

Peak(s)	Ben Nevis via Tower Ridge
Elevation(s) (ft/m)	Ben Nevis (4,413ft /1,345m)
Date(s)	May 6th 2017 (Saturday)
Partner(s)	Kyle Finnegan
Elevation gain/loss (ft/m)	+/- estimated 4,000ft (GPS casualty) – Another climber same route had it at 4855ft
Distance (miles)	Another climber on the same route had it as 10.75 miles
Total time (hours/mins)	12 hours (car to car)
Grade/Rating	Tower Ridge (British Grade 3) – Class 4 and 5 (we climbed in mountaineering boots and believe we may have gotten off route a couple times but I'd estimate a few mid fifth class sections). Perhaps a couple 5.6 moves.
Equipment	Used: Helmets, rope (Beal Opera 60m 8.5mm), Cams (1 3cam, 2 2cams, 2 1cams, 2 0.75cams, 1 0.5cam, 0.4cam, one set of 1-10 Metolius nuts), 8 draws, webbing Carried: Food
Weather Forecast	Sunny and 15C
Weather Actuality	Sunny, light breeze higher on the ridge but generally pleasant temperatures up high. Blue skies.
Flora/Fauna	N/A
Wildlife	Sheep
Accommodations	G C B and B near Torlundy
Tourist Attractions	N/A

Day 1	
Drive time	Leeds to Torlundy approximately 6 hours and 20 minutes
Depart BnB	8.20am
Depart North Face TH	8.40am
Summit of Ben Nevis	6.20pm
Arrive North Face TH	8.45pm
Dinner at Browns Restaurant	9.15pm
The Story	

With Kyle's birthday on Friday and a great looking weather window for the weekend we decided to go up to Scotland. The weather cams on Ben Nevis were showing the mountain to be mostly snow free (at least from what we could see). So we decided to test our skills and try a Grad 3 route. *I mean. After all, I did two trad routes a week ago in rock shoes so what was a multi pitch alpine route in mountaineering boots? Plus, we did a couple Grade 1 routes, so let's just graduate past Grade 2's and try Grade 3's? You might ask why, but the question really is why not?*

Admittedly, I have not gotten into my groove with finding route information in the UK. My normal sources aren't usable here and I have not found replacement websites for valuable route beta. So in many instances I felt like we've had to 'feel' our way up routes. In many cases there have been other people on the routes so we were able to get a better sense of the way to go but that would not be the case on Tower Ridge. In hindsight, I really should have put more time and effort into researching the route but since this trip report is indication of our safe return I will not dwell on that further.

Kyle got back from work on Friday afternoon at about 4.20pm and we loaded up the car and got out the door at about 5.00pm. The GPS told us it'd take just over 6 hours from Leeds to Fort Williams so halfway up we sent the B and B (Jane and Michael) a text message letting them know that we'd be arriving at about half past eleven in the evening. Jane then sent us a message saying she was going to go to bed but she'd put some food in the little group fridge and leave our room unlocked. Fair enough. I took the second leg of driving from just south of Glasgow to Fort William. It was perhaps a three hour drive on dark winding roads with lots of blind corners but overall good practice and I was glad that I got to drive when the roads weren't as busy. But we had a hard time figuring out why people kept flashing their lights at us. That mystery remains unsolved. But I coined a new term for driving in the UK. I like to call it 'interpretive driving' because I often find that the signage is misleading or odd and you have a split second driving to make a call on what to do. We got in at about 11.30pm, grabbed a few snacks from the community fridge and headed up to our room. Jane had left little white pieces of paper with printed out labels on doors etc. for us. It was cute and really helped. Like little clues on what we were supposed to do. Since we had pre-packed our bags on Thursday night to be ready to just grab and go on Saturday morning we essentially got to the B and B, had a snack, found our way upstairs and crashed.



