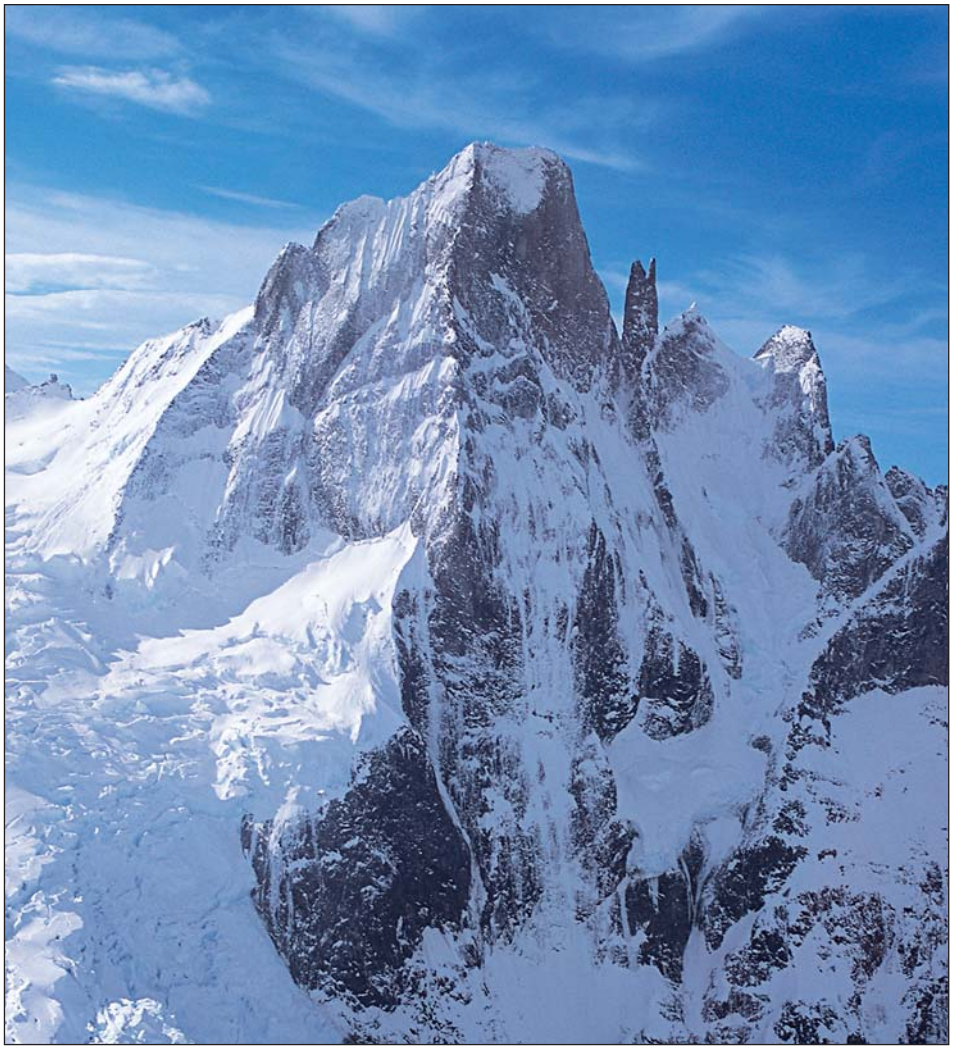
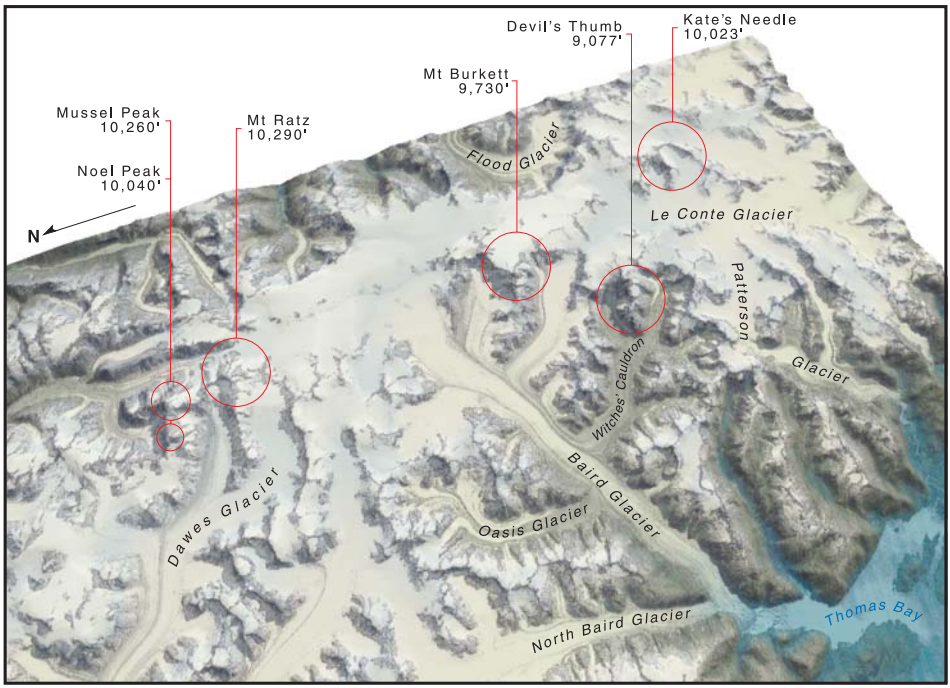
The Fickle Face

The northwest face of Alaska's Devil's Thumb—Could it just be unclimbable?

