
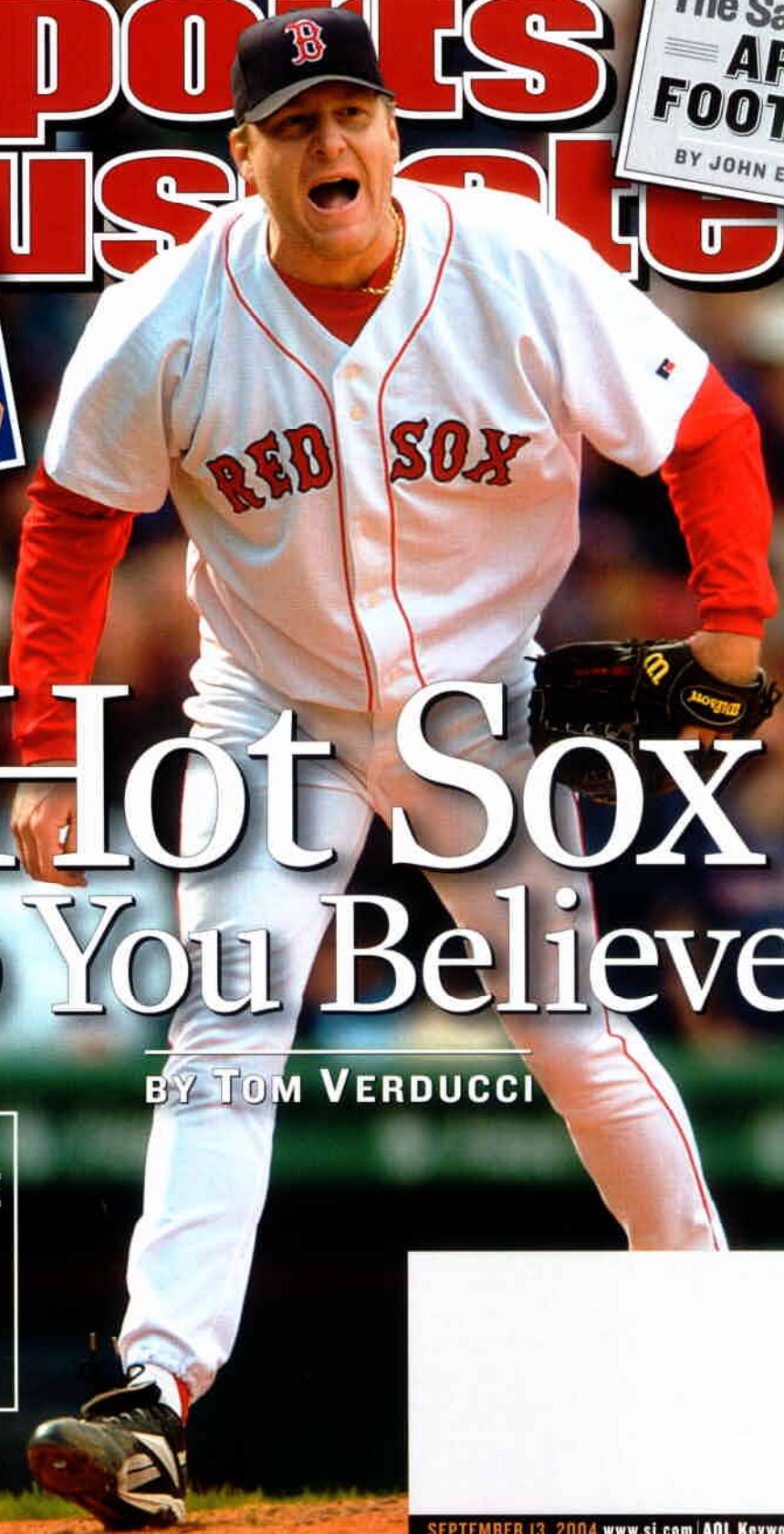


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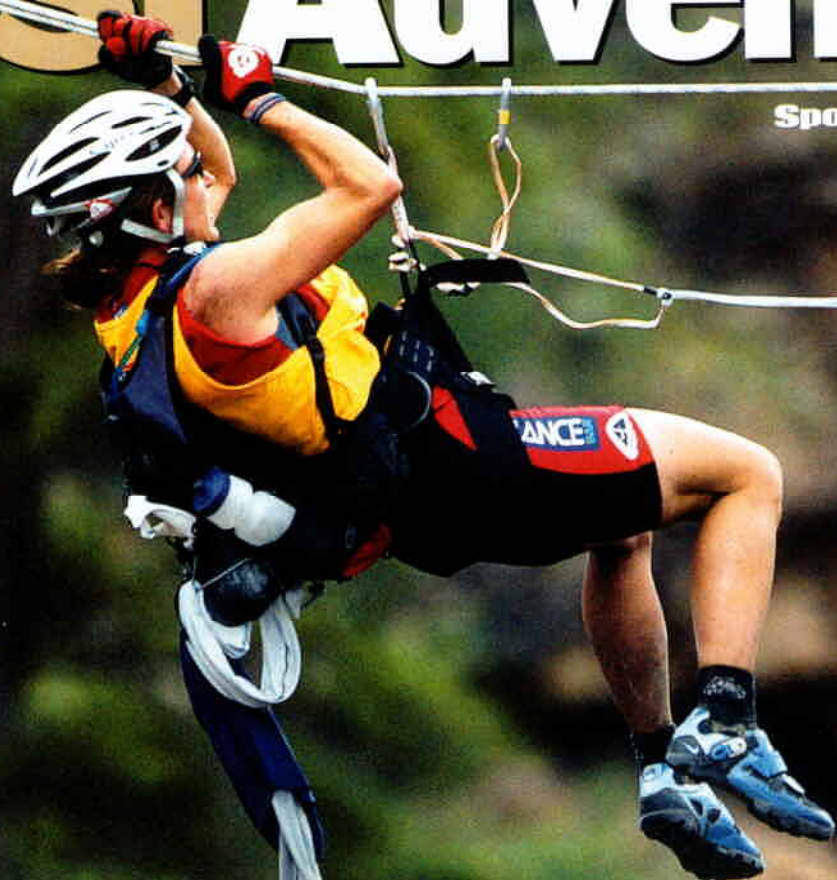
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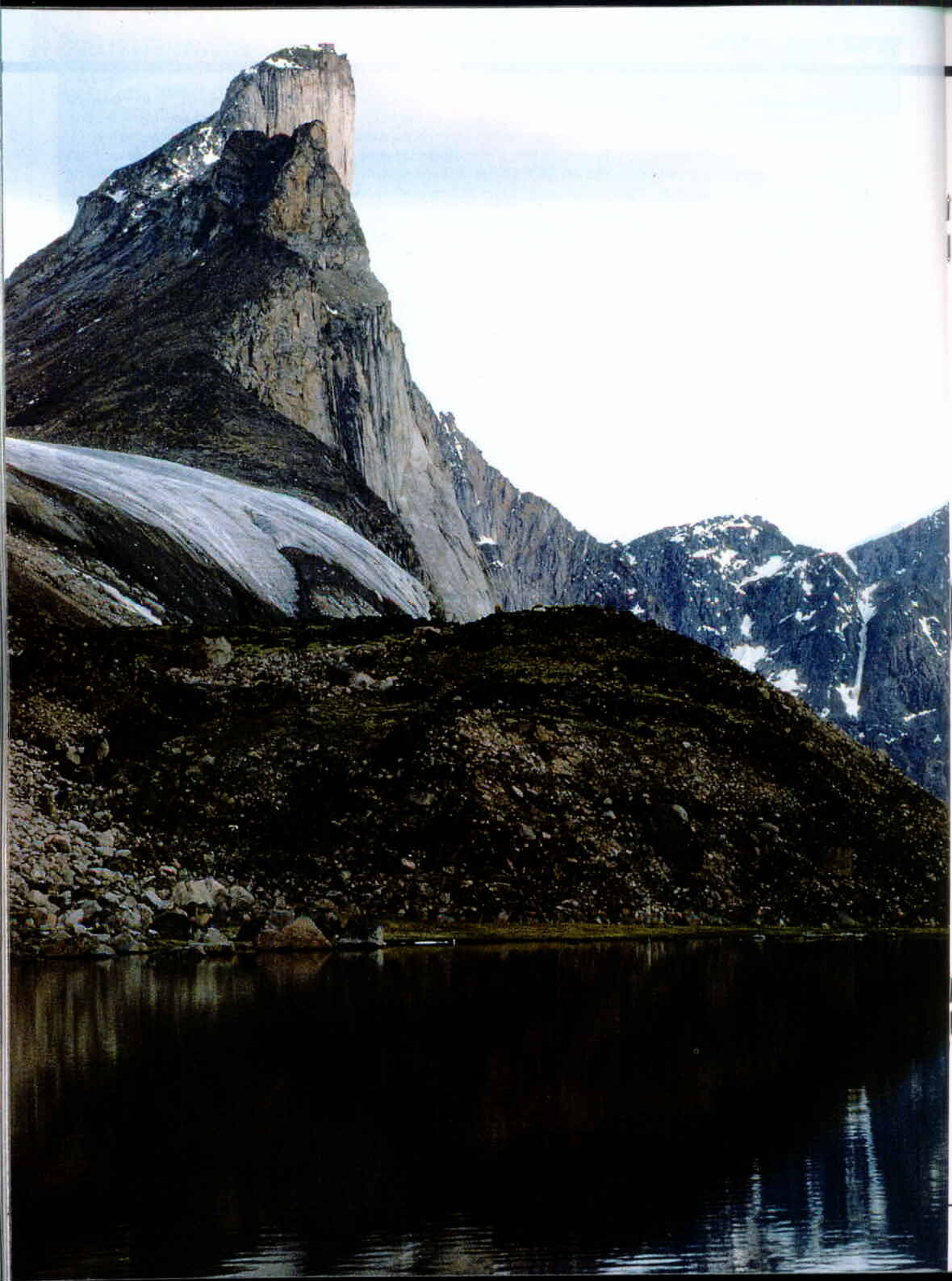
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HIGH ROLLER

