



## AAC Publications

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### **Mt. Dickey, South Face, The Great Wall**

Alaska, Central Alaska Range, Ruth Gorge

Gašper Pinti leading one of the best pitches on The Great Wall, on the south face of Mt. Dickey, on the second day of the climb. Photo: Tom Livingstone

**On April 2, Paul Roderick slowed the Otter plane and we landed in a whoosh of snow.** Gašper “Pinti” Pinter and I chucked all our stuff onto the Ruth Glacier and Paul, ever cool, flicked the peace sign with his fingers. “Good luck, see you in a month!” he said. The Otter’s engine echoed around the mountains, then faded until it was only us and silence.

Between pitching our tents, we stared at Mt. Dickey, Mt. Bradley, Mt. Wake, Mt. Johnson, Mt. Grosvenor, and Mt. Church, stacked one after the other like a lineup of monsters. The granite peaks appeared to float, adrift on clouds and gentle snowfall.

The bitter cold and short glimpses of sunshine didn’t make life easy during the first ten days of our trip. It was like living in a freezer—except one where snow blows in every night. “It’s not normally like this—it’s usually a lot warmer!” I explained to Pinti as we stamped our feet one cold morning.

“Tom,” Pinti said another morning.

“Hmm?” I was still scooping peanut butter into my overflowing breakfast bowl. We weren’t here to lose weight, after all.

“Look,” Pinti pointed with a gloved hand.

“Hmmm.” I added a sixth spoonful of peanut butter.

“The sun! It’s here.”

It was hard to know what conditions would be like up on the various faces, as they were plastered white from recent storms. After a few days of scouting, our attention kept returning to Mt. Dickey (9,545’), certainly one of the jewels of the area. Attempting a direct start to Ruth Gorge Grinder on Dickey’s east face (5,000’, AI6+ M7 A1, Marvell-Rousseau, 2019), I climbed 60m of névé and shouted down to Pinti: “I have no gear or a belay...”

“Well, I’m not soloing,” came the reply. I had an ice screw in névé but doubted it would hold a large fall. With no ice in sight, I began downclimbing in that awkward, arse-out, swing-from-the-shoulder way.

We found Blood from the Stone (5,000’, WI6+ X M7+ A1, Easton-Steck, 2002) out of condition, too. From a belay at the start of the business (around pitch five), we looked up and saw only drips of névé plastered to a wall, rather than the gullies of fat ice that Matt Cornell, Sam Hennessey, and Rob Smith found when they repeated the route in 2023.

We also attempted the central groove on the west face of Peak 7,400’, to the right of the prow climbed by Optimist (Amano-Masumoto-Nagato, 2010). This was a beautiful line of névé and

ice...until it ran out.

Mt. Dickey from the southeast, showing (1) The Great Wall (2024) and (2) approximate line of the 1991 summer route climbed by an Italian expedition. A 2002 route, Crime of the Century, climbed the most prominent rock pillar at far left. Photo: Tom Livingstone

Back in camp, we reassessed while shoveling out the tents again. Sometimes blaming the conditions is an easy excuse, but in this case it seemed valid. Whenever the névé steepened to vertical, it became rotten and sugary snow. It collapsed under our weight, shrugging us off, leaving us puzzled about how to climb such shite. Without ice, we also had no gear. No ice, no dice, I thought.

To keep our spirits up and ward off the cold, we ate fatty dishes on rest days: “cheese product” bagels fried in butter, quesadillas with pesto, reconstituted meat containing turkey, beef, and pork (it was a bad idea to read the ingredients). The mornings passed slowly as we waited for that sudden illumination inside the tent, the sun’s warmth like a revelation each time.

During our third week on the glacier, the weather forecast improved and we investigated the south face of Mt. Dickey. Since arriving, we’d continually eyed a big couloir high on the face and wondered if we could reach it via some crazy-looking slabs. Our planned route started just right of an old rock route, climbed in early June 1991 by an Italian team. After fixing 700m of ropes in May 1991, Giuseppe Bagatolli, Paolo Borgonovo, Bruno De Donà, Fabrizio Defrancesco, Fabio Leoni, Mario Manica, and Danny Zampiccoli completed their route in a push from June 5 to 7. Above the initial corners, we planned to angle left over the slabs, crossing the Italian route, to reach the big groove system we’d spotted.

On April 14, we spent the day climbing the first few pitches, pleasantly surprised there were cracks for gear and hooking our tools. At the top of a right-facing corner, with the sun casting shadows across the slabs, I pendulumed across to a snowfield and Pinti came over. We fixed three ropes down to the ground. Maybe, just maybe, this route could work! I thought as we skinned back to base camp.

Returning the next day, we followed a subtle traversing line through the crazy slabs. Pinti led a memorable steep pitch with hard dry-tooling. I aided through an overlap that boomed every time I moved, then climbed a run-out ramp of crunchy rock—a pitch that was best if you didn’t think too much about it.

In the middle of the face, after climbing some ice bulges, we squashed into a little cave to bivy, cradling hot freeze-dried meals and capturing all their energy—every particle of heat and spoon of food.

The next morning, we zigzagged higher as snow fell. Clearly, the forecast had been wrong. We finally got our little slice of Alaskan heaven, though, with a long pitch of real ice, complete with reliable screws for protection. Later that day, we found a plush bivy on a snow arête roughly three-quarters of the way up the face, and Pinti smoked his last cigarette.

Later that day, we found a plush bivy on a snow arête roughly three-quarters of the way up the face, and Pinti smoked his last cigarette. The morning brought a short section of overhanging névé, which we climbed between heavy bouts of spindrift, then slogged up to the summit. A proper storm was forecast to arrive that evening, so we spent only a few blustery minutes on top before stomping down the west face.

Our route gained 1,500m, and we settled on The Great Wall for a name—it was meant as a joke. The south face of Mt. Dickey is an impressive and inspiring wall, but our trip involved a lot of time in base camp wishing we had a suitable wall to stop our tents from getting buried.

—Tom Livingstone, U.K.

## Images



Tom Livingstone climbing steep névé on an attempt at the west face of Peak 7,400' in the Ruth Gorge. He and Gašper Pintar bailed when they hit a large roof about two-thirds of the way up the face and couldn't traverse around it.



Tom Livingstone aiding through a steep section on day two near the start of The Great Wall (1,500m) on the south face of Mt. Dickey, Ruth Gorge, Alaska Range, Alaska.



On a stormy day three of his Gašper Pintar's ascent of The Great Wall on Mt. Dickey, Tom Livingstone climbs steep ice and névé.





Tom Livingstone at the bivy at the end of day three on the south face of Mt. Dickey.



Mt. Dickey from the southeast, showing (1) The Great Wall (2024) and (2) approximate line of the 1991 summer route climbed by an Italian expedition. A 2002 route, Crime of the Century, climbed the most prominent rock pillar at far left.



Gašper Pinti leading one of the best pitches—dry-tooling up a steep crack followed by a finish on blobs of ice—on The Great Wall on the second day of the climb.

Article Details

Author	Tom Livingstone
Publication	AAJ
Volume	66
Issue	99
Page	122
Copyright Date	2025
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions