



## AAC Publications

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### **Surviving Medusa: Seven Days on the North Face of Mt. Neacola**

Alaska, Neacola Mountains

**My first thought, upon being violently shaken awake at 4:30 in the morning, is that I'm getting buried in an avalanche.** My second thought is that I'm going to die. I press my hands against the nylon wall in front of me to brace myself as the tent flips end over end for what seems like an eternity. It comes to rest for a second and I have a glimmer of hope, but then I'm launched again, hurtling across the glacier. I can feel the repeated impacts on all sides. I wish it wouldn't end like this. I wish I could see my wife again. I hope Justin and Nick are okay. Finally, my body comes to rest. Miraculously, I'm not dead. I'm not even badly injured. I can move all my limbs, have feeling in all my digits. I'm breathing. I'm alive.

This was how April 4, 2021, began for Nick Aiello-Popeo, Justin Guarino, and me. The east face of Mt. Neacola in southwestern Alaska had released an avalanche so massive that the air blast sent our entire camp—which we thought we'd pitched a relatively safe distance from the wall—cartwheeling down the glacier. When that nightmare version of a magic carpet ride ended, and we each individually realized we were still on the surface, we yelled for each other, unsure if anyone else was still buried.

Nick had been deposited about 70 feet from me, twisted in his tent and covered in snow; Justin had gone a bit further. "I flew!" I hollered at my friends, and Justin yelled back: "Big-boy float!" Only then did we realize we were all okay. People deal with traumatic events differently—our way is by joking. Justin hobbled out of his tent to help extricate Nick, and I hauled ass back to our original campsite to retrieve Justin's boot shells, which had been in the vestibule of his tent.

Regrouping, we scrambled to find what little food was left and managed to frankenstein a single working tent from several broken ones. Sitting in our cook tent, holding up the wall against the howling wind, we had a brief discussion about whether we could still launch up our planned route, but it didn't take long to realize we needed to get out of the range and sort some things out. Unfortunately, the weather continued to be too heinous to move, let alone be picked up by our pilot, so we just waited.

It was unnerving to be pinned down for two days in a camp that had just been demolished, with avalanche danger increasing on the mountains around us. One of us had to brace the side wall of the cook tent constantly against the wind. We've since concluded that nowhere on that narrow glacier is truly safe; had we been further up the glacier (where we camped on our first trip to Neacola in 2019), the outcome would have been much worse. One day after the avalanche, Justin and I ventured outside to recover our gear cache at the base of the north face. The wind finally abated that evening, and the next morning our pilot, Doug Brewer, swooped in.

Suddenly we were in Kenai, eating hamburgers and trying to figure out our next move. So much time and effort and money had gone into this route already. Should we take this as a sign and just go home and never come back? The weather had gotten even worse, and returning to base camp right away was out of the question. A tactical retreat back to New Hampshire seemed like our best option, but we weren't finished with the face. We drove the rental van to Doug's hangar and dropped all our gear. "Keep our stuff safe, Doug. See you when the weather gets good."

In 2019, the three of us had made an alpine-style attempt on the huge and imposing north wall (a.k.a. the Medusa Face) of Mt. Neacola; at about 9,350 feet, it's the highest point of the Neacola Mountains.

That year we bailed a third of the way up, due to bad weather and the realization that we were under-equipped for the climbing above.

We were only the second team to try the Medusa Face. Twenty-three years had passed since Topher Donahue and Kennan Harvey's visionary effort in 1996, when they nearly reached the top of the face in three days (after fixing ropes at the bottom). A storm drove them down before they could finish the wall. "We were completely absorbed by 5.10 rock, A3 aid maneuvering, and much intricate ice and mixed climbing," Donahue wrote in the 1996 American Alpine Journal. In 2019, we'd found much the same. But we had been unable to verify if the final "800 feet of easy climbing below the summit" would really be as easy as Donahue suggested in the AAJ. Driving out of Kenai on our way to Anchorage and seeing the mountain disappear in the rearview mirror, I wondered when we'd be back again—or if the third time would be the charm.

We flew home to the North Conway area and each put in a solid 40 hours of blue-collar labor— Justin and Nick banging nails while I did some arborist work. None of us are sponsored athletes; we work our asses off in order to take "vacations" like this. After only six days at home, all the weather models matched up and predicted a sustained system of high pressure in the Neacola Mountains. Our wives weren't super thrilled about us going back and camping below a mountain that had almost killed us, but they know this is who we are, and are all amazingly supportive. I can't imagine how I would feel if the tables were turned, and my own wife, Angela Driscoll, put me in the same situation, but I would try to be as understanding as she is. And so, within 34 hours of leaving New Hampshire, we were back on the glacier. We set up camp in the same damn location and went to sleep with the prevailing feeling that "lightning doesn't strike in the same place twice." Hopefully.

On April 11 we left for the north face. Standing below our objective after all that we had been through filled me with excitement and a certain amount of trepidation. The wall looked meaner than ever. The forecasted weather window was somewhat brief and characteristically tentative—what you see on the glacier here often doesn't match the forecast. There was no time for getting lost in thought, so we launched upward.

Our first day on the wall went well, aside from a momentary lapse in sanity when I fell into the maw of the bergschrund while ascending with the haul bag, and then insisted that we toss it off the wall and continue with only our packs. The boys talked me down, and after some route-finding around the bergschrund we completed the entrance snowfields and set up camp with an ice hammock supporting our tent about 900 feet up the face.

The next morning was quite windy, so we mostly stayed put, venturing out only to fix a couple of pitches above us. Sometime during that second day we lost the pot for our Reactor stove, thanks to an extra strong gust of wind; a somewhat less efficient Windburner was now our only functional stove. A snow squall came through and reminded us how much spindrift the lower face gets. That night we took turns braving the maelstrom every few hours to dig out. Cooking was a real chore with three of us in tight quarters, and we each had an important job: Nick was the cook, Justin had to remain perfectly still so he didn't hit the hanging stove, and I had the pleasure of reaching one arm out of the tent to scoop snow into a stuff sack. I'm amazed none of us passed out from stove fumes.

The mixed ground on day three had been snowier and easier when Nick climbed it in 2019. This time Justin led, and we remembered how good the climbing on this face can be: thin ice in a shallow gully, with sporadic rock-gear placements. I took over after a couple of pitches and led some thin snow for a few hundred feet to a snow rib with spectacular views—a nice spot to excavate a platform.

We spent the morning of day four traversing a series of snow ramps. Arriving at our 2019 high point by midday, we paused to take a good look at the options above us. A perfect M6 seam was the obvious choice, so Justin took the rack and ventured forth, torquing, stemming, and aiding his way upward. On any climber's local crag, this would have been a classic pitch.

Justin led another pitch or two to an icy snowfield below a headwall. It was time to deploy our inflatable G7 portaledges, and we set to work building the best anchors we could. The gear placements were so uninspiring, though, that we only ended up setting up two of the ledges, and Nick—always the most willing to suffer—decided to hack a little ice bed above my ledge and go to sleep. As I crawled into my floating ledge I thought about what it would feel like if the anchor ripped and I plummeted down the face. The fear was overwhelming for a moment; then I bottled it up and put it deep down inside. “Fear won’t do you any good right now,” I told myself, and I did my best to sleep.

The next day our camp only moved a few hundred feet. We watched in awe as Nick, bare-handed in freezing temps, led us up 200 feet of 5.9 slab that reminded us of the climbing we often do back home on Cathedral Ledge, carefully smearing his boots and shifting his weight between small features. Above this we were back on lower-angle mixed terrain, and finally we arrived at the last bit of snow before the north face’s 1,200-foot headwall. I dug out a ledge for the tent while Nick and Justin fixed a couple of pitches above. Our strategy of fixing ropes in the evening to discourage bailing in the morning was working quite well.

The morning entertainment on our sixth day was to toss the haul bag containing our portaledges and some wet gloves off the wall. We were only about 500 feet from the top of the headwall and expected to be on snowier and wandering alpine terrain soon. To start us off, Justin skillfully led two pitches of hard mixed and aid in a chimney feature—the leads took forever, every move a question mark with potentially dire answers, and Nick and I steadily got colder at the belay.

“Off belay! Ropes fixed!” we heard Justin yell far above us. We were going to make it through the headwall! Surely there would be a wonderful spot to bivvy just above. Nick cleaned the gear while I juggled, wearing my pack with Justin’s pack dangling from my belay loop. As I passed piece after piece of sketchy pro, I appreciated the tremendous effort Justin had put in for the team. But when we arrived at his belay at 7 p.m., we realized we were in for a long evening—this was obviously no place to stop for the night. The weather was still clear, but the cold was coming, and, just like children, we feared the dark.

I led off on a rising traverse. One hundred feet into the pitch, around a corner from my friends, I found myself in a shallow dihedral with some suspect rock. I slotted the pick of my right tool into a thin seam, clipped my left tool to my harness, and used my hand to gently feel the left wall. I heard the rock move before I felt it, and to my horror realized that a sizable portion of the left half of the dihedral was moving. I fully loaded my right tool and tried to help an oven-size block clear my ropes below. Luckily they were under a little roof and trailed down and left due to the traverse. I nearly vomited with fear. For the second time in as many weeks I had thought: “So, this is how it ends.”

After a couple more pitches, I built a belay at a stance with two fixed pitons and realized this must be the high point where Donahue and Harvey had “spent the short Alaskan night doing the dance of life on a tiny ledge chopped into the ice.” Thinking about them standing there all night with spindrift pouring onto them “with the intensity of a waterfall” made us all appreciate the current fine weather. Nick took over and led one more rising traverse pitch to a small area of snow that, with some effort, yielded a bivvy site.

At this point, given Donahue’s description in the AAJ, we hoped things might get mellower. We were keeping an eye out for the easy-looking terrain he described, but simply couldn’t see it from this vantage. The rock above us or out left looked loose, steep, and convoluted. We also believed that getting to the east ridge too soon wouldn’t put us in a good position to summit, since it would mean more knife-edge ridge traversing to reach the top. The face seemed to be leading us up and right, so we decided to keep going that way and then punch it directly to the highest point of the ridge we could see.

Nick had the vision, so after a little moderate mixed climbing above the bivvy and a low-angle snow

feature, he led the final three rope-stretching pitches to the ridge while Justin and I followed with a mix of Micro Traxion seconding and proper ascending, feeling the commitment that traversing always adds. As Nick fired up the final pitch, the rock quality became very poor, and Justin and I cowered below a small roof. We heard Nick holler in excitement that he had reached the ridge, and began ascending the pitch to join our friend. Just 30 feet from his belay on the ridge, my rope shifted and a toaster-size rock skipped off and hit my leg. I can't remember who said it, but somebody joked that my leg would have been broken if it weren't for the vast quantities of ice cream I consume, keeping my bones strong.

Using the ice hammock again, we constructed a small, uneven platform to set up the tent, 30 feet below and 70 feet to the left of the gendarme we'd wrapped with cord for our anchor. We crawled in together and tried to sleep. The night was relatively calm except for one scare when I shifted to use my pee bottle and Justin thought that I was slipping off the ledge—If I had slipped, we all would have gone for a massive surprise pendulum in total darkness.

After a beautiful night, we woke with high hopes of traversing 1,000 feet to the summit (about 250 feet higher than where we stood) and then descending the west face, which had been climbed in 1991 by James Garrett, Lorne Glick, and Kennan Harvey. However, as soon as we climbed back up to the east ridge from our bivy down on the face, we were met with wind so intense that it stung our eyes through our goggles. We could barely stand upright, and verbal communication was totally out of the question. Reduced to head shakes and nods, we quickly agreed that going to the summit would be insane, impossible, or both.

The decision to go down is often tough, but in this case it really wasn't. Climbing the face was our goal and we had accomplished that. Going to the summit was always the ultimate dream, but down was the only choice to make if we wanted a good chance of making it out alive.

