



AAC Publications

West Witches' Tit, west ridge, No Rest For The Wicked

Alaska, Coast Mountains

I'm never too surprised when I get an email from John Friehe showing the weather in some obscure part of Alaska. He is one of the best in the country at finding a weather window and capitalizing on it. I trust his judgment and just go along for the ride. My job is to be the safe, upbeat partner and take as many leads as I can.

I had never been to the Devils Thumb area, but I saw from the helicopter flight into the glacier that this was a climbing paradise. We landed around 4 p.m. on May 27, set up our base camp below the east ridge of the Devils Thumb, and unloaded our gear. Using snowshoes, we walked down the glacier to get a daylight look at our planned approach below the south side of the massif toward the West Witches' Tit.

We left camp at 3 a.m. on May 28 and began weaving westward over the glacier. An hour into our approach, I noticed I had lost the front point on one of my crampons; thankfully the secondary points were long enough to justify pressing onward. When we topped the rock rib that rises up toward the east and west Witches' Tits, we were confronted with an overhanging rappel to reach the glacier on the other side. Reluctantly, we decided to leave our tag line—one of our two ropes—in case we needed to return this way. After continuing along the glacier we headed up a prominent snow ramp toward the col below the west ridge of the West Witches' Tit. This involved several hundred feet of mixed climbing and another rappel. To the left of our route the deadly northwest face of Devils Thumb released ground-rattling chunks of ice in five-minute intervals.

Standing below the 1,500' ridge above, I'm not sure either of us believed it looked doable. After a quick snack I began leading, finding tricky terrain from the get-go (80° M6). Above, John and I swapped leads up steep ice, snow, and mixed climbing until reaching a squeeze chimney with brittle ice deep inside the cleft. I took my pack off and went to work, often turned sideways with only one tool and one crampon in the ice; the walls on either side were featureless, and the only thing that really held me into the crack was puffing out my chest. The chimney ended below a large overhang—one of the hardest things I've climbed in the mountains (M7). Above, we continued swapping leads up difficult terrain, pulling on gear as necessary to keep moving.

Near the summit we found rappel anchors from a prior ascent (Belcourt-Rackliff, AAJ 1995). Shortly afterward, around midnight, we reached the top, having completed No Rest For The Wicked (1,500' AI6 M7 A0). Rather than waste our entire rack on a questionable descent route, we decided to use the rappel anchors we spotted, which took us down the southwest face of the West Witches' Tit. Lucky for us, the descent was set for one rope.

We reached the glacier again at 8 a.m. and made our way back to our tagline. What seemed earlier like a lifeline up and over the ridge and back to camp now looked like a disaster in the making; neither of us wanted to ascend the 7mm cord hanging over the roof above. After a 10-minute nap, we descended the glacier in search of another option. A 70° couloir took us over the ridge and under a car-sized chock stone, and then a final rappel off the other side and some downclimbing deposited us a short distance from camp.

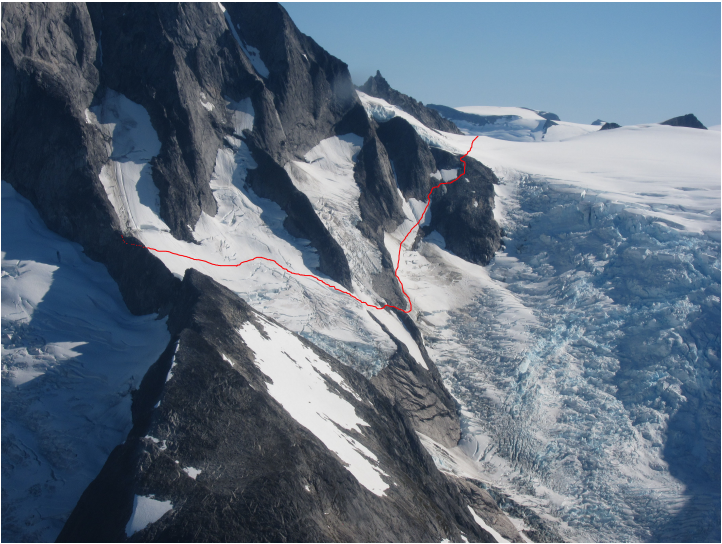
We had told our pilot we would be at camp by noon on May 29. We were late. Through a fog we heard the helicopter scanning in vain for us. We were only 45 minutes from camp when we heard it

retreating to Petersburg. Our pilot refueled and headed straight back. With limited visibility he spotted us and landed before we reached camp. With a foul weather system approaching, we were informed it was our only chance out. Without hesitation we piled in with our crampons still on and ice tools in hand, and left our camp behind. We had only two meals and half a canister of fuel left, and we were glad to get out before the storm.

Overall, it was an amazing trip and a pleasure to be with John on another “smash and grab”—or “smash and leave,” as one of our friends so aptly pointed out.

Jess Roskelley

Images



Looking east toward John Friehe and Jess Roskelley's base camp and their high approach to the West Witches Tit. The rock rib where they made an overhanging rappel is shown on the left.



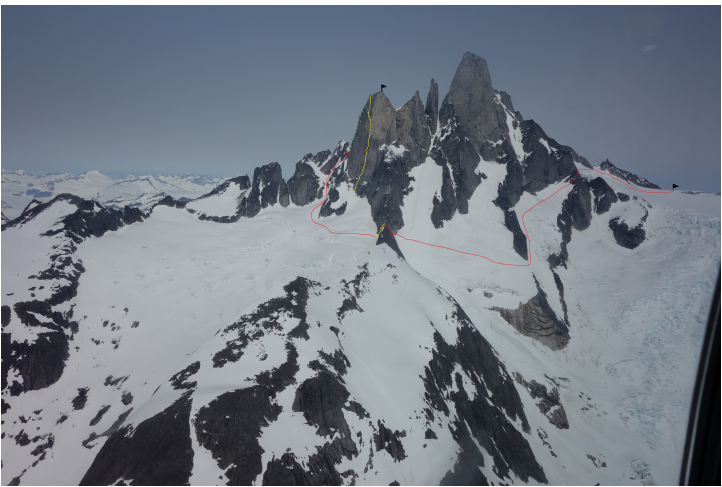
John Friehe coming up the cruiser ice and snow ramp.



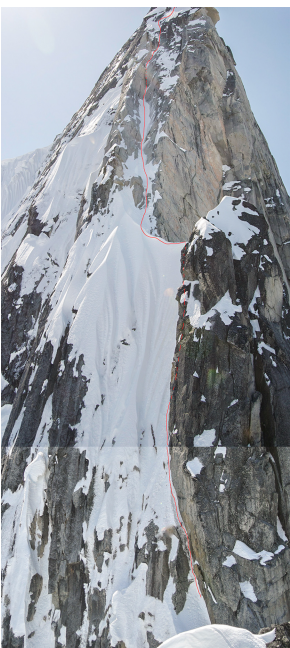
Jess Roskelley leads up one of the difficult pitches at the start of the route.



Jess Roskelley gains a cruiser ice and snow ramp.



An overview of the Devils Thumb massif, showing John Frieh and Jess Roskelley's approach (red), their new route No Rest for the Wicked (green), and their descent line (yellow). Frieh notes that it took about 8--10 hours from base camp to reach the base of the ridge, including multiple rappels and belayed climbing.



A foreshortened view of the west ridge of West Witches Tit showing No Rest For The Wicked (1,500', AI6 M7 A0). The upper ridge toward the summit is out of frame.



Jess Roskelley leads up one of the crux pitches of the route, a smooth, icy squeeze chimney.

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