

Vertigo

No 823 November 2018



NEW ZEALAND
ALPINE CLUB

Wellington Section Monthly Bulletin

www.facebook.com/nzacwellington Twitter @NZACWellington

Piotr Nowak on top of Mount Brewster (2,515m). [More here](#)

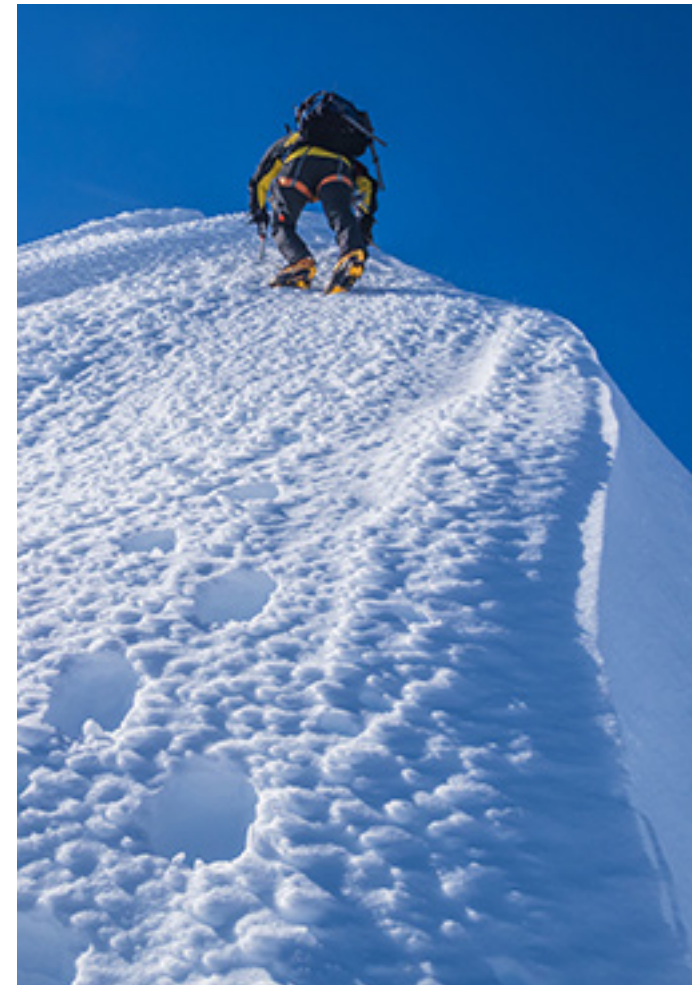


As the gradient levelled out I stated the obvious “It’s not the true summit!” “No. That little knife-edge looks interesting” Piotr Nowak replied. “Shall we do it?” I said. “Yeah, I think so” he replied. “Ok, but time to get that rope out.” The summit of Mount Brewster was a tantalising 30 horizontal metres away and a mere 10 metres higher, but between us and it lay a narrow snow ridge with sheer drops either side.

As thick clouds billowed up around us I felt a tinge of unease. It’s one thing being up on exposed terrain in good visibility but, in a whiteout, exhilaration quickly morphs into anxiety. Despite our 2,500 metre altitude, the snow was quite soft. Not predictable enough to trust to free climbing across the knife-edge. In fact, Piotr’s plan was to use my axe to build a T-slot anchor, so that he could use one of our two snow stakes to put in an interim anchor out on the knife-edge. As it was, an axe didn’t cut the mustard. We had to bury a snow stake about half a metre and compact the snow above it to build a half reasonable T-slot anchor, which I clipped in to as Piotr prepared to venture forth.

Left - Piotr heading for the false summit

Above - On the false summit, contemplating the exposure ahead on a short final pitch between us and the true summit



A few minutes of delicate traversing, as I played out the rope, saw Piotr on top. He used our other snow stake to anchor himself similarly to me, so I could follow him up and, soon, I joined him. I’d hoped the clouds might blow over, but that wasn’t happening – a pity because the summit panoramas I usually photograph weren’t on offer. “Ah well,” I thought “at least we’re on top.” Four years ago, I’d made a guided attempt via the long west ridge. Since then Brewster had been unfinished business. Now it wasn’t.

