Hunter's South Ridge—Alpine Style

Simon Richardson
Plates 1–6

Jim Okonek's Piper Cub roared down the Tokositna glacier below the S face of Mount Hunter. As it gathered momentum, the tail rose in a cloud of snow and ice particles, and the little aeroplane quickly became airborne. Ed Hart and I were now alone, each coming to terms with the size of the mountains all around us, the intense cold and the total silence. As far as anyone knew we were the first climbers to land here for six years. Our objective, the S ridge of Hunter, towered nearly 2000m up into the clear blue April sky, trailing long plumes of spindrift in the wind and glistening in the late afternoon sun. I stood in silence, shivering slightly, staring up at our proposed route, as Ed busied himself pitching the tiny two-man tent. In over ten years of climbing, I had never felt so afraid before starting a route. I wondered who, Ed or I, was the more crazy. I, for a desire, bordering on an obsession, to climb Hunter from this remote and neglected cirque, or Ed who, unlike myself, was on his second expedition to Alaska, and had some idea of what we were about to let ourselves in for.

Mount Hunter (4442m), which lies to the SE of Mount McKinley, is one of the three giants of the Central Alaska Range. Although Foraker and McKinley are higher, Hunter is the steepest mountain of the three. Its twin summits are separated by an ice-field four kilometres long, and no easy route leads to this isolated plateau. All of Hunter's ridges are long and heavily corniced, and its 1500m faces are swept by avalanches and collapsing séracs from the hanging glaciers on the fringes of the ice plateau. Despite being near to the Kahiltna glacier landing strip, which is the starting point for most parties climbing McKinley, Hunter rarely receives more than one or two ascents a year. The most obvious line to the summit is the W ridge by which the mountain received its first ascent in 1954. Seven kilometres long and corniced for much of its length, this ridge has had only a handful of repeats, although its classic status means that it is attempted several times each year.

It all began, as so often, with a photograph. One of those Washburn black-and-white aerial photos where every ridge, granite spur and cornice is clearly picked out under a perfectly still sky. The S face of Hunter was reminiscent of the Argentière wall, but twice the height. It was a mountain that just had to be climbed. The picture appeared in Mountain magazine and illustrated an article that described the 1980 alpine-style ascent of the SE spur by three Colorado climbers.[1] It was to fascinate me with the rarely visited S side of Hunter for the next five years. The climbers spent 13 days on the mountain, enduring several storms, and after climbing the spur they then had to traverse the summit plateau before being able to descend the W ridge. The route sounded hard and sometimes dangerous, with long sections of unstable corniced ridge, but it was the commitment and overall adventure of traversing a big mountain that really appealed. I tried to forget that they had all ended up in the frostbite clinic in Anchorage.

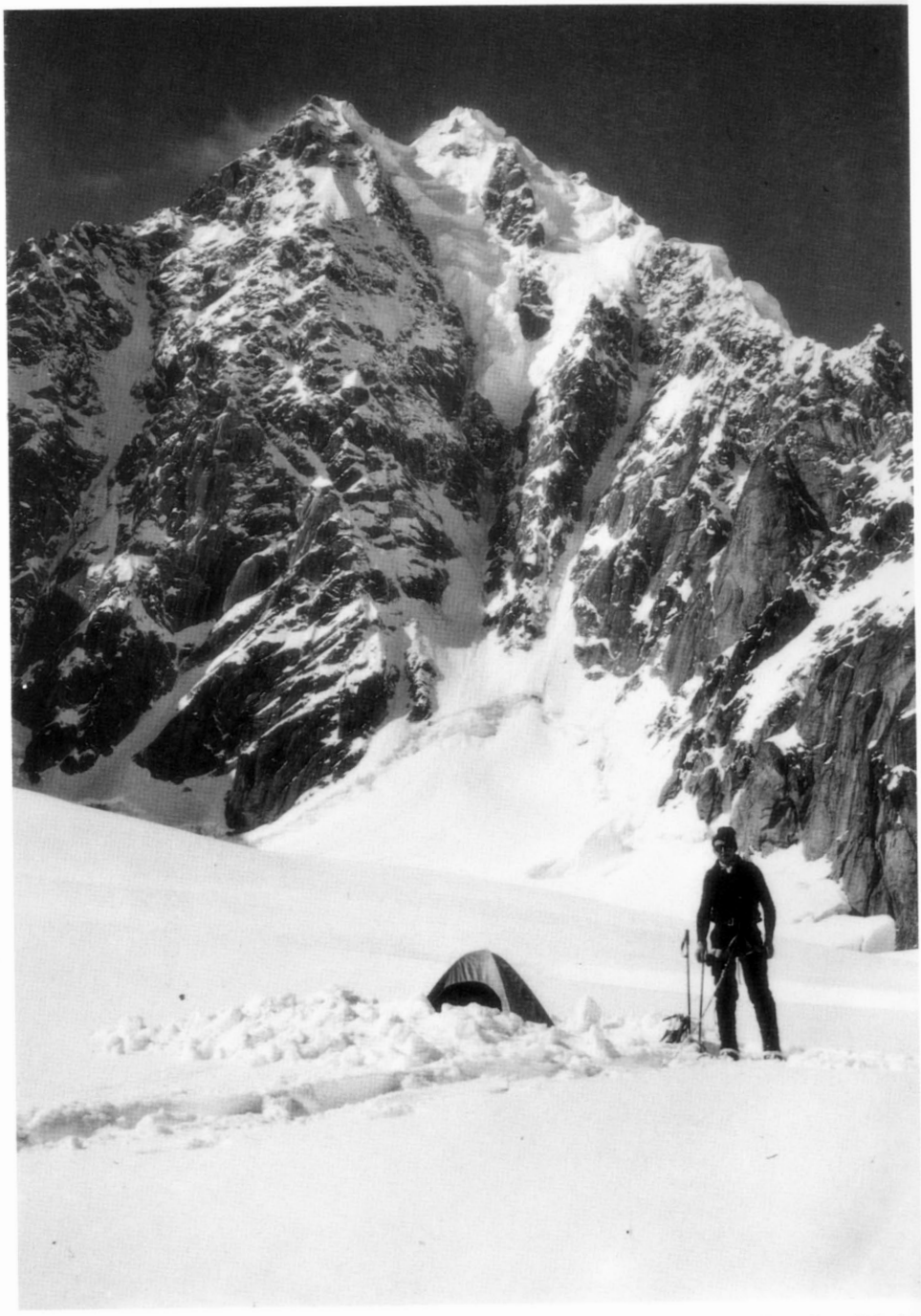
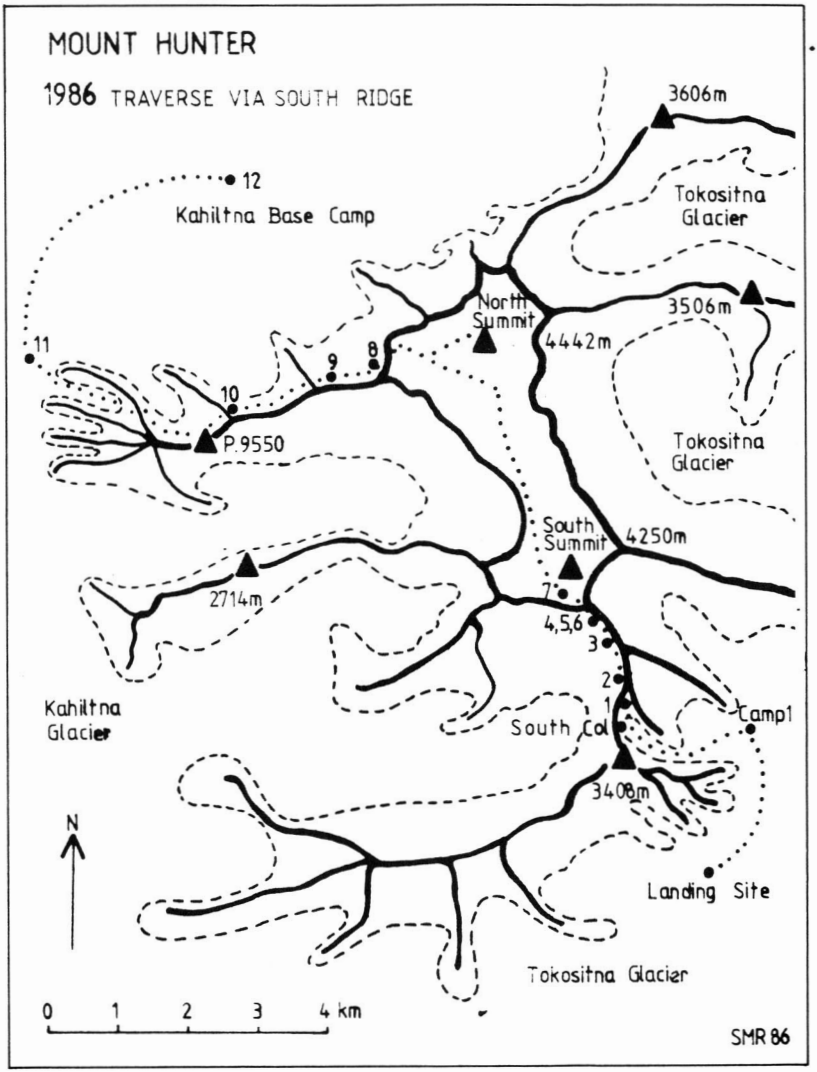


Photo: Simon Richardson

1 Ed Hart below the S face of Mt Hunter. The S ridge is the skyline (L).



Ed Hart, who had climbed the Cassin Ridge on McKinley in the spring of 1984, shared my interest, and, after making tentative plans to attempt the SE spur in 1985, we decided to go for the S ridge in the spring of 1986 instead. In many ways the S ridge was more of an unknown quantity, as it had not been repeated since its first ascent in 1973. We did know, however, that it had been tried at least twice before the successful ascent, and that fixed ropes had been used. It also turned out that, although the ridge had been climbed to the summit plateau, the successful team had neglected to climb the final few

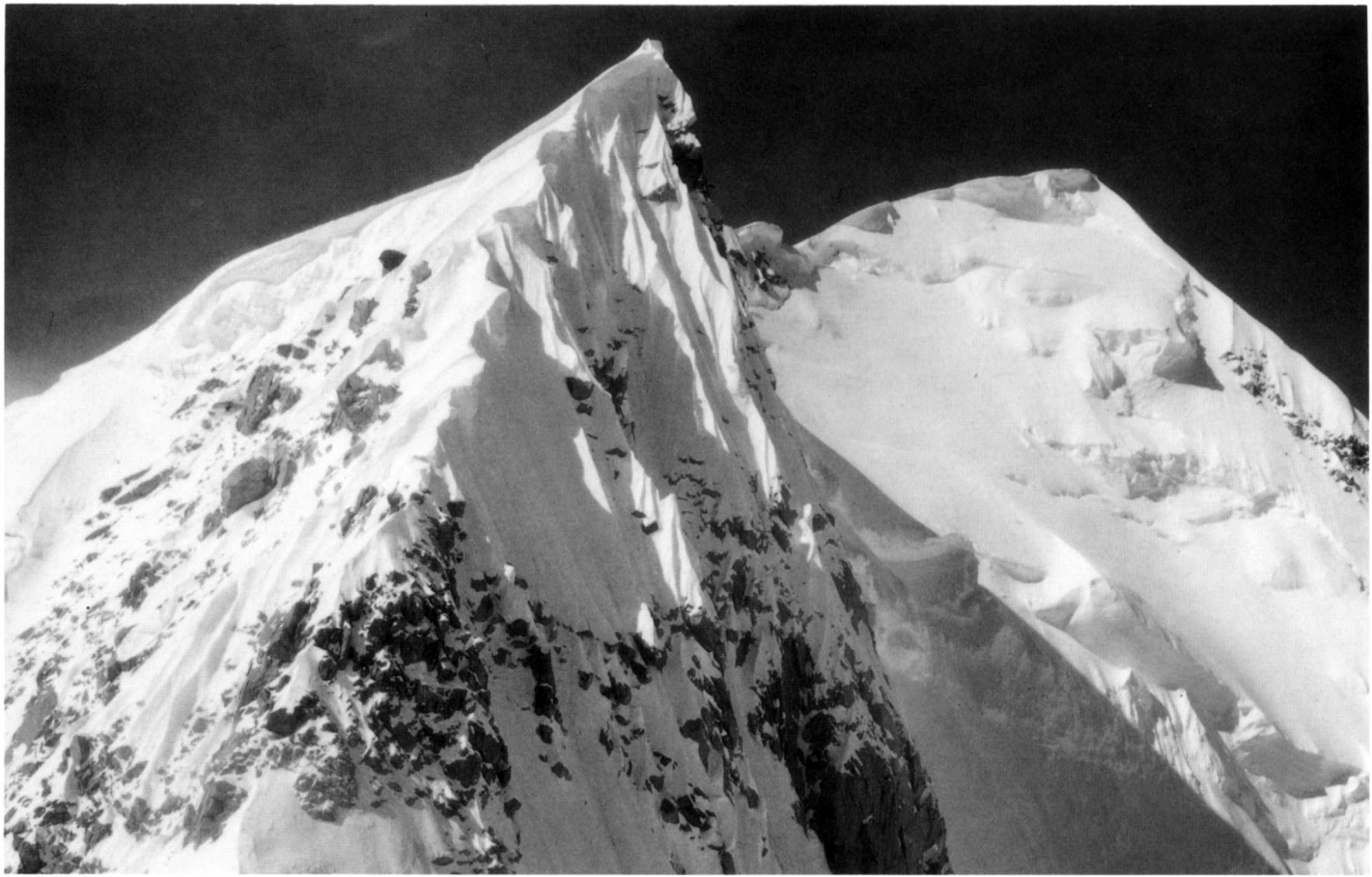


Photo: Simon Richardson

2 *The final ice-arête of Mt Hunter, with the S summit behind.*

hundred metres to reach the S summit. In some respects, therefore, the route had been left unfinished. We planned to repeat the ridge alpine-style, cross the summit plateau and descend the W ridge. We also hoped to reach the higher N summit. Both Ed and I were not just interested in climbing a technical route, but wanted to experience the commitment and adventure in traversing a big mountain. Traverses of major Alaskan peaks are rare, and we were well aware that, once we had committed ourselves to the route, our only way off was to continue over the summit.