Danelle Ballengee lines up yet another win at the Beaver Creek 24-hour race.

Photograph by Dan Campbell



MICHAEL NICHOLS/INTERNATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY (LEFT); BEN KIM

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Toil and Trouble on Mount Thor

An attempt to set a **world-record rappel** down a fearsome rock face near the Arctic Circle plunged an ambitious team into a struggle against nature—and each other

BY MICHAEL RAY TAYLOR

HERE'S A dirty little secret about mountaineering expeditions: They're like marriages. First-timers go in thrilled, bursting with faith in their new partners, shoving aside misgivings. Those who have been around the block tend to be more realistic. They openly entertain fears that it might not work. And an expedition planned by leaders who barely know one another is like an arranged marriage: Anything can happen, but chances are it won't be good. When relationships sour, little is left but a few uncontested facts and the bitter tang of regret and recrimination. Some uncontested facts:

In 1982 Dan Twilley, then 34, and his friend Steve Holmes—both experienced cavers—led an expedition to Baffin Island, right on the Arctic Circle, where they and 15 others set a rappelling world record by descending (and then climbing back up) a single rope 3,280 feet from the overhung face of Mount Thor. It was a big, no-holds-barred sort of trip, funded by the now-defunct magazine *Geo*. Participants included the noted outdoor photographer Michael (Nick) Nichols, professional photo assistants and an advance team to haul in food, gear and supplies for a comfy base camp amid the stark, breathtaking scenery of Canada's Auyuittuq National Park.

Twilley and Holmes had helped develop



the pursuit of “big wall” rappelling and climbing in the 1970s, when they used a new type of static caving rope to descend the 2,650-foot overhung cliff of El Capitan in Yosemite. The two acquired an affection for the controlled thrill of stepping off a ledge into a thousand feet of space. Rigging, rap-

PELLING and climbing back up such lengths of rope demanded skill, physical conditioning and an analytical mind. Even minor rigging errors, amplified by the weight and sawing action of thousands of feet of rope, could prove fatal. To find walls offering more than the 1,400 or so feet provided by the deepest caves, Twilley and Holmes began scouting canyons and mountain cliffs.

Mount Thor offered the world's longest known “free” drop, where a hanging rope would barely kiss granite. To take on that face, Twilley and Holmes employed a new type of descender, called the Thor Rack—a yard of U-shaped steel rod, bridged by aluminum break bars. With it, they could control the friction and steadily increasing speed created by the physics of lowering a human body down a half mile of nylon kernmantle no thicker than your index finger.

Ever after that 1982 trip, Twilley talked about the view from halfway down the face of Thor in a hushed whisper suggestive of a deeply religious experience.

ABOUT FIVE years ago a caver and big-wall aficionado named James Englett, now 42, approached Twilley with the idea of organizing a return to Mount Thor. Sitting around campfires at caving functions in and around his native

DROP ZONE Mount Thor, site of a record rappel in 1982, had Englett (right, on the summit) and his team, hanging on in July.

state of Tennessee, Twilley and Englett speculated that it would be possible to rappel farther than the 1982 expedition did. A team rigging at a slightly different spot on the summit, dropping the rope farther down the scree slope at Thor's base, might achieve a rappel of as long as 4,000 feet.

It's common among cavers to start a conversation at a social event, continue it a year later at the base of a pit and then develop it through phone calls, e-mails and caving conventions until an expedition blossoms. This happened between Twilley and Englett. Last winter they agreed to spend July 2004 climbing, rappelling and derigging Mount Thor, using a small team that would be the antithesis of the big '82 expedition. No gear sponsors, no media, no professional photographers, just "seven guys going for a world record," as Englett put it. Although Englett would select the team, the two agreed to jointly lead the expedition.

Nunavut, Canada's newest territory, was created in 1999. It covers 772,000 square miles—fully one fifth of Canada's land mass—yet holds only 29,000 inhabitants, spread among a few hamlets and villages. The vast majority of the population is Inuit, and the semi-autonomous territory governs itself according to Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, a set of traditional principles. The mountains that guard Pangnirtung Fiord, Thor among them, are sacred in native religion.

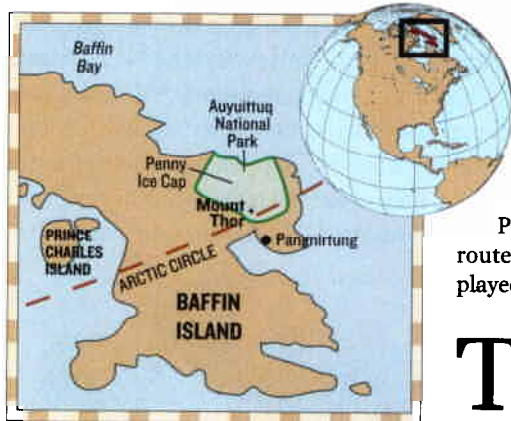
In his 1982 trip Twilley learned that the Inuit depend on good rope for harnessing dogsleds, fishing, hunting and many other daily tasks. He realized that even old caving rope is far stronger than most that the natives were using. In February 2004 Twilley e-mailed U.S. caving organizations saying that the new Thor team had decided to donate old caving ropes to the Inuit. Their goal was to amass up to 300 feet for every man, woman and child in Nunavut.

In late June Twilley squeezed into a van bursting with donated rope and drove from Chattanooga to Ottawa. On July 1 the seven men—Twilley and Englett, plus Chuck Constable, Ben Holley, Ben Kim, Dick Siron and Kenneth Waite—arrived in Pangnirtung, the gateway to the national park. Each member had spent between \$3,000 and \$4,000 on gear and travel, and each had spent much of the previous year training at caves and canyons throughout the U.S.

They had made it to the expedition of their dreams, and to the point where the untested facts become fewer and fewer.

THE PLAN, developed in consultation with park authorities, was for each member of the team to shuttle his gear 21 miles up Akshayuk Pass to the base of the mountain. The return trip would be easier, as the team planned to load much of the gear on a raft and float it down the whitewater of the Weasel River.

Mount Thor offered the world's longest known "free" drop, where a rappelling rope would barely **KISS GRANITE** in more than 4,000 feet.



A 5,000-foot rope weighs more than 300 pounds, so it was carried strung among six team members; the seventh hauled the deflated raft.

"It figured out to a 25-mile walk per day to move your gear five miles," Twilley says.

In addition to the terrain—the group was hiking over loose gravel and crossing icy freshets—and steady rain slowed progress, adding two or three extra days to the hike.

"But we were still exactly on schedule for the rappel," insists Twilley, who had built extra time for delays into the itinerary. The group paused for a day at base camp. While they waited for a foot of snow

to melt off the mountain in the 60° heat, ermine and Arctic fowl played about them—and the honeymoon ended.

Halfway up the left flank of Thor, the Fort Beard Glacier grinds down from the Penny Ice Cap. While climbers seek to challenge the face of the mountain, the top-down strategy of the rappel team was to ascend the gradual slope of the moraine to the ice cap, then cross to the backside of the mountain for a more gentle ascent to the summit rig point. From his hike in 1982 Twilley recalled only one place requiring rope, a climb of about 20 feet over an ice ledge to a relatively easy path up the 45-degree scree slope at the back of the mountain. But the planned two-day ascent to the rig point degenerated into a week of searching for the right route, enduring miserable weather, dicey climbs and traverses, equipment failure, diminishing food and declining morale. Days swung from sun to rain to snow to sun again, and the men were beset by hordes of hungry insects taking advantage of the brief Arctic summer. They crossed the paths of wolves. And they argued.

There remains no single cause for the team's decision, on or near July 22, to abandon its quest. Instead, there were many small causes, each now a bone of contention between the two leaders.

Problems with the rigging plan, the route, food, equipment and weather all played a part in what followed.

THERE ARE two ways to get a long rope up a mountain: carry it or haul it. The latter requires one team to summit with a light haul cord, which is then weighted and dropped to a second team at the base of the cliff. The cord is tied to the heavier main line and used to haul it to the rig point. In theory this appears an obvious alternative to lugging a heavy rope up a mountain, but in practice it can cause problems. The cord can get hung up during descent or, worse, can snag and break during hauling. Even with radios, communication between top and bottom teams can be difficult; whole days can be wasted searching for the lowered end of a hard-to-spot haul cord. Englett argued for the slower—but surer—method of walking the main line to the top.

Twilley insisted that careful cord placement would lessen the danger of breaks. In the end the group agreed to Englett's plan.

Glaciers reshape the face of continents; a lot can change on one ice-bound mountain in 22 years. Twilley's 20-foot climb to an "easy" route was anything but. The decision to carry the rope would probably not have been made had the team known the condition of the route.

"The old route up must have gone in a landslide," Kim says. "You can ask anyone; they'll tell you I do some pretty wild climbs. But this stuff was scarier than anything I'd ever seen. You're on a tiny ledge, and it's covered with slippery lichen, and frost on top of that, and you've got several hundred feet of exposure, a 5.7 climb ahead of you and an 80-pound pack."

On the first day of the ascent, less than halfway up the moraine, those at the head of the line stopped below the intended camp. Englett and the 38-year-old Kim were nursing sore knees. The next day the team struggled up the scree and established a camp Englett dubbed Meatgrinder, for the jagged rocks littering the ground. The team spent the following days in deteriorating weather, desperately trying to find the route to the summit. "We kept coming to a sheer 300-foot wall, then we'd have to backtrack and try another spot," Kim recalls. "This happened several times."

Twilley blames Englett's "summit fever" for the final difficult ascent, up what Twilley deems the wrong route. Englett blames Twilley's poor memory and changes in the mountain. Meanwhile, as the weather worsened, Kim argued they shouldn't do anything on wet rocks, because someone would surely fall. The team was, in Englett's words, "tempting fate daily." In addition food was running low, and several members of the group, having brought very little foul-weather gear, were suffering in the cold. Kim recalls noticing increasing signs of hypothermia in Twilley, in particular. A second camp, established at the base of the scree slope leading to the summit, became a small base in itself, as each day scouts tried to find the route or waited out wet weather. "We named it the Donner Camp," Kim says, with only a trace of humor. "We figured we might have to start eating each other."

Twilley ultimately made a 30-hour solo trip down the mountain to warm up and to resupply the team with a packful of food. When he returned to the Donner Camp, the rest of the team had gone to examine the route to the summit that Englett had forged. When the team returned from the summit at 2 a.m., the decision was made to take advantage of the fresh food and a break in the weather to grab the rope and make a charge for the top. But fatigue was setting in, and errors in

a great place like this and no one gets hurt, we can call it a success," he argued. Over the next few days other team members had picked up this mantra, even as Englett and Twilley kept pushing for the summit and the rappel—albeit in more frequent disagreement as to how to go about it.

On July 20, amid a heavy snowstorm, the team finally reached the summit. Over the next day, during short breaks in the storm, they began to rig the rope so that it would be ready the moment the weather cleared. Everyone was cold. Englett and Twilley argued at length about the best method and spot for rigging. Before the team dropped the big rope into place, Englett descended a 300-foot section in an attempt to find the friction padding that had been left in place after the 1982 rappel. Fog swirled in and a layer of frost coated his gear and skin. He ascended without finding the pad. It was to be the only taste any of the team would know of the face of Mount Thor. Hungry, wet and exhausted, most were ready to derig and head down.

Twilley urged waiting another 24 hours. If the weather cleared, they could all rappel into base camp for a hot meal and resupply, spend a day climbing and rappelling, and still have a full week to catch their Aug. 2 flight out. According to Twilley's version of events, the group agreed to wait, but changed its opinion sometime that night, while he lay shivering in his tent. When he stepped out in the early morning, he says, the rope had already been derigged and

was being loaded into the last of the rope packs. Englett and Kim, however, insist that the group offered Twilley the chance to rappel before the rig was dismantled, but that he declined. "He had his chance," says Kim. Twilley was livid that the expedition was being ended. "If you do this, and the weather clears," he told the others, "I will never forgive you."

Shortly after the team left the summit, the sun emerged. The descent to Pang proceeded without incident. Most of the men who suffered through that trek in July only to look down in vain from the top of Mount Thor want to return to try again, and plans for a 2006 expedition are in the works.

Who will lead it remains uncertain. □

"We named it the **DONNER CAMP,**" says Kim, of the team's improvised shelter. "We figured we might have to start eating each other."



END OF THEIR ROPES The demands of the attempt raised conflicts for coleaders Englett (left) and Twilley.

planning and logistics were taking their toll.

Among the equipment Twilley had carried from base camp was a satellite phone, rented by Siron, a 46-year-old defense worker who planned to phone his friends and family from the summit. But no manual came with the phone, and no one on the team could get the thing to work. What was operable was the emergency rescue beacon—left behind at base camp. There would be no margin for error.

Earlier, while the team had still been scrambling over snowfields and rain-slick, mossy boulders in search of the route up, Kim had remarked that if the weather didn't improve, they might have to start back without doing the rappel. "As long as we've seen

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