



AAC Publications

Choss Odyssey

Alpine-Style And All-Free On Baffin's Big Walls

"Rock!" The choss bomb exploded onto our haulbag and tag line. "You've got five meters left!" I yelled up to Sean. The ropes fed surprisingly quickly through my belay device, and when they came short Sean continued to tug. "I can't stop here," he yelled. I swore I could hear him laughing. "There's no gear and the rock is too loose. You'll have to start climbing!"

The thin lead lines traced a curve into an overhanging dihedral and up to Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll, the Irish-Belgian Beast, who was using his impeccable bridging skills to cop a no-hands. I tightened my shoes and started climbing. Ten meters up, I found a shoe-box-size stance where I could pull up the haulbag and clip it to me. I shouted, "Okay, man, you've got 10 meters of rope now." Ten meters higher the same scene replayed. Finally he settled into a broken belay stance, hauled the bag, and brought me up.

What had seemed from my belay like solid rock had proven to be dangling choss and decomposing kitty litter. The psyche and inspiration I'd felt at the base of this wall was quickly being replaced by a feeling of uncertainty and despair. I was confused—I wanted to bail—I had gravel in my underwear—I wanted to climb splitter cracks—I wanted to climb this huge line in a push—I didn't want to disappoint my partner or my captain Bob. At the belay the words came out as angry and frantic gibberish. Sean looked at me from behind his dust-covered beard like I was kidding. He asked me to calm down. I slumped onto the belay and looked around.

We were six pitches up the Great Cross Pillar in Sam Ford Fjord. High pressure was dominating the weather pattern for the first time all month. Polar Sun Spire, the Turret, and Broad Peak stood proudly across Walker Arm from our position on the 1,000-meter formation. This was a legendary place. We could be heroes. If only the rock would get better.

Baffin's eastern coast is well known for the huge walls that rise out of deep, ice-choked fjords, including the 1,400-meter Polar Sun Spire and 1,200-meter Walker Citadel looming over Sam Ford Fjord and Walker Arm. Baffin's fjords are iced over some eight months of the year, and prior to 2014 not many teams had ventured into the fjords during the ice-free months. Most climbs here have involved weeks of effort and extensive aid in subfreezing temperatures. A notable exception was the July 1992 expedition of Conrad Anker and Jonathan Turk, who piloted kayaks through broken sea ice and completed the first wall routes around Sam Ford Fjord. Their [AAJ](#) report reads like a multi-sport adventure race of snow machines, sea kayaks, rock climbing, and chess with pack ice.

To plan an expedition to this area during the summer months you need a team that has flexibility in their schedule and access to a sturdy boat. In 2010, Captain (and Reverend) Bob Shepton had invited Nico and Olivier Favresse, Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll, and me aboard his 10-meter sailboat, the Dodo's Delight, and over the next three months we climbed nine big-wall first ascents on the west coast of Greenland before sailing back to Scotland across the North Atlantic ([AAJ 2011](#)). Four years later, Bob had left his boat to winter at the shipyard in Aasiaat, on the west coast of Greenland, and he was looking for a climbing team and crew to join him for the summer of 2014. Sailing 400 miles from Greenland to Baffin Island seemed like an ideal way to access the big walls of the eastern fjords. I had wild dreams where global warming had reduced the icebergs to just the right size to fit in my glass. I envisioned our strong team climbing wall after wall and eating salmon nigiri on the beach below Polar Sun Spire. In a barrage of emails between 79-year-old Bob Shepton

and our crew of thirty-somethings (whom Bob calls the Wild Bunch), a plan began to unfold.

We met in Aasiaat on July 5, my 39th birthday. This time everything seemed familiar—we knew where the portaledge would fit just right in the small boat, where Bob liked to store the condensed milk for his coffee, and which bunks were least likely to transfer mold to your sleeping bag. The Arctic sun illuminated late-night bouldering sessions on rocks we'd first climbed four years earlier. We hung the sails, topped off the water and gas tanks, and toasted our great fortune in being together for another summer of adventure.

