

THE WEST FACE OF MOUNT HUNTINGTON

BY DAVE ROBERTS

(Four illustrations: nos. 1-4)

SOMEONE said, 'the best expeditions are uneventful ones'. But this does not mean that eventful expeditions can offer no reward. Our expedition was eventful in the worst sense—we had an accident in which Ed Bernd, one of our four, was killed. It happened on the descent, twenty hours after we reached the summit of Mount Huntington, as Ed started to rappel; we shall never know precisely why it happened. But out of some mixture of loyalty and sorrow—fidelity both to the friend we miss and the climb we are proud of—we refuse to believe that ours was a bad expedition. We refuse to say that it was not worth it, even for Ed. We believe that the intensity of our experience and its occasional moments of piercing happiness justify the risk we could not avoid. Not that they justify Ed's death—nothing can, to those who cared for him; the consolation for them must be the knowledge of his happiness, of which only the other three of us can tell.

A few minutes before midnight on July 30, 1965, as Ed and I were descending to a lower camp, we set up a rappel. He was in position to go first. He put a karabiner through the anchor piton, then clipped our doubled climbing rope through it and got on rappel. We did not have an extra rope to belay with, but I was attached to the fixed rope which in turn was tied to the anchor piton, a precaution in case it pulled. Ed wrapped the rope around his body, leaned back, and flew into space. The rope and karabiner both had come loose; the piton had not budged. Without a chance to stop himself, without even yelling, he fell 4,000 ft. to his death.

Apparently the karabiner was the point of failure; either it broke or somehow it came loose. Perhaps the gate had frozen open, and in the dim Alaskan light Ed had not noticed. There is no way of knowing. We were never able even to get to Ed's body.

At the time Matt Hale and Don Jensen were above, camped in a two-man tent out of my shouting range. I managed to descend alone to our lower camp, where I waited two days for them. We had never been able to find a spot on the route large enough to allow all of us to camp together, but there we crowded three in the tent for a last night before completing the descent in terrible snow conditions the next day.

Alaska, one of the last paradises for the mountaineer, is known outside North America for little else but McKinley. But some of its smaller peaks are more incredibly shaped, more difficult; it has its Muztagh



Photo: Bradford Washburn]

MOUNT HUNTINGTON. THE NORTH-WEST RIDGE, CLIMBED BY THE FRENCH, IS SEEN FRONTALLY, THE WEST FACE
IN PROFILE ON THE RIGHT

(No. 1)



Photo: Bradford Washburn]

MOUNT HUNTINGTON, UPPER PART OF THE WEST FACE WITH 1965 ROUTE MARKED. FIGURES INDICATE LEVELS OF CAMPS II (9,900 FT.), IIA (10,200 FT.), III (10,900 FT.), IV (11,500 FT.).

(No. 2)

Towers and Chacrarajus: the Moose's Tooth, Deborah, countless unnamed spires. And 12,240 ft. Huntington, one of the finest and last to be climbed (in May, 1964, by an eight-man French expedition under Lionel Terray), still offered three or four superb routes that had not been tried. We picked the West face, an extremely steep, largely rock, wall, to which we could gain access by a feathery knife-edge ridge that rose from the Tokositna glacier, the last of the glaciers near McKinley to be camped on.

Don Sheldon flew us in on June 29, leaving us in the sudden stillness of the glacial basin with enough food for sixty days and enough gear presumably to get us up our route.

The going was slow. We spent five days hauling loads to a base camp near the face, and two more climbing an ice-fall and digging a snow cave. The feathery ridge turned out to be tough; we had to climb over many snow plumes edged by sharp granite, on the side of the ridge that overlooked a 3,000 ft. drop. The friendlier side of it was corniced. To reach the ridge, Matt tunnelled through what was left of a cornice the same day we had watched the rest of it break off.

We put fixed ropes on all our pitches, since we had to carry loads over them. After a few days we began looking for a camp site, but only on July 16 were Matt and Ed finally able to pitch a tent at the top of our nineteenth pitch, in a wedge-shaped hole of snow and hard ice which they spent five hours chopping.

Often (and this is the curse of the low-altitude Alaskan summer), it was too warm to climb even at night. A pair of climbers never got more than four new pitches placed in a night's effort. We spent long, sociable hours in our cave playing Monopoly, arguing about Ayn Rand, and reliving other climbs. We had done most of ours together: Don and I on two previous Alaskan expeditions, and all of us in the 'Lower 48', especially on weekends with the Harvard Mountaineering Club. We were about equally good technically; as it turned out on Huntington, Don led the hardest free rock, Matt the hardest direct aid, Ed the hardest ice, and I the hardest snow pitch. I enjoyed climbing with the other three as much as I ever had with anyone, because of their individualities: Ed's jovial spontaneity, Don's solidness and devotion, Matt's quiet intensity.

