
WARREN HOLLINGER

The Great and Secret Show

(Plates 15–17)

A route up the centre of the Polar Sun Spire was the brainchild of Mark Synnott and myself. Well to tell you the truth, we didn't really have a choice. Having travelled to Baffin Island's north-eastern fjords with Jerry Gore in 1995, and after letting this monolith stare us down for the 13 days of our Great Cross Pillar ascent, we realised that this could very well be the largest unclimbed Big Wall on the planet. Armed with this knowledge we took it as our sworn duty to complete the wall or suffer a lifetime of haunting memories about 'The Big One' that got away. The project received Top Secret status and all serious enquiries were treated with cunning deception:

'Oh the Polar Sun Spire, what a HEAP! Climbs like an Eiger, only half the size. Let me tell you about this incredible ...'

Once the smoke-screen was laid, we plotted our mission to successfully scale the wall before the competition had a clue they'd been scheisted! With the help of the Mugs Stump Award, various sponsors and our ever-draining Visa cards, Mark and I found ourselves once more at the base of the Spire, only this time we were heavily geared and dead serious on completing this project. We took on a new partner, Jeff Chapman; though lacking somewhat in hard Big Wall first ascents, he was renowned for the amount of pain he could withstand. The latter quality was an essential ingredient, as we would have to endure 39 days of climbing and 36 days living on the wall to complete this 4400ft route up the frigid North Face.

The Great and Secret Show (VII, A4, 5.11, WI 3) was by far the most demanding route any of us had ever encountered. After 1000ft of 80° to 90° climbing to a snow ledge, the angle swung hard past vertical and never kicked back for the next 2000ft. The following 1400ft would average 85°-90° to top out this wall. Because of the nature of the rock features in the Sam Ford Fjord, continuous cracks are not the norm and the 2000ft crux was pieced together by connecting discontinuous corners and incipient seams. This section accounted for over half the time spent on the route. Yosemite rules were applied directly, and in most cases, if a pitch could be done with less holes yet would take longer, we opted for intricacy.

To describe this show, pitch for pitch, would be a study in futility. I truly believe that understanding how the cogs that make the engine work, and not just the road travelled, is the greater service I can provide. Why were we there? What kept us on the wall? How did we handle the solitude? Which partner did I want to kill first?

The only way I can give a better understanding of our motivation is by sharing with you the diary I kept while the events took place. So ...

21 May 1996

I have absolutely no idea what the day is today. Never quite sure if it's am or pm. But that's how it is out here. It seems that we are mostly up in the middle of the night, since the wall is sometimes in the sun during those hours if it's not cloudy or storming. Here's the recap:

We flew into Clyde River, Baffin Island, on 5 May and stayed in a hotel for the next three days. An incredible journey was spent touring the Gibbs and Clark Fjords assessing the most imposing walls for future teams. There are so many walls waiting to be done.

We raced back to Sam Ford Fjord with the thought that a Japanese team might try to get on Polar Sun first. The next day was great and we had fixed two pitches when the Japanese showed up and told us they would only climb 1000ft and come back next year to complete the wall. That night a big storm hit and 60+ mph winds ripped the sides out of our tent; we grabbed at everything that was about to be blown down the fjord. In our underwear, covered in snow, we scrambled to get clothes on and hoped none of the really important pieces got blown away. What a start!

8 June 1996 Day 12 on the Wall

First hanging bivvy off snow ledge. We're now 1600ft up the route, and have spent 12 nights sleeping on the wall. We went down for more food and fuel on 4 June after 18 gallons of water froze solid and we worked out that 3½ gallons of fuel was not enough. On 6 June we headed back up the wall with 21 days' food, stretchable to 30 at a pinch. Through the headwall we've brought up 26 gallons of water, five haul bags, three bullet bags, one bucket, two portaledges and provisions for 30 more days. The wall is steeply overhanging for the last 600ft, with no way to get back to the anchors. We are totally committed now!

12 June Day 15

Our rations are very sparing right now and food is always on our minds. I figure we're all pretty hungry seeing that a day on the wall for us is 36 hours. The pitch may take 10-12 hours, and we cook in the morning, jug, haul the day's supplies, lead, clean the pitch, come down, take off gear, talk about the pitch and cook dinner. This takes about 20-24 hours each day. So we are consuming one day's worth of food every 36 hours. This definitely makes for grumbling stomachs! We're all a bit edgy and probably have one lightly heated argument every day or two, but everything gets resolved and we always go back to our routine as usual.

Bivvy living has been very comfortable; this new A5 Diamond portledge definitely makes the climb bearable. The man in the hammock downstairs has it pretty cushy, yet you have to sleep on your back, never on your side



15. Warren Hollinger at a belay on The Turret, Baffin Island, while climbing *Nuvualik*, a new route on the West Face. In the background, the Great Cross Pillar. (Jerry Gore) (p50)

(you get used to it). Upstairs is wider and longer and taller than regular doubles, and the breathable fly material keeps the condensation from building up and turning to ice. Not so downstairs, but that's the breaks. We take turns in the lower hammock; two nights down, four nights up. The weather has been getting warmer (relative term), rising above freezing occasionally, though it has been overcast for the last five or six days. The ice is showing signs of melting. Major cracks are forming and the snow has almost melted off the top, leaving that reflective sign of naked ice ready to change to its liquid state.

I'm a bit worried about the last part of the route up the right side of the pillar. It's all black-stained and probably fed by a snow patch behind the pillar. Another problem with the warmer temperatures is that at least every 30 minutes, all day long, rocks are cutting loose all around us and all over the fjord. Luckily we've picked a very steep route and bivvy under overhangs, but when we hit the large snow ledge we may not have the same luck finding good shelters for the portaledge. We'll have to play it by ear.

It sounds like a war zone around here, missiles fly by, crash into ledges below us. It's pretty wild, yet it becomes routine. It's actually enjoyable when we get a moment to trundle something big (not always much fun for the leader, who is continually worried about chopping himself or his rope in half). We all get ready and watch the show. Jeff seems to get the biggest loose rocks. He cut loose a 500-800lb block. Whoa! Did that one ever explode! We pull all the ropes in tight and watch the missile tear up the air and hear it explode a second or two after we see the impact.

Today has turned out quite nice. It's Mark's lead and I have the day off. I cleaned up the rock dust and shrapnel chunks out of the ledge. Straightened things up a bit and repaired a burn hole in Jeff's sleeping-bag (he's been smoking 3-5 cigarettes a day and is not a practised smoker). We've been working well as a team like that, drying out and repairing each other's kit.

I sometimes secretly wish we could stay up here longer. On the mellow days there seems to be no other place I would rather be. The living is hard, yet comfortable. The quiet is so fantastic, not another human being for 80 miles. No sound except the air in your ears – and the rock missiles. People think we're crazy but they have no idea the world they are missing.

It was my lead yesterday (that's figurative, it was probably 48 hours ago). I had a 13½ hour lead and an hour drilling the belay. I was exhausted. It started with a bolt ladder (17 rivets) which took 4½ hours, then I never placed another bolt for the next 100+ feet. It was scrappy; 10-15 Heads, 10 Bird Beaks, 4-5 Baby Knife Blades and a few small Arrows. The guys thought for sure I would have to drill and said it was a great lead. The No 3 Heads were good, yet you couldn't very well call them A1 placements? Mark cleaned the pitch and was amazed at how easily all the pieces came out, especially the Beaks. He said a couple of the #3 Heads were fixed so we decided to be more conservative and call the pitch A3+ (but unless you fall, you'll never know). The rock was very loose and flaky and I came

down covered in rock dust and dirt. It was caked in my eyes and clothes and I filled the ledge with it. We are moving like slugs, but still trying to remember to enjoy the process, not the goal.

