



AAC Publications

Celeno Peak: West Face Direct

Alaska, St. Elias Mountains – University Range

As the plane swooped into the Canyon Creek Glacier, Chris Wright and I caught the first glimpse of our objective: the 6,000' west face of Celeno Peak (13,395'). With our eyes glued to the window, we watched as it simultaneously towered above and fell below us, our plane dwarfed by its fantastic mass.

Our pilot, Jay Claus, had made the first ascent of the peak with Kevin Ditzler in 2012 (AAJ 2013), and as he circled in he pointed out the route he had climbed up the peak's northwest ridge, which we planned to descend.

Later, when the sound of the plane had long faded and base camp was partially situated, we stood staring once again. Now 4km away, the face still dominated our attention, and we scanned upward along our proposed route. On paper it had seemed so reasonable, but now, from the glacier, it looked dark and wild and it hung high above us.

Storm clouds closed in that night, giving a reprieve from the looming presence of the mountain, and we hunkered in, preparing our bodies for the face above. Our forecast showed 24 hours of storms before the onset of a large high-pressure window that was sure to give us an opportunity to attempt the wall.

On May 12, after waiting two days for the mountain to clear, we launched at 1 a.m. The route began with 2,000' of snow and ice to 70°, which we climbed unroped. A small section of this climbing was exposed to objective hazard from above, and we climbed quickly to cross this gauntlet in less than 15 minutes. This placed us on a mixed spur that we planned to climb directly to the summit. I led the day's first block of pitches through fantastic mixed terrain, sustained at M4 to M5, with a stout M6 chimney crux. Chris then led two moderate yet extremely loose pitches that placed us 3,000' above the start of the route. There, we stopped in late afternoon to bivy, digging a platform into a thin snow ridge on the crest of the spur, which offered a relatively comfortable night free of objective hazard.

A hundred feet above the bivy was a geological contact between the granitic lower half of the mountain and the metamorphic rock that defines the upper half. The bottom of this metamorphic rock presented a severely overhanging headwall. Chris continued his block on the morning of May 13, leading two moderate pitches that brought us to what appeared to be a weakness in the wall above. He then spent more than three hours leading the route's crux: a wildly steep and loose pitch of 5.10 X A2+ that can only be described as totally fucked—a very compelling reason for this route never to be repeated. While making the final aid moves through a roof, he dislodged a large section of rocks, damaging one of the ropes and crushing a carabiner lower on the pitch.

After we dealt with the damaged rope (fortunately the core shot was close to one of the ends), I took the lead and carried us through two more loose but moderate pitches of rock climbing to the top of the band and a 3' by 4' platform on which we melted water and sat out the heat of the afternoon. While this day resulted in less than 500' of progress, it allowed access to generally low-angle climbing above.

Departing our small perch at 2 a.m., I led through two final high-quality pitches of easy mixed before the route changed from rock and mixed climbing to steep snow and ice. We simul-climbed to the top of the spur before cutting hard right to reach an ice gully that led to the summit. (A short section of this traverse was subject to exposure from a medium-sized serac.) The day's climbing consisted of approximately 2,500' of sustained 70° ice with short sections of 90 to 95° ice and snow as we crossed over flutings and between runnels. During this time the weather deteriorated, with visibility reduced to around 100'. It came as a huge relief when we reached a large, flat snow ledge just below the summit in the early afternoon. Due to fatigue and the lack of visibility, we bivied on this ledge for the remainder of the day and evening.

On the 15th, we once again started before sunrise, making our way up 200' of moderate snow to the summit of the peak, under clear skies. As the sun rose over the range, we marveled at the ocean of mountains surrounding us, including Mt. Logan, Mt. Saint Elias, University Peak, and the Atna Peaks.

The rest of the day was then spent following the first-ascent route down the northwest ridge of the peak, along the edge of a massive hanging plateau dubbed the Balcony by Claus. The three miles of ridge climbing proved stunningly elegant, reminiscent of sections of the west ridge of Mount Hunter. We reached the top of the Black Couloir, which Claus and Ditzler had climbed to make the first ascent of Celeno, at around 1 p.m. and waited until the evening to rap and downclimb the 4,000' chute. This section was unpleasant and rather dangerous due to the low-quality rock that comprised the walls of the couloir.

We reached our skis on the Canyon Creek Glacier at 11:30 p.m. and made it to base camp an hour later, exhausted and hungry. We had completed the second ascent of the peak and the West Face Direct (6,000', 5.10 X A2+ M6 95°). Our trip was supported by the Mount Everest Foundation (U.K.) and the New Zealand Alpine Club's Expedition Fund.

– Graham Zimmerman

Images



Chris Wright scoping the west face of Celeno from the safety of base camp.



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Graham Zimmerman climbing unroped on the lower section of the west face of Celeno.



Graham Zimmerman tackling a steep mixed pitch on day one of the west face of Celeno.



Graham Zimmerman following a traverse to reach the base of the crux rock section on the west face of Celeno.



Graham Zimmerman following a traverse to reach the base of the crux rock section on the west face of Celeno.



Chris Wright on the crux rock pitch of the west face of Celeno. This lead took more than three hours and went at 5.10 X A2+.



Chris Wright climbing on the upper west face of Celeno during day three.



Graham Zimmerman leading into mushrooms high on the west face of Celeno during day three.



Chris Wright and Grahm Zimmerman on the summit of Celeno.



Graham Zimmerman psyched to be on the summit of Celeno



Chris Wright looking back at the west face of Celeno during the descent



Chris Wright rappelling into the couloir that led down to the Canyon Creek Glacier during the descent from Celeno. The peak's first ascent, in 2012, began via this couloir.



Graham Zimmerman looking out across the vast Alaskan landscape during the descent from Celeno



The west face of Celeno Peak, showing Chris Wright and Graham Zimmerman's new line: the West Face Direct (6,000', 5.10 X A2+ M6 95°).

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