



AAC Publications

High and Distant Dreams: New Routes on Golgotha and Hunter

Alaska, Alaska Range

The east face of Golgotha (8,490'), showing (1) the peak's first ascent route, finishing up the southeast face (Helander-Trocki, 2012), (2) The Shaft of the Abyss (Helander-Marin, 2022), and (3) the general line of the Svoljšak-Zupin route (2019), the second ascent of the mountain.

A stacked lenticular cloud billowed over Mt. Huntington as August Franzen and I climbed the final few meters to the south summit of Mt. Hunter (Begguya). It was May 16, 2022; sunbeams warmed our faces and the air was still. The central Alaska Range splayed around us, from the darkened cluster of the Kichatna Mountains to the serac-laden ridges of Mt. Foraker (Sultana) and Denali's monumental south face. As August joined me on the narrow summit, it felt surreal. Despite many serious attempts, I hadn't summited a mountain in five years. Now, in just over seven weeks, I'd finished two of my longest-standing projects in Alaskan alpinism. At age 37, and after 16 years of expeditions in the Alaska Range, I'd exceeded the wildest dreams of my youthful ambition to establish new routes in these mountains.

Two months earlier, in mid-March, Andres Marin and I had embarked on our fourth attempt together on the unclimbed direct east face of Golgotha (8,490'). Among the 600-mile-long arc of the Alaska Range's countless peaks, Golgotha is scarcely known: It's a solemn, difficult-to-access monolith at the southern end of the Revelation Mountains, a seldom-visited subrange at the westernmost corner of the Alaska Range. From 2008 to 2022, I made 12 expeditions to the Revelations, including five attempts on Golgotha.

David Roberts, along with five friends, made the first climbing expedition to the area in 1967 (AAJ 1968). During their 52-day trip, they made several first ascents and bestowed names on the Revelations' prominent peaks, including Mt. Mausolus, Apocalypse Peak, and Golgotha. When Seth Holden and I first visited, in 2008, fewer than 10 teams had come to the Revelations, and only a few peaks had been climbed. Seth and I identified a long list of unclimbed objectives, including the Ice Pyramid, Mausolus, Apocalypse Peak, Titanic, and the Obelisk.

Seth and I first spied Golgotha as we attempted the Ice Pyramid in 2008. Golgotha is the epitome of a mountain—an almost geometrically perfect pyramid. Tiered granite buttresses soar skyward; tendrils of ephemeral ice and remnants of avalanches streak down shadowed walls. That day, the setting sun bled the sky crimson while Golgotha's nearly 4,000-foot east face darkened in sinister shadow. The umbra converged in a terrifyingly narrow shaft of ice slashing the wall, framed by prows of weathered granite. Atop the runnel, a free-hanging snarl of ice dripped over a massive chockstone. Above that, the face broadened and a series of steep ice steps, tight passages, and large chockstones led toward the summit. Anything that fell from the upper mountain would funnel into the shaft. There would be little chance of survival if a barrage of rocks or a spindrift avalanche tore down the runnel. Still, it was the most beautiful direttissima I'd seen.

David Roberts told me that when his group spied Golgotha in 1967, they considered the east face “a route for the next generation. Or the next.” Seth and I vowed that someday, after we quietly ticked off other difficult Revelation peaks, this route would be the culminating testament of our time in the Revelations.

In August 2010, Seth died when the small plane flown by our friend Brandon Reiley hit a sandbar along the Susitna River, killing both men. Seth's death was sudden and shocking—and sadly foretold

the future loss of many other friends and climbing partners. Still, I knew I had to carry on our vision. I justified the risks by methodically studying these routes, often waiting years for them to form in good condition during a rare prolonged high- pressure system that would limit overhead avalanche hazards.

In March 2011, Scotty Vincik and I made the first ascent of Mausolus via a massive ice line on the imposing 4,500- foot west face. Seth and I had tried this route in 2010 and had always considered it our final stepping stone toward Golgotha. After I spread Seth's ashes on Mausolus, I stared at Golgotha, several miles to the west. The sun faded, casting a macabre blackness over its east face. I finally felt ready to attempt the wall. It would take five missions over the next decade to accomplish Seth's and my dream, nearly costing me my life in the process.

I first attempted Golgotha with Ben Trocki in March 2012. After we landed on the Revelation Glacier and established base camp, we skied southeast toward a pass at 6,300 feet. From there, we dropped into the confining cirque below Golgotha's east face. A broad couloir on the left side of the face and a right-trending snow ramp led us to the shaft. Up close, it appeared even steeper and narrower than I'd imagined: scarcely more than two meters wide and choked in unconsolidated vertical snow. I took the first lead, hacking at overhanging mushrooms as my feet sheared through frost covering the runnel's blank walls.

After 60 meters of near-vertical snow and thin ice, I searched for an anchor, but eons of avalanches had polished away any usable features. Eventually, I built a quadrupled V-thread in aerated snow. At my little stance, gripped by some sudden, spiraling fear, I contrived peril in everything I saw: I imagined a wall of spindrift ripping us down the slot or a bone-shattering leader fall as my tools sheared through the illusory ice—an accident seemed inevitable. "If it's like this the rest of the way, something bad is going to happen," I said when Ben reached me. I begged him to bail.

"There's just no protection," Ben agreed. "Anything that falls down will hit us."

After rappelling, we retreated toward the main couloir and stopped to confer. A storm darkened the sky, but we were equipped for several days. The couloir slanted above us toward the lower-angle southeast face. We decided to continue up the couloir, and then pushed through a blizzard and 70 mph winds to the summit in a long day. On top, despite having made the first ascent of Golgotha, I felt little satisfaction. As I wrote in *Alpinist* 49, "I wish we'd gone down: I'd compromised my ideal of a first ascent via the east face for a lesser definition of success."

In 2013, I published an article in the AAJ exposing some of my long-kept Revelation secrets, including Golgotha's direct east face. At the time, I reasoned I'd never try it again: I viscerally remembered that terrified, claustrophobic feeling in the narrow runnel. Still, the only thought that haunted me more than not returning was the idea that someone else might succeed. Four years after that first attempt, I succumbed again to my obsession.

I recruited my longtime friend Andres Marin, whom I'd met in 2006 while we were both working on Mt. Rainier as guides. In an incredible display of flying, our pilot friends landed us on the minuscule pocket glacier below Golgotha's east face in March 2016. The walls that surrounded us were taller than the basin was wide. We grew concerned as the temperatures skyrocketed from -40°F to almost 30°F as a storm moved in. A meter of snow fell in 24 hours, and we could hear the ever-louder rumble of avalanches in the whiteout. We were preparing to move camp when a giant crack reverberated through the storm. Andres and I frantically waded through knee-deep snow as the avalanche roared closer. A cloud engulfed us; a blast of wind knocked me over. I felt myself begin to get buried. Then, everything grew quiet and calm. I kicked free of the debris pile and screamed to Andres, who stood up and hung his head in shock, a few meters to my right.

Our tent had been ripped apart and buried. Twisted, broken poles poked out of the snow. Food, boots, and duffel bags were simply gone. As we slowly recovered random items, we ran from other large avalanches. Each of us wore a backpack with individual survival gear: a sleeping bag, an inReach, a

stove, a shovel. We cowered in our shredded tent under a solitary rock in the middle of the glacier during a week of unrelenting snow. Even there, powder clouds from the biggest avalanches covered us. For the first couple of days, I was almost certain we were going to die. We stomped a runway that was soon covered in new slides. Our pilot texted us, saying he'd been turned around again by weather. We were about to call for a military helicopter rescue when our pilot squeezed through a hole in the clouds and saved us in a daring display of aerobatics.

In March 2017, Andres and I returned with Leon Davis. Before becoming a pilot, Leon had also worked with us on Rainier. He was a more casual alpinist, but his stoic demeanor and technical ability made him a welcome partner. This time, we landed on the wider Revelation Glacier, a few miles north of Golgotha. During a stretch of good weather, we blitzed over to the small cirque below Golgotha, which we had dubbed the Misfit Glacier. It hadn't snowed in weeks. The wall's bare golden granite contrasted with the razor-thin white line slashing down the face. We kicked up the entry couloir by headlamp, reaching the runnel at dawn. On the first lead, my picks sheared through snow veneered by an icy skin until they caught on invisible granite nubbins. We excavated overhanging snow and searched for protection in the runnel, sporadically placing tied-off pitons, small cams, and wobbly screws in aerated ice.

