

# WALLS IN SHADOW

*Single-push climbing is out there, all right, but not beyond judgment.  
Speedy climbing on the second ascent on Mt. Hunter's Wall of Shadows  
and a new route, Common Knowledge, on Denali's Washburn Face.*

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KEVIN MAHONEY



The north buttress of Mt. Hunter. Wall of Shadows begins in the couloir on the left then takes to the face. *Kevin Mahoney*

Spindrift avalanches pass the door of our snow cave. A grin grows wide on Ben Gilmore's face as he raises his fist triumphantly. Two thousand feet up the Wall of Shadows we discovered this crystal cavern to enjoy shelter from the storm. We stumbled upon the cavern by the Force, that undeniable draw that leads one off route with blind faith that something will come together (a.k.a. fool's luck when you are desperate). It is 10 hours into our second day of climbing; during the last three hours snow has been falling, creating spindrift avalanches at regular intervals. BTUs, sweat, Gore-Tex, and spindrift have joined forces to soak through all my layers. We are at the top of the Crystal Highway and another open bivy, with spindrift filling my bivy sack, seems less appealing than it did while leaving our tent behind on the glacier. Light may be right, but spindrift sucks.

## Q

This is our third trip to Alaska, which lately seems to be the only time we get to climb together. So it was easy for us to believe that we could pull off the second ascent of the Wall of Shadows with a scant alpine rack, two 7.6-mm 60-m ropes, four days of food and fuel, our sleeping bags, and bivy sacks. The A4 sections that Michael Kennedy and Greg Child experienced seemed to have ice on them, so we hoped it would go free or with very little aid since we were not prepared for anything more.

As Ben led up through the bergschrund, I recalled what Kennedy said about the first ascent: "It was the most difficult route in our combined 50 years of climbing." As the rope went tight and I started to climb, I wondered what we were smoking back on the glacier for us to



Ben Gilmore leaving the shrund on the Wall of Shadows. *Kevin Mahoney*

believe we could pull this off. A thousand feet higher we must have been smoking again, because after the first day we felt confident we would succeed. So far we had been able to avoid the first aid section, dubbed Coming into the Country, by climbing ice to its left. Then, half a dozen pitches of fun ice led us to Thug Alley, 200 feet of thin, plastic ice less than a yard wide. At the base of the Enigma, we chopped a bunk-bed bivy out of the ice.

Brew, dinner, brew, sleep, spindrift, sleep, spindrift, sleep. Finally we woke to a beautiful, cold morning. After drinking our instant oatmeal (the fastest way to get it down), we were ready to tackle the first real unknown, the Enigma (A4). Fortunately, it was Ben's block so I got to cheer him on, hoping he could find a way through the mystery that was just out of sight. A thin ice



Ben Gilmore on the Dry Heaves pitch (pitch 10) of the Wall of Shadows. *Kevin Mahoney*

runnel to a small roof ended with a choice: left or right? After some tenuous exploration, he settled on a thin ice smear to the right. Clearing off a dusting of snow, Ben discovered an old rivet from the first ascent. With a junk #1 TCU in, Ben stretched to hook a front point in the old, sun-faded tat, which got him high enough to gain egg-shell ice that had separated from the rock. The angle was only 85 degrees, so Ben figured it was no harder than WI 5. He continued with no gear for 30 feet on ice that was so thin that it required him to spread his body weight over three points, since no single point would hold. Most people would call it WI 6X, but Ben still thinks it was only NEI 5-. Finally, the Enigma was behind us and the rest of his block went smoothly and ended at the Crystal Highway.



Ben Gilmore (left) and Bruce Miller 14 hours into Common Knowledge on the Father and Sons Wall. *Kevin Mahoney*

At first I was psyched to have this block, but as the snowfall increased and the spindrift filled my jacket with regularity, I realized that justice had been served. Ben had had the crux pitch so I deserved the crux weather while leading 80- to 95-degree plastic ice. Fatigue, chills, common sense, and insecurities begged us to retreat; the thought of another spindrift-filled night loomed over our heads. At one spot we went off route to explore the top of a diamond-shaped blob frozen to the wall. The top had no potential, so I put in a rock anchor and started down the other side; halfway down my boot broke through the ice to my knee: paydirt. Forty-five minutes later, as we watched the spindrift avalanches pass the door of our snow cave, we were again optimistic about our future. Tomorrow, the Somewhere Else Wall (A4).

## Q

We wake to blue skies, just when we need it. Now it's my turn to sort out the other A4 section of the route. I climb an ice runnel to a hanging snow-mushroom traverse, then pull on some gear to get through the exit roof and gain ice for a belay. As Ben follows, his feet drop out from under him. The huge mushroom drops away and he is left hanging from one tool slotted in a crack. The next piece of protection is five horizontal feet away with blank rock separating him from it. With no other options, Ben cuts loose for the heinous pendulum into the right-facing corner. After pulling through the roof and settling into the belay, he finally starts to breathe again. After some more mixed terrain that required pulling on gear to ease my nerves, we are done with the Somewhere Else Wall. Ben leads us through the "dry heaves" and onto the third ice band, where we join the Moonflower Buttress.

As we search out the best place to spend our third night, we hear voices. Doug Chabot and Bruce Miller are finishing their second day cruising the Moonflower Buttress. I knew Doug from Exum Mountain Guides, and we had met Bruce the previous year. We decide that we will go to the summit together the next day.

