

Mount Asgard

Doug Scott

We had been lured up into the Canadian Arctic by these two granite walls that reached up into the sky making a beautiful 2000 ft dihedral. Dennis Hennek (California) and myself (Nottingham) had been to Baffin Island the year before, Paul Nunn (Yorkshire) and Paul Braithwaite (Lancashire) were on their first visit.

Now this dihedral was not the only break on the w side of Mount Asgard for there were others more prominent but none that attracted us so much. The texture of the granite was coarse-grained but not crumbly, the cracks were clean-cut and had not weathered themselves into grit and soil, and we knew that this chunk of the earth gave the best rock that a climber could wish for. We had climbed 2000-ft walls to the s of Asgard during our 1971 campaign. They are to be remembered amongst the best rock climbs we had attempted, because the rock medium had been so perfect.

So why had the w face dihedral been left for another expensive 4000-mile journey? Well, the storms and a large film commitment had hampered our effort, despite nine men in the team and a six-week stay on the island.

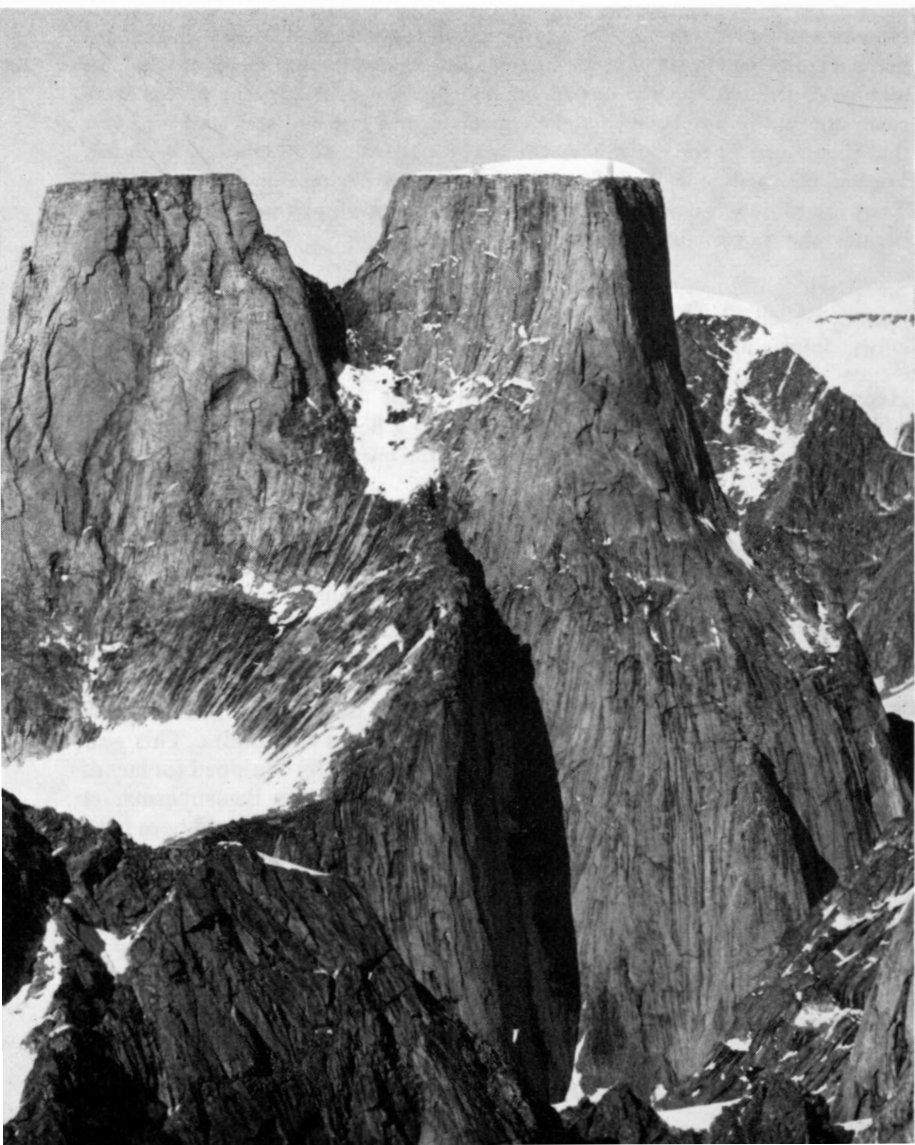
Hennek and myself had reached the foot of the dihedral after a 1000 ft of Alpine mixed climbing, only to be savaged by a fierce five-day storm and by much colder weather thereafter proclaiming the onset of winter and the end of our struggle.