By late afternoon, we had climbed six technical pitches. Leon led out of view, then for an hour the rope barely moved. Up at the belay, Leon's broken crampon dangled uselessly from his boot. After a failed attempt at a repair, we descended. Several hundred feet above, the crux ice dagger hung like a fragile guillotine. The standard terrible weather soon returned to the Revelations, precluding another attempt.

Now that we knew much of the route, we aimed for a third attempt in 2018. But, after a recon to the range that spring, we saw that a heavy winter had left Golgotha smothered in snow. Andres and I kept our distance, memories of the avalanches fresh in our minds. The next year, 2019, we went to Nepal. Meanwhile, a Slovenian pair, Janez Svoljs ak and Miha Zupin, attempted the direct east face and reached a new high point near the top of the runnel, just below the crux ice pitch. After bailing, they made the second ascent of Golgotha via a snowy fracture splitting the right side of the east face, leading to the north ridge.

In March 2022, Andres and I returned for one last attempt. When we landed on the Revelation Glacier, we were delighted to see wind-scoured glaciers and mountain faces plastered with gray streaks of ice. The range was in perfect condition: It hadn't snowed in weeks, and conditions looked even better than in 2017; there was no need to worry about avalanche hazard or rockfall. We started climbing at 8:30 a.m. on March 23, and were soon kicking steps up the broad couloir. I led toward the runnel, clipping an old anchor of ours as I traversed an exposed snow ramp. Andres continued up vertical snow steps, stemming between the chasm's polished walls. Just when things became desperate, firm névé would appear.

We planned to bivouac inside a spacious cave we'd spotted in 2017. As I led out on the fourth pitch, Andres directed me to kick at a curtain of ice. I slid into a 20-foot-high hole and stood in awe. The cave's ceiling and walls were coated in infinite shimmering crystals. Within minutes, we had shed our ropes, crampons, and harnesses, relaxing in the comfiest alpine bivouac of our lives. I suppressed any fear about the hanging ice dagger above. If it turned us around, I would not be returning.

The next morning, three more pitches of steep steps brought us to the crux pitch. We gazed upward in humbled silence at a truck-sized chockstone, a free-hanging pillar of white ice dripping off its underbelly and a translucent smear oozing over the vertical slab above. Granite walls jutted outward on either side. "This would be a world-class pitch anywhere," Andres said. I re-racked in the runnel, feeling like I'd been swallowed by some giant stone monster. "Yeah, well, let's just hope there's some protection up there," I said as I nervously started my lead.

Andres is one of the world's best ice climbers, but I was glad this lead had randomly fallen to me. I'd

spent 14 years simultaneously fearing and envisioning this moment. And now I was finally about to answer the lingering question: Would

I be good enough to achieve my oldest dream? Nervously starting up, I carefully hacked at ice-encrusted snow until every stick felt secure. Cauliflower drips steepened as I neared the overhanging dagger. I spun useless screws through thick rime into hollow voids. Exhalation. A momentary rest. Calm the mind. Calf and forearm muscles burned as I clung to fragile nothingness. Everything I dropped bombarded Andres, who grunted as chunks of snow and ice smashed into him. "I'm trying to be careful," I yelled down. After bashing through a frozen curtain, I peered into a dark hole and crawled into another narrow cave, then set a belay to bring Andres up, midway through this crux section.

I led out again. By climbing a steep ramp inside the cave, I could "cheat" and avoid part of the overhanging ice outside. After a few meters, I chopped through the wall of ice and leaned out over the void. The chockstone reared overhead and the dagger hung in space to my right. I slithered out of the window and scratched through a ceiling of snow until my picks caught in unseen cracks. After a small fall, some aid, and an exposed traverse, I climbed past the fang of ice and raked my picks into firm névé as I manteled over the chockstone. Andres and I screamed in elation. I heaved and knelt in the snow, overjoyed to have shed the massive emotional weight I'd been dragging.

Above, on the broadening face, Andres led a 170-meter simul-climbing block up steep grooves and ice-veneered slabs. Near dusk, we chopped a small bivy ledge. Andres organized the anchor while I crawled into the tent. As I moved to the back, I slid over an unsupported corner and fell, tent and all, dropping 12 feet until my tether caught me. When I poked my head out, Andres stared at me, aghast. We reset the ripped tent and soon fell asleep, too tired to care.