Dieter Klose



The unclimbed (and unclimbable?) 6,500-foot northwest face of Devil's Thumb. The northeast face is in sunshine, and Cat's Ears Spire stands proud. Dieter Klose



Source: Landsat TM, September 9, 1989 Bands 3,2,1 as RGB
Place names and elevations from USGS 1:250,000 Sumdum & Petersburg Sheets.
Scale varies in this perspective.

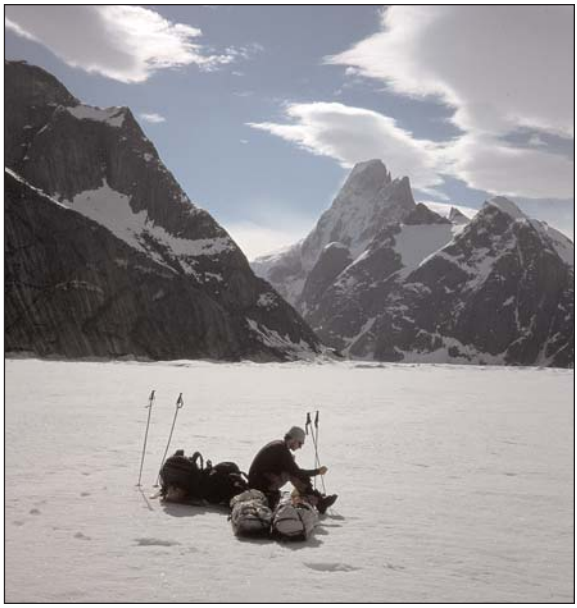
Stikine Icefield
Boundary Ranges
of the Coast Mountains
Southeast Alaska/Canada

Like the Sirens who lured Ulysses to a blissful yet certain death, the northwest face of the Devil's Thumb continues to tempt the alpinist onto her flanks. Yet those who approach this beckoning alpine maiden should have themselves strapped to the mast, as did that wise fellow of yore, and sail on by.

Soaring at an average angle of over 65° and standing 6,500 feet tall, the great northwest face of Devil's Thumb may well be the steepest wall of such size in all of North America. It is a dangerous and difficult face that rarely, if ever, comes into condition. It is the epitome of Fickle. Its direttissima is probably the prize of the continent. But this big, bad, beautiful plum could well happen to be one that never gets picked. Involving an international cast of suitors who have whispered its name for more than 25 years, this wall has repulsed all attempts. It is looking like it may well be The Unclimbable. Imagine: a face that, for whatever reasons, will not be climbed.

In this era of destination consciousness, where obscure new routes and faces are being discovered and ticked off, this face of the Devil's Thumb remains an anomaly. This secreted wall in the Stikine Icecap of southeast Alaska dominates a glacial basin called the Witches' Cauldron. The wild face, discovered well over two decades ago, ends on a very specific summit. Here are all the makings of both post-modern and futuristic alpinism, yet it simply has not, does not, and seems not to be do-able.

Philosophically, the time may be nigh for a reference point, the absolute limit of what a mountain will allow to a simple human. Perhaps this is what the state-of-the-art of alpinism needs: a place where no person will willingly go the distance. A place that simply by its own



John Millar on a rest break during the 2002 approach to the Devil's Thumb. Guy Edwards

nature will remain unwanted by all humans, by choice; a refuge of alpine purity; a sanctuary where only the birds may alight, and then only so long as the avalanches deign. Nothing is allowed or welcomed here, for nothing will survive. Imagine.

The zero success rate has not been for a lack of strong climbers. The list of suitors reads like a who's-who of alpinists. The late, great Mike Bearzi, whose name became synonymous with the northwest face, thought he had cracked the code. He really wanted it, and went there on a total of four month-long expeditions. Along with the author, he made a big dent, but that was shy of even halfway up. Since then, the likes of Alex Lowe, Jack Roberts, Bruce Miller, Randy Rackliff, and Sean Easton have paid empty-handed tribute to the monstrosity.

Last spring two Canadians, Guy Edwards and John Millar, went to have a peek. They were the fourteenth party to do so. Of those fourteen unlucky ones, only five actually set foot on the face. The rest never saw anything close to it being in nick—and didn't even venture onto it.

