Alone on Mt. Thor

The second ascent of *Midgard Serpent*

by D. Jason "Singer" Smith

"When there's only one in the crew, everybody gets to be captain." – "Big Wall Pro: Flavio d'Bongo," from *The Complete Book of Big Wall Climbing,* by Chongo.

I turned my head as the first crack sounded, and watched, dumbfounded with awe and reverence, as a 200-foot block separated from the face and plummeted toward the earth. Exploding upon impact, it started a rock slide that would continue for just shy of a mile down the slabs and talus that had been a daily chore for me for the previous eight days. The block, about 40 to 60 feet in diameter, added up to 15 feet of talus at some spots and tossed house-sized boulders like a child kicking at mere gravel. The ensuing dust cloud was quickly forgotten to the howling winds in the valley below. I was still marooned here, alone, hauling a fleet of four haulbags to the sixth pitch of *Midgard Serpent* on Mt. Thor in Baffin Island. Witnessing this powerful force of nature inspired but two thoughts in my head: this is the dumbest idea that I have ever had; and, do I still have enough rope to bail?

My plan to solo a remote big wall was sparked after climbing El Capitan solo over Christmas, 1997. Finishing a moderately difficult 16-pitch route in three days, I was left wanting something bigger. Logistically, Thor, with its relatively short approach, the lack of glacial cover both at the base and summit, and an overhanging headwall that would keep rockfall to a minimum, was the most feasible project for a solo ascent.

Chris McNamara and I had traveled to the Weasel Valley that summer intent on climbing Mt. Turnweather. As rookies on the big-wall scene, we had to rely on our neophyte instincts to tell us that the constant deluge of waterfalls and avalanches on the lower 1,000 feet of our chosen face might make the climbing more tenuous than we had reckoned. In an attempt to salvage our trip, we began carrying all of our gear to Mt. Thor, where we hoped to climb *Midgard Serpent*, a route established over 15 days in 1995 by Brad Jarrett and John Rzeczycki. We arrived at the base two weeks before Chris was scheduled to begin school in New Jersey. Plagued by low food rations, we climbed just two pitches before heading down. I vowed to return to Thor and finish the project.

Pangnirtung, July 15, 1998. The air temperatures was 70°F—warmer than anybody could remember. In the evening, just before high tide, I departed with my local outfitter, Joavee, for the two-hour boat ride up the fjord to Overlord Peak. Once there, I would begin shuttling my loads up the Weasel Valley to Mt. Thor, 20 miles beyond. My plan was to get my bags the ten miles to Windy Lake and set up a base camp. From there, I would take one load per day the remaining distance to the wall. I had planned ahead by shipping 255 pounds of my supplies to Joavee in April; he had snowmobiled the provisions to the

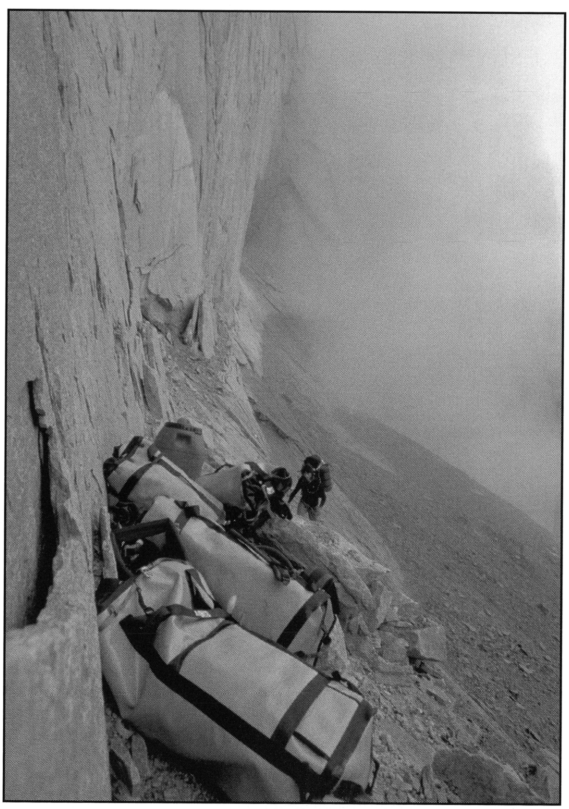
LEFT: *The 3,600-foot west face of Mt. Thor, showing* Midgard Serpent *(VI 5.9 A5).* JASON SMITH

lake, saving me a few days of walking. From the lake, I would carry about 400 pounds of food and climbing gear the remaining ten miles to the base of the wall.