On the third morning, overhanging snow mushrooms, chockstones, and crust-covered slabs had us wondering if we'd get turned around just a few hundred feet below the summit. I was only sure of our success when I crested a cornice, straddled the north ridge, and belayed from the highest rock. Andres led the final pitch. On the summit, we embraced and laughed; we cried and thanked each other. Andres had inherited Seth's dream, which had bonded us into brothers. Golgotha had nearly killed us in 2016, but on the summit we reveled in that most fleeting of life's emotions: satisfaction.

We rappelled the 2012 first ascent line—the southeast face to the major couloir—then climbed back over to the Revelation Glacier. High winds had scoured powder snow from the glacier, and, with heavy packs, we cursed and fell as we struggled to ski in the darkness back to camp. When we arrived, we stared in shock. Our massive kitchen tent, along with most of its contents, had been ripped from its anchors and blown away, never to be found.

Treading carefully on a corniced ridge of the lower West Buttress of Begguya (Mt. Hunter), August Franzen pulls into the bivy site on day one of the four-day climb.

Golgotha was the coda on my time in the Revelations. I'd now tried, retreated from, or sworn off every objective that Seth and I had planned. But I still had eyes on one "last great" Alaskan route, a line on Mt. Hunter I'd attempted in 2021. Hunter has always been an archetype by which I judge other mountains: It's a bastion of strength, with no easy route to the 14,573-foot summit. Many new routes here have become mythical chapters in the annals of mountaineering—from Jon Waterman's 145-day solo first ascent of the Southeast Spur to the fabled North Buttress, where my early climbing idols like Greg Child, Michael Kennedy, and Mark Twight established routes that still test the best alpinists.

While climbing Hunter's West Ridge in 2011, I scoured the ice-laced granite walls beneath the summit plateau to the southeast, looking for potential routes. Every appealing line was topped with dangerous, actively shedding ice cliffs. In the distance, however, a tantalizing granite buttress capped by a lower-angle serac rose above the sharp, icy ridge that divides the Ramen Valley (just south of the West Ridge) from the cirque below the Southwest Ridge. On a reconnaissance flight years later, Paul

Roderick flew me by the southern side of what I'd half-jokingly come to call the West Buttress of Hunter. On the nearly vertical rock wall, I spied a crescent ramp that arched right and then veered straight up through broken terrain to a massive golden rock jutting from the summit plateau at 11,200 feet. From there, it would just be a long slog to the south summit (13,965'). The route seemed so obvious—I couldn't believe this major feature had somehow escaped the hundreds of mountaineers who fly by each spring.

For years I prioritized other projects, but this undiscovered gem hovered in the back of my mind. Finally, in May 2021, I recruited August Franzen for an attempt. August was only 23 in 2020 when he lost Kalley Ann Rittman, the love of his life, in a climbing accident near his home in Valdez. I watched as he navigated his grief by turning to the mountains instead of running from them. I saw pieces of myself in him, and remembered how climbing had been everything to me at his age.

To reach Hunter's West Buttress, we'd have to either navigate the broken Ramen Icefall on the north side or go through another heavily crevassed glacier with more overhead serac hazard to the south. Fortunately, according to Roderick, it appeared the tip of the serac capping our route had melted back in the last decade to a smooth ice tongue. With no chance of glacial calving from above, the route felt quite safe—or at least safer than the terrain that bracketed it.

I had descended through the Ramen Icefall in 2013 after climbing the Bibler-Klewin route on the North Buttress. In 2021, as August and I skied through the icefall for our first attempt on the new line, I took a 25-foot crevasse fall, plummeting into the terrible void. When I came to a stop, I was unscathed. After I climbed out, we kept the rope extra tight in the icy labyrinth. At the head of the Ramen Valley, we stashed our skis and climbed two pitches up a glacial ice face to a series of gendarmes on the corniced ridgeline of the West Buttress; we simul-climbed many pitches to reach the rock buttress itself, and then continued around its southern aspect.

I led out on the first mixed pitch of the buttress, scratching and hooking on exceptional granite under a series of short, left-trending roofs and steep corner systems. On the second lead, August stemmed up a bulge, torquing in compact seams and aiding off Peckers. Below another bulge, he found an ancient purple sling. (We later learned that Dan Donovan and Dave Wills had attempted a route farther right in 1999. This relic likely wasn't theirs, and further research did not determine who had left it.)

We had baked in the sun all day, but now storm engulfed us. Spindrift poured down Hunter's sheer faces. We desperately looked for a protective overhang to set up the tent. As I tackled a seemingly endless hour-long lead, August shouted up encouragement through the blizzard. Eventually I found a sloping ledge, and we jumped in the tent after 19 hours on the move. We spooned in our one sleeping bag as snow sluffs soaked us. In the morning, powerful waves of snow washed overhead, and we quickly made our escape.

August and I returned to Hunter in May 2022, launching from Kahiltna Base Camp on May 13—exactly seven weeks after I summited Golgotha—following six days of unstable weather. We had navigated the Ramen Icefall several days before with two skiers, and we were happy to have a well-wanded path as we skied nine miles to the head of the Ramen Valley. Once we were on the climb, the first two pitches of ice climbing ended in a near-vertical arete, where I straddled narrow cornices and humped across until I reached a large scoop where we could bivy at 8,500 feet.

The next day, we climbed deep snow up the steepening ridge to the foot of the rocky buttress at 10,000 feet. I felt new wrinkles forming as my face scalded under a cloudless sky, and I lamented believing young August when he said he had "enough" sunscreen for us both. However, as he torqued up a steep bulge (M7 A1) on the second pitch, I was impressed enough by his performance to forgive him. On the third pitch, I scratched across a broken headwall and tried as hard as I've ever tried in the mountains, hooking up orange flakes and an overhanging series of cracks (M7 A1). Below and left, our bail anchor from the previous year's high point glistened in the sun.

On these crux pitches, we hauled both packs so we could free as much as possible. As August joined me atop the day's third pitch, I traced cracks up a protruding wall on the left. As he started this lead—and before he could place any protection—August fell four feet onto the anchor; he regained his composure and then grunted up the vertical wall of seams, cracks, and solid micro-features (M7 A1 again). On the next pitch, I traversed up and right into an obvious snow ramp and sped up easier terrain as the midnight sun dropped behind Sultana. We kicked a spacious ledge on a snowy knob. Before I drifted asleep in the calm evening with the tent door open, I watched the full moon traverse over Thunder Mountain. I beamed with immense gratitude simply to be where I was.

Google Earth image showing the approach from Kahiltna Basecamp (KB) to the West Buttress of Begguya (Mt. Hunter), on the right, followed by the traverse left to the summit of Begguya and descent by the West Ridge and Ramen Couloir.

On the third morning, as I made an airy rightward traverse on blocky terrain, rocks I'd dislodged careened 2,500 feet into bottomless crevasses on the shadowed glacier. I chimneyed up an ice-filled dihedral onto mixed terrain until the rope came tight. "Most fun pitch of the route," August yelled, climbing up to my belay before he started up a slabby corner. Somewhere just above loomed the unmistakable golden prow marking the top of the buttress. I used a final point of aid to surmount an overhanging step and then scratched through several M5 bulges. When I looked up, the golden rock towered just above me. I huffed in the thinning air and looked for a belay on its sheer left side, and then screamed in excitement.

For 16 years, I'd been almost single-mindedly driven to climb as many first ascents in Alaska as I could. I held off pursuing a "real" career while I slowly ticked off one dream line after another. But each close call or loss of another partner—Ryan Johnson, Jess Roskelley, David Lama, and so many others—slowly marred the purity I sought as I pushed closer to the edge. Now, I couldn't help but feel that I was immensely lucky to still be alive. Perhaps, with this climb, I have begun to satiate the endless hunger of my ambition for big first ascents in Alaska's mountains. August, wide-eyed with youthful excitement, joined me atop the buttress. Taking turns breaking trail, we leaned into fierce winds and post-holed up several thousand feet of deep snow to a protected bivy in the bergschrund below Hunter's south summit.

The wind died the next morning. We tagged the seldom-visited south summit then traversed the two-mile plateau to the central and north summits, plodding through breakable crust and deep powder for ten agonizing hours. On top of Hunter's north summit (14,573'), August and I lingered for 20 minutes. I sat in quiet gratitude as I recognized that, in the span of less than two months, I had lived two of my biggest dreams.

Eventually we began our descent by the West Ridge and the Ramen Couloir. Three hours after leaving the summit, we collapsed at the base of the couloir at 8,200 feet. All we had to do was post-hole a mile across the valley to our skis, then navigate the treacherous icefall by the dark of night, then stagger on blistered feet nine miles back to base camp. When we reached our tent at 5 a.m., we had been on the move for 24 hours. It had been a good day and an even better season.

