



## AAC Publications

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### Neacola Mountains: New Routes, Attempts, and Packraft Adventure

Alaska, Neacola Mountains

**A couple of years ago, a photo of unclimbed spires rising out of glacial ice sparked the inspiration for an expedition to the Neacolas, a remote subrange of the Alaska and Aleutian ranges.** The dream soon grew beyond climbing these peaks to include forging an overland route back to civilization through the wilderness. Craig Muderlak, David Fay, and I planned to fly into the Neacola Mountains, attempt climbs on the granite spires, and then make our way back to civilization using skis and packrafts.

The obvious problem was the amount of gear we'd need. Climbing big, technical mountains and surviving on a glacier requires tons of equipment—the fact that we'd be returning by boat and on foot meant we'd have to cut corners. We crammed food into burnable containers and made hand-sewn camera bags out of Dyneema fabric and foam. Seats came out of the packrafts—we'd use sleeping pads. David constructed the Settlers of Catan board game out of cardboard. We even hand-made wooden skis that we could use on the glacier and then burn to avoid having to bushwhack with them. When the plane dropped us off on the Pitchfork Glacier on May 12, we didn't really know if the skis would last for three weeks, but we were committed.

With much favorable weather, we were able to make attempts on several mountains above the Pitchfork and Neacola glaciers. First we set our sights on the prominent northwest buttress of the Citadel, first attempted by a British team the year before (AAJ 2016). However, our attempt ended early due to warm conditions. The ice had melted to slush and wet avalanches rumbled all around us. After a warm spell we returned to the peak and aimed for a narrow slot on the northwest face that we called the Sliver. Climbing at night when the snow was firm, we ascended névé and ice through some mixed steps to a corniced ridge atop the northwest buttress. Facing deteriorating snow conditions and a prominent headwall above, we retreated after 3,000 (AI4 M3 90°). Our attempted route provided expedient and fun climbing to the upper headwall of the mountain, and would be best completed in colder conditions.

The real prize on this expedition turned out to be what we least expected: splitter rock climbing. While ice melted and wet avalanches rumbled all day, we turned our attention to the east buttress of Dog Tooth (ca 7,150'), a 1,200' gem of clean granite first climbed in 2011 (Chriswell-Johnson-Thrasher, AAJ 2012). We first established Red Dihedral (1,200', IV 5.10+) on quality stone on the main south-facing wall of the east buttress, left of the original route, and then a week later returned to attempt the picturesque south prow. After climbing four pitches up to 5.11c, we retreated when the cracks disappeared into shallow seams. The good weather continued, and the next day we tried another crack system, clad in the cut-off jean shorts we'd hauled up for fun, because you can't put a price on morale. Following continuous finger cracks linked by tricky face climbing, we put up Birthday Jorts (1,000', IV 5.11a) on David's birthday, all free and on sight. [Editor's note: The group's two completed lines and their attempt all lie to the left of the 2011 route, which generally follows the eastern ridge of the Dog Tooth. Both of the 2016 routes end atop the summit of the east buttress, without continuing to the summit of the mountain. A rappel line was established down the right side of the buttress' south face.]

Climbing at night when the snow was firm allowed us to also make the first ascents of two peaks. A triangular-shaped peak at the head of the north fork of the Pitchfork Glacier caught our eyes from camp. On May 18 we ascended to the west-northwest col of the peak, then followed snow couloirs

around the northwest aspect to a mixed step near the summit, completing Shred Mode (2,000', 70 M4). We named the peak Spearhead (ca 7,100', 60°49'58.5"N, 153°18'43.3"W Google Earth).

