

The Wine Bottle on Mount Dickey

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LIKE TWO PLANT LICE that the wind has blasted, we crouch in the cold glacier wind below the east face of Mount Dickey in the Ruth Gorge south of Mount McKinley. We shudder at what stands before us. It is a huge bottle, 5250 feet high, or better said, a gorgeously beautiful cliff, lovelier than Michelangelo's David, which stands only a few meters high. It is a whole world of stone, unclimbed and paved with secrets. This has been enticing me all year long.

Last year in July, I had stood along with Sepp Jöchler, Mugs Stump and Lyle Dean below this gigantic buttress. Mugs and Lyle had already picked their objective a few kilometers down the valley. Sepp and I were torn between various possibilities. The greatest line was indeed this buttress. It was of the size and steepness of the Norwegian route on the Great Trango Tower, at which I had stared with awe on my way to Masherbrum. After a short introduction to this region by Mugs Stump, the prince of the area, he pointed to the dream buttress and, in a hushed tone that said it all, murmured, "The Wine Bottle." He was well aware of the quality of this climb and the light in his eye and his quiet words let us see how much he would have liked to pull the cork on this wine bottle and what colossal respect he had for it. We bade each other good luck and each pair departed with ski and sled to the foot of its objective.

Sepp and I then made two fine climbs (*AAJ*, 1988, pages 113-5). However, our attempt on the Winebottle failed at a roof five pitches up, due to our underestimation of this route, not the last time we would fail to face up to the seriousness of the climb. We then summoned up all the rest of our energy to make an attempt on a new route on the east face of Mount Barrill, a smooth 3000-foot-high wall. In fine style, we climbed the first 15 pitches, the hardest part of the face (VII-, A3), up to the top of the buttress in the center of the wall. Then a frightful typically Alaskan storm with rain and snow drove us back, overfatigued, disappointed and burned out. That was already a year ago and I had had time to mull over this wine bottle; and the fire of Barrill was still smoldering: two great fragments, two stumbling blocks. The solution of such dreams had to come.

There we stood in the middle of the Ruth Glacier, 100 kilometers from the closest house, alone in the whole region. Before pilot Doug Geeting set us

PLATE 28

Photo by Bradford Washburn

MOUNT BARRILL.



down, he had flown us on several passes in front of Mount Dickey's Wine Bottle and Mount Barrill to let us study the routes. Tommi was standing there for the first time and he was just as moved as I had been when I was first there in 1987. Despite his mere 20 years, Tommi Bonapace is an experienced mountaineer. This year he had already made a redpoint ascent of the Casarotto buttress on Fitz Roy and an ascent of Cerro Torre. He is one of the best Tirolean climbers. As for me, I wondered whether it had been wise to turn down the invitation to join a Karakoram expedition in order to return here. But the more I thought, the more my optimism grew. During the year, a special relationship with the east face of Dickey had built up, a relationship full of curiosity and yet tinged with doubt. Sixteen hundred meters of vertical and unclimbed rock would call for untold energy but also for a fitting degree of apprehension.

With an eye continually squinting to the side at the Wine Bottle, we succeeded in climbing the east face of Mount Barrill in two-and-a-half days. On July 3, we surmounted the summit cornice. A shout of joy ended the tension of the previous year. The route had first been unsuccessfully tried seven years before, and then nearly every year thereafter. Recently two Americans had reached the same buttress top from the left which Sepp and I had reached from the right, two great attempts with a single meeting point, but both without success. Now, we had bagged it. With big-wall technique, climbing free all that we could, we had experienced two-and-a-half splendid days, on that face, ascending two pitches in a water groove, ten meters of overhanging, compressed scree, and otherwise heavenly cracks, dihedrals and slabs, mostly of VII difficulty with a few short stretches of A3. Two relaxed rest days full of inner satisfaction healed our wounded fingers and mobilized all our psychic and physical strength for an even greater goal, the east face of Mount Dickey, the Wine Bottle.

On July 6, we cosily planned our first contact with this Superthing. Without a haul bag, without bivouac gear, with only climbing equipment, we set out as we might at home for a 1000-foot wall. We knew that we could not make the climb in one go. Our first goal was just to reach our high-point of last year. This year, however, the Wine Bottle showed its teeth at the very start. While in 1987 we had been able to traverse from a hanging glacier on the left side into a crack system 100 meters above the lowest point, this year a gigantic schrund prevented our getting onto the hanging glacier. We had no choice but to attack the bottle at its very lowest point near a quartz vein. It looked so smooth and perpendicular that we wondered if we could stay faithful to our principles of climbing nearly everything free. With a little courage and fingertip feel for the right line, we managed to climb free the first frightening-looking pitches to a short traverse that with UIAA Grade VII difficulty brought us onto last year's line.

After two days of bad weather, we were back. We climbed up a difficult shingle-roof wall to a crux at the foot of a 50-meter dihedral, a two-meter-high slab that stuck up into the air. A year before, I had nailed my way up over this nightmare pitch with the most frantic moves of my climbing career. Then came the question, the highest pitch of last year's attempt. Studying photos at home,

PLATE 29

Photo by Bradford Washburn

**Wine Bottle Route on MOUNT
DICKY ascends the sunlit ridge on
the Right Center.**



I had noticed a parallel crack system to the one where our previous attempt had woefully died. I made every effort to get into this system since I wanted to avoid the roof at all costs. Before I got to the other set of cracks, I flew back into the dihedral along with all the carefully placed rurs and copperheads. I must not describe my landing! Stubbornly, I made a second successful try. Unfortunately, the parallel crack system was a bitter disappointment, a rotten water groove, from which I had to retreat with a carefully controlled pendulum. I just had to climb the rotten pitch of last year. Motivated by fright, I did only ten meters of A2 aid climbing before Tommi climbed the rest free. And so, we had reached a point two meters higher than last year. We set as a goal only one more rope-length before returning to our glacial home. Tommi pendulumed across to an enticing crack. However, rather than free climbing, it turned out to be one of the two most technical aid pitches in the whole route, two hours of cleaning moss and grass, the gardener's crack! With every centimeter of rope, including the haul bag line, two climbing ropes and various bits of line, we fixed the entire route to let us gain time for the final attempt.

Tommi and I again headed up into the bottle at 4:30 P.M. on July 10, two hours after the weather cleared, with our life-insurance in the form of a 90-pound haul bag. During the next days, we were bound to the bag with love-hate. While we were hauling, it was a fiendish enemy. At the bivouacs, it was a miraculous grab-bag which provided food, clothing, sleeping bags and stove. It was filled with food and material for nine days, for this time we did not want to flee the field on the onset of bad weather but rather wait it out. Day 1 took us up hair-raising jümaring and five mad pitches to the top of the first great steep section. It was rarely less than VI with three pitches of VII and two of A2 aid. We gained 350 meters. Days 2 and 3 provided free climbing on heavenly granite which seemed to have endless crack systems. The whole was garnished with two precipitous icefields. On the third evening we made an exposed bivouac at the beginning of the bottleneck on a snowpatch that was big enough for the first time to provide enough water for both night and morning. The main part of the bottle lay below us, 29 pitches of it. With almost any other route, we would have been on the summit, but here the world of rock was standing on its head. We were tired, drained. The endless days of climbing, the wet, the lacerated fingers, the effort and the tests of courage had made us frail. It was just lucky that we did not know what awaited us.

