



AAC Publications

Mendenhall Towers, Main Tower, The Trench Connection

Alaska, Coast Mountains, Boundary Ranges

In early March, Seth Classen, Keagan Walker, and I made a rare winter ascent of the Main Tower (6,910') in the Mendenhall Towers massif, via the standard Mountaineer's Route (1,600', III 5.6 in summer). Prior to that, the last people to be up there in those conditions were my good friend Ryan Johnson and the renowned Marc-André Leclerc. They made the first ascent of the Main Tower's north face in March 2018, but died during an accident on the descent. While Keagan, Seth, and I were up there, we put our memories and respect for those two out into the universe.

Seth and I returned just a few weeks later, this time with Alex Burkhart and Cameron Jardell. On the afternoon of March 26, as we glided across frozen Mendenhall Lake on skis, retracing the approach from a few weeks earlier, we gazed up toward what we hoped would be our new route: a snaking line up the south face of the Main Tower, leading directly to the summit. This area of the face had not been climbed in either winter or summer, but a path looked possible.

The 10-mile, 5,400' approach went down in seven hours. We reached the base of the climb at nightfall, and instantly the temps plummeted. The tradition of taking turns holding the stove and kicking warmth into our toes proceeded for the next hour as we prepped for yet another nighttime, winter alpine climb; we had opted for a climb-through-the-night strategy because, although it would have been below freezing during the day, the solar effect on the rime and snow would translate to dangerous climbing conditions. While we brewed up, a north wind showered us with spindrift. It was supposed to break for a few hours—and we hoped it would—around the time we planned on topping out.

Seth and Cam start climbing while Alex and I finished melting snow for water. Cam was in front, shovel in hand, and dug a trench through the waist-deep powder that had deposited at the base of the face. We did not rope up, choosing to solo. Eventually the powder gave way to lovely smears of ice, and we picked up speed. We had started on the Mountaineer's Route, slanting toward the peak's west ridge, but before long we headed straight up on brand-new terrain. An easy, 30' mixed section led to some more 70° ice and rime, followed by a long, exposed, and sustained 75° traverse. We regrouped on a flat bench, halfway up the mountain; psych was high, everyone was doing well.

The next leg was a terrifyingly exposed hanging bowl, the bottom of which funneled down to the top of 500' cliff. We blasted up more AI2 névé and ice glazes, eventually reaching the back of the bowl, where we were forced into a long traverse up and right. The névé turned to powder, and soon Seth was digging out a deep cut through the snowfield with a five-foot snow wall on his left and steep exposure on the right.

Finally, we exited the bowl and gained the South Buttress (2,000', Fisher-Svenson, 1973; FFA: 5.11a, Hayden-Johnson, 2011), a classic rock climb in the summer. We were only a few hundred feet from the top. Yet above us, all we saw was a near-vertical wall of rime. I traversed farther right, looking for an easier way, but only found steeper terrain. We broke out the rope for the first and only time on the climb, and Seth led a pitch of 85°, protection-less rime, trying not to disturb the ice too much lest he be forced to deal with the featureless granite underneath. He brought us all up one by one on a bomber anchor of ice screws and pickets. We crested the ridge and were greeted by a blood-red crescent moon, the summit just a short distance away.

After sharing the usual summit high-fives and stoke, we started down the west ridge. Nearly all of the rappel anchors from our ascent three weeks earlier were still in place and findable, making the descent smooth and quick. We were back at our cars by 10 a.m. on March 27, happy with our effort on The Trench Connection (1,600', IV AI3 85°).

– **Dylan Miller**

Images



The Mendenhall Towers from the south. The Main Tower (6,910') is in left center.



Skiing up the Mendenhall Glacier in early March, en route to a rare winter ascent of the Main Tower.



Keagan Walker approaching the Main Tower via the Mendenhall Glacier ahead of a rare winter ascent with Seth Classen and Dylan Miller. Three weeks later, Classen, Miller, Alex Burkhart, and Cameron Jardell climbed a new route up the south face of the tower.



The Trench Connection (1,600', IV AI3 85°) on the south face of the Main Tower in the Mendenhall Towers massif. The line shares a start with the Mountaineer's Route, the original route up Main Tower; that route continues up left to the saddle and then up the west ridge (left skyline) to the top.



Seth Classen during the descent from the top of the Main Tower after making the first ascent of The Trench Connection (1,600', IV AI3 85°) with Alex Burkhart, Cameron Jardell, and Dylan Miller.

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