

## THE R.J McMAHON MEMORIAL ROUTE (24)

### My ultimate trad lead: by Gerry Narkowicz

Yesterday I led my ultimate trad route first ascent, the R.J McMahon Memorial route at Africa on the western escarpment of Ben Lomond. It is named in honor of my old mate Bob McMahon, the king of Ben Lomond, who pioneered most of the climbing on the Ben since 1971, and who sadly passed away in 2013. Africa was his spiritual home away from home, the place where he felt most connected on the mountain. I thought it was fitting that my best ever new route on the Ben be named after him.

It was the culmination of two summers of work, involving multiple trips to Africa, a 2.5 hour steep hike to this remote cliff. Both Andy Martin and myself carried 100m static ropes, double racks of cams and camping gear, and made a base camp. I cleaned and worked the project over many days, top-roping the route, sussing out the gear and getting it totally wired for a headpoint lead. I make no apologies for this style of ascent. With a 10m fall potential at the crux, I need all the help I can get being 52 years old, injured with arthritis and climbing at my limit. But all the gear was placed on lead in good style.



*Half way up first pitch, mainly grade 23 bridging.*

During the initial workings of the route last summer, I was convinced of a certain sequence which would mean grade 26 moves over a roof, with a marginal wire saving a potential 20m fall. I could barely do the move, and in an act of fear and compromise, I placed a piton at the crux. This was common practice for climbers in the 70's and 80's, and Bob McMahon and I would often place pitons, and even tow a hammer up some climbs.

This is very controversial in modern times, and most of my mates advised against it, especially as I started a no-bolt policy on Ben Lomond. Now a piton is not a bolt; it goes into a natural crack, but it nevertheless is fixed gear. If removed they can create a pocket for a wire and damage the rock. Some would see this as the start of a slippery slope leading to bolts. Others from an English climbing background, see no problem with pitons as they are still used in the U.K.

However, with our tradition of using pitons from the old days and being absolutely terrified by the route, I was prepared to compromise. Soft as shit. I would be dismayed if people thought this was a license to bolt on Ben Lomond, as I can clearly see the difference between the two.

This summer, I rapped in to discover the piton had fallen out over winter due to the freezing/thawing action of water in the crack. This was a clear sign that the piton was not meant to be, the mountain spitting it out in disgust and telling me to grow some balls. I still couldn't do the move and despaired of ever climbing it, until Isaac Lethborg found easier, alternative beta 3m to the right. Now only 23, but with a 5m runout from a wire, it was still a terrifying prospect. But with some toprope rehearsal my confidence grew and on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> January, 2017 in the company of Ingvar Lidman, I lead the route.



*Happy lad on top of the route, with the redpoint glow.*

Thanks to Andrew Martin, Nick Hancock, Isaac Lethborg and Ingvar Lidman who belayed me at times and gave me moral support.

## ROUTE DESCRIPTION

### The R.J McMahon Memorial Route 120m (23, 24, 20, 8)

Located on the first major buttress down the descent gully of Asgard Crag, starting 40m right of Source of the Nile (giant chasm on left of cliff). Start just right of centre of the buttress at a left slanting thin seam with a small ledge 20m up.

**Pitch One (30m, 23).** Technically challenging bridging and face climbing up the thin seam to small ledge. Climb blank corner above using flake on right for holds and gear (#2 cam). Onto another small ledge, then short corner to belay on big foothold near the arête. Gear: cams # 0.2, #2 x 3, #0.75; variety of small to medium wires. Belay to cams #0.5, #0.75, medium offset nut.

**Pitch Two (55m, 24).** Spectacular pitch, probably the best I've ever led on the mountain. Up central blank groove, no gear for 3m and only 3 small wires for first 10m, until possible to move left and up to large foothold and no hands rest. #1 cam here.

Continue up groove for 5m till it blanks, place crux wire (grey peanut) and traverse airily left 2m to big foothold. Now for the crux: fridge hug the sharp edges about an arm span wide with no feet for several moves to gain good crimp and side pull up left, before breathtaking traverse left to stem across corner above the roof. Runout is 5m and the move is 23.

Continue up the line with desperate move over bulge to big finger lock (shorter people will find this harder than the crux). Sustained stemming and face climbing (22) with spaced gear to big ledge. Up steep broken corner over right and excellent jam crack through roof (#2 cam) and continue up wide crack to belay ledge.

Gear: cams #1 x 2, 0.5 x 2, 0.75, #2 x 2, #3. Many small to medium wires, especially Wild County super-lites. Belay to medium cams in back of chimney.

**Pitch Three (20m, 20).** Up thin line in middle of face with wires and small to medium cams. Tricky at times. Beware of a small section of loose rock near the top.

**Pitch Four (15m, 8).** The main route finishes on a pinnacle. Therefore scramble easily across ledge to base of chossy chimney over right. Up this with care to the summit.

FA: Gerry Narkowicz and Ingvar Lidman. 16/1/17

**\*SEE NEXT PAGE FOR TOPO**

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Pitch 3, 20m, 20

Belay

Pitch 2, 55m, 24

Belay

Pitch 1, 30m, 23



