



## AAC Publications

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### **Obelisk, Southwest Face, Emotional Atrophy**

Alaska, Revelation Mountains

**There would be no sleeping. The wind moaned a slow, agonizing cry among the summits and the lenticular clouds. My partner, Tad McCrea, was also awake, and we just lay in our base camp tent, listening in silent fear.** Despite our snow walls, the wind seemed to blow right through us. As the ferocious storm roared in, our four-season tent flattened, with the fabric stretching and poles creaking. "We're not going to make it through the night," I thought. Like a captain talking to his battered ship amid a tempest, I begged the tent to survive. "Hold strong," I pleaded. Tad and I weren't expecting a windstorm when we landed under halcyon skies a day earlier. Now, in the northern heart of the Revelation Mountains, we felt alone and adrift. "Should I put my boots on?" I wondered.

Early March's morning twilight eked through our sagging tent walls. Now the winds were only gusting to 80mph, but our snow walls were defeated and the glacier was scoured. We spent all day digging, excavating a snow cave under the flat glacier. We couldn't survive another night of wind without it. By that night, the brunt of the storm had passed, but ceaseless wind followed for another five days. We resigned ourselves mostly to the tent and the snow cave, barely escaping long enough to catch a glimpse of our distant prize, the unclimbed monolith Peak 9,304'.

Tad was running out of time and the wind had yet to subside. We called for a weather update: It would calm the next day. We woke at 4 a.m., but the incessant wind persisted. We rolled over and tried to sleep. By 11 a.m. the winds had subsided and only a quiet aura remained. Our pilot had to pick Tad up in less than 24 hours, but we skied away from camp in rapid procession anyway. The south side of Peak 9,304', a mountain I had long called the "Obelisk," held its triangular form as we approached.

Now on the face, a snow-filled chimney held my picks but threatened to spit me out. After a rope length, a grainy crack offered a decent spot for an anchor. Above this, Tad led a long block of simul-climbing to the base of an ice-streaked headwall. The summit was still many thousands of feet above us. We retreated, and Tad reluctantly flew out the next day as John Giraldo arrived and took his place, fresh and unbeaten by the storms.

John and I quickly reached the previous highpoint on the Obelisk, and I searched for courage to confront the looming ice above. A bad ice screw penetrated snow and aerated ice, then a few feet higher I found a good, small cam. "Watch me, John," I muttered, "this is really hard and scary." My tool shuddered and reverberated as it penetrated nominal ice and struck the granite slab underneath. Another swing and a wide stem and I was still moving upward. I swung again, only this time the tool broke through the ice and into air. A two-inch crack! Hanging there, teetering on my pick, I excavated the crack and placed a dreamy cam. The crack continued for another 15 feet. Difficult climbing continued, and I searched for an anchor as the rope came tight. As John followed the crux, I studied my anchor of small cams and pins in bottoming cracks.

Above the crux, we continued in long blocks of simul-climbing. The absence of the wind seemed so strange, and the sun burned our faces. We approached the summit in the afternoon (March 22), high above most of the surrounding peaks. On top, I thought back to the stress of the previous week, and I pushed the pain of a failing relationship from my mind. I thought silently of two words: Emotional Atrophy (1,000m, WI5 M6 A0). Now on the summit, I found a brief moment of long-desired tranquility.

– Clint Helander

## Images



The southwest face of the Obelisk (Peak 9,304'), showing the route Emotional Atrophy (1,000m, WI5 M6 A0).



Clint Helander below the crux pitch (WI5) on Emotional Atrophy, during the first attempt with Tad McCrea.

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