



## AAC Publications

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### Stone Good, Snow Bad: Mt. Huntington's Two-Mile South Ridge

Alaska, Alaska Range

**A FIERCE GUST of wind blew across the summit ridge of Mt. Huntington.** The snow hissing across the tent's thin fabric sounded like the moan of a haunting wraith. The chill penetrated beyond my physical core, intensifying the dark emotions that had lurked in my mind throughout the past week. Our breath frosted the tent's inner walls, and icy feathers knocked loose by the gusts stung our faces. Jess Roskelley curled in the fetal position next to me, and I felt him shivering under his wet sleeping bag. "Well," he said with a raspy cough, "at least we aren't still on that ridge." Darkness fell.

Snow filled our tent whenever we opened the door, so instead we choked on carbon monoxide and suffered raging headaches. The pungent aroma of week-old socks blended with an acrid stench of ammonia from muscle tissue being consumed. Dinner that night consisted of four bullion cubes and some warm water: 22 calories per man. How much snow would this storm dump? Could we survive if we were trapped up here for a week?

For five days, we had struggled over paper-thin cornices and blade-like gendarmes during the first ascent of Mt. Huntington's complete south ridge. We clawed our way to the 12,240-foot (3,731-meter) summit through a rising storm, then conceded to the stinging, windblown snow and set up the tent. We tried to convince ourselves that we were just recovering and waiting for a break in the weather, but as I prepared for my second night near the top, I began to come to terms with the idea that we could perish on the summit after climbing the biggest route of our lives.

**MT. HUNTINGTON is a mountain devoid of subtleties.** Its features are sharp and appear exaggerated—its monstrous seracs and house-size cornices seem more in place atop the higher flanks of Denali or Foraker than on the narrow ridges of this "lesser" peak of the Alaska Range. Huntington is a technical climber's mountain—one with no easy path to the summit. The walls surrounding the Tokositna Glacier form one of the most precipitous corners of the range. A storm may encase Huntington in three feet of snow while the Ruth Gorge, just five miles away as the raven flies, barely receives a trace.

"The most beautiful mountain in Alaska," as it has often been called, has captivated technical climbers since its first ascent in 1964 by a French team led by Lionel Terray. Those who have written the history of Huntington's arching ridges and icy faces include the names that inspired me most as a passionate young Alaskan alpinist: David Roberts, John Waterman, Glenn Randall, Jack Roberts, Jay Smith, and Jack Tackle. Though I had few qualifications to justify such dreams, I longed to add my own story on such a magnificent mountain. I thought I had been born a few years too late; it seemed that every distinct feature had been ascended long ago—until I discovered that Huntington's longest and most prominent ridge had never been completed.

I first noticed the south ridge in 2013 during a summertime flight-seeing tour with my family. From the air, the two-mile-long ridge resembled a jagged saw blade. Kurt Hicks and I had climbed the Phantom Wall, on Huntington's southwest face, several months before, but in our rush to beat an incoming storm I hadn't noticed the seemingly infinite chaos of cornices and serrated gendarmes to our right.

Back home in Anchorage, I tore through my collection of Alaska climbing literature. "[The] south ridge

looked incredibly difficult; it was not so much a ridge as five separate, serrated peaks, each increasingly higher,” David Roberts wrote in his 1967 classic *The Mountain of My Fear*. “To traverse them all would involve gaining perhaps three times as much altitude as the east ridge would require, and the necessity of cutting oneself off from the base camp might be unavoidable.”

During the 1970s, when Alaska was still in its “ridge phase,” several teams poked around the lower south ridge without much success. In the 1973 *AAJ*, Jeb Schenck wrote, “An attempt in early July to climb the entire south ridge was an utter failure. Rotten sugar snow without any base prevailed, due to the lack of the normal spring thaw. Avalanching was considerable.” Before making the first ascent of Huntington’s southeast spur in 1978 with three other climbers, Angus Thuermer Jr. ran into a group of 13 mountaineers from Sapporo, Japan, on the glacier. They had retreated from the south ridge after a month of sieging up to the second of the ridge’s peaks. “Over ceremonial coffee we tried to communicate,” Thuermer noted in the 1979 *AAJ*. “Queries had to be rephrased before we drew their response: “Stone good, snow bad.”

In May 1979, David Jay, Jay Kerr, Jeff Thomas, and Scott Woolums bypassed the first four towers along the ridge by climbing a couloir from the east to reach the upper south ridge, between Huntington and its 10,700-foot southern subpeak (now called Idiot Peak), then continued up the ridge to the top. In the *AAJ*, Thomas wrote, “[T]o climb the entire ridge was enticing, but it would be terribly difficult.”

