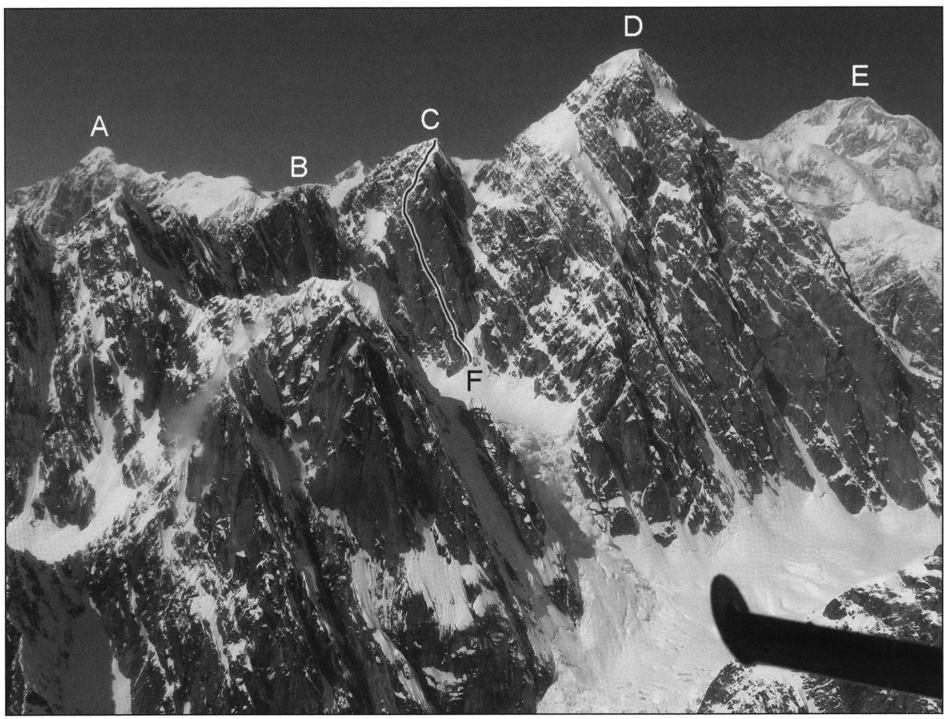
Catharsis

After 28 Alaskan expeditions: the trip of a lifetime.

Jack Tackle

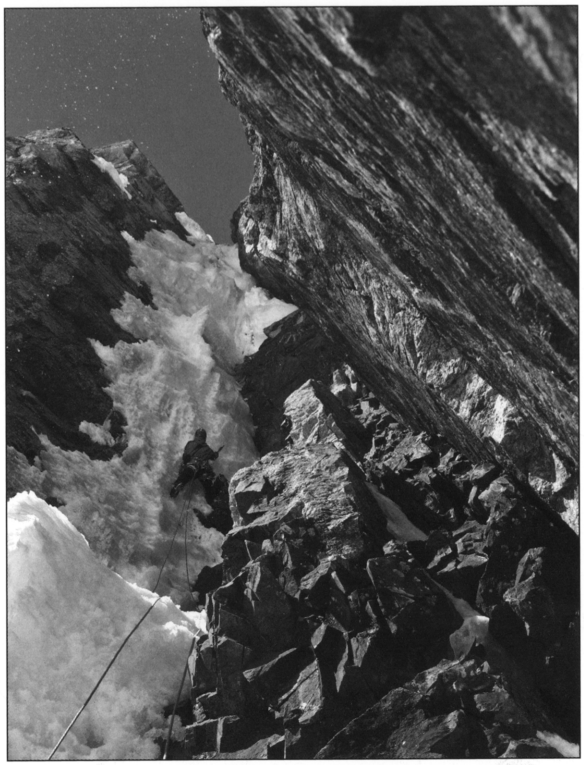


A) Kahiltna Queen (12,380'). (B) Top of the "Scottish Wall." (C) The 10,300' south peak of Mt. Huntington, with the line of Prizefight (Smith-Tackle, 2009). (D) Mt. Huntington (12,240'). (E) Denali (20,320'). (F) "My Private Idaho," the hanging cirque where pilot Paul Roderick landed for the first time ever to drop off Jay Smith and Jack Tackle. The Rooster Comb is out of view to the right. *Jack Tackle*

There is a rare feeling of completeness and calm that can only come after concerted effort and toil, sacrifice and vision. As the Beaver lifted off from the Kahiltna, and Jay and I headed for Talkeetna and home, I felt more at peace than I can ever remember feeling. The previous 18 days in the Alaska Range had cleansed some lingering doubts and demons; now all I had to do was breathe.