Everything on Day 4 had become automatic: getting up already roped, cooking breakfast, packing. Even climbing belonged to an automatic routine and was no longer special. After a fine pitch, Tommi drew a shingle-roof rope-length that seemed to promise a great deal. For two days we had been using big-wall technique: that is, one climbed while the other pulled up the haul-rope, jümaired and in the process cleaned the route of gear before being able to rest after 50 meters. This time the suspense remained. After 20 meters of VII free-climbing, suddenly all cracks ended and Tommi stood before a nearly crackless wall. With brilliant aid technique, he crept from tied-off piton to piton ever farther from the safety island of the last good protection. He had gained ten

PLATE 30

Photo by Tommi Bonapace

**Orgler on DICKEY's Wine Bottle
Route.**



meters! If he slipped, there was nothing to strike, but that was a small consolation for the psyche. Tommi has nerves as thick as cables. After he had finished his super achievement, he had to belay me as I struggled up two parallel, 50-meter-high breaks. I clung on with all I possessed. I puffed like a pack donkey and tried meanwhile to quiet my jangling nerves. I was happy when I had run out 50 meters to the only possible stance and could bring Tommi off his dizzying perch.

Our redemption was of short duration, for his next pitch was a nightmare on rotten rock. Suddenly the quality of the rock turned to super, but our problems were not yet over. Two heavenly pitches took us up the "Midnight Roof," which we got over just at midnight. Then it was up to me to search for cracks. To there, a superior hand had guided us up the right route in the 1200 meters we had already climbed; why not here? After a short search, a pendulum took me around a corner directly onto a bivouac spot. Exposed, small and divided down the middle, at that moment it was worth more than gold. We had taken 16 hours to climb the last seven pitches from the last bivouac, climbing through the night. The rain had poured over us in two heavy showers. But all is fine if you can sleep. And here was an iced-up chimney which gave us water and promised a continuation of the route. Leaning up against the "hot-dog stand" that divided us, we prepared our food and caught some sound sleep.

At three P.M. we left everything on the "stand" and climbed four lengths first up the iced-up chimney and then up a waterfall chimney. Soaking wet, we clambered to the left on quartz holes below a giant chimney roof on a dry ridge-top. We could see for some seconds the glimmering hope of flatter slabs which promised the continuing route. With this quieting knowledge, we made three rappels on dry rock back to our "hot-dog stand," leaving the ropes in place. After a complete clothing change, we spent the fifth airy night where we could peer 1400 meters (4600 feet) straight down into the crevasses on the glacier below. We celebrated with a hot fruit cobbler, which raised our optimism and swept away our climbing lethargy.

On Day 6, in nine pitches of slabs, cracks and icefield, we got to the tin-foil at the top of the Wine Bottle's cork. There we left the nicked, damaged haul-bag rope. One of us dragged all the climbing gear and the other tugged the haul-bag, as we climbed another five pitches of IV to V difficulty to the summit. We seemed to float up the last few meters of breaking trail in the snow despite our 75 pounds of gear and weary bones.

We had climbed a full vertical mile of perpendicular rock, had carried out the dream of a full year and had had an experience that few can ever have. These and many more thoughts raced through our minds as we made a night-descent of Mount Dickey's west side, though a night-descent when it never really got dark. For three more days, we dreamed in the tent, our sleep interrupted only by eating. Our memories, the facts and a confused heap of new plans remain in our mind's eye.



PLATE 31

Photo by Andreas Orgler

**Third Pitch (5.10+) on MOUNT
DICKEY.**

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTES: Mount Barrill, 2332 meters, 7650 feet, East Face, July 1 to 3, 1988.

Mount Dickey, 2909 meters, 9545 feet, The "Wine Bottle" on the East Face, July 10 to 15, 1988.

PERSONNEL: Andreas Orgler, Thomas Bonapace.

INTERESTING DATA ON MOUNT DICKEY: 1600 meters or 5250 vertical feet gained; 65½ hours of actual climbing; 51 pitches, including 4 of UIAA grade VII (5.11), 19 of VI (5.10 or 5.9), 16 of V (5.6 or 5.7), 4 easier, 2 of A1, 6 spots up to A3 +, 8 pendulums, 6 pitches of ice.

