



AAC Publications

Sendero Luminoso

Two Years of Effort to Free Mt. Hooker's Hardest Route

"Open up, I'm coming in!" I squeeze under the rain fly of the portaledge next to Nik Berry and Mason Earle. The rain is turning to sleet and the thunder's getting closer. The three of us are hunkered down, 800 feet up the north face of Mt. Hooker in the Wind River Range of Wyoming. It's 2013, our first trip into the range, and we've just moved our ledge into the middle of the sheer headwall, right on the prow of this giant backcountry wall.

We count five to seven seconds between flashes and booms. Is five seconds a mile? Or is it seven seconds? We turn up the pop music and dig deeper into the bag of peanut M&Ms, wondering what to do. The rain is pounding. The inside of the portaledge lights up like a strobe. We barely sense the time between a boom erupting and then echoing within the massive cirque of 12,000-foot peaks surrounding Baptiste Lake.

"Holy crap! I'm out of here! See you guys in camp!" I squeeze back under the portaledge fly, clip into the fixed line, and drop away. Mason follows quickly. Nik sits in the ledge for a while longer, contemplating if the wall will dry enough for him to start rock climbing again. Another flash of thunder, quickly followed by a deafening boom. Mason and I are safe at the base, hiding in a massive cave. Nik reluctantly crawls from the ledge and begins his rappels.

The north face of Mt. Hooker lies 20 miles deep in the rugged Wind Rivers. Several high alpine passes guard the wall, which erupts above Baptiste Lake at 10,500 feet. The face was first climbed in 1964 by Yosemite legend Royal Robbins and his team of Dick McCracken and Charlie Raymond, over an impressive four days in horribly cold temperatures. Unlike the sustained crack systems of Yosemite, Mt. Hooker is characterized by discontinuous cracks and flakes, making for difficult and inobvious lines. Robbins' team pieced together these broken features with 200 pitons and nearly no bolts. This marked the first wilderness Grade VI wall in the United States.

In 1990, two teams raced for the first free ascent of the north face. First, Stuart Richie, Mark Rolofson, and Annie Whitehouse made a three-week attempt, falling just 50 feet shy of their free-climbing goal. Just a couple of weeks later, Paul Piana, Galen Rowell, Todd Skinner, and Tim Tola completed the first free ascent via minor variations to the original 1964 route, which they called Jaded Lady (VI 5.12). Rowell recounted in the *AAJ* that Mt. Hooker's north face "had a serious alpine character." He claimed it was the coldest route he had done in North America, comparing it to climbing on Denali, minus the sunny days one might find in Alaska. I can attest that Hooker's north face is shrouded in shade the entire day and often beaten with a freezing wind.

For such an impressive wall, relatively few climbers make the trek to Hooker. But Steve Quinlan was obsessed with the wall, making several trips between 1986 and 1988 to establish Sendero Luminoso (VI 5.10 A4) completely solo. After this he teamed up with big-wall legend John Middendorf to establish the Third Eye (VI 5.10 A4, *AAJ* 1994) over three seasons.

There's no doubt Mt. Hooker's "Nose" is Sendero Luminoso, which takes an improbable and bold line straight up the prow of the formation. It follows the first four pitches of the 1978 Jim Dockery and Rick Bradshaw route Shady Lady (VI 5.11 A4), but where that route trends right into large corners, weaving in and out of the Robbins route, Sendero Luminoso quests out onto the steep, blank headwall for nearly 800 feet. On this monolithic wall, tiny and incipient seams require delicate

piton craft and extensive bird-beaking. These seams connect over and over, in nearly perfect 120-foot pitches, each ending at a wonderful small ledge. The climbing is difficult with modern gear, and in the mid-1980s there's no doubt it would have been at the cutting edge of difficult aid routes.

I spent the spring of 2013 training and preparing for a trip to Pakistan to attempt a new route on the Great Trango Tower. I had been invited by two Polish friends—guys with dozens of expeditions under their belt. It was to be a real dream trip. Then, in late June, a group of terrorists attacked the Nanga Parbat base camp. My trip became complicated and scary, and then fell apart entirely.