But for all the fun the climbing was, for all the pleasure of clean rough granite, we were not getting anywhere. We had so far always climbed in pairs; after July 16 we also camped in pairs. Matt and Ed, with four days' food, got established in the tent, which they had pitoned to a protecting rock wall, just before a storm hit; Don and I stayed below in the cave. For three days none of us could budge. At last Don and I forced our way up to the others, scraping the ice off the fixed ropes, and Don stayed with Ed while Matt went down with me. On July 20

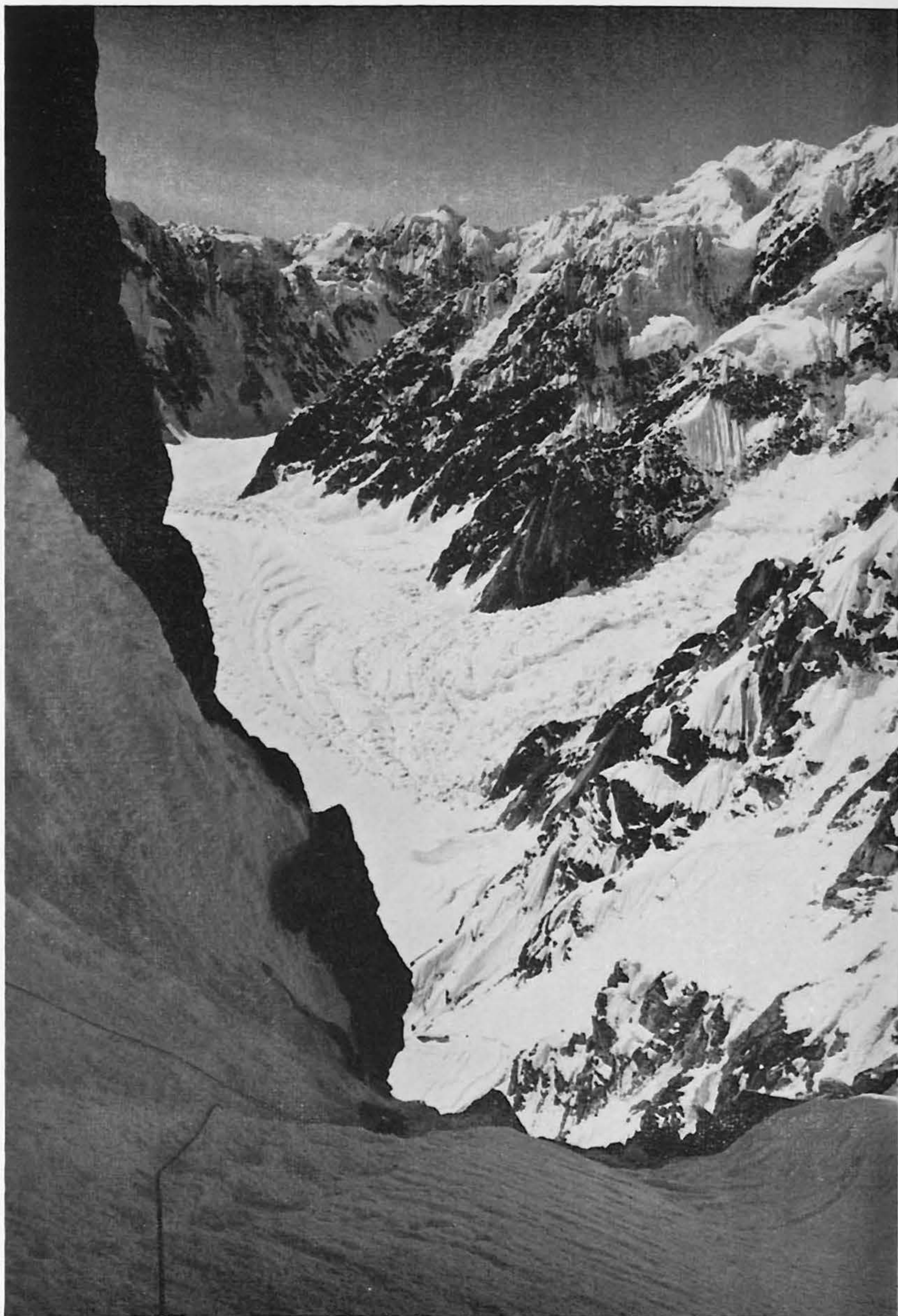


Photo: D. Jensen]

MOUNT HUNTINGTON, WEST FACE: LOOKING ONTO THE LOWER TOKOSITNA GLACIER
FROM THE EIGHTH PITCH.