SUMMARY: First ascent of The Shaft of the Abyss (3,700', VI A15 M5 A0 90° snow), the direct east face of Golgotha in Alaska's Revelation Mountains, by Clint Helander and Andres Marin, March 23–25, 2022. First ascent of Full Moon Fever, the West Buttress of Begguya/Mt. Hunter (5,900' to south summit, Alaska 6 M7 A14 A1), with a traverse over the higher north summit and descent via the West Ridge and Ramen Couloir, by August Franzen and Clint Helander, May 13–17, 2022.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Clint Helander lives in Anchorage and has done more than 25 expeditions in the Alaska Range, including the eight-day first ascent of Mt. Huntington's Gauntlet Ridge (south ridge) with Jess Roskelley, featured in the 2018 AAJ. He is already questioning his claim that he may be done with exploratory alpinism.

CUTTING EDGE PODCAST: Clint Helander and Andres Marin described their attempts and the climb

of the east face of Golgotha in episode 47 of the AAJ's Cutting Edge podcast.

The Cutting Edge · Clint Helander and Andres Marin in Alaska

Images



Andres Marin excavates the remnants of the kitchen tent moments after an avalanche buried base camp below the east face of Golgotha in March 2016. The climbers waited a week amid continuing avalanches before a plane could get in to retrieve them.



The east face of Golgotha (8,490'), showing (1) the peak's first ascent route, finishing up the southeast face (Helander-Trocki, 2012), (2) The Shaft of the Abyss (Helander- Marin, 2022), and (3) the general line of the Svoljšak-Zupin route (2019), the second ascent of the mountain.



Andres Marin inside the amazing ice cave bivouac on the east face of Golgotha.



Andres Marin leading out on the start of day two on the east face of Golgotha.



Andres Marin leads steep ice on day two of the first ascent of Golgotha's direct east face. The route's crux chockstone and dangling ice curtain are visible above.



Andres Marin pulls into a small belay cave midway up the crux passage on Golgotha's east face. To start the next pitch, Clint Helander chopped a window through the ice and pulled onto the overhanging face.



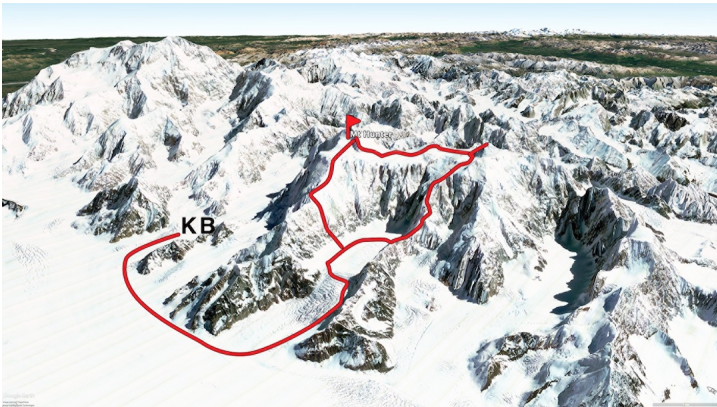
Mixed ground high on the east face of Golgotha.



Clint Helander (left) and Andres Marin on the summit of Golgotha.



Google Earth image showing the route followed for the first ascent of the west buttress of Begguya (Mt. Hunter). The summit is at far left.



Google Earth image showing the approach from Kahiltna Basecamp (KB) to the west buttress of Begguya (Mt. Hunter), on the right, followed by the traverse left to the summit of Begguya and descent by the west ridge and Ramen Couloir.



The first ascent of the west buttress of Begguya (Mt. Hunter). The climbers traversed left over the south and central summits to reach the main peak of Begguya (out of photo).



Treading carefully on a corniced ridge of the lower West Buttress of Begguya (Mt. Hunter), August Franzen pulls into the bivy site on day one of the four-day climb.



Regaining his composure after a factor-two fall onto the belay anchor, August Franzen leads the Free Fallin' pitch, near the top of the rock headwall on Full Moon Fever, the first ascent of Begguya's West Buttress.



August Franzen follows a steep pitch on the West Buttress of Begguya (Mt. Hunter).



Approaching the steep climbing on the West Buttress of Begguya (Mt. Hunter).



Clint Helander and August Franzen on the summit of Begguya (Mt. Hunter), with Denali in back.

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