The alarm went off at 7.15am and we got up, fairly quickly all things considered, and partook of the cereal and other snacks that were in the fridge and in our room compliments of Jane. We even packed up some of the spare food for lunch later. We got out of the door at around 8.00am and made it to the trailhead in about fifteen minutes. It was quite close. I had a little thrill following the signs for the 'North Face Parking'. It felt adventurous bordering on extreme after having not been on any significantly difficult routes in years. Despite the gloriously blue bird day

dawning the parking lot was relatively empty so we quickly threw on our mountaineering boots (Scarpa Charmoz), grabbed our packs and headed off into the unknown armed with a print out of GPS tracks and our own GPS to navigate the trails up to the base of Tower Ridge. Luckily, it was a well-marked trail for the most part and I had a general sense of which direction we wanted to be heading so we made it up to the open area above the trees without issue and found the trail up to the CC hut which is situated right at the base of Tower Ridge. The hike in, despite the relatively early hour, was hot. We were both

sweating and I realized that having been thirsty all morning I hadn't drank a lot of water. *Good. Starting partially dehydrated is the keystone to success.* There were some patches of snow on the north side but mostly located in couloirs or gullies. I kept my eye on the ridgeline though because there was enough on the top of the north side ridges that I figured we'd almost certainly be passing by some snow patches if not going directly over some. We had opted to leave our ice axes in the car because from the online photos and our vantage that day it looked like there wasn't sufficient snow on the route. Well we'd see shortly if that was a regrettable decision but I was willing to remain optimistic and hope for the best. It was clear it wasn't a total covering of snow so it also remained possible we could bypass smaller sections.

We followed the trail up to the base of the Douglas Boulder. It didn't look too difficult to go up the North side of the ridge but it was clear that if we circled around to the left (east) side of the Douglas Boulder it was a Class 2/3 scramble so that is what we did. We went around to the East side and up about a hundred vertical feet before veering right up towards the ridge. We followed the path of least resistance to the ridge proper. We ended up coming up just above the Douglas Gap that way. Shortly after that we came up to another sharper incline. It wasn't too difficult looking but as we made our way up we veered slightly right (west) around a ledge to a large granite section (Class 4/low 5). It was not too difficult but we roped up because we had on our mountaineering boots and a slip would likely not end well. Now that I think back on it the lack of crampon scratches on the rock should have been an indication that we may have veered slightly off the regular path which I believed stayed right on the spine of the ridge at this point. But it went fine. I lead up and then belayed Kyle up the approx. 120ft/40m pitch. We then short roped because it was easy going after that for a while. We continued up the ridge (Class 3) to the base of the little tower. And here is where it may have gotten a bit haywire.

We approached the 'Little Tower' and I had this thought cross my mind. It went something like *'I probably should have done more research on the route'*. But then in the next moment my brain compensated for that by saying *'It's good Torngat training and an adventure to boot! Get used to finding your own way!'*. So at the base of the 'Little Tower' we followed a series of ledges around to the left (east) and upwards where possible. As we climbed up I had a few moments where I wondered if we were on the correct path because the rock was darker and had more lichen on it than I'd expect for a well-travelled route. That and in some areas I didn't see much in the way of crampon tracks on the rock. As we worked our way up it became evident that I'd have to lead up at least one challenging section as we seemed to have gotten boxed in on all sides. Could keep traversing left around and under the ridge but that was more exposed and didn't put us on the 'ridge'. Going down would mean creating an anchor and leaving gear. So for the most part going up proved to be the best option still. But the options for 'up' weren't as promising in appearance. I choose the path of least resistance for the most part and after one fairly heedy 'pitch' (they were shortened pitches because of the rope drag – despite having the runners extended). I think it was mostly the fact that it was mountaineering boots on the tougher terrain, not that it was egregiously difficult. But I came across a sling on this odd path I'd woven and it looked to be nearly new so I let out a big 'whoop' in self-celebration and congratulations. It was simply a sling wrapped around a rock. I yanked on it hard and it didn't seem to move but I couldn't look at it entirely from below. But I clipped it. It'd at least provide some resistance. I ungracefully humped my way up onto the ledge where the sling was. It was a downward sloping ledge that was about 20ft long and on the far side was a chimney with a chockstone. Midway along this ledge was a red sling on the wall so I made my way over to the sling and found it was attached to two old pitons. I mean old. Very rusted and

showing what looked to be partially eaten away façade. I clipped the two pitons and then set a cam but given the options to place pro and my remaining gear that was what I thought a reasonable anchor. I did have to hang on it to belay Kyle up though. I was able to put some weight on my feet but had to sit back and weight the system to get even moderately comfortable.