The nearly 24-hour daylight was beneficial for carrying loads, allowing me to run on what my partners know as "Singer Days:" periods that usually begin around noon, but then extend for 12 hours beyond. After two such days I arrived at the lake, physically spent and suffering slightly from food deprivation. Finding my supplies stashed in an emergency shelter, I was delighted to indulge in a meal of macaroni and cheese, along with white chocolate and Kool Aid—all items of untold value after a taxing day of humping loads across the Arctic Circle.

When I awoke, the wall was visible for the first time. I spent the day talking with some passing backpackers and organizing my copious amounts of gear. By the next morning, I had discovered how Windy Lake had come by its name. Each evening, as the sun went behind the surrounding peaks, the temperature would quickly drop. Stout gales would soon roll in, continuing to howl throughout the night.

I then began the first of what would be seven trips to the wall. I would eventually loathe every step. The first mile to the wall was on the standard trekking path, a well-traveled solid walking surface. At a bridge, the standard route crosses the Weasel River, but the trek to Thor continues up the untracked side of the water. Eight miles of rolling tundra are followed by the most imposing talus field I can imagine. Tundra is a most disagreeable surface for hiking, best likened to walking on a wet down-feather bed. With every step, I sank to the ankles while the ground oozed like a sponge, burning my slight legs in minutes, even on level ground.



On the eighth trip to the base of the wall. JASON SMITH

The excitement didn't really start, however, until I arrived at the talus field. Every trip up this granite staircase of torture was an immensely frightening and fatiguing experience. Thinking it stable, I would step to a desk-sized (or larger) boulder, only to have it, and a ten-foot circumference of rock around it, slide several feet down the slope, with me quivering in the center. Luckily, much of the talus could be circumnavigated by walking up several slabs, but my trips up the field still took between two and four hours.

It was wonderful to finally arrive at the project. Conditions for climbing couldn't have been better: with no wind and flawless white granite to absorb the sun's rays, it was approaching a sweltering 80°. Looking up, however, I felt a strange sensation. The route loomed above as a delicate passage through mostly blank rock. I was somewhere between terrified and psyched.

In his book, *Big Wall Climbing*, Doug Scott called Mt. Thor "exceedingly bare of features." A Spanish team proved this in 1997 by climbing a route on the right side of the face with 260 holes. I felt that a new route on Thor would debauch the rock just for the sake of doing something "new." Also, my emaciated arms hurt at the mere thought of hand-drilling 20 belays. The low 115-hole count of *Midgard Serpent*, as well as the caliber of the first ascensionists, meant that both difficult and quality climbing were assured.

For the next ten days, I carried gear to the wall, taking one day off for rest. The good news was that the weather was holding remarkably well, with temperatures on most days stretching into the 60s. Unfortunately, it would not continue. I awoke on the day of my last trip up the slope to see black thunderclouds rolling over the ridge to the west. The temperature had dropped into the 30s and would remain there for the next three weeks. After fixing two pitches, I carried up two loads of water and went to sleep. It would be my last night on the ground for two weeks.

When I awoke the next morning, the weather had definitely changed for the worse. Although I was mostly protected by the steep angle of the wall, it was snowing lightly, and ice continued to fall from above. I packed up my four haulbags, including 48 liters of water, and clipped everything into my haul line. I reasoned that a single 3:1 haul, while taking more time, would be more energy efficient than two hauls and the inevitable rope cluster that would accompany such a system.

The first 230-foot haul ended up taking three grueling hours to complete. Utterly exhausted by the effort of hauling the load and then leading the next two overhanging pitches, my journal entry that night was kept simple: "I think that the people who think I'm simply stupid for coming here are right. I now think wall climbing is ridiculous. I feel like shit tonight."