The next day is clear and cold, and Bruce and Doug head out first for the Bibler Come



Kevin Mahoney on the crux Candelabra pitch of Common Knowledge. *Bruce Miller*

Again Exit. While we wait our turn for the first real pitch, Ben discovers his water bladder has leaked two quarts of water all over his down parka—a great way to start our summit push. We climb through three fun pitches to gain the upper slopes to the northeast ridge and join forces with Bruce and Doug to break trail to the summit on a beautifully calm evening with light clouds dancing in the setting sun to keep us in awe during the tedious post-holing. A quick celebration, one last photo, then back down the northeast ridge.

Nine rappels, courtesy of Bruce Miller V-thread Express, bring us back to our bivy on the third ice band and finally sleep. The next day, nineteen more rappels and we are back at our skis on the glacier, marveling in the glow of an anxiety-free night of sleep.

## Q

I wince at the dull thud of plastic hitting ice. My body and mind were just starting to unwind after leading the crux of Common Knowledge, a full 200-foot pitch of vertical to overhanging, sun-rotten, sublimated ice that Ben dubbed the Candelabra because of its resemblance to a huge candle dripping with melted wax. Bruce had already followed the pitch and is perched next to me for the bird's-eye view of Ben's stoic performance. Ben's crampon spring bails have compressed to the point of obscurity; tiny front points poke out beyond his plastic boots. With every kick of his boot the plastic sounds a dull thud that reminds Bruce and me that Ben is essentially campusing WI 6 at altitude with a pack on. Now, that is just the challenge; the truth is we are 2,000 feet up a 7,000-foot route, and every thud of plastic against ice means toe against plastic. Not one to complain, Ben admits that it is a little pumpy.

Backup plans are essential in the mountains. Weather, conditions, health, and psyche all factor into which route is appropriate. Our intent was to attempt a new line on the southwest face of Denali. We joined forces with Bruce Miller, who was in search of a partner. After a period of unstable weather and a reconnaissance, we chose a less committing route: an obvious ice line on the northwest side of the west buttress. Ben and I had thought of attempting the line the previous year but had turned around while on the descent to the base of the route. The ice had been so hard that our brand new Express screws had to be torqued into the ice with our ice tools. This year it is later in the season and the temperatures are much warmer. We hesitated, knowing that other very competent parties were eyeing the same route and each was likely to succeed. After giving it due respect, we racked up. With 9.4-mm and 8.8-mm 60-m ropes, a light alpine rack, and a stove with 22 ounces of fuel, oatmeal, and ramen we were off.





Ben Gilmore following the Somewhere Else Wall pitch after the Mushroom Collapse on Mt. Hunter's Moonflower Buttress. *Kevin Mahoney*



Bruce Miller leading the Waterfall Pitch on Common Knowledge. *Kevin Mahoney*

From 14,000 feet on the west buttress we descended 5,000 feet, around Windy Corner and down from Motorcycle Hill. Seven rappels brought us to the Peters Glacier, and we were now completely alone, staring up at our proposed route, hoping the needle of ice in the middle of the route was better than it looked.

Bruce led us up through the bergschrund, then we soloed the next 700 feet to the base of the first steep pitch. Ben led the first block of cruiser ice with steep steps to spice it up. At the base of the Candelabra, I took the lead. After leading up through the 200 feet of fun, tenuous climbing, I gave the rack to Bruce to share the wealth that continued for one more pitch. But first we have to suffer through the sound of Ben's boots thudding into the ice as he muscles his way up the Candelabra.

Bruce takes his block through cruiser ice and a few steep steps. Then my block starts with the Waterfall Pitch, a pitch of WI 4 that would be more at home in Crawford Notch, NH, than at 14,000 feet on Denali. By now the clouds that had blanketed the valley floor have crept up to us and are dropping snow on our parade, but we have become adept at climbing in spindrift. After a few more pitches of mellow ice, we are on the upper shoulder and into simul-climbing terrain. We debate brewing up since we have been on the move for 14 hours and are low on water, but we decide we can wait for a more protected spot. We must be fatigued and dehydrated to believe we can find a more protected spot on the broad, sweeping slopes of the upper north side of the west buttress. The next 3,500 vertical feet take much longer than it should, up through slopes of 55-degree blue ice and snow with a few belayed steep pitches up through a rock buttress with ice runnels guiding us. We finally reach the top of the buttress after 20 hours; here we spend the next two hours resting and brewing, trying to rejuvenate for the traverse back to the fixed lines.



The Washburn Face on Denali: (1) *Common Knowledge* and (2) *Beauty is a Rare Thing*, 1995. Kevin Mahoney

The technical climbing is behind us, but after 22 sleepless hours even horizontal ice with 2,000 feet of exposure gets your attention. Bruce and Ben go ahead while I lag behind, realizing with every step that, despite my exhaustion and desire to drink a gallon of Cytomax, I am turned on to a new style of climbing: single push, with the same gear that you might go out for a day of cragging with, plus a stove for a brew session. Many strategies are used to get up peaks or just to do cool routes like *Common Knowledge*, with no summit at the end. Yet to cover 7,000 feet of terrain and feel confident to handle whatever you may encounter is liberating and fun. Prior to attempting to climb a big route in this style, I was tempted to think that such tactics are outside the envelope of safety. Now I feel that it is out there all right, but judgment can keep it within the envelope. This self-awareness and decision making is one of the greatest attributes of alpine climbing.

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Alaska Range

ASCENTS: Second ascent of *Wall of Shadows* (VI, WI6 mixed 5.9 A2) on Mt. Hunter's north buttress. May 15-18 up; May 19 down the *Moonflower* rappels. Ben Gilmore and Kevin Mahoney.

First ascent of *Common Knowledge* (V, WI 6R) on Mt. McKinley's Washburn Face (the northwest face of the west buttress). June 2; 26 hours round trip from 14,000-foot camp. Ben Gilmore, Kevin Mahoney, and Bruce Miller.