Partnering with Bob and Belgians has been one of the highlights of my climbing career. Nico, Olivier, and Sean are famous for their climbing, but also for their mandolin, accordion, and flute music. Any time the psyche begins to ebb, out come the instruments. Through the years of our partnership I've learned to play the harmonica and the spoons, and even Bob gets in on the action with a bead-filled egg. On an expedition, handmade music has the effect of bellows breathing air into a fire. Music brings life into those spaces of expedition life that climbing can't satisfy—downtime isn't a downer anymore. As we sail around scouting climbing objectives, Bob is as giddy as a schoolboy, deeming some lines proud and denouncing others as too easy. At almost 80, he is an inspiration with his love for adventure and (mostly) good humor.

The online charts still showed sea ice intact around the Baffin settlement of Clyde River and the eastern fjords. Not wanting to get too soft while we waited for the main event, we started exploring the massive complex of fjords around Umanaaq, Greenland. During the next month we established five new lines on crumbling sea cliffs. [See Climbs and Expeditions.] We also climbed around 100 new boulder problems, gained weight on the unlimited cod and muscles we harvested, and saw dozens of whales as the weeks ticked past.

In early August reports finally showed that pack ice had slipped free of Baffin's coast. We had been in contact with a Canadian team that had been in Clyde River for a few days, also trying to reach Sam Ford Fjord by boat, and received word that after a few false starts their outfitter had managed transport them to a base camp near Polar Sun Spire. On August 5, we finalized our supplies in Umanaaq and steered west into Davis Strait.

After four days of sailing and dodging pack ice and polar bears we reached Clyde River. Still unsure of exactly which fjord we intended to visit, we headed up the coast. As we sailed through the night on glassy seas, the sun began to dip below the horizon for the first time of the season, giving us a multi-hour show. After a 24-hour voyage, Olivier steered Dodo's Delight into Sam Ford Fjord and we began scanning cliffs for lines. On August 9, after a close call when the engine ran out of fuel as 30-knot winds pushed us toward shore, we dropped anchor in an inlet below Walker Citadel. This would be our home for the next two weeks.

Bad weather plagued us for several days. Snow started to pile up on the north-facing walls. Global warming seemed like a myth. We spent the days fishing for the fabled arctic char, hangboarding in a dry cave uphill from our anchorage, and motoring around the fjords to scope walls. We focused our attention on the sunnier aspects of Walker Citadel and got psyched on the 1,200-meter northeast and southeast pillars, which promised great alpine-style climbs if we ever got stable weather.

On August 15 we awoke to clear skies and were surprised by the sight of a large sailboat pulling into the fjord. The Novara was en route to the Northwest Passage but wanted to see the legendary walls first. That evening we joined the crew for chicken curry, all the wine we could drink, and an epic jam session. Outside, the sunset burned for hours in the clear Arctic evening. We rowed back to our own boat filled with energy, and impulsively decided to go climbing. It was 10 p.m., we were tipsy, and our skin was thin from bouldering, but the excitement was infectious. Nico and Olivier decided to have a go at the southeast pillar of Walker Citadel and set out on foot. Sean and I decided on a smaller objective across Walker Arm. Bob dropped us off at midnight.

We walked the base and scoped lines in the dwindling light, finally choosing a series of dihedrals on the right side. I started the first pitch in near darkness. Though the rock was far from perfect, cracks appeared in just the right places. We continued up steep, loose dihedrals through the pale night, hauling a small bag with the bare essentials. Sunrise greeted us with alpenglow on the symmetric massif of Polar Sun and Beluga spires, just across the fjord. Sean led out a 10-meter roof via a perfect hand crack for the crux. By the seventh pitch, thick cloud cover hid the summits, and a storm seemed imminent.

Partway up this pitch, I spotted a new, blue static line hanging down into the dihedral. One name kept ringing in my head like the sound of a hand drill: Libeck! Is there anywhere that guy hasn't been?! In May 2014, Mike and his partner had spent 12 days aiding a line that started farther to the right. [See *Climbs and Expeditions*.] We began to find two-bolt and cam anchors every 50 meters or so, and we stripped the gear to use later. Snow began to fall on the last pitches, but the rock got better and better until we were jamming a perfect fingers splitter up a steep slab. We topped out in a howling snowstorm after 12 all-free pitches.