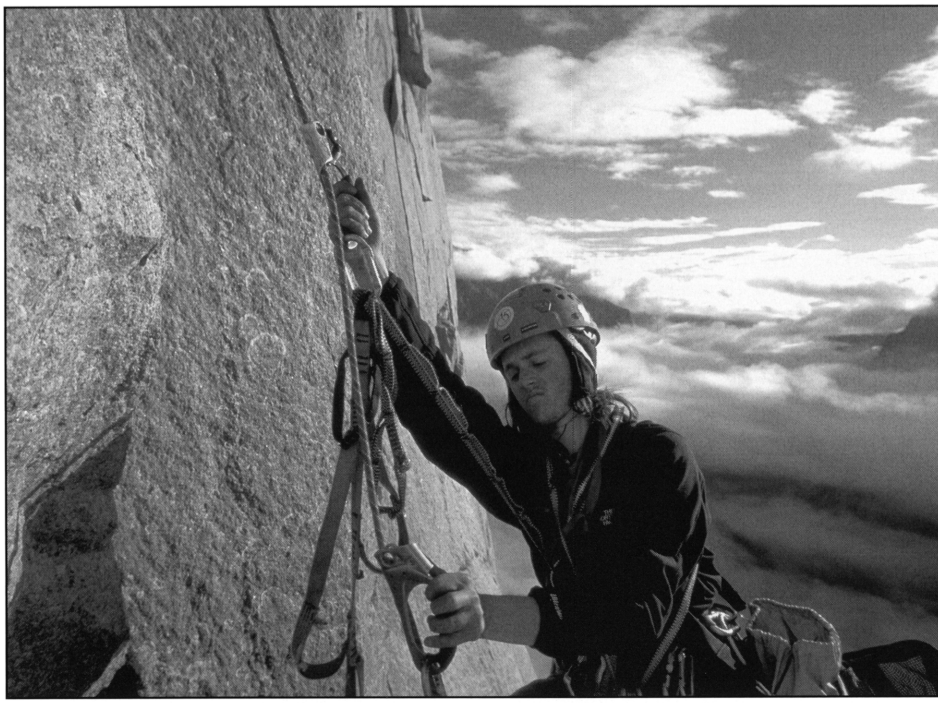
Two days later, while hauling my convoy, the huge block to my right crashed to the ground. I stared, motionless, for ten minutes before resuming my work. The previous day I had spent over eight hours hauling two pitches. After watching this spectacle of nature, I realized that I had to do something to move more quickly. I docked the load at the belay, then dug into my bags and trundled 20 liters of my water, effectively committing myself even more to the climb.

I took my first fall the following day. Hooking through a maze of nearly flawless rock, I came to a small flake. I didn't really think that it would take body weight, but, unable to see anything else, and unwilling to drill on an established route, I used it anyway. While getting into my top steps, the feature peeled away from the rock, sending me careening 40 feet back down. I stopped with my head and arm resting comfortably on a small ledge.

My bigger worry, however, was that my right hand had been burned by the rope during the flight. While it was nothing that you'd get sent home from school over, I did lose some motion in two fingers, which really ruined my day. I taped the two injured fingers together, finished the lead, hauled, and crashed into deep sleep.

By the next morning, I had lost much of my psyche. I woke at 10:30 a.m., dreading the steep, arching, knifeblade corner above after my near-mishap of the previous afternoon. A neuro-linguistic programming book that I had brought along kept me entertained in the comfort of my sleeping bag with a steaming cup of tea. I even contemplated taking the entire day off. In the last paragraph, the author explained that he liked to finish his seminars by telling people:

> At any moment that you find yourself hesitating or if at any moment you find yourself putting off until tomorrow something that you could do today, then all you need to do is glance over your left shoulder and there will be a fleeting shadow. That shadow



Cleaning pitch 9. JASON SMITH

represents your death, and at any moment it might step forward, place its hand on your shoulder and take you. So that the act that you are presently engaged in might be your very last act and therefore fully representative of you as your last act on this planet. When you hesitate, you are acting as though you are immortal.

