

# Superunknown

*Four thousand feet of uncertainty on Baffin Island's Walker Citadel*

by PAUL GAGNER

As with any expedition to a super-remote corner of the world, our expedition to Baffin Island forces us to keep the fear factor in check. This isn't proving to be easy. Fear is an emotion that can all too often become all-consuming, coursing through veins like a freight train out of control, paralyzing you like a deer in headlights. On a wall, if not controlled, it becomes a lead weight around the neck, as constant as gravity in its attempt to derail the climb.

We control it; we have to. Not only are we climbing a 4,000-foot rock wall high above the Arctic Circle a hundred miles from the closest human settlement, but the sea ice we had hoped to cross on the hike back to Clyde River is rapidly melting. Already huge areas of open water lie below us. Being so close to the top, we rationalize that we need to focus on the climb; we'll worry about getting across the open water when we get to it. Visions of paddling icebergs or making a raft out of our ABS food barrels and portaledge help bolster our decision to continue. Obviously this wasn't an eventuality we had planned for.

Our goal has been to climb a big wall and explore the remote Sam Ford Fjord, half-way up Baffin's east coast. At the end of the trip we plan to hike 70 miles back to Clyde River. As the fifth largest island in the world, Baffin straddles the arctic circle with a remote and vast expanse of tundra, water, ice, and big, big walls. Prior to this year only two or three other expeditions have explored this vast fjord's climbing potential.

Rick Lovelace and I arrive on Baffin Island in early June. We immediately set out with our outfitter and 500 pounds of gear on a frigid 17-hour trip by snowmobile into the fjord. We are equipped with the latest high-tech big wall gear, including a titanium A5 portaledge that will become our home on the wall for three weeks.

After setting up basecamp across the bay from the 4,000-foot Walker Citadel, we spend several days scoping the cliff with binoculars for a feasible line. Carrying loads across the frozen sea ice to the base of the cliff adds a whole new dimension to the adventure. The ice is between two and three feet thick, and cracked with watery crevasses. Seals beat holes through the ice so they can flop onto the surface to sleep. The paws of polar bears are covered with fur, giving them a stealth-like advantage for approaching sleeping seals for dinner. We sleep with the shotgun between us... just in case.

After numerous bad weather days, the sun pokes out and we start up the

Paul Gagner on the Walker Citadel (Great Cross Pillar in background).

