Excursion to Alaska

The first ascent of the South Face of Mount Hunter

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(*Plates 65–70*)

People frequently ask me what my mountaineering ambitions are, and after successful trips to India, East Africa and South America I was finding it increasingly difficult to answer this question. But while attending the 1988 Alpine Club Symposium, which that year concentrated on Alpine and Arctic North America, it became apparent to me that Alaska begged further exploration. The state is enormous, covering 1.5 million square kilometres. It is six times the size of the UK, and with a population of only 400,000 – many of whom live in Anchorage – this is truly one of the greatest pristine wilderness areas on earth.

Fortunately I chanced upon both a climbing partner and a potential objective that weekend. I fell into conversation with Roy Ruddle, a Nottingham-based climber, and we discovered that we both had independently attempted the same W face route on a peak in a remote area of the Cordillera Huayhuash. I felt a kindred spirit and, while poring over black and white photographs of the McKinley range, we alighted on a particularly striking shot of the S side of Mt Foraker. An enormous ridge snaked its way down from the summit in splendid isolation from all other obvious features on the mountain. Our eyes met over the picture and it was love at first sight (for the ridge, not the eyes!).

Though Alaska abounds in mountain ranges, from the coastal Chugach and Wrangell mountains, boasting peaks over 4800m high, to the less elevated but more remote Brooks range in the north, the allure of the McKinley massif is compelling. Mt Foraker, 5300m, is the sixth highest peak in North America and has various pseudonyms. Early Russian explorers called the mountain 'Bolshy Gora'. The Tanaina Indians called it 'Sultana', meaning 'His Wife' (Denali's). Finally, in 1899 Joseph B Foraker's name stuck, despite the fact that he was later driven from public life following a bribery scandal. The mountain was first climbed in 1934 by a party led by T Graham Brown via the W ridge, and 12 routes have been completed on it to date. In 1976 a French team under the leadership of Henri Agresti made a memorable ascent of the SSE ridge. This ridge is 7km long, rises 3200 vertical metres and contains sustained technical difficulties on rock and ice. The team fixed cumulatively a total of 7300m of rope during their six-week ascent of the mountain. We aimed to spend anything up to 10 days climbing the ridge alpine-style and descending the SE ridge (the line of the 1963 second ascent).

In preparation for the trip we had to re-equip in various departments, despite the fact that both of us had climbed at altitude before. We upgraded



64. Ol Doinyo Lengai from the Engare Sero River. (Peter Payne) (p 133)



65. Jonathan Preston on Mt Hunter W ridge, day 1. (Roy Ruddle) (p 145)

boots, duvets and tents to withstand severe arctic storm conditions. For this reason, coupled with the fact that airfares to Anchorage are not cheap, an initial expedition to Alaska can be a fairly costly affair. Offset against this, though, are the lack of peak fees, porters' wages and liaison officer's welfare that are incumbent on a Himalayan venture. We aimed to climb during the second half of May and early June when temperatures might be slightly higher than in April and early May, though the weather could be less settled.

Our forward planning worked to perfection. So much so that we enjoyed the somewhat surreal experience of finding ourselves on the morning of 15 May 1989 ambling round Heathrow's Terminal 3, casually trying to check in 130kg worth of crunch-bars, soup-packets, skis, snow stakes etc, while on the morning of the 16th the MSR stove was purring contentedly as we assembled our dome tent and built an igloo in full view of Alaska's 'big three' – McKinley, Foraker and Hunter. 36 hours had elapsed, during which time we had crossed the Atlantic, been met at Anchorage, filled our bellies with caribou stew, bought food at a late-night supermarket, driven the 180km to Talkeetna (a tundra bush-town), registered at the Ranger station, collected white spirit and plastic sleds at the airstrip and jumped aboard a Cessna 185 light aircraft. The company's motto is 'Fly an hour or Walk a week' – we chose the former.

