the vertical section he had just finished than to the pitch he was on, he had been struck by indecision. A low-angle shelf on the ridge just below the summit was only fifty feet away. After a short intense discussion, we agreed that the best thing was for him to speed over to the shelf as quickly as possible. He arrived in a couple of minutes. As I was about to follow, I realized that I had fouled the ropes at the screw at the bottom of the vertical pitch. Chagrined and to the deserved laughter of Tobin, Paul and Jim, I downclimbed the section, rearranged the ropes, and then went back up, ending with frazzled nerves.

Shortly we were on top. It was early afternoon. The weather had held for six days. It took us five more days to descend and retrace our track back to the roadhead at Sunwapta Falls.

If Clemenceau were near a road, the northeast arête would probably have been climbed at the same time the ridges of Robson were done. In a sense, it is a great route of a past era.

In recent years it has become fashionable to use helicopters to replace hard multi-day approaches. Use of such aid is probably necessary and justified when the object is a big wall requiring hundreds of pounds of gear that simply couldn't be humped in by climbers and friends. However,

it seems that more often choppers are used to increase convenience and comfort, to eliminate "unpleasant" approaches, and to speed up the entire process so that one can do more climbs in a season. I suggest that the use of a chopper or similar mechanical equipment to carry one beyond a roadhead in situations where it is a matter of ease, speed or convenience rather than necessity is no different in kind from using pins and étriers to get up a F7 rock pitch. Climbs achieved by such means should be viewed in similar light by those concerned with ethics of climbing.

The climb of Clemenceau's northeast arête demonstrates that a climb of substantial difficulty in a remote place can be done nicely in traditional manner without artificial aids on the approach. The approach becomes an integral and pleasant part of the entire trip. Climbing is essentially a matter of human rather than mechanical effort and achievement. This observation should apply to approaches as well as to the ascent itself.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Canadian Rockies.

NEW ROUTE: Northeast Ridge of Mount Clemenceau, new route, Grade V, August 13, 1980.

PERSONNEL: Dennis Eberl, Paul Jensen, Tobin Kelley, Jim Wilson, Gray Thompson.