



AAC Publications

Mt. Macdonald: The Indirect American

Canada, British Columbia, Selkirk Mountains

I HADN'T BEEN DREAMING of mountains. I was just enjoying my fall, soaking up the sunshine and going rock climbing, but when things align for a seven-year project you can't really say no, so instead Graham and I said yes and we got in the car. Five days later we stepped off a Revelstoke sidewalk covered in fresh snow, wiped the slush from the windshield, and drove home through a storm. In between were three days of the most unlikely good fortune.

If you've ever been to Rogers Pass in the Selkirk Mountains on a clear day you've probably seen it, because it's right above the road and staring you straight in the face: an enormous corner and handsome streak of ice high on the north face of Mt. Macdonald (2,883m), forming the most conspicuous undone line in western Canada. I remember first pulling into Revy one drippy winter night in 2011 on a road trip with a friend as he shopped for a new place to live. A week of incredible skiing convinced him to move there immediately, and me to visit almost every year since. On each of those occasions I'd repeat the experience of looking up at Macdonald's mighty north face. Each season I'd try to convince myself and my friends it was a good idea, but there was always something in the way.

A few things actually. Foremost among them, the bottomless powder that makes Rogers Pass famous for skiing is not generally ideal for climbing, and the avalanches it can produce threaten both the approach and descent. Since the mountain is directly above the Trans-Canada Highway, it's also completely closed to overnight or multi-day climbing during the bulk of the winter to allow highway crews to control the slopes with explosives. It took me a few years to realize that for the route to be viable the collection of factors that had to align would be daunting. First, the ice would need to be there, but it would need to form before the control work and closures started in late November. Second, avalanche hazard had to be low and the weather needed to be clear—both rarities for British Columbia in winter. I owe a great debt to Percy Woods at Parks Canada for helping us navigate these difficulties by sending over fresh photos and conditions reports whenever I asked.

Graham Zimmerman and I both had our annual reminder of "The Rogers Pass Thing" on our calendars again, but I was occupied with projects at home in Bend and was unconvinced we would actually do anything about it. When I finished a new climb at Smith Rock and found my schedule clear, I lazily checked the weather one morning. To my surprise, the forecasts agreed the perfect window was coming. I texted Graham that we should drive north the next day. When we got there we spent a day watching the face, taking pictures, and making guesses. We got the go-ahead from amused park employees, packed, and went to bed early.

On the morning of November 11 we left the car well before dawn, and after a few kilometers of walking on the dark highway we were soon wallowing through steep devil's club, scrambling over cedar limbs, and crossing great rakes of debris in between. We plowed upward via a deep couloir, eventually roping up as we started mixed climbing on snow-covered, compact quartzite. We climbed through the afternoon, and as the short day came to an end we dug a bivy on an enormous snow ledge directly beneath the obvious drip that defined the middle of the route.

At sunrise on the 12th we swung into the white line that had drawn us in, which yielded 90m of excellent climbing on a funky vein of thin ice. Funnily enough, of the climb's 23 pitches, that ice comprised only one and a half of them. As irony would have it, Graham got to lead those pitches too, and then I took over and drew two hard leads on pitches of M6+ and M7, including a rather terrifying

traverse across a water groove bereft of both ice and protection.

Above this was the major question mark on the route, a blank section on which we hoped either mixed climbing or aid would allow us to reach another flow of ice higher up. Unfortunately, it was prohibitively steep and lacked climbable cracks, and it led only to more delaminated patches of junk plastered to featureless stone. Instead we traversed hard left, and as darkness fell we climbed into the next rock band, trending toward the existing route up the central rib of the face. [The upper portion of this rock rib, accessed from the face to the left, was first climbed in August 1963. Two summers later, Fred Beckey and Jerry Fuller climbed a more direct line to gain the rib and followed it to the top.] After several pitches we reached a snow ledge and dug in for another night, regretting the optimism that had convinced us to pack food for only a day and a half.

Once again starting at sunrise, we traversed back into the primary weakness and climbed four more exciting mixed pitches that led to the east ridge about 50m from the summit. The weather was perfect as we topped out at noon, a hundred miles of wild mountains in every direction and all of them shining. We downclimbed and rappelled the southwest ridge to the top of the Herdman Couloir, descended this to join the Crossover Slidepath, and reached the road around 5 p.m. and town shortly after.

We called our route the Indirect American (1,000m, WI4+ M7), an invitation to someone luckier or stronger than us to straighten it out in the future. We woke in Revelstoke the next morning to wet snow falling, our dream of the north wall already fading into memory, just us and the rocks and the clouds, the ice and the air, a sense of purpose and the sun passing as one more dream was finally made real.

– Chris Wright, USA

Images



Chris Wright following the first pitch on the central ice hose early on the second day of climbing on Mt. Macdonald.



Chris Wright leading the first of two mixed cruxes of the Indirect American in the middle of the second day. After some steep climbing in the corner, the pitch engaged a sparsely protected traverse left across the next tier of water polished quartzite.



Chris Wright packs up under a gorgeous sunrise on the team's third day on Mt. Macdonald.



Chris Wright nearing the top of Mt. Macdonald's north face on day three of the climb.



The north face of Mt. Macdonald, bathed in spindrift. The Indirect American takes a line just right of center.



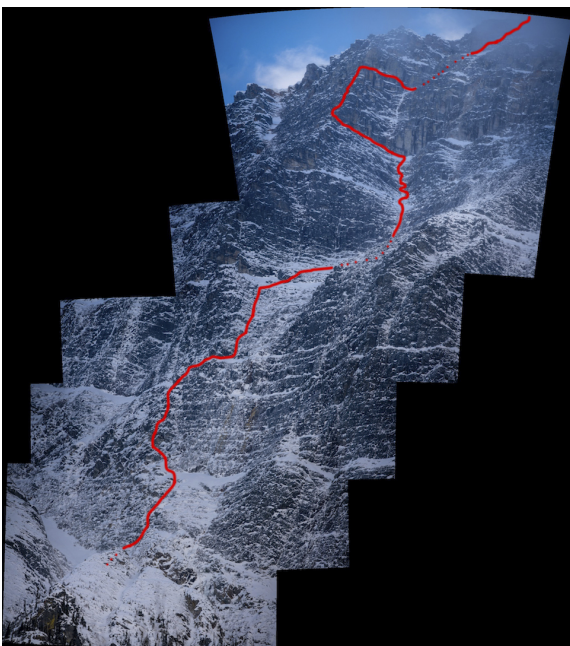
Graham Zimmerman on lead on the ice hose that drew the team to the wall. It was only 90 meters out of 1,000, but worth it, they said.



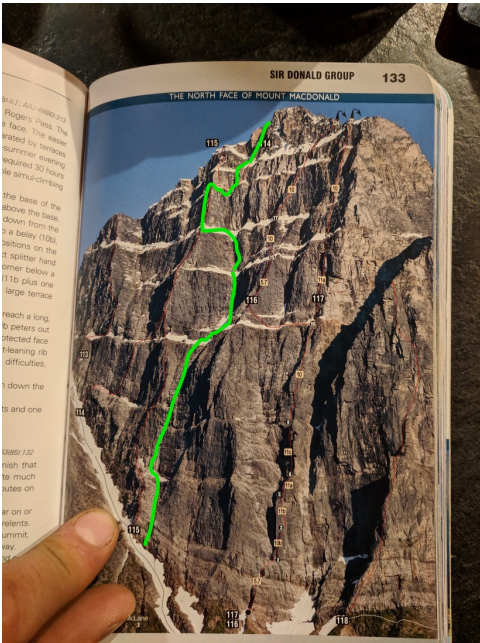
Graham Zimmerman pulling up to the belay after the first M7 crux with the Trans-Canada Highway behind. "It was a strange contradiction to feel so far out there with a busy road so close below."



Graham Zimmerman finishing a section of highly technical wallowing high on the route. The pitch was typical of the easier sections of the route, with deep, loose snow sitting atop compact stone with little in the way of protection.



The line of the Indirect American (1,000m, WI4+ M7) on the north face of Mt. Macdonald.



Marked-up photo in the Rogers Pass Alpine Guide showing the line of the Indirect American on Mt. Macdonald's north face. The zag to the left was after the crux on day two.



Graham Zimmerman on the summit of Mt. Macdonald, with Mt. Sir Donald prominent to the south.

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