THE PROBLEM

Several factors lend to the difficulty of finding the face in condition. As a rock climb it's a perfect place to commit suicide, for reasons I'll discuss later. "In condition" means fully iced-up, move-fast terrain. This appears to be possible only during the spring transition, when just the right amount of storms and thaw-freeze conditions coat the face in white and a touch of blue. For a justified attempt, these conditions must then be followed by a promise of at least two days of clear skies in order to quickly climb through the 4,000-plus vertical feet of avalanche-prone zones. Sadly, this springtime period is usually one of unsettled weather, where an apparent clearing is usually just a brief tease. Making a bad call on the weather at this point could leave one stranded up high for weeks, if not avalanched off the wall entirely.

The crux of the diretissima, the steep band at half-height, is concave; any precipitation causes lethal avalanches here, which continue onto the lower face (which is also threatened by a hanging glacier). The steep band is generally the last portion to properly ice-up.

Due to the rather atrocious weather in the region, the face has been seen to ice-up splendidly, only to be melted off by a following period of rain, described by Guy Edwards as

"a stage of molt." Lastly, as Alex Lowe put it, scoffing, the face is simply "too low." Starting at an elevation of a mere 2,500 feet and ending at the 9,077-foot summit, the route is indeed low by alpine standards, even taking into account a latitude of 57 degrees north. After icing-up, the lower wall tends to fall apart in short order while the upper portion still beckons. Or, vice-versa. When I was on it, the lower half was in perfect nick, whereas the upper half was out. Perhaps it had fallen apart and needed to get itself back together. Quite the neurotic little über-wall.

THE CONSTANTS

Having lived within sight of the Devil's Thumb for 19 years, I have had the opportunity to either be on the mountain or doing aerial reconnaissance during every month of the year. The change in the demeanor of the northwest face through the seasons is drastic. There are, however, five constants:

1) An average annual rainfall of 10 feet accompanies the Patagonianesque weather.

2) If there is any precipitation, the entire face will be constantly riddled with avalanches.

3) The sun hits the top of the wall at 2 p.m., causing frequent avalanches and/or rockfall.

4) There is a hanging glacier at half-height, which Bearzi dubbed "Sammy Serac." Sammy looses a lethal sweep of the lower part of the route every six days, on average.

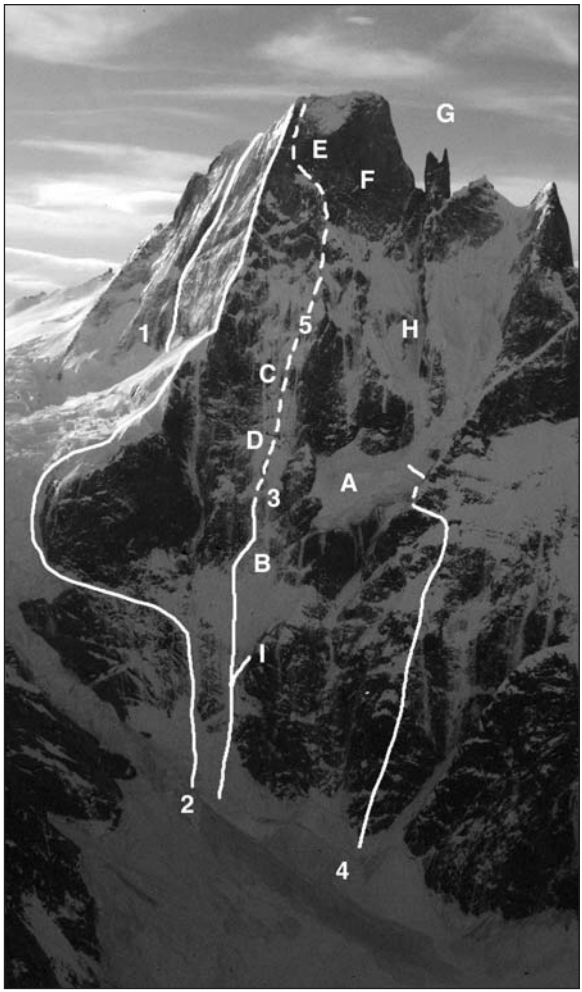
5) Avalanches from the massive hanging glaciers and seracs bordering the face sweep the approach at irregular intervals.

In mid-summer the face is almost devoid of snow and ice, with the exception of Sammy Serac. Waterfalls are common. As a rock climb, the slow-going on the rotten gneiss would be sheer suicide, given Sammy's threat and the inherent short spells of clear skies. The summit becomes heavily rimed in any season when the wet southwesterly storms blow through. This rime adds to the otherwise high avalanche hazard as it falls off.

In winter the face is generally bare with occasional dustings of snow, though things are basically too cold to promote a thaw/freeze pattern which forms ice. In all seasons avalanches are commonplace due to the five constants listed above. Hence, siege tactics are not a realistic option.

