



AAC Publications

Cloud Peak, south face and southeast arête; Paint Rock Buttress, south face; Bomber Mountain, east face

Wyoming, Bighorn Mountains

For several years Mark Jenkins and I had wanted to climb together in the mountains of Wyoming, where he has done many new routes. In mid-August the stars aligned and we planned a week in the vicinity of Cloud Peak (13,167') in the Bighorn Mountains.

In 2008, Mark and Ken Duncan had climbed a hard new route on the Merlon, a stunning detached tower on the southeast side of Cloud Peak, and he remembered seeing many unclimbed lines nearby (AAJ 2009). They had approached from the east, humping loads for a dozen miles, half off-trail.

To ease the burden on our half-century-old knees, we planned a slightly shorter approach from the southwest, and Mark arranged horse packers to carry our loads about 6.5 miles to a bend in the trail just beyond Mistymoon Lake. Here we shouldered huge packs and trudged another 3 miles through soaking rain to a 10,900' base camp at the head of Paint Rock Creek.

Clouds still wreathed the peaks early on the morning of August 15, but when the skies began to clear we decided to attempt a line on the prominent, south-facing buttress about half a mile down-valley from camp. This formation is clearly visible from nearby trails; the hiking route up Cloud Peak runs above it. Unaware of any prior ascents, we called it Paint Rock Buttress. We climbed six pitches up the left center of the face, finding excellent crack and face climbing in the upper half: The Man Who Feared Marmots (ca 550', II 5.10+). This buttress has many good-looking lines, including a potential 5.12 or 5.13 crack system on the overhanging east side.

The next day we set out before dawn to climb over the ca 11,700' pass northeast of camp. From there we slid down a short snowfield to a tiny tarn and the toe of the striking southeast arête of Cloud Peak, due west across a gully system from the Merlon. After 300' or 400' of fourth-class scrambling, Mark started up a curving, left-facing corner but was forced to retreat, leaving two cams, when protection possibilities vanished. He found an easier alternative around to the left, and I followed the corner at hard 5.10, cleaning his cams. Another pitch led to a sag in the ridge, where we simul-climbed for several hundred feet. The ridge steepened and narrowed as it rose alongside the dead-vertical east side of this wall (probably unclimbed). We contrived to stay directly on the arête, which narrowed to less than three feet. The southeast arête (1,200', III 5.8) is a very fine alpine rock route, ending only 15 minutes of boulder hopping from Cloud Peak's flat summit. [Editor's Note: It's very likely this prominent line had been climbed before, but no prior description of it has been found.]

During our descent to the saddle, we studied Cloud Peak's steep 800' south face, to the left of the southeast arête. A rust-colored pillar on the lower wall caught our eye, and we decided to cache our ropes and gear at the saddle for an attempt the following day. Our line followed the right side of the rusty pillar. A 5.9 approach pitch, very wet from the recent rains, led to two short crux leads: a technical stemming challenge in a slick flare, followed by hard face climbing around the left side of a bulge. Easier and excellent crack climbing led to the top of the pillar. We then climbed several pitches of steep face and grooves, placing pro where we could get it on Cloud Peak's compact granite. (We used no bolts or pins on any of our routes.) Two pitches of slabs and short vertical steps gained a headwall, where Mark avoided an ominous chimney with a long, complex lead. One more slab-and-step pitch led to the top. Rust Never Sleeps (10 pitches, III 5.11-) is likely the first route up the south face and is highly recommended. We were back in camp about 12 hours after leaving.

We spent August 18 sacked out in our tents and wandering around the beautiful Paint Rock valley, where we saw no other people the entire week, despite a busy hiking trail a couple of miles away. We did, however, see tracks of coyote and bobcat, as well as a couple of pine martens high on Cloud Peak. We still had time for one more climb, and I was keen to explore the east face of Bomber Mountain (ca 12,840'), hidden beyond the saddle above camp. All we had to go on was a cluster of contour lines on our map and a single photo I'd found online that seemed to reveal a golden, leaning slab of granite like something out of the Sierra. (The peak was named after a B17 Flying Fortress that crashed into its side in June 1943.) Getting to Bomber's east side would be challenging. After studying the map we decided to climb over Bomber's summit and try to find our way down into the east-facing cirque, climb a new route back to the summit, and then descend to camp. It promised to be a long day.

