

The Tusk

GARY SPEER

I WAS PSYCHED. The loose holds, a slippery wet gully, and rockfall had taken its toll. How did Paul lead this thing? It wasn't very hard, maybe 5.7, but it was nasty—loose and wet. It was here that Paul took a twenty-foot leader fall on a bolt left by a previous party.

I reached for the only decent-looking hold with my left hand. In horror, I watched a melon-sized rock rip loose and crash onto my thigh. I cursed at top volume. Paul asked if I was all right.

It hurt, but it was nothing worse than a bruise. Hurriedly, I clipped the haul rope into Paul's pack, and thrashed my way to the top of what we were calling Elephant Gully.

Once out, I breathed a sigh of relief and began hauling the pack. I'd pulled in about 30 feet when the rope went slack and I heard a crashing sound below: the pack was gone. I instantly was flooded with guilt and self-anger. In my fear-induced haste, I had clipped the haul rope into the accessory straps—not the stronger shoulder straps. I told Paul what had happened and apologized profusely. Not only was the day's climbing at an end, but also, I suspected, was Paul's camera and binoculars which were in the pack.

Paul was forgiving. I was hoping that the Tusk would be forgiving on a second attempt. I had visions of being "gored" by this giant horn of rock.

We fixed a rope to a bolt near the top of Elephant Gully and rappelled the route. Down-climbing the 50° couloir was as nerve-racking as the loose rock had been in the gully. Having left crampons and ice-axes near the bottom of the Tusk, we had planned the day as only a "reconnaissance." Having turned the day into a full-scale attempt, we now yearned for the security of an ice-axe.

At the bottom of the couloir I looked up at the route. At the top of the couloir is a jagged finger of a rock, pointing savagely at the Alaskan sky. At the moment, it struck me as signaling a particularly obscene gesture.

The Tusk had certainly given it to other parties. It was first attempted in 1971 by a strong team led by Alaskan Steve Hackett. We had seen a "note-bottle" stashed at what Hackett termed "Disappointment Col" at the top of Elephant Gully. They were stopped cold by a blank headwall on what we called Walrus Buttress. We had a good look at it that first day, and it looked as if it was going to be bolts and thin placements in flared cracks. In short, it looked slow.

When I interviewed Fred Beckey for a profile last year, I ran across a story about the Tusk in the book *World Climbing*. Beckey, Craig Martinson and Eric

PLATE 32

Photo by Robert Smith

The TUSK from the Northeast. The route ascended the right couloir to the upper col and then the left skyline.



Bjørnstad in 1977 hadn't succeeded, yet it was easy to see why they wanted to climb this remote fang of rock: it looked like something out of Patagonia. Though not nearly as high as Fitz Roy, the Tusk bore obvious resemblance to that or perhaps Bugaboo Spire. When I confronted Beckey with questions about this prize, he reluctantly admitted that it had never been climbed.

I soon found that there were good reasons for failure. The rock was bad. Beckey had described it as "the worst rock I've been on in twenty years." Hackett's party made the same comments.

Bjørnstad told me that at one point a ledge had broken loose, and a rock "the size of a TV set" had tumbled down, nearly hitting him. Both he and Beckey had been hit by rockfall, but weren't injured. When I pressed Bjørnstad about why they hadn't at least tried to continue, Bjørnstad confided that the party was "pretty psyched out" by loose holds and deadly rockfall.

Nonetheless, I saw the Tusk as an irresistible challenge. Besides that, the rock didn't *look* all that bad in the photos. Maybe, I optimistically told myself, there is another route.

By far the most impressive alpine challenge in the area is the west face of the Tusk. Rising vertically some 2500 feet, it will someday give fine Grade V or VI routes on Yosemite-like granite. Numerous crack systems tempted us, but the summit—by whatever route—was our goal and the south arête appeared most feasible. And our first attempt had failed.

Paul and I returned to our Base Camp on the west side of the Tusk. Since this trip had the added company of my wife it was a pleasure I'd never experienced on longer expeditions. Far from loved ones, I often developed a hard shell (or so I've been told) that wasn't easily cracked by homesickness. Though she is a capable climber, we felt it was best for Jennifer to stay at Base with our CB radio and do the thinking for us in case the unthinkable happened. I related the events of the day to her as the evening sun lit up the great west wall of the Tusk.

The next day—the summer solstice—we awoke to another beautiful sunny sky. We ate a quick breakfast and were off at 6:30 A.M. Paul's pack was undamaged when we found it in the moat of the couloir, some 800 feet below where I'd dropped it. His camera, binoculars, and light meter, however, were a total loss. It showed me how quickly things can go wrong when fear gets the upper hand.

Controlling fear was foremost on my mind as we hiked around to the east couloir—the start of our route. We had considered other possibilities while studying the aerial photos taken by Bob Smith of the Hackett party. From the comfort of a living room chair, it's easy to draw ambitious lines of possible routes up huge walls of granite. But when you arrive on the scene, the lines disappear, leaving only impossible-looking faces that can be left for some future challenge. We wanted the virgin summit, and it was quite clear that Hackett and Beckey had picked the best possible route.

About midway up the east couloir we heard a reassuring sound: Lowell Thomas's Heliocourier. He had come to check on us, and we waved as he made the first of several passes. Climbing the couloir with ice-axes was infinitely more

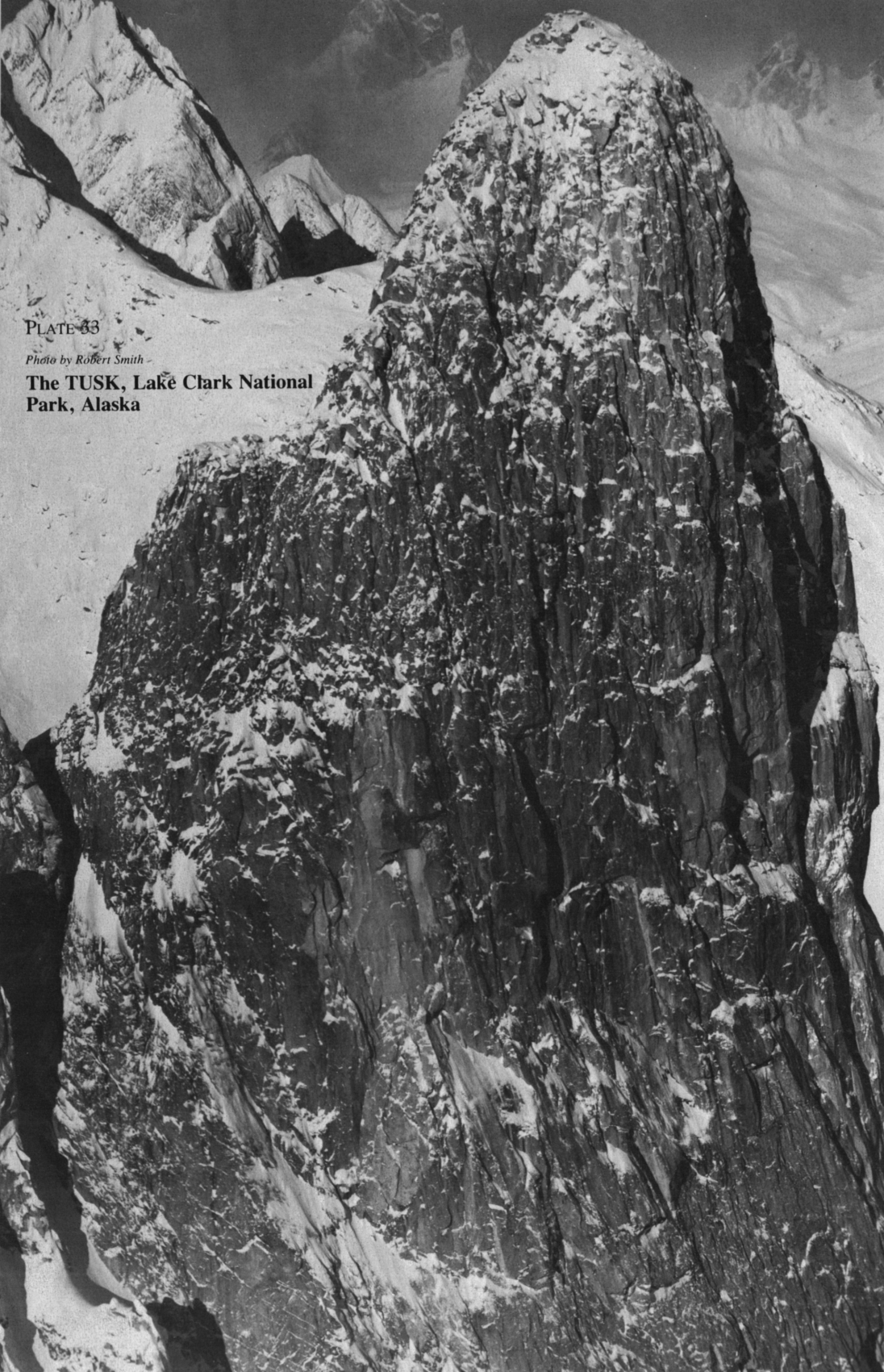


PLATE 33

Photo by Robert Smith

**The TUSK, Lake Clark National
Park, Alaska**

secure. We ascended some 500 feet up the east couloir and where it narrowed scrambled into a horizontal moat where we began climbing the rock on the right. Feeling more secure because of Lowell, I led toward Elephant Gully. The first pitch ascends parallel to the couloir (Class 4). The second pitch bears up and right into a dihedral (5.5). The third pitch enters what we called Elephant Gully (because you *feel* like an elephant when your in it—awkward and clumsy). There is a bolt about halfway up the pitch, which is fortunate: the protection is dubious and the rock is very bad here. There is another bolt for a belay at the top of the pitch (5.7). The day before, we had fixed a rope on this bolt. About halfway up the fixed rope, I heard Paul yell. His arm had been hit by a baseball-sized rock. As I hung from my Jümar, he told me he wasn't sure if it was broken.

"No," yelled Paul. "I don't feel any protruding bones. Let's try for the col and we'll see how I feel."

At the col we had a bite to eat and took a nap. Paul said I even started snoring. Upon my waking, he said what I wanted to hear: "Let's give it a try."

Despite a big swelling knot near his elbow, he stoically decided to continue. After sorting out an arsenal of bolts, pitons, rurs, bashies, and hooks (along with my regular "free" rack), I scrambled up the exposed, knife-edged ridge to the Walrus Headwall.

"Why don't you have a look around to the right?" Paul called out, before I could even drive one pin.

"Well," I responded, "I guess we've got nothing to lose."