Bob Rugo in the Witches' Cauldron during the 1981 approach. Mike Bearzi

Springtime, specifically the



The northwest face of Devil's Thumb, showing (A) Sammy Serac, (B) ramp, (C) steep band, (D) overhang—should be great bivy, (E) exit chimney, (F) overhanging headwall, (G) Cat's Ears, (H) bowling alley couloir, (I) last seen point of Guy Edwards and John Millar. Routes and attempts: (1) northeast face, Bebie-Pilling, 1991, (2) north pillar, Stutzman-Plumb, 1979, (3) Bearzi-Klose highpoint, 1982, (4) Cole-Rouner-Rouner, 1977, (5) Klose's interpretation of the direttissima line. Dieter Klose

months of April and May, is the only time that the face has been observed to be fully iced-up. However, this does not happen every year. Yet, when it does ice up, a reliable fair-weather window must follow for a justified attempt. This combination, although appearing to be a variable, has historically become a constant, in that it constantly *does not happen.*

THE ROUTE

Sitting below the face, one is dwarfed beyond perception. The scale is so vast that I was never able to truly reconcile it in my mind. The word "huge" is not big enough to describe it; "mind-boggling" works better. As the mountain rears overhead, the upper face, so far away, actually looks small, but, as Bearzi described it after a fly-by, "What struck me was how very vast the upper face was. There were canyons and spires, and ridges, as if a whole other mountain range had sprouted out of this face. A person could get lost up there. Yet, here is the paradox. With the wall either being devoid of any specific features representing lines of weakness down low, or having too many up high, and being as extensive as it is, there really is only one line up it. All the myriad parameters cancel each other out, leaving but one choice."

The northwest face direttissima, though not the plumb-line of the proverbial drop of water that Comici would let fall to describe his perfect climb, strikes a sequence of arcs creating a potential alpine masterpiece.

The lower snow and ice bands lead to a short ramp that bisects the first steep section. Next, the "fluff band" is a mix of steps and slabs upon which the avalanches apply a layer best

described as fluff-snow. The imposing 800-foot steep band (apparent crux) lures the mixed-master with a choice of three distinct ice-smears. Several hundred more feet on milder-angled mixed terrain lead to a prominent rib on the upper face, where avalanche danger is much reduced. Thence up and leftward toward an Eiger-esque exit chimney, the 300-foot entrance to which appears to be another crux area. Runnels of water-ice linking the stepped buttresses have been observed here at times. A tantalizing alternative would be to tackle the overhanging upper headwall directly, though this would appear to require extensive nailing.

The top of the exit chimney, creating a notch in the summit ridge, is also the start to the normal descent down the southeast face (Beckey Route). The true summit awaits just three or four rope-lengths westward.

THE STRATEGY

The strategy of assault developed by Mike Bearzi in 1981 still holds as the most logical approach, as if logic were a factor in even going there in the first place. A stable, cloudless, and cold northerly weather pattern is a prerequisite once the face is properly iced. Free-solo absolutely whenever and wherever possible, during the hours of midnight to 2 p.m. Swift, ultra-light alpine style is crucial.

The end of the first day should find the party bivying in the prominent cave just above the base of the steep band by 2 p.m, when the daily avalanches start. Here one would also be well above the threat of Sammy Serac. On day two the steep band is passed, and progress speeds to a bivy somewhere in the labyrinthine upper face. Day three sees one moving up

Mike Bearzi and Dieter Klose at the mouth of the Witches' Cauldron on the approach in 1982, with the Devil's Thumb still 10 miles away. Dieter Klose

Bearzi, Steve Monks, and Damian Carroll wining, whining, and waiting for colder skies below the northwest face in 1982.
Dieter Klose

toward and through the exit chimney and onto the summit ridge. After one descends the southeast face, the steep, torturous icefall south of the Thumb gives access back into the Witches' Cauldron and the eight-mile hike back to base camp. A previously placed food cache here, or at the base of the southeast face, would provide welcome relief. Three days up, two days down. Piece of cake.

THE AUTHOR'S ATTEMPT

Thomas Bay, April 18, 1982. For some obscure reason Mike Bearzi and I decided to attack the route from sea level, completely unsupported, on our 40-day effort. With some 600 pounds of gear between us (including potatoes and an iron skillet), we humped three loads through the broken snout of the Baird Glacier in a blinding snowstorm. Just as we shouldered our last load, a floatplane landed and expectorated two Brits. The plane flew off and halted introductions commenced. We were, after all, going for the "secret" and coveted northwest face of the Thumb. Steve Monks and Damian Carroll, from Bristol, were going for the northwest face as well, thank you very much. Shit! We had 600 pounds, and they had maybe 200. They'd have had more, but U.S. customs confiscated all of their food containing meat, including the freeze-dried stuff. On a shoestring budget, they hadn't enough cash to replenish their stocks. They also had but one pair of snowshoes between them, whereas we had skis, sleds, and food to eat like plunderous kings. And, we were one whole camp ahead of them. The race was on.

In the two intermediate camps enroute to base, Mike and I did the usual routine: cook tea and meals in the tent and dump the dregs of potato peels and tea outside the tent. At night, rather than don shoes to relieve our swollen bladders, we'd just kneel at the door and let go into the pile of dinner dregs. Due to the daily soakings from the audacious weather, I had repeated dreams of meeting a woman who had a clothes dryer in her tent.