Before we left Talkeetna we arranged with Jim that, if we did not appear at the Kahiltna glacier landing strip within 21 days, he should assume that we had failed on the route and return to the Tokositna glacier to fly us out. We were carrying no radio, so Jim very kindly offered to fly over the route every three or four days to assess our progress. The landing site was about two kilometres away from the base of the mountain, so the following morning, after cacheing about seven days of food, we ferried loads through a 150m ice-fall, and crossed the glacier above it to reach the cirque below the SE face. We were lucky, the next day, to find a fairly easy way through the complicated second ice-fall. This barred entry into a wide snow couloir that led up to the S col at the foot of the S ridge. The ski sticks and snowshoes which had been indispensable when crossing the glacier were now even more essential for climbing the long steep slopes of deep unconsolidated snow in the couloir. We reached the col on 29 April, after two days of exhausting load-carrying. The weather was excellent, and as we were now established at the foot of the route with 16 days of food and fuel, we were in a perfect position to start climbing. But, first I, then Ed, succumbed to a stomach infection that left us weak and almost incapacitated for the next four days. Jim flew over us one beautifully clear afternoon, and hearing the noise of the engine I managed to crawl out of the entrance to the tent. Jim acknowledged my wave by waggling his wing-tips as he flew off. He must have wondered why we were not climbing on such an excellent day, but it was an immense boost for us to know that someone knew exactly where we were.

By the time we had recovered the weather had turned bad, which gave us time to pack the food, sort out the gear, and decide on exactly what line to follow. We read and re-read the description of the 1973 route that was published in the American Alpine Journal[2]:

'The climbing was consistently more difficult than we had expected. From the S col the route broke into three parts: a lower rock ridge, a mixed middle face, and an upper snow-ice ridge. Where the lower ridge was easy, it remained devious and consumed a lot of rope and effort. Over 3000ft of fixed line and forty anchors were placed in this section. From a distance the middle face looked low-angle, but it proved steep . . . The upper ridge was as insecure as the lower ridge with its many rock belays was secure. It became a nightmare of steep rotten ice and absent belays on a knife-edge dropping 6000ft on one side to the Kahiltna and 5000ft on the other to the Tokositna. A middle pitch in this section, the "Happy Cowboy" pitch, had us straddling the ridge for lack of any other way to move along it.'

From the col, which we estimated to be at about 3000m, we could see to the top of the middle mixed face about 900m above. We decided that we would try



Photo: Ed Hart

3 *Simon Richardson on the Happy Cowboy pinnacles.*

to avoid the lower rock ridge, which looked long and complicated, by climbing an ice-field about 150m to its left. This looked straightforward except for a steep rock barrier which denied access on to the upper mixed face, but a tenuous line of ice smears and grooves appeared to cut through the wall. These looked difficult but appeared highly preferable to the lower rock ridge; it was too cold to consider doing much rock climbing.

In dubious weather, early on 4 May, we crossed the bergschrund and started moving together up the ice slope above. With 10 days of food, 6 litres of fuel, tent, shovel, snow-stakes, ski sticks, snowshoes, sleeping bags and duvet jackets, our sacks felt impossibly heavy, but by concentrating on the climbing we found we could almost forget about them. The ice-face was straightforward at first, but as we gained height the ice became harder. Ed, who was leading, put in a screw every 30m or so, until after nearly 200m he belayed at the foot of the first ice-groove that broke through the rock wall, and I led through. It would have been a satisfying pitch in Scotland, but brittle ice thinly overlying steep granite made it a demanding lead. Near the top I bent the pick of my axe, and had to fight hard to make the final placements to reach an awkward hanging stance below a bulging wall. Ed hammered the pick straight before leading another difficult pitch. This began with a short aid section followed by a tension traverse that allowed him to reach another ice-runnel that led up on to a steep ice-field. We climbed this in two pitches, teetering on front points up black glassy ice, to reach a sharp snow arête on the lower rock ridge just below a smooth steep rock pillar. The last four pitches had taken most of the afternoon, and after searching for a while we found a superb bivouac ledge one rope-length down from the ridge on the E side. It was too small to put the tent up, but big enough for both of us to lie down comfortably. It even had a large rock overhang above it to act as a roof!

We woke to a perfect dawn with the Tokositna cirque spread out below us, and we ate our breakfast enjoying the view. We couldn't see the route above, but after we had regained the ridge we decided not to attempt the smooth rock pillar. Instead we made a long diagonal abseil, down and left to reach a ramp-line that cut across the wall. This led, as we had hoped, on to the middle mixed face above. It was classic Alpine TD terrain, never very hard but always demanding care, and methodically we swung leads for 14 pitches to reach the start of the S ridge itself. Our calf muscles screamed and our shoulders ached as we climbed the final four pitches up yet more hard ice, and we had to slump over our tools at the stances to rest. Occasionally the blue polypropylene fixed lines of the 1973 expedition were tantalizingly visible, glistening inches deep in the clear water ice. One strand lying on the surface snapped when tugged. The weather had closed in again during the day, but late that evening when I thankfully pulled over a snow-crest to belay in a crevasse on the S ridge, the clouds lifted to reveal the route ahead. Huge cornices and sérac walls hung either side of the ridge, dropping thousands of feet to the glaciers below. Behind us Huntington and the Moose's Tooth stood out from a sea of smaller but no less impressive mountains. Ed ran out the rope for the last time that day to find an excellent site for the tent below a sérac wall.

