

Horn Spire

CRAIG LINGLE, *Unaffiliated*

THIRTY miles north of Juneau, Horn Spire towers above the junction of the Thiel and Battle Glaciers. A triple-edged blade of rock, its 6700-foot summit stands 4700 feet above the valley glaciers below. Cliffs and steep, glaciated slopes rise 3000 feet to the base of the actual spire; above, three symmetrical faces and ridges rise precipitously in a nearly perfect, needle-like pyramid.

During the spring of 1973 Dick Benedict, Gerry Buckley and I organized an attempt to climb it. When the weather broke clear on June 1, Ralph Swedell, a local geologist who owns a light bush plane, and I loaded twelve days of food, gas and climbing equipment into his airplane. We placed the airdrop on a snow shoulder at 4500 feet, three-fourths of a mile southwest of Horn Spire.

Several days later we drove to the road-end at Echo Cove, 32 miles northwest of Juneau, but our complicated and arduous approach ended in failure and near disaster. Halfway to the top of an icefall we took off our packs and paused for lunch. Minutes later a "crunch" above signalled the beginning of an avalanche. We dove for cover behind rocks and scrub trees. One ice block bounded directly towards me. I ducked and heard it crash against Gerry's pack before spinning over me and into space. The Kelty frame was bent into a Z-shape. Clearly the signs were not right. We retreated to Juneau to await better snow conditions.

Later Swedell suggested that it might be possible to approach the spire by landing on one of the gravel bars near the terminus of Gilkey Glacier, within easy reach of the spire: a hike of two miles up the Gilkey to where Battle Glacier joins it as a tributary, followed by a five-mile hike up the Battle and Thiel Glaciers to a point below the airdrop site.

On a gray, rainy morning Ralph and I took off from Juneau Airport, flew low up the coast to Burners Bay and continued up Gilkey Valley into the Coast Mountains under low, heavy clouds. Near the terminus of Gilkey Glacier it became apparent that the gravel bars were too rough to land on. As we flew over the glacier, we were struck by the extraordinary smoothness of the surface. The Gilkey is receding; its terminus is low and gently sloping. Since Gilkey Valley is quite level, the glacier itself, though seamed and dotted with boulders, is flat and uncrevassed. Ralph circled, observed the glacier closely, approached, scraped his wheels on the ice, gunned it and took off again. It felt good. He circled and landed. Feeling incredible elation, we stepped out and

laughed uproariously. Being able to land in a place like this is like cheating the bank.

Early in the evening of June 26, Dick Benedict and I squeezed ourselves and our packs into Ralph's airplane, lifted off and landed on Gilkey Glacier. Ralph returned to Juneau; shortly we were joined by Gerry Buckley and Bruce Tickell. The following day we reached our airdrop site, where we succeeded in locating *six* of the original *eight* boxes. We were in serious trouble. One of the missing boxes contained a climbing rope. The next morning we descended the glacier which flows down one side of the shoulder towards the Thiel Glacier. After looking in crevasses and elsewhere for two-thirds of the way down, we began working back up. On the lower lip of a crevasse we spotted a dark object. Pure luck was with us; it was the corner of a drop box, protruding from avalanche debris. It contained the climbing rope. The other box was never found, but it contained only food, of which we had enough.

Around noon on June 29, when the overcast thinned enough for us to perceive the silhouette of Horn Spire in the murk above, we set out. A 50°, 700-foot snow couloir led from the cirque beneath the west face to a precipitous, knife-edged col on the crest of the northwest ridge. Small wet-snow avalanches descended periodically, but all were funnelled into a central rut; we were able to ascend safely to one side. Above the col rose the crux of the climb: a 300-foot vertical rock step. Bruce began leading the step while we belayed him and at the same time excavated a tent platform in the col with a collapsible snow shovel. Thinking we would return to bivouac in the col before finishing the climb, we left a tent, stove and hot-drink materials on the platform.

The first lead of the step went F5: good climbing on solid quartz diorite. The second lead was F7, A2: of sustained difficulty but with good cracks. After belaying Bruce, I cleaned the pitch on Jümars, lowered the Jümars to Gerry and Dick, returned the hardware to Bruce and belayed him as he nailed the last fifteen feet of the step. Above, a sharp crest led to a ten-foot overhang which again blocked the ridge. There was a moat beneath it.

When we reached the moat, the sun was setting. Realizing it would take much too long to descend to the col and reascend in the morning, we used the snow shovel to enlarge the moat, level the floor and build a side wall to block the wind. The bivouac was rather like sleeping in a wet icebox. Above, the sky was clear, but the overhang dripped steadily. At sunrise the weather remained good. A dense undercast extended to the horizon below us, but the upper part of Horn Spire, and the other high peaks of the Coast Mountains, stood above it.

At 4:30 A.M. we started for the summit. A short but tricky pitch took us around the overhang, then steep snow led to reasonable going along the ridge crest. We found ourselves treading between the vertical

west face, which drops 1000 feet into the cirque, and the fluted, precipitous north face, down which avalanches roared periodically as it attempted to rid itself of the last vestiges of snow and rime ice.

The upper portion of the ridge rises abruptly towards the summit. Late in the summer it is bare rock, but now it was thinly covered with snow and ice. As Bruce led, he used snow plates and occasional pitons in the rock for protection. On the upper ridge a small avalanche started above and poured over him. Momentarily I expected to see him swing off into space (he was ten feet above his last piton), but Bruce held on. Without comment, he continued climbing.

The last pitch to the top was steep loose rock, mixed with snow and ice, rather unpalatable. The summit—which looked from the air as if there were room for one man to balance on one foot—turned out to be roomy enough for the four of us to relax in the sun. Tired from the previous night's bivouac, we actually slept there for three hours.

At two P.M. the cloud layer rose from below and immersed us in fog. We descended the upper spire with two long 150-foot rappels plus some belayed down-climbing, continued along the ridge and reached our previous night's bivouac site with another rappel from a snow plate. A fourth rappel down snow got us to the top of the vertical rock step; two more, partially free, to the col where we had shoveled out the tent platform. By that time the wind was driving sleet through the air, so we pitched the tent and moved in.

The stove and candle enabled us to brew hot cocoa comfortably and then doze off. At three A.M. Bruce, Gerry and I awoke, our feet too cold to sleep. We reignited the stove and burned it the rest of the night to keep warm. At 4:30 an earthquake (!) rocked the mountain beneath us. There was nothing to do but to stare at each other incredulously. Shortly it stopped, but with a faint roar avalanches poured off the north face. Later we learned that the quake, centered 150 miles northwest of Sitka, was 6.8 on the Richter scale.

The next morning we descended the couloir, using one snow plate per rope-length for protection, and returned to camp, where we concocted a huge meal and sacked out for the day. On July 2 we hiked up the unnamed valley glacier to the 4800-foot pass at the head of Davies Creek Valley. There the worst weather of the trip struck: complete whiteout and driving rain. The following day we spent beating brush out Davies Creek to the road-end, which we finally reached at 1:30 in the morning.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Coast Mountains, Southeastern Alaska.

FIRST ASCENT: Horn Spire, c. 6700 feet, June 30, 1973; NCCS IV, F7, A2.

PERSONNEL: Bruce Tickell, Dick Benedict, Gerry Buckley, Craig Lingle.