Will Mayo and Chris Thomas made the first ascent of Idiot Peak in 2005, approaching from the west. In 2009, Jay Smith and Jack Tackle established several impressive routes on the east face of the south ridge, including one to just below the summit of Idiot Peak, but none of the lines continued up the ridgeline toward Huntington.

After several reconnaissance flights and countless hours studying photos, it was apparent the complete south ridge would demand total commitment. The approach would involve traversing avalanche slopes, scurrying under numerous seracs, and navigating complex crevasse fields. The first tower (Point 9,460’) appeared to be overhanging on its north side—it might be impossible to reclimb, if necessary, after rappelling into the col beyond it. If a storm arrived halfway up the ridge, there might be no way to move safely in any direction. Even so, each spring from 2014 to 2016, I convinced myself and potential partners that the ridge would be possible to climb. But a suitable weather window never arrived.

In March 2017, my would-be partner injured his shoulder. With the prime season only a few weeks away, I scavenged for a high-caliber replacement. Jess Roskelley and I had climbed Fitz Roy at the same time, but we had never shared a rope. I was impressed with his calm and confident approach to technical climbing, and we enjoyed the same grade-school humor. When I called him and he agreed to attempt Huntington without even seeing a photograph of the ridge, I was sure he was just the right type of crazy. Two weeks later, an ideal high-pressure system rotated north toward Alaska from the Pacific Ocean. Jess was on a plane to Anchorage the very next day.

**I’VE ALWAYS HELD that every Alaska Range adventure should begin and end at the bar of Talkeetna’s Fairview Inn.** It felt strange, then, to fly from Anchorage in my friend Conor’s little plane and bypass Talkeetna, thereby avoiding the hangover that seemed to mark the start of every expedition. On April 18, as we flew past Huntington toward the landing strip on the upper East Fork of the Tokositna, I flashed a thumbs-up to Jess: Conditions looked great for our route, with far less snow than I had seen in years past.

Less than two hours after setting up our base camp, Jess and I began the painstaking and dangerous approach to Death Valley, the narrow cwm of the lower East Fork. Directly below Huntington’s southwest face, we bypassed a Khumbu-like icefall by dropping 2,000 feet down a steep and slender couloir.

At the bottom of the valley, we felt like the proverbial fish in a barrel. Towering walls encased with massive seracs surrounded us on nearly every side. Large chunks of sharp blue ice littered the basin. Debris piles from fresh avalanches crisscrossed in every direction. Above us, the Phantom Wall turned a sinister red in the late evening.

Darkness fell as we navigated through a minefield of crevasses—Jess' diligent arrest kept me from falling too deep into one hole. Rather than risk another fall while trying to navigate in the dark, we heeded to prudence and established camp among the trenches. We convinced ourselves that we were out of reach of the seracs adorning the south ridge, but dawn couldn't arrive soon enough.

At first light we escaped Death Valley and wrapped around the tip of the south ridge. At 5,700 feet, we began to climb up a left-slanting ramp. Already, it felt like an entire expedition lay behind us, and we had only just finished the approach. I pushed against my instincts as we climbed up old avalanche runnels. It hadn't snowed for several weeks and the face felt safe. But what if it snowed even an inch? We wouldn't dare come back this way. But the 3,750-foot climb up the funneled south face of Point 9,460' went smoothly, and late in the evening we found a ledge and settled into a comfortable bivy. In our tent, nestled in our 20°F sleeping bags, we studied photos of the route ahead, knowing we would be totally committed if we chose to continue along the ridge.

In the morning we peered into a vertigo-inducing gunsight notch between the north side of the first tower and a rotten gendarme. Scuds of cirrus boiled into an ominous gray tempest. Just as I had feared, the north face was overhanging and composed of shattered black crud. Rocks bombarded the notch as I balanced onto a narrow ledge. Clouds enveloped us and Jess squinted into blowing sleet that froze onto his face.

"Do you feel good with this?" I asked him.

"Is this only a localized storm?" he asked.

Across the Tokositna, Mt. Hunter faded behind a wall of white as more snow began to fall. Powerful sloughs washed down the ridge.

"Yes," I said. "I hope." Jess rappelled without saying another word.

After what seemed like an eternity, I screamed to Jess but the only sound was the wind rushing against my hood and the rumbles of small sloughs below me. I feared he had been hit by a falling rock as his ropes raked across the fractured wall, and I had begun to panic when I heard a faint "off rappel." Mounds of stacked blocks shifted as I carefully pushed away from the wall. When I swung back, falling rocks shrieked downward. I watched in horror as they peppered around Jess, who held his pack overhead as a makeshift shield.

Jess was clipped to one cam in an icy crack. We smashed two pitons behind a frozen block as waves of snow washed over us. I stared westward beyond the whirling shrouds of snow. Mt. Hunter was illuminated in brief moments of sunshine. We suppressed our doubts and put our faith in the forecast. As we watched the ropes fall toward us, we knew we were committed to the summit, at least four days away.

After another rappel, I led two traversing pitches across jutting snow flutings and some steep mixed sections along the left side of the ridge. If Jess was alarmed, he didn't show it, but it was terrifying to witness the power of the sloughs caused by even a light snowfall. Jess calmly dispatched a difficult traverse along the fracture line between solid granite and decaying schist. His feet sunk through vertical, aerated snow while he torqued his picks across the thin rock seam.

Stone good, snow bad.

We barely noticed that the weather had improved as we bypassed overhanging snow mushrooms and chopped up through cornices. "I don't know how you would ever downclimb that," said Jess as he arrived at one stance.

After hours of the most technical snow climbing either of us had ever done, we reached a broadening ridge at the base of the second tower (Point 9,800'). We were wet to the core, and as light faded our clothes gelled into ice. I searched for any place good enough to chop out a ledge, but every site that looked promising from below proved too small or sloping when I reached it.

Twilight cast a purple hue upon the snow as I waded upward toward a giant boulder. When I arrived, I was startled to see two ancient pitons encased in ice. It took some time to chop them out, but after testing them with my hammer, I clipped them and belayed Jess up. Throughout the last two days, I had searched for any sign of the 1978 Japanese expedition, but had seen nothing. Now I hacked away at the ice beside me as Jess climbed, exposing aluminum aid ladders, pickets, and strings of fixed line. "Have I got a surprise for you!" I yelled to him. As we widened the expansive ledge, we found 35 pitons and a gallon of gas. Old rope showed that the Japanese had most likely accessed the second tower from a gully to the east. We were now sure they had not come the way we had just climbed, and surmised that we had been the first people to stand atop the first tower.

**IN THE MORNING we added 15 Japanese pitons to our rack, wondering if we should take more.** On the summit of the second tower, we saw the last signs of the Japanese climbers. Beyond, we lost more elevation than we gained. Tedious route-finding across complex gullies and buttresses on the west side of the ridge, beneath looming cornices and blank rock, often meant that we would finish a pitch significantly lower than where we had started, leaving the second climber exposed to dangerous falls. Tension traverses, difficult mixed climbing while simul-climbing, and the feeling of cornices settling under body weight became the standard. After a while, 100 feet between hand-placed pickets hardly merited a thought. Throughout this, Jess' morose humor never waned, and I laughed at his jokes almost as much as he did. "Don't tell my wife about this," he'd say as he pulled out a picket by hand. Our new partnership had quickly developed into what felt like an ancient friendship. Thousands of feet below, I noticed, our meandering tracks through Death Valley had been covered in two spots by large slides.

As night fell, we reached the base of the third tower. Our tent in the col hung halfway over a cornice. That night, the aurora borealis danced across the sky in vibrant flashes of greens and purples.

Moving up the steep side of the 10,100-foot third tower the next day, Jess led two incredible pitches of immaculate granite, jamming bare hands into sun-warmed cracks while his crampons skittered upon flawless stone. After leaving anchors for at least a dozen rappels, our rack felt dangerously light. We took inventory on the summit of the third tower: Of the ten titanium pitons we had brought, plus the 15 we had raided from the Japanese cache, only six pitons remained, plus a few nuts, cams, and ice screws. We made two rappels off the narrow peak to reach the col, and then started up the craggy, unclimbed south face of Idiot Peak. Far below, we could see our tent in base camp, as insignificant as a single fleck of feldspar upon a sprawling granite wall.

Jess led through a steep mixed face and fixed the rope. As I prusiked up, the taut rope slipped over a large boulder and I tumbled violently backward. I clawed at the slope. Had the rope been cut? Did the anchor blow? The rope came tight and I crashed into a rock, too full of adrenaline to feel any pain. After gathering my breath, I tugged on the rope and continued ascending. The bivy site that night was too small to erect the tent, so we slept on the edge of a great precipice with slings tied around our bodies. I struggled to close my eyes as another spectacular display of the aurora borealis illuminated the sky.

Scuds of gray cirrus wafted high across the sky in the early morning. Our marathon was about to become a sprint against an incoming storm. Jess placed psychological protection in deep snow near the summit of Idiot Peak while Mt. Hunter disappeared into broiling clouds. We should have been

numb to it by now, but as Jess crept 50 feet across overhanging cornices without finding any protection, the worst-case scenarios of anchor-ripping falls kept playing through my head.

We used the last of our 120 feet of rappel cord while descending Idiot Peak and then began leaving slings. Dark mist curled around us and wind lashed our faces, cutting short a much-needed break. Two more rappels to the east ate up another cam and the last of our nuts. Snow whipped off the summit of Huntington. "My picks are so dull, I'd might as well be swinging with those foam pool-noodle things," Jess yelled as I joined him at a stance. I led a long block up the southeast face, kicking through deep snow on unclimbed terrain in a couloir crowned by a suspicious serac. Every step required double the effort from days before.

At 11,600 feet, I brought Jess up and willed him to take us to the top. Rime encased our faces and clothing. Idiot Peak disappeared in the blanket of rising darkness. Jess climbed into a growing lenticular and I lost sight of him. My fingers and toes were numb, and my thoughts became slow and murky. I reached Jess just below the summit and navigated by snowy braille, feeling for the hardest snow and knowing that the cornices were perilously close. A slight tinge of gray several meters away delineated the sky from snow.

On top we quickly agreed that attempting to descend would be foolish. A mistake felt inevitable in the storming dusk. We set up the tent just below the summit and crashed to sleep without melting any snow to rehydrate. We had little food to cook anyway. The weather the next day was just as bad, and our mental capacity had improved little, if at all. We tried to descend, but as I searched for the route, all I saw was a featureless gray murk. Descending blindly with our pathetic rack would be foolish. After swinging around for an hour, I ascended the ropes and we re-pitched our tent on the summit ridge for a second night.

The weather cleared just enough on our eighth morning on the mountain so I could spot the trajectory toward the west face couloir—our planned descent route. We still felt utterly wasted. As I led the 15 rappels, light snow fell and sloughs, some impressively powerful, hit us as we descended. I left screws when V-threads became too much work in the storm. Jess had a near miss when a carabiner came unclipped from the anchor as he leaned back to weight the rope. We were barely keeping it together.

We staggered into base camp past two teams who had given us up for dead. Nearly two feet of snow fell soon afterward, and we shuddered to imagine that storm arriving while we were still on the ridge. On our fourth night stuck in base camp, a 5.2 magnitude earthquake shook the glacier and caused multiple seracs to calve in the distance. Confined in the tent, I felt helpless and honestly wondered if, after all we had experienced, we might die in base camp. When Paul Roderick of Talkeetna Air Taxi flew us out two days later, the south ridge of Huntington was almost unrecognizable. Gigantic cornices had formed where we had crossed only days before. Hundreds of avalanches had scoured every aspect. Any trace of our passage had been erased.

**Summary:** First ascent of the complete south ridge of Mt. Huntington (The Gauntlet Ridge, 2,500m, VI M6 A0 95°) by Clint Helander and Jess Roskelley, April 18–25, 2017. The two bivouacked once during the approach, four times on the south ridge, and twice on the summit before descending the West Face Couloir.

**About the Author:** Clint Helander moved to Anchorage from Seattle in 2003. He has ventured into the Alaska Range every year since 2007 and doesn't plan on missing a season for the next few decades. Other articles about this climb are in *Alpinist* 59 and *Rock and Ice* 244.

## Images



Death Valley in the lower East Fork of the Tokositna Glacier, below the menacing seracs on Huntington's south ridge. Darkness forced an unwelcome bivouac amid this minefield of crevasses.



Gear cache below the second tower on the south ridge from a Japanese attempt in 1978. The pitons were a welcome addition to the 2017 climbers' depleted rack.





Aurora borealis from high on the south ridge of Mt. Huntington.



Roskelley climbing a rock step.



Helander studies the clouds from an open bivouac on the fifth morning on the route.



Tenuous downclimbing while following a traverse between the second and third towers on the south ridge.



To access the south ridge of Mt. Huntington from the glacier landing strip, the climbers descended alongside the icefall of the east fork of the Tokositna Glacier to reach Death Valley, where they bivouacked. After traversing around the toe of the ridge, they climbed to the first tower, then traversed on or alongside the ridge crest over the second and third tower and Idiot Peak to the top of Huntington. They spent four nights along the ridge and two nights near Huntington's summit before they could descend the West Face Couloir and return to the landing strip.



Moving through the cornices guarding Idiot Peak.





Roskelley starts a rock step high on the third tower.

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