

Mt. Logan-Cook Expedition, 1953

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URED BY some of the fine climbing problems in the St. Elias Range of Alaska and Yukon Territory, Canada, a group of Seattle climbers, in the winter of 1952-53, organized the Mt. Logan-Cook Expedition. Principal objective of the expedition was a new route on 19,850-foot Mt. Logan, highest mountain in the range and second highest on the North American continent. Mt. Logan has been climbed three times by a route on the western flanks of the massif. During the summer of 1952, as a member of the King Peak-Yukon Expedition, I had opportunity to familiarize myself with the southern section of the St. Elias Range. This knowledge, together with photographs by Bradford Washburn, was of great help in planning the expedition. A ridge at the eastern end of Logan, at the headwall of the Hubbard Glacier, appeared to be the only chance for establishing a new route.

Two other mountains were selected as secondary objectives: McArthur Peak, an unclimbed satellite at the eastern end of Mt. Logan, and Mt. Cook, an unclimbed mountain rising above Yakutat Bay. These peaks are, respectively, 14,400 and 13,760 feet.

Five members composed the personnel of the expedition, Tim Kelley, Franz Mohling, Tom Miller, and myself, all members of the Seattle Mountaineers Inc., from Seattle, and Dick Long, a member of the Sierra Club, from Richmond, California. To carry out aerial support for the expedition we engaged Mr. John Merriman, a bush pilot at Yakutat, assisted by William Niedorff of Seattle.

Supplies were shipped to Yakutat in April, to await our arrival

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early in the summer. On June 15th Long and Mohling arrived at Yakutat, followed by Miller and me on June 22nd and Kelley on June 26th. A small two-way radio set, to be sent to Yakutat, did not turn up there. Another was ordered in Seattle, to be parachuted after we were back in the mountains.

We spent the first week at Yakutat airdropping the 2200 pounds of supplies at the six drop sites. Drops were located at the bases of the three peaks and at three points along the route in which we were to hike over, making the 85-mile stretch to McArthur peak a pleasant trip. Approximately 250 pounds of supplies could be carried on each flight back into the range. For the drops a Super-Cruiser plane was used. All drops were free-fall, about 25 feet over the glacier. Opportunity was taken on these flights for reconnoitering the routes.

On June 29th we were landed on the beach, on the north side of Yakutat Bay. For the first 25 miles we hiked over the Malaspina Glacier to Seward Rock, then 45 miles across the beautiful Seward Glacier to Water Pass, lying on the ridge between Mt. Logan and Mt. Vancouver. On July 4th we dropped down the north slopes of Water Pass onto the Hubbard Glacier. Traveling westward up the glacier, we reached the base of McArthur Pass between the east ridge of McArthur Peak and a 12,200-foot peak to the east. On the summit of the pass we were at the head of the Logan Glacier. Five miles of easy downhill travel brought us to the base of the north ridge of McArthur Peak. Our air-drop was recovered in perfect condition. Six days had brought us over 85 miles of beautiful glaciated country, probably the first such expedition making an approach to the interior from the ocean.

On the morning of July 5th Miller and Mohling elected to remain at base camp to await the arrival of the plane with the radio, while Long, Kelley, and I set off up the north ridge to establish Camp 1. We encountered moderately difficult snow slopes between 7300 and 9000 feet. Above 9000 feet the ridge became narrow and exposed, making step-chopping necessary. Late in the afternoon Camp 1 was established at 10,800 feet. Above camp a 45° snow slope rises to 11,800 feet, where a ridge begins and runs steeply upward to 12,500 feet. Above this eleva-

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tion begins the crux of the climb. A large rock promontory rises from the ridge to a plateau glacier leading to the final summit pyramid. An ice-filled couloir, in the center of the rock promontory, looked like the only feasible route over the obstacle. Overhanging ice and steep slopes made traversing it impossible.

Miller and Mohling arrived next morning with the news we were without communication. The parachute containing the radio had failed to open. This proved very awkward because Long had awakened this same morning with every sign of appendicitis. We discussed his condition and decided we must get him down to base camp as soon as possible. He was very weak but able to walk, so all the way down the ridge Kelley supported Long with the help of two men belaying them and the last man acting as an anchor.

Once at base camp, we began to give Long chloromycetin. Attempts were then made to reach the beach and signal with fires for help. This proved impossible because of a severe storm which blanketed the area. The only thing left to do was to stamp letters in the snow "APPENDIX—10 RESCUE" and await the return of Merriman. The storm lasted four days. On the fifth day Merriman flew over, saw our distress signals, and notified 10th Air Search and Rescue. On July 11th, 10th Rescue flew over, dropping a radio set to use in communicating with a doctor on board the plane. The doctor confirmed our diagnosis. Because of the elevation they were unable to land the Albatross, so Merriman returned and picked up Long. We were relieved to know that he would soon be under medical care.

On July 15th the weather cleared just enough to return to Camp 1 on McArthur Peak. Another storm was brewing, so we decided to attempt the summit the same day. At the rock promontory we were unable to push a route over it before being overtaken by the rapidly rising clouds, so we climbed down to Camp 1. The storm continued the next four days. Several times we tried to push the route higher on the mountain, but never succeeded in getting above the rock promontory. During this time we used up what little food there was left. Finally, with the storm still raging, we returned to base camp.

There we were faced with a very difficult decision. Should we

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travel 15 miles to the Logan airdrop, pick up food, and return to finish the climb of McArthur or make a reconnaissance on Logan's east ridge and leave a cache which could be used on a future expedition? We decided on the latter because time was running short, the weather was unusually poor, our manpower was down to four, we had no communication, and a reconnaissance of the east ridge would greatly improve the chances for success of any future expeditions.

On July 21st, we reached the Logan airdrop. Above the drop rose the east ridge. There was no practical route onto the ridge on the north side because of the 60° ice slopes; therefore difficult rock was climbed at the end of the ridge. Once on the ridge, July 22nd, ropes were dropped down the 60° ice slope and supplies were hauled up, using a pulley system. A cache was made in the rocks. Two days later we continued our reconnaissance up to 10,200 feet. At that elevation we found the ridge very narrow, exposed, and dangerous because of loose rock (granite diorite). Between 10,200 and 13,000 feet there appears to be moderately difficult rock and ice climbing. Above 13,000 feet there is probably very difficult ice climbing on slopes up to 65°. At 15,500 feet there is a plateau glacier leading to the east summit, approximately 19,700 feet. An ascent of the ridge will involve a tremendous supply problem, along with technical rock and ice climbing. Following the reconnaissance we returned to base camp.

Several days' easy sledding down the Hubbard Glacier to Water Pass, then across the Seward Glacier, brought us to the north face of Mt. Cook. Our airdrop, which had been lying on the glacier for about a month, was in perfect condition. All the bundles were accounted for, making all the drops 100 per cent efficient for the summer. The five gallon metal cans in which the food was packed proved to be unbeatable.

The Base camp was located between the summits of Mt. Cook and Mt. Vancouver to the north, which marks the International Boundary between Alaska and Yukon Territory. We therefore named it "Boundary Camp." We arranged camp as we had so many times during the summer. Our nylon tarp was laid out, covered with snow to melt; the tent was pitched to give a maximum view from the door, and the food was arranged according

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to variety. Miller and Mohling were snapping one picture after another of the mountains, as Kelley glumly looked over the food supply for something new.

Above camp the sharp-pointed summit of Cook was plainly visible. A ridge led northeast from the summit to a col at 10,000 feet. The northwest slopes of this col led down to an immense amphitheater directly behind camp. The glacier which emerged from this cirque was as complex as any imaginable. Crevasses ran in patterns like those of a checkerboard. In order to get up to the col, we had first to find a route back into the amphitheater.

For two days we crawled in, out, and around crevasses, searching for a route. Finally, two of the party were able to place a route back to the less broken section of the glacier at the base of the slope leading to the col. On July 31st Camp I was set up at an elevation of about 8500 feet in the center of the amphitheater. All about us avalanches poured out onto the glacier floor, even from the slope we would soon have to climb.

We were not surprised to find the weather fast closing in on us the morning of August 1st. Apprehensive lest we be driven off another mountain, we needed little urging to pack and start up the avalanche slope leading to the col. We couldn't have planned the timing better, for when we reached the base of the slope the temperature was well below freezing. We found the snow frozen hard enough to reduce the avalanche danger, but not hard enough to provide an unbreakable crust for the two heavy climbers, Mohling and Kelley.

At 8 A.M. we reached the col, elevation 10,000 feet. Southward the wind was sweeping a sea of clouds toward us. Past experience reminded us we would have only a few hours before being engulfed in mist. Having only two days food with us, not enough to

*Top—AERIAL VIEW OF MT. COOK,
showing the route on the north side. The X's mark the
Base Camp, Camp I, and Camp II.
Photo, Franz Mohling*

*Bottom—MT. LOGAN, 19,850, FT.,
rising above the Seward Glacier. The east ridge and east summit
are on the right. Note magnesium sled used by expedition.
Photo, T. Miller*

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wait out a protracted storm, we decided to make our summit attempt immediately.

We climbed the snow slopes directly above the col, encountering numerous bergschrunds, none offering any problems. The soft snow made progress tiresome, and we were much relieved to reach the hard, wind-packed snow on the ridge. From the point where we gained the ridge to another several hundred feet below the summit we moved without encountering any problems. The final steep slopes on the summit pyramid made good steps necessary. At 4 P.M. we reached the summit. We stood in a thick mist, unable to see past a sub-summit to the south. After a few moments of careful observation, we agreed that we were on the higher of the two summits and sat down to enjoy our victory. The snow driven into our faces by a strong wind soon made us pack and descend to the more protected north slopes. Several hours of descent in soft snow brought us to Camp 2.

The weather was fast deteriorating. Below, the Seward Glacier was covered with fog, and mantle clouds billowed from the summits of Mt. Augusta and Mt. St. Elias to the west. The warmer weather would endanger our chance of having safe travel conditions on the avalanche slope below Camp 2, so we waited at Camp 2 until 5 A.M., August 2nd, before descending to Camp 1. From there we continued on to Base camp, arriving later that day.

On August 3rd we began the 60-mile journey to the ocean. Rain, fog, and poor visibility made the trip a most uncomfortable one. When we reached the beach on August 9th we didn't have a piece of dry clothing among us. The preceding six days had been too much for even waterproof articles. To add to our misery, a cache of food left on the beach was stolen, apparently by fishermen. We were reduced to a diet of wild peas for three days. On August 12th we were picked up by Merriman. Dr. Robert Sharp, geologist studying the Malaspina Glacier, had spotted us earlier that day while attempting to air drop supplies at his camp on the Malaspina Glacier.

At Yakutat Mrs. John Merriman provided a wonderful ham dinner with all the trimmings, a welcome treat after 46 days of

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concentrated foods. Still in the rain, we boarded an airline plane on August 14th for the return to Seattle.

The summer had been a most enjoyable one for all of us, even for Dick Long, who had spent only a few days in the range before having to be evacuated to Yakutat with appendicitis. Lack of manpower, poor weather, and no communication had made it necessary to discontinue our full-scale attempts on McArthur Peak and the east ridge of Mt. Logan, but we had accomplished a first ascent of Mt. Cook. Perhaps our most important achievement was the reconnaissance of Mt. Logan. We hope that future expeditions will find this valuable in their attempts.

Summary of Statistics

ASCENT: Mt. Cook, 13,760 ft., St. Elias Range, Alaska; first ascent.

PERSONNEL: Leader, Richard McGowan; T. Kelley, Richard Long, Thomas Miller, and Franz Mohling.

