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



THE SOUTH FACE OF MOUNT McKINLEY 1976

67 Mount McKinley, S face (Photo: Bradford Washburn)

lacked adventure. Cassin's strong party reached the summit absolutely exhausted after a last 17-hour day following fierce storms in the lower part. The 4-man S Face Direct team had to sit out one 13-day storm and kept going in the face of an avalanche and of complicated route finding. Both teams took many weeks to fix and climb their routes.

Having decided to visit Mount McKinley, Dougal Haston and I consulted the Alaskan pioneer climber, Bradford Washburn, and scrutinized his wonderfully sharp aerial photographs of the S Face. There seemed to be the possibility of taking a line up the face between the Cassin and the Direct, that would take us up a main feature of the face directly to the summit. It might even be easier than the other 2 routes, for it was nearly all on snow and ice. We would make up for the lack of technical difficulty by climbing in Alpine style, without the use of fixed ropes and then there would only be 2 of us climbing at the end of April when, although the weather may be more settled, it can also be bitterly cold.

On the 29 April we flew in a light ski-plane from Anchorage to within 17 miles of the S Face. The plane flew away, leaving us standing on the SE Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier, eager for unknown adventures.

The Climb (D. Haston)

We spent the first few hours on the glacier tuning in to our new environment, arranging equipment, talking to the other parties around. These were 4 British to attempt the W rib of McKinley and 8 Japanese for the Cassin Ridge. All were busy and surrounded by piles of equipment and sledges to haul it, like

human dog teams. They had long days of transportation ahead. It felt good looking at our small pile of gear, knowing that, though we had some heavy backpacking to do at least we would be able to start climbing much more quickly. Contrary to what we had heard about typical McKinley weather the sun was out burning strong and putting back our urges to get moving. Slowly the sacs filled up and by 4 in the afternoon, charged with something like 60lbs each, we were ready to move. My mode of transport was a pair of Trucker skis with the new Remer binding with which I wished to experiment. Doug had opted for the more traditional Alaskan method of snow-shoeing. It is totally necessary to have either of these means hereabouts as it can snow as much as 10ft in a night and what has been a hard beaten track the day before and walkable in boots can turn into a fluffy white ocean of snow, where the only alternative means of progression to skis and snow-shoes would be if there was a way of snorkelling and swimming in snow. On foot you simply cannot move.

The hours passed going through various stages of pain as a month of easy American living began to be flushed out of systems and as the sun dropped behind Mount Foraker the Arctic cold quickly made us aware of its presence. By 8pm we had made a dump a long way up the SE Fork of the Kahiltna glacier. By 10pm we were back in camp with the advantages of skis making themselves apparent as I glided away from Doug.

Next day saw us ready to evacuate base camp, reckoning we could shift the rest in one push albeit a heavy one. The time floated on oblivious to 2 very bowed and stooped figures bearing our self-imposed 70lb burdens, gaining the dump in the late afternoon. Pitching the small tent we definitely felt the commencement of our cutting adrift process. The tracks of the other parties had been left a long time back on the main glacier, now a large expanse of snow stretching towards the S Face.

Two days of heavy loading and one day of storm-enforced rest later we were sitting underneath watching its moods from the site of a providential igloo left by a Colorado party forced to retreat from the Cassin ridge about a week before. As well as shelter they had abandoned some reasonable food to which we staked a claim and now felt confident in being able to sit out a bad weather period at the foot of the wall. Although still a few hours from the start of the climbing our route could be seen in reasonable detail. What we saw we liked and what we liked even more was the lack of evidence of much avalanche debris on the snow-slopes at the foot. Feeling itchy to get working on the real problems we slid into a good tired sleep, only to be wakened a little later by a roaring around the igloo door. A storm had arrived in a way we had been told to expect – fast and violent. All night and most of the next day it smashed its way around, then departed just as quickly, leaving 3ft of snow behind as its visiting card and making the next day's approach to the foot of the wall a sinking wade even with snow-shoes. But by late afternoon we were at the place where the climbing would start and were squinting contemplatively at the way ahead. The foreshortening was enormous. Above was 3000m vertical. Two Eiger North Walls. Yet it looked as if one could put out a hand and touch the summit. Putting 3 rope lengths quickly behind us on a 50° ice field, the last and only fixed roping to ground we would do, we left a heavy sac at the high point and rambled easily back to the igloo, happily dis-