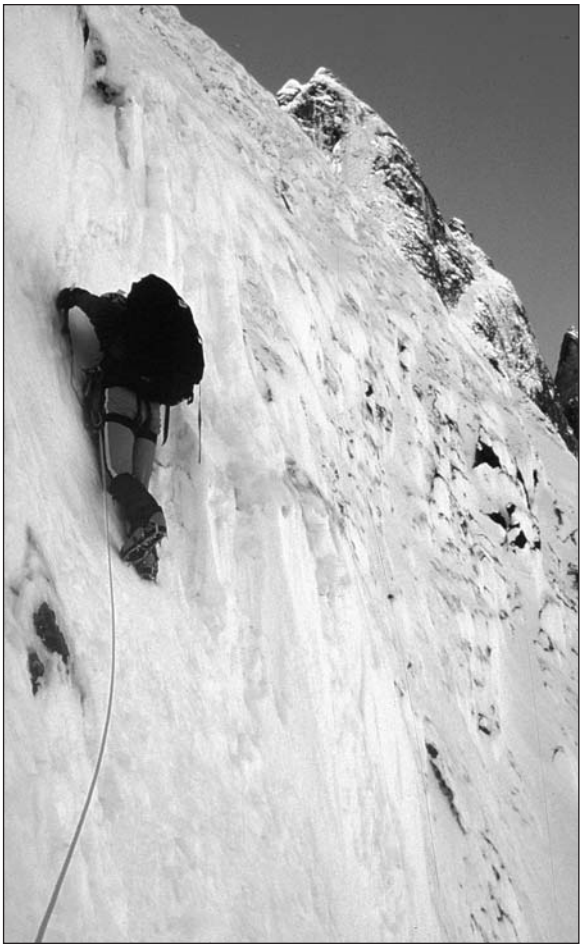
We arrived at base camp on the 24th, a scant mile from the incredibly imposing brutality of the northwest face. It was not yet in shape, so the wait began. By evening the Brits arrived, one postholing behind the leader's snowshoes. They were actually quite fun lads, and over the next few days we shared many a cup of tea (our tea; they had only one bag per man-day,

whereas we could have thrown a Boston Tea Party).

As we waited for the face to ice up, the kinship grew. We tried to dig down to the ice of the glacier like kids making a fort, and had ice-climbing comps in crevasses. Eventually, Steve and Damo felt comfortable enough to admit that they had found and cooked-up our potato peels and tea which we'd dumped in front of our tents on the approach. We, on the other hand, didn't feel comfortable telling them what we'd done to those dregs at night.

The days of waiting turned to weeks. Storm after storm blew through, coating the face in ice, or so we hoped. The monotony was broken often by the spectacular avalanches from the mountainsides (including our intended route) that would engulf our camp in temporary, swirling blizzards. Eventually, the Brits had had enough, and they buggered off. On the next day an apparent clearing lured Mike and me onto the wall. We left camp at 2 a.m. with three days of food, five days of fuel, 300 feet of 8mm rope, a super-light rack, a stove, and a sleeping bag. After scurrying through a half-mile of avalanche debris, the bergschrund was easily passed, for it was filled with snow from above. The difficulty started immediately on a 65° slab covered by six inches of loose snow. Spooky. We stopped and chopped a ledge below the first ice band to wait for daylight. The apparently go-anywhere terrain turned out to require more than headlamps to show the way.

After an hour of eating and watching the weather, we headed up, Mike trailing the rope. Sparrows chirped in the twilight below. We soloed side by side, the ice varying between 60° and 70° for 600 feet. We flew. The ice was excellent, with rarely a bad placement, yet just as rarely a rest step. The 50° snow-band was soft enough to get the feet in halfway. Ice chunks zoomed by frequently despite the early hour. The second ice face dropped under our crampons at a consistent 65°–75°. Nearing the right-angling "ramp" at the beginning of the fluff-band, the thinning ice reclined to 70° and we had a short rest on chopped footholds. We had soloed 2,500 feet in three hours and were basically beyond the threat of Sammy.



Klose squirreling through verglas and fluff near the turnaround point in 1982. Mike Bearzi

Bearzi racing the clock on the rappel in the avy zone in 1982.
Dieter Klose

After 500 feet up the ramp, the angle steepened further as the snow-ice thinned, so we roped up. Mike's lead was outrageous, terrible tool placements topped by a near-vertical 30-foot section of thin, fractured ice, 150 feet out, all without protection. I arrived at his belay to find a very manky anchor. Above us was the first truly vertical section, which consisted of a hundred feet of fluff and sketches of verglas. I led right and up, scouring for something to put my tools on or into. Nothing. Our coating of ice had turned into insubstantial fluff, the backwash of avalanches sailing over these drop-offs. A brief discussion had us in agreement that even if we could somehow make this section go, tomorrow's steep band would yield more of the same. The mountain wasn't ready for us yet. Our attempt came to an abrupt halt.