17 June Day 21

Apparently today is the day we were to be picked up and brought back to Clyde. That's definitely not to be. We are 2600ft up the wall and have no intention of turning around until we reach the top.

Jeff led ten hours while it snowed on me on the single belay ledge for six of these hours. It was wet snow, almost rain, and kept me huddled in the belay bag. Luckily Jeff knew my situation and didn't ask to be zipped extra gear. I led a 200+ft pitch yesterday out a roof, then zigzagged back about 150° for 40ft, went free for 40ft, made a small anchor, zipped a new lead line and freed most of the next 160ft at 5.9 crack. It was our fastest pitch in weeks (6 hours). We're cutting our sleep back and will try to get in at least two pitches a day on the faster upper section. We'll actually be able to follow continuous crack systems (what a novelty). We are all hustling, hoping we can make it out before break-up.

The wall has been wearing on us. I heard Mark say the other day, 'It feels like we've been climbing this wall for a year.' Three weeks actually. Most days I forget what day it is, what time it is, how long we've been on the wall, and I never know the day of the week. We've been getting at each other a bit more lately. Probably the close quarters, no privacy and the continuous intensity of our mission tends to fray the nerves ever so slightly. You try to think of everyone else but when you're strung out and tired you snap at each other from time to time. We had a productive two-hour talk last night and spoke of most of the things that are pissing us off about each other. We all resolved to be more conscious of our actions that are irritants and hope not to get on each other's nerves as the cliff wears on for another two weeks.

Mark and Jeff are trying to make a single push to the top of the big snow ledge. It looks to be 200ft to the lip and 100ft up to the top of the ledge (who knows, you really can't tell from this angle). After ten long pitches of overhanging climbing with the shortest pitch taking 9 or 10 hours, we are happy to see continuous cracks and less than vertical climbing. The weather has definitely been getting colder. It is full whiteout conditions and the guys have opted to go without a belay ledge. They've been out for eight hours. I hope they make it to the ledge before they get too cold (that snow and wind can really wear on you).

Looking down at the ice – what a fantastic view! We notice that the ice is looking more solid than last year. Yet the cracks are HUGE! They cut totally across the mouth of the fjord in five or six places. That alone could prevent us from getting out. The only way we'll know is when we make that fateful call to the Inuit on the radio in a couple of weeks. Morale's good though, and we are still working like a well-oiled machine.



Above

16. Polar Sun Spire, Baffin Island:
The Great and Secret Show (4400ft)
goes straight up the middle of the
North Face, to the right of the
obvious ice streak.
(Warren Hollinger) (p52)

Right

17. The first hanging camp on
Polar Sun Spire.
(Warren Hollinger) (p52)



22 June Day 26

We've been hit by five days of fairly constant snow. Our bivvy now is on the middle snow ledge at 3510ft on my altimeter. It's a big snow ledge sloping at 45°-70°. We stamped out a good platform against the wall and put up the portaledge and we spent about five hours getting the bags up to our high point. Of course the snow started pouring down as we set up the portaledge; needless to say we and the portaledge were soaked when we stepped in. But eventually everything dries and after 24 hours of sleep I ventured out. All hell broke loose and five hours later, after a fantastic A2 Head and Bird Beak seam and some scrappy burrowing through snow looking for placements on a small ramp, I called it quits. I had made 100ft and was completely soaked.

For the last couple of days we've been pelted by small avalanches funnelled right into us from above, though it's an 85° wall and not an obvious drainage zone. The guys headed out at 5pm, by 10pm the sun hit us and by 12am the bigger slides, melting and getting heavier, started sloughing off. We definitely need to move the bivvy soon. It's a bit unnerving listening to avalanches hitting all around the ledge every 30-60 seconds (it really is that continuous). The sun is wreaking havoc up here.

While I was collecting water today I was able to spend a few moments taking in the view. I look out at a view I'll never experience again and am dumbfounded by its beauty. There will be other walls in the future, yet this one is now and its majestic panorama is like no other in the world. The frozen ocean, cracked in dozens of places for miles across the fjord, splits twenty or so 2000ft walls. The snow has almost left the ice entirely and the reflections and shadows are staggering. I know one day this will be over and I'll long to be back up here again.

28 June Day 32

We established Camp 5 four days ago on the most incredible perch I have ever seen. The view is phenomenal! Our portaledge now sits on the edge of the pillar, 3500ft up. We finally got a couple of sunny days, but the avalanche danger is great. Jeff led the next pitch and found more ice-climbing. Unfortunately the chimney was flowing from run-off, and all we could hear from Jeff were curses and whimpers as if he was going to take the inevitable fall that would kill him. (We later found out he had been underneath a small waterfall trying to thread a chockstone.) When he got down to the ledge he was completely soaked and hypothermic. Mark and I stripped him of his gear and clothes; we cranked the stove, put him into dry clothes and spent the next few hours watching him recover. Jeff did a fantastic job given the conditions.

We could see the black corner looming above, completely vertical, overhanging and leaking water like a sieve. I knew for us to do these pitches we needed overcast conditions and like clockwork, 24 hours later, the temperatures dropped to sub-freezing and though it was extremely cold,

we blasted. I had a 5.10 pitch and stopped at a natural belay 30ft wide of the black corner, quickly followed by precarious 5.11 face climbing around a huge loose block. If I knocked the block off, all 400lbs would likely have gone through the portaledge 300ft below. When I got to the black corner, thinking I would plug it up with a 4 or 5 Camalot, I was surprised to find the crack too large. It was laser cut, about 12 inches wide and 15 feet deep. The back was full of ice all the way till a foot and a half from the lip. Mark led this pitch in about eight hours with wood blocks, No 5 Camalots and rivets. The day was clearing up and our timing was perfect. Mark got a dry pitch, and with the sun coming out, Jeff headed up to lead his pitch. The conditions were still cold and dry, and since we weren't getting direct sunlight, this made Jeff's pitch go much easier. I led a short 5.10 face pitch to the base of the final headwall, kicking steps with my free boots for the last 25ft, to the notch at the back of the Pillar.

I was blown away that I could look down at Base Camp. This had been 21 days since I had left it and it felt great to see it, though it was just a speck way down there 4500ft below us. The view is breathtaking. It really gives us a sense that this is almost over when we start seeing everything from this height. Being almost over is a relief – it has been a long time up here. We really would like to finish this climb and get on with our lives.

Postscript: Mark led out the final 300ft-plus traverse from Camp 6. Mark and Jeff were moving together, with me belaying them both. To our surprise, the ridge wasn't an option. We were actually able to unrope and slog around the back of the wall to a 400ft, 80° section. On the most perfect day of our entire stay in the fjord, we were about to summit. Three hours later we snapped obligatory shots, lay around and tried to savour our achievement. The latter proved difficult since there were too many events over the last couple of months to absorb and still there was the issue of getting off the wall. Six more hours put us back at our high camp, stuffing our faces with as much food as our shrunken bellies could contain.

Ten hours after we settled in, Santa (perhaps because of our proximity to the North Pole) granted us an early Christmas gift. After 26 days of total isolation, the forgotten hum of snowmobiles entered our dreams. Once we realised we were all sharing the same hallucination, we tore the fly open to find three dark specs on the ice heading our way. The last piece of the puzzle was falling into place. We were going home and nothing in the world was going to stop us!

Summary: Warren Hollinger, Jeff Chapman and Mark Synnott made the first ascent of the Polar Sun Spire via the North Face. *The Great and Secret Show* (VII, A4, 5.11, WI 3) was a 4400ft route involving 39 days on the spire. After 1000ft of 80°-90° climbing to a snow ledge, the angle swung past vertical and never returned for the next 2000ft. The following 1400ft averaged 85°-90° to the summit which was reached on 30 June 1996.