68 Climbing on Mount McKinley S face (This and next two photos: Doug Scott)

cussing, with no nervousness despite the loneliness of the situation. Only both savouring with real anticipation the potential good and bad times immediately ahead. After scrutinizing the photos we realized that we were following the American Direct Route. It was the logical way and we would follow it to half its height and then strike out on our own. Reaching our high point without incident the next morning we prepared to start climbing in an overcast sky. One could see the sun's shape through the cloud. Blue sky wasn't too far away but what was to become a steady pattern in the next few days now showed itself. Anytime there is a cloud in the vicinity of McKinley it contains snow. In most other ranges one can climb in cloud without being troubled by any annoying contents unless there is an actual storm around. But there were no simple fluffy clouds here, consequently it was nearly always snowing when we were climbing. Of course during the next few days we were going to have vary-

69 Haston preparing to move off from the third bivouac



ing degrees of severity of snow-fall but I suppose one could say we completed the route in continuous storm conditions going through the range of little storms, average storms to big savage storms. But that was still future as we started the climbing. The day was uniform on an ice-field of 50° - 55° – often powder snow with hard water-ice beneath. At first our system was leader climbing unladen to the end of the rope length, then tying off the rope to an ice piton, after which he started to haul the heavy sac on a separate rope while the second man came up the fixed line on Jumar clamps carrying the lighter of the 2 heavy packs.

Late evening found us on a narrow snow-ledge beneath a rock buttress. We had come a long way up but still were not too happy with the progress. The sacks had been too heavy and it had been more a problem hauling and carrying than actually climbing. Reckoning we had been too conservative in our food estimate, we decided to jettison as much as possible after that night, working on the principle that with lighter sacks we could travel faster and also use less energy.

The bivouac site was adequate in so far as we had some shelter under an overhang but the snow-ledge was too narrow to allow us to sit together and get into the bivouac sack. So we settled in. Doug right under the overhang and myself down below slightly more exposed, thus claiming the tent sack and its forfeit, the cooking. By the time we had had some food and drink it was midnight and, feeling the pace of a long hard day, we both found no problem sleeping. But the peace of the night did not last long. I was awakened by Doug swearing and then the dull thump of a powder snow avalanche as it dumped its contents on to my head and into the tent sack which was left open to prevent condensation. Doug's cursing was caused by a similar happening creeping round the side of his overhang. Clearing vision I looked out and realized it was snowing heavily. Knowing our site was safe and what had hit us had been minor slides, I cleared out the tent sack and closed the entrance and settled back to wait and sleep. The latter now was not so easy as heavy avalanches were rushing down the main couloir. So it continued, blocking us until late afternoon the next day when it cleared sufficiently to let us climb 3 rope lengths above the bivouac and fix our 450ft of rope before sliding back to our (by now) wet sleeping bags. This could have been serious but that night we both found that there was still warmth forthcoming from the wet down and that, combined with our fibre pile suits and woollen underwear made life still fine despite the efforts of the elements to disconcert us. Morning came grey and snowing lightly with the sun now back in its position of showing and teasing but giving no warmth.

The climbing became varied and interesting, our progress quicker as we left behind a load of food, some rock pitons and a rope. Only one piece of nastiness stands out in the shape of a very rapid 300ft crossing of the main avalanche couloir done in as close to a run as one can manage on 50° ice, thereafter leading into a long narrow couloir giving both steep and absorbing rock and ice climbing before evening brought us out on to a narrow ridge where hope was for a comfortable bivouac site. Forlorn hope!

Digging a step in the lee side somewhat out of the blast of a now violent wind we crouched together in the tent sack, pulled it over our heads and amazingly slept for 6 hours.