I unclipped from the silly anchor while Mike led the first rap. I looked around and took in the view. We were way up there, it was way cool what we had done. I was happy. I tried to forget about the hour. It was 10 a.m. At 2 the shit would hit the fan, and we were the fan.

After an hour "off rappel" wafted up; something was wrong. When I arrived at Mike's perch I started to worry. He had gone straight down instead of angling left back to the ramp. The single anchor he'd found was a runner around a 3-inch icicle, and it was virtually a hanging stance. Mike looked tired; he hadn't slept a wink the night before, in anticipation. He pointed out that continuing to rap would get us into overhanging terrain, and that traversing left back to the ramp was the ticket. After a few more minutes, we backed up the icicle with a tied-off knifeblade I'd taken out of the first anchor. Mike led left onto 80° mixed terrain.

Here my psyche began to buckle. I was looking straight up into 3,500 feet of concave wall, with the steep band rearing over me like a monster with fangs bared, ready to drool. Any saliva that came down would surely take me. I was a sitting duck, hog-tied to an icicle and a spindly flap of steel, waiting for Mike to finish his goddamn lead and get us to some shelter. Finally, I couldn't take the pressure any more. I lost it, breaking the rule of maintaining an optimistic morale: "Mike, you have to hurry."

"I know, I know," came his focused yet stressed reply. A few more hour-long minutes

and he was on the ramp. His only anchor was his bum on the snow and two axe-plants, with a single tied-off screw between us. The 60-foot traverse had taken him an hour and a half. Following was desperate. His meager footholds of snow had crumbled after his use, leaving me scraping for purchase, way too hurried for the required technical moves. It was a phenomenal lead that somehow I managed to mimic. The hour was 1pm. We had wasted a lot of time on the raps and traverse, and had only one hour left before the afternoon avalanches would begin.

Mike belayed me up the ramp and then down, maniacally looking for a place with enough snow to dig a cave. Finally I found a spot. Mike came down and we started digging. We were tied to the only good anchor we'd found during our time on the wall. After digging in just two feet we hit rock. We dug sideways, swallowing our desperation. By 2 we crawled inside the little hole and sardined with our legs sticking out. To our great relief the short but steep section of wall above us let the avalanches soar over us, just a few feet from our ditch.

We rose at 2:00 a.m. to a cold yet overcast sky. Rather than stay put and potentially be stranded there for weeks, we hoped to get to the bottom before the precipitation and its attendant avalanches would begin. We rapped on the happy cave anchor, then an A2 anchor got us to the snow-ice. From there we performed time-trials in bollard production and virtually flew down the rest of the face. Ice and rocks flew by as well, but we escaped any real avalanches. Those didn't start until we were back at camp, a lullaby for two very tired dogs.

History

Mid July, 1976: A note in the B.C. *Mountaineer*, Volume 54, mentions a party "under the north face of Devil's Thumb." No details are available.

Early August, 1977: Peter Cole, Nichols Rouner, and Rainsford Rouner. Finding the wall virtually devoid of snow or ice and with no obvious lines up the apparently rotten rock, the trio opted for a line heading to the west buttress, along the couloir that forms the right-hand margin of the face. Starting on an adjacent buttress below the Witches' Tits, they continued across a hanging glacier. While the three were soloing, tragedy struck: Nichols died from rockfall.

Mid-August 1977: Bob Plumb and Dave Stutzman approached from Scenery Lake with an airdrop, planning to go up the lower northwest face via an hourglass couloir, then proceed directly to the north pillar. On the northwest face portion of the climb, Stuzman reported poor rock, waterfalls, and rockfall. The crux of their 60-pitch climb was found in the initial cliff band. Due to the poor nature of the rock and conditions on the lower face, they traversed left into the adjacent icefall, onto the icecap, and thence onto the north pillar. In four days they completed a hammerless first ascent of the north pillar, all under clear skies. They descended via the southeast face and south icefall.

April 30-June 3, 1981: Mike Bearzi and Bob Rugo approached from sea level with an airdrop. The face was in condition when they arrived but, as Bearzi described it, "A three and a half week rainstorm drowned our hopes. A false start or two as a clearing degenerated while the

wall degenerated as we degenerated into frustration would sum up the remainder of our stay." As a consolation, they attempted the Beckey route but were turned back by a storm. They completed a 38-mile circumnavigation of the massif on skis and on foot.

April 17-May 23, 1982: Mike Bearzi and Dieter Klose approached from sea level, unsupported. See above story. At the same time, Steve Monks and Damian Carroll approached from sea level, unsupported. See above story.

April/May, 1983: Mike Bearzi and Art Wiggins approached from sea level with an airdrop. Bearzi: "Ten days of clear weather replete with warm easterly winds and nothing even close to nighttime freezing temperatures. The lower 3,000 feet fell apart rapidly and we had no opportunity to make an attempt." At one point the winds were so extreme as to blow their tent down-glacier, with both of them in it. An attempt on the nearby Aiguille du Stikine was thwarted by avalanche hazard and weather.

