

Background: Mount Colonel Foster is the second highest peak on Canada's Vancouver Island. Located deep in the wilderness, a days walk from civilization, the granite walls are rarely climbed. A coveted peak, shrouded in mystery that repels most attempts, even on it's most straightforward routes.

Ocean's of Stone:

Disappointment and Redemption on Mount Colonel Foster.

By: Scott Kennedy

Staring westward, the dying embers of day sting my eyes. I sit alone, only the pounding waves and the fading light to keep me company. The warm sand creeps between my toes, the sea consumes my thoughts. The rhythmic lap of the waves comforts my soul; the cadence beats with my heart. The beach is quiet and peaceful, perfect long-board waves stroll in, set after set. Knees to my chest, I smile and whisper, "perfect."

In the distance I see something change. Out back the waves turn to mush as the wind picks up. Inbound the wind licks my face, brisk at first then cold, the wind stings. Colder still I shiver, something isn't right, something doesn't fit. The warm glow of sunset is whipped clean and replaced with a cold expanse of stars, I shiver again. Reeling from the gunshot of confusion I open my eyes and wake up. Where am I? Where did the beach go?

The *idea* of an open bivy is much more pleasurable then the actual experience and this one was no exception. Shivering uncontrollably I curse my decision to forgo a sleeping bag. I close my eyes, trying in vein to get back to the beach. No luck, I am only able to conjure the present tense. The south Col of Mount Colonel Foster is cold, windy and dark. My mind drifts between luscious memories of the past and anticipation of the future. I rarely drift far from the sense of cold uncertainty that the darkness feeds. It will be dawn soon, but what will the new day bring?

The plan was hatched on the beach. Gavin and I had finished a day of surfing in Tofino when the idea was thrown down; the Traverse of Colonel Foster. We couldn't think of a good reason why not, so the idea became a plan and the plan became a mission.

Two days later we were walking towards Landslide Lake in the blazing sunshine. Past the campground, around the lake and up to the snow. Kicking steps in the snow till the moats urged us onto the rock. Fourth-class choss lead us higher and higher, more snow and a calf burner finish delivered us onto the South Col.

Here we would bivy for the night and tackle the south tower at dawn. We would need every ounce of the next day. Starting from the col, we would climb the south tower, descend onto a high snowfield climb to the true summit, then

down and up again to the north summit. Finally down once more to the north Col, down to the lake and out. It had all the markings of a massive day.

Five o'clock was a welcome milestone; the alarm clock was a sweet relief from the cold. Gearing up was a synch, no gear to pack as it was all on my back. After filling water from a puddle that would give a goat the shits we started towards the tower. There were a variety of options for ascending to the south summit. Three obvious snow gullies dissected the face. Obvious lines that looked like the ticket. Heading leftward we trudged toward the most interesting of the gullies.

The sun crept into the sky as we reached the snow. Looking at the gully I grimaced with disappointment. The snow only reached a ropelength or so up the gully. Once the snow petered out the real fun began, the angle steepened and rock quality took a sharp turn south. The elevator shaft of leg breakers and life takers was as inviting as freezing free root canal. The idea of being pounded to submission by rock fall for the day was pissing me off. We scanned the face looking for alternatives. Just to the right of the gully proper was a small cleft in the face, the rock looked solid, one look was all we needed.

My rock beat Gav's scissors and I tied into the sharp end of the rope. A Volkswagen sized chalkstone blocked the chimney so I worked my way up and left onto a blunt arête. The arête looked beautiful, clean and exposed. Upwards over moderate terrain I found decent gear and enjoyable climbing. Halfway through this first pitch something struck me as rather odd. The beta we had on the climb told us that the routes to the south summit were a mess of pins, tat and traffic. This pitch was devoid of all of that. I shrugged it off and kept climbing. After forty meters I moved right, back into the gully, to another chalkstone. After setting up a semi hanging stance I brought Gav up.

Gavin lead through, moving back left, back onto the natural line. Well I may of won the rock-paper-scissors battle for the first pitch, but Gav struck pay dirt on his first lead. The second pitch started with a tricky thin move into a shallow dihedral, to something we had never expected.

A finger crack stretched out before Gavin, Squamish style. Perfect jams, bomber gear and edges for feet; it was a pitch to write home about. Soon enough the rope came taut and I cleaned the belay. The climbing was magic, every finger lock was welded tight. Looking over my shoulder I could see the col shrinking beneath me. The surrounding peaks were bathed in a glowing light that invited the eye. Looking left, looking right the south pillar of The Colonel unfolded around me, I was adrift on an ocean of stone.

Reaching Gavin I nodded with approval. "That was gorgeous, just gorgeous!"

“Just perfect, next one looks good too.” Gavin replied as he passed me the rack.

A deep dihedral just to our right drew me upwards. Funky stemming, little edges and a good crack for gear, up I went. After a half pitch of climbing I arrived at a narrow col, I had intersected with the west ridge. Slinging the top of the pillar rodeo style, I set up a station and brought my partner in crime up.

The angle began to ease above us, we had miles to cover and only so much day. Gavin lead through running out the rope. I flip coiled over my shoulder, when the rope came taut I tied off on a bite and we started simple-climbing. Weaving around stone gargoyles and placing the odd piece we pushed onward.

Almost before we knew it the West Ridge collided head on with the East Ridge, not far to go now. The summit ridge was exposed and scrambly fun; Gavin and I came around a corner to see the large cairn of the south summit. Gavin filled out the register as I sorted gear for the next phase. A short down climb to a sphincter-tightening sidewalk of stone no wider than a diving board. From there it was down onto the snowfield and across to the main summit tower.

Sitting on a large slab re-stacking the ropes I felt the wind for the first time that day. I closed my eyes trying to bring back the warm breath of the ocean; a drop of rain slapped me back to reality. Looking westward we could see a system building, wisps of grey at first. But like a ghost emerging from the depths the grey cloak was quickly shed to expose the black underbelly of the approaching storm. Charging hard, the storm was sucking energy from the ocean bearing down toward us.

Silent, we looked westward hoping the nasty weather would divert to anywhere but there. I bit my lip, the weather was moving faster now, the wind had the sour smell of rain.

“Shit, I just felt a drop.” Gavin looked skyward willing the rain away.

The slab around me was speckled with the black drops of rain. By the time I had my gore-tex on it was officially raining. The westward sky was a mass of black cloud. The imposing peaks to our left were now invisible amongst the cloud. Gavin looked at me, then the west, and then me again, “It’s time to go.”

I knew it too; he was just the first to say it. I swore under my breath and turned around to face the direction we had just come from. “Alright, lets get the hell out of here.”

It was hard to turn my back on the remainder of the route. It looked amazing; steep, exposed, everything a good alpine route should be. I turned once more to look at what we were leaving behind. As I looked the wind screamed in my ear and rain pelted my face. The grey slab that I found tinder dry ten minutes ago was now a black, slippery dance floor. It’s time to go home.

Starting downward we moved quickly, keeping the rope in the pack till we needed it. It made sense to rap our route; we knew the terrain, the belays. We would have to burn for gear to get down, but that's life, *literally*. Working down the west ridge I saw something down to my right in the gully. Blue as the dawn sky, a sling around a horn was our free ride back home. It was the gully that we had thumbed our nose to that morning. Standing atop it I trundled down a basketball sized rock, the stone pinballed down the narrow gully gathering more rocks and speed as it went. "Great, this is going to be fun."

Down we went, the rain pouring now. It was a delicate tiptoe over the shattered walls, every step produced another bomb. The first person would go down trying to clear as many of the loose rocks as possible. Then the second would follow walking on eggshells as the first person sucked themselves into a gnome-sized hole. After several near misses and on nearly chopped rope we were back at the col.

Sitting in the rain we shared a tin of kippers and looked at the face. We looked at the topo over and over again, reading all the route descriptions for the South Summit. To our surprise, none of the descriptions were of the route we had just climbed. Had we done something new? The line we had climbed was solid and obvious why had it been neglected until now? As we ate, more questions were brought up then could be answered. The route was clean of pins, cracks had vegetation, evidence pointed to a F.A. but could we be sure? We debated back and forth convincing ourselves at one instance that we had done a first ascent, than the next moment laughing that idea off.

There was nothing left to do but walk the long road home. The rain soaked me to the skin. My boots were like led, soaked to the core. Kilometre after kilometre we walked, never stopping, just trying in vein to get the whole awful walk over and done with. Hours later we arrived back to the truck; my feet were destroyed, nearly as beat up as my motivation.

The Colonel is just a memory now. The blisters have healed and the grim memories of trudging in the rain are fading away. What it left is the mystery. The jury is still out: did we climb something new? For a long while after the climb I wanted an answer, I wanted to know either way. It was important for me to know. But like all wounds, that one is healing too.

The questions have brought answers, not of weather we climbed a new route but of the significance of the idea. We went to Colonel Foster for fun and adventure; we went to push our limits as climbers and to grow. What we found was an opportunity to cut the ties of security; we found a path that was uncertain. We turned our backs on the relative security of a route that was a virtual guarantee and made the leap of faith into the unknown. We didn't know what we were going to find as the climb stretched out before us, and in those moments of

uncertainty, when the outcome was still a mystery we found what we had been searching for all along. Pushing into the dark unknown, leaving the security of the known path is what makes us feel alive, not just as climbers but as people. First ascent or not we covered new ground internally and in the end that is for what I am most proud.

Leaning back in my chair I can remember the cool wind on my face as I looked to the west. Surfing on a sea of stone, an uncharted ocean of experiences, set after perfect set rolling in...

For the record: *Fosters Logger*** (5.7 600m) F.A. Gavin Harrison, Scott Kennedy. July 2003.