

Mount Logan's "Independence Ridge"

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I HAD long wanted to climb Mount Logan and in the fall of 1963 I set out to find a group of men with the same ambition. It is not hard to get an able, qualified crew from the many excellent climbers in the Denver-Boulder area. The final party consisted of Mac Magary, Will Bassett, Ned Amstutz, Eric Coleman and myself.

From the very first it was decided we would attempt a new route. The mountain, though one of the world's largest, had been climbed by only two routes. The south side lay unclimbed, but we were well aware that the route possibilities there are long, steep and unrelenting. The north side has a different nature and though the routes offered are difficult, it is possible to gain access to the plateau at about 15,000 feet. This would concentrate the major difficulties of the climb into the 7000 feet between that altitude and the 8000-foot basin below. Using Bradford Washburn's excellent photographs and drawing upon his knowledge of interpreting them, we were able to choose a route.

At Glenallen we met our pilot, Jack E. Wilson. Jack is typical of the tough, hard-working Alaskan bush pilot and has logged many hours shuttling climbers in and out of the St. Elias Mountains. After completing our arrangements with Jack, we drove on to Chitina, Alaska, 60 miles closer to the mountain, to organize our 850 pounds of gear. At two A.M. on June 12, Wilson and I and the first load of gear headed in. Typical features of glaciation were displayed below us as though the plane were flying above pictures from a gigantic textbook. We flew closer, passing over scores of unclimbed peaks. Jack headed the plane south and suddenly before us was Mount Logan, immense, beautiful, dominating. The ridge we had picked from Washburn's photographs seemed to be straight-forward and continuous, the best route possibility. Most of its difficulties were concentrated in the first few thousand feet as we had expected. We made a fine landing on a large smooth area at 8300 feet just below our ridge. Within minutes the sound of the plane died away and I was left very much alone with my pitiful little mound of equipment. The heat of the strong northern sun was already scorching though it was only six

A.M. I spent my hour of solitude absorbing the magnificent beauty of the tremendous basin from which our ridge climbs and watching huge blocks of ice break away from the plateau above, initiating huge avalanches.

That evening, after Wilson had deposited the last load and returned to civilization, Mac and I made a short reconnaissance up the west side of the ridge where we found the going easier than anticipated. We worked a way around the first rock tower, or fin, and the route beyond seemed reasonable. The following day Will and Eric led off to explore the slopes beyond the first reconnaissance while Ned, Mac and I packed loads to 9200 feet. They climbed a 450-foot 60° avalanche slope under a huge cornice and fixed lines along it. We had no choice; it was the only way. None of us ever liked this slope and were horrified to find that the cornice possessed a deep fracture line attesting to its impermanence. From then on we decided to do most of our climbing at night. It was light enough to climb 24 hours a day and snow conditions were much better during the cooler hours.

On the evening of the 14th, when Camp I was established on an airy perch at 9650 feet, an odd thing happened. Wilson flew directly over camp, landed in the basin below and left two men and a pile of gear. The men immediately loaded their pack frames and started up our route. They soon arrived at Camp I and introduced themselves as Dick Springgate from Seattle and Dave Stelling from Tacoma. We had heard that a party from Washington was planning to climb the north side. When they asked if they might join us, no conference was necessary. There was nothing else to do and they seemed like good fellows. They soon returned to Base Camp where their companions, Tom Stewart and Bob Baker, both from Seattle, had landed.

The only thing we did not like about the situation was losing our chance for a first ascent. As the days passed, however, we continued to do all the leading. Later they mentioned that they considered it unethical for them to take over since we had been on the climb first. We were very impressed with their generosity. They spent many a night toiling with the fixed lines and helping with some of the less glorified tasks. Our groups remained separate, cooking our own meals and packing our own loads, but we were really one group, sharing the work and fun of a ranking first ascent.

Directly out of Camp I Ned led a 25-foot ice wall that culminated in a cornice. This lead put us on the east side of the ridge for the first time. We found snow and ice conditions so changeable that one step could take us from soft, knee-deep snow to solid ice. In places the ice was so porous that a misstep could drop us completely out of sight. As the ridge

was too corniced and fractured to walk its crest, and climbing the west side would mean steeper slopes under the cornices, we kept to the east side most of the way from Camp I to the plateau.

