

Middle Triple Peak

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THE Middle Triple Peak, a piece of rock and ice, was unclimbed. It stands to the west of Mount McKinley within a rugged complex of glacier and granite known as the Cathedral Spires of the Kichatna Mountains. "The Spires are probably North America's closest equivalent to the towers of Patagonia . . . heavy glaciation, remoteness, bad weather . . . vertical walls, pinnacles, and obelisks." (Roberts and Millikan, *A.A.J.*, 1967.)

"These 'Triple Peaks' were a set of beautifully symmetrical summits . . . smooth granite walls . . . crests of ice and snow . . . transplanted from Patagonia." (DeMaria and Geiser, *A.A.J.*, 1966.)

"We knew June was the wrong month but . . . Middle Triple, second highest of the Spires and a splendid prize interfered with our judgment. . . . In twenty days we never set foot or piton on Middle Triple Peak. The snow conditions were consistently hideous, but probably typical for June." (Roberts, *A.A.J.*, 1971.)

Well, with a west face higher than El Capitan that is capped with 600 feet of ice and the promise of nifty Alaskan storms in an isolated area, what more could one ask for?

Charlie Porter had just finished his solo of the Cassin Ridge (an accomplishment in American mountaineering which deserves far more attention than this west wall.) when he called me in Salt Lake City demanding that I leave on the next available flight to Anchorage, or he'd kill me. Before I knew it the whole west coast of the U.S. had buzzed by and we threw my gear into the back of the jeep. The next 48 hours were passed going from store to store buying squeezezy margarine, disks of pilot bread (highly recommended by a local female who no doubt had her eye on Porter) and Australian beer. Some time thereafter we were in "beautiful downtown Talkeetna" humping loads in a drizzle from the train station to the red hanger that would house us until the weather cleared over the Spires.

I was awfully quiet on the flight in. Pilot Sharp was talking of wing tanks siphoning out on glacier landings, checking compass bearings, altitude, thinking about his machine. Charlie was taking photos and questioning Sharp. Below us wandered endless carvings, olive green ribbons of water, as the plane dropped and rose.

The Spires appeared as phantom shadows in a gray cloud, a soft

aquatint blurring steely edges. Sharp had never been to the Spires before, and because of the cloud he had to use a topographic map to weave his way over ridges and around peaks; in the end we were on the Tatina Glacier. In thirty days, Sharp was to return. Then we couldn't see the plane anymore and the snow was heavy and quiet.

The following day we started the move to the Monolith Glacier. As soon as the weather permitted, we fixed five pitches to the prominent second arch, taking two days. It started to storm as we reached the base of the wall.

Listen; the pat of snowflakes on the fly, the wind and the constant thoughts thrown about. A chess board is quickly scored on a paper pad and pieces made of adhesive and duct tape. After three days Charlie has won every game, but the storm has finally passed. The face is left with a beautiful talcum dusting of snow.

We had considered well the possibilities of hypothermia on the wall and designed our diet and equipment accordingly, leaving few problems unsatisfactorily resolved.

Again the stove is refilled to melt more snow for one more water bottle and the avalanches come down the face exposing our ropes. Breakfast of Champions is finished and maybe tomorrow we go up. Hauling loads to the base of the wall, up slush to the bergschrund, postholing, get out of step somehow, twist about, get back into that rhythm, so important, that rhythm; back to the tent, last load.

Mists close in, weather's going cloudy, gotten colder, starting to snow, not serious, silent snow flowers; the world is a twenty-foot circle interrupted by the rhythm of paying out rope. Watch the haul line bounce as he checks a pin, pay out more rope as he clips in, and wait. A few pitches higher, still snowing, still a twenty-foot periphery. I'm asleep at the wheel, an angry tug from above, sorry to frustrate you, but I was dreaming.

Tension off of nested arrows; push the snow off, tap-dancing is damned difficult in these double boots. Bong crack filled with ice, chop it out in small pieces. Water running down the face, ice in the cracks, leap-frog bongs, getting dusky, maybe sleep after this pitch.

Struggle for an hour to get into the hammock, sleeping bag's a hassle, everything's tied in, don't lose those boots; eat, tiger's milk bar, and a can of tuna. It's not really cold, just damp, pull down the fly to welcomed darkness, sleep.

Bladder's going to burst, gotta get up, look it's clearing, but sleep some more is the reply, start this afternoon, you bet, you bet. Another tiger's milk bar, a piece of cheese. . . . Hey, I'll trade you a half a Thuringer for all your chocolate-chip breakfast bars!

A big chunk falls off from somewhere far above, hits once and bursts into spinning, twisting, floating ballerinas, Walt Disney Fantasia,

Fire Bird Suite, Swan Lake. Clouds play in and out changing the light, too good to close my eyes.

I can hear Charlie stirring above. Up in the sky a warm tangerine-ball shines on honey-colored rock like Tuolumne. The dihedral gobbles up nuts, starts to lean and crosses a water course. Boots slip, can't stand high, the crack deepens, bongs in the back just tipped in sideways; drip, drip, clouds in again out again. Loose flakes, only a few nuts left, all too small, hands look like wrinkled white gloves.

We'd been in cloud dressed in parkas and cagoules when the sun came blazing out; the sudden increase in temperature was oppressive. Charlie had just cleaned the pitch and was at the belay. He'd taken off his helmet and was pulling the cag off, arms struggling in the air. . . . A piece of ice had caught him off guard; it hit him hard on the side of the head, shoulder and hand. "Well it may be broken, it's only a finger, but it may be broken." "Listen, do you want me to lead this pitch?" "No, I'd better find out now if I can use it." It must have been painful, but I could only guess.

Until now the rock had been quite firm, but now it changed to flaky and soft; this coupled with the verglas at night made for some varied climbing, but no matter, we were on the mountain and the weather was holding.

The pattern was now familiar and two more bivouacs brought us to the summit icecap. A cold white medium stood above us as Charlie stepped out of aid slings into crampons. Opaque and fast, the clouds came once again to envelop us in their folds. But the ice was superb and offered more freedom than we'd had in days. Yes, full run-outs up a 70° fluted surface. We swung out into the wind and cloud, a bit of orange and blue, as we approached an alabaster summit.

We had five bivouacs during our ten days on the wall. We rappelled the route in a fantasy-like white-out, reaching the bergschrund on the first of July.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Kichatna Mountains, Southwestern Alaska Range.

FIRST ASCENT: Middle Triple Peak, 8835 feet, via the west face, June 21 to July 1, 1976 (Russell McLean; Charles Porter).