From the summit we tried calling Bob and the others with our VHF radio. Before dropping us off the night before, he had been complaining about a sore appendix, and we wondered how he was getting along. There was no response. We decided not to eat any of our remaining food until we knew what was up. We walked down a huge gully to the shore, dug out a low cave in the talus, and lay on our ropes, rising occasionally to try the radio. The snow turned to rain. We had no means of protecting ourselves against bears and no way to tell time. I awoke from a nap to the sound of a horn, and Sean bolted upright so quickly he slammed his head on the roof of the cave. The storm had made it impossible for Bob to come looking for us sooner, and before long we all were back on Dodo's Delight.

During the same storm, Nico and Olivier climbed almost 20 pitches of Walker Citadel's southeast pillar before bailing. They were able to traverse off via a ledge system and descend a loose gully with only a few rappels. The weather stayed bad for another week, but on the 20th the skies cleared and Nico and Olivier set out for their second attempt on the Walker Citadel. However, they soon called for a pickup—the wind was too strong near the wall.

Sean and I woke early on August 21 to no wind and clear skies, and Bob ferried us in the dinghy to the base of the northeast buttress of the Superunknown Pillar on Walker Citadel. We put on our rock shoes directly at the waterline and began simul-climbing in huge blocks, with difficulties up to mid-5.10. We followed a huge, red dihedral system with decent rock to a scree-covered ledge about halfway up. Above this we continued on perfect cracks until, at three-quarters height, we realized the clear skies had disappeared. I put on more layers and started leading the next block. Sean joined me below an icy chimney and gave a wide grin. He loves this sort of thing—the wider, the looser, the sketchier...keep it coming. It was snowing heavily now and we put on our waterproofs. Two long, wet pitches later, I wrapped the ropes around a snow-covered rock on the summit of the Superunknown Pillar and belayed Sean to the top. We had been climbing about 12 hours.

The descent options seemed bleak. Our original plan had been to pioneer a way over to the Favresse brothers' rappel line, but in current conditions we could barely see the nearby walls. We had brought a topo of the Gagner-Lovelace aid route Superunknown (AAJ 1996), which showed two-bolt belays all the way down the 4,000-foot face. It was a questionable decision to head into irreversible terrain on a steep, blank wall, but finding the nearly 20-year-old line of bolts proved easier than expected, the line was steep and clean, and after five hours we met Nico and Oli, with the dinghy, at the base. Soon we were enjoying a civilized dinner in our floating apartment, wondering if it had even happened or if we had imagined it all.

A few days later the Favresse brothers set out for their third attempt on the southeast pillar of Walker Citadel. The weather forecast looked solid for a few days. Sean and I packed up bivy and climbing gear, and Bob dropped us below the Great Cross Pillar, about an hour away from our

anchorage. We had no protection against the polar bears except for a few flares, so we chopped out a sandy campsite about one pitch up the rambling initial wall. The next day we climbed and fixed the first five pitches of a new route. A pair of peregrine falcons swooped above our bivy ledge.

On the 1,200-meter southeast pillar, Nico and Olivier encountered difficulties up to moderate 5.12 as they climbed cracks, faces, and chimneys on generally solid rock. During the night, they were surprised by a snowstorm that once again coated the rock. They dug deep, and in the early morning the skies cleared. They topped out the southeast pillar in bright sunshine and enjoyed the feeling of hard-won success as they found a way down the mountain on foot. Back on Dodo's Delight, Bob informed them that he'd omitted the negative part of the weather forecast the day before to ensure they'd get the route done, exercising a "captain's prerogative." Thus the route name: Shepton's Shove. Olivier returned with a large dent in his helmet.