It can be quite an exciting flight to the Kahiltna glacier, even though we chanced upon the first fine day for several weeks, as the pilot sets a beeline course for the only notch in a long ridge on the edge of the range, known as 'One Shot Gap', for obvious reasons. Safely through the gap, we landed on the flat, uncrevassed W fork of the glacier, below the SE ridge of Foraker, and set up Base Camp more or less on the spot, the silence ringing in our ears.

We were at 2000m with the summit of Foraker looming 3300m above (about the same height difference as between Everest Base Camp and the highest point on Earth). The colossal scale was illustrated by the aircraft which had brought us and all our gear in now being reduced to the merest speck as it took an age to fly across the SE face of the mountain. The whole of the W flank of Mt Hunter (4442m), stretching 8km from the N to the S summit, lay across the glacier from us, while the S side of Mt McKinley, with the Cassin ridge showing prominently, stood etched impressively in the bright sunshine. The Rangers had informed us that there was an all-time record number of 367 people ensconced on the W buttress route of McKinley at that time. More than 90 per cent of climbers in the range opt for this route, which means that the rest of the peaks are virtually untouched. We met two people on the glacier and four on Mt Hunter during our five-week stay.

We explored the local area on skis, inspecting the French ridge from close quarters and looking down over the vast Lacuna glacier. We were utterly alone, the very occasional drone of a light aircraft flying into the permanently manned Kahiltna Base Camp on the SE fork of the glacier the only reminder of any other form of life. Though CB radios are widely used by climbing parties, we had concluded that a rescue on the French ridge would not be feasible and so had forgone this potential lifeline.

We aimed to acclimatize before tackling Foraker and though we made one abortive attempt over three days on the W ridge of Mt Hunter (one of the



66. *Mt Hunter W ridge. Camp at 9000ft, day 2.* (Roy Ruddle) (p 145)



67. *Mt Hunter South peak, from Base Camp. The sunlit ridge (R) is the SW ridge – our descent route.* (Roy Ruddle) (p 145)

ubiquitous Heinrich Harrer's first ascents and not repeated in a quicker time since), retreating from a severely creaking snow-slope, we still needed to spend time high-up. So we then packed up food and fuel for eight days and set off in 'Tilmanesque' style towards a tributary glacier on the S side of Hunter. Forget envelopes, the plans we had would have fitted on the back of a postage stamp!

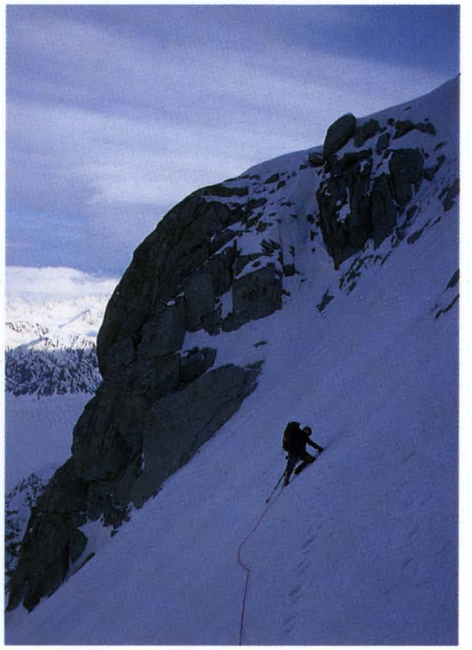
We ski'd 10km across the gently undulating Kahiltna glacier, weaving our way through one icefall, to set up the two-man single-skin Goretex tent at 2000m in spectacular surroundings, with 900m of rock and ice walls on one side and the S side of Mt Hunter on the other. We had come here to explore and we both spotted what looked to be a likely line up the impressive S flank of Mt Hunter and decided, somewhat impulsively, to climb it. The line seemed to be the only safe route through a series of hanging glaciers, with access to the summit plateau barred by a large rock buttress. The weather was fine, hot and sunny for the fourth day in succession, and we decided to set off as soon as possible.

The following day, 25 May, we waited for the sun to move off the face and at 9.30pm, shouldering as heavy a pack as I have ever encountered outside an Outward Bound centre, we gained the first 300m on skis. Though conditions were warm at first as we ploughed up through knee- and thigh-deep snow to the crest of a well-defined ridge, the temperature soon plummeted as the sun slid down for its brief disappearance below the horizon. We moved along the ridge and entered a shallow gully that separated a steep broken glacier on one side from a rock buttress on the other. The snow here was of good quality and we moved together up the grade II-ish gully for 450m, pausing for a snowstake belay near the top to overcome a steep, powdery bulge. The snowy crest of another ridge led to a big, glaciated icefield that we traversed first left and then right, before finally taking a rock belay at around 3200m, below an enormous area of rock buttresses that stretched up to the SW ridge. Here we chewed on a frozen crunch-bar and put on an extra layer of clothing, overseen by a pink-red moon which was in oddly close juxtaposition to the brightening north-eastern skyline.

Thirteen pitches of grade III mixed and ice climbing followed. The rough, blocky granite provided good belays throughout except for one taken on ice. Route finding was intricate as we traversed right for four pitches to avoid blank rock. Roy then found a way upwards via a broad couloir, and I led on up an ice gully to disappear through a crumbling cornice that provided a link back to the main rock buttresses. Roy then led the hardest pitch on the route, a precarious mixed affair reminiscent of classic Cairngorm buttress climbing, though carrying a tent stove and several days' food makes teetering and scratching on front points all the more ungainly. After a couple more short rock-steps, pure ice followed for several pitches and, although exhaustion and altitude were beginning to take their toll, I felt on familiar ground as resoundingly good axe and hammer placements followed one after the other. We were leaving the bulk of the rock buttresses behind us now and soon emerged, after a brief disappearance into a snow-covered bergschrund on to a flattish section of the SW ridge, just below the summit plateau that contains both the S and N peaks of Mt Hunter. Coincidentally, Roy had pulled on to the ridge close to a four-man



68. *Crux buttress section of 'Eroica', Mt Hunter, seen from the glacier.* (Roy Ruddle) (p 145)



69. *Jonathan Preston on the S face of Mt Hunter.* (Roy Ruddle) (p 145)

American team's camp, so I was greeted as I stumbled off the face by a hand proffering hot orange juice, an unexpected pleasure in such a hostile environment.

It was 2pm on 26 May and we had climbed flat out for 17 hours, gaining 1400m from the point at which we had left our skis. The light had been quite bright enough for climbing throughout. It had been cold during the early hours of the morning, especially when windy (alpine winter-type temperatures), but we had only stopped a couple of times to rewarm frozen fingers. The weather had held while we were climbing, but it deteriorated as we started to dig the tent in and soon it began to snow, continuing solidly for 36 hours.

Three of the Americans had just repeated the 1978 route up the SW ridge and had survived a minor avalanche while returning to their camp. For us, continuing on to the top of Mt Hunter's S peak was unfortunately now out of the question, as more than a foot of fresh snow now loaded the slopes above. We sat out the storm until the morning of 28 May when the wind stopped rattling the tent and, though visibility was poor, we decided to descend with the Americans. The descent involved six 50m abseils from ice-screws and snow pickets. With a sense of enthused abandon, the first American disappeared down the ropes into the mist. Unfortunately he happened to be a two-metre giant of a man, whose weight stretched the ropes so much that no one else could reach the next anchor-point without downclimbing. We were operating as two teams of three, and I found myself in the unenviable position of being last man down, which entailed removing the back-up screw at the top and clambering off the ropes at the bottom to front-point down, totally unattached, to the next belay, tugging the ropes through at the same time. With relief we reached a col, from where a 600m curving couloir led back down to the glacier. One short abseil, a lot of front-pointing and eventually a long, long glissade, including an exciting airborne moment clearing the gaping bergschrund, landed us safely back a few hundred feet from our skis. It had taken a full day to descend the SW ridge and we spent the 'night' in happy revelry on the tributary glacier before making tracks back to our Base Camp the following day.

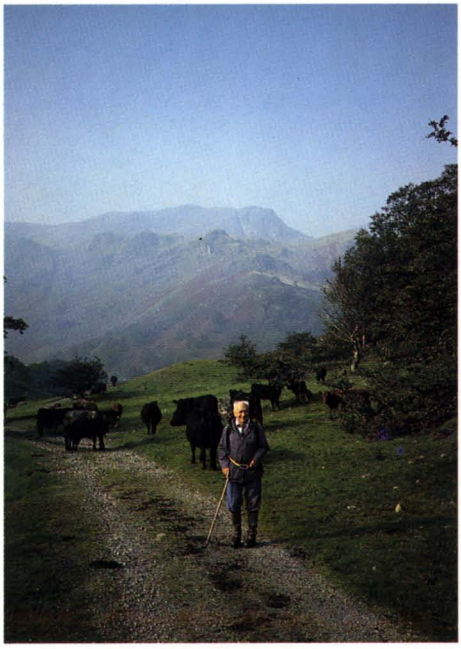
From the next day (30 May) onwards the weather became very unstable and it snowed heavily for eight days, almost continously. We lay in our tent, the Walkman music punctuated by regular rumblings as layers of snow clattered down from Foraker's ridges. We had already witnessed one enormous serac avalanche that scoured the entire tributary valley in which we had camped south of Hunter, and reluctantly we had to concede that, after so much snowfall, Foraker was totally out of condition.

We had one brief foray on McKinley's W buttress, the only route free of avalanche danger at the time, before being whisked back to the comforts of Talkeetna. The Rangers here confirmed that our climb on Hunter was the first time that the S face had been penetrated and we decided to name the route 'Eroica', after much time spent in the company of Beethoven on the glacier. It is an Alaskan grade 4; McKinley's W buttress is 2, the Cassin ridge 5. Overall, the route can be compared with Route Major on Mont Blanc, but it is longer and harder.

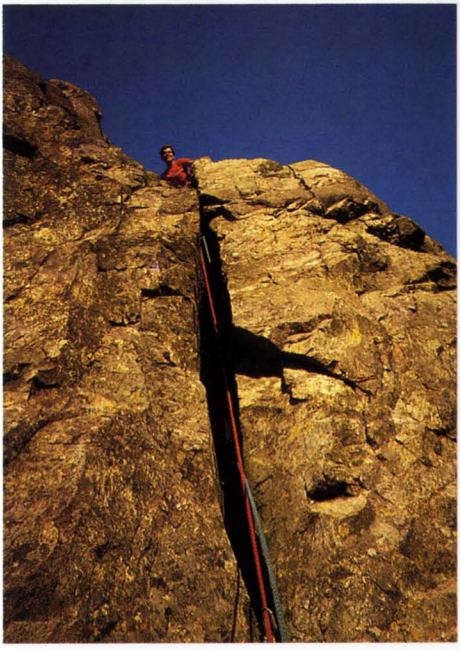
Alaska is certainly the most serious climbing environment that I have ever



70. *Jonathan Preston resting below the crux of the buttress. Mt Hunter S face.* (Roy Ruddle) (p 145)



71. *Ivan Waller in Dovedale on the day he climbed Westmorland's Route, 1985.* (Stephen Reid) (p 184)



72. *Stephen Reid, exhausted, at the top of Waller's Crack.* (Jill Reid) (p 184)

been in, and is definitely not a place for the faint-hearted or unprepared. While passing through 'One Shot Gap' on the flight back from the Kahiltna glacier, I noticed a maxim on the pilot's joystick that read, 'If in doubt, don't'; sound advice generally for any activity in the McKinley Range.