Mount Thor: Direct West Face

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Mount Thor is located 16 miles above the Arctic Circle in the Weasel Valley on Baffin Island. Our goal was to climb the 4,500-foot west face, tackling the 1,600-foot overhanging headwall.

Previous attempts on Mount Thor's west face had ended at the base of the headwall. In 1979, a large Japanese expedition attempted the face, but retreated after the death of a climber. Later that summer, after 32 days on the face, three American climbers were driven from the wall by winds in excess of 100 miles per hour. In 1984, a second Japanese team reached the summit via the west face and north ridge. Their climb avoided the headwall, but unfortunately ended with the tragic death of a climber during a stream crossing.

John Bagley, Tom Bepler, Earl Redfern and I elected to attempt the climb in May and June, enabling us to transport our gear by native Inuit packers on snowmobiles and to avoid the fierce winds that rake the area in July and August. We had provisions for 28 days on the face, but the climb took us 33 days after leaving our fixed lines. The rock was crumbly for the entire route, making nailing insecure. Storms, rockfall, and severe cold plagued the lower portion of the face, as did the atrocious hauling conditions. Ten of the twelve pitches on the headwall were direct aid, and seven of those were A4.

I arrived on Baffin Island five days before the rest of the team to establish our Base Camp. The day after the other climbers arrived, we began to carry loads up the first 1000 feet of steep Class-4 snow. The next 2000 feet of the face were vertical, and the last 1500 feet had an average angle of 105°. We climbed the face in increments of 600 feet, with the leaders stretching out our two 600-foot Blue Water static lines. One rope served as a haul line, the other a guide rope for the hauling system and a fixed line for jümaring. We hauled approximately 1000 pounds of food and gear in multiple smaller loads.

The first 600 feet of our route involved climbing a large right-facing dihedral that ended on a snowy platform that we named the First Pedestal. The rock here was fairly sound, but short sections of snow and ice provided great difficulty.

The rockfall determined our tactics for the first 2000 feet. Atop the pedestal, a basketball sized rock struck Earl and knocked him to the ground; his MSR
West Face of MOUNT THOR.

BB = Bivouac at Base of Wall;
P = First Pedestal; FR = First Bivouac; HB = Heart Bivouac;
MLB = Main Ledge Bivouac;
FHB = First Headwall Bivouac;
SHB = Second Headwall Bivouac; --- = Japanese Line.
On the West Face of MOUNT THOR.
helmet saved his life. This incident showed the seriousness of our position. The rocks came from a giant ledge 2000 feet up the vertical face. The rubble-strewn ledge was nearly 100 feet wide in places and was downsloping in its entire length. As snow melted on the ledge, it carried rocks down the face. John likened climbing this section on the wall to his combat experiences, except that here you couldn’t run.

We couldn’t place a camp on this section of the wall, so we decided to use the ledge at the 900-foot level, climbing from the pedestal to one-third of the way up the vertical section of the face. We led this section by bat-hooking in the downsloping holes, jamming copperheads in them and making various hook, RURP, and rivet placements. Two of the three bolt ladders were solid A4. For the most part, this 300-foot section was crackless crumbly rock that the Japanese had bolted. These were the only bolt ladders on the face. Someone had removed most of the bolts from the first two pitches, leaving useless downsloping metric holes. On my lead through this section, I tested one suspect bolt. When I twisted it with my fingers, it came out and shattered the surrounding rock. I am still amazed that this piece ever held body weight.

It was now the second week of May and daylight for 24 hours a day. Whenever possible, we climbed in the cooler evening hours when there was less falling rock and ice. Climbing in shifts of 24 hours or more, we were frequently at the edge of our physical limitations.

On May 20, we committed ourselves to the wall. Tom and John ascended to the ledge at the 900-foot level. The weather soon deteriorated into rain for the next two days. Finally, under leaden skies, Earl and I left Base Camp to assist in hauling. As the weather warmed, the rockfall increased alarmingly, transforming the base of the wall into a battleground with dozens of impact craters.

Our first haul was an epic. The bags became stuck about halfway up to the ledge and Earl and I were unable to free the load from below. Earl volunteered to go up to free the bags and ride them to the ledge. Fortunately, he succeeded and after 48 hours, we were united on the ledge.

Above the ledge, our route deviated from the Japanese line for four pitches. We climbed a system of cracks and ramps leading off the ledge which kept us out of the worst rockfall. This section was mostly easy free climbing with one section of 5.10 which Earl led.