The left (west) side of the Buttress looked loose and improbable. I was skeptical about the prospects to the right, but thought anything sounded better than trying to attack the headwall straight on. A forty-foot horizontal traverse took me to a small ledge. I looked up into a reasonable-looking dihedral and smiled.

"Yeah," I yelled. "This is it!"

I led what was the first pitch of untouched granite on the Tusk. I'd expected more of the same loose, dangerous rock. Instead I found superbly sound alpine granite. I was elated. I led to a small alcove and brought Paul up. The following two pitches were moderate class 5 with a few harder (5.8) moves here and there. In less than an hour we had solved the major crux of the Tusk: the Walrus Buttress. Lucky route-finding made it three pitches of 5.8.

The top of the buttress was a spacious, airy place. There was room for four or five to comfortably bivouac, and we stopped here to admire the view. The remaining south ridge looked like cake.

Paul is a man of science (a research associate at Washington State University). Still, he has these odd moments of superstitious sentiment.

"Paul," I declared, "I'm going to make the summit even if I have to bolt it from here. I can feel it."

"Now, don't say that," Paul cautioned, half chuckling.

I just smiled and grabbed the rack, walking across the top of the buttress, so hyped-up and excited I could hardly contain myself.

The remaining six pitches were very enjoyable but quite easy (Class 3 to mid-Class 5) on more superb granite. I often climbed a whole rope length with only one or two pieces of protection. About 200 feet below the summit we unroped and scrambled together to the top—the first virgin summit I had ever attained.

All around was a sea of mountains and glaciers, most of them untouched as the Tusk. Several peaks stood out as having excellent climbing possibilities. Among them were Goldpan Peak, the Mammaries (as we called those twin towers), and the Pyramid. We took a dozen or so photos, shook hands, and built a cairn. I was nearly overwhelmed by the joyful glow of the moment, but tempered my emotions with the fact that we still had to descend the route—some 2000 feet.

The 20 or so rappels were tiring but uneventful—except for one detail: our camera was left on the top of the buttress. Shades of Cesare Maestri and Cerro Torre? No proof that we made the summit? Maybe such doubts can entice a second party up the Tusk. They can have the camera—I just want the film.

At the bottom of the route I looked up at the spire that yesterday I had thought was flipping obscenities at us.

“Paul,” I said, “Look at it. It looks like a salute!”

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Chigmit Mountains, Alaska

FIRST ASCENT: The Tusk, 1674 meters, 5820 feet, Summit reached on June 21, 1986 (Gary Speer, Paul Bellamy), Grade IV, 5.8.

