

Mount Alberta

3,622 metres/11,874 feet – East Face and South Ridge (Japanese Route)



East face of Mount Alberta from Mount Woolley

August 28-31, 2001

Nancy phones at noon on Monday, August 27. “Bill, do you want to go climb Mount Alberta? The weather looks good, and this may be the last window to climb it this year.”

“Uh, sure. (Although I’ve just climbed Bass Butress the day before and my work schedule is a bit crowded, the opportunity to climb Alberta under relatively dry conditions sometimes comes only every few years. And Nancy is one of the very few people with the interest, skill and determination to get me up Alberta. So, the hell with work.) “When do you want to leave?”

“Tonight, after work.”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah. The weather forecast for Jasper and Golden is a mix of sun and cloud tomorrow (when we’d be doing the approach), but it should be clear Wednesday (the day we’d be climbing) and then starting to cloud over Thursday (when we’d be coming out). Doug can’t take tomorrow off and going a day later is too late” (and when it comes to bagging 11,000ers, he sometimes takes second priority).

The plan is to cross the Sunwapta River and get as far as the Woolley-Diadem bivy site that night, to shorten the approach to the Alberta bivy site on Tuesday. But between work, picking up supplies for kitchen renovations and packing, I don’t leave Calgary till 6 p.m. and reach Canmore till 7. We eat a plate of Japanese takeout food in our laps while driving to the Sunwapta flats, just past the Columbia Icefield, which we reach around 10:30 and go to sleep in the back of my car around 11.

Tuesday, August 28

Sleep pretty well despite stuffy car and occasional vehicles whizzing by in the night. Up at 6 a.m., cook some oats, brew tea and don running shoes for the 7 a.m. crossing of the Sunwapta River’s braided channels. The channels are mostly below the knee, but by the fourth crossing we’re moaning from the pain of the glacier-fed water.



East face of Mount Alberta from Lloyd MacKay Hut

Despite the pack weight – perhaps 45 pounds of the full arsenal: two 60-metre, 8.5-mm ropes, a small rack (four friends, handful of nuts and six slings), crampons, ice axes, camping gear, bivy sacks, spare clothes and three days of food – we make good time up and over the loose-rock grunt of Woolley Shoulder (one hour) and take a beeline down the glacier to the hut, which we reach around 1 p.m.

The partly cloudy skies are starting to lift, the occasional spatter of rain has ended and there's just a small cloud draped over Alberta's summit. Lines of snow still linger on the ledges and in the east face gullies – borderline conditions, I think, recalling my turnaround on Alberta with Forbes and Roman three years ago, but Nancy thinks it's dry enough to give it a shot (that's one of the reasons you climb these kinds of peaks with rare individuals like Nancy or Forbes – they keep you moving forward when doubt creeps in that would prompt lesser souls to consider turning around, and believe me, there are several times the next day when I think we're stymied). Plus, Mount Alberta hasn't been climbed since the dry summer of 1998, and these conditions may be as good as it gets for a few more years.

After eating a quick lunch and checking out the renovated Lloyd McKay Hut and outhouse, we heft our packs and descend the small glacier to the gravelly flats below (losing some 1,500 preciously-gained feet from the crest of Woolley Shoulder) and then begin the thrash up the lower scree slopes of Mount Alberta, mindful of guide Grant Statham's words: "the slopes up to the bivy make Woolley Shoulder look like a walk on a park trail." We head up and left under some lingering snow and then traverse left beneath cliffs on exposed, rubbly slopes.

For the next two days, there's hardly a place on this steep, horribly loose mountain where you can afford a slip, adding to the strain of just getting up and down this huge mountain. Every time I dislodge a loose rock, I watch to see if it will stop, but it invariably bounds down the steep slope, launches off a cliff and keeps crashing down to the flats several thousand feet below.

Rounding the corner and scrambling up the endless treadmill of the scree bowl above, we angle too far up and left, cramponing needlessly across a snow slope, cresting a ridge and staring up at the steep, unclimbed west face. We backtrack, traversing high on steep, rubble-covered ledges and end up on a very exposed, 18-inch-wide ledge that traverses around a small bowl. I watch Nancy tiptoe across (past an eerily-abandoned ski pole), leaning over the void a couple of times where the smooth wall overhangs the ledge. After a long day of slogging up loose slopes with a big pack, I balk at this final passage. Nancy, afraid of even more backtracking and down climbing, offers to take my pack across. Swallowing the remains of my pride, I accept, plus take a belay for one exposed move near the ledge's end.

Fortunately, just around the corner is a beautiful, if somewhat narrow bivy spot, just flat and large enough for two bivy sacks and tucked against the wall out of the wind. From here, it's a short, easy traverse into the gully we need to ascend the next morning to reach the second bivy ledge that leads to the start of the roped climbing (we're camped halfway between the first and second

bivy ledges). It's 8 p.m. and the end of a tough (6,000-foot elevation gain), 13-hour day, which turns out to be the shortest (albeit the most aerobically-challenging) of the three days we will spend on Mount Alberta.

We melt some snow, and I heat spicy Thai soup and cook dehydrated chili for dinner, washed down with two cups of tea and hot water. Amply hydrated, I discover I can pee while lying down in my bivy sack (I do unzip the bag), arching a steaming stream onto the rocks, a few feet shy of a big drop off. Given this slender perch, I sleep quite soundly and better than Nancy who, as a good guide, has forsaken this more sheltered of the two sleeping platforms.

Wednesday, August 29

Awaken at 5:30 to clear, starry skies. Eat breakfast (me, oats and tea, Nancy, a bagel sandwich and hot chocolate) while sitting up and leaning against the rock wall, still ensconced in our bivy sacks and sleeping bags. We stare across this wild, forlorn valley (aptly known as the "Black Hole") at the big faces of the Twins and Mount Colombia, while silently steeling ourselves for the big day ahead.

We're off by 6:30 and are soon climbing the "ugly gully," bypassing big chunks of teetering rocks and bits of ice by swinging onto small, gravelly ledges on the side. The rock steepens but improves as we make the last few strenuous moves out of the gully, aided by a 10-metre length of good climbing rope someone has left dangling from a piton.

We angle right up a small scree bowl, again going too high, thanks to my selective memory from three years ago. To avoid tumbling rocks, released by the early morning sun, we go higher still and delicately kick steps across a steep snow slope above a small cliff. We are thus unnecessarily a couple of hundred feet higher than the second ledge, which traverses the east face, and lose the better part of an hour reaching the beginning of the belayed climbing – just to the left of one of the famous elephants' asses – which begins in a corner, where a red sling around a chockstone is visible.

From the chockstone belay (about 9 a.m.), Nancy ascends low-angled but wet, loose shit in the corner and then up a short but steep and exposed wall (probably 5.7) with small holds and precious little protection. She gets in only one friend and runs the rope out maybe 30 feet nearly to the next belay stance. Three years ago, Forbes precariously banged in a piton on this wall, above which we fled the mountain when a snow squall melted, turning the face into a waterfall with rifle shots of loosened rock whizzing past our ears.

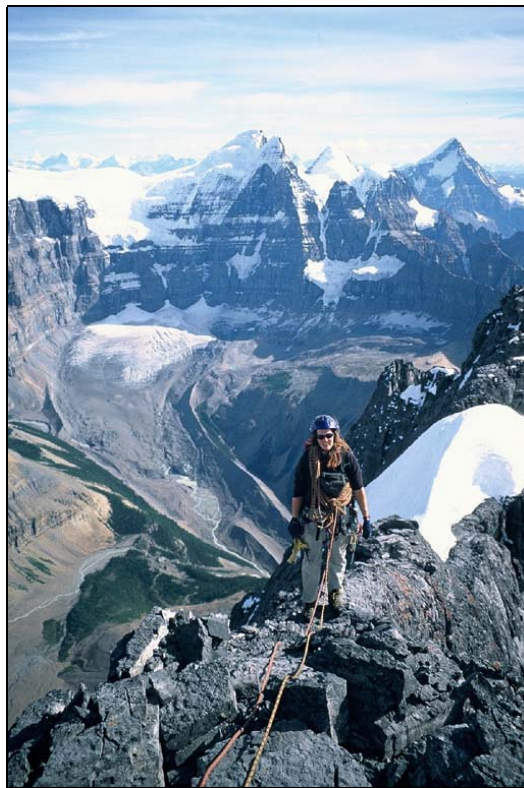
For the rest of the climb up the east face, we will mostly be going from rappel station to rappel station, with the odd one- or two-piton belay stance. Other than the exit pitch, the difficulty eases to 5.3 or maybe 5.4, but the grade really means nothing. The black limestone is often wet (particularly in the lower pitches), often down sloping on small, sometimes muddy holds, generally very loose and always hard to protect; on some 50-metre-plus pitches, Nancy is lucky to get in three pieces of gear, none of them likely to hold a fall. I've brought rock shoes along, but with the wet rock, occasional patches of snow and the time-consuming effort of changing in and out of footwear, I decide to stay in my big boots. To be honest, though, I'm selfishly happy to let level-headed, careful and gutsy Nancy shoulder the mental strain of leading as she "fries my few remaining brain cells." The only good news is the rock fall is fairly minimal today, other than what we kick down or the rope knocks off. For the most part, the belays are out of the line of fire, and I only get dinged by a couple of small rocks, although one volley of big, bone-crushing boulders knocked off a loose ledge near the top of the face is a crouch-tinge-and-pray affair.

Beyond the first pitch, the route angles right towards a small gully that ascends all the way to the second notch (from the south end of the ridge), where we will exit the face climbing. Soon, we are alongside the gully and briefly go into it but mostly meander along its left side for perhaps six pitches, at least a couple of which require a 60-metre rope. The right side of the gully, which we have to cross at some point, looks too wet and steep to climb yet. While some past parties have been able to kick steps up the upper part of the gully and thus save considerable time, the snow is rather soft and impossible to protect and would funnel any falling rock.

So we stick to the lovely rock, crossing a narrow part of the gully where it is flanked by two rappel stations. The rock on the right side looks more solid and lower-angled than the left, and Nancy promises to cruise up the next pitch but is soon cursing, as the holds and protection get even thinner. She then embarks on the exit pitch, angling right into a steep, strenuous corner (again probably 5.7 with very poor pro) and slowly and carefully surmounts the difficulties till I hear the high-pitched pinging of a belay piton being hammered into the rock (the normal, easier route might be to go left up into the second notch proper, but when we rappel down, it looks equally steep). By now, Nancy's really fried, so I lead up the final, easy half pitch to the south ridge.

It's now 4 p.m. and after the seven-hour strain of the east face and mindful of the one-kilometre of narrow ridge yet to be covered in the dwindling daylight, I hardly notice the sheer drop down the west face. The first part of the ridge is pretty straight forward – a slender sidewalk in the sky – mostly level rock with the odd up, down or around little pinnacles. I figure we should top out about 6 p.m., but the ridge keeps going on and on, and distant cornices turn out to be just another signpost en route to the summit.

Nearly halfway along the ridge, we reach an unexpected short but steep rock step, which we belay and protect. A little ways beyond is the infamous notch, a 15-metre fin of snow that plunges down a 50-degree slope, narrowing at its bottom to a few inches, with a couple of thousand feet of air on either side. With the accumulated snow on the rock above the notch, there's no hope of finding any old pitons to rappel off. "Holy shit, we're screwed," I think, mindful of the second ascent party, which rappelled off a single ice axe plunged into the snow. Actually, it's screws that save us, as Nancy is able to get two all the way into the ice for an anchor. With a backup belay, I gingerly rappel down the fin, kicking steps and planting my ice axe deeply so as to not go penduluming off this tenuous perch. As I reach the narrowest part, there's only room to put one foot directly behind the other. Finally I sit down, straddling the snow ridge and "au chevalling" for about five feet, until I'm able to use the ridge as a handrail and kick steps along the steep face, with my quivering ass hanging over the void. Nancy enjoys the top-roped experience even less. Soon enough, however, we're out of the notch and, even though it's now 7 p.m. and a summit-ridge bivy is a certainty, we figure we can cruise to the top.



Nancy below summit on South Ridge (Twins and Columbia in the background)

But the building cornices over the past three years have conspired to throw one last curve at us. After tiptoeing atop one airy, snow-covered pinnacle, we're only about one hundred horizontal

metres from the top when we reach another pinnacle that apparently offers no passage. It's icy rock and almost straight down on the left and corniced over the east face straight ahead. With no other option, I dig in with an ice-axe belay below the cornice while Nancy tentatively taps hollow-sounding steps up to and along the edge of the cornice. Ten nervous feet later, it's over and we can stroll the remaining steps to the summit (8 p.m.).

Despite this route's storied history – including a supposed silver ice axe left by the first ascent party (five Japanese and three guides) and removed by the second (bloody Americans) – the summit itself is rather undistinguished. There's just a small cairn – containing a little Japanese-style umbrella and a few film canisters frozen in place – and beyond, 30 more feet of slightly higher, corniced snow, which we ascend as far as prudent. A few quick pictures and a message left in our own film canister, and we're heading back down the ridge, hoping to get to one of two small bivy walls built by previous parties.