We decided to place our bivouac under a dark overhanging bulge we dubbed The Heart. Again, Tom and John ascended to do the hauling. This time, it was necessary to haul diagonally for 600 feet. During the first haul, the wall tent became stuck in a chimney and was difficult to free. Properly tensioned with lighter loads, the system began functioning. Over 24 hours later, they finished the job.

I jumared to our next bivy. This time I was greeted by the comforting sight of our wall tent. We had all worked on the design and building of the tent, and given the very short time we had to test it, it functioned remarkably well, keeping us warm and dry.
We spent several days at the Heart waiting out a series of storms. We reached the Main Ledge after two forays from our tent, climbing at times in foul conditions. The ghostly remains of past Japanese attempts; fixed lines and sacks of gear hammered by rockfall gave this section an eerie surrealistic feeling.

We prepared to move our tent again. Earl and John hauled while Tom and I dismantled the bivouac. As I began my ascent to the ledge, snow began to fall heavily. As snow started avalanching down the wall, Tom’s position in the dihedral below became serious as he was in an avalanche chute. He erected the wall tent and took shelter in the upper deck. The climbers on the ledge had a hot meal and then resumed hauling. While eating, the lines became tangled and frozen in the wind. We had to cut the lines loose and untangle the mess on the ledge. Finally, we left a care package of hot food and water on a ledge near Tom and retreated to the shelter of some boulders for some much needed sleep. We awoke to find that Tom had managed to reach the rope. We finished the hauling and were reunited after 48 hours. We then began organizing for the headwall.

Earl led the next three pitches on an A4 expanding flake he named the Potato Chip Flake. The section to our first bivy was consistently difficult. After 20 days of climbing, we were nearing our goal. This is what we had come to climb. However, we were running very low on food and our ropes had taken quite a beating.

I belayed Tom on the first pitch above our bivouac from the warmth of my sleeping bag. Our goal was to reach a pair of ceilings about 500 feet above us. Tom led this by linking a series of loose flakes together, eventually joining a crack system that was just as loose. I led the next pitch which was a giant slab occasionally broken by flakes and knifeblade cracks. I made six hook moves and placed two rivets, then moved to tied-off knifeblades, free climbing, more hooks, blades, and then an A3 expanding flake—165 feet of scary, airy, and extremely enjoyable climbing. Tom was eager to lead the next pitch which was an A2 crack that reached to the first of the giant ceilings. It was one of the most spectacular leads of the climb. I cleaned the pitch in the setting sun’s golden rays, after which we descended to the tent for some badly needed sleep.

John led a short but difficult pitch to the site of our next bivouac. We had only three more pitches to the summit and were all very excited. We had just made radio contact with the Parks Canada wardens who could see our bright red tent closing in on the summit. Earl led the first pitch above the bivy—thin nailing leading to a flaring crack. Tom led the next pitch, a combination of free and aid.

One more pitch remained to the summit—a giant slab. Although it was steep and poorly protected, it could be climbed free. As Earl was about to climb, he removed his outer boots and climbed in his inner boots. Tom began to clean the pitch, but a large rock dislodged and landed in his lap, causing him to fall. He wasn’t seriously injured, but his legs were cut through the many layers of clothing. I was the last to leave the bivouac and as I jumared to the summit, I saw the expectant faces. The rope that I was on was a mass of knots and abrasions. Casting its last stone, Mount Thor sent an egg-sized rock whizzing by my ear. I then climbed to the summit.
Climbing on MOUNT THOR's West Face.
The vista from the summit was beautiful, with miles of glaciers and jagged peaks stretching northwards as far as we could see. Marring this wonderful moment was our concern about Tom’s injury. He was able to hike out and, true to form, carried one of the heaviest loads to Base Camp. With loads of almost 100 pounds each, we made the 24-hour trip down the talus glacier to our camp. Having eaten our last meal on the summit, we had only soups to sustain us for the 30-mile hike to Pangnirtung. Six days after reaching the summit, we arrived. We were all happy with the climb and were soon on the plane with a drink in our hands.

Summary of Statistics:

**Area**: Cumberland Peninsula, Baffin Island, Canada.

**New Route**: Mount Thor, 1675 meters, 5495 feet, via the Direct West Face, May 19 to June 21, 1985; summit reached on June 21, 1985.

**Personnel**: John Bagley, Tom Bepler, Eric Brand, Earl Redfern.