



## North Face of Main Tower: Tracing the Steps of a Final Climb in the Mendenhalls

Alaska, Coast Mountains

**On March 4, Juneau resident Ryan Johnson and Canadian Marc-André Leclerc started up the unclimbed north face of the Main Tower (6,910') in the Mendenhall Towers massif.** In the early afternoon of the next day, Leclerc posted a photo from the narrow summit. Johnson sent a short video to a friend, spinning in a slow circle to show the view from the top. Johnson had completed numerous first ascents on these formidable granite spires, but the north face of the Main Tower was undoubtedly his dream line.

From the summit the pair headed down the east ridge and then made five or six rappels down the Fourth Gully. Something happened near the bottom of the gully, and they never made it out. The scale of the ensuing rescue and recovery attempt is a tribute to the impact these two men had on communities across the world.

The exact line of their first ascent of the north face will likely forever remain unknown. However, I had the honor of attempting this same face with Ryan in October 2015. We began on the left side on the face and climbed a long, steep apron of snow, eventually roping up and climbing one long pitch up a blank slab covered by a thin veneer of powder. Encountering airy snow and ice that was climbable but not protectable, we decided to bail. As I stared up at the face above, I remember tracing a zigzagging line of thin ice daggers and slanting snow ramps that seemed to offer the most feasible path up the rearing granite wall. I imagine that Ryan and Marc had better conditions than we did in 2015, but there is no doubt the upper half of this 750m wall would have presented an extremely challenging combination of ice and mixed climbing.

I was invited to join Serge Leclerc, Marc-André's father, and friends of Johnson's on a flight into the Mendenhalls days after the pair were declared deceased. Along with the overwhelmingly emotional task of removing our loved ones' base camp cache, we were able to fly incredibly close to the wall. Not only did I observe ample ice, I felt some lingering presence of their passage up the face. Many tears were shed as we traced their week-old footprints leading down the east ridge from the summit. I had no doubt these men had authored the most impressive first ascent in the Mendenhall Towers' history. Beneath the crushing sadness, there was an undeniable sense of awe.

– Clint Helander

## Images



Ryan Johnson below the north side of the Mendenhall Towers in October 2015. The black line marks his attempt with Clint Helander on the north face of the Main Tower. Red line shows the speculative line up the complete north face; the exact line followed by Johnson and Marc-André Leclerc in 2018 is unknown. The Fourth Gully descent route is off-picture to the left. At right is the north face of West Mendenhall Tower. Johnson and Sam Magro made the first ascent of this face via the Great White Conqueror (2,500', V AI4 M5 A1) in March 2008.



The north face of the Main Mendenhall Tower is in center. This photo was taken on March 13, 2018, a little over a week after Ryan Johnson and Marc-André Leclerc disappeared during their descent from the first ascent of the north face.

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