Ten minutes later, I was hammering away at a tied-off knifeblade. Two hours later, I was teetering sideways for a long reach off a delicate bird beak. I think I only whimpered when I stopped to look at the piece and knew I was going for another flight. While mid-reach to clip my previous piece, I sailed for another 40 feet of fun.

I've always maintained that free climbing will be the crux of any big wall, and this one proved to be no different. The 13th pitch was a 100-foot direct traverse across the most unpleasant ledge system that I hope to ever see. Loose, dirty 5.9X climbing offered no protection and demanded strenuous hauling. I was forced to stretch a rope between the two belays and partly haul, partly walk the haul bags across the span.

As usual with soloing traverses, cleaning the pitch was as much of a thrill as the lead. The ledge became twice as unpleasant when I noticed that there were several haulbags abandoned farther down the ledge. They were Go Abe's, the solo Japanese climber who had perished on the wall the year before. The clouds that were quickly filling the valley below magnified the ominous feeling. Within an hour, the temperature had dropped significantly, visibility was less than 50 feet, and it had started to snow.

August 5, 1998. 10:35 a.m. It is now really time to get off this wall. Last night I jolted awake and thought I was hearing more rockfall. While fumbling for my camera,

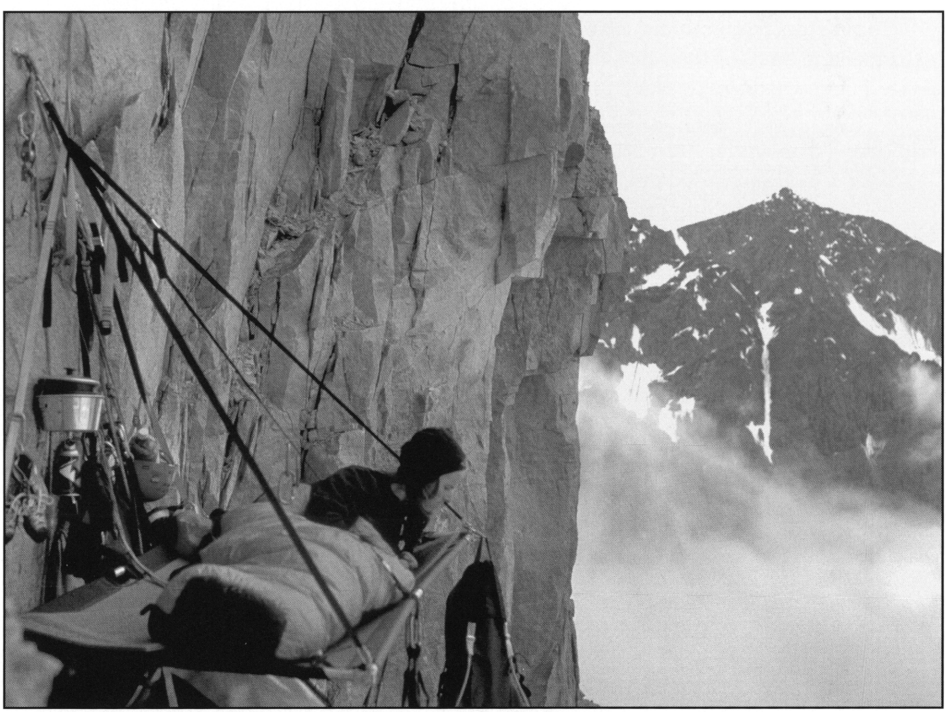
I realized that the sound was my watch alarm, beeping. When I tried to turn it off, I remembered that it was always set for 10:30 a.m. It was now only 3:17 a.m. Then I didn't hear it anymore. Haven't seen people in almost two weeks.

August 5, 1998. 8:30 p.m. Bivied at top of 14. It snowed all day. Way rad expando flake. Six pitches to go. My head is starting to feel nuked. I was hearing that fucking watch beep all day long, but not really. I took it off and almost hucked it, but decided I need it. My CD player quit working tonight as well. Junk.

I still can't figure out how 12 a.m. can be the hour after 11 p.m. Shouldn't 12 a.m. follow 11 a.m.?

