



AAC Publications

Fifth Tower, The Fifth Element; Sixth Tower, The Sixth Sense

Alaska, Coast Mountains, Juneau Icefield, Mendenhall Towers

DURING THE EARLY DAYS of March, I received a call from Reid Harris telling me that Ryan Johnson and Marc-André Leclerc were overdue from the north side of the Mendenhall Towers. I had known Ryan for almost a decade and we had established numerous first ascents together in the Juneau area.

As the days went on and bad weather made helicopter searches impossible, our fears gave way to the reality that Ryan and Marc would not be coming home. Between friends, we concluded that they now had the most bitchin' headstone in all of Juneau—the Mendenhall Towers. Ryan would have liked it that way.

The following months flew by. I was afraid summer might slip away entirely, but near the end of July I stepped off an Alaska Airlines flight at the Juneau airport and looked up to see the Mendenhall Towers once again.

I had intended to climb with Gabe Hayden, but his work didn't give him any time off, so he recommended Dylan Miller. I hadn't met Dylan prior to him picking me up at the airport, but soon we were loading into the helicopter for a ride to the Mendenhall Towers.

Our clear weather window was only a couple of days long, so we chose what we anticipated to be a reasonable plan of trying to climb the fifth and maybe the sixth or seventh of the Mendenhall Towers. I recalled an enticing quick peek at the Fifth Tower years prior as my helicopter sped through the gap alongside it en route to the distant Taku Towers. Dylan had previously climbed the Solva Buttress (1,000', IV 5.8, the south buttress on the Fifth Tower) and was familiar with the descent. The helicopter dropped us right at the base of the Solva, where we set up camp and spied some enticing splitter cracks to the right, in the center of the southeast face.

It seems every time I climb in the Mendenhall Towers, a collapsed piece of glacier allows for easy access across the bergschrund to the crack system I intend to climb. Luckily, this was the case once again. Our route followed a left-leaning crack system on the left side of the pyramid-shaped southeast face. The splitter cracks at mid-height that we had scoped were unfortunately full of dirt and moss, so we bypassed them on the left. Most of the climbing we encountered was in the 5.8–5.9 range. Dylan made for a solid partner and we breezed through the pitches. A crux just above halfway featured a splitter finger crack that petered out, forcing a leap of faith to a jug (maybe 5.10d) and another crack. Everything seemed to come together on the climb, with nothing being terribly run-out or too difficult.

This was the first route on the prominent southeast face and the third route on the tower (the other two being the Solva Buttress and the east ridge, first climbed by Clint Helander and Ryan Johnson). From the summit, I could look down and see the crevasses where Marc and Ryan still lay. We downclimbed and rappelled the Solva Buttress and finished back at our camp with lots of light to spare.

We chose the Sixth Tower for our next objective, largely to avoid some crevasses that blocked easy

access to the Seventh. The south face mostly appears as broken rock divided by a series of ramps but the east side steepens into a more formidable and appealing buttress lined with clean vertical cracks enticing the imagination skyward. A precarious-looking snow bridge provided access to the rock. A glacier-ravished ramp and an excellent steep crack led to grassy slabs that we soloed for about 300' until we encountered a bunch of steep cracks. We chose the leftmost crack because it look good, but more importantly it had the most shade. Two pitches of great 5.10 led us to another ledge. From there, we encountered more steep cracks on the final portion of the buttress, with a crux 5.11 boulder problem off a pillar near the top.

The summit views of the Juneau Icefield were slightly marred by forest fire smoke, but more concerning was the fact that the coastal inlets were now almost completely obscured by clouds. If we didn't get down fast, we could be stuck for days or face a long, heavily crevassed walk in the rain to get back to town. We reversed our line of ascent, for the most part, and the 1,000' of rappels went pretty quickly. The clouds were now covering the Inside Passage and had made their way up the glacier. About 15 minutes after touching down from the rappels, camp was packed up and the helicopter we had called appeared through a narrow gap in the clouds.

Minutes later we were back in Juneau, with almost no transition time to process the climbs, seeing Ryan's final resting place, or anything else. It felt like a snap of the fingers as we traded ice for pavement, the sound of the breeze for the seagulls and traffic, the fear and intensity of beating incoming weather with the new sensation of, "What do we do now?"

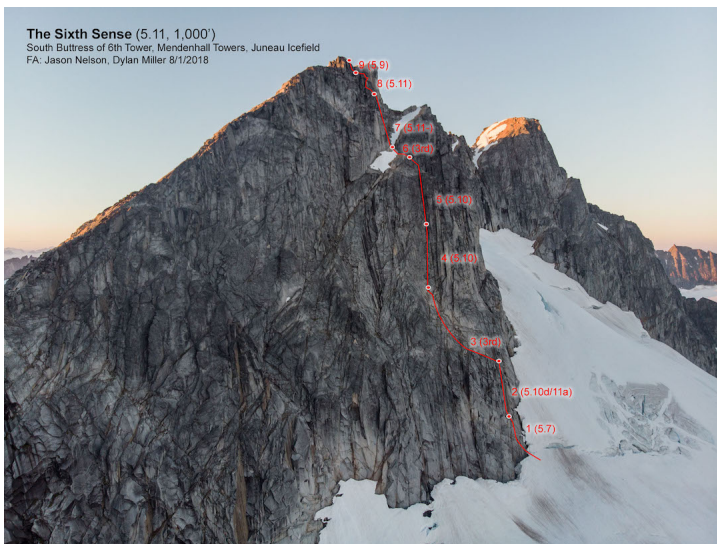
We didn't have to think too hard—beer and pizza were just a short drive away. We named our routes the Fifth Element (1,200', 5.10d) and the Sixth Sense (1,000', 5.11). Both featured great climbing and deserve to be repeated.

– Jason Nelson

Images



The southeast the Fifth Tower in the Mendenhall Towers of the Juneau Icefield, showing the line of the Fifth Element (1,200', 5.10d).



The Sixth Tower in the Mendenhall Towers of the Juneau Icefield from the southwest, showing the line of the Sixth Sense (1,000', 5.11).



Dylan Miller hanging at the tent at the base of the Solva Buttress (1,000', IV 5.8) on the south side of the Fifth Mendenhall Tower, on Alaska's Juneau Icefield.



Dylan Miller leading the first pitch of the Fifth Element (1,200', 5.10d) on the Fifth Mendenhall Tower.



Dylan Miller leading high on the Fifth Mendenhall Tower during the first ascent of the Fifth Element (1,200', 5.10d).



View of the Fifth Mendenhall Tower with the south buttress, a.k.a. Solva Buttress (1,000', IV 5.8) on the left skyline. The Fifth Element (1,200', 5.10d) goes up the sunlit central southeast face.



Dylan Miller seeking shade on pitch four while leading steep 5.10 cracks during the first ascent of the Sixth Sense (1,000', 5.11) on the Sixth Mendenhall Tower.



Dylan Miller leads a pitch of 5.11- on the upper portion of the Sixth Sense (1,000', 5.11) on the Sixth Mendenhall Tower, on Alaska's Juneau Icefield.



Aerial view of south face of the Mendenhall Towers massif, on Alaska's Juneau Icefield. The Fifth Tower is the pyramid-shaped summit right of center, and the Sixth Tower to its right.



Dylan Miller waves to a passing tourist flight from the summit of the Fifth Mendenhall Tower, on Alaska's Juneau Icefield.



Dylan Miller enjoys a snack and view on top of the Fifth Mendenhall Tower. Main Mendenhall Tower is the prominent shaded peak on the left.

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