70 Haston climbing out of the spiral couloir on the fourth day

But no bright dawn awaited us. The wind was cracking against the ridge, losing some impetus, then spilling over and blasting in circles around our heads. The snow had actually stopped but the wind on the summit ridge was lifting off enough powder to make it seem as if it was. A struggle gained a pot of tea. Its warmth made us contemplative. All the rational signs pointed downwards. We were less than half way up. The weather was worsening again with the wind making us cringe at each attempt to face it out. There would be no possible help from anywhere if we found trouble higher up. This was reasonable thinking but maybe we were in unreasonable states. Physically and mentally the team form was wonderful. We did not really feel as if we had been put to any big tests yet. There were many reserves. The unanimous vote was upwards. This was 5 pitches of great climbing in a maelstrom of wind and powder snow with at last a clear sight of the upper field. It did not look too far away but we opted out of pressing on after a few more rope lengths, still in the early afternoon. Our reasons? A good bivouac had been uncovered under an overhanging boulder. We reckoned a good long rest with lots of food and drink would give recuperation from the 3 bad bivouacs behind. This we proceeded to do. For once the nightly snow and wind went around instead of attacking directly. Freshness was the morning feeling. Light snow-fall with no wind the weather pattern. The climbing mixed, difficult and original for at this point we left the 1967 American Direct Route and made an upward swing out left and on for the top.

What had seemed like a few pitches to the big ice-field was in fact many.

The arrival there no relief at first. Crevasses hidden and open. Very real wind-slab avalanche danger and little snow-slides all made our upward progress tortuous and weary. But around 6pm as we were traversing towards the point where we could strike upwards into the final couloir, what seemed to be a miracle to our battered minds took place. The wind stopped, the clouds rolled away and we were left with a staggering view of the Alaskan wilderness. In the evening sun we stopped and brewed a hot drink beside an ice-block and just sat there marvelling. The peaks below were less high and less spectacular than, say, in the view from the top of Everest but this in its loneliness and wildness seemed just as impressive. White and black. No other colour relief. Rock, snow and glaciers, looking like the frozen rivers they are, stretched for hundreds of miles in all directions. Our aloneness, apartness and untouchability was suddenly right there with us but it was not frightening. I felt we had a right to be there. Our compact and homogeneous twosome was still playing the survival game and playing it well. Feeling good, we cramponned out of the sun into the vicious prenight cold. Even moving together and quickly the bodies were hardly registering a warm feeling anywhere. Right into the transitional Arctic twilight we front-pointed upwards on beautiful snow-ice till tiredness and straight cold forced a halt. Stopping beside a crevasse lip I poked in my axe. It was a day of miracles. There was an almost ready made snow-cave. A little digging and we were in. The temperature had now dropped so much that another open bivouac would have been very strength consuming. Inside the cave it seemed almost warm. This night it was only hot drinks and sleep. Freeze-dried food had lost its attraction. Looking at our face photos it seemed as if we should be able to reach the summit fairly quickly in the morning. We should have known better than to indulge in this type of thinking. True we did exit from the face on the late afternoon of the next day but came out with a series of indelible mind searing impressions of a 55 to 60° ice-slope that seemed to go on and on with us climbing roped but continuously together and seemingly front pointing for ever into a storm that had once again sprung up hard and strong and a wind that gave no relief on any side as it blasted the snow up around and down. Everything was cold, even our souls. Frost-bite was waiting to jump at the slightest weakness but each of us was playing his own particular winning game with it. That day in particular there was no doubting the toughness of climatic conditions on McKinley. We were drawing heavily on all our Himalayan experience just to survive and it was a very respectful twosome that finally stood on the summit ridge. Our only thoughts were to find some kind of snow-cave where we could stop and think about everything, free from the blasting of the wind in our brains. It took a few hours digging but we had it, a miserable little hole but free from wind and spindrift and there we passed an equally miserable night. We had climbed the mountain too quickly to acclimatize and now were suffering! Crawling out into a cold, cold morning we scurried briefly to the top and then started to descend as quickly as possible, knowing that with the increased warmth and more oxygen in the air all the impressions would catch up and we would float downwards in a beautiful retrospective cloud. Or so we thought!

After the Summit (Doug Scott)
We moved slowly down and across a plateau of windswept snow towards

Archdeacon's Tower. There, sat in the snow, were 2 climbers with equipment strewn all the way around them. Our first reaction was one of surprise which turned to anticipation that we might scrounge a brew, then on reaching them our reaction was one of horror. They were young lads of about 20 years and one had a black silk glove ripped apart revealing yellow fingers that had frozen solid. The other was just sitting in the snow stupefied with his head bowed over his own useless frozen hands. Yellow Fingers was chirpy joking at the coincidence that we should meet near the summit like this. Dougal asked him why his hands were exposed, and received a confident flip reply. We told him that he had frost-bite and would probably have his fingers if not his whole hand cut off if he did not look after them. 'Now wait a minute, what do you mean frost-bite?' said Yellow Fingers. We patiently explained, and pulled his gloves out of his sack and other clothing and made them both warmer. They told us that there were 8 other members of their team down below at Denali Pass (5550m). We at that time were so wrapped up in our own personal survival, so near to the end of our strength that we could neither wait around nor help them down. We needed to descend rapidly to lower altitudes to gain strength, so we set off, promising to warn their friends of their predicament, and suggested that they climb into their sleeping bags and all their clothing. We descended into Denali Pass within half an hour but their friends were not there. We had to go on down to 5200m to find them, then we traversed across to their camp and collapsed on to the snow too exhausted to speak at first. After a long hot drink of fruit juice, we told them of the conditions of their friends and that it was essential to bring them down to camp without delay.

