



AAC Publications

North Hozomeen, west face, Zorro Face

Washington, Cascades

Both the north and south summits of Hozomeen Mountain (8,012') bear a great mystique, and an ascent from any direction has long daunted mountaineers (see the "Battle for Hozomeen" in Fred Beckey's *Challenge of the North Cascades*). In the early 2000s, John Scurlock's aerial photography of the foreboding west face of North Hozomeen, the "Zorro Face," stirred—perhaps haunted—the imagination of many Cascades alpinists. Its zigzagging ledge systems and few apparent weaknesses only added to its evil reputation. Rumored attempts surfaced: seasoned hard men were spurned before even attaining the base of this great, unclimbed wall.

Rolf Larson and I were just another two moths attracted to the ill light of this wall. The opening passage of Jack Kerouac's *Desolation Angels* speaks volumes about the dark attraction of the mountain: "Hozomeen, Hozomeen, most mournful mountain I ever seen...vertical furrows and bumps and Boo! crevasses, boom, sheer magnificent Prudential mountain, nobody's even heard of it, and it's only 8,000 feet high, but what a horror when I first saw that void..."

Established routes on the north side of the peak reputedly held difficult-to-protect rock, loose and devoid of cracks. Colin Haley's account of his attempt seemed to confirm this was also true of the Zorro Face: "The face is very large, much steeper than we expected, the rock is friable, and most importantly, there are almost no protection cracks, even for thin pitons. I think that the north face of South Hozomeen and the west face of North Hozomeen are perhaps the two most difficult walls in the Lower 48. The significance of an ascent with bolts will all depend on how many are placed." (adapted from Colinhaley.com). These words compelled us to wait for the right combination of weather, fitness, and appetite to make an attempt that would honor the style of Cascade alpinism. Leading up to our climb we trained for expected runouts on this wild wall.

Everything harmonized at the end of August. On day one a long hike brought us to a bivouac. On day two, we downclimbed a loose gully and then crossed several precipitous rocky ribs to our targeted launch point below the face. The stuff called "rock" on this peak is metamorphosed basalt—also called Hozomeen chert—and was valued by the native Salish for making knives and arrowheads (Hozomeen is Salish for "sharp"). What it lacked in solidity and protection, it somewhat made up for with a plethora of in-cut features—good for climbing when solid.

Rolf won the first lead. On the second, I found the only evidence of human visitation on the wall: a quarter-inch bolt and a bail biner. The next pitches led up friable, vegetated, wet, and mostly welded-shut rock. The well-featured rock and sparse pro engendered a methodical rhythm of movement. The hook was set. On the third pitch Rolf's expletives drifted down to my belay. On the fourth I traced one of Hozomeen's tiger-stripe ledges left to avoid an overhanging headwall, revealing an avenue toward left-facing corners above. The fifth lead fired down rock missiles, more curses, and words—I wanna go home—in the wind. But we were drawn to the dark promise of corners above. Pitches 6 to 10 were rope-stretchers, mostly following the corner system. Atop pitch 10, I placed a single, crappy pin to augment the anchor. Above, Rolf raced the sunset to a ledge, where we would shiver through an exposed bivy.

At dawn I pieced together a long, winding pitch 12 on worsening rock to the summit ridge. From here it was a casual stroll for 100' to the summit, with incomparable views of the North Cascades. We had placed and removed one shallow pin, placed no bolts, and stretched the rope for 12 pitches on this

unmatched and uniquely Hozomeen adventure: the Zorro Face (IV 5.9).

Eric Wehrly

Images



One of the photos that inspired it all: the Zorro Face in winter. The line climbed by Rolf Larson and Eric Wehrly mostly follows the left-facing corner system leading directly to the summit. They bivied just 100m below the summit where a snow patch is visible.



Looking up at the wall from the base.



Rolf Larson nears a crux on the shallow corners of pitch 7.



L to R: South and North Hozomeen from the north. The Zorro (West) Face falls out of view on the right skyline.

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