



James at the change-over on the midsection of the route Tower Couloir. The climbing would turn out to be two grades harder than anything he had ever been on before.

free climbing NOW." Ropes go slack. Weight back on my arms. Back-and-foot up the chimney. Reach up with the axe. Slam right axe down. THWOCK. Good névé. Yes. Slam left axe down. THWOCK. Another bomber placement. Big pull now, this is what you did all those pull ups for. And yes, I can see the col...

A good belay in the side of the gully and I'm climbing again. The gully reverts to type with some truly awful climbing. Polystyrene ball bearing snow on granite slabs. Just one runner in 60m. But at least it is not too steep. 'A little but often' I say to myself as inch by inch, I dig a trench through the funky snow that was two feet deep and four feet wide. I hear James shout out: "Olly, it's getting late..." but we are so close now and I just can't let it go. An hour and a half later, soaked to the skin from all the snow clearing and I've made it to the col.

As the light fades from the sky I stand on the ridge with the cold tearing into my clothes as the landscape slides by like a scene from an IMAX movie. I'm the first person to stand in this place and it feels like a personal, seminal climbing moment. I have to admit, this place is deeply impressive. I start to shiver. My clothes are soaked from my struggles with the ball bearing snow and my jacket is turning into an icy carapace. Now we have to get out of here. At Base Camp we'd talked about descending down the back of the mountain and going down the Coffee Glacier but now I'm not so sure. The way down looks awful, a steep gully that plummets into a maze of crevasses. Again I hear James's voice shouting again from below. I can't make out what he's saying, but I can tell he's not happy. The cold seems to be affecting my decision-making ability. I have to get this right. 'Get moving' I say to myself, 'This is no time for indecision'. Another shout from James. 'Better the devil you know' I think to myself. "Nearly there," I shout down to James, my voice squeaky from hypothermia. I wade across to the rock wall on the left side of the col. There is a big crack and it swallows one of those new red anodised Hex 8s on a sling. I hammer it home 'Ding, Ding, DING'. I tie the rope to my harness in case I drop it and try to untie the ropes from myself so I can rap off them. The knots are frozen solid so I just reach out for my knife and slice the ropes from my harness with the blade.

C O U L O I R



Top: James approaches the route at dawn. Bottom: Mount Dickey is on the right, Mount Bradley on the left, 747 Pass is in the centre and the tent can be seen in the trench complex left behind by a local mountain guide.

I abseil down the rope back to James. I've been climbing flat out for 10 hours and I'm losing momentum. My brain fogs with tiredness, I'm shivering from cold and my arms feel like they've been doing a pull-up competition. "I'm struggling a bit here, James," I say, "can you look after the descent?" "No worries dude. I've been thinking about it for the last hour or so and I've got a plan." He says as he threads the rope through the station. "This is going to be a blank cheque descent," he says. "We'll ab off all this gear and get back into the cave," he says, "we'll brew up there."

It may be dark outside, but it feels great to be in the cave with James handing me sweet tea from a roaring stove and the chocolate melting in my mouth. I put on a fluffy, dry down jacket and James hands me his spare shell. I stuff the stiff, frozen jacket and gloves into my pack and my hands go into the spare dry mitts. My core temperature stabilises. Now I'm just rather cold instead of going hypothermic.

As we abseil down through the night I get a proper look at what we've climbed. With all the snow and ice ripped out from the chimney it looks like a demolition site. 'Did we really climb that?' I keep repeating to myself and shaking my head. I dropped my belay plate on the way up the climb so I have to abseil using an Italian hitch. It twists the rope and as James is unwrapping the coils I realise I've become a passenger. Now James is leading the way. We've done this kind of thing together so many times before - we work the stations in near silence, both knowing exactly what to do. I give the equalised station he's built at the side of the gully a sideways glance, but I know before I look that he'll have done it properly. "Teamwork makes the dream work," I say, my voice slurring from tiredness. We descend through the darkness and are back on the ground a few hours later. The final trek back to the glacier into the brutal arctic wind seems to take forever. My skis are humming a tune as they scrape across the snow. 'Bottles of gin', they repeat. 'Bottles of gin'. As we unzip the tent we hear the electronic bleep of the alarm clock. It's 3.30 in the morning... We've been on the go for 24 hours. 🏔️

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