A week later we skied down to the Neacola Glacier and climbed an attractive spire along a shoulder east of Peak 6,310' that we called the Wing.[Peak 6,310' was first climbed by Joe and Joan Firey with George and Frances Whitmore on June 25, 1965. This ascent had been unreported previously, but is documented in correspondence archived in the University of Alaska Anchorage / Alaska Pacific University Consortium Library. See also AAJ 2016 for a climbing history and map of the Neacolas.] **We climbed the peak, again at night, via snow slopes on the northeast and north sides to the west col, from which we climbed 100' of fun, steep 5.7 rock to the top (ca 5,700', 60°51'11.4"N, 153°24'02.5"W Google Earth).**

During our time spent on the Pitchfork Glacier a larger unknown loomed in our minds: our return to the sea through some 60 miles of wild terrain. Our loads weighed 110 pounds each when we began skiing down the Pitchfork in the Arctic twilight. Sixteen miles later we reached the toe of the glacier, where we shuttled loads over moraines to the headwaters of the Glacier Fork of the Tlikakila River. The next morning we inflated our packrafts and pushed off into the rushing current.

Camped at the confluence of the Glacier Fork and the main Tlikakila the next day, we faced a major decision. We either had to schlep 330 pounds of gear over a mountain pass and then descend the Drift River, or we could try to bushwhack and raft our way to the Big River over terrain where we wouldn't be able to use the map. This territory had been submerged beneath a glacially dammed lake when the map was drafted in the 1950s. That glacier has since receded, and now a descent through thick forest and along a rushing river would lead to a new lake. Eager to be done with snow travel, we burned our wooden skis on a gravel bar and committed ourselves to making it to the Big River.

After hauling our boats over Lake Clark Pass, we encountered Class IV and V whitewater that was too burly for us to float, and we were forced to portage. Shuttling loads through slide alder was slow—in two days we gained less than four miles—and we spent the night camped in the rain and mosquitoes, dreading our return trip in the morning for the remaining gear. Stress, doubt, and scant rations wore us thin, and countless grizzly tracks meant we couldn't let our guard down. After two days of bushwhacking and running rapids, we finally reached the iceberg-studded lake at the headwaters of the Big River. The next day we floated 35 miles out into the vast coastal plain. Shorebirds and seagulls appeared, and Craig spotted a harbor seal. On the sixth day of our voyage from base camp, we paddled the last miles to the river's mouth and awaited our pilot at the edge of the ocean. – Drew Thayer

## Images



On the second attempt on the northwest face of the Citadel, the climbers aimed for a narrow slot that held the promise of ice. Craig Muderlak encountered steep ice and plenty of névé in the Sliver.



Drew Thayer climbing steep snow on the Citadel.



Drew Thayer pulls onto the arête on the second pitch of the team's first new route on the Dog Tooth:



Red Dihedral (1,200', IV 5.10+).



Drew Thayer follows a perfect splitter on the Dog Tooth, pitch four of Red Dihedral.



Flat water along the coastal plain, with the mountains behind and the smell of the ocean in the air.



Treacherous rapids during the exit from the mountains sometimes demanded portages, a slow and arduous process.

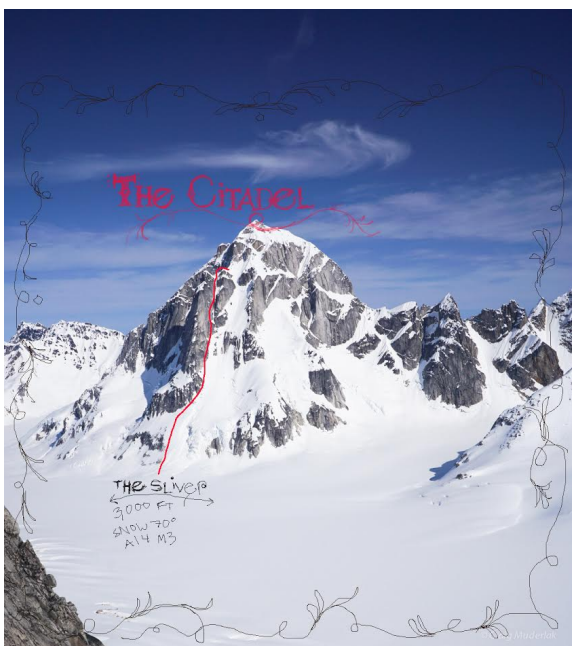




The climbers left base camp saddled with 110-pound loads, setting off toward the distant ocean. Fortunately, their handmade wooden skis held together for 15 miles of glacier travel.