*Rick Lovelace*



# Baffin Island

Walker Citadel - SE Face

VII 5.10+ A3

FA Paul Gagner / Rick Lovelace

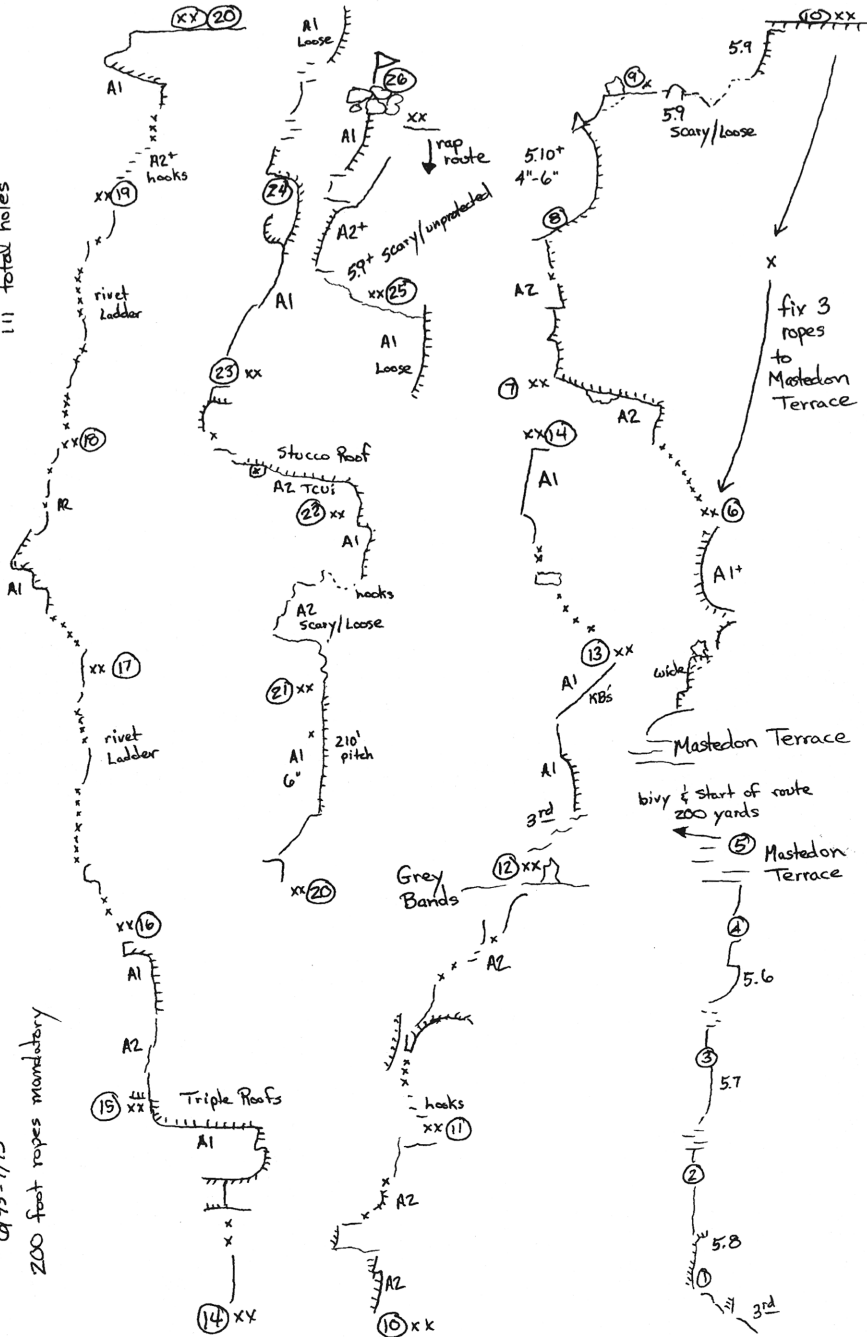
6/95-7/95

200 foot ropes mandatory

15 heads  
10 bolts/pickers  
10 KBs  
10 L&S  
3x 1/2"-3/4" angle

all hooks  
4x cams to 4"  
2x cams to 6"  
3 stoppers  
4x TCUs all sizes

bolts- 2 1/4" x 3/8" Rawl 5pc. or  
5/16" x 1 1/2, 1 1/4, 1 3/4 machine  
rivets  
77 on lead holes  
34 below holes  
111 total holes





wall. Incredible granite yields beautiful free climbing with good flakes for cams and Stoppers, and after two days of fixing we arrive at a huge gravel-covered ledge 800 feet up, which we name Mastodon Terrace. It is to become our home for the next week as we wait out storms, melt snow for water on the wall above, and move all of our gear up.

Brutal wind and rain storms lash us as we hole up in our shelter. Whenever we can, we climb, fixing our ropes higher off the ledge. Several pitches above the ledge, a beautiful fist-to-off-width free pitch leads to an improbable face traverse with sketchy pro, then a small ledge where we can stretch three ropes back to Mastodon.

After waiting out a particularly nasty storm we set out on what will become our regular routine for the next two weeks: climb (or freeze while belaying) one day, then sit through a soaking storm the next, repeat procedure.

We rename our portaledge the "washing machine." First the pre-soak: a storm starts, and we are lashed by wind-driven rain. Next is the wash cycle: the storm increases in intensity. Finally, the spin cycle kicks in: the wind lashes and tosses our tiny inconsequential shelter around. Not once during the entire ascent are we able to climb two days in a row.

Since we are not following any major features, we keep expecting to come across difficult aid pitches. Much of the climb has been spent linking small features by hooks or rivets, yet we find that either the features are good and useable, or there is nothing but smooth, hard, flawless granite.

After 19 consecutive days on the wall we are finally fixed to within 500 feet of the summit. We wake early on summit day and go through the morning routine: attempt to move, find hanging stove and stuff sack with coffee, make coffee, drink several cups, force down breakfast. By now our food supply, which we have stretched from a planned 14 days to 19, has dwindled to a few bags of ramen, some oatmeal, a few Power Bars, and enough coffee to get us fired up one more time.

Once again the weather is threatening. I ignore it, thinking it will go away. But after being out of the portaledge for a whole five minutes I take a peek at the dark clouds creeping up the Walker Arm and realize I have gone through all this effort for nothing. I dive back to my self-imposed squalor and my fetid sleeping bag as the rain begins to fall.

The two qualities required for alpine big wall climbing are patience and determination. After a few hours in the portaledge these pay off and the weather seems to improve. Quickly we jummar our three ropes and I start a perfect A1 pitch that leads to a nasty-looking corner below the summit. On the next pitch Rick weaves his way around loose blocks and teetering flakes before moving out of the ugly mess to a belay on the face.

A scary next pitch turns out to be one of the cruxes of the climb. An unprotected, steep, free climbing traverse leads past loose blocks to a corner.

Rick Lovalace following high above Mastodon Terrace.

Note open ocean below.

*Paul Gagner*



Several thin placements, a horizontal number four Camalot buried partly in mud and partly in rock, an afterthought traverse to the left, and a short A1 corner find me threading my way over the lip and onto the summit rubble.

Summits are always anticlimactic. Months of planning have been focused on getting to the top, yet now we are only half-way there. The descent is always an afterthought, a given if you happen to reach the summit. But below us lie 4,000 feet of rappels straight into the open ocean, a few more cycles in the washing machine, and the problem of finding a way back to civilization.

Seven hours into the descent we are overtaken by a storm reminiscent of Patagonia. Super high winds and driving rain literally force us to a crawl. Below, the sea ice has been replaced by crashing waves, forcing us to rig a series of traverses several hundred feet above the ocean for a horizontal half mile. I set my pack down to scope out a lower ledge, then turn to see it fly off the ledge, over a cliff. I stand stunned for several seconds, shocked at the prospect of my pack at the bottom of the ocean. Quickly I run through a mental checklist of what is in the pack (electronics stuff, of course — Game Boy, Discman, film) before sprinting down the ledge system. At its bottom I find it pushed by wind-driven waves to the edge of the rocks on the shore. Patience, determination, and the third dimension — luck!

Finally, after a 13-hour traverse around the bay, we are back in our camp, 23 days after leaving. Our original plan to hike out across the frozen fjord has been foiled by the early break-up of the sea ice. After studying the map we cook up a hair-brained alternative. Four thousand feet above our camp is a huge glacier. A climb to that, followed by six miles of glacier travel, a route around the bottom of the fjord, and zig-zagging through a slew of valleys should bring us back to our starting point at Clyde River, a mere 160 miles away.

Twenty-four hours after stumbling back into camp we start out again. Our flight back to the States is due to leave in nine days. We decide to lighten our loads by leaving the ice axes and crampons behind, opting for lighter ski poles and snowshoes. Sheer faith that this first day will be the toughest gets us up 4,000 feet and onto the glacier. Fifteen hours of scary post-holing with heavy packs, snowshoes, a seven-millimeter rope, but no ice axes, gets us through this live minefield to where we can drop off the glacier, exhausted, but onto what we hope will be cruising terrain.

It's not. After two days of tricky traversing and dicey river crossings, we have covered only half the per-day distance we need to make it back to Clyde River in time for our flight. We are tired. Our skimpy food rations are not enough to replace the energy we are expending. Ski poles become crutches; we rely on them 100 percent and pray we will not twist an ankle. Out here there is no hope for rescue. Every few hours we stop to consult our map. This only depresses us further when we see how little terrain we have covered and

how far we have to go.

Finally Rick broaches the subject we have both been dreading. Should we continue on this course, which probably means running out of food and fuel two weeks before reaching Clyde River, or should we turn around and make our way back to our original basecamp and hope someone puts two and two together?

Three days later we stumble back into basecamp, happy with the thought that in a few days we will be overdue. Without a doubt, our outfitter will come in to get us.

Days pass. Our food supply dwindles. Soon we are down to two bags of ramen and a can of tuna per day between us. We speculate endlessly, wondering why we haven't been picked up. Another week passes, this time without food. It is an effort to walk 20 feet from the tent to pee. I headrush every time I move; my mind seems detached from my body. We have read all of our books. The Game Boy and DiscMan are salty from their tumble into the ocean. I have read the *National Enquirer* 50 times. Without any food to cook there is nothing to do but sit and sleep... and speculate.

I begin to wonder how people die from starvation. I am skinnier than Rick; it worries me that I will probably be the first to go. Then, after several days of hard rain and huge mudslides, we decide our camp is no longer safe from the hanging mudslopes above us. In our weakened state we stumble through the talus, dragging our tent and gear to a safer spot. The river behind our camp makes a constant drone that sounds like a boat engine. It drives us crazy as we keep looking out the tent door only to see our placid, empty bay.

On our 14th day back at camp I wake at 4:30 in the morning. A tone change sharpens my senses, but I ignore it as just another hallucination. Then, at the same time, Rick and I bolt upright and unzip the tent door. We are not hallucinating. A hundred yards from shore a small boat laden with three caribou and three Inuit hunters from Clyde River is slowly approaching. A wave of relief flows over us. All of a sudden everything seems worthwhile: the climb, the lack of food, the stress. Today we will return to civilization and eat. Now there is only the fear of gorging ourselves sick after our extended forced fast.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Walker Arm of the Sam Ford Fjord, Baffin Island, Canada.

FIRST ASCENT: *Superunknown* (VII 5.10+ A3, 4,000 feet, 26 pitches) on the Walker Citadel, June-July 1995 (Gagner, Lovelace).