The ice desert of Kilimanjaro

Iain Allan

Any climber with knowledge of the mountains of East Africa would agree that the Southern Glaciers and Breach Wall area of Kilimanjaro's Kibo Peak is one of the most serious mountain districts in that part of the continent. It is a region renowned for its inaccessibility and remoteness – rescue facilities are non-existent. Those who hike in this part of Kilimanjaro do so with caution, and even comparatively straightforward climbs like the Heim Glacier (III), possess an air of seriousness not usually inherent in routes of that standard.

The Kersten Glacier is the steepest of the large glaciers which descend from the Southern Ice-field of Kibo. It was first climbed in September 1962 when 2 Austrians, Walter Welsch and Leo Herncarek, fresh from a whirlwind climbing tour of Mount Kenya stormed up it in 3 days. They were fit and acclimatized after 2 weeks on Kilimanjaro's northern neighbour but they nevertheless found the Kersten demanding. In their account (*Mountain Club of Kenya Bulletin No. 55*), they describe the route as being steep and uncomfortable due to the continuous melt-water and avalanches which swept down upon them. Their route lay up the left side of the Kersten's lower ice-fall, then traversed to the right across the glacier to its centre and an obvious feature which they named The Silver Saddle. From here their route lay straight up the Southern Ice-field, which they found heavy-going due to the altitude, finally to finish on the summit of Kibo – Uhuru Peak.

Thirteen years passed before interest was again shown in the Kersten Glacier. The story picks up in December 1975 when Ian Howell, John Cleare and Bill O'Connor went up to have a look at the possibilities of a direct route up the glacier. Howell and Cleare knew the area both having climbed the nearby Heim. Starting from a bivouac at the snout of the Kersten they climbed up a difficult ice couloir cleaving the rock wall beneath the glacier. The climbing was intricate involving occasional aid on the ice. With this initial couloir behind them their route led on to the main ice-field, at the top of which they bivouacked. The following day the Original Route was joined and the summit reached late in the afternoon.

A few weeks later South African climbers Paul Fatti and John Moss repeated the Direct Route (VI) adding a new variation at the start.

The Kersten is very wide. The major problem is in negotiating the first 2000ft where the ice is steep and broken. After this it gradually curves back becoming easier with height. Easier only in a technical sense, however, for as the ice leans back the altitude generally affects the climber. Having spent considerable time studying aerial photographs of the Kersten I felt sure that a major route was waiting to be climbed up the extreme right side where it appeared no-one had ever been. Where the Kersten ends on the right there is a prominent rock buttress, to the left of which the glacier is a confusion of giant awkward-angled seracs. A large sweep of steep ice-field lies beneath the serac barrier, and it looked as if a long ramp system joined it from the right. If the ice-field could be reached from this ramp, and a way found through the seracs it would put climbers in a position far right of existing routes and The Silver Saddle. In other words there was a line some 5000ft in length which



66 The S glacier area of Kibo showing the route on the Kersten glacier (Photo: I. Allan)

nobody had touched. Mark Savage was interested and we started up the Umbwe Route which winds its way up through the lower forests and moorlands. It was the beginning of the last week in July 1976.

Two and a half days later we were firmly established in a bivouac at the snout of the Kersten. The afternoon had been spent searching for a start to the ramp system. We felt optimistic, there was a start and more than that, it looked as if a narrow gully wound its way up through the seracs. Another pleasing factor was that the mountain seemed to be in a state of relative calm, for nothing had fallen down the face that afternoon. Our bivouac was at 4400m; we felt fit, acclimatized and ready to go.

At first light we crossed the ugly screes to the start of the ramp. Alternating the leads, we worked our way leftwards over ice-covered slabs; the angle was slight and we gained height steadily. Eight pitches took us to the foot of the ice-field and for the first time I was able to appreciate just how foreshortened the face had appeared from the scree. I had reckoned on 2 steep pitches up this ice-field, it turned out to be 6. Apart from being steeper the climbing had become more serious due to the hanging seracs which threatened overhead. Scour marks on the ice around us encouraged haste.

From the top left corner of the ice-field we front-pointed across to the narrow gully which swung upwards through the seracs. This would be the key to the crux of our route. At first the gully rose directly but after 3 very steep pitches it traversed to the right along a line of weakness which split the 2 serac barriers. The exposure was magnificent. When climbing steep ice, one builds up such a rhythm and becomes so involved that ground left behind is often

forgotten. Then there comes a point on the route when you are forced to absorb it all, and you realize just how far you have come. Perhaps this is the mark of a good route. From our traverse we looked down upon the main ice-field up which we had climbed and saw countless other sweeps of ice which we had passed without noticing.

At the end of the traverse there was a narrow break through the second serac barrier and we moved towards it. Three pitches saw us through and on to the main ice-field above. Far up on our left we could see The Silver Saddle and the cave where the Direct Route team had bivouacked. Our line lay up to the right. So far, with the exception of the lower ice-field, most of our route had been spent in narrow couloirs, enclosed by large ice-cliffs. Now we were climbing up a vast white blanket which stretched as far as we could see. The angle had leaned back to about 50° and looked like going on forever. At 4pm we found a break in the ice and levelled out a platform for the bivouac. Our altitude was 5200m – we still had 600m to go.

The following morning we awoke cold. As we started up the main Southern Ice-field of Kibo I could look down and now see The Silver Saddle far below us. How does one describe the climbing of the Southern Ice-field? The angle drops back to about 40° and just goes on and on. At every horizon one expects to arrive at the crater rim, but there is always another horizon. By mid-morning our altimeter showed 18,600ft (5669m) and we still had a lot of ice ahead of us. Shortly before mid-day it suddenly steepened again and we found ourselves on ground more like that which we had ascended the day before. Four pitches of this took us to the side of the crater 300ft from the summit cairn.

Summary

Kilimanjaro – Kibo Peak – 5895m. First Ascent of Right Side of Kersten Glacier. Iain Allan and Mark Savage. 28-29 July 1976. Grade V 27 hours.

The south face of Mount McKinley 1976

Doug Scott and Dougal Haston

Introduction (Doug Scott)

Mount McKinley is at 6194m the highest mountain in North America. It stands head and shoulders above all the other mountains in Alaska and dwarfs its immediate neighbours Mount Foraker (5304m) and Mount Hunter (4442m). Unless Mount McKinley is seen in exceptional light it is in appearance an amorphous lump of a mountain, especially on the S side. There are few features that really stand out, and those that do, such as Cassin (1961) and the S Face Direct (1967), have all been climbed. Both these routes were first ascended by teams using large quantities of fixed rope; 8000ft on the Cassin and 6750ft on the Direct. The full climbing commitment was not made on either of them, for with fixed rope down to the ground an easy retreat was always available from storms, avalanche or injury. That is not to say that these climbs