Back at Great Cross, Sean and I were disappointed to find that our idealized line was a pipe dream of overhanging and closed seams. Scrapping our big-wall plans, we scanned for another option and convinced ourselves that the steep, obvious dihedral system in the middle of the wall (well to the right of the existing climbs) would be the best choice for an alpine-style ascent when we returned. Stuck without radio contact, we waited several days at our camp on the ledge, sleeping with a flare between us in case a bear showed up, before the seas calmed enough to return to the mother ship.

Reunited with the rest of the team, we motored across Sam Ford Fjord to Swiss Bay, which was about the same distance from Great Cross but would allow radio contact. We rested another day and swam in the icy waters flowing from distant glaciers. With stable weather ahead, Nico and Olivier planned to try the unclimbed east face of the Turret, while Sean and I would go for broke on the Great Cross dihedral.

On August 28 we juggled five pitches back to the big ledge below the main wall of Great Cross with supplies for a long push. Sean started leading the dihedral, and it quickly became apparent the rock was horrendous. After climbing four and a half pitches of the worst choss of my life, with Sean stretching the rope and urging me on, he took a whipper on lead and I pulled the plug on our attempt. After five adventurous routes in Greenland and Baffin, with countless loose pitches, enough was enough. We cleaned our fixed lines and returned to camp.

While Sean and I felt the sting of defeat for the first time on this trip. Nico and Olivier managed the first ascent of the 900-meter east face of the Turret and open-bivied on top of their new route: Life on the Kedge. The next morning they rappelled the south pillar route (1987). They reported splitter cracks and sustained 5.11 and 5.12 climbing, with mixed rock quality. Olivier told me that at times it was just about bad enough to bail—I think he was just trying to make me feel better. This time Nico returned to the boat with a broken helmet. The captain was proud.

Sam Ford Fjord had delivered four new all-free routes in three weeks. Our vision of which lines seemed appealing and feasible had needed a bit of an adjustment. Obviously, everyone wants to find clean splitters up the biggest, blankest faces, but from what we saw those lines are best left to the wall rats. For free climbers there are abundant options on beautiful formations, but it takes a little luck, time, and patience to find them. Having a trio of badass Belgians doesn't hurt.

Regrouping in Swiss Bay, we took stock of our food and fuel. With two and a half weeks until our flights home from Greenland, there was plenty of time for more exploration, so on September 1 we sailed north, past the cliffs of Scott Island and into Gibbs Fjord. It felt like Indian Summer as we sailed to the south tip of Sillem Island. It wasn't yet truly dark at night, but we could see stars and the occasional aurora borealis for the first time all summer.

The southern wall of Gibbs Fjord hosts the most impressive walls and the best-looking rock, but at that time of year they were almost permanently in shade. The other side faces the sun, but the rock seemed loose. At this point we were all feeling a bit gun-shy about choss. Nico and Sean scoped an

impressive but cold arête on the south side, and after a day of picking blueberries in the sun they headed out, planning to camp at the base with supplies for a few days. Olivier and I decided we couldn't motivate for the level of adventure these walls would require, and we gladly stayed with Bob aboard the Dodo.

Sillem Island felt like one of the most isolated places on Earth, and I reveled in the raw nature and beauty. Olivier and I went for a long walk on September 4, leaving the gun behind, and heading up a steep hill toward the top of the island. We could see massive icefalls cascading between big faces and into cold, dark water, and we could look across Gibbs Fjord to the wall that Nico and Sean were climbing. The gray and gold rock near the top of the wall was just entering the sun for a few hours before a long, cold evening. We had left the summit, laughing and talking loudly, when Olivier stopped short and made a strange sound. I looked up and saw a bear, just 15 meters away, running the other direction.

Holy shit, a polar bear! was all I could come up with. We watched in awe, laughing nervously, as the bear covered about a mile in five minutes across rocky terrain. It stopped, sniffed the air for a while, and then started walking back in our direction. The laughing stopped. The bear came about halfway back before turning again and heading across the mountain. What was it doing up there? The only good answer was it had followed us up the mountain, hoping for an easy meal, but had been frightened off when we appeared, large and loud, above it. Bob, who was a bit disappointed that Olivier and I weren't climbing, concluded the bear must have been a "small female."