Morning began a little after dawn with Ed lighting the MSR stove. As soon as



Photo: Simon Richardson

4 *Morning on day 4 on the S ridge. The S face of Mt McKinley is in the background.*

the tent had heated up a little we were able to get out of our sleeping bags, and start dressing. We had to wear our Goretex jackets to prevent ourselves from being showered with the thick layer of hoar-frost that coated the inside of the tent. We wore vapour barrier socks during the day to prevent our alveolite inner boots from becoming wet. Every night we put talcum powder on our feet and dried our thin inner socks by sleeping with them next to our skin. We could only move one at a time in the cramped tent, so the process of cooking breakfast, dressing, and packing our sacks took between two and three hours. The stove thwarted an early start on day 3 however, for after reluctantly melting our first brew it refused to stay alight. In retrospect I am surprised that we didn't consider the potentially very serious implications of continuing with a malfunctioning stove, but it was a beautiful morning and we were keen to start climbing. We left a bundle of pegs on an ice ledge in the sérac wall behind the camp-site in case we had to retreat back down the mixed face, and then started off along the mile long S ridge.

It immediately began the way it was to continue, for unstable snow and double cornices forced us to climb the east side of the crest. When we were able to regain the ridge the views were excellent, and the exposure wild with a 1500m drop to either side. We moved together whenever we could, but often we had to traverse slowly pitch by pitch, frequently with no belay, but relying on the security of the second standing the other side of the crest. For the next two days we traversed well over a kilometre of the ridge, sometimes well beyond the fracture line of the huge cornices. Occasionally we were forced to abseil down or traverse across sections of vertical sérac wall where great chunks of the cornice had fallen away.

The 'Happy Cowboy' Pinnacles, however, that we climbed on the morning of the fourth day, made the rest of the ridge seem almost mundane in comparison; this must rank as some of the wildest climbing that either of us had ever done. For 100m the ridge thinned to a vertical knife-edge less than a foot wide, with its sides dropping almost vertically thousands of feet to the glaciers below. The double corniced crest was decorated with delicate towers and mushrooms of unstable crusty snow. Previous parties had straddled the knife-edge as though they were riding a horse, laboriously chopping away the hollow rubbish, and praying that the whole delicate formation was not going to collapse under them. With no belay, the consequences of a fall (which seemed more than likely) didn't bear thinking about, and we immediately decided to try an alternative solution. By making a long and intricate lead on the east side of the ridge below the crest of the pinnacles, I managed to reach a stance beneath a huge cornice. The climbing was difficult on steep hard ice interspersed with flutings of unstable powdery snow, but the protection was good, and it felt safer than trying to traverse over the top of the pinnacles. Ed led off in a similar vein, and after a rope-length chopped through the cornice to regain the ridge at a small col between two of the pinnacles. He was unable to find a belay, but it was only after I had pulled on to the ridge and looked down the other side that we realized that we were standing on top of a double cornice.

I grabbed the rack, and frantically led off on the other side of the ridge, traversing across steep ice in a wildly exposed position, making for a steep

subsidiary ridge that came up from another pinnacle on the right. I put in a snarg runner, and 7m higher when clearing away the light powdery snow to place another, I saw blue dots in the ice. I had to have a double-take before realizing that I could see blue sky through the airholes in the ice, and I was climbing up a vertical sheet only inches thick. The whole thing vibrated as I made each placement, but eventually I managed to mantleshelf delicately on to the top of it. Fear and adrenalin then took over, and I hammered our 90cm snow-stake up to its hilt into the sugary ice of a huge cornice above me. Precariously balancing on the fragile ice-fin I hacked away at the cornice, sending vast quantities of snow down the face below. Twice my footholds collapsed, and I was left hanging on the shafts of my axes with my feet dangling free. Eventually, shaking with fear and praying all the while that it wasn't going to collapse, I was able to pull through the cornice and stumble down the snow-slope behind. I then slid down a 2m ice-wall to land in the soft snow of a crevasse where I belayed.

Our joy at having climbed the psychological crux of the route was tempered by the disturbing thought that we had now passed the point of no return, and were committed to finishing the ridge and traversing the plateau. If, even in our wildest dreams, we had wanted to repeat the 'Happy Cowboys', it was unlikely that we could have done such delicate and insecure climbing in any other than the perfectly still weather we had had that morning. The ridge was now fairly straightforward, however, and, apart from making one abseil from a snow bollard down an overhanging sérac wall, we made good progress along the whaleback ridge, to reach the great col beneath the steep ice arête that led up the final 250m to the plateau. Not being able to find any natural shelter for the tent, we pitched it on flattish ground on the very top of the col. We decided to ignore the high cloud that had appeared to the west. We paid dearly for our laziness, for during the night it started to snow, the wind rose, and before long we were caught in a fully-fledged storm. Ed excavated the tent during the night, but by morning conditions were desperate and we were worried about how long the aluminium poles of the tent were going to withstand the constant buffeting of the wind. After some debate about what to do we dug a trench a little way down from the col, and pitched the tent in that. It was a different world down there out of the wind and we soon felt snug and secure. The rest of the day soon passed eating and sleeping.

When we woke on day 6 it was still snowing, and Ed was worried. I was very worried. The weather had been too good for too long, and it was quite possible that we were trapped in an eight-day Alaskan storm. Conditions outside the tent were too ferocious to consider doing any climbing at all. The 1980 SE spur party had described the final ice arête as having the most difficult ice climbing on their route. Neither of us admitted it to each other at the time, but there was no doubt that the storm had caught us in the worst possible position on the entire traverse. Having climbed the 'Happy Cowboys' we were now totally committed, but we still had the technical crux to come. We estimated that, even in good weather, we would need five more days to traverse the mountain and reach the Kahiltna glacier, but we were now down to our last five days' food. We cut ourselves down to half-rations, studied the map and set a compass



Photo: Bradford Washburn

5 *The W ridge of Mt Hunter (the descent route). It is 8km from the N summit to the end of the ridge.*

bearing so that we could navigate across the plateau in a white-out.

It seemed preferable, at least, to attempt the ice arête rather than spend a third day in the cramped and squalid tent. However, it was really fear and, more important, hunger, that forced us out of the tent the following morning. As an incentive we promised ourselves a full day's food if we succeeded in reaching the plateau that evening. It was still snowing and the wind was blowing hard, but the sky seemed lighter and we managed to convince ourselves that the weather had improved. Packing up the frozen Goretex tent that was now as stiff as cardboard was a slow and painful business. First our fingers became numb and then our toes; we were not to feel them again for hours. We made our way slowly through knee-deep snow to the foot of the ice arête, and after two days of inactivity it felt good to be moving again. I led off in the wind and spindrift up some tricky mixed ground, and Ed led through on similar terrain, before taking a line through some snow mushrooms on the left side of the ridge. More mushrooms and then a series of unstable floppy cornices lined the ridge all the way to the summit plateau. It was a depressing sight, and half-heartedly I crossed over the ridge and started traversing under the cornice on steep water ice, scraping away the thick covering of powder before making each placement. For every foot gained in height I had to traverse three or four to the right, and the summit plateau still looked a very long way away. I put in a snarg and crossed over a snow fluting, but the going was still desperately slow and insecure with soft snow overlying hard, hard ice. Once again I bent the pick of my axe and, after failing to place a second runner, I reversed the pitch trailing a long loop of slack. I arrived back at the stance to find a surprised Ed, who hadn't heard my screams to take in the rope over the wind. The strain of the climb was now beginning to show. I freely admitted that I was very frightened, but I was also convinced that to continue up the ice arête with no belays and a bent axe was verging on the suicidal. Ed calmly took control, and, after abseiling from a small wire, he led for the rest of the day. We traversed horizontally left across steep mixed ground for ten pitches, several hundred feet below the great sérac barrier that marked the edge of the plateau. We then crossed an icy couloir to reach a steep snow-slope that led up to the sérac barrier. I broke trail up the long and exhausting slope of bottomless powder to find an excellent site for the tent that was protected from the wind by the lip of the sérac. We were immensely relieved that the technical climbing was now behind us and went to sleep praying for clear weather for the crossing of the plateau the following day.

We were anxious to maintain our momentum, so we were up and away early on day 8. The weather still looked dubious, but as we had the occasional view back along the S ridge we were hopeful that it might improve later. We traversed under the sérac barrier until we found a reasonable way through, and I led a pitch up a steep ice-wall to reach the plateau itself. I was greeted by a strong south-easterly wind and a thorough white-out. We only briefly glimpsed the S summit to our right, and were unsure of where exactly we were. We took out the map and compass and made a slight compensation to the bearing to account for our guessed position, and then set off with Ed in front and I behind with the compass. After an initial problem with my snow-shoe bindings we

made good progress with the strong wind behind us. After a couple of hours the cloud began to clear, revealing Foraker to our left and McKinley with a long lenticular cloud covering the summit to the north. Directly in front was the N summit of Hunter. We decided not to go for the summit that day, but to take advantage of the clear weather and establish ourselves on the W ridge. We had been told that in some years the sérac barrier that separates the W ridge from the summit plateau can be impassable. Although we had to make several long and unlikely detours around some huge crevasses that split the edge of the plateau, we found an easy entry on to the ridge. We had to descend about 150m to escape from the wind and spindrift, and found a sheltered site for the tent in a partly blown-in crevasse.

The weather stayed fine throughout the evening, and slowly the tension of the previous four days dissipated as the realization that we were now on the descent slowly sank in. We even began to feel slightly euphoric. Throughout the climb we had not allowed ourselves the luxury of thinking about finishing the route, but had just concentrated on the day's climbing ahead. Now directly beneath us was the landing site and, with any luck, we thought we should be down there in two or three days' time. We still very much wanted to make a summit attempt, however, but we were now down to our last two days' food. We agreed that, if the weather was fine the following morning, we would go for the top, otherwise we would start going down. I fell asleep that night tingling with the excitement and expectation of topping out the following day.