Kyle followed up with no issues. It was difficult to maneuver both of ourselves on that space but we got him hooked in and me back on belay once more. The next part looked interesting. The way that the wall on my right pushed out and forced my body to lean out a little made it difficult to get good purchase with my mountaineering boots. I sat there and really struggled at it several times. After pressing up against the rock pushing outwards several times as I lowered myself back onto the slanting ledge it pushed on my water bottle pocket and pushed the GPS out of the pocket. At first I thought my GPS and camera had fallen. But as it turned out it was just the GPS. I saw it hit the rock and briefly thought about dropping a new or lunging for it but I've a somewhat ingrained policy of never lunging for objects. Better to lose an object than your life. Or so that's what I've concluded. Though I will say it was more emotional than perhaps it should have been to watch the GPS tumbled down the slanted slab and off the edge. The language was strong with me. I had already been feeling the mental exertion of picking the route up an unknown rock feature, leading in boots for the first time in a very long time, now there was the added bit of mild exposure and a move I was having a very difficult time making. Then losing the GPS seemed to throw off the tentative equilibrium I had going. I felt so guilty to have done something so stupid as having left it unclipped when I reminded myself earlier to reclip it after I stopped referencing it so frequently! It was that acute sense of immediate failure when faced with another daunting set of moves that I think really struck deep. I took several deep breaths, repeatedly told Kyle I didn't like the move and that I was very sorry for being so foolish before making the move. Kyle tried to reassure me it was okay but I really did have a hard time accepting it at that moment. But I knew that I had to push it to the side of my mind. It was leading me down a dark road and I couldn't focus on anything that might upset me at that moment. Instead, I pushed the loss to the back of my mind and focused on the route, albeit a little more shakily. I was able to pull myself up the move and found that someone had gotten a blue nut really wedged in and had an extended runner on it that was half frozen in a chunk of snowy ice. I clipped that and it felt bomber. The next series of moves however, were very difficult in boots. There were no cracks deep enough for good pro that I could find and I was faced with either going straight up a very vertical section with a slight outward protrusion or try to step right (north) around the protrusion to get onto a face of sorts. It was difficult to see what was above and aim for the best solution. Instead, I was blindly feeling my way up the terrain and it'd lead me to this very difficult step around.

There were almost no handholds and no footholds and in boots I was having a very difficult time keeping my footing. I told Kyle after that was the closest I believe I've ever come to taking a lead fall on trad. My foot slipped briefly from its one purchase and I had to twist my body into an odd angle and leverage myself upwards with an undercling on the left and no handholds above. I was breathing heavily and erratically. The whimper sounds of over emotion. The panic had risen. It had been excited not ten minutes before and this was really forcing me to get a hold of them. I had worked myself up into a position where I had to make the move. I steeled myself as best as I could and made the move. My right boot was slipping off of the small indent it was being forced into to act as a hold and the awkward angle with minimum to no holds was forcing me to jerkily use core strength and force my shaking body upwards. It was at this point that my badly shaking, sewing machine, foot really started to slip and with no other hold I dug my fingers into the slight variations of the rock to try and hold on and managed to

stay on. In that rush of adrenaline, I forced myself up another ten feet onto more secure footing and looked for a piece to place. I got a nut in but it worked itself loose. There weren't very many immediate places to place a cam so I had to work myself up about five feet higher before I got in a cam. The rest of the route went better. I was able to collect myself and topped out onto the ridge again. I then wrapped a boulder and placed an additional three pieces and made a bomber anchor. Now in a safer place I extended my own clove hitched anchor and walked over to the edge where I could yell over to Kyle and asked if he wanted me to put him on belay and then lower him to look over the edge to see if he could see the GPS. It was difficult to communicate and he did go down a little bit but per my advice thinking he wouldn't be able to climb up what he was being lowered down he decided to climb up to me. And when he reached me I asked if he had filmed that section and he hadn't. He hadn't got the tough move or my bomber anchor!! Alas! *Why did we bring the camera again?*

