

# North Pillar of North Twin

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ARM LIMESTONE . . . Fires smearing on small rugosities . . . hands sunk into a perfect over-vertical crack . . . pleasant evenings spent brewing up on ledges that are just big enough to sleep on . . . and walking across the icefields in a storm that at least had the decency to wait until we were off the face. There are the memories we have of what is one of the biggest alpine rock climbs in Canada, the North Pillar of North Twin.

It was in 1982 that I first saw this face, during an attempt on the Lowe-Jones route. In spite of our lack of success on this occasion, I did get the opportunity to look across at the impressive pillar that rears up the right-centre of the wall. Summers came and went. I was on Everest in 1983 and George Lowe and I had ample opportunity to discuss last great problems in the Rockies. He of course knew of this line, and to my contention that I had a claim to it as I had been watching it for over a year, he replied: "Well, Chees, I've been watching it for ten!" Logic like that I couldn't argue with!!

During spring and summer of 1984 the Canucks were safely over in Pakistan, so George and Alex Lowe went in to give it a go. Luckily (!) the weather was atrocious and they were unable to get started. On hearing of the attempt I had to concede that if I didn't get it first, there was no one who deserved it more than George.

Finally, one year later, it seemed things were coming together for an attempt—Barry Blanchard and I were both in Canada for the summer, and made plans to go in to the Columbia Icefields in July. As the summer wore on and the weather remained warm we figured the face was getting in good condition. Meanwhile we both did a tremendous amount of rock climbing—Barry in his profession of mountain guide, I on weekends and evenings after work.

At last we were hiking in over Woolley Shoulder, cookin' is more the word as we raced up the scree in anticipation to check out the condition of the wall. Using binoculars from the col it was possible to see that generally the route was dry and free of snow. We could make out cracks on the lower two bands, and a slight break up the outside of the final buttress leading to a ledge system about two rope-lengths from the top. This was going to be the big unknown. Could we get from here up the final section to easy ground? It would be an impressive and expensive descent if we could not!

Dropping down to the Little Alberta Hut we received a shock. Two climbers from Seattle were in the valley, their objective North Twin, North Face. Could word of this route and our intentions have leaked out? Or were they in to try the long awaited second ascent of the Jones-Lowe? We packed quickly and rushed down the meadows in pursuit, continually seeing little dots moving on the glacier or on the wall itself. Finally, relief when we spotted what was undoubtedly they on the first few pitches of the 1974 route. At a more leisurely pace we continued down the slope and crossed on to the glacier.

Camped that night on a sandy beach next to a glacial tarn, we tried to sleep in spite of the crash of collapsing séracs on Stutfield. The face itself released a few rocks and I wondered if maybe it wasn't a bit too warm. We did resolve to at least try the first band in the morning and see what conditions were really like. I knew if we made it up the first few pitches, we would most likely go for it, and if not, we would at least have an idea of the type of climbing the route had to offer.

It wasn't long after being beeped into wakefulness that I was jamming and stemming my way up a perfect limestone crack. It was hard to tell where it fitted into the 5.10 system as the walls were wet and there was a decided lack of protection. This was the first of many times I regretted our decision to leave the #4 Friend behind! Two more pitches at the same standard and we were on top of the band. Unfortunately the sun was by now hitting the top slopes, and the buzzing from falling debris was getting to be more constant. In the corner the steepness had protected us well, now that we were on to easy ground we both felt extremely exposed. I rationalized that if we ran across the snowfield to the protection of the next band we would be fairly safe for a while, and luckily Barry agreed to the plan. In spite of some scary moments we managed to move quickly into the shelter of overhangs for a well earned breather. Still dodging the missiles we traversed left to and across a steep, wet and fearsome gully on the right edge of the pillar we intended to climb. It seemed to be a natural funnel for everything that came off the face, and we sprinted across the black snow to the shelter of the far wall.

A few pitches up the rock and we arrived at a small ledge that, considering the time of day, we decided to make home for the night. As we brewed and shifted rocks to make it somewhat comfortable, we noticed the rockfall seemed worse to our left where the other route went. It was therefore a relief to establish voice contact with the others; incredible that this face which rarely sees an attempt could have two parties on it at the same time. Philosophizing about the beauty and remoteness of our situation, and reminiscing of climbs gone by and planning future trips, we finally dozed off to the cacophony of falling ice coming off the Stutfield séracs.

A surprise next morning when we spotted a tent pitched on the glacier. Not another group in to attempt this face! Slowly we came to the realization that it must be our unknown companions from the other route—rockfall or perhaps injury had driven them off the wall. The situation suddenly seemed even more remote as we watched them pick their way slowly down the boulder-strewn

PLATE 30

*Photo by Urs Kallen*

**North Face of NORTH TWIN. Lowe-Jones route on left and Cheesmond-Blanchard route on right.**



PLATE 31

*Photo by David Cheesmond*

**Barry Blanchard at the base of the  
Second Band on NORTH TWIN.**





glacier on their way back to Woolley Shoulder—tonight they would be back in the fleshpots of Jasper! Our plan, optimistic as it was, meant we had no hope of joining them in under a week.

With perfect weather we made good progress up the pillar on the second day. Pitches meld into pitches, but there is one jam-crack that sticks in my mind. Straight up for two long pitches, with runners at about fifty feet spacing, and the climbing consistently in the hard 5.10 bracket. It confirmed the feeling of how serious a fall would be up here; luckily the mountain gods were in a benevolent mood and we passed unscathed.

