



Mystical Realm

A Remote Big Wall in the Ramparts of British Columbia

HALFWAY UP the ten-pitch headwall, at yet another hanging belay, Tony looked at me with a grin. “Normally I climb with someone first, you know, before venturing out on a big climb like this.”

It’s true: We had never roped up before. I’m also 20 years Tony’s senior; I used to climb with his dad. Tony and I had worked together for a few weeks in Oman, humping seismic cables around the Jebel mountains. Still, it was a leap of faith when he texted me: “Interested in climbing Postern with me? The macdaddy of unclimbed walls!... If you already have plans maybe you should bail on them...lol...you will be pretty psyched on this wall.”

I had taken some photos of the elusive Postern Mountain the winter before, on a wildlife-study flight with Parks Canada, and I had offered to share them with Tony. I remember being blown away by the sweeping buttresses and walls that make up the 2,944-meter peak’s northwest aspect. Alpine rock has always been my favorite part of the climbing spectrum, and I have enjoyed putting up new lines in many of the remote ranges in British Columbia. But I had never made a journey into the Ramparts.

I knew that Tony and Jason Ammerlaan had attempted the northwest side of the peak two years before. Halfway up the ultra-steep headwall, the top in their sights, a hand injury had sent them packing without the reward of the summit. I bumped into Tony on the touristy streets of Jasper while they were on their way home. His eyes were wild as he told the story of their attempt. Although he was reticent to specify exactly where they’d climbed, I surmised it was Postern.

Last August, a rare solid weather forecast had Tony scrambling for partners. After the recent birth of his son, Jason had declined the invitation. Tony must have spun through his digital Rolodex a few times before he texted me.

Two days later we met in a parking lot in Jasper National Park that smelled of horses and bug spray. We danced the familiar jig of racking up for a five-day adventure. Bolt kit? More like pins. Jumars? A Grigri will do. Crampons? A single ultralight ice axe should be sufficient. Before we knew it, we were ready.

WHAT MAKES the Rampart Group very unusual in the Canadian Rockies is that the peaks are formed of solid, blocky quartzite instead of the typical shattered limestone. It takes a solid day or more to get to the base of these mountains, and few climbers make the arduous hike. Among the 37 peaks that make up this range, only 16 new routes were recorded in the past 40 years. Most notable was the Lowe-Hannibal Route on Mt. Geikie (ca 3,270m), climbed in August 1979—part of George Lowe’s grand cours hat trick (Mt. Alberta and Twins Tower being the others). Honky Tonquin (VI+ 5.10 A3)—another outstanding line on the north face of Geikie—was climbed by Scott Simper and the late Seth Shaw over nine days in 1996 and is still unrepeated. Our planned route up Postern Mountain lay in the next valley to the west, in British Columbia, stepping up the remoteness another notch.

Twenty-five or so kilometers of mostly pleasant hiking had us sleeping under the stars on a pretty little grass bench perched above Amethyst Lakes. In the morning we stashed our big packs under a

quartzite boulder and marched up to the Bastion- Drawbridge Col, which separates Alberta and British Columbia. From there we could see the profile of Postern and the descent we hoped to take, down the steep wall separating Postern from Casemate Mountain to its southeast. It looked like a lot of hiking, climbing, and rappelling.

We dropped about 800 meters to the valley floor and picked up a rope, hammer, and some pins that Tony and Jason had stashed two years prior. After a desperate (for me) boulder-to-boulder leap across Geikie Creek, we hiked downstream and made dinner. We guessed there would be no water for a couple of days, so we guzzled and then filled two liters each to carry. At about 6 p.m., we started up the arduous scree cone toward the foot of the northwest face. The dark, 1,000-meter wall loomed as we slowly made our way to the toe of the northwest buttress, which forms the left side of a narrow amphitheater, and which John Catto and Mark Hesse had climbed in 2001 in an impressive four-day ascent. Tony's mellow vibe allowed me to bury my doubts as we started gearing up. But not for long.

Before I had my shoes on, Tony disappeared around the corner and started up the near vertical buttress, following ramps and crack systems, soloing terrain on which I would have enjoyed a rope and a belay. I yelled up, expressing my concern, but he assured me it was no big deal and added that we had about 400 meters to solo before we roped up. Great. I sucked it up and followed him, with what felt like gray matter leaking into my eyes but was really only sweat. I did ask for the rope once, as I really didn't want to die, and was grateful when it slithered down to me.

The shadows grew long as we meandered up the buttress. I finally caught up with Tony as he flaked the rope and switched on his headlamp in preparation for a couple of steeper pitches. My pack tugged at my back as the beam of my headlamp narrowed my reality to the small circle of light in front of me. It was hard to appreciate the good crack climbing and solid rock after such a long day, but I tried.

At a big ledge system, we unroped and traversed right for 20 meters, away from the Hesse and Catto line and directly underneath the headwall. At a semi-flat spot under an overhang, we silently shuffled a few big rocks, blew up our sleeping pads, tucked ourselves in beneath the one lightweight sleeping bag we carried, and passed out. We were right on schedule.

0600 CAME FAST. We brewed instant coffee, scrambled out right on the huge ledge, put on our rock shoes, and for breakfast did a little more soloing up to the base of the true headwall. The sky to the north bore strings of cirrus clouds, silky and foreboding. Fresh wind lifted the roar of the rowdy creek into the amphitheater, disturbing the stillness. Neither of us mentioned these changes. We were where we were.

A pitch below the imposing orange headwall, we made a belay and Tony climbed around a corner and disappeared. I paid out a bunch of rope, and after what seemed like a long time he yelled, "Secure!" To my surprise, he now was about 15 meters below me, with no gear between us. He had downclimbed a vertical wall into a traverse that I wasn't interested in soloing—I ended up down-aiding, pulling on gear as I descended. On the ledge beside Tony, my eyes scanned upward to trace the only viable weakness, a line of thin cracks, roofs, and bulges.

Tony led up the dihedral, and it looked hard right away. Clean and compact, the orange quartzite was streaked with white and black horizontal bands. Thin cracks provided good gear and jams. Face holds were in short supply, but bomber. Everything was overhanging—like nothing either of us had ever seen on an alpine climb. When I joined Tony at the belay on the second pitch, still huffing and puffing after pulling on the last few pieces of gear, he mentioned that Jason had onsighted this pitch during their attempt. It felt like 5.12 to me.

Apparently, this was the easy part. The climbing soon got harder, and we slowed. On some of the

pitches I juggled with the Grigri and a prusik, while Tony hauled the packs with two Micro Traxions. We climbed six pitches of sustained, hard 5.11, with some tricky aid sections. Tony pounded beaks and knifeblades to patch together discontinuous cracks. This took us to a small ledge—Tony and Jason’s high point. I couldn’t imagine rappelling from here and hiking all the way out. A wave of gratitude for their efforts washed over me. Still, I silently hoped the climbing would get easier. It didn’t.

We shuffled left for five meters to the only obvious weakness that split the upper headwall. Tony shot me the “want to take over?” look, but I thought it made sense for the monkey 20 years younger to keep on keeping on. The name of this game was to get to the top of the wall before dark. The thought of hanging in my harness all night thwarted any desire I might have had for the sharp end.

Tony battled hard through roofs and changing corners, employing technical trickery to free as much as possible. But the unrelenting compact rock and difficult (or absent) protection forced him to stand in slings from time to time. Whatever it took. As the wind intensified and the sky darkened, our outrageousness exposure and isolation truly sunk in.

Nearing the end of the headwall, after three more long pitches, the rope slithered in fits and starts through the Grigri as Tony led on. He was out of sight and silent. Finally I heard him scream, “Secure!” He was 50 meters out. The 6mm tag line hung three meters out in space. I hadn’t seen him in an hour.

I was just taking him off belay when I heard him yell something else that was stolen by the wind. I hesitated and then yelled back for clarity. More chopped half words. I kept him on belay, and after a pause the rope began to move. Finally I caught “secure!” again. Juggling the impressively steep pitch was challenging, and I took huge swings due to the lack of directionals after Tony’s abundant back-cleaning. As I slid my prusik up the taut rope, I could only hope the cord wasn’t running over a sharp edge.

Lost in my personal battle, I still marveled at the beauty of our position. We weren’t desperate or miserable or cold. We were doing exactly what we’d come for. Pulling around another small roof, I saw Tony’s Cheshire grin as he leaned over the rim, with his chalk bag protecting the rope from a nasty razor slot at his feet. He was standing on top of the headwall.

Postern Mountain (2,944m) in winter. (1) Catto-Hesse (2001).
(2) Mystical Realm (2016). Photo by Tim McAllister

AFTER THE TYPICAL, awkward high-five-to-hug combo, we took a moment to absorb our position. My sweat from juggling cooled as the last light to the west faded behind worrying clouds. We untied and scrambled over ledges, looking to find a bivy sheltered from the wind. A snow patch provided much-needed water. We settled on a large slab and fashioned a tarp shelter. Strong winds buffeted the tarp all night and, like a married couple, we fought over our small mummy bag.

Dawn broke cool and windy—but still no rain. The views of the upper Fraser River and the steep black buttresses of the south face of Mt. Geikie were spectacular. I tried to make out Mt. Robson to the north, but it was obscured in the murk. I radioed Jasper Dispatch to let them know we were fine. My friend Gord, warm in his dispatch seat, told us nonchalantly that he had just seen the final Tragically Hip concert in Ontario. It felt like we were in a different realm.

