



AAC Publications

Pushing Me 'Ard: The First Ascent of Captains Courageous

Canada, Newfoundland, Gros Morne National Park

Casey Shaw in the elevator-shaft chimney of Captains Courageous during the 1999 first ascent of the longest ice climb in eastern North America, gaining over 2,000 feet in all. Photo by Joe Terravecchia
“Feel free to get involved, Jimmy,” says Joe: a classic exchange between Joe Terravecchia and me when the ropes are tangled and one of us is momentarily distracted by time and place. We are three pitches up what will become Captains Courageous, and we are in an outrageous position. We are enveloped by rock, 80 feet inside a giant cleft that runs 800 feet above us. In the maw of this fantastical chimney, we are climbing serpentine ice that we hope will connect to the upper sheet of ice at the top of this 2,000-foot route. Looking out at Western Brook Pond from the back of the chimney gives a sense of viewing the scene from inside a telescope. With the open ocean in the distance, air, water, and walls merge, instilling a profound sense of isolation and commitment.

It's 1999, our third winter coming to western Newfoundland, and we've imprinted some exciting moments in our gray matter, but this route, in this place, on this day, is about to burn an indelible stamp into our memories. Captains will become the longest ice route on the east side of North America, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Joe and I are far from certain that the line connects, and this uncertainty is part of the reason we keep coming to this uncharted land.

Carved by glaciers, Western Brook Pond is a landlocked fjord that is 10 miles long and 541 feet deep. In places the shoreline is framed by massive rock walls that drop directly into the water. As a result, climbing up is often the only way out, unless you possess a dry suit and are prepared for a winter swim. The locals call it Whistling Pond (or “Pand” in the local dialect) because the wind can be heard to whistle as it rips down from the Big Level. The Big Level is a plateau 2,600 feet above sea level, and in the winter it is a monochrome landscape where it is easy to become lost. As the wind descends off the Big Level, it accelerates and creates a low-pressure vortex that can break up the frozen lake surface and blow giant sheets of ice a quarter mile on shore. Lore has it that an anemometer once maxed out and then blew away during a “Jaysus good blow.”

Casey Shaw (left) and bush pilot Rick Adams. It was from his plane, on an earlier trip to Newfoundland, that Shaw and Joe Terravecchia spotted the line that would become Captains Courageous. Photo by Joe Terravecchia

On our first trip to Newfoundland, in 1997, Rex (Rix) Hewlin from nearby Sally's Cove guided us onto the Big Level, where we planned to camp and scout for routes on the walls below. Rix stood up on his snow machine with his jacket unzipped, taking the full force of the wind. A hand-rolled cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth, the fur ear flaps of his hat porpoising with the wind. He yelled over the roar of the two-stroke engine when we pointed to a place on the topo map, “Yiss, b'ys, I know right where she's to,” then navigated along the flat, white landscape, past Two Rock Pond and other barely discernible landmarks, delivering us exactly where we had pointed. The Hewlin family have become close friends over the years, and Joe and I feel blessed to know them.

Midway through our stay that year, Rix used a good weather window to deliver fuel and freshly baked bread from Irene, his wife. Rix had made the delivery as an excuse to check in on us. He yelled our names and shook the tent, and when we didn't answer, he later told us, he was afraid to unzip the door and look inside for fear we were frozen to death. It was a rare good weather day, and we were out climbing.

When we arrive in Newfoundland in 1999, Rick “FA” Adams is months out from a hip replacement and has insisted on flying us into “Dub-e-yah Bee” (Western Brook), even though he is unable to load his own plane. Rick’s verve for life and flying is infectious, and he leaves us with a legion of classic Newfoundland expressions, including “pushing me ‘ard, b’ys, pushing me ‘ard.” This is quickly shortened to “PMA” and incorporated into our personal lexicon. We once asked Rick about the payload of his Super Cub, and he replied, “Two men and a moose, b’y.” When Rick realized that Joe and I loved bush flying, he made a point of buzzing the landscape, hugging the contours from 50 feet up. We had to ask Rick if he’d ever had an engine-out emergency landing. “Oh, yiss, b’y, several times!”

It was from Rick’s plane that we had spotted the line that would become Captains Courageous. With no way to reach it from below, only a committing series of rappels will allow us to attempt it.

Captains Courageous begins in the dark slot in lower right and then traverses left to gain the upper ice, gaining about 2,000 vertical feet in all. The photographer, Bernie Mailhot, and two partners made the second ascent in 2004.

I arrive at the belay after my third stop to purge a stomach unsettled from bad kippers and the sheer audacity of the place. I help sort the ropes after Joe’s rejoinder to get involved, and then meander upward, weaving under and then belaying on top of a giant chockstone lodged in the chimney. Darkness arrives and the apprehensive feeling I always have during the sunset evaporates into the darkness. Joe, always the ace, leads an engaging pitch along a thin ramp, with a soaring rock wall leaning overhead and long gaps between pro. “What’s the issue up there, Jimmy?!” I yell. Code for, I’m with you, but I’m getting cold. All day we’ve been carrying the extra weight of uncertainty: It might not be possible to climb to the rim, but we are absolutely certain that going down is a bad idea.

Joe and I have certainly experienced the far side of adventure in Newfoundland—snapping ice curtains, broken bones, an avalanche ride, and frostbite—but this day will be different. A Holy Grail kind of day, when the magic aligns and something rare and special emerges.

Joe’s lead of this committing pitch links the upper and lower sections of the wall. Knowing that going up is the only option, we climb cautiously into the night. Somewhere in the arc of pitches, the moon rises above the opposite side of the fjord and lends a distant comfort; we feel less alone. Later still, when our minds float in the interstitial space between lucidity and a ghostlike delirium, a brilliant display of Northern Lights appears, shimmering like an ephemeral blessing. There has been no wind, and it remains calm throughout the night, a rare occurrence in Newfoundland and much appreciated in the bitter cold at the back of Whistling Pand. We enjoy time in the quiet dream-state of the belays, kept company by the incredible light show.

At the upper ice sheet, we feel cautious relief. The ice is thinner than expected and we occasionally hit the underlying rock with our dull points; we keep a firm grip on our situation, and on the tools. When the ice ends, we carefully wallow up a steep snow slope. There is no pro here, and we’ve already had a close call with a slab avalanche.

We arrive at the tent with the sky streaked in the early morning pastels of dawn. We look at each other with the wordless acknowledgement that something magical has just happened. I’m at a loss to describe the emotional wave of utter contentment and stillness, but it is here. If only these moments could last longer. We celebrate with a wee dram of the amber restorative, but with the waning of adrenaline, it is impossible to resist sleep.

About the Author: Casey Shaw loves climbing as much today as he did on his first day, and is fortunate to enjoy his job as an innovation designer at Patagonia.

Images



Casey Shaw (left) and Joe Terravecchia on another Newfoundland adventure.



Casey Shaw in the elevator-shaft chimney of Captains Courageous during the 1999 first ascent of the longest ice climb in eastern North America.



Captains Courageous begins in the dark slot in lower right and then traverses left to gain the upper ice, gaining about 2,000 vertical feet in all. The photographer, Bernie Mailhot, and two partners made the second ascent in 2004.



Looking up Captains Courageous in Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland, during the first ascent in 1999.



Casey Shaw (left) and bush pilot Rick Adams. It was from his plane, on an earlier trip to Newfoundland, that Shaw and Joe Terravecchia spotted the line that would become Captains Courageous.

Article Details

Author	Casey Shaw
Publication	AAJ
Volume	63
Issue	95
Page	53
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Feature article