In the fallout I drove to the Sierra Nevada, where I ran into Mason Earle. Though we were only acquaintances, he soon invited me to join him and his partner, Nik Berry, out at Mt. Hooker. Just a few weeks later we met in Salt Lake City to start our drive to Wyoming.

Nik and I had never met, but we got along well from the get-go. I love to rock climb and be in the mountains—a lot. Climbing focuses my hyperactive brain and allows me to find clarity and meaning that I often struggle to see in real life. But Nik Berry—he loves to rock climb more than anyone I have ever met. When we got to Hooker, Nik was always the first one out of camp and the last one back, often staying on the wall for the final golden hour in the evening sun.

While hiking to the wall we realized we'd forgotten all of our topos for the existing routes on Hooker. When we began scoping lines our eyes were instinctively drawn to the large, clean, silver headwall on the nose of the north face. We spotted seams cutting across the face and knew this was the line we needed to climb. We got to work the next morning, thinking we were headed into uncharted territory.

Nik excitedly pulls on his climbing shoes and begins connecting obvious features: up a corner to a roof with small gear, then running it out to the belay ledge. One hundred feet later he finds an old bolt, rusty but well drilled. After phoning a friend on our sat phone we find out we're on the existing line Sendero Luminoso. Slightly disappointed, but not surprised, we push on for the headwall above. Mason casts out on the second pitch, the first of many 5.12 leads. He encounters an old bolt ladder we were unable to see from the ground. After free climbing along the line of bolts and rivets he reaches an old anchor. After updating the anchor it's my turn.

An old bolt ladder arches up the wall into slim corners, rooflets, and even thinner seams. Two hundred feet later, I've yet to find anything worthy of building an anchor, so I push over a roof made of puzzle-piece flakes stacked together. Pitons and beaks between blocks threaten to dislodge rock straight down onto Nik and Mason. I shout down warnings and climb carefully. There's a belay stance nestled in a large corner.

The next day, as I aid a thin crack system up and left, I fear that our chances of ever free-climbing this line are dying. The crack has finger locks here and there, but the higher I go the thinner it gets. Beaks became the go-to protection, nailed into the slightly offset seam. I clip the anchor and yell my doubts to Mason.

At the same time Nik is three pitches below, swinging around on a fixed rope and exploring the blank face to the right of the old bolt ladder and the desperate thin seam I had climbed the previous day. He's excited because the rock is featured with thin patina face holds. With the rope fixed on my pitch, Mason begins jumaring and cleaning the gear up the beautiful A3 seam. Within moments he is fingering holds in the middle of the pitch, pushing on footholds, grabbing and pulling on edges, and gastoning the seam. He shouts up, "Dude! There are holds on this! I think this is going to go! It totally has holds!"

Nik follows, brushing and scrubbing the holds, chalking and ticking a few. Atop the pitch, we deploy

the portaledge as the icy wind picks up to gale force. I'm rejuvenated by the idea that this beautiful seam could be free climbed. In honor of Leo Houlding's A1 Beauty pitch on El Cap's Prophet, and of trying to tackle the impossible, we dub the pitch the A3 Beauty.

For now we keep our focus on the 1,000 feet of climbing above our portaledge. Mason is first onto the sharp end the next day. The seam continues up the headwall and out of sight for another 500 feet. From the ground it had looked so blank. Now the angle appears less severe, with texture and features abounding. For Nik and Mason there are enough holds to provide hope.

That first season at Mt. Hooker we spent 18 days in the mountains: two days hiking, two rest days, and 14 days of climbing. The weather was difficult. Afternoon storms were regular, and the ice-wind demotivated and froze us. We established seven new free pitches before escaping to the right in a bizarre and accidental traverse, eventually joining Shady Lady to reach the summit. Most of the pitches were between 5.12c and 5.13d. (At the time Nik and Mason suspected the crux was 5.14a, but the following year, while releading the pitch, I broke a piece of rock in the seam, easing the grade slightly). After our new free linkup, we also repeated the entirety of Sendero Luminoso using a mix of free and aid techniques.

During that first trip I led many of the pitches first, aid climbing them and moving ropes up the wall. I soloed the two hardest aid pitches on the route: serious A4 nailing with beak tips barely hanging from terrible, closed seams, and all above ledges. I was worried they'd crumple me like a soda can if I fell. Mason and Nik worked hard down below, using the fixed ropes to unlock the secrets of a free route.

The three of us shared a vision for a big-wall free climb, and we worked together to realize that dream. Completing the entire aid route of Sendero Luminoso had been an important goal for me in its own right. At camp we debated the ethics of our tactics and decided we felt good about the style: aiding the route and then unlocking and freeing the pitches. While the rock was amazing quality, every pitch needed cleaning and deciphering. A true ground-up free attempt would have presented far too much deadly X-rated climbing.

After seeing all of Sendero Luminoso, we knew we had to return and complete our vision for the entire route, seeing the original line go free to the summit.

"Oh, these things are bomber, right?" Mason asks, hammering small beaks and pitons into the start of an A4 pitch. Dikes crisscross the wall to the left of the seam, and after a few pins Mason fearlessly steps out of the aiders to free climb leftward. After about two meters he places a small hook and drills a quarter-inch bolt. Calmly, he launches into thin, off-balance movements. It's not until later, when I free climb through this section, that I realize the climbing's very hard 5.12.

It's August 2014, and after the long hike in we've gotten straight to work. By the third day we've passed our free climbing high point from 2013, and now we're exploring a variation across the face to the left of an A4 pitch. Nik, Mason, and I each take turns pushing this pitch a little higher, hooking and drilling bolts on the dike-covered wall. Eventually Nik takes the lead and free climbs up to the high point. Like Mason he makes the 5.12+ climbing look easy. Once he drills another bolt up high, he lowers to the belay and Mason goes back up, adding one more bolt to the blankest section of face. The third 5.13 pitch on the route is ready to go.

Nearly 1,200 feet up the wall, the ninth pitch is the final difficulty. It looks wild but climbable, and we are sure there is a way to free the flared seam. Several hours of scrubbing grain and grit yield the fourth 5.13 pitch of the climb, an incredible and powerful lieback with a wild, head-high kick-through to get a foot onto a small, perfectly placed knob. "I'm headed down, I'll make dinner," I tell the guys before rapping off the wall to base camp.

Over smoked herring burritos, we resume the dreaded and difficult discussion about climbing ethics. At this point we knew the whole route would go free. The previous season we'd added only a single bolt to the A3 Beauty—a pitch that still requires fixed beaks and pitons for free climbing protection. Mason had led the second 5.13 pitch on scary, preplaced triple-zero cams and micro nuts. These tactics would not lend the route to being repeated in ground-up style.

Before our 2014 trip we had received a lot of excitement and enthusiasm from other climbers, expressing interest in repeating our route—and that was before we'd freed the entire line. In order for the route to be repeatable by anyone not interested in first climbing A3+ and then free climbing above poor, small beaks, we needed to add several more bolts.

Low on the route we had diverged from the original aid climb and established two long and excitingly bolted face pitches through immaculate thin patina. While these pitches had required bolting, they did not fall on the original route, allowing us to feel comfortable with our decision to add permanent protection. Now it was different.

"It went to voicemail again." After three days trying to call Steve Quinlan on our sat phone we make the difficult choice to add bolts to the route. We know the bolts will make the free route highly desirable and repeatable from the ground up—one of the hardest wilderness big-wall free climbs in North America, just as it was the hardest wilderness aid wall in 1964.

The next day we finish equipping the route and then take our first rest day, eight days into the trip. Mason's hoping to redpoint the A3 Beauty, and both he and Nik want to lead the whole route in a ground-to-summit effort. Rest days are spent fishing in the incredible Baptiste Lake, and thanks to the horses that packed in our gear we're fully stocked with food. As usual there's no one else around.

Nik and I wake early for the ground-up push. Mason is going to continue working out the A3 Beauty. By 7 a.m. the wind is howling full force and clouds are in the sky. Despite truly arctic temperatures and completely numbed-out fingers and toes, Nik climbs all the way to the top without falling, leading the most difficult pitches.