"It was hard to part with our homemade skis after three weeks of glacier travel, but they would become a hefty burden in the thick alder forests that we knew were coming. David Fay cooks our last dehydrated mushrooms on our farewell fire."



The Citadel, showing the attempted line via a feature the team dubbed the Sliver. The northwest buttress is just to the left.



Craig Muderlak climbing a splitter hand crack on the second pitch of Red Dihedral on the Dog Tooth.

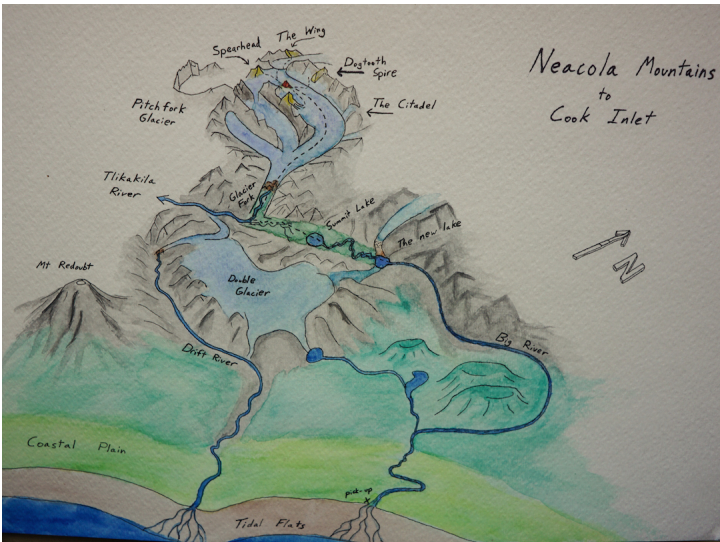


Craig Muderlak traversing to another crack system on pitch three of the attempt to climb the south prow of the Dog Tooth.





The Dog Tooth, a 1,200-foot chunk of clean white granite, showing the two completed routes and one attempt from 2016. All three of these lines are to the left of the peak’s 2011 first ascent route.



The Neacola Mountains and the peaks climbed and attempted in 2016. The expedition had two potential routes to the sea: the Big River and the Drift River. After much deliberation they chose to attempt the crossing of unknown terrain past Summit Lake, over Lake Clark Pass, and down the Big River.





Craig Muderlak inflates his raft at the headwaters of the Glacier Fork of the Tlikakila River.



The previously unclimbed peak named Spearhead, showing the route Shred Mode (2,000', M4 70°).



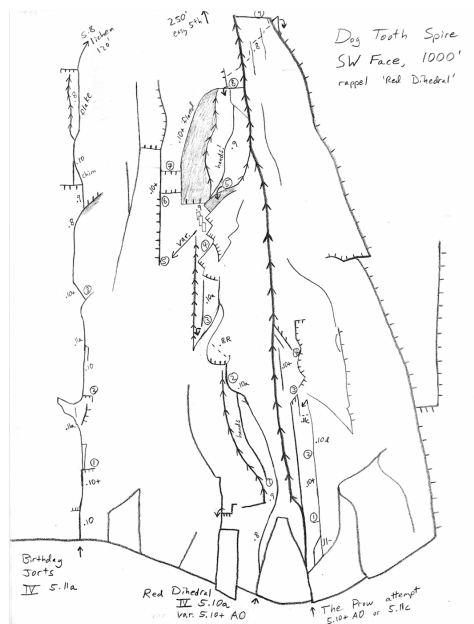
"The success of our expedition hinged entirely upon these hand-crafted planks of wood. Without them, we'd be sinking up to our waists in sun-baked snow. David Fay inspects the skis."



Drew Thayer leads a runnel of ice on the Sliver.



## Alaska-Size Adventure



Topo for new routes on the Dog Tooth, Neacola Mountains.

Article Details

Author	Drew Thayer
Publication	AAJ
Volume	59
Issue	91
Page	0
Copyright Date	2017
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions