
Cold Climes



Julian Cooper, *Dom*, oil on canvas, 40 x 61cm, 2013

DEREK BUCKLE

Survival on Mount Eaton



Paul Knott on the corniced upper east ridge of Mount Eaton. (*Derek Buckle*)

My down sleeping bag was a soggy mess, my feet were numbingly cold and continuous snowfall once again threatened to collapse the small tent in which Paul and I had spent the last eight nights. It was a desperate situation, made all the worse by our meagre food supply and the inability to use our liquid-fuel stove due to gusting high winds that simply refused to abate. Attempts to open the tent door immediately flooded the tent with vast quantities of swirling snow that only added to the piles already present. Knowing that these were unusual conditions for the time of year, and that such a prolonged period of bad weather was unexpected, was of little consolation as we dined lethargically on 60 Kcal per day and drank only the water that we could melt using our meagre body heat. Hypothermia and certain death were inevitable if we remained trapped on Eaton's east ridge much longer; we could only hope that the helicopter that we had requested five days earlier would arrive today.

The whole chain of events leading up to our critical situation began in



Paul Knott above camp II on the east ridge of Mount Eaton; summit on the right. (Derek Buckle)

August 2012 when Paul Knott invited me to join him for an attempt on the long unclimbed east ridge of Mt Augusta (14,070ft/4288m) in the St. Elias Range. Having never been to Alaska, I jumped at the chance and in April 2013 we met in Seattle for the flight to Juneau. From here we



Paul Knott and pilot Paul Swanstrom, on the Seward Glacier. Mount Augusta (left) and Mount Eaton behind. (Derek Buckle)

took the ferry to our starting point at Haines. It was at Haines that I got my first insight into the fickleness of Alaskan weather, when we were forced to wait nine days before it was clear enough for our pilot, Paul Swanstrom, to drop us on the Seward Glacier at the western foot of Mount Owen. When eventually, he was able to on 7 May, it was immediately obvious that the south-west rib of Mt

Eaton, by which we had hoped to access the ridge to Mt Augusta, was non-viable, but an alternative *via* the even longer east ridge of Mt Eaton appeared feasible. After stashing most of the supplies we then snow-shoed across the glacier to make our first camp a little short of an obvious left-slanting ramp near the Corwin Cliffs at 4,231ft/1290m.

After a late start the next morning we continued along the glacier until it



View down the east ridge of Mount Eaton from the summit; Mount Vancouver in the background. (Derek Buckle)

was possible to access the easy-angled ramp. Stashing snowshoes where the slope visibly steepened we then climbed to a small ledge at 6,688ft/2038m just below the ridgeline where we made our second camp. This site offered spectacular views of Mt Vancouver, Mt Queen Mary and Mt King George in addition to Mt Cook and Mt Owen from where we had started. It was less far than we had hoped, but our heavy loads were by now beginning to take their toll, on me at least. By now we had already decided that completing the long ridge to Mt Augusta was no longer an option so we set our sights on making the first ascent of Mt Eaton instead. Anticipating only one or two more nights before returning we stashed all bar three days' worth of food before leaving early the following day. Gaining the ridge proper via a steep snow face we continued along Mt Eaton's convoluted and foreshortened east ridge to establish a high camp in a depression at 8,729ft/2661m, little knowing that we were later to get trapped at this height by inclement weather.

On the morning of 9 May we set off along the heavily corniced ridge, traversing numerous false summits, until after 5hrs 45mins we reached the rounded snow dome of Mt Eaton at 10,945ft/3336m. At this point the sky remained clear and we had excellent views of Mt Logan and the east ridge of Mt Augusta. Heading back down to high camp we arrived just prior to an incoming storm that we had expected to arrive a day later. After ascending around 3,600 feet over almost 1.5 miles from high camp to the summit, and the incoming storm, there was little chance that we could have continued further that day.

Nevertheless, despite poor visibility and heavy overnight snowfall an attempt was made to descend the next day as we anticipated that the low pressure area developing over the region would be short-lived. However it soon became evident that without a clear view a safe descent of the complex ridge was impossible. Somewhat resignedly we struggled back to a snowy dome some 80 feet away from the site of our earlier high camp and re-erected the tent. The next three days gave consistently high gusty winds, near zero visibility and precipitated some 13 feet of new snow. As the tent had to be dug out several times to prevent its collapse we eventually decided to relocate to a snow hole. Unfortunately no sooner had we transferred all the gear into the snow hole than we realised we were becoming buried alive. It was with some effort that we again re-assembled the tent and moved all the gear back in. With the situation looking increasingly desperate we made one further attempt to descend in the continuing poor visibility on 15 May but the slopes were in a dangerous condition and we abandoned the attempt. In our weakened state we were lucky to manage the 150 feet climb back to the snow dome that we had so recently vacated. At this point rescue was the only option if we were to survive.



Paul Knott stamps out a helicopter landing pad. (Derek Buckle)

At 5am on Sunday 19 May, after a particularly windy and cold night (down to minus 12 degrees C), we saw clear skies for the first time in eight days. A possible rescue was on!

A little after 6.30 we could clearly hear the sound of a helicopter and around 6.45 Dion Parker and Scott Stewart teetered on the 10 feet square that constituted the only available landing space. Although only 50 feet from the tent I struggled to make the distance to the landing area and could only drag my 'sack through the thigh-deep snow. The relief was indescribable, but we still had to get back to Kluane. With heavy cloud encircling Mt Vancouver it required skilful navigation to return and we did so with only 30 minutes of fuel remaining after the 2.5-hour return trip.

Back in civilisation Paul was treated for serious dehydration and I was nursing frostbitten hands and feet. Fortunately neither of us appeared to have suffered permanent damage, but without the Kluane rescue effort it would have been a very different story.

Becoming increasingly dehydrated, with little food and with me on the verge of hypothermia, we called the Kluane National Park. Their response was magnificent, but they could do nothing under the prevailing conditions as they too required clear weather. Although in regular contact, it was to be five days and the deposition of another 10 feet of snow before they could launch a rescue.

At 5am on Sunday 19 May, after a

DIDIER JOURDAIN

Unlocking The Labyrinth

First complete traverse of the Cordillera Darwin,
Tierra del Fuego

Three hundred days of storm and the other 65 not pleasant.

– Alberto de Agostini, describing the Cordillera Darwin after his 1913 attempt on Monte Sarmiento.



On the Shipton-Darwin ridge, descending to camp 24. Peaks in the background are Mt Jimmy Button (left) and York Minster. (GMHM Collection)

Stories told by the rare few who have ventured into the Cordillera Darwin have the flavour of Homeric tales. As we tried to unveil the mystery that surrounds this mountain range we learnt of impenetrable fog, wind gusting at more than 200 km/h that can raise you from earth like an invisible hand, summits still unchallenged, massive glaciers suspended over sheer drops or plunging into the sea, persistent rain, wildly differing maps and the lingering spirit of the Alacaluf Indians. It was as if our team from the *Groupe Militaire de Haute Montagne* (GMHM) would be entering a