



AAC Publications

Caliban, Calibration and the Marshall Mathers Memorial Route

Alaska, Brooks Range, Arrigetch Peaks

IN LATE JULY, Lang Van Dommelen, Chris Williams, and I flew into Gates of the Arctic National Park looking for adventure, suffering, and ecstasy on the walls of the Arrigetch Peaks. They did not disappoint. Coyote Air dropped us off on a gravel bar in the belly of the Alatna River valley, not too far from the mouth of Arrigetch Creek. Shouldering our 120-pound packs, we began the long approach up Arrigetch Creek, beginning with two hours of river crossings, tussocks, and bushwhacking. Once we gained the trail, the going became much easier, although still mainly composed of marsh, mud, and talus. For the rest of that day and part of the next, we slogged up along Arrigetch Creek and eventually made it to our mountain camp on the valley floor, directly below Caliban (7,181'). [Editor's Note: The first ascent of Caliban was made by Arthur Bacon, George Ripley, David Roberts, and Robert Waldrop, from the southeast side, during the first climbing expedition into the Arrigetch in 1969, see AAJ 1970.]

The next day, July 25, as a means of acclimating ourselves, we put up a long variation start to Pillar Arête (V 5.10b, Hokanson-Johnson, 2008, see AAJ 2009), on the northeast ridge system of Caliban. Calibration (1,500', IV 5.8) follows a shallow ridge system between choss gullies and links up to the base of the first main tower of the Pillar Arête, which the first ascensionists had reached by scrambling from the north side. We climbed 10 roped pitches, interspersed with 4th- and easy 5th-class soloing. As this was our warm-up, we ended the route at the shoulder just below the first main tower of the Pillar Arête. After joining the Pillar Arête, we scrambled down the gully below the first tower toward the east, then did two 70m rappels to get to the top of the slabs below the east face of Caliban. After a few hundred meters of down-soloing, two more 70m raps took us to the ground, about 15 hours after we left it.

After two days of rest and exploration, we decided we should attempt the shorter but steeper east face of Albatross on July 28. We climbed a few approach pitches between 5.8 and 5.9 before we got into the business of the wall. I took the lead from this point on, through two thuggy pitches of 5.11 R climbing on hollow golden flakes and badly protected traverses. We stopped on a ledge below a large flake when the gear seemed to dry up. After going up and backing off a few times, I saddled up and vision-quested over the blank faces, trending left toward an obvious corner. This traversing pitch got us to the base of a large right-facing corner, the first 35m of which was fun 5.10+ dihedral climbing, with small placements dug from the dirt-filled cracks on the left side. However, at around 35m, I came upon a blockage of flakes that had fallen in just the right way to precariously bridge themselves between the two walls of the dihedral. As I had put our last belay directly below the base of the corner, I decided to bail off a pair of nuts rather than set off this cannon shot with the team sitting just inside the barrel. Three 70m rappels took us to a ledge that would take us to the ground.

We now felt warmed up enough to make an attempt on a major objective, and on Sunday, July 29, we turned our gaze to the unclimbed east face of Caliban. On the far left side of the east face, the first thousand feet would be low angle slabs, leading to a fifteen hundred foot headwall. Like our previous route on Caliban, we used another shallow ridge system move through the slabs and approach the face. A few roped pitches and a couple hundred meters of 4th- and easy 5th-class took us to the base of the headwall. This began with two easy pitches, between 5.7 and 5.8, on stellar rock, following corners and splitter cracks to a good belay ledge. The next two 50m pitches up the headwall featured superb 5.10 face climbing past good gear and long splitter cracks, which took us to a belay below an obvious right-trending chimney and corner system.

After the previous two pitches of pure and unadulterated fun, I gave Chris the lead, thinking that I shouldn't hog all the good climbing. I realized I'd sandbagged the hell out of him when he went into a terrifying 5.10 R traverse. Lang and I just shouted affirmations to him as he took 20 minutes trying to protect 15' of consequential climbing without dislodging a wiggly, 300-pound cleaver of a flake. His pitch eventually took us over a small roof to a belay in a shallow corner below a second small roof.

We could see a splitter hand crack about 20' to our left, but between us and sweet, protectable climbing was a pane of unbroken, off-vertical slab. Our other option, leading just out of the belay, was a thin flaring seam that went through a small roof and into an enticing finger crack. Right out of the gate, I got a stiff tips-crack boulder problem with a mandatory foot cut, protected by a #3 offset RP and a 0.2 Camalot X4 in a shallow pod. This boulder problem took me over the small roof and into the best finger crack I have ever seen. Forty meters of impossibly splitter fingers and tips opened up in front of me, and I just grinned ear to ear while shadowed clouds began to appear over my shoulder. I got to a belay ledge just as it began to rain. Chris and Lang followed in the rain, pulling on gear where the water poured through the seams. Luckily, it was just a squall that stopped about 30 seconds after they reached the belay.

After drying out, we climbed three more pitches of 5.8 to 5.9 climbing on consistently stellar finger cracks up to a large ledge on the ridge. From here, the rock quality quickly deteriorated. Faced with stacks of car to house sized boulders on slabs, we used a ledge system to head left off the ridge and into the gully. After three pitches of easy climbing through the gully on wet and marginal rock, we topped out the east summit of Caliban (6,994') around 2 a.m., amid stacks of car-sized blocks precariously perched in a Dr. Seussian fashion. Future parties would be advised that the large ledge on the ridge is a logical descent point for this route, as that's where the good rock really ends. We did not continue along the summit ridge to the true summit of Caliban.

For our descent, we made two 70m rappels into the gully behind the ridge we climbed. Three more rappels down the gully got us into the next gully system over (we believe this is the gully that was climbed by Norm Larson and Lorna Corson in 1993, see AAJ 1995), which took us to the ground.

Midway through our descent, as the sun began to appear again in our valley, we became increasingly delirious and sleepy. Chris swears that he heard an ice cream truck driving through Arrigetch Valley, and Lang and I began to see shapes in the colors of the early sun. To stay awake, we began to recite rap lyrics, mostly Eminem. From this trippy episode spawned the route's name, the Marshal Mathers Memorial Route (2,500', 17 pitches, V 5.11 R). We stumbled into camp 25 hours after we began and collapsed into our tents.

While sitting at one of the final ledges on the ridge of the M.M.M. and watching the last light of the sunset play across the expanse of granite around me, I felt a sense of being in a place I had always dreamed of being in. While I began my climbing career as a gym and comp climber, I had always seen the act of free climbing big walls in the alpine as the epitome of climbing. The hard moves, long pitches, and the omnipotence of the mountains felt like a culmination. I had a feeling of profound appreciation for the opportunity to be there and ecstatic anticipation for where I was going. While I had realized a dream, I recognized that this was only the beginning of many more adventures to come.

– Gus Barber

Images



After 12 hours of marching through alpine rivers, tussocks and swamps with 120 pounds on his back, Lang Van Dommelen breathes easy as he takes his boots off.



The east face of Caliban in Alaska's Arrigetch Peaks, showing the line of Calibration (IV, 5.8 1,500'). The route is essentially an alternate and more difficult start to Pillar Arête (V 5.10b, Hokanson-Johnson, 2008 and joins that route at the base of the first major tower. Pillar Arête follows the obvious ridge and tower system on the right skyline.



The team's attempt on the east face of Albatross, also known as Gus's Vision Quest. The attempted line lies between the Direct Southeast Face (Ferro-Musiyenko-Prince, 2017) and the Eye of Sauron (Mills-Pappas, 2016).



The massive east face of Caliban in Alaska's Arrigetch Peaks, showing the line of the Marshall Mather Memorial Route (2,500', 17 pitches, IV+ 5.11R) on the left, and Calibration (IV, 5.8 1,500') on the right.



Chris Williams climbing on the upper pitches of the Marshall Mathers Memorial Route on the east face of Caliban in Alaska's Arrigetch Peaks.



Gus Barber getting calibrated for alpine ridge climbing during the first ascent of Calibration (IV, 5.8 1,500') in Alaska's Arrigetch Peaks.



Chris Williams, Lang Van Dommelen and Gus Barber back in Coldfoot after 15 days and nearly a vertical mile of climbing in the Arrigetch Peaks.



Lang Van Dommelen briefly enjoys Alaska's late-night sunset after 20 odd hours on the east face of Caliban.



Chris Williams leaves the slabs behind and heads for the steep headwall on the east face of Caliban during the first ascent of the Marshall Mather Memorial Route (2,500', 17 pitches, IV+ 5.11R).



Gus Barber leads out the headwall on the east face of Caliban during the first ascent of the Marshall Mather Memorial Route (2,500',17 pitches, IV+ 5.11R).

Article Details

Author	Gus Barber
Publication	AAJ
Volume	61
Issue	93
Page	0
Copyright Date	2019
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions