

THE NORTH FACE OF NORTH TWIN, TOUCHSTONE OF THE RANGE

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It is, hands down, the hardest face in the range. Five thousand feet of sheer, black, and north facing limestone, steeper than the Eiger, one and a half times as high as El Cap, a great dark cape of a peak. Hundred foot seracs calve thunderously and with violence from its belly, wisps of water ice hang from its brow like icicles tacked to a ship's prow, and rockfall darkened icefields foot its soaring pillars. Then there is the loose rock and the falling rock ... at times it makes the Eiger look like a kiddies sandbox. Climbers are familiar with almost every crack on El Cap, yet, after thirty years of attempts solely two routes have been established up the shadowland of North Twin; mystery unmarred, aura enhanced by each and every one of the vanquished.

The dog days of August, 1974, **George Lowe and Chris Jones** venture onto the Twin in full-on Eiger Sanction mode: full shanked leather boots, wool knickers, and Dachstein mitts, nylon tops. They find climbing similar to the hardest ground in the Dolomites (5.10, A4) yet their situation, in what local climbers refer to as the "Black Hole" of the Canadian Rockies, is far more serious than any climb in the Dolomites. They are a full day of mountainous travel from the nearest road, and once past the first quarter of the wall, rescue--even given today's techniques--is impossible; furthermore, the wall they are on is glaciated, vertical to overhanging, and brazed with alpine ice. The Readers Digest version is that there is really nothing comparable to North Twin in the Alps. George and Chris strive; wet blowing snow frequently smears slush onto the holds. On the fifth day they are battered by hail and George "goofs-up" a hop step while waiting for Chris to remove and send up a piton from the belay; George falls 30 feet and loses the critical aid placement of the pitch. They are 4,000 feet up the wall. That night, their fifth on the wall, neither man sleeps until 3 a.m.. When they admit to each other that they no longer have enough gear to retreat and that there is no chance of a rescue, they agree that there are no options; if they are to survive they have to climb.

The dawn of day six brings swirling clouds and snow. George leads an improbable and time consuming traverse across a snow-peppered slab then escapes into an ice runnel that he gains by liebacking the edge of a roof and pressing his knees into the remains of the winter's snow/ice! Falling snow matures into hail, avalanches run, George leads through the storm for 15 pitches on ice. They have all of three ice screws. Chris and George summit and set-up their small tent right there and accumulating snow collapses the tent twice in the night.

Writing in *Ascent* Chris stated that he and George had crossed an indefinable line and that on their eighth day out, searching for their descent by compass atop the Columbia Icefield, the brief glimpse of helicopter and warden Hans Fuhrer's words, diced by the rotor, "ARE YOU OK?"

"We realized someone cared about us, that we were not alone ... tears ran down my face."

I'll suggest that, in 1974, the route that George and Chris opened on the North Face of North Twin was the hardest alpine route in the world. I believe that nothing then accomplished in Patagonia, the Alps, Alaska or the Himalaya measured up to what George and Chris accomplished with "a rope, a rack, and two packs." Further, I'll assert that George Lowe has contributed every bit as much to the evolution of alpine style climbing as Reinhold Messner ... and perhaps more.