Our second night was spent below the upper icefield, with the headwall looming over us and looking absolutely unclimbable in the late evening sun. We could just begin to see onto the icecap, and the rockfall had diminished to only an odd whirr every now and again, as rocks originating from the summit slopes passed over our heads a long way out. Over to the west the sky was pink above the Clemenceau Group, and ranges of peaks stretched away into British Columbia. There is an incredible amount out there that we never get to see.

Due to his expertise on ice, Barry went ahead across the second icefield. About 400 feet long at 60°, and pock marked with imbedded rocks, we were relieved to be across before the sun hit the face. After this it was once more rock shoe time, as hard pitches followed one another in almost monotonous regularity. We were into the main break in the upper pillar, and the rock was some of the best either of us had seen on limestone. Even though it was a serious place to be, we relaxed enough to enjoy gymnastic rock climbing in one of the wildest places.

We must have relaxed too much at one point, when the main belay popped while Barry was in the middle of jugging a pitch. I was sent flying for five or six feet head first down the face until the back-up belay caught, and the 3000 feet to the glacier etched themselves clearly in my brain! With considerably more care we continued, cursing yet again the decision to leave the larger nuts behind.

Later that day, as we looked around from yet another hanging belay in the evening light, we began to worry about the lack of anywhere suitable to spend the night. Back at the highway we had been only too pleased to dispense with hammocks in an attempt to get our packs down to a semi-reasonable size. Now I wondered how wise a decision that was going to be. What was of equal concern was the mist now swirling around us, starting to wet both the rock and us, and making the thought of a bivy standing in slings very unappealing. It being six P.M. we decided to do two more pitches, and then if nothing turned up begin the job of rigging a safe variety of pieces to stand around in for the night. One hour later Barry led up and around a bulge and started uncontrollable whooping at the top of his voice. I understood why when I jugged into the mouth of a tiny cave sitting in the midst of this blank wall. Big enough to lie down in, and absolutely protected from flying objects, this was definitely a remarkable place to sleep. After some digging of ice from the floor we were even able to pitch our small tent inside. I think it rained that night, but in the morning when we emerged the sun was once again shining on the Twin.

Back on the rock a short traverse returned us to the main break. The face here was steep to overhanging, and it was only due to large holds and a perfect crack that we could continue free. Four pitches of continuously difficult climbing, and a short tension traverse, brought us to a split in the break. The right crack I thought went higher, but by leaning out I could see roofs and more roofs which would almost certainly require extensive aid. So far the climb was mostly free, and we wanted if possible to keep it that way. I therefore bridged up and left, with strenuous climbing leading up to and through a small overhang to a continuation of the crack in the face above. With failing arms and shaking legs it was just possible to power up and exit left onto a fair sized ledge. When Barry joined me, we pulled out our photo of the wall, and thought we could make out the ledge as a thin horizontal line. More importantly it looked as if we were nearing the top of the headwall and it seemed there might be another crack running up from the left edge of the ledge.

Excited at the prospect of getting onto easier ground Barry rushed across and swarmed up the crack, which turned into an ice-filled chimney. With some chopping and cursing we soon emerged onto a better ledge, and continued to the top of a huge pinnacle attached improbably to the wall. From the minute ledge on its top the central bowl fell away in a few thousand feet of overhanging rock, while to the right the headwall continued up vertical or more for at least two rope-lengths. Straight above, the rock was blank, the only hope lay in a thin flake running up on the right. Already cramped from a long day of leading, jugging and hauling, I fixed the rope and rappelled to Barry's stance. We soon had a small area fashioned, and with our feet hanging out over the edge we lay in our bags and contemplated the awesome position we were in. I think we both knew how difficult, dangerous, expensive, and perhaps impossible retreat would be from here. I was hopeful the flake would go, but if it didn't there was a distinct lack of alternatives. To add to our concern there were once more threatening storm clouds moving in over Alberta, and during the night sporadic squalls passed through and wet us. We both awoke from our troubled dreams at one point, when a huge slide of rock poured down the face to our left, with sparks lighting up the night and a terrible crashing and rumbling as tons of limestone tumbled past following gravity to the glacier. We were shocked and stunned by our smallness in such a vast and powerful environment.

The next day a perfect finger crack led up and out across the top of the headwall, with thousands of feet of limestone falling away on both sides. Thankfully, the face kicked back one pitch higher and we raced over easy ground to the summit ridge. All that was left was the climb over the Twins Tower, the walk across Stutfield and the descent back into Habel Creek.

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Forty-eight hours later I stumbled behind Barry as he forded the Sunwapta in the late evening. Cloud level was down to the road. The storm that had raged around us on our last day on the wall, the same storm that had chased us across

the icecap like small birds lost in the wind, that storm was still raging in the mountains. Glad to be out of it, but basking in the reflection of our sunny days we had been lucky enough to enjoy up there, we were truly happy.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Columbia Icefields Group, Canadian Rockies.

NEW ROUTE: North Twin via the North Pillar, July 31 to August 5, 1985 (Barry Blanchard, David Cheesmond).

PLATE 32

*Photo by Barry Blanchard*

**David Cheesmond leading on the  
First Band on the North Pillar of  
NORTH TWIN.**

