



AAC Publications

Mt. Deborah, Northwest Face to Northwest Ridge, Bad To The Bone

Alaska, Hayes Range

On April 18, Jon Griffith and I were dropped by helicopter on the upper Gillam Glacier in the Hayes Range. This beautifully harsh set of mountains is less conducive to climbing than the granite ranges farther west—ultimately that is their charm.

Upon landing we were immediately met by foul weather, which over the next 24 hours escalated to gale-force winds. All of our tent poles snapped and our base camp was destroyed. We managed to escape into a half-dug snow hole to sit out the next two days of extremely harsh weather. Once the weather passed, we excavated our gear, food, and destroyed tent from under newly drifted snow. By day four we finally had base camp in good shape, with a spacious snow hole to live in. It was also the first day we saw Mt. Deborah (12,339').

We hoped to climb a new route up one of the huge faces on Deborah's north side. A diamond-shaped face on the northwest aspect had caught our attention while scouring the mountain with Google Earth. After a quick recce of the face on skis, we were pleased to discover this face seemed relatively safe from objective hazards and had an obvious line from the 'schrund to the northwest ridge (Cady-Nash-Nolting-Watts, AAJ 1977). [Editor's note: Mt. Deborah has seen various new routes on its west and north aspects since the 1970s but never an ascent by this steep northwest face.]

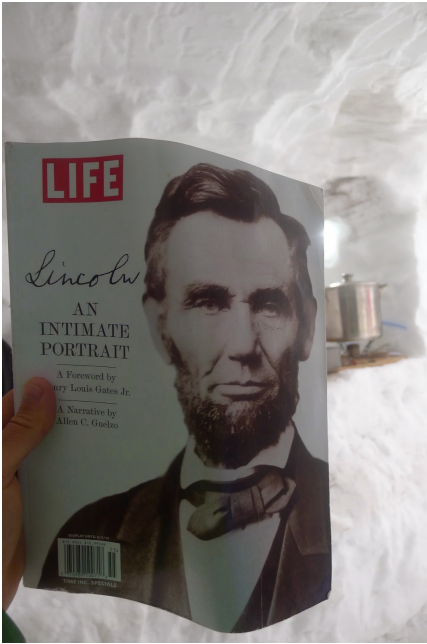
We started climbing on the sixth or seventh day after arriving in base camp. Two avalanches, likely caused by cross loading from the storm, had us very nearly turn around at the base. However, we persevered and climbed 1,000m or more on steep and sometimes nearly vertical névé, snow slopes, and some thin ice smears through rotten rock to a point on the upper northwest ridge. We were forced to make a long traverse about two-thirds way up the face due to large avalanches releasing down our intended exit (a few hundred meters higher than our actual exit); we were very lucky to have a traverse option at that point. This took us about 16–18 hours.

very windy night on the ridge, inside our bivy tent, was followed by a beautiful dawn and another 1,000m of gain to the summit of Deborah. From our bivy, this involved several hundred meters of easy ground, then traversing for several cold and thought-provoking hours along a knife-edge ridge reminiscent of a reptilian spine. The summit itself is a house-size cornice. "Let's call this the summit," I said to Jon, as I reached his belay a safe distance from Deborah's dorsal-like crest. [Editor's note: At least one climber has broken the summit cornice while standing on it. See AAJ 2000.]

From the summit, we descended the south face. Twelve inventive raps off threads and bollards and some downclimbing deposited us on the Yanert Glacier. We descended this glacier for approximately 1km before ascending the south side of the northwest ridge to reach our bivy from the previous night. Here we spent another night before traversing down the lower northwest ridge for approximately 1.5km the next day. Upon reaching a notch in the ridge we had previously identified from base camp, we made about 15 abseils under threatening cornices to the upper Gillam Glacier and our camp. The fuzzy high of whiskey overtook our beaten bodies as George Thorogood's "Bad to the Bone" found its way out of our speakers. It seemed to fit: Mt. Deborah had indeed been Bad to the Bone (approximately 2,000m climbing).

– Will Sim, U.K.

Images



Life in the snow cave after the team's base camp tent was destroyed in a windstorm.



Jon Griffith starts across the team's traverse at two-thirds height on the northwest face.



Will Sim leading up the northwest face of Mt. Deborah.



Will Sim on the icy northwest ridge of Mt. Deborah, day two of the climb.



Will Sim on a recce of the northwest face of Mt. Deborah.



The northwest face of Mt. Deborah, showing the route Bad to the Bone (2,000m). The route climbs the northwest face to two-thirds height then joins the northwest ridge route (Cady-Nash-Nolting-Watts, AAJ 1977) to the summit. The climb and descent were quite involved, taking the climbers three days

round-trip from their base camp.

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