Nancy near the top of corniced South Ridge

We make pretty fast time down the first part of the ridge – pausing a few times to take pictures of the cornices and the backdrop of the Twins and Mount Columbia in the magnificent evening light – and climb back out of the notch (much easier than going down) at 9 p.m., just as the sun disappears. There's almost a full moon rising and, guided by its light, we carry along the ridge until headlamps are needed to down climb some steeper, looser rock. Drained and dehydrated (I've only drank half a litre of water all day), I want to stop before we make a careless mistake in the dark, but Nancy wants to push on to a flat bivy site. After slinging a rock, we rappel down the rock step and soon thereafter are at the first bivy site (nearly 11 p.m.)

We spend about an hour building up the small rock wall, chopping away ice and raking the rock with our axes to create a flat spot big enough for two bivy sacks. We put on long underwear and rain gear, take off our drenched boots and put on dry socks (fleece mitts on feet for Nancy) and, at midnight, crawl into our bivy sacks, with ropes and empty packs providing some cushioning against the cold ground. The moon, heaven full of stars and tall silhouettes of the Twins are spectacular, but our exhausted brains are reduced to a single thought – staying warm. Despite the wall, a cold, stiff wind rattles the nylon sacks and infiltrates the mesh windows all night. Now and then, I sit upright in an inverted fetal position, clutching my knees or rubbing my wooden feet. Mostly, we snuggle against each other for communal warmth. Nancy is colder than I am and at

one point throws one leg over mine to warm her chilled thighs (her moaning is from the cold, I believe). Over seven shivering hours, we're lucky if we sleep half an hour.

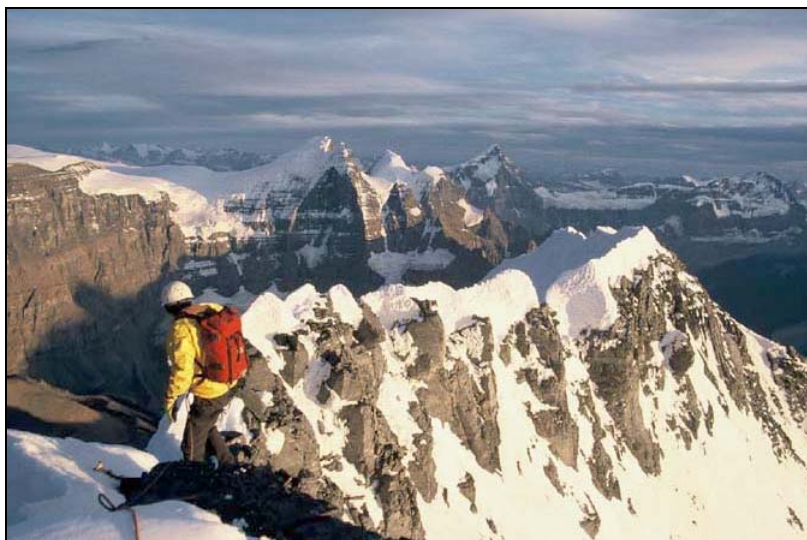
Thursday, August 30

We wait past first light for the sun to hit us (7 a.m.) before stirring from our frozen cocoons and exposing ourselves to the biting wind. There's ice not only in my water bottle but also in the toe of one boot. I struggle for 10 minutes to get my feet into the frozen boots before succeeding by removing the liners. "Great," I think. "We're going to get frostbite in August." We quickly pack up and, at 7:45, stiffly descend the remaining ridge, reaching the second notch at 8:30. Our feet warm up quite rapidly, though my big toes are still tingling several days later as I write this.

In theory, rappelling nine or 10 times down the face should be a lot quicker than going up it. But because of the relatively low angle of the face and the many bits of protruding rock, the thrown ropes only go down about 30 feet before stopping in a tangled mess. Thus the first person down often spends the better part of half an hour cleaning up the tangles, throwing the ropes down another 30 feet and repeating the process several more times before reaching the next rappel station (someone later tells us we should have stuffed the ropes in a pack or clipped them to the harness, unfurling the rope as we rappelled). As well, we have to do a couple of delicate traverses on loose rock to get to the next station.

As a result, it's after 2:30 by the time we reach the second ledge, two raps below the start of the belayed climbing. The good news is this proper ledge is a stroll, compared to the higher snow we came across the morning before, and we soon reach the top of the "ugly gully" for one last rap, the rope and our feet knocking down large pieces of homeless rock. High clouds have rolled in during the day and a stiff breeze makes us thankful we were on the summit ridge in the relative calm of the day before. We traverse to our original bivy site (4 p.m.), brew some tea for our parched throats (I've drank less than a litre of water in nearly two days) and pack up for the descent off this ugly mountain.

The mountain isn't quite done with us, though, as we have to gingerly down climb some very loose rock, with big packs on, in the bottom of the "ugly gully." From there, we traverse right, past the bivy site where I camped three years earlier, and head down the scree of the second gully, down climbing a couple of small steps and traversing right to the edge of the snow, where a cliff band peters out. From there, it's easy scree going down and left to the corner, where we traverse left (going a bit too low) below cliff bands and down to the valley bottom. After crossing the toe of the glacier and its many rivulets of running water, it's a final 200-metre grunt up to the hut, which we reach at 9 p.m. as darkness descends.



Bill descending corniced summit ridge

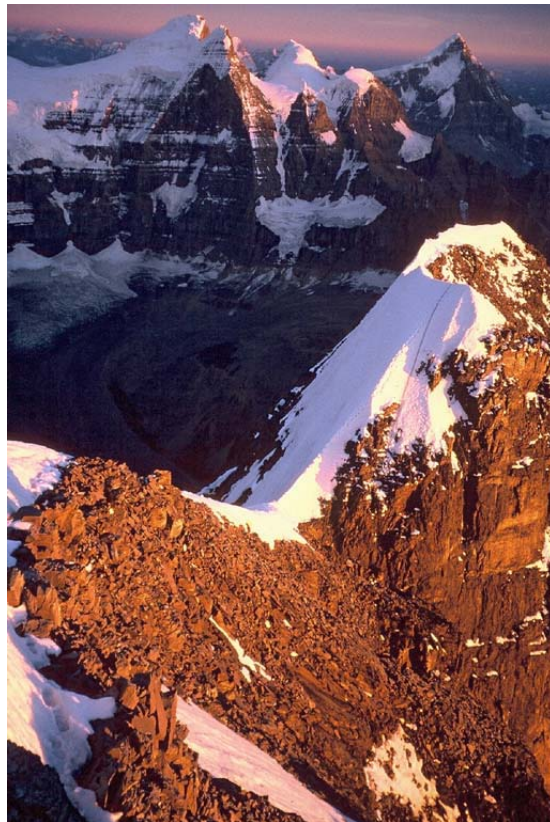
My fingertips are so sore from two days on this heinous mountain that it takes me five minutes to undo the knotted laces on my boots. We just have enough energy to cook and eat Nancy's pasta

dinner and write a short entry in the hut journal before passing out (11 p.m.) on the cozy mattresses, sufficiently warm in this tiny tin shack that the sleeping bags are just needed as blankets.

Friday, August 31

A very short night ends with the watch alarms beeping at 4:30. We're both going to be late for work, plus Nancy knows a concerned Doug will be calling the park wardens fairly early in the morning, as we were expected out the night before. After a quick, uncooked breakfast and tea, we're off at 5:20 under headlamp, with Nancy picking a high, traversing line up the glacier. Just below Woolley Shoulder, we take off the crampons and head up the scree, luckily finding the trail in a few minutes. We zip down the other side of the shoulder in about 15 minutes and then it's only three more hours of tired trudging.

As we reach the Sunwapta River flats, we see a park warden's truck pulling up to my car. In my haste to reach him before he takes off and perhaps summons a search helicopter, I plunge into an icy, waist-deep channel and hit a current that starts carrying me downstream, my feet frantically churning to maintain contact with the bottom (one running shoe has had the laces chewed out by a rodent, and it's all I can do to keep it on my foot). Luckily, the bank is near and I struggle ashore without tipping over.



Returning to the notch at last light

Another couple of minutes and I'm crossing the highway to where the warden is still sitting in his truck (10 a.m.). He rolls down the window, looks at a piece of paper and says, "Are you Bill Corbett?"

"I am."

"What were you climbing?"

"Mount Alberta."

"Did you get up it?"

A small grin. "We did."

He reaches an arm out the window and shakes my hand. "Congratulations."