In our final days we both hope that Mason can finish preparing and rest up for his ground-up push. During this time, Nik and I repeat the wild and exciting Jaded Lady in a day. After a rest, Mason easily redpoints the crux A3 Beauty on our 12th morning, but the weather begins to deteriorate that evening. Mason still wants to free the entire route, but with clouds and a bitter wind, he and Nik make a last-minute decision to jug past the crux pitch and free climb from there to the top, allowing Mason to redpoint all the pitches and realize his hard-earned summit.

"The weather looks like shit out here!" I say to the others as they lie in the tent the next morning. It's on me to jumar nearly 900 feet up the wall and clean all our ropes and gear while the others pack camp. Clouds and rain swirl overhead. I lose sight of the ground in a light squall. Four hours later, everything is packed and we begin the long hike out.

A couple of months after returning home I finally connected with Steve Quinlan. We talked for over an hour about the Wind River Range, Mt. Hooker, and all his years of climbing there. I told Steve about the bolts we had added to protect 5.13 climbing. I felt good telling him that we had first repeated the route in ground-up style, aiding or free climbing the pitches as he had done. There was no doubt we had to stick our neck out in order to reach each anchor.

I was nervous to tell Steve about these details of the free route, but he offered his good graces and some sage words. He told me he didn't care if we had to add a few bolts. We weren't accountable to him. He had had his experience on the route. He said the next generation would climb and judge the route that we left behind, just as we did with his creation.

Lucky for us, whether aid or free, Sendero Luminoso is a hell of a line.

Summary: First free ascent of Sendero Luminoso (VI 5.13d), with some variations, on the central prow of Mt. Hooker's north face in the Wind River Range of Wyoming. The 14-pitch route has four 5.13 leads, three of 5.12, and seven of 5.9 to 5.11. David Allfrey, Nik Berry, and Mason Earle completed the route in August 2014, with Berry and Earle leading every pitch free. [See AAJ 2014 for Nik Berry's report about the first year.]

About The Author: David Allfrey was raised in California and learned to climb in the Sierra Nevada. He now lives in Las Vegas but will always think of Yosemite as a second home.

Images



David Allfrey leads a beautiful corner on pitch five (5.11c) with Mt. Hooker's "private" pool, Baptiste Lake, below.



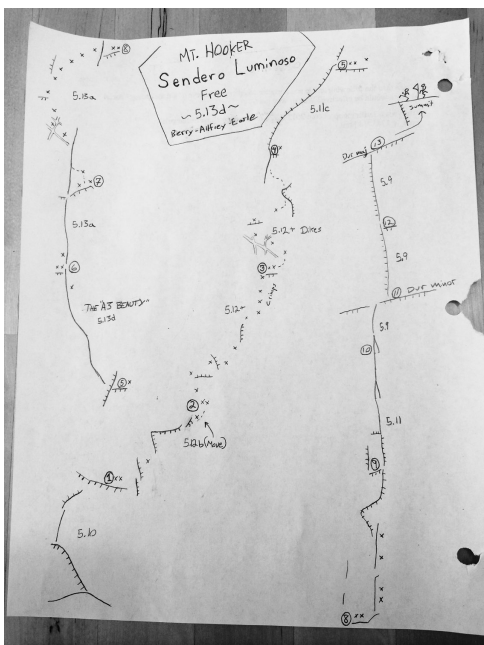
Mason Earle leads the A3 Beauty, a 5.13d pitch on Sendero Luminoso.



Mason Earle at the belay below the A3 Beauty, with a storm brewing in the Wind Rivers.



Nik Berry eyes the crux of the second pitch (5.12b), the first of seven pitches rated 5.12 or harder.



Topo of the free Sendero Luminoso.



The north side of Mt. Hooker, showing Sendero Luminoso. The 2013 free ascent escaped right after seven pitches to end on Shady Lady. In 2014 the climbers freed the full line.



David Allfrey leads out the A3+ seam—the A3 Beauty—that would later be free climbed at 5.13d.



Mason Earle climbs pitch seven, one of four 5.13 pitches, while David Allfrey belays on the portaledge below.

Article Details

Author	David Allfrey
Publication	AAJ
Volume	57
Issue	89
Page	0
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions