



AAC Publications

Pyramid Peak, Techno Terror and Smoke 'Em if You Got 'Em

Alaska, Alaska Range, Revelation Mountains

I first saw a photo of Pyramid Peak in 2016 and was immediately drawn to a central line on the mountain, though it looked improbable. Paul Robertson and I applied for a grant in 2017 to attempt it, but we didn't receive funding. The Revelations are an expensive zone to access, so we shifted our sights to the Phantom Wall on Mt. Huntington, where we made the second complete ascent of the route.

In 2020, Matt Cornell and I made plans to attempt Pyramid, but the pandemic shut them down. In 2021 we tried to go again; Matt received the Cutting Edge Award to fund his portion of the trip, but we were unable to get weather to fly into the glacier and instead tried several things in the central range.

This year Matt and I, along with Jack Cramer and Austin Schmitz, left Bozeman on a road trip to Alaska in mid-March. Tired of having our sights set on specific objectives, we instead kept the mindset of chasing good conditions. When we arrived in AK a few weeks later, Andres Marin and Clint Helander had just finished their trip to Golgotha, and they kindly shared a photo of Pyramid with us. The conditions on the peak looked quite promising. After a flightseeing tour around the central range to check conditions, we shifted our ambition to Pyramid once again.

We spent a week hanging around Talkeetna trying to line up flights while also watching a very stable-looking weather window grow nearer. At last, Talkeetna Air Taxi was able to take us to the R&R Hunting Lodge, which sits only 25 miles from the head of the Revelation Glacier, and from there Rob Jones flew us in five loads with his Super Cub to our base camp on the glacier.

We landed at the beginning of a seven-day high-pressure system. Base camp was set and we started scoping lines. The central line on Pyramid—which had drawn our attention for years—looked more involved than we had initially expected. Not wanting to use up the window aid climbing the first several incredibly steep pitches, we opted for a less obvious line of ice ribbons that connected features directly to the summit on the right side of the west face.

We set out from camp the following day with three days of food, a double rack, and a light aid climbing kit with many beaks. There were several question marks on the route we had identified through our spotting scope that prompted the light aid rack.

I took the sharp end and we simul-climbed the first 210m of the route. Arriving at the beginning of the harder climbing, we broke into block-leading tactics. Matt led us up to the first question mark, a large leftward traverse to connect to smears of ice above. The traverse went down quickly with Matt freeing the pitch—thin slabs of ice with sparse gear miraculously connected and deposited us at a belay stance with three tied-off stubby ice screws for an anchor.

I took the next block, setting off on paper-thin delaminated ice that creaked as I scraped by for two pitches. (Both of these pitches fell off once the sun hit them later that day.) This block led us to the base of the next question mark, a massive rock-scar corner that we dubbed the "Crystal Corner." Matt took the first pitch of the corner, completing another impressive lead that required M7 moves quite far out from gear. I then led the remaining pitch in the corner, which put us below a large snowfield

two-thirds of the way up the wall.

By then the sun was on us and things were getting quite warm. Matt led up an obvious slot to connect into the snowfield where we planned to bivy, but the slot brought us to a blank kitty-litter slab with difficult route-finding, and we were forced to make a five-foot rappel to gain the snowfield. (Once safely back in base camp, we joked that we should have just made the jump to keep our free ascent.)

We dug a snow ledge for our two-man tent and enjoyed a sunset, drinking water and slurping packets of freeze-dried meals. The next morning we slept in till 8 a.m., enjoying the plush bivy we had built, and thinking we only had a few moderate pitches to the top.

We left the bivy at 9:30 and simul-climbed a few rope lengths to the beginning of some more technical climbing. I took the lead on the last question mark of the route, a thin runnel that led into a left-leaning roof. From the ground, the roof appeared to have a smear of ice underneath. Out of sight from Matt's belay, I made several requests to "watch me close here, I might whip" as large amounts of faceted snow rained down. Fifty meters out, I excavated snow and entered the roof section, which I climbed with creative headlocks and smeared crampons. Thankfully, a smear of ice flowed from the lip of the roof, and once I was on the smear, the pitch was quickly finished.

Above the roof was a beautiful runnel of ice. Matt took off and quickly dispatched two more pitches of vertical to past-vertical ice that led us to the summit slopes. After a few steps of mixed climbing we found ourselves on top of Pyramid Peak, where we enjoyed a pot of coffee and began our descent. We downclimbed a large chunk of the north ridge and then rappelled six rope lengths. That put us in a large snow couloir, which we descended unroped to the glacier. We named the route Techno Terror (3,600', AI6 M7+ R A0).

After two days of rest, we decided to attempt another route on the northwest face of Pyramid with Austin and Jack, who had been traveling with us to document the trip.

The line was an obvious snow and ice climb with one question mark two-thirds of the way up. We left camp at 6:30 a.m. and booted 1,000' up the couloir that we had descended on our prior route. This brought us to the beginning of the technical climbing. Eight hundred feet of 70° to 90° ice brought us to a snowfield that led into the crux portion of the route: perfect névé in a corner with difficulties up to AI5+. These pitches led us to the base of a steep rock step that split the couloir. I tried to climb the pitch free but got shut down once the wall steepened, and I resorted to aid to finish the pitch.

Above this step, we continued climbing 70° to 80° ice, which led us to the final slopes. We summited at 7:20 p.m. and enjoyed a few cigarettes on top before retracing our steps down the descent of the north ridge. We named the route Smoke 'Em If You Got 'Em (3,600', AI5+ A2+). It was great to climb this as a team of four after spending the prior month traveling together.

We spent a few days in base camp enjoying the views with clear skies, and on one of these John Varco dropped out of the sky unexpectedly to give us our flight out of the range to a lake, where we caught another flight back to Talkeetna.

— Jackson Marvell

Images



Matt Cornell connects the dots on a cruxy leftward traverse into the meat of the new route Techno Terror on the west face of Pyramid Peak.



Matt Cornell following a rock pitch on the new route Techno Terror.



Looking up the difficult roof on day two of Techno Terror on Pyramid Peak.



Jackson Marvell leading a thin pitch on Techno Terror.



Matt Cornell leading high on Techno Terror on Pyramid Peak.



Pyramid Peak's west face, showing (1) Techno Terror (2022) and The Odyssey (2014). The northwest face (also climbed in 2022) and descent route are hidden to the left.



Matt Cornell leads beautiful ice on Smoke 'Em If You Got 'Em, the first route up the northwest face of Pyramid.



The line of Smoke 'Em If You Got 'Em on the northwest face of Pyramid Peak (red line). The green line shows the descent route.

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