This trip culminated an odyssey of recovery from two significant health challenges, the first in 2001 and another the following year. Contracting and surviving a rare auto-immune disorder

called Guillain-Barré syndrome was by far the most serious medical event of my life. Everything else has been a mosquito bite. I could write a book about it, and many people tell me I should, but I can barely do my taxes on time. Recovering from near-complete paralysis, learning to walk again, and retraining my muscle memory were only parts of the process. Suffice it to say that many, many friends and family members, along with my loving wife, Pat, helped me through this, and to them I am forever indebted.



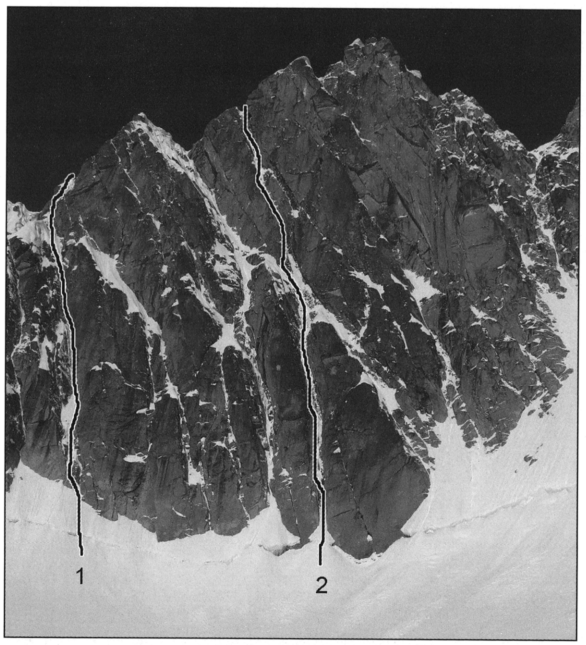
Jay Smith leads the crux ice pitch of the Black Pearl. *Jack Tackle*

Eighteen months after I came down with Guillain-Barré, an attempt to get back on the horse went bad. I started up an unclimbed face on Mt. Augusta with Charlie Sassara, and 2,000 feet up I was hit by a falling rock that broke my neck and back. The parajumpers and my friends rallied to pull my sorry ass off the wall—again, chapters in a book yet unwritten. But I survived it all, and now, finally, I was back home in the Alaska Range with Jay Smith—who could ask for more?

On May 7, Jay and I flew into a small cirque below the south peak of Mt. Huntington, thanks to Paul Roderick's skills and his awesome Otter ski plane. No one had ever landed in this cirque, a hanging arm above the upper Tokositna Glacier which I called "My Private Idaho." Our objective was a new route on Huntington's main peak, but after a day of reconnoitering the line, we knew it was not going to happen: too much wall climbing, too slow. Dejected, we wondered what to do next. Jay suggested the Rooster Comb: "Hey, we're here, let's at least climb something."

On May 9 we left a tent below the east side of Huntington, climbed to the col between Huntington and the Rooster Comb, and continued up what's likely the 1978 route from the West Fork of the Ruth. We summited in 7½ hours—possibly the fifth ascent of the peak—and were back at the tent nine hours later. The next day, as we labored back to base camp, Jay gazed around our Private Idaho. Jay has more new routes to his credit than anyone I know, and now he pointed out potential routes everywhere. From past experience, we both knew the alpine granite on Huntington is as good as any in the Alaska Range. The lines looked worthy, and the weather was splitter.