We woke at 5am and left the tent two hours later in a magical but bitterly cold morning. Ed carried a light sack and I the rope and rack. It was a delight to move unencumbered, without the weight of our monstrous rucksacks. We were feeling strong, and spurred on by the appearance of some ominous-looking weather to the northwest behind Foraker, we made good time across nearly a kilometre of the plateau to reach the steep little N face of the N summit. Despite moving fast we still felt very cold, and Ed had to take his boots off and warm his toes under my armpits in the bergschrund. We moved together up the ice-face, frontpointing up perfect névé for 200m to reach the summit ridge. This was pleasantly straightforward, and after climbing a final steep section we reached the small flat summit at 9.30am on Wednesday 12 May. We had been climbing for nine days. Almost as soon as we had arrived, Jim's blue and white Cessna flew over us. He made several low passes, taking photographs of us jumping up and down on the summit and waving our axes at him. We were both delighted that it should be Jim who was there to share our happiness at reaching the summit, after he had shown so much interest in us, and so much concern. Jim flew off to continue his scenic flight around McKinley, and Ed remarked that this was the first mountain he had climbed since McKinley two years ago. My recent mountaineering record had scarcely been better, and I wondered how long it would be before we each succeeded on another mountain, and what it might be. I couldn't help noticing that Ed had been looking longingly at Foraker for a very long time. We took the obligatory summit photos, and then quickly set off down, to return some feeling to our numb fingers and toes.