Nico and Sean started climbing early in the morning in cold and snowy conditions. Thin clouds covered the wall, coating the rock features in a snowy mist that only cleared for the last part of the climb. They topped out near dark after climbing 900 meters of clean cracks, with mostly solid rock and difficulties up to 5.11+, much of it covered in snow. The pair spent the night rappelling their route, Walking the Plank, as we slowly sailed back to pick them up.

Later that day we sailed out of Gibbs and into the large bay known as Refuge Harbor, toward the end of Scott Inlet. There are nice boulders here, and we talked of making the long walk into the Stewart Valley for a recon. But after a few cold, snowy days we made the tough decision to begin the journey home. We didn't know it yet, but our adventure was far from over: We would run out of water and battle a storm before making it back to Greenland. But after two and a half months and 10 first ascents the climbing was finished. Morale was low. But only for an hour or so. Then the epic jam session began.

About the Author: Ben Ditto is a professional photographer, alpinist, and rock climber. He lives in Bishop, California, with his wife, Katie Lambert, when he's not adventuring around the world.

Images



Sean Villanueva stems past icy rock on the Superunknown Pillar.



Captain Bob Shepton and the Wild Bunch lived 10 weeks aboard their floating base camp, the Dodo's Delight.



The Plank Wall. The 900m first ascent mostly followed the obvious arête.



Olivier Favresse sheepishly displays his brother's helmet, broken when Olivier dropped a rock off the east face of the Turret.



The Walker Citadel (ca 1,200m), showing the approximate lines of (1) Shepton's Shove (Favresse-Favresse, 2014) on the southeast pillar (a.k.a. Drunken Pillar). (2) Superunknown (Gagner-Lovelace, 1995). (3) Imaginary Line (Ditto-Villanueva, 2014), with rappel descent by Superunknown. (4) Mahayana Wall (Helling-Libecki-Mitrovich, 1998).



Olivier Favresse on the Drunken Pillar of Walker Citadel. The Favresse brothers made two attempts on the pillar before succeeding on a single-push ascent, climbing through a nighttime snowstorm with difficulties up to 5.12.



Nicolas Favresse follows a wide crack during the first ascent of Walking the Plank.



Sean Villanueva reaches for the warming sun during the first ascent of the Plank Wall above Gibbs Fjord.



Nicolas Favresse living Life on the Kedge, the first ascent of the 900m east face of the Turret.

SAM FORD FIORD

Looking Tower: Up the Creek Without a Paddle (500m, E5 6A).
 Joins New Dog, Old Tricks (0.53 C7); Hoag L. Beckli, 2010 after six pitches. Walk-off descent. Dito-Villanueva, August 15-18

Walker Citadel, Superunknown Tower: Imaginary Line (2,000m, E3 9a). Red groove and crack system on right side of the tower. Rappel descent by Superunknown (Cagnier-Lovellon, 1995; Dito-Villanueva, August 20-22)

Walker Citadel, Southwest Pillar (a.k.a. Drunken Pillar); Shadler's Show (2,000m, E5 6B). Obvious route line with crux pitches near the top. Walk off to south and down/gully. Favresse-Favresse, August 23-24

The Turret, East Face: Life on the Kedge (900m, E5 6B).
 Change pillar right of huge chimney spotting the east face. Rappel descent by Seria Route (south pillar). Favresse-Favresse, August 28-29

GIBBS FIORD

Plank Wall, north-facing wall (20 92 N, 71 43 W). Walking the Plank (500m, E4 6a). Climbs mostly left of prominent water. Rappel descent. Favresse-Favresse, September 4-5

1841! The 400-mile crossing of Davis Strait took four days each way. During the return voyage, the climber/sailors nearly ran out of water and battled a serious storm. Jeremy Collins

The 400-mile crossing of Davis Strait took four days each way. During the return voyage, the climber/sailors nearly ran out of water and battled a serious storm.

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