



## AAC Publications

---

### **Mt. Macdonald, Little Face, Water of Life**

Canada, British Columbia, Selkirk Mountains

**In August 2019, Tony McLane and I ventured out to one of Canada's greatest roadside attractions: The Little Face of Mt. Macdonald.** The goal was to climb an entirely free route through the meat of this north-facing wall right above the Trans-Canada Highway, linking as much clean, steep, dry terrain as possible. By early afternoon on our second day, our plans had been foiled by a blank slab. We tried an adjacent corner system, but it was soaking wet. We decided to bail. On the hike out, we spotted an encouraging line closer to the center of the face. It seemed a rising traverse might provide access to the upper part of the wall's original climb, the Waterman Route.

In 1974, cousins John and Dane Waterman came from the eastern United States to western Canada on an epic climbing road trip. In July, they made the first ascent of the 600m Little Face. "The steep route took four days and three bivouacs, two in the rain and one without water," John Waterman wrote for the AAJ, his description of the impressive ascent not exceeding a paragraph. "We used many pitons, with difficulties up to A3 (including one "waterfall" pitch) and F8."

Various guidebooks have placed the Waterman Route more or less in the center of the face. Will Stanhope has twice attempted to free the climb (once with Andrew Boyd, once with Kiff Alocer). He didn't get far either time, nor did they find any sign of previous passage. Even after a long dry spell in 2019, in the hottest part of the year, Tony and I didn't even consider climbing in that area of the wall: The Waterman Route (or the line the Watermans are assumed to have climbed) was still soaking wet, and even if dry it would be much more difficult than the start of Tony and Jason Ammerlaan's 2016 route Position of Comfort.

A little over a year later, in September 2020, I was cragging at Lake Louise with Brette Harrington. Brette had just finished telling me about her and Tony McLane's wild new line on Neptuak Mountain when my phone went off. Who could it be? Tony, of course.

"Hey, heading back to Squamish soon, but I'm free for a few days. Want to try the Waterman?"

Of course, I was in.

We met on Monday at the Rogers Pass visitor center. We packed a double rack, double set of nuts, hammer, pins, 14 slings, and a 60m rope and tag line. We planned for two nights out. We each brought an ultralight sleeping bag and carried a double siltarp to share. We would climb with separate packs or haul when it was too difficult to free climb with packs. We also packed a power drill and eight bolts, reasoning that if we needed any bolts to link crack systems or to bail, a hammer drill would be a good idea.

We approached the wall in late afternoon on September 21 with a good forecast for two days, and slept just below the treeline. That night, rain sprinkled the tarp consistently, but when we woke at 5 a.m., the sky was clear. With relief, we brewed a couple of strong coffees before setting off.

Tony won the first lead block in a rock-paper-scissors game. The apparent start of the Waterman Route was again soaking wet, so Tony efficiently dispatched the first four pitches of Position of Comfort. Pretty soon we were on the broad ledge below the upper wall, and it was my turn to lead. I

led three more corner and chimney pitches of Tony and Jason's route, and then ventured out left into unclimbed terrain, finding a nice rising handrail traverse that led to a small ledge.

Tony McLane leading through horrendous conditions high on the Little Face of Mt. Macdonald. Photo by Niall Hamill

Next up was a big arching undercling feature, which Tony led: slabby feet with mostly a good crack for hands and gear. The crack was at times stuffed with loose flakes, which Tony tiptoed around and trundled while seconding. Manteling onto a thin rail, his last gear well below him in the overlap, Tony yelled, "Drill!" I clipped the drill to the tagline and then watched as he expertly placed a bolt from a precarious stance. He followed the bolt with a couple of body lengths of run-out 5.10d terrain, finally finding a good crack and then a ledge. It might have been the most impressive onsight lead I have ever seen. Above here, we thought we'd be joining the Waterman route, but we saw no signs of it.

Tony started the next pitch with another bolt and a tricky slab downclimb/traverse, and when I followed I had to lower out on the bolt to avoid a terrible fall if I blew the downclimb. I then led up a steep and mostly solid left-facing corner. After a tricky start and burly finish, I manteled onto a small but relatively flat ledge. Whether it was the pack or the climbing, this was the one time I felt truly pumped on the route. When Tony arrived at the belay, I cheerfully suggested that we spend the night there. With 11 lengthy pitches and the steepest parts of the wall below us, we happily refueled and nodded off to sleep, figuring we had it in the bag.

That night, rain pattered steadily on our tarp. We were only mildly concerned, because of the good forecast, but at dawn the rain had intensified and a thick fog had moved in, obscuring the mountain above us. We sat and brewed coffee under the tarp, munched on a few hundred calories each, and discussed options. We were 400m or so up, the hardest climbing was likely behind us, and we still had a good margin of safety. So, without further talk, Tony started up the next pitch.