We spent the next week doing three new routes right above our base camp. The first was Prizefight on the south side of Huntington's 10,300-foot south peak. On May 13 we started



The Scottish Wall, south of Mt. Huntington's south peak: (1) Lagavulin (5 pitches) and (2) the Black Pearl (8 pitches). *Jack Tackle*

up an obvious left-leaning ramp across the rock wall that comprises the lower half of the route. We led with packs in three-pitch blocks over immensely enjoyable moderate terrain, with short challenging cruxes of mixed climbing. Jay pulled out his rock shoes (the only pair we'd brought) for the key pure-rock section (5.9R), two pitches leading directly up from the end of the ramp, the first of which was like plated City of Rocks granite. Above this was mostly snow, with the occasional rock step or short section of mixed terrain. Nineteen hours after we left the tent, in darkness, I manufactured a snow hole for a brief bivy without sleeping bags. After three hours of "sleep," we emerged from our cocoon to forge upward through poor snow to just below the summit of the south peak; the last 20 meters were too rotten to climb safely. We made 17 or 18 rappels down a different line from that we'd climbed, and 39 hours after leaving we were back at the tent.

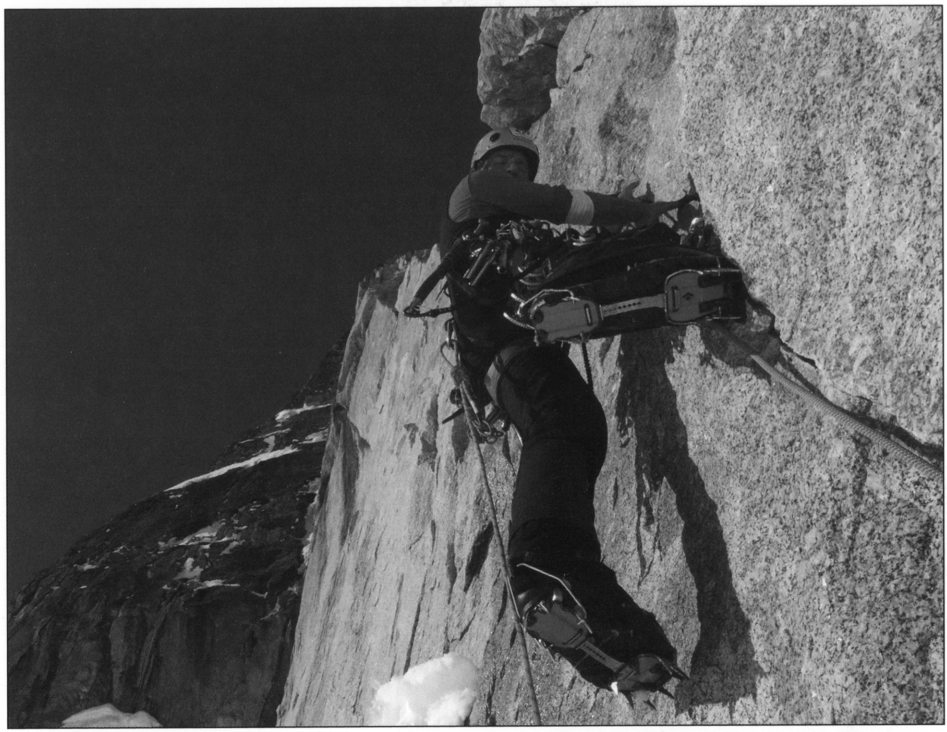
It snowed the next day—the only snowy day of the trip—but that didn't matter. We were toasted, and we just slept, made margaritas, and rested some more—perfect timing, for once.

Sometimes things just line up, though most of the time they don't. My success ratio sucks generally, and especially in Alaska. But as the soreness left our bodies, we again gazed around our solitary alpine arena and saw more routes we had to climb. South of Prizefight was a wall with unique parallel chimneys formed by intrusive diorite dikes. We called it the Scottish Wall; it was maybe 20 minutes from the tent. (This made up for my 75-mile approach to Mt. Kennedy in the Yukon in 1978.)

Lagavulin, our first climb on the Scottish Wall, started with a splitter 5.10 crack that I dry-tooled up, and the rest of the five-pitch route followed an obvious weakness, with thin but protectable WI4+/5 pitches. Just to the right was a longer, harder line we dubbed the Black Pearl. (Clearly, Jay had watched *Pirates of the Caribbean* with his stepson Grady more than once.) The Black Pearl started with M5 mixed climbing; it had one of the best alpine WI5+ pitches I have seen, which Jay fired in one 70-meter lead; and the sting in the tail was a poorly protected M6 pitch that I struggled up while looking for gear the whole way. We were 14 hours up and down the eight-pitch line.

I was back at home in the Alaska Range, and I'd done four climbs (three of them new routes) in less than two weeks, with an old friend—who could ask for more? Well, we did.

When Paul flew us out from My Private Idaho, he stopped at Kahiltna base to pick

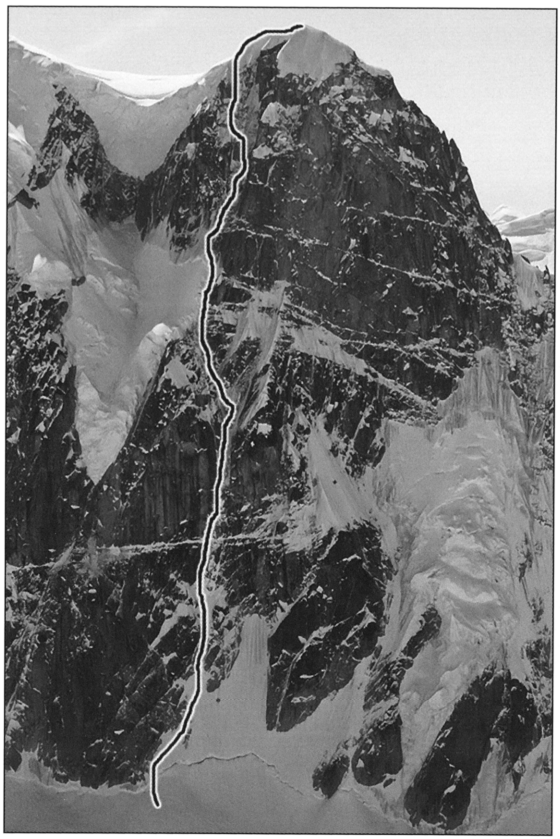


Jack Tackle leads the start to Lagavulin on the Scottish Wall. *Jay Smith*

up more climbers, and I casually asked him to fly by the north face of Thunder Mountain (10,920') on the way out to Talkeetna. I had spied a potential route on Thunder in 1996, when Doug Chabot and I did a new route on the south face of Hunter's south peak (The Sound of Freedom), directly across from Thunder. It had been on the list ever since. I knew of a couple attempts by very good climbers, but poor ice and snow had likely prevented success. It's all about timing. Now, 13 years later, Jay and I clicked away with our cameras as we flew by. It was in! Before we'd landed in Talkeetna, we had decided to return. We could have gone home content, but how many times do things line up so well?

After three days of rest, reracking, getting new ropes, and drinking draft beer, we were ready to go back. We landed on an arm of the Kahiltna underneath the face. It was, to the day, the 10th anniversary of my friends Jim Donini and Malcolm Daly's epic on the south side of Thunder. The imposing 4,000-foot north face had an obvious line. Also obvious were the hanging glaciers and massive seracs just left of it. Careful study and two weeks in the range made us confident we could climb fast and safely to a point where the objective danger was no longer an issue. After a few hours of scrutiny with the binoculars and strategy discussions, we packed two-pound sleeping bags, a canister of fuel, and one and a half days of food. We'd seen a small crevasse more than halfway up that might offer a bivy site.

Our packs weighed 17 pounds when we crossed the 'schrund at 5 a.m. and simul-climbed the first 900 feet. Jay took the first block of three pitches, and the climbing was deceptively steep. In fact, he had to leave his pack to haul with the tag line while I jumared, because the climb-



The line of Tangled Up in Blue (4,000', VI- AI6 M7) on the north face of Thunder Mountain. *Jack Tackle*

ing was, as Jay described it, "as hard as any pitches I've ever led in the mountains." That's saying something. Protection was hard to find; there were slightly overhanging sections where you swore there wouldn't be; and it was mostly compact snow over thin ice, not just stick and go. Each 70-meter pitch took Jay one to two hours to lead.