Ten years elapsed between attempts on the face. It appears that a reputation of futility began to take hold before Bearzi once again grasped the torch, one last time.

April/May, 1994: Mike Bearzi and Barry Rugo approached from sea level with an airdrop. The face appeared to be coming into shape, but a prolonged spell of warmer, wetter weather began to sow doubt. Their only attempt stopped at the end of the first steep section as a result of constant sluff avalanches and non-existent protection. The following day, a warm two-week storm moved in. The team moved around to the west buttress but quit in the face of torrential rain and high winds. Rugo: "My feeling is that someone will, through a combination of luck and manic resolve, get up the thing. They'll be moving light, non-stop, and not placing much gear because there won't be much to place. The upper headwall should nonetheless stimulate some ass-clenching pauses."

May 5-May 18, 1995: Bill Belcourt and Randy Rackliff. Helicopter round trip. Rackliff: "The face looked fantastic with eye-catching runnels streaking down the mid-section. However, in the morning we found that the snow on the glacier hadn't frozen and as if we couldn't have figured out what that meant, a colossal section of serac left of the face broke off, sweeping the entire approach. The timing was fortuitous, as half an hour later we would have been right under it. Avalanches and sloughs fell continuously, day and night throughout the Cauldron. The roar reminded me of camping in the middle of a railyard." As the face fell apart, the pair turned their attention to the virgin West Witches' Tit, summitting after 15 pitches in a continuous push. They then skied around the Thumb, hoping to make a quick ascent of the Beckey route, but were stymied by days of whiteout.

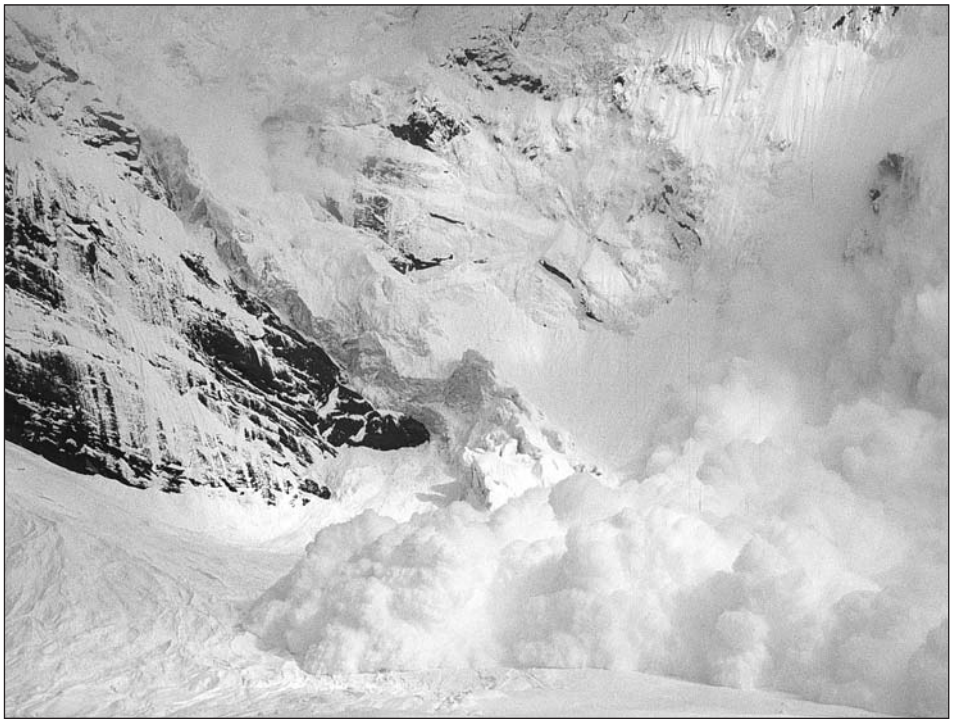
April 20-April 30, 1997: Alex Lowe and Randy Rackliff. Helicopter round trip. Rackliff, the only person other than Bearzi to go to the face more than once, had these observations: "Alex and I left earlier than my previous trip hoping to get a little better freeze. We did; on the second morning the snowpack on the glacier was solid enough to walk on. And that was it. Conditions then returned to Depth Hoar Purgatory and there was never any question of getting on the northwest face. Your real nemesis is the peculiar nature of freeze/thaw dynamic—or should I

say thaw/thaw dynamic? It just doesn't freeze the way you'd expect in other areas. One of the fascinations of the face, for me, is that it seems to *demand* a really fast and light style. With the vagaries of weather, thaw, rock/ice fall, etc., I'd want to be racing up this thing and off it fast. Personally I wouldn't go back to the northwest face. But that may have more to do with my current interest level in such things. If you've been winning the lottery a lot lately, and really want to tag a major unclimbed face it's definitely a great one to try. It's SO big and SO cool looking it's hard not to want to be the one who finally gets lucky. Just don't expect Prom night when you get in there."

