



AAC Publications

Mt. Blane, West Face, Life Compass

Canada, Alberta, Canadian Rockies, Opal Range

I met Brette Harrington at Grippéd magazine editor Brandon Pullan's house—a veritable couch-surfing operation for climbers hanging around Canmore—in mid-March, almost exactly five weeks after the death of her partner, Marc-André Leclerc. There was a rawness about her, but after a trip to the Stanley Headwall with Barry Blanchard and Ian Curran, she returned to Brandon's with a mountain glow. She regaled us with a few stories from earlier trips to the headwall with Marc before the veneer crumbled. She slipped out for a walk, and we sat helpless. That night was bad.

A few days later, Brette and I tied in for the first time together on the Slawinski-Takeda line on Mt. Athabasca. The route was fun and engaging, with a few little steps separated by rambling alpine terrain. We climbed well together and returned to the car with plenty of light.

The next day Brette introduced me to Mt. Blane. Her attention had become fixed on Blane, specifically its west face, after she and Brandon took the long way home following a day of cragging in Kananaskis Country. A well-known peak in the region, Mt. Blane (2,993m) forms the heart of the Opal Range. Its west face is clearly visible from the Kananaskis Trail road, rising 1,000m above the trail into King Creek Canyon. It was first climbed in 1955 via its northwest buttress in an outing that ended in tragedy, with only three of the four ascensionists returning alive. Brette and I spent the evening studying photos of the west face scoured from the Internet, piecing together a possible route.

We awoke at 4 a.m. the next morning, April 25. In predawn light, we crept up the well-trodden path through King Creek Canyon. Where the drainage splits, we took the left branch and then headed up the first gully toward the west face. We post-holed dispiritedly through spring slush until we reached a tongue of firmer avalanche debris that took us to the toe of the wall. I had to work hard to keep pace with Brette. She had a fire burning deep in her belly.

We traversed the base of the wall past a steep, broken corner to a narrow gully. By 10 a.m. Brette was leading up sun-affected ice before traversing rightward on rock above the belay. I heard a dismayed shout and looked up to see her axes clatter past—Brette's leashes were missing with Marc in Alaska. Fortunately, both axes were retrievable. Soon the rope was inching out again.

I followed as rapidly as I could, but I was slowed by steep terrain, shrinking holds, and loose rock underfoot. I marveled at Brette's delicate touch as I tucked my axes away, pulled off my right glove, and crimped hard while swinging my body left. A short while later I reached Brette's belay, warm from my exertions. We estimated the climbing on this pitch at 5.10a.

I led the next few rope lengths of 70° to 80° snow slopes, which we simul-climbed to another rock band. Here, Brette made a short, steep traverse out of sight to the right and climbed a full rope length before making an anchor out of two beaks and a thread. I continued past her into the sun, where I was greeted with good rock but sloughing spring snow. A steep layback corner brought us to the rightmost edge of the upper snow slope.

Brette took the lead again and several more rope lengths of simul-climbing took us leftward behind a false summit. Finally, we could see the true summit raising bluntly ahead. We quested upward on snow for several more rope lengths before an improbable traverse on ledges brought us to a final

hidden snow slope and a clear path to the top. Brette took this last pitch, cresting the ridge only meters from the summit, which we reached at 8 p.m.

We had hoped to downclimb the northwest ridge, but after a hundred meters of roped downclimbing, unconsolidated snow and darkness stymied our progress. The wind picked up, and after some discussion we decided to try abseil the northwest face. An hour of digging provided only fractured rock, and Brette resorted to slinging a low-angled bump on the ridge. It was 11 p.m. before I heard a faint "off rope" from below. I gingerly lowered myself over the edge, making sure to keep my weight low so as not to pull the sling over our sloped bollard. We were pleased to find more secure anchors for our remaining two abseils, which took us to the upper snow slopes flanking Blane's northwestern aspect.

It was a relief to pack the ropes away and continue our descent on foot. We suffered through several more hours of variable snow, and after one more short abseil from a tree, we eventually staggered back onto the trail we had walked up some 20 hours before. It would be 4:30 a.m. before we reached the car and began the one-hour drive back to Canmore, each taking turns at the wheel.

We named our climb Life Compass (980m, TD+ 5.10a M4+ 80°) in dedication to Marc and the dramatic change Brette's life has taken after his disappearance. I would like to further dedicate it to all those who are left behind, including Brette, when their loved one is lost in the mountains.

– Rose Pearson, New Zealand

Editor's Note: At the time that Harrington and Pearson climbed Mt. Blane, they were unaware of the location of several previous routes climbed in summer conditions on this face. (Current guidebooks provide limited information.) Their line was widely reported as a new route. However, with information from Raphael Slawinski and David P. Jones (who is working on an updated guidebook for the region), it became apparent that Life Compass followed much of the same line climbed by Heinz Kahl and Peter Schotten in 1957; Life Compass likely had a more difficult start than the 1957 route and then followed a significant variation to the left near the top. Kahl and Schotten are believed to have climbed the face in summer, while Harrington and Pearson climbed it in late April, using ice tools and crampons.

Images



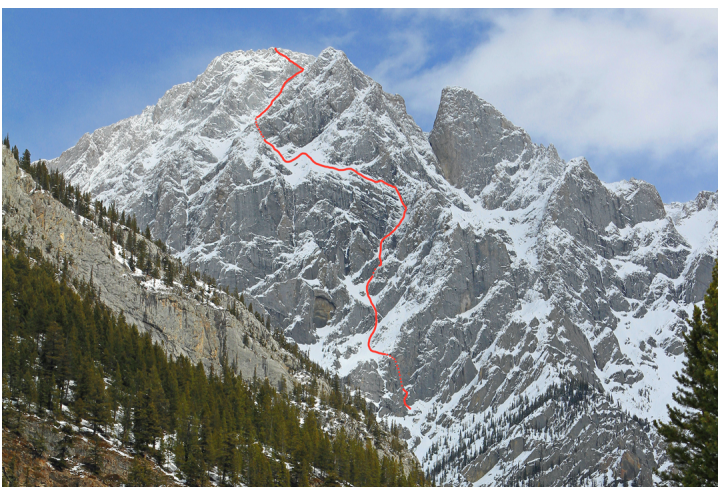
Rose Pearson near the start of the traverse two-thirds of the way up Life Compass (980m, TD+ 5.10a M4+ 80°) on Mt. Blane.



Brette Harrington descending the northwest ridge shortly before dark, after she and Rose Pearson completed Life Compass (980m, TD+ 5.10a M4+ 80°) on Mt. Blane. The two eventually decided to rappel to the west.



Brette Harrington delicately negotiating some loose rock shortly before the crux traverse on the first pitch of Life Compass (980m, TD+ 5.10a M4+ 80°) on Mt. Blane.



The route line for Rose Pearson and Brette Harrington's Life Compass (980m, TD+ 5.10a M4+ 80°) on the west face of Mt. Blane in the Opal Range. This line is similar to a route climbed in the summer of 1957 by Heinz Kahl and Peter Schotten, with likely a harder start than the 1957 route and an independent finish. Other routes climb the face to the left.



Brette Harrington (left) and Rose Pearson enjoying the evening sun after completing their route Life Compass (980m, 5 TD+ 5.10a M4+ 80°) on Mt. Blane.



Rose Pearson leading a mixed step on the west face of Mt. Blane.

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