Fear of being hit by an Arctic depression receded during the following months as our curiosity to know all the little secrets of the dihedral increased to bring us back to be part of its superb rock sculpture for a few days. We arrived at Pangnirtung by regular Nord Air Services (£135 return from Montreal) and went by Eskimo sledge pulled by a skidoo up the now frozen fjord. The noisy machine left us standing by our 130-lb packs at the entrance to Weasel valley. We had been denied the pleasures of back-packing the year before thanks to a liberal use of air-drops and helicopters buzzing about the tundra. This year we were determined to move as a self-contained unit fully equipped for any of Baffin Island's big walls and to stay away from the Hudson Bay supermarket at Pangnirtung for three weeks. Hence the 130 lb each. They would have been considerably heavier had we not planned to live off freeze-dried food-packs and Dennis's Granola. We reached Summit lake after 25 miles and two awful days, falling into slushy snow, bogs and cold, turbulent side streams and after doing considerable damage to our achilles tendons and knee joints. We decided to split the loads at the lake and take them up to Asgard in two carries via the length of Summit lake and up the Turner glacier. We pitched a camp by a glacier lake convenient for an attempt on the w and e faces of Asgard. Six days out from Montreal we were ready to attempt the w side dihedral.

MOUNT ASGARD

The sun was never far below the horizon and the mild July weather made for sloppy snow which gave Braithwaite a few nasty moments in leading us all to the foot of the dihedral. The two newcomers began to dig a snow-cave whilst Dennis and myself set off up the dihedral. The first ice-choked pitch led into the true dihedral; Dennis led through on lost arrows and angles for 50 ft and stopped at a small roof. He stretched out horizontally and said it was blank beyond. 'Blank'? Yes, blank with not a hair-line crack for the next 60 ft. We had been deceived by a water streak that might well repeat itself higher up. Neither of us felt like drilling lines of bolt holes so we came down, which

37 *Mount Asgard, South peak (left) and North peak* This and next photo: D. Scott



wiped away the happy expectant smiles from the faces of the others. Ever been taken on a wild goose chase? However, they didn't say that, for Paul and Paul are understanding people, so we just came down and went back to the tents for a long think.

We went round the E side and started climbing the slabs that go up towards the cylindrical top of Asgard's left-hand pillar (E side, N summit). They were fabulous open slabs and Dennis got the best climbing out of them, free climbing mostly in his PAs (alias EBs). None of us used many pegs, in fact most of the aid came from Chouinard wired chocks and big Clog chocks on nylon lodged in the vertical cracks and under small overhangs.

The slabs were wrapped round the base of the mountain one on top of the other, boiler plate fashion, forming a huge bulge that eased off before the actual top pillar. Looking up the wide expanse of slab the eye became fixed by this pillar which seemed to overhang the bulge below. We looked forward eagerly to those top pitches, for they would run up cracks that cleaved the upper part of the mountain.

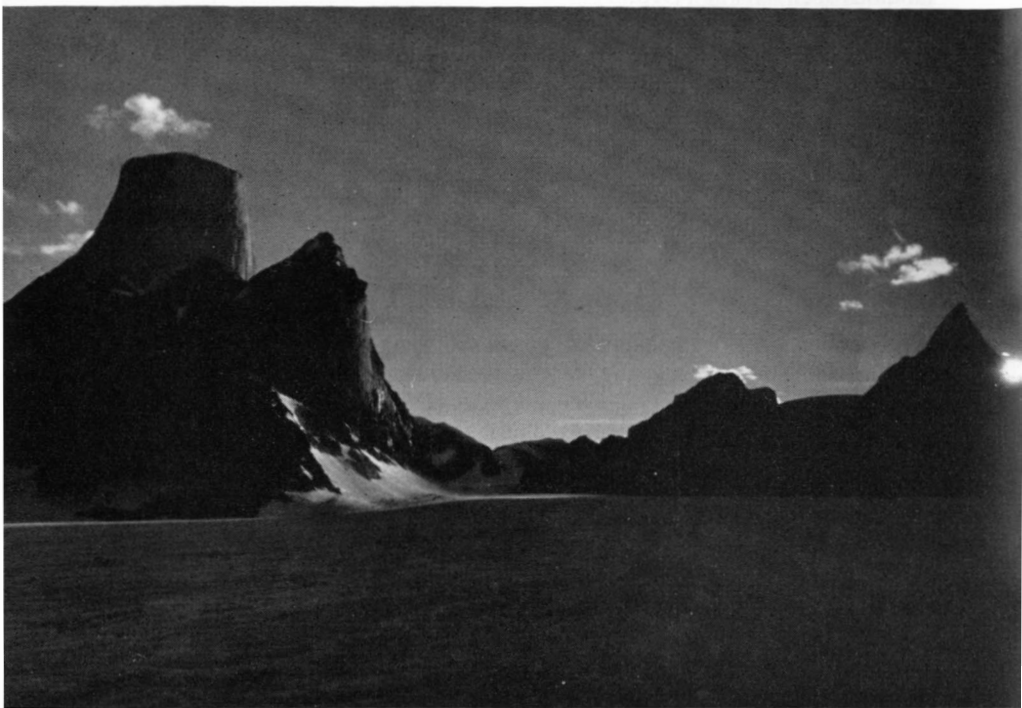
The climb went on past midnight and into the next day, with big Paul Nunn ambling with sloth-like ease over the steepening slabs, climbing into a mist that now enveloped the mountain. Paul Braithwaite raced up the first of the head wall pitches. We had each led about a quarter of the route, except that Dennis and I were two pitches behind. So the last two fell to us just as the mist rolled back, and all the summit snow-fields on Friga, Freya and all the many unnamed peaks around glowed pink above the white mist and against the grey sky. The sun had moved right round Asgard during our climb, mostly above the sky-line, except when it dipped down for a couple of hours and now at 3am it was back again.

Dennis stripped off to his vest and pants to squeeze his bulk up the tight chimney that was the hardest pitch on the climb—being 5.8 for 100 ft. That was the penultimate pitch, and we three spectators were glad to use jumars on it. Gritstone-like jam cracks about HVS brought us up the last pitch to the summit plateau.

It had taken us 30 hours of continuous climbing to scale those 4000 ft of VS/HVS climbing and A1 aid climbing. We were dropping off to sleep when Dennis happened to look down on to the tents by the lake—now in the lake! All our sleeping bags and duvets were down there and it looked like bad weather was rolling in from the S. We steamed through the summit snows, abseiled down to the col between Asgard's twin summits and reached the snow-basin leading to King's Parade glacier (not our name!).

Then the nightmare began—wading up to our chests and sometimes disappearing altogether in mushy wet snow. It seems unbelievable looking back that snow could be so bad; we rolled, crawled and slid in our efforts to stay near the surface. It took eight hours to descend two miles of easy-angled snow to our snow-shoes.

Half an hour later we had covered the last two miles on snow-shoes and reached the lake. Our tents were mercifully on an island of snow protected by the canvas from the sun. Nearly 40 hours later we were back in our tents, now re-pitched well above the rising lake, to mull over our effort, gradually becoming aware of a great and classic rock climb.



38 *Asgard and Loki at midnight*

Over the next week we moved on down the valley passing Breidablik, Fork Beard glacier, Thor, waterfalls in full spate, and the crater lakes. The snow was fast disappearing from the tundra and the drab browns and greens were peppered with pink willow herb, yellow arctic poppy and alive with weasels, arctic hare and mosquitoes. We walked down the fjord to Pangnirtung as the Italians arrived. We could not speak with them as they roared overhead by helicopter. We looked up with disdain, feeling rather superior, having quite forgotten last year's enterprise and that we would have given anything for a seat in a helicopter during our 'walk-in'!

SUMMARY Paul Braithwaite, Dennis Hennek, Paul Nunn and Doug Scott made a first ascent up the left-hand pillar on the E side of Mount Asgard's N summit. The route took 30 hours of continuous climbing and was 4000 ft long of ED Alpine standard.