After climbing to a pass to make radio contact for an early pick-up, the pair descended unroped. Alex went ahead and, just when out of sight, was swept, tumbled, and pummeled down 2,000 feet in an avalanche, unbeknownst to Randy. Moments later, when Randy got over the edge and saw Alex dusting himself off on the glacier 2,000 feet below, he thought, "Wow, I knew Alex was fast, but I didn't think he was that fast!"

April 18-May 3, 1998: Bruce Miller and Jack Roberts. Helicopter round trip. Roberts: "The northwest face appeared to be coated with rime ice over a layer of more substantial ice. How wrong we were. Six days of on-again off-again temps in the 70s, with only one, maybe two nighttime lows around 30 degrees dramatically altered the appearance of the face from being a reasonable objective to simply becoming objectionable to climb due to its altered state. *Unreasonable*." Miller: "The face is conditionally challenged. Avy right down the middle as soon as the sun hits. A trip I'm trying to forget." A slight attempt was made, only to find sodden snow on wet rock coupled with avalanches and rockfall. The trip was aborted early.

Exposure! Looking down the NW face from the summit ridge. It's so steep, after the upper few hundred feet the next thing you see is the glacier 6500' below. Note shadow of Cat's Ears and Devil's Thumb summit. Dieter Klose



Sammy Serac cuts loose a lethal sweep. This and many other avalanche clouds engulf base camp 1.5 miles away. Dieter Klose

March 18-April 5, 1999: Conny Amelunxen, Sean Easton, Keith Reid. Helicoptered in and skied out to tidewater. They waited for two weeks below the face in weather so bad they could only see the face on three days. Temps from 5° to 60° brought snow, rain, and sun in no discernable order. Easton: "An immense wall, requiring just the right combination of weather conditions to set up a face that spans a huge range of temperatures and climbing mediums. Someday a lucky party will be sitting at the base and hit the jackpot."

April 24-June 3, 1999: Lionel Daudet and Sebastian Foissac. Round trip from sea level, unsupported. The face was out of shape, so the pair skied to Burkett Needle. Before starting on their ascent of the Needle, per Daudet, "We had a terrible snowstorm that destroys our base camp, and we had to dig a snowcave in a hurry…." Besides shredding their tent, the winds blew away their sleds, never to be found again. The duo lived out the remaining 24 days using their portaledge for shelter on the successful third ascent of Burkett Needle.

May 16-June 5, 2002: Guy Edwards and John Millar. Round trip from sea level, unsupported. The face was out of shape. During the 20 days, 15 gave continuous rain or snow; five were without precipitation, with only two of these in actual sunshine. No attempt was made on the face. Edwards: "One of the largest prizes that I know of. We watched the face…with lots of objective hazard. The face starts at such a low altitude—you certainly need cold weather to

climb the lower part safely. The face is so big there's always a lot of threatening snow, ice, and rock above you. The Devil's own face." The pair instead climbed new lines on both the West Witches' Tit and on Cat's Ears spire, making the second and third ascents, respectively.

Summary

Of all the individuals who have visited the northwest face, not a single one was lacking the technical expertise and determination that the wall would require. The extreme avalanche danger alone has kept many at bay. However, as I have shown, either the conditions on the face, or the weather, or a combination of both were the final culprits in halting all suitors. Some of those lads think it will one day be climbed by a "lucky" party. I doubt it. I believe that the wisdom of Ulysses is the best approach: look and listen, but don't touch. Don't waste your time.

As a result of all this trying, and perhaps because of that trying, we have one big beautiful wall that stands as an even purer virgin, an enduring monument to the tantalizing mystery that forever leads man into the unknown. It is the very nature of this wall to keep it that way. As irony has it, climbers don't embrace that kind of idea, and owing to human nature they are going to keep coming, trying.

Epilogue

When my story went to the editor in April, 2003, Guy Edwards and John Millar returned to the Thumb. They skied in with their friend, Kai Hirvonen, under stellar skies. The face was in nick when they arrived. After a day of rest and observation, this trio of hardy alpinists set off for the face during the last hours of Easter. Just before reaching the avalanche debris at the base of the face, Kai followed his gut feeling, told his pals it wasn't worth the risk, and turned around.

From base camp, Kai watched their headlamps ascending into the night. That is the last anyone has seen of them. An exhaustive search by helicopter has revealed no clues as to their fate. It is believed that Guy and John are buried by avalanche at the base of the monument.

A Note on the Author

Raised in the flatlands of Germany and the U.S., Dieter Klose, 44, discovered the mountain realm in 1973. A life-long passion for places wild and remote drew him to Alaska, where he lived for 20 years. He has two children, Wrenna (17) and Dylan (15). With dozens of forays into the Devil's Thumb region, and having long-served as a hub for visiting climbers, he's been coined the "Manager" of the Stikine Icecap. He is now based in Colorado between travels, where he works as a home designer and builder, though he continues to visit the Stikine area on an independent study of glacier bears.