“We better not hang about. The viz is getting worse and the snow is only going to soften more” I said. We’d contemplated earlier the possibility of a ridge descent to the west, but now the best option was to use our own tracks up the 50 degree south west face as a handrail down.

Piotr belayed me as I retraced my steps back across the knife-edge. I tried to disrupt the tenuous snow directly underneath the summit as little as possible, knowing that Piotr still had to use it on his return after me.

Once both of us were back on the false summit again, we agreed that retracing our steps was the best option and prepared to go. “That was a nice little bit of climbing eh Pete!” I had to agree. The summit of Mount Brewster is a ‘real mountain’ summit. And the 180 or so metres of steep snow we’d climbed on the south west face to reach the summit ridge were pretty focusing too.



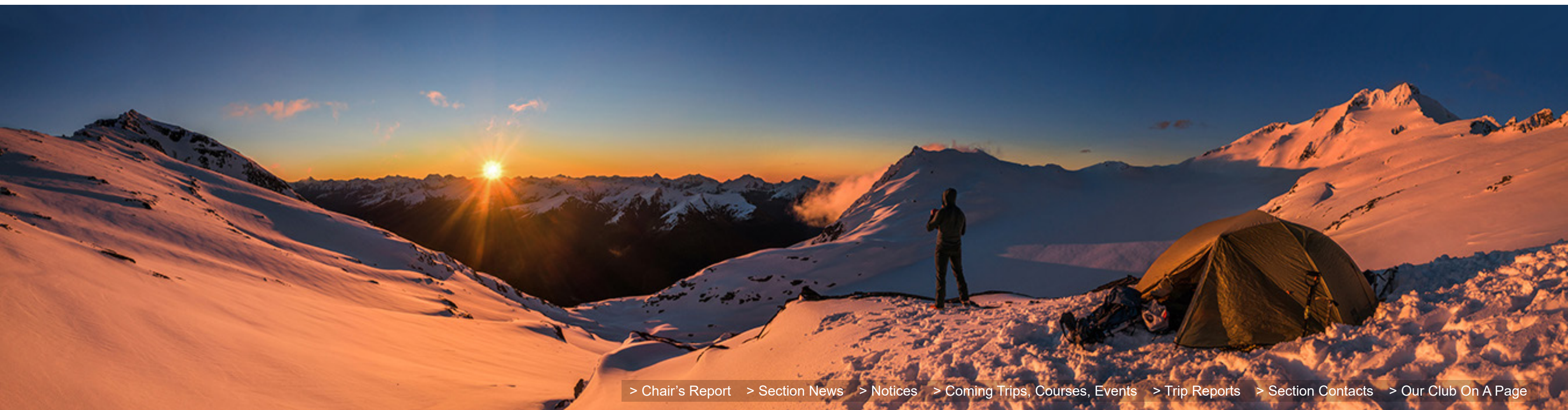
Our trip had started at 3am in Christchurch the day before. It took us about 6 hours to drive to Fantail Falls carpark just on the west side of Haast Pass. Any blarney was chilled away by a barefoot wade across Haast River. Then in wet, misty conditions, we lugged our 23kg packs up the 900m bush-slog to Brewster Hut and the snow line. From there we carried on in soft, ever-deepening snow, straight up to about 1,700m, before beginning our northerly traverse towards Mount Brewster.

Gaining altitude didn't improve the snow condition. With heavy packs it was arduous going. We encountered avalanche debris at various points, reminding us to stay alert. My four-year-old recollection of the route to the base of Brewster led us on a 'less than optimal' traverse over some bluffy terrain, but eventually we trudged to a halt at 1,900m about 4pm. By now the weather had started to clear and we enjoyed our first glimpses of our objective of tomorrow, as we levelled a tent platform and established camp. From our spectacular vantage point above Brewster Glacier, to me, the south west face looked dauntingly steep. "No worries Pete. It should be fun." Piotr reassured me.

We melted snow and cooked while watching a nature lightshow unfold. The nearer to sundown we got, the clearer the sky became, until we marvelled at a classic mauve glow on Brewster, Top Heavy and Armstrong as the last light faded away. That night was cold so, because my boots got wet during our ascent through the wet snow, I brought them inside the tent in the vain hope that they might dry slightly.

