



AAC Publications

Beluga Spire

The All-Free First Ascent

Our team of four Canadians departed from Clyde River, Nunavut, with little certainty that we would reach our destination. We had decided against the traditional snowmobile approach to Sam Ford Fjord over sea ice because we wanted to free climb during the milder summer months. But we were denied access to the open ocean of Baffin Bay by a slow-moving flow of pack ice. Thankfully our Inuit guides were more persistent than postwar Polish alpinists and were deaf to the sounds of the crunching ice on the hull.

After hours of glacial progress we popped into the open ocean and speedily made our way to a base camp below the Turret, near the junction of Sam Ford Fjord and Walker Arm. Crosby Johnston, Paul McSorley, Tony Richardson, and I sat staring, smiling, and babbling about unclimbed walls, with the enormity of the place and the very palatable tastes of coastal, Arctic and alpine flavors flooding our senses.

With a favorable forecast, including highs of 20°C, we started gearing up for the big hunt: the north face of Beluga Spire, one of the last unclimbed big walls in Walker Arm. We packed our bags with enough food and bivouac gear to outlast an Arctic storm high on the wall, and added a couple of survival suits for the ride across the fjord in our 11-foot tin boat.

[The following story is told in photos.]

[Below] The north faces of Polar Sun Spire (left) and Beluga Spire, showing (1) Dave Turner solo attempt (2009) and (2) Harpoon (1,100m, VI 5.12) by the 2014 Canadian team. The Canadians descended by traversing south and then east behind Polar Sun Spire.

[Above] Accessing Beluga Spire was a significant logistical challenge. We had rented an 11-foot boat with a 2 hp Yamaha engine, barely adequate to carry four climbers and gear. To retrieve the boat after we descended, we also had a two-person inflatable raft and custom ski-pole paddles. Luckily, during the retrieval mission, the tides and winds were in our favor. **[Below]** We climbed the wall as a team of four with two dynamic ropes; the second would follow with a belay while the others used Micro Traxions to self-belay or jug. Here, Paul jugs past the second-to-last pitch, which included a 30-meter runout in a squeeze chimney. Paul later described his position as “Olympian detachment from the world below.”

[Above] We started the route late on July 31 and climbed until our circadian rhythms encouraged us to sleep, as none of us brought a watch. We found small pieces of ice to melt for water and just enough ledges to fashion workable sleeping arrangements. **[Below]** Crosby led the first block of the Harpoon Headwall, a series of featured cracks and corners leading to the very apex of Beluga Spire.

[Below] At night the red sunsets cast a smokey hue over North America's greatest walls, including the Walker Citadel at left. We summited late on August 2, and during the five-hour descent we traversed five kilometers of ridgeline and two more peaks to get back to camp.

[Below] After climbing Beluga the team wanted to establish a free climb up the Turret, and we knew it would take not only a creative eye but also a handful of bolts. The Precambrian granite and gneiss of Walker Arm is beautifully featured but rarely has continuous crack systems. We climbed about 450 meters over two days, placing 12 bolts for anchors and face climbing, before poor weather forced us down. Here, Tony tries to connect the dots on the unfinished west face. Afterward, on August 8, Crosby and I climbed a new line up the Turret's north pillar (5.12 A1) in 11 hours. Our style on the north pillar was born out of necessity but also to contrast with the style of the west face.

[Above] The Turret from the northwest. (1) North pillar (1987). (2) Johnston-Lavigne (2014). (3) Nuvualik (1995). The unfinished Canadian line starts right of Nuvualik, and the south pillar (1987) is farther right. Life on the Kedge (Belgian, 2014) is opposite. **[Below]** We started up the north pillar in freezing conditions, and at first we couldn't use bare hands on the rock. Crosby, a renaissance man, wrapped the reflective lining from his backpack panel around his torso to retain heat. I cut the toes off my socks to make ankle warmers.

[Above] Tony on a 5.11 pitch on the west face of the Turret. Deep in Baffin's fjords the weather is often up to 10°C warmer than in Clyde River, as it is more sheltered from ocean winds and currents. But if the wind blows from the northwest, be ready for chilly weather, as the Barnes Icecap is only 30 kilometers away.

About The Author: Joshua Lavigne is a climber and IFMGA guide living in Canmore, Alberta.

Images



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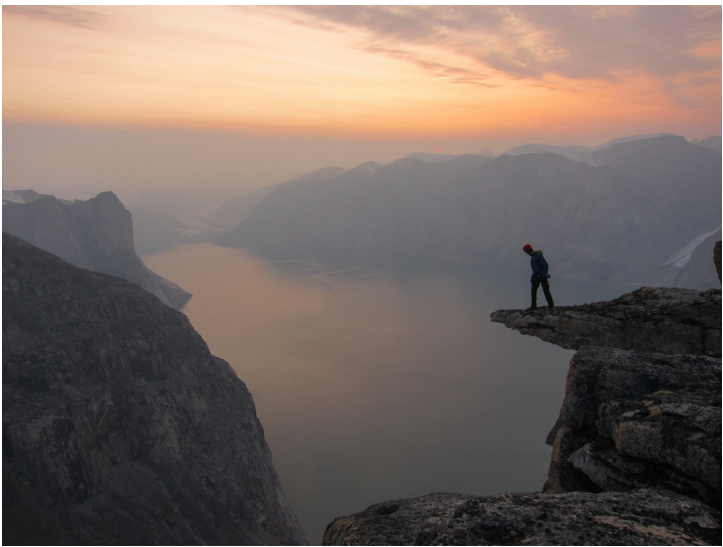
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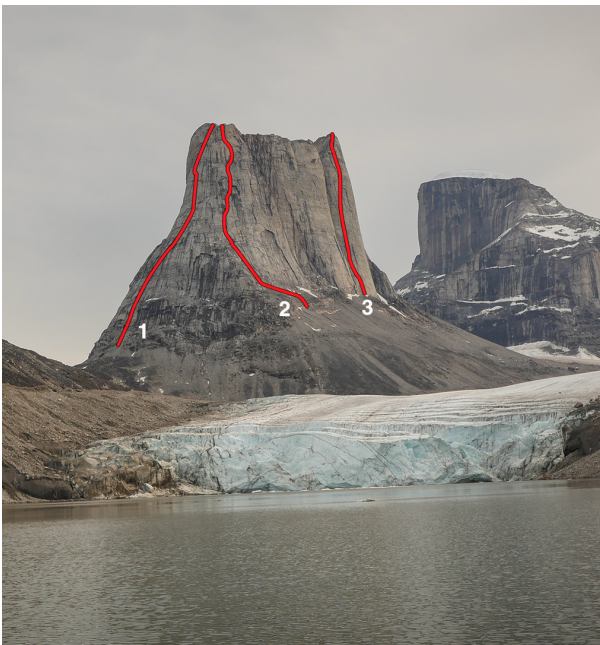
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