We were back at the tent at midday. The sun was still shining, so we dried

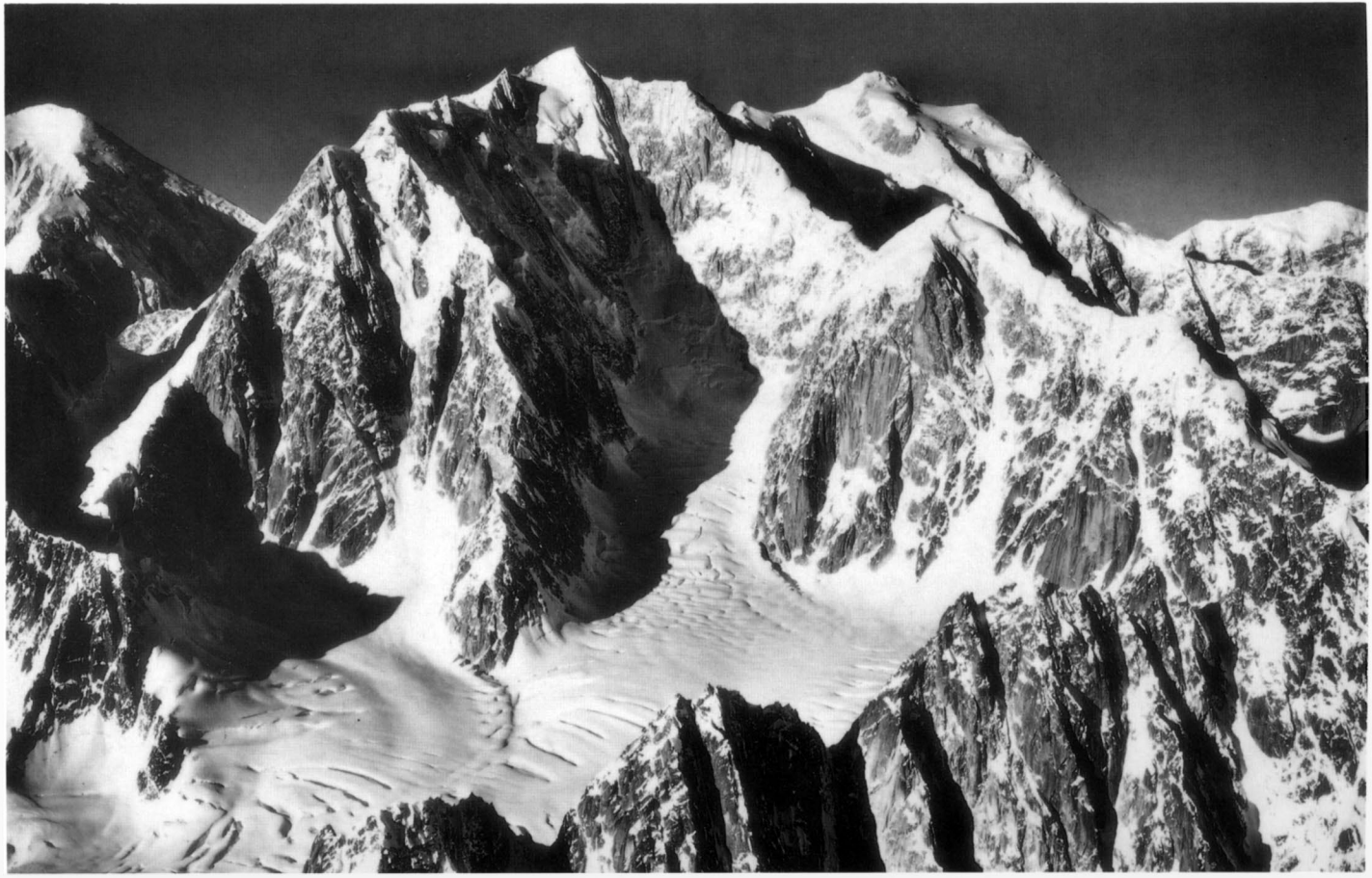


Photo: Bradford Washburn

6 *Mt Hunter from the S. The S ridge rises up from the S col (L).*

out our frozen sleeping bags and the inside of the tent that had collected a thick layer of ice and rime during the bad weather. It was difficult to relax. It was not the time or place to relish the exhilaration of reaching the summit that morning, and we now had to concentrate fully on the descent. The W ridge stretched out in front of us for over five kilometres to where it joined the Kahiltna glacier 2000m below. It didn't look very easy. The weather clouded in almost as soon as we started, and very soon we found it difficult to find the route in the mist. We made two abseils down steep ice to reach a snow slope which we traversed before making another abseil from a snow bollard over a huge bergschrund. Ed's pack was so heavy that it turned him upside down as he went over the lip. Visibility was now reduced to a few feet, so we put the tent up in a huge ice cave in the 'schrund and settled down for the night. We agreed to make a very early start the following morning, to take full advantage of any clearer weather.

We woke very early the next day, and since the stove refused to work we gave up breakfast and were moving by 5am. As soon as we left the shelter of the cave we were exposed to a very strong cold wind, which took us unawares and shocked us by its ferocity. We followed the bergschrund to its end, and abseiled down a sérac wall. We then traversed on the south side of the ridge for about ten pitches, sometimes moving together on good snow, but belaying when it was icy. We reached a steep triangular ice-face and made five abseils down this from screws. The visibility was poor, the wind was still blowing hard and it was bitterly cold. I frost-nipped the tips of my fingers setting up the anchors, and our feet felt like blocks of wood all day. We were feeling the effect of not enough food, for even though we were losing a lot of height our bodies never seemed to get any warmer. The ridge then continued more easily, although occasionally cornices fractured and broke off under our feet with an alarming thump. At one point a poor snarg belay stopped us falling 1000m to the glacier when a bergschrund collapsed under Ed. On reaching a flat broad section of ridge we were forced to put on our snow-shoes to wade through deep powder snow, and then we abseiled down a rocky couloir to reach a col where we set up camp.

Day 11 dawned ominously, with grey skies and low cloud which immediately threatened our hopes of getting down that day. We followed a long corniced ridge over a series of rocky peaks, and took great pleasure in moving together efficiently over such intricate terrain. We soon reached the top of a stepped 150m rock arête that led to a small col beneath Peak 9550. Unable to abseil directly down the crest, we made ten frustratingly short, but time-consuming, abseils down the south side of the ridge, and then climbed up snow-slopes to reach the col. It was now snowing heavily, and with visibility reduced to only a few feet we slowly climbed Peak 9550 taking great care with the corniced edge to our right. We tried to follow another corniced ridge on the descent, but after nearly walking over it in the mist we dug into the snow-slope and put up the tent, expecting to be there for the night. By the time we had made a brew the cloud lifted to reveal the Cat's Eye Pinnacle only a short distance below us. This was the last difficult obstacle on the ridge, and barred access to the five spurs that spread out like fingers to reach the Kahiltna 700m below. We climbed the pinnacle in two excellent mixed pitches to reach the col that split the small

summit into two. Suddenly the route was all over, for only snow-slopes down the most northerly finger remained. Throughout the descent I had become more and more obsessed about not making a mistake, and I found it difficult to relax now the route was almost finished. Ed on the other hand was more at ease, and he persuaded me to spend a few minutes enjoying the now beautifully clear evening, watching the sun set on Crosson and Foraker, and see storm clouds gradually clearing away from distant Mount Russell. An hour and a half later, tired and very happy, we arrived on the glacier just as it was becoming dark. We put up the tent for the final time and cooked the last of our food, before falling into a deep untroubled sleep.

All that was left to do the following morning was to snow-shoe up the glacier for five kilometres to reach the landing site. We arrived at 9am, eager to meet and talk with other people. We had been alone for twenty days. The camp-site was quiet, as many parties were trapped by the bad weather on the W buttress of McKinley. Everyone asked us what we had done, but nobody could quite understand why we had come all the way from Britain to climb Hunter when McKinley was higher. We were too tired to try and explain, and waited impatiently for Jim to come and fly us out. We were rewarded with a superb flight, up and over Hunter's S ridge and then down the Ruth gorge past the spectacular peaks of Huntington, Dickey and the Moose's Tooth. The sun was shining when we landed in Talkeetna, and as we climbed out of the plane we were greeted by the smell of spring and greenery. For the first time in weeks our feet felt warm.

References

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