On June 17, while placing Camp II on a huge cornice at 10,850 feet, we did a foolish thing. Without probing the area, we unroped to stamp out a tent platform. In an instant I found myself up to my armpits in a three-foot wide, umteen-foot deep crevasse. Looking between my legs into the black abyss below convinced me I wanted out, and quickly. Though I laughed it off at the time, if I had fallen in, I would have plunged 100 feet or more! We roped up again and probed the area, establishing camp between the crevasse and the fracture line of the cornice. It was an uneasy place but unfortunately the best available.

The following night the Washington party arrived and found us still in our tents. Visibility was 200 feet and it would have been folly to attempt serious route-finding. After a two-day wait, Ned and I set out early in clearing weather. We worked on the route for the next two days, pushing it to a ledge at 12,200 feet. On the 22nd, Will and Mac found a site for Camp III below an icefall 200 feet above our previous high point. Bad weather again held us back but on the 23rd Will and I climbed past the icefall to 13,200 feet and saw that the end of our difficulties on the ridge was near. On the 26th the weather took a better shift and by morning of the 28th cooperative effort put us all in Camp IV at 14,150 feet. The 27th had been a long day for Ned and Will. They spent 22 hours packing two loads all the way from Camp III, establishing 1000 feet of new route and fixing 600 feet of line.

From Camp IV we could see up onto the plateau. The route to it wound around many snow blocks that had fallen from the north peak, through a crevasse field and up a steep slope. There was some discussion as to the amount of food we should take above this camp. At my insistence our party took six days' food. I also sneaked in two extra lunches and an extra breakfast. The Washington party, however, took only four days' food. Tom led, with the rest of the Washington party following, using their snowshoes for the first time. We didn't have snowshoes and for the next mile and half wished we had. Because of the crevasses, the route was quite complicated, but the Washington party did a fine job. I had not been able to sleep that day because of the heat and was wondering how I would do. The condition we had all built up by now, which had been so graphically demonstrated the night before by Will and Ned, shone through. I took over the lead at 15,000 feet and continued the rest of the way to Camp V at 15,850 feet. Though tired upon our arrival, we felt confident that nothing could go wrong now; success would soon be ours.

The weather was bright and clear; a slight breeze was blowing. Plans called for moving camp again to a site high on the plateau from which it would be possible to attempt more than one of Logan's summits. Next morning the slight breeze started to play a little rough with our tents and soon turned into a full-scale blizzard which kept us tent-bound for four days.

Only climbers who have waited out several days of storm in a tent high on some lonely peak know what it is like. The wind constantly snatched at our tents, threatening to rend them. Little tears opened up; tent poles strained and bent. Tempers frayed easily with the knowledge that the mountain had the power to bring an early, sad conclusion to the climb. Trying to be optimistic you say "Tomorrow it will let up. See, it seems to be letting up already." And then "God, what a gust. Hold down that corner of the tent." "It's not my turn to get snow." "Dammit you spilled soup all over my bag." You venture outside to relieve yourself as infrequently as possible and find it difficult to breathe in the snow-filled wind. You come back inside with your beard caked with snow; pockets, boots and pants filled with snow. At first it was just a novelty, a night's blow, but the days dragged by. We slept twelve or fourteen hours a day and listened to the blizzard howl. "Bridge, anyone?" Mac yells from the other tent. "Hell, no one wants to come over even to play bridge." "Cripes, Mac, you'd think you were offering a blonde or something," Dick banter from the Washington tent. And my poor tentmate Eric had to listen to me jabber about *CMJ* all the time.

Finally at ten A.M. on July 3, as the wind seemed to be abating and patches of blue were visible in the sky, we left camp. Will was in the lead with Mac and Ned on his rope. Eric and I made up the second rope with the Washington group on a third rope behind us. Eric and I soon overtook Will and had a conference. The weather was still uncertain; would it be wise to attempt the central summit six miles away? We decided to climb the north summit and I led off over a lake of hard ice and up a steep trough which seemed to lead to the summit. Mac was having trouble acclimatizing and 750 feet from the top he gave in; even dexedrine couldn't help him. Will, who was feeling strong and fit, gave up his chance to climb the north summit to return to camp with Mac. Will was so deserving a member of the expedition that we all felt deeply sorry that he could not have climbed with us. Ned tied into our rope. On we went, the snow becoming hard and crunching beneath our feet. The view through the clouds around us revealed the tremendous size of the plateau, a sight so overwhelming it made us dizzy. Suddenly there was no more up. We waited for the Washington rope and walked with

them to the highest point. It was pleasant on the summit (-2°F.) and we spent a long time there, drinking in the marvelous view. Back down at camp we found Will Bassett determined to attempt the central summit the following day.

We left camp at 8:30 A.M. on July 4, a cloudless, still, almost unbearably hot day. Mac and Eric chose to remain behind, Eric because he had been up most of the night trying to dry his sleeping bag after overturning a water bottle on it, and Mac because the altitude was still bothering him. We climbed the shoulder of the north peak to avoid a crevasse field. The Washington ropes broke trail in the softening snow to 17,775 feet where Will took over for the rest of the ascent. The plateau went on and on, stretched like an endless desert of snow before us. At 18,500 feet we encountered a breeze coming through the wide trough between the summit and the 19,000-foot summit ridge. At 19,500 feet on the final ridge we began to slow down and realized that the temperature had dropped drastically. A gash in the ridge forced us to descend a few feet before we started up the last steep slope to the summit. At last it was over; we stood by the bamboo pole left by the '59 party that marks the highest summit of Mount Logan. We shared the true happiness that only mountaineers know, and savored sights that only four parties had seen before us; Mount St. Elias, King Peak, Lucania, Steele, McArthur, Queen Mary, King George and countless other named and unnamed, climbed and unclimbed peaks. To the south a blue tint betrayed the ocean; to the north were the forests of the Yukon. We spent little time on the summit for the temperature was -21° and a stiff breeze was blowing. A few feet below the summit we met the Washington rope and exchanged congratulations with them. We had lunch and waited for them at 19,500 feet before I led the way down. The six and a half mile trip back to camp took us four hours. We knew we were tired and so moved cautiously. We arrived back in camp at ten P.M., $13\frac{1}{2}$ hours after leaving. Mac and Eric had dinner waiting with gallons of hot tea.

We remained in Camp V until eleven the next morning. The descent took all we had for the next three days. The route had changed a good deal and the 5000 feet of fixed line were invaluable. Descending a route one has just climbed is very revealing. The difficulties are spread over many days on the way up but condensed into hours on the way down. As we evaluated the difficulty of the route, we were all a little proud.

At Base Camp we rested for two days and christened our route "Independence Ridge" and the basin from which it originates "Independence Basin", in recognition of the nature of mountaineering and the summit climb on July 4.

The Washington party planned to walk down the Kaskawulsh Glacier and on July 9 they loaded their sledge and headed out. They spent three days getting to the head of the Kaskawulsh where they prevailed on the glacier research station there to fly out 200 pounds of unnecessary equipment. The trip took them eight days altogether. Our somewhat lazier crew waited for a prearranged pick-up by Wilson and were all in Glenallen by July 15, bringing a wonderful trip to an end.

A Note on White Gasoline vs. Butane. We used white gasoline; the Washington group, butane. As a result it is possible to make a direct comparison of the two. While on the mountain they consumed 22 pounds of fuel and we used 48 pounds. Though the white gas is slightly faster and cheaper, on a trip of this nature the butane is probably superior.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: St. Elias Range, Yukon Territory, Canada.

ASCENT: First ascent of Northeast Ridge on North Face; North Peak, c. 18,325 feet, July 3 (Amstutz, Blomberg, Coleman, Baker, Springgate, Stelling, Stewart); Central Peak, 19,850 feet, July 4 (Amstutz, Bassett, Blomberg, Baker, Springgate, Stelling, Stewart); Point c. 16,700 feet (east of Camp V), July 4 (Coleman, Magary).

PERSONNEL: Richard Springgate, Robert Baker, David Stelling, Thomas Stewart (Washington party); Gregg Blomberg, Edward Amstutz, William H. Bassett, Eliot W. Coleman, Frank A. Magary.