Nothing wanted to go on the plumb line that day, and we were still free climbing, so we followed zigzagging weaknesses; a few were dead-ends, and we had to downclimb. The day went by quickly. It was pouring rain, and we were soaked. The wet, frictionless quartzite felt dicey even on moderate slab moves. Finally, after ten shorter pitches above the bivy, we reached the west ridge.

We didn't feel like the summit scramble would add any value to the line, so we headed down the ridge to the top of Position of Comfort and began to rappel the face around sunset. On the third rappel, our rope got badly stuck, and the tagline suffered a core shot. We taped over the core shot and continued. On the following rappel, Tony ended up over a huge roof in space and discovered the lead rope was horribly core shot where it had gone over an edge. He had to jug back up the line, and then we chopped our rope down to 50m. A couple of rappels later, another core shot. Again, we shortened our rope, forcing us to build intermediate anchors between Tony and Jason's fixed stations. For the last two rappels, we had to fix our pathetically mangled ropes as single strands to reach the ground. Finally we took off our harnesses. Slashing rain pounded our tarp as we sat underneath, rehydrating with hot soup and coffee before the steep hike down to the road.

Just below a waterfall in the descent gully, I noticed small rocks whizzing overhead. Delayed by the dense fog and rushing water, the sound of tumbling blocks reached our ears only milliseconds before they crashed over us. Tony dove for cover in the bushes. I was in the guts of the gully and had to duck under a tiny bulge in a turtle position. It felt like we were in the jaws of the mountain, dodging its gnashing teeth. Needless to say, we bushwhacked the rest of the way down to avoid the gully. When Tony's headlamp began to fade out, we moved faster, as the highway was close.

Crossing back over Connaught Creek, now swollen with rain, Tony slipped on a jagged tree snag and tore his pants nearly clean off, from crotch to ankle. I couldn't stop laughing for the sight of us, totally spent, tufts of insulation poking out of our coats, and soaked, as we bushwhacked up toward the harsh glare of the highway lights and into our cars for warmth, snacks, and a shared moment of reflection on this outing. It was the water of life, and our cups were overflowing.

— Niall Hamill, Canada

**Editor's Note:** Hamill and McLane climbed about 200m of Position of Comfort before adding 180m of new terrain to link into what is believed to be the unrepeatable Waterman Route; they then climbed another 220m to the top. All pitches were led free. "Whether we were ever on the Waterman [Route] I'm still not sure," Hamill said. "We were looking for signs that they had been there, but we didn't see anything. If the Watermans did go straight up the middle of the face, that certainly would have been impressive."

## Images



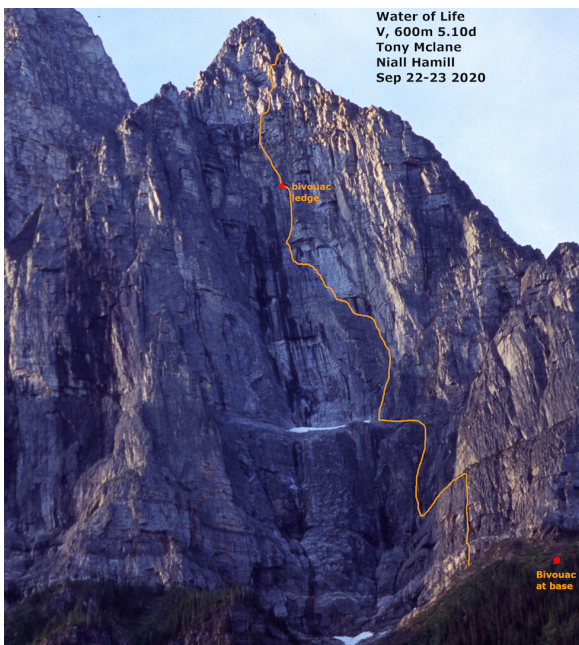
Tony McLane leading a steep corner during his and Niall Hamill's climb of Water of Life (600m, 5.10d R), on the Little Face of Mt. Macdonald in the Selkirk Mountains.



Tony McLane leading through horrendous conditions high on the Little Face of Mt. Macdonald in the Selkirk Mountains during his and Niall Hamill's climb of Water of Life (600m, 5.10d R).



Tony McLane leading the crux pitch—a techy undercling traverse—of his and Niall Hamill’s Water of Life (600m, 5.10d R) on the Little Face of Mt. Macdonald in the Selkirk Mountains. This shot was taken during the first day of their climb, before the weather deteriorated.



The Little Face of Mt. Macdonald in the Selkirk Mountains of British Columbia, Canada, near Rogers Pass. Niall Hamill and Tony McLane’s new route Water of Life (600m, 5.10d R) is shown. The route links the start of Position of Comfort (Ammerlaan-McLane, 2016) to what is believed to be the upper Waterman Route (1974), with about 180m of new terrain. See AAJ 2017 for a photo showing other routes on the face.

Article Details

Author	Niall Hamill
Publication	AAJ
Volume	63
Issue	95
Page	106
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions