



AAC Publications

Mt. Hunter, North Buttress, First Solo Ascent to Summit and Speed Record

Alaska, Alaska Range

In May 2012, I attempted to solo Begguya (a.k.a. Mt. Hunter, 14,573') via the North Buttress, and in a state of extreme exhaustion I turned around and descended from only 100m below the summit.

One hundred meters is not a lot of mountain, especially on a route that gains about 2,000m, with the steepest and most technical climbing in the first two-thirds of that height. But since it was an objective that I really cared about, I knew I wouldn't feel satisfied with that near miss. In the end, I'm actually somewhat happy that I didn't succeed in 2012, because in the intervening years I have progressed significantly as a climber, and thus the style of climb that I finished this year is one that makes me prouder than the style of climb I nearly completed five years earlier.

On May 12, 2017, I woke up around 4:30 a.m., skied up to the base of the North Buttress, and at a deliberately relaxed pace labored up to the bergschrund, which I crossed at 6:35 a.m.

Through the first rock band, I climbed on essentially the same line that I had established in 2012, and while I'm sure it is the easiest route through that rock band, it still contained two bits of trickier climbing, which were the most technical of my entire ascent. [Haley's line through the first rock band is well to the right of Deprivation (Backes-Twight, 1994).] The first was a sort of dihedral between rock and serac ice, climbing with my left foot and hand on rock and my right foot and axe on ice. The second bit of tricky climbing was a few meters of rock at the top of the rock band, exiting onto the first ice band. I was established on the first ice band by 7:44 a.m., about 70 minutes after crossing the bergschrund. My line through the rock band is exposed to some serac hazard, but I'd estimate that I was only in a dangerous area for about 40 minutes.

I labored up and left on the first ice band to link up with Deprivation at the base of the second rock band. There was dramatically less ice in this rock than there had been in 2012, but fortunately the climbing remained easy along moderate ice.

At about 9 a.m., I arrived on the second ice band and started making a long traverse to the right to join up with the upper portion of the Björnberg-Ireland Route (1980). Here I was again exposed to serac hazard for a short period, but I deliberately increased my pace and was out of the dangerous area in less than 30 minutes.

In 2012, I had followed the Björnberg-Ireland all the way to its junction with the original Japanese northeast ridge route (1971), at the top of the North Buttress, but there I had spent perhaps an entire hour tunneling through the cornice. Knowing better this time around, I instead veered up and left, climbing the classic final ice slope of the Bibler-Klewin (1983) to gain the top of the buttress. I reached this spot, the "Cornice Bivy," at 11:53 a.m., about five and a quarter hours after crossing the 'schrund.

In four previous trips to the top of the North Buttress, I had only managed to reach Begguya's summit once, despite trying hard every time to do so, so I knew to not underestimate the difficulty of ascending the upper northeast ridge to the summit. Therefore, I was quite happy to see tracks in the snow from another party. After a quick break to eat and drink, I started up the ridge, looking forward to cruising along a trail. A couple of minutes later, only about 100m of distance and 10 vertical meters from the Cornice Bivy, the tracks came to an abrupt end at a section of narrow ridge. After feeling

briefly disheartened, I continued on my way, and the crazy purist inside me felt a little relieved that I would have to “earn” my solo ascent all on my own.

There were just a few short steps of AI3 along the way, and after some short pockets of calf-deep trail breaking, the snow became pleasantly firm—boot-top at most, and often less, which is of course a huge boon compared to deep trail breaking. Once past the steps of AI3, I pulled out my iPod and enjoyed the non-technical cardio exercise, except for one section of crevasses where I turned off the music and carefully picked my way through what I believed to be the safest possible route.

I arrived on Begguya’s summit at 2:22 p.m., 7 hours and 47 minutes after crossing the bergschrund. After eating some food and drinking some water, I started down. The descent to the Cornice Bivy went easily, and at 4:15 I was making my first rappel down the North Buttress. Much of the upper ice band had a fair amount of snow stuck to the ice. This made finding good ice for Abalokov threads difficult and down-climbing relatively easy, so after three rappels on the upper, iciest bit, I down-climbed most of the top ice band.

The rest of the descent was just a long routine of making Abalokov anchors and pulling the rope. Descending 1,500m of steep terrain with a single 80m rope makes for a lot of rappels, and I would guess that I did 40 to 45 raps. However, rappelling is probably the one type of climbing activity involving a rope that is actually faster alone than with a partner, and by 9:53 p.m. I was below the bergschrund. (I had preplaced a few anchors at 40m intervals low on the Bibler-Klewin during a “cragging” day with Mikey Schaefer a week earlier, the biggest concession of style on my solo round trip.) At 10:20 p.m., I was back in Kahiltna base camp.

The entire ascent and descent had gone so quickly and easily that I almost immediately started wondering if I had built the objective up in my mind to be more difficult than it was. Compared with my epic the previous year on Sultana [a.k.a. Mt. Foraker, see [AAJ 2017](#)], the whole thing felt like a walk in the park. However, while I do think that soloing the Infinite Spur is a greater accomplishment than my recent solo on Begguya, I also believe it is easy to conflate an epic with a great accomplishment. My fight-for-survival descent of Sultana does not make the accomplishment of soloing the Infinite Spur greater than if my descent had gone smoothly, and my shockingly mellow experience on Begguya shouldn’t undermine that ascent either.

I think that my solo on Begguya set a speed record, regardless of what portion is being measured: 5:18 bergschrund to Cornice Bivy; 7:47 bergschrund to summit; 15:22 round trip from bergschrund; 17:13 round trip from base camp. However, climbing ropeless is always so much faster than climbing roped, making it somewhat pointless to compare times with roped parties. Much more significant and meaningful to me is how much faster I was able to climb compared with my attempt in 2012. That year I took 15 hours, 10 minutes to climb from the bergschrund to the Cornice Bivy—nearly three times as long!

Aside from being a better alpinist than I was five years ago, I think I was able to move faster this time due to better conditions, better weather, better and lighter equipment, and wiser strategy, gained from my experiences of the past five years. This time I free-soloed everything, while in 2012 I had self-belayed a few short bits. Obviously, this change in strategy is only (safely) possible by gaining a higher level of technical climbing ability, but it provided exponential benefits: 1) Not ever self-belaying saves a lot of time; 2) Free-soloing allowed me to carry an ultra-lightweight static rappel rope, while in 2012 I had carried an 80m twin rope, which is much heavier; 3) Avoiding self-belaying allowed me to keep the rope inside my pack for the entire ascent, which is massively more efficient, from energy perspective, compared with trailing the rope as I climbed. [Editor’s note: Haley provided extensive detail about his equipment and clothing choices in a post at [Petzl.com](#).]

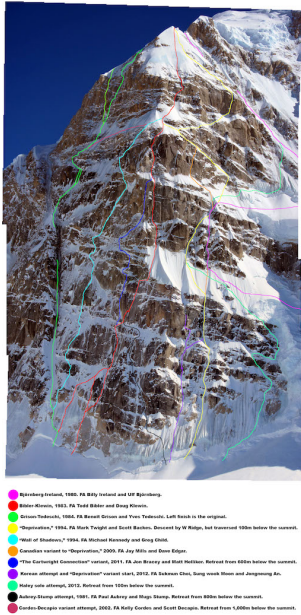
In 2012 I carried a small stove to melt snow along the route, along with a freeze-dried meal to eat at the top of the North Buttress. All that melting of snow and boiling water takes a significant amount of time, and eating and digesting a freeze-dried meal is slow. This time I brought only bars and gels, and

I carried no stove. Instead, I filled four one-liter Platypus bottles with hot water in base camp, insulated them with bubble wrap, and called it good.

Strategy aside, I'm sure the biggest reasons I was able to move so much faster in 2017 are that, in the past five years, I have become a better technical climber and have greater cardiovascular fitness. Those personal improvements, and the very direct, quantitative evidence of them, are the most satisfying aspect of my solo ascent.

– Colin Haley

Images



The famed North Buttress of Mt. Hunter (Begguya), showing all known routes.



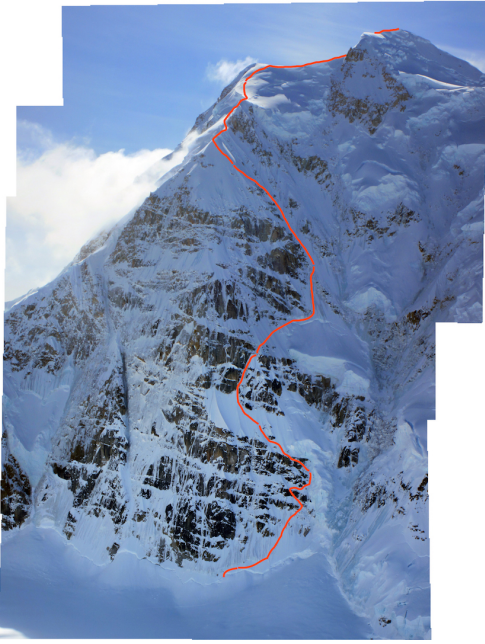
Looking down the crux of Colin Haley's solo ascent of Mt. Hunter's North Buttress, in the first rock band.



Haley climbing moderate ice just before joining the Björnberg-Ireland Route on the North Buttress of Mt. Hunter. Haley soloed the peak on May 12 in record time, taking a mere 17 hours and 33 minutes round trip from Kahiltna base camp.



Colin Haley on the summit of Mt. Hunter after soloing the North Buttress. He reached the top of the peak just 7 hours and 47 minutes after crossing the bergschrund.



The line taken by Colin Haley during his May 12 solo ascent of Mt. Hunter's North Buttress, gaining roughly 2,000m of elevation from the bergschrund to the summit. The line combines portions of Deprivation, the Björnberg-Ireland Route, the Bibler-Klewin, and terrain near the bottom of the face that Haley first climbed in 2012. In 2016, Haley soloed Mt. Foraker's Infinite Spur in just over 12 hours.



A shot of Mt. Hunter's upper northeast ridge from the point where the tracks ended. In 2012, Haley had climbed to 100 meters below the summit after soloing the buttress, but turned around due to exhaustion.

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