(No. 3)



Photo: D. Jensen]

MOUNT HUNTINGTON, WEST FACE. ED BERND DESCENDING THE THIRTY-EIGHTH PITCH, MOUNT MCKINLEY IN BACKGROUND.

(No. 4)

Don led our twenty-fifth pitch, the first of the real face, a fierce pitch about which he said to me later, 'When we saw it I was sure it'd require aid. But I got up there, and there were these beautiful holds. . . .' Ed led the long exposed pitch above, his crampons scraping steep slabs and knocking ice chunks down on Don. This was the most difficult climbing we had met, evidently a preview of things to come.

Two days later Don and Ed had just repaired their defective stove when Matt and I showed up. They were not very glad to see us, since it meant switching, going out supperless into the cold. But they gallantly left us their warming chicken stew.

At this point Matt and I were pretty pessimistic. Two new pitches did not seem much gain for four days, and when it took Matt and me six hours to get light loads to the top of them on our first effort, we saw nothing to justify the enthusiasm Don and Ed had expressed at their progress. We only sensed that our chances were shrinking.

But the next day, the second clear one in a row, we got quickly past the old pitches and put in seven new ones. The first was a steep ice-filled chimney that required aid past a chockstone; the last was a fifty-foot ceiling in which Matt found a series of cracks he could nail nicely up. Suddenly we were at 11,000 ft., and the summit seemed within reach. Descending late in the night, we passed Ed and Don, who were coming up in the gloom. 'Tremendous, guys, we saw you way up there!'

They pitched our other tent that night, then carried it up to just below the ceiling the next day, following Matt and me as we carried food and equipment for them. We left them that night knowing we might not see them until after they had reached the summit. Matt and I thought it quite possible that they had our only chance of reaching the top. But any success would be enough; we had done our part.

For Ed's third time, they laboriously chopped out a platform in the ice. Again, they secured the tent to rock pitons above. It was a beautiful site; the door opened on the distant hulks of Foraker and Hunter above the door-mat of the Tokositna. They had to pitch the tent narrow, or it would have overhung the edge of the platform.

The next day they only had time to put a fixed line of stirrup-loops over the ceiling. But on July 29, our thirty-first day, they got an early start. The weather was still perfect; none of us could believe it, and I often looked uneasily south for the sign of a storm. With only a minimum of hardware Don and Ed led pitch after steep pitch. Don solved the last rock problem, twice using aid from small, shaky pitons far above any protection.

Ed led up a short steep fluting, and emerged on the summit ice-field. Soaring, sweeping in the afternoon light at an angle of 50° toward the summit, it seemed as featureless and open as a desert. They alternated leads on the slope, but the sun had warmed it dangerously. Around

5 p.m. they stopped on a rock ledge, the highest on the mountain, to wait for night and better snow. They pitched Don's tiny bivouac tent and crowded inside.

Matt and I meanwhile were bringing up the last of the hardware from the lower camp. We got to the higher one quickly and found Don and Ed had left it. We knew they were short on pitons, so we climbed the ceiling and followed their steps and fixed lines. We could help safeguard their descent by improving the protection, and if we felt strong, perhaps

We were amazed at their pitches. With so few pitons on such steep snow, ice, and rock, they had climbed marvellously. It was getting late, but there was not the slightest breath of wind, and we continued.

Late that evening we popped onto the summit ice-field and caught up with Don and Ed. As the sun faded behind McKinley, we ate some candy bars and hooked up as a rope of four. Don led in the growing darkness. The snow was still not good, and ice lay a few inches beneath. Once he had to belay from a rock piton driven in ice. A little after midnight, in the eerie starlight, we reached the summit ridge. We were almost there; yet it had taken the French four and a half hours on this last stretch, the only part our route had in common with theirs.

As the first light sprang from the tundra beyond McKinley, I took the lead. We faced two short, vertical, fluted walls. Attacking them very high, almost on the cornice, I found they were made of airy, soft snow. After a lot of excavation and some delicate pull-ups on an axe and a picket, I was over them. Carefully we belayed each other up the fluted steps. Extremely tired, for we had been going seventeen hours straight, we climbed the last few pitches. The world seemed to hang in a held breath, perfect, still, a world of glacial snow and soaring rock and, out to the limitless horizon, the hazy blue of the vast tundra; ours, ours only for that hour as we stood together on the summit. Nothing could last thus suspended; we were bound to die, Ed in only twenty hours; but if time for us had ever stopped to let the savage splendour of the earth declare its timelessness, it was then.