We made our way back onto the northwest buttress for the final three long pitches of the Catto-Hesse Route—superb 5.10d on perfect quartzite. The thin cracks were technical, and route-finding was tricky. We summited in midmorning under gray and windy skies and started immediately down the ridge to the southeast, the line Rex Gibson and Ernie Niederer had followed in 1927 for the peak’s first ascent.

The ridge was longer than expected and loose in places. As I followed Tony around a gendarme, a block the size of a mini-fridge pulled out like a cash register from under my feet and crashed a thousand feet down a horrendous gully. My feet cut loose but my hands gripped a solid ledge. I almost puked with fear. A couple of raps to avoid steep downclimbing plunked us on the broad col between Postern and Casemate.

From the col, we downclimbed a lower-angle face to the east, toward Geikie Creek, patching together a labyrinth of ledges and grassy patches. An hour later we began six or seven 60-meter rappels to reach a small, steep pocket glacier. We hacked away at the hard gray with our one tool to chip steps—trying not to blow it. Our efforts felt pathetic, comical—but the consequences of being so far out there were real.

Back at Geikie Creek, I chose to wade across this time instead of making the huge leap across the boulders. As I searched for a suitable location, Tony made the jump and grabbed my stashed poles to ease my crossing. We choked down a couple of bars and started the thousand-meter grind up to the col, and then back down to our original bivy site, on the eastern side of the Ramparts. The next morning we woke, wet and weary, to fresh snow on the ground. Our climb was only the third ascent of Postern Mountain, and, in our opinion, a timely progression of style and grade. Elated, we shouldered our packs for the last time and slogged toward Jasper. A giant grizzly scat filled with purple berries pointed the way down the snowy trail.

Summary: First ascent of Mystical Realm (1,000m, 5.11d A2) on the northwest face of Postern Mountain (2,944m) in British Columbia, Canada, by Tim McAllister and Tony McLane, August 18–22, 2016 (round trip from trailhead). The climb shared the first 300m and final 200m of the Catto-Hesse Route (2001) on the northwest buttress.

About the Author: Tim McAllister lives near Invermere, British Columbia, in the shadow of the Bugaboos. He works full-time as an IFMGA guide and is always plotting new routes on obscure cliffs in his backyard.

Images



During the approach, the climbers hiked over the Bastion-Drawbridge col and 800 meters down the other side, then around the right side of Postern to reach its northwest face. They descended the southeast ridge (left skyline).



Approaching the technical climbing on Postern after the long approach.



Tony McLane beginning the sixth pitch of Postern's headwall, near the high point on his 2014 attempt with Jason Ammerlaan.



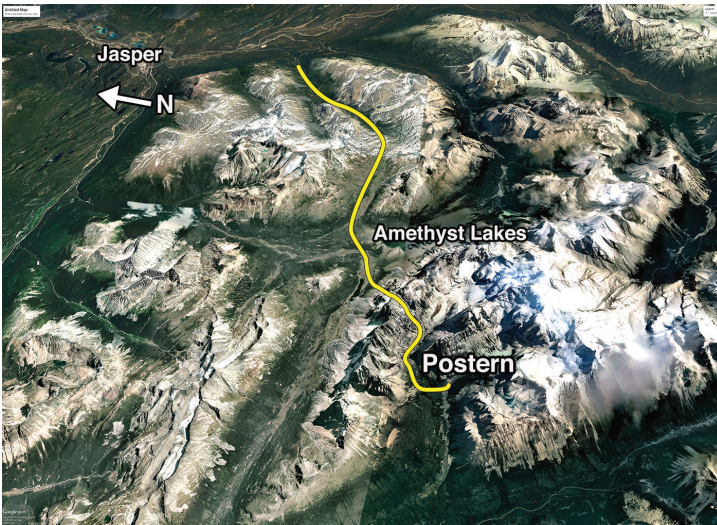
Looking down from Postern to the headwaters of the Fraser River, one of Canada's longest rivers.



Tim McAllister stares down some mandatory strenuous free climbing during a traverse on the fourth pitch on Postern.



Tony McLane leading a steep pitch on the northwest face of Postern Mountain.



The climbers' hiked 25 kilometers up Portal Creek to Amethyst Lakes, then over the Bastion-Drawbridge col, to reach Postern Mountain.



Postern Mountain (2,944m) in winter. (1) Catto-Hesse (2001). (2) Mystical Realm (2016).



Steep climbing on the northwest face of Postern Mountain.



Tim McAllister follows pitch nine, way, way above the headwaters of the Fraser River.

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