There were only 2 of the group fit enough to go, so whilst they went off in the direction of the Denali Pass, we descended further to another camp at 4250m, because there had only been 4 of the 8 at 5200m and the remainder were still acclimatizing lower down. Towards evening we came into 4250m camp where the leader John Patton immediately radioed the Park Service for a helicopter. The Park Service did not have the use of a helicopter that could reach the lads at 5500m and they told John that it was essential that all casualties were brought down to 4250m. Dougal and I both groaned inwardly, for we knew we would have to return to 5200m and help the lads down the difficult part of the W Buttress. After a restful 8 hours sleep we set off in a high wind and snow back up to the 5200m camp. It was a real effort to will our aching bodies back up the hill. At the higher camp we found the rest of the team were now together, for the 2 injured climbers had been brought down by 2 lads who were even younger. Willy from Colorado was only 19 and had put up a very impressive performance. His companion, however, was frost-bitten, and so with Willy's assistance we brought 3 frost-bitten climbers back down the W Buttress to 4250m. The next morning a total of 4 climbers from this group were evacuated by helicopter for they had already made earlier summit attempts that had failed in the same storms that had battered Dougal and myself on the S Face. Subsequently, the 2 lads we first found lost two feet and other toes and fingers despite some of the finest treatment available at the Anchorage Hospital.

The morning of the evacuation was just like a scene from 'M.A.S.H.' Whilst we were loading the bodies into the helicopter huge food boxes were brought out and taken into a snow-bunker; after the helicopter had departed the 8 of

us left behind relaxed and joked over Kentucky Fried Chicken and all the trimmings washed down with Coca-Cola. The group were Christians practising their religion through adventure. They said it was divine providence that we happened to arrive at the time we did. We told them that they had been very lucky and that in our experience the 2 lads would probably not have survived another night, for as it turned out they had already been 2 days in the summit area. They had narrowly failed to top Mount McKinley, despite having spent a whole day above 5500m and having made only 300 yards progress. They were so strongly motivated for the summit that they had ignored all the warning signs, and had continued past the point of no return.

How do inexperienced climbers come to be on North America's highest summit where the weather is notoriously super severe? It may be that risks are taken in the McKinley National Park, because of the very presence of the Park Service. Even though the National Park Service strongly point out to visiting climbers that their 'own group is the best and only source of rescue aid', they nevertheless insist 'Each expedition on major peaks must carry a two-way radio capable of reaching another manned station. This manned station must be capable of maintaining contact with Park Headquarters. There is a limited source of radios so these arrangements should be one of the priority pre-climb goals.' They indicate that on receiving a radio request, helicopter rescue may be available and also a ground party could carry out a rescue although it might take several days. It seems to us that the situation here as in other mountain ranges which have been taken over by the authorities can lull climbers, especially inexperienced climbers, into a false sense of security. When the inexperienced party is too goal-orientated then it only needs a slight deterioration in the weather pattern for a potential disaster like the one we found here and which we have seen elsewhere. In 1974 8 Russian women climbers died from hypothermia on Mount Lenin. They too were in radio contact with rescue teams but when the crunch came and the storms blew in and when they had succumbed to the debilitating effects of altitude and cold no one could help them but themselves. They had not the experience to survive and they perished just like the 2 lads on Mount McKinley nearly did.

As it turned out, of the last 5 expeditions to McKinley Dougal and I were the first *not* to be rescued, and yet we had climbed as a pair one of the hardest routes on the mountain, sitting out storms without using fixed ropes and without carrying radios. Every climber has a right to climb this way, providing they too have accumulated sufficient experience on other mountains over years of climbing. There is no short cut to safe climbing at high altitudes for it is a long and painful apprenticeship.