Above this the angle eased somewhat, but the concrete ice was relentless. We did five more 70-meter pitches in order to reach the bivy crevasse at 1 a.m., about 20 hours after we started. Happy we had scouted this bivy site from below, we rearranged some snow for comfort, brewed and ate, and fell asleep as it began to snow. Seven hours later it was still snowing lightly enough that we talked ourselves into brewing and eating some more, before launching once again.

At midday I left the comfort of the crevasse and headed toward the upper face. Until this point, it hadn't been clear if the line would connect easily at the top, because of the ominous seracs on either side. But, again, the route proved safe, with beautiful ice and mixed ground. Jay got another great mixed lead around pitch 13, but this one had good gear and better rock (generally the rock improved the higher we got). Near the top of the day's nine pitches, we could sense a weakness through the final barriers. The last pitch eased onto flat terrain and we left the vertical world in which we had lived for the past two days.

Near the summit I found another crevasse, and we crawled inside to escape the wind. Jay slept for two hours, but I only dozed, believing I needed to eat and rehydrate more than I needed to sleep. Initially we had planned to rappel a parallel line down-glacier from our route, but by now doubt and concern over dropping into the unknown abyss had filled our minds. We also thought it might be possible to downclimb unknown terrain off the west side and thus reach the Kahiltna. After some deliberation, we decided to go for the longer but less technical way down. In hindsight, I could have said to myself, as I am fond of saying to others, "How does it feel to be wrong?"

During our trip back to base we experienced some of the most heinous, deep, soft isothermal snow either of us had ever seen. We ended up all the way down on the main Kahiltna and had to wallow back uphill for miles to reach our tent. (The descent totaled eight miles.) At times

we would sink waist-deep in the soft snow, only held up by our packs. We were out of food, fuel, and water, so there was no real benefit to stopping, and so we just kept struggling. At one point, for the first time in my life, I was not confident that I could just keep going for the barn. It was that bad. Only the bottle of tequila in the tent kept us moving. That and the fact that stopping wasn't going to solve the problem. Sixty-seven hours after we left the tent, we returned—wasted, parched, hungry, almost delirious. I had never felt better.

Jay and I agreed that if we'd just gotten out of the plane on May 7 and attempted Thunder, things probably wouldn't have gone as well, or at all. This climb was not only the highlight of the trip, but also, in many ways, the culmination of 75 years of alpine climbing between us. Sometimes it takes a while to get warmed up. I recently read Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers*, and one of the major premises is that no matter who you are, or how much opportunity and natural talent you have, it takes 10,000 hours of doing what you are passionate about to be the best—or at least, as Garrison Keillor says, "above average." All of our collective experience in the mountains had paid off.

Partnerships are talked about so much they have become something of a cliché in climbing stories. But, for me, one of the lasting values of this kind of climbing is sharing a unique experience with another person whom you trust implicitly—and he you—and never letting the other person down. Commitment, Vision, and Trust has always been my mantra in alpine climbing. And the beauty is, when everything lines up and a climb goes perfectly, nothing can ever take that away from you. And therein lies the essence of life: perfection in an imperfect world.

SUMMARY:

Area: Alaska Range

Ascents: Ascent of the Rooster Comb via the Huntington–Rooster Comb col and west ridge (May 9, 2009). First ascent of Prizefight (2,000', 5.9R M6 AI5) on the 10,300' south peak of Mt. Huntington, May 13-14. First ascent of Lagavulin (800', 5.10 WI4+/5, May 17) and the Black Pearl (1,500', WI5+/6 M6, May 18), both on the "Scottish Wall," an east-facing cliff south of Huntington's south peak. First ascent of the north face of Thunder Mountain via Tangled up in Blue (4,000', VI- AI6 M7, May 23–25; 67 hours round-trip, with one bivouac and a brief rest en route). All ascents by Jay Smith and Jack Tackle.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jack Tackle, treasurer of the American Alpine Club, lives in Victor, Idaho, with his wife, Pat. He first climbed in Alaska in 1976.

Jay Smith (left) and Jack Tackle on the summit of Thunder. *Jay Smith*