Left - Room with a view, Mt Brewster ahead. The south west face heads straight up to what appears to be the summit, which is actually another 30 or so metres along the knife edged ridge to the right

Below - Mt Brewster (right - 2,515m), Top Heavy (centre - 2,076m) and Mt Armstrong (left - 2,174m) at sunset





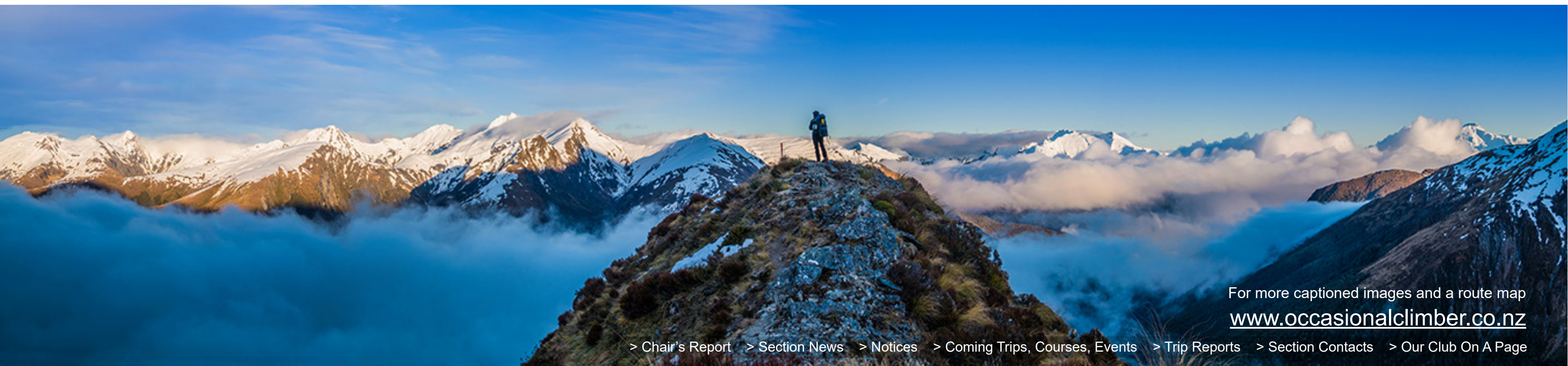
Finally underway to the base of the south west face, it was a joy listening to my crampons squeak up the frozen snow, as the rising sun painted our surroundings in violet, red, orange and yellow. And to my relief, the closer I got to the face, the more do-able it appeared. Our entry point to the face was an hourglass shaped ramp Piotr measured at 50 degrees. From there our route essentially went straight up, all the way to the summit ridge. On the face, the snow was softer than on our approach, making for good step plugging as we free climbed. Even so, as we progressed higher, the yawning exposure at my back kept me fully focused on maintaining three points of contact.

From tent to summit took four hours. The descent added another two and, after a brew, food and packup, our drop down to Brewster Hut through very soft, knee and thigh deep snow took two more. Being Saturday, we arrived to a packed hut, scoring the last two free bunk spots. While Piotr had the energy to complete the descent all the way back to the carpark, I did not. We got away at dawn next morning though and the rigors of the past two days caught up with me as I slowly nursed my knees down the steep, slippery, root entangled trail. To offset my complaining knees, I reminded myself we'd just been to the summit of Mount Brewster. It hadn't been a perfect freeze, but good enough to walk away with a happy heart.

"Bloody hell, they're frozen solid!" So much for 'drying out' I thought. My boots provided our first evidence that we got the freeze we'd hoped for overnight alright. But getting my boots thawed out enough to put them on was an unwelcomed mission at 5am. I eventually forced my feet into them and immediately my toes began to freeze. At least all my grunting and cursing drove Piotr reluctantly out of his bag. In the subzero conditions, it took two hours to get fully organised. Just as I was about ready to go, a 'number twos' urge came over me, so I put on my crampons and headed down the slope to our private spot. On my return, Piotr set off, while I struggled to get my harness past my crampons.

Above - At about 2,100m on our way to the base of the south west face

Below - Our view west to the main divide, on the descent from Brewster Hut



For more captioned images and a route map
www.occasionalclimber.co.nz