



## AAC Publications

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### **Kichatna Spire, East Face, Thunderstruck**

Alaska, Alaska Range, Kichatna Mountains

**We set off from the airstrip in Talkeetna, totally psyched for the challenge waiting for us high up above the Shadows Glacier. Mike “Twid” Turner and I would have to dig deeper than ever before on past big wall trips—it was just the two of us, and the workload was going to be immense.**

Twid had attempted our intended line up the east face of Kichatna Spire in 2000 with Stu McAleese, but backed off after 100m due to a section of loose rock. In the interim it seemed as though the mountain had shed this bit of choss, and after landing on the Shadows Glacier, we quickly bundled our kit and took our first loads up to the base of the wall. [Editor’s Note: Four previous big-wall routes have been climbed up the very steep east face of Kichatna. The route described here is the second line up the “East Buttress,” left of a route completed in 1992 by Han Tai-il, Shin Dong-seok, and Yu Hak-jae from South Korea.]

In the afternoon heat, we broke trail and dodged crevasses to the base of a good corner. The first pitch went free up to a big terrace beneath the wall’s first huge, impending overhang. We cached our kit, fixed a line, and abseiled back to the glacier and base camp, where Smash (a British brand of instant potatoes) and soup awaited.

On day two, with clear skies above, we got an early start up to the base of the pillar. I set off, free climbing at first but soon aiding on hooks and creaking cams behind booming, downward-facing daggers of rock. Halfway through, a microcam exploded from its brittle flake, in turn ripping my hooks and RPs ripped, and unzipped my progress to a good number 5 nut. A moment to compose, then up again I went to nail it. The end of the day found us under a massive roof, before abseiling down to head back to BC for another feast and banter.

Over the next three days, we progressed over the roof, making a tenuous traverse left into a mega corner, and began moving quickly upward, each night fixing lines and returning to our base camp on the glacier. There was the odd bit of difficult aiding, but it was mostly great climbing and amazing rock.

On day six we aided out a stunning roof crack with breathtaking exposure. The lip of the roof was somewhat void of gear, and some A4 climbing on hooks and mashies proved nerve-testing, technical, and exposed—truly amazing! Above was a wide chimney and crack that led to a decent bivy ledge. We prayed for snow for water, but there was none. After a long abseil to base camp, we spent the next day preparing to commit to the wall.

On day eight, June 5, we cast off on the big jumar, then climbed a complex pitch above the ledge to access the upper crack and corner. After another 60m pitch we decided our day was done. At the top of this pitch was a small cave filled with frozen snow—hallelujah! We filled a bag, descended to the ledge, and set up the portaledge.

From the cave the next morning we swung to the right and the corner and crack above. Progress was good, we were on fire, and the feeling of flow was insane! The next day a rather complicated section above with a tension traverse slowed us, but soon the ridge was in sight, and one more pitch got us there. A long abseil back to the ledge and another feast of Smash and chorizo!

The final day started with a long, heavy jumars to our high point, then many transitions, from hard aid, to free climbing, scrambling and small roofs, rock shoes, then eventually, onto snow and mixed. The summit ridge proved a lengthy and involved affair—towers and downclimbs, snow, ice and mixed, a labyrinth until the final summit block. The way up the east side seemed impossible, but we found a sneaky way to traverse around to the west, then up gentle snow slopes to the top. The summit was stunning and overwhelming, with views to reward us for all our toil and efforts on what felt like one incredible journey, up some absolutely wild terrain. From the very start to the very end, totally Thunderstruck!

After a long night descending back to the ledge, we prepared for another full day of getting all the gear back down the wall. It all went relatively smoothly, and soon we were back on the glacier, slip-sliding our way under massive loads back to BC, where we collapsed into the tent. High fives and Smash, with reduced-fat custard for pudding. Heaven!

We had absolutely no idea what the wall would throw at us, and never did we feel the challenge was within our grasp. Over every roof and at the top of every crack lay another piece of climbing that tested our resolve and pushed our limits of endurance. Thunderstruck (1,200m, 33 pitches, VI A3+ 6c) is the real deal—a modern, strong, eye-catching line up one of the most glorious towers any climber could wish for on an expedition. We were blessed with amazing weather and an incredible opportunity to express ourselves on such a masterpiece, sculpted by the forces of nature. How lucky we were to have unlocked those hidden secrets, high above the glacier, just two climbers and a whole load of determination. So much adventure, such incredible climbing. We will be back!

**Summary of Activity:** Thunderstruck (VI 1,200m, 33 pitches, A3+ 6c) on the east pillar of Kichatna Spire in the Kichatna Mountains of Alaska by Mark Thomas and Mike “Twid” Turner. May 29–June 9, 2022

— Mark Thomas, U.K.

## Images



Mike "Twid" Turner on the summit of Kichatna Spire after making the first ascent of Thunderstruck (1,200m, 33 pitches, VI A3+ 6c).



Mark Thomas relaxing in tight quarters on one of the team's ledge bivies during the first ascent of Thunderstruck (1,200m, 33 pitches, VI A3+ 6c) on the east face of Kichatna Spire.



Mike "Twid" Turner jugging up golden granite on the east pillar of Kichatna Spire during the first ascent of Thunderstruck (1,200m, 33 pitches, VI A3+ 6c).



Foreshortened view of the east pillar of Kichatna Spire, above the Shadows Glacier, showing the line of Thunderstruck (1,200m, 33 pitches, VI A3+ 6c). Mark Thomas and Mike "Twid" Turner spent two weeks putting up this new line in June 2022. The 1992 route by climbers from South Korea (Han-Shin-Yu) is to the right on the same pillar.



Mark Thomas coming up the final summit ridge on Kichatna Spire, during the first ascent of Thunderstruck (1,200m, 33 pitches, VI A3+ 6c).



Mark Thomas following a pitch high on the east pillar of Kichatna Spire during the first ascent of Thunderstruck (1,200m, 33 pitches, VI A3+ 6c).

## Article Details

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