We had been staring at photographs of the mountain for two years now, and were somewhat sure that if we rappelled off a gendarme by the mountain's north summit and onto the east face, we could gain a system of snow ramps that would lead us back to the glacier. This was the same face that had avalanched on us two weeks earlier, but it was still early in the day and quite cold, and 98 percent of our descent route would be off to one side of the serac band that had tried to kill us.

I led the descent, hyper-focused on finding good anchors and getting us off the mountain. We rappelled eight or ten times—I lost count. The usual anchor difficulties persisted: tied-off pitons, tight cracks, limited options. After a bit, we landed on snow that we could downclimb and enjoyed simple descending with tired legs. At long last we arrived at what would be our final rappel. In my depleted state, I dropped two pitons in a row while trying to make an anchor. Justin and Nick just watched wordlessly, too tired to care. We rappelled again and landed on the lower snowfields of the east face. For our final exercise, we ran across the gully that was capped by the massive serac that had triggered the avalanche before.

Thirty minutes later, we arrived at our gear cache on the glacier and enjoyed some celebratory Pop-Tarts and candy. Stunned that we had pulled it off, we hiked back up to the base of the north face, grabbed our skis and haul bag, and stopped to stare at Medusa one last time. Sunlight had cooked the glacier surface and the evening shade had firmed it up, granting us some true New Hampshire snow conditions for our ski back to camp.

I am grateful for many things, but mostly that I shared this experience with my close friends— an adventure like this requires a real connection to your partners, and Nick and Justin are the best that anybody could ask for. We all question why we do this sort of thing: Is it really worth it? How will our families deal if we don't come home? I can never come up with any good answers. I love climbing mountains, and as I write this, the memory of the suffering and terror has already faded some and I'm starting to think about the next big objective. I guess there are worse things to be addicted to.

**Summary:** First complete ascent of the north face (Medusa Face) of Mt. Neacola (ca 9,350 feet) in southwestern Alaska, by Nick Aiello-Popeo, Ryan Driscoll, and Justin Guarino, April 11–17, 2021. The climbers measured the wall at about 4,600 feet high and graded the climbing at 5.10 A2 M6. They descended by the east face on April 18. Driscoll and Guarino spoke about their attempts and the climb of the Medusa Face on episode 40 of the AAJ's Cutting Edge podcast (see below).

**About the Author:** Ryan Driscoll is a trade worker and guide living in Tamworth, New Hampshire. When not climbing, he enjoys spending time with his wonderful wife, Angela, and two dogs. Driscoll received a 2021 AAC Cutting Edge Grant to help support this expedition.

The Cutting Edge · Surviving the Medusa Face of Mt. Neacola, Alaska

## Images



Foreshortened view of Neacola's north face with the 2021 route line. The wall is about 4,600 feet high. A visionary attempt by Topher Donahue and Kennan Harvey in 1996 reached very high on the wall before a storm sent them down. They coined the name Medusa Face.



Surveying the wreckage about two hours after an avalanche blast destroyed base camp below Neacola's east face.



Estimate area of the avalanche that destroyed base camp below Mt. Neacola's east face (tent symbol in lower left). The north face is on the right.



Hauling below the headwall on Mt. Neacola's north face. The team jettisoned the haul bag on the morning of day six of the climb.





Mt. Neacola from the north. After topping out on the north face, the team descended left along the sunlit east face. The summit of Neacola, behind, was reached in 1991 from the opposite side (west face).



Nick Aiello-Popeo works up the headwall on day five of the first complete ascent of Mt. Neacola's north face.





Ryan Driscoll angling up steep ground above the headwall in the evening of day six on the route.



Nick Aiello-Popeo nods off in the Alaska sunset, just below the final bivouac.



A snow hammock tent platform for one of the bivouacs on Neacola's north face.



Justin Guarino forging directly up steep rock on the north face of Mt. Neacola.



The complex wall prompted multiple solutions to the problem of where to sleep, including inflatable portaledges, snow hammock tent platforms, and an old-fashioned open bivouac.



Ryan Driscoll at the fifth bivouac on the Medusa Face of Mt. Neacola in Alaska.

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