Over the course of the next few days, my psyche and the weather both deteriorated at exponential rates. I found the climbing up the headwall to be not only steep, but very sustained as well. My two-pitch days were becoming difficult to keep up, especially with the now-daily snowstorms. The nature of the climbing had become very much like modern El Cap routes: particularly frightening.

No matter how much I climb, I am always learning new things about the sport, the gear, and the rock. Sometimes it seems like the simplest details are the ones that, when overlooked, can be the most terrifying. For instance: when rope soloing, clipping wire rivet hangers for an upward pull can result in a fall much farther than necessary; and, Grigris and icy ropes were not meant to be friends and should never be introduced to each other. Re-learning both of these lessons had me feeling strong summit fever.



Atop pitch 13, 2,500 feet up on Hrungnir Ledge on the seventh night on the wall. JASON SMITH

A laborious corner, a small flake, some free climbing, and I suddenly found myself looking down the east slopes of Mt. Thor. I hadn't walked in 13 days. I stumbled over the summit ridge, untied, and jogged and jumped around the boulders. Suddenly it seemed as if all of my woes on the wall—cold, food, water, wind, snow, rockfall—had been trivial. Being constantly connected to 400 pounds of gear for two weeks had become a psychological weight on my shoulders. Even though I was still miles from shelter, just being untied from the ropes felt like a new life.

In many ways, I was ecstatic that such an experience was close to being over; in others, I felt that I wanted it to go on. I wanted something more. In some warped sense, I wanted an epic; I wanted to get really worked.

I quickly rapped back to the last belay and cleaned the pitch. Just as I finished the last haul, it began to snow intensely. Feeling that a summit bivy would not be much like a slumber party, I quickly packed up my four haulbags and dragged them to a ledge that overhung the face. I attached my drogue parachute and sent the load back to the base.

My only beta for getting down from the summit was, "Oh yeah, there's this talus and these fixed ropes that. . . . Well, you'll find 'em."

As the blizzard increased, I moved cautiously down the talus. I reached an impassable cliff band, then walked back and forth searching for the ropes through the snow. I finally spotted the anchor, but simultaneously realized that I had inadvertently left my rappel device in the snow at the summit. Fortunately, I had enough carabiners to build a brake, though it would leave me short if I had to rig an anchor.

Halfway down the 200-meter rope was an ice-coated, two-foot core shot. I bounced to get the frayed cord through my device, my eyes glued to the spot until I was safely off the rope. Some more scrambling led into an obvious gully system. Arriving at an 80-foot cliff, I scanned the area for the ropes that had been at all previous and similar areas. There were none. There was also no place to rig any decent anchor. I retraced some of my path back up the slope, but found that the cliff was the only way down. I was now faced with down climbing a low-angle, flaring off-width.

Since I had descended out of the snowstorm and into a drainage gully, the fissure was flowing with a refreshing cascade of ice water. I crawled into the crack and tried to repeat semi-controlled slides to get down. I would slowly squirm down until I was unable to hang on, at which point I would find a chockstone below me and let go, paddling at the rock to stay in the gaping maw. Twice I was able to latch onto chockstones; once I was able to throw in an arm bar.

Soon enough, I was cruising the level ground below. Some time later I stopped to rest on a rock. I awoke to my watch beeping several hours later—1:38 a.m. I groggily pulled out my bivy gear, climbed in, and slept for another 12 hours.

The next day I returned to my base camp at Windy Lake. After resting for two days, I returned to the wall for my gear. For the next week, all the work I did seemed surreal. The lack of real objective dangers combined with the desire to return home forced me to put strong physical demands on myself: I walked up to 35 miles per day to get my gear back to Overlord.

One week later, I had a seat on the morning flight out of Pangnirtung. Fading into sleep, watching the desolate landscape pass below, I was startled by my watch alarm beeping out a wake-up call. As I pulled back my sleeve to inspect the scratched face, I was relieved to see that it was 10:30 a.m., sharp.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Auyuittuq National Park, Baffin Island, Canada

FIRST SOLO ASCENT: *Midgard Serpent* (VI 5.9 A5, 3,600') on the west face of Mt. Thor, July-August, 1998, D. Jason "Singer" Smith, solo