The top of the Little Tower was once again a Class 3 scramble. It was not very exposed. There was one step that was wide but had a steep drop on the left (east) side. But again, not necessary to be protected and solid. We just short roped and simul scrambled without placing pro. That way we didn't have to stow the rope and slow down when we'd need it again (almost certainly). From the top of the Little Tower over to the base of the Great Tower was easy and quick. At the base of the Great Tower there was some snow. It was initially difficult to tell which way to go. For a moment, I thought it looked easier on the right (west) side but after some looking around further I found the left (east) side of the tower is where the exposed trail ran. I had seen pictures of this trail so that was promising. It was fairly exposed and in this instance covered in an icy snow. Great. I had recovered a fair amount of my equilibrium from the earlier incident but I wasn't excited about the prospect of walking along this icy ledge (perhaps 2-3 feet wide) with a significant drop on the left and no ice ax. Fortunately, I was wearing my mountaineering boots so the stiffer sole allowed me to try to kick in some steps. There were some indents from where another person had previously walked and although they weren't clear they at least provided some extra purchase. It was quite icy. I made sure to walk slow and cautiously. I placed a piece of pro or two along this (although in dry conditions I foresee forgoing that). As I traversed along this ledge the thought flittered across my mind *"At what point should we call this?"* coupled shortly thereafter with *"What if it gets worse?"*. Almost certainly we'd be encountering more snow and we hadn't even reached the so called 'crux' of the route. From a time and gear perspective it seemed that perhaps continuing upwards, for the moment, made the most sense. Or at least that was the conclusion my brain reached at that moment. Immediately after turning the corner on the ledge I saw the giant chockstone chimney that I'd also seen in numerous photographs. It felt good to be back on the established route. That being said, it was mostly snow filled. It looked like it 'might' be possible for me to squeeze between the snow/ice and under the chockstone but I wasn't sure and it was very icy here. I worked my way upwards with my right foot on the icy section under the chockstone and my left foot searching for purchase on the higher rock to the left. I then veered left up and around the chockstone onto the 'face' so to speak. It went fine. I settled myself on top of the chockstone but once again extended my personal anchor to belay from the side (not on the chockstone) because the rope drag would be atrocious. Kyle made quick good work of the route. I think he even had the audacity to tell me it wasn't that bad. *I'll ignore that comment for the moment.* The route was less clear from this point.

I knew that the ridge was where we'd find the 'Tower Gap' step and from this position so it seemed best to aim upward. Once again, I started out and made my way upwards. I worked up another fairly vertical section onto a ledge. I yelled down for Kyle to give me a lot of slack so I could do some exploring. It

looked like if I traversed left I could traverse to right under 'Tower Gap' and possibly bypass it!! That being said the rock had a fair amount of lichen on it this way. I decided to opt for the ridge and aim for the gap. But I was very pleased to note that there didn't appear to be snow on this 'crux' section. *Thank you sweet Lord!* But, there was snow on a steep portion a hundred feet above it right before the flat summit plateau. *I'll deal with that if that's all that stands between us and the top at this point!* I completed the last easy portion to the ridge (top of the Great Tower) and belayed Kyle up. As he approached I yelled something to the effect of 'Not the best anchor of my life' and then I realized he was filming. *Wow. No winning today!* It seemed accomplishments were not going to be shown on these videos. To which Kyle cheekily replied "I thought you wanted candid moments.". I was very anxious to keep going as the end was literally in sight and I wanted to get the crux done. I walked along the boulders of Tower Gap. I actually didn't think it was that exposed compared to what I was expecting. A fall would certainly not be good but the decline on the left (east) was graded so it didn't have the 'dramatic' exposure that I was expecting. I walked along this spine for about 40ft before reaching a large boulder on the spine. I did not see webbing on it as I was expecting to from some of the video's and just general assumption about the use of the route so I whipped out the massive piece of webbing Kyle and I had just bought earlier that week and slung it around the boulder. It was still a little large so I tied a knot in it to make it a little snugger around the boulder, clipped it and hugged my way around the right (west) side. Once around the move I noticed that the boulder everyone else had slung was immediately after the one I had. I clipped that as well and then sat down and asked Kyle to keep the rope tight on me as I was going to hold the webbing and lower myself down the 4/5ft step. It went fine and I was able to lower myself off and gain some purchase. I then stepped across the gap on the left side and climbed up the ridge on the other side. I then yelled for Kyle to go ahead and come across. When he got there I told he was unlikely to get my webbing off. I'd managed to get it on good and it had gone under a hook on the other side. Would have to be able to reach it and unhook it from the rock. Plus, in the absence of being able to see all of the webbing on the second boulder it seemed a bit safer. We used similar combo to get him off the step and over. *YES! Just one last section and home free!* It was good to know we'd be getting off the ridge before dark since it was hard to tell where we were on the route for a large part of the day. We certainly had hours to go but it was a relief to see and know that we were nearly the end because for a moment on that Little Tower it felt very far off. Plus, I'd had to use the bathroom for what felt like ages. And it wasn't that there wasn't anywhere I could safely go it was just that I didn't want to stop and deal with it. So focused was I on the end goal.



The most snow we encountered was right on this last hundred or so feet to the summit. It appears from one drawing I looked at later that people tend to work their way up and right (west) around the ridge. However, the snow was very icy and it was hard to tell if it'd go and with no way to protect it I didn't really feel like traversing across a snow/icy patch to look further. Instead, I hugged the rock and the ice for the lower section and headed straight up from the ridge and continued on that to the top. I had my left foot on rock and my right on ice for the lower portion and then had to try and kick steps into the icy to get some purchase while using my ungloved fingers on the ice to try and pull myself upwards. I then crossed a short 4ft section of rock and onto an icy ledge I traversed about 10ft rightward to below a sharply steep icy slope. I was able to get a piece in on the traverse and then again used my left foot on the rock and my right on ice to shimmy up higher. I then found

myself shouting down to Kyle to see if it looked like traversing around to the left (east) side looked easier from his vantage. He couldn't really tell so I made the executive decision to head straight up. This was perhaps one of the harder sections as well as my boots were now wet from the icy and there was so grass and moss growing on the rock (despite being nearly vertical) that made it hard to get a good purchase. The moves in boots were fairly difficult in a couple spots as well so I made a few more ungraceful moves that may or may not have involved a knee or two and a lot of grunting. *Rather take a knee than a fall!! If pride cometh before the fall my knee is before that!* I placed several cams on the way up but made steady progress. Again, on the last section I had to make a few icy steps but the angle drastically reduced and then I was on the glorious summit plateau!! *Ah! Woot! Bam and Hallelujah!* Since it was the summit there was just a lot of boulders and not a lot of secure anchors, immediately apparent. I worked my way back from the edge to use that distance to my advantage and as resistance which, coincidentally created some rope drag. My arms felt like they were dragging on this last belay. I had kept Kyle on a 'guide mode' belay for most of the day just for safety's sake but the friction on this last one was making me belay slower than he was climbing, at least on the last section. So when he did walk the last ten feet over to me I just casually said "Yah, you're off belay now." and then I noticed the camera was on again and I incredulously asked "Are you filming again?!" to which Kyle confirmed. All

there was left was for me to throw my hands up and start laughing. *No winning*. That said we did high five and congratulate ourselves on completing the route.



I told Kyle to go ahead and skip off to the true summit where the hut and other people were gathered and I'd finish coiling the rope and have a quick chat with a gent who was approaching. I asked about the best way off the mountain, given we'd lost our GPS, and he gave me a few pointers. Since it was a nice day I really wasn't that worried. I'd eyed the mountain on our way in and felt pretty confident that even without any advice we'd make it off fine but I did appreciate his words of

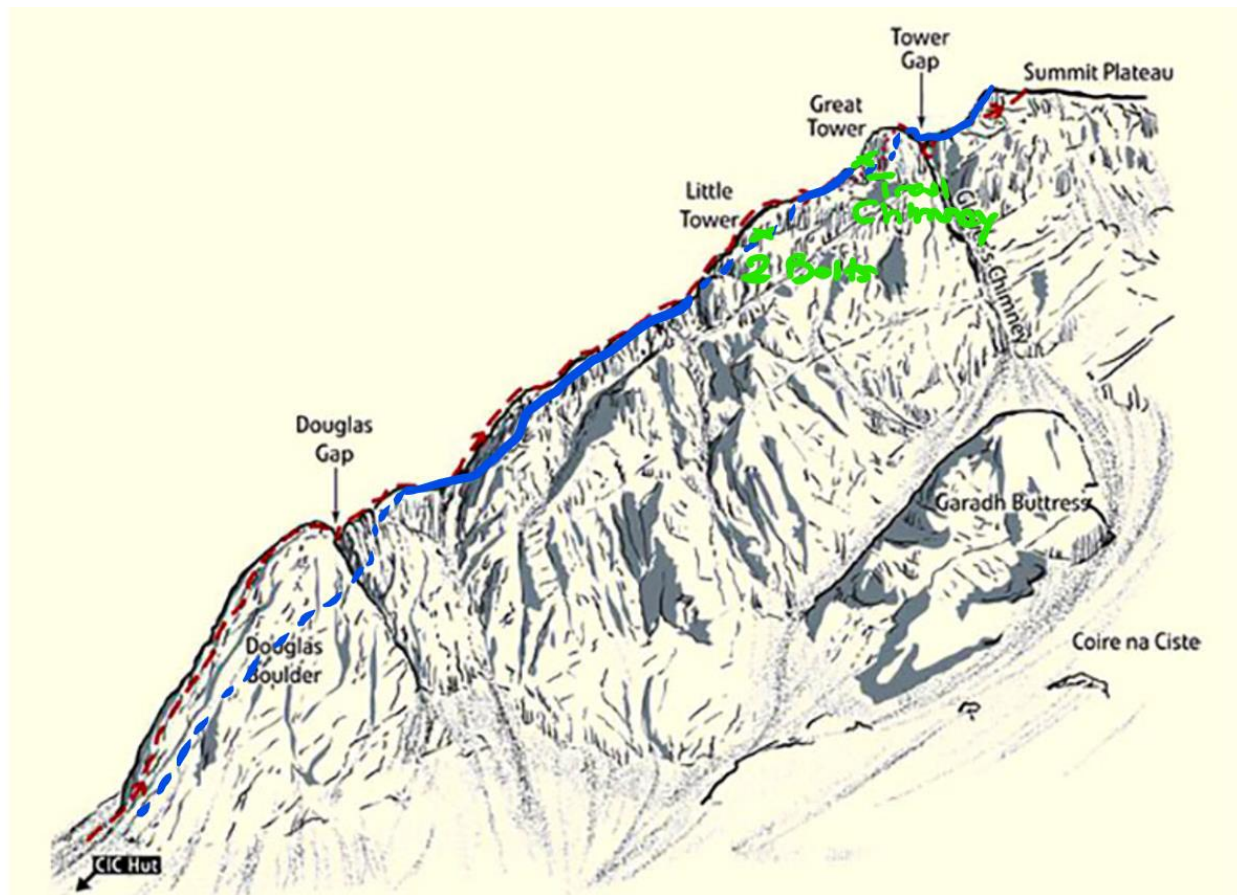
wisdom though, which, we did adhere to. I marched over and met Kyle on the summit where we ran into lots of people coming and going and taking photos. It was an odd feeling with people in tennis shoes and shorts and felt removed from the route and excitement we'd just experienced. A guy who said he was from Vancouver had carried up a stick and decorated it with pen writing "I <3 Scotland" on it and walking around taking photos. It's a rare chance Kyle and I both get to enjoy having our photo taken together so I made sure to get us snapped together. We then poked our heads into the shelter and headed off. We hadn't eaten for most of the day excepting the few peanuts I begged off of Kyle at one stop and a few suckles off of each others water bottles. I wasn't hungry but it'd be nice to get off the mountain before dark and snag some food before heading back to the B and B. We briefly chatted with people as well walked off the mountain. As soon as we'd dropped several hundred feet on the main trail it warmed up considerably and I ended up unzipping my jacket and my base layer to show my bra and had Kyle get a 'sexy sweaty mountain-time' shot. *Very proud but also very playful*. Someone asked us how long it'd taken us and at that point we'd calculated something like 9 or 10 hours and this one guy gave us this look. I could feel the judgement just oozing off of him and he told us it'd only taken him an hour and a half to get most of the way up. I subtly mentioned something about 'going a different way' but shrugged it off and kept walking. I really had to go to the bathroom and there were people crawling over the mountain. Once we made it to the far side of the lake on the west side of the mountain I was able to get a window to go to the bathroom and it couldn't have happened sooner because any later and I might have had an accident!

The trail coming down was rocky but solid and then after the far side of the lake we hoofed it cross country back to the trail heading up to the CC Hut. Shortly after we crossed a river and scrambled up the other side we encountered a guy and girl heading up. We briefly chatted and they said they were headed for Tower Ridge as well so we exchanged some beta and then headed off for the trail. My mind



was now fixed on food. We ended up weaving a bit on some 'bike trails' or kind of 'gamey' trails through the woods but found our way back to the parking lot before the sun had set. Photos for posterity, a quick change of clothes and ten minutes after leaving the parking lot we were pulling up to a restaurant (Brown's) in Fort Williams. *Ahh. The sweet life. And that's all I have to say about that.*

Lessons Learned
1. Kyle – sometimes you can do more than you think you can. Perseverance.
2. Clip your GPS to something.
3. Apparently proper nutters ski off of the north side gullies well into the spring and summer. We could hear one groups skis 'chattering' on the ice as they went off. <i>Negative and no thanks.</i>



The dotted blue line represents when we were more situated on the east side (out of direct site of the route) and the solid line represents the visible parts of the route. The first green X indicates where we encountered two pitons (although another solitary piton was noted lower on the litte tower as well). The second X indicates where the noted 'trail' is and just after the chockstone chimney.