On August 19 we headed back to that saddle for a final time, then scrambled up the north ridge of Bomber. From the easternmost summit, nearly 2,000' above camp, we hiked south down a plateau to a break in the cirque wall. More than an hour of tedious and treacherous downclimbing, plus one rappel, put us on the snow, where we made a long, sketchy traverse in approach shoes. I had to self-arrest once with my nut tool. We finally reached the foot of the wall more than four hours after leaving camp.

From below, we could now see that the Sierra-like pillar in that photo only comprised the top part of the wall. About 800' of broken rock and steps led to this headwall, which is gray and blank on the left side, golden on the right, and split by a deep corner. We could not identify a good-looking, continuous line. After catching a bit of water from melting snow, we decided to scramble as far as we could and hope a route revealed itself. We carefully zigzagged up the lower wall, mounting several fifth-class steps, and then roped up behind a huge fin of snow, at the foot of a broken chimney in the shattered shield of gray rock.

It was 11:30 a.m. and very late to be starting an unclimbed and indistinct line on the "wrong" side of the mountain. We both felt the weight of commitment—it would mean a long and dangerous retreat if the line didn't go. But it went. The six roped pitches included two excellent leads in the middle bookended by loose chimneys and corners, where stacks of blocks were poised like unexploded bombs that might go off at the slightest touch. Mark took a 20-foot fall on the final pitch when a moss step collapsed. We can't recommend our route, UXO (1,200', III 5.10 R), but it was satisfying to climb such a large and remote alpine wall. The golden pillar to the right promises hard climbing on better rock, and the right skyline of Bomber's eastern cirque looks to offer a very good ridge route. [Editor's note: In July 1971, Art Bloom, Howard Bussey, Rex Hoff, Ray Jacquot, and Bill Lindberg climbed the "central arête of the east face," following a prominent chimney line on the right side of the face, then traversing left to finish on the central pillar with a few moves of aid (15 pitches, 5.7 A2), AAJ 1972.]

We staggered back over the summit and down talus slopes to the saddle and our camp. The next morning it rained again, and we thanked our lucky stars we hadn't been caught out on Bomber. We met the horses above Mistymoon Lake and strolled out to the road with daypacks, having completed the best week of alpine rock climbing either of us could remember.

—Dougald MacDonald

Images



The south side of (A) Cloud Peak and (B) the Merlon, seen from Bomber Mountain. (1) Rust Never Sleeps (10 pitches, 5.11a, 2014). (2) Southeast arête (1,200', 5.8). (3) No Climb for Old Men (IV 5.11c R A2, Duncan-Jenkins, 2008). (4) South face (5.11a, Matt Cupal and partner, 1988). (5) Super Fortress (5.11+, Bechtel-Lilygren-Model, 1996). This route completes a line started ca 1975 by Dennis Horning and Jeb Schank. (6) East prow (5.7, Davis-Jacquot-Satterfield, 1961, first ascent of the Merlon).



Starting up Rust Never Sleeps (III 5.11a) on the south face of Cloud Peak.



Mark Jenkins at the crux of the Man Who Feared Marmots (5.10+), Paint Rock Buttress.



Paint Rock Buttress with the Man Who Feared Marmots (6 pitches, 5.10+). The hiking route up the southwest ridge of Cloud Peak runs very near the summit of the buttress.



Mark Jenkins starts the third pitch (5.11a) of Rust Never Sleeps on Cloud Peak.



High on the southeast arête of Cloud Peak.



Starting the ninth pitch of Rust Never Sleeps, south face of Cloud Peak.



Highly foreshortened view of the six roped pitches of UXO (5.10 R) on the 1,200' east face of Bomber Mountain. About 750' of fourth- and fifth-class scrambling lies below. The 1971 first ascent of this face followed the chimney at far right, finishing atop the central pillar.

Article Details

Author	Dougald MacDonald
Publication	AAJ
Volume	59
Issue	87
Page	0
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions