Mount Logan's Hummingbird Ridge

JOHN EVANS *and* ALLEN STECK

Part I . . . ALLEN STECK

The Catchment Basin and the Agony of Osod *July 8 to 18.*

THE GLACIAL valley lies in the blistering heat of the midafternoon Yukon sun. Two tents, one a shocking red color, hang motionless in the still air, while nearby an eight-foot prod pole is stabbed into the snow. Cast out upon the glacial sea is the usual expedition flotsam: food cartons scarred by the rough handling of an airdrop, hauling sacks filled with food and quarter-inch dacron rope, a pile of rags which on closer scrutiny turn out to be John Evans' pants and fish-net longs, and a collection of snow pickets, shovels, assorted climbing gear and empty soup packets — all of it designed in some way to ease the pain of an ascent, the prospect of which already hangs over the mind like an unsteady sérac.

Taking the long view of things, and at the same time raising one's glance over a span of some forty degrees, the serenity of Base Camp is altered somewhat by the contemplation of the 12,000-foot south face of Mount Logan and the giant ridge that descends from the summit at 19,850 feet in a mighty six-mile sweep to the Seward Glacier. It is not the eye alone that is impressed. As it says in the good book, *Mountaineering, Freedom of the Hills,* "a glacial valley is the catchment basin for avalanches;" the constant roar filling our ears and the alarming increase in glacial substance lend authenticity to this statement. Camp is placed close enough to the base of the ridge so that the avalanches there are viewed in the most personal way, reminiscent of the surf where, with your toes digging in the sand, you watch the foaming mass come in to expend itself virtually at your feet, all the time wondering about that ninth wave supposedly so much larger than all the others.

A brief digression is necessary in order to place the scale of human activity along-side the immense bulk of this mountain to give perspective

to our tale. The ridges span some twenty-four miles in an east-west direction and close to twenty miles north and south: the summit plateau comprises nearly ten square miles above the 17,500-foot contour. The faces are vast expanses of hanging glaciers and rocky abutments, and the three south ridges drop 14,000 feet to the Seward plateau like gaunt fingers under great compression, flexed as if to support the huge mass of the mountain itself and prevent its collapse into the surrounding glacial emptiness. The south ridges, in the past, were avoided because of their very formidable appearance. The central ridge, perhaps the longest, is the most prominent, and the manner in which it rises directly to the summit is impressive indeed. It emerges gently enough from the Seward plain and continues at 9000 feet to a point four miles from the summit where it rises abruptly in a series of rocky gendarmes and delicate snow arêtes to the Snow Dome at 13,000 feet two-and-one-half miles from the summit. A drop of 200 feet leads to the beginning of a 5000-foot horizontal traverse along a most slender and fragile corniced ridge which joins the main mass of the mountain 7000 feet below and still one-and-one-half miles south of the summit.

Our plan is direct enough: climb the ridge, bringing our camps along with us. At the point of no return we shall decide whether to go on over the summit to a supply cache set in King Trench or return to a similar cache at Base. The continual reevaluation of that point of no return will cause no end of mental anguish.

Dinner is over and the unusual habit of taking to our beds in full daylight is again upon us. A brief conversation develops: "We'd best leave the prod pole at Base . . . it's just too awkward to carry. I really don't believe we'll find crevasses up there on the ridge." It is Dr. Long speaking in that finite uncompromising mode of expression: unassailable medical opinion. The discussion is interrupted when a mighty roar diverts our attention to Osod Couloir: a great mass of snow cascades down, engulfing the fixed lines and the cache in the bergschrund. Our panic threshhold has risen sufficiently so that we can now observe these occurrences with equanimity . . . Osod, an indigenous word bearing the full-flavored, all-pervasive feeling of fear: the perfect description of that ghastly couloir and buttress.

The prod pole is engineer Frank Coale's device and I notice a humorous sparkle in the eyes of our dynamic companion as he replies: "The pole may not matter that much, though I am sure we'll find some holes up there. '707' here is in agreement I think." Jim Wilson has already acquired this title owing to the computer-like intellect at his

disposal for the delineation of cornice fracture lines and related calculations. Jim's bearded face reflects a delightful mixture of inner calm, humor, common sense and genuine love for the simplicity of mountains. The prod pole was left at Base and it was Coale's ultimate joy to be belaying Long far up on "Shovel Traverse" as the latter plunged into a hole utilizing nature's own prod pole, tested through the ages, the cramponed boot. A fitting reward for the dogmatist. We lay on our bags with bandanas over dark glasses, primed with sleeping pills which were of little use as the constant rumble of avalanches was far too stimulating. We had slept four hours by midnight and were on the move again. The achievements of this day were won by Evans and Long who completed the intricate and dangerous lead to the Prow and came to within 200 feet of the crest some 2800 feet above Base. They returned after twenty-two hours of continuous effort. "Not even a place to sit down comfortably and eat lunch up there . . . a campsite is out of the question," said Long on his return to Base.

A storm moves in, and the next few days are filled with gloom. The prospect of moving loads up Osod, including fifteen gallons of fuel, 4200 feet of fixed lines and thirty days of food, not to mention our personal gear, seems so hopeless that we despair of ever reaching the crest. On the 15th, we have a number of loads at the base of the Prow, and on the 16th Evans sets up a hauling system on its top while Paul Bacon and I tie on the loads. During the next seven hours Evans, all alone on that tiny ledge at the Prow, single-footedly* raises the seventeen 40-pound loads up that 200-foot horror; what admiration we have for that combination of steel wire, mylar cartilage and strap iron of which Evans' leg is seemingly composed. Paul and John bivouac on a ledge over the Prow while I return to Base Camp. Paul's tale of his own battle with the Prow is grim enough. A skier of Olympic calibre and a fine mountaineer, he is more than equal to the task on this his first major expedition. With a load, the Prow is not easy to climb even with a fixed line and two Jümar prusiking devices. For me it is a "spasm passage": down-sloping ledges covered with ice, awkward holds that face the wrong way, and unbelievably loose rock at the top.

On the 17th, we cut our ties with Base, haul up the fixed lines and commit ourselves to the ridge. As last man I wait at the Prow while Coale ascends the fixed line. Suddenly I am aware of a whirring sound . . . a falling rock! Instinctively I press myself close to the cliff, but the

*A Yosemite hauling technique using leg rather than arm power.

sound persists and as I turn to investigate I notice a tiny hummingbird hovering over my bright red pack, darting in and then retreating, with that delightful grace peculiar to its kind. Is he merely curious or does he wish to stop and rest awhile on something other than rock and ice? In a moment he has flown away, consuming his fuel supply at a rate perhaps 30 times my own. My little friend, you and I are both intruders on this lifeless ridge; you have been blown off course by chance, while I, owing to forces I do not fully comprehend have come voluntarily — like a moth to a flame — attracted by the elemental dynamism of the mountains. We are now both engaged in a struggle with our environment, though mine appears the more absurd . . . I wonder which of us is the better prepared to meet the trials to come? Somehow, I think you may even reach the world of green things by nightfall . . . In any case I shall be thinking of you.

After a full day's effort we finally reach the crest, but there is no place for the tents. Bacon, Evans, Coale and I prepare a rocky ledge for a bivouac (the second for Evans and Bacon) while the others use the lower bivouac ledge. Just beyond our rocky balcony are the jagged edges of a broken cornice. Bacon tells me that at two this afternoon, as Evans was clipping into a piton directly beneath the cornice to belay Paul's lead to the crest, Evans had said in a bitter jest, "If that cornice falls, don't tell me about it. I want to be surprised." Quite without warning, it had collapsed at four-thirty, crashed down onto the buttress and was quickly diverted into Osod couloir. All of us had been on the buttress and had watched the ice crystals shoot into the sky as that ghastly thing raced into the catchment basin, cleansing and scouring the 3700-foot-long couloir as it went, with a roar that remains in our ears to this day.

Camp I at last! . . . a narrow ledge, hand-carved in the ice by 12 man-hours of cheap American labor, just wide enough for the tents. On the 18th, all loads are brought up, and it begins to snow.

The Camp That Was Known As II. *July 19 to 24.*

Just above Camp I we had a glimpse through the mists of the ridge beyond. It was a depressing view: 500 feet across a rocky notch to a black gendarme, beyond which the ridge rose another 800 feet to disappear in the swirling snow. Snow would fall intermittently for the next six days, and progress would be made only at great physical expense. We approached two huge cornices with the usual rock climber's attitude of avoiding snow at all costs, and, after wasting two hours, we finally faced

our first cornice crossing, which Long successfully completed, much to his surprise. Long and I then crossed the notch, a slender spine of most unstable rock requiring piton protection and pushed the route to the base of the Black Gendarme. Using several pitons, Long led over this tower, a most impressive fifth-class lead, completed as it was in the failing light and lightly falling snow. It was here that the concept of the *téléferique* was born. On the following morning, in a freezing fog, the ropes were set up across the notch and most of the loads hauled over by nightfall. While the *téléferique* was in action, Evans and I placed fixed lines over the next 800 feet, eventually reaching a level stretch in the ridge, capped by two huge cornices.

It was still snowing as Evans moved out onto the first cornice, the beginning of which was as wide as a boot print. Out of rope at last, he came back and reported that if fortune smiled upon us, we might find a campsite out there somewhere. We turned back at eight P.M. and began the agonizing retreat down the fixed lines in the dark. New snow covered the rock. The *téléferique* lines were still up, and they looked like huge cables with their coating of rime.

July 22. A mass of evil-looking clouds bears down from the north. In a moment of insanity we dismantle camp and move on up to look for Camp II, the impact of which we do not fully suspect. We are not lacking in aggressiveness.

A cornice is a lovely work of nature, graceful . . . artistic; born of the marriage of wind and snow; slender and delicate in youth; powerful, massive and still unpredictable in old age . . . in short, a creation of absolute beauty to be observed from as great a distance as possible. Viewed forty feet away, however, in the fading light which filtered through the snowflakes, with the tents neatly tucked in our packs, the cornice was exciting beyond belief, perceiving as we did that an intimate association was both imminent and unavoidable . . . the perfect tableau for the Spanish saying: Desperation is the mistress of the impossible. Evans' diary brings the scene to mind:

> Al went on another forty feet (it was now seven P.M.) and called for me to come with the shovel. The cornice was incredibly airy and the dropoff amounted to several thousand feet on both sides. I shoveled furiously as it was quite cold, and Frank soon came up to help . . . later the platform was complete, although quite marginal in space and *most* precarious-looking . . . Steck seemed strangely subdued these last few hours.

"Subdued" in this context is a euphemism of the worst sort. I stare at Coale as he plunges the shovel ever closer to the heart of the cornice,

and with each blow I settle deeper and deeper into a psychological morass. "In the name of Osod, 707, what is happening here?" The sparkle in the eye is dulled. "This ridge is sheer madness," comes the pronouncement, and we could not disagree.

Our panic threshhold has soared and we are prepared to accept Camp II on its own terms. As we were to spend seven nights here we soon engaged in searching for the optimum solution to "the falling cornice problem." Tent A, located on small platform B, is reluctantly anchored to cornice C by distraught occupants D using parachute cord E; calculate the elastic limits of this unique biotic system assuming the tents occupy 70% of the available space and the cornice weighs five tons and is falling.

It seemed to us now that there was little hope of reaching the Snow Dome and a glance at Long's face revealed to me his final acceptance of this fact. I thought of the dream he had nourished ever since he first set eyes upon this same ridge during his travels across the Seward Galcier in 1953. How infectious a dream can be I mused as I sat there idly looking through the tunnel door at the cornice wall . . . *the cornice wall:* I was assailed by reality as I noticed that we were eating a rather large hole there and was amused at the concept of this contribution to its eventual collapse. When will it go? It was best that we did not know it was programmed to fall on the afternoon of the 29th and that we would depart for good that same morning. Bacon would be the one to suggest that the tent lines were holding it up.

Part II . . . JOHN EVANS

The Locus of Points of No Return *July 25 to August 1.*

The seeds of defeat had been sown far below Camp I and the preceding week of dangerously hard climbing and load hauling strengthened this mood. Our discomfiture was due more to the bad weather and the enormity of our venture than to the individual technical problems we had met. We were divided at first whether to leave our fixed lines in place for the descent, but finally decided to pull them up after us so that we might continue if some near miracle made this reasonable, desirable or necessary. Consequently we decided that the Snow Dome was the most suitable objective we had at the moment.

The storm abated on the morning of July 25, just long enough to lure us out of the tents. Long and Coale went ahead to advance the route while the rest of us descended to bring up loads from the *téléferique* dump. New powder snow made the going treacherous, and before we

had been out an hour more snow began swirling down. Despite the weather, by ten P.M. all the loads were up and I smugly felt the haulers had won the day. At least so it seemed until the next day when I got a good look at the 900 feet of ridge that Long and Coale had pioneered. Their outstanding progress over that rather formidable stretch resulted largely from the fact that Long forgot to leave our big scoop shovel in camp, and when he began leading, the shovel proved to be a substantial time-saver. Indeed this turned out to be such an efficient tool for cutting steps and knocking off cornices that from this point to the summit plateau the shovel was used on almost every lead.

Again a furious wind rattled the tents through the night and continued the next day. Bacon and I, who were to push the route ahead, cowered in our tent until about noon. The wind was gusting at around 50 knots and I did not envy Paul as he led out from the previous high point. I could watch him as he shoveled his way up out of a sharp notch, cringing before the stinging gale. The wind was blowing up from the nearly invisible camp, and we could occasionally hear the singing and the strains of Steck's harmonica. The boost this incongruous bit of elegance gave our morale was remarkable; a great part of the charm of the mountains surely lies in the climber's awareness of this strange combination of beauty and discomfort.

The following day brought the first clear, calm weather in two weeks, and Long and Steck fixed a record 1800 feet of line. The only major difficulties on this stretch were a few fifth-class rock pitches, but the steepness, the great exposure and the cornices, still made fixed lines indispensable for carrying loads.

On July 28, Coale and I advanced another 300 feet to where we could chop off enough of the ridge crest to make a tent platform. A single snowy spire separated us from a notch which we feared might be a major obstacle, so we made a concerted effort to surmount this point in order to appraise the difficulties to come, alas in vain, for snow flurries and white-out prevented our seeing anything. Exposure seemed all the greater when fog shrouded the glaciers far below. As we returned to Cornice Camp, I for one thought we were surely stopped.

It turned out that my pessimism was totally unwarranted, as 24 hours later we were established at Camp III (Crest Camp). All the loads had been brought up, and the snow crest that had so dismayed me had been negotiated in fine style by Steck and Coale, who pushed the route beyond most of the notch. The third slab above the notch caused particular trouble, though they climbed it free. Looking up from the camp plat-

form I could see a frail spiderweb hanging over the small slab, and above a crimson parka stood out against the snow. We never did agree on the rating for that ten-foot horror. Coale found a foothold which had somehow escaped Steck's scrutiny, and declared the pitch a middling 5.7.

Crest Camp was fully as airy as Cornice Camp but somehow seemed more elegant and less precarious. The next afternoon Long and I located a higher campsite near the top of the Snow Dome, while the others brought up gear. Long had shoveled his way over another 600-foot lead in rapidly closing weather, arriving at a sloping shoulder which he decided would be a better place to camp. We were now just above the start of the traverse at 13,000 feet, and my first thought as I viewed this terrible succession of cornices and towers was that this was the worst of my nightmares.

By the time Long and I had descended in a storm to the site of Crest Camp and returned with our personal gear, the tent platform was nearly ready. When Bacon rammed his ice axe into the snow to reinforce the anchor for the fixed rope, an inch-wide crack appeared, paralleling the rim of the cornice some thirty feet away. Although the cornice would not have taken any of us with it if it had collapsed then, it would have had our tents, a stove, and much of our food, fuel, and sleeping bags. The fixed lines were intentionally left in place all the way back to Camp III, for we felt that the storm was surely going to force our retreat. The point of no return had been set: either we would be across the traverse on August 2, or we would begin the unthinkable retreat to Base Camp. By nine on that night of July 30, the weather had miraculously cleared.

Dawn broke cold and clear. Long and Coale assumed the privilege of having the first go at the traverse. When I regained Camp IV with the last load, I was utterly amazed at the progress the lead team had made. Two tiny dots could be seen about a quarter of a mile out. Long was belaying from a pocket he had excavated in the 65° slope. Coale was 200 feet beyond, working at his stairway to heaven with the diligence of a man who had just realized that the best way off the mountain, from this point, was up.

The route those two put in that day defies adequate description. A high-wire in the sky, artistically daubed with a stiff meringue of snow; a bottomless fantasy of cornices and flutings. They had even burrowed under a sheer ice tower, enlarging a natural tunnel. Carrying loads over this stretch that evening was an unnerving experience as the sun had made their steps treacherous. Of my many mishaps on that little jaunt

one was most memorable. This time I pitched off head-first with my heavy pack and thus enjoyed an exhilerating snap when my Jümar finally picked me up on the fixed line.

We established a dump about halfway out on the traverse, on an incredible island in the sky. This was the first flat place since Base Camp big enough for the tents and we affectionately named it "Yukon Flats." The next day Steck and I pushed the route ahead while the others set up Camp V there, carried loads, and pulled up the fixed lines between Camps IV and V.

The shovel technique, which had been worked out to a science, was the key to our progress. The leader, rarely taking his ice axe out of his pack, used ice hammer, pickets, rock pitons, and the scoop shovel. With the latter he could quickly knock off the smaller cornices or with a single stroke produce a splendid bucket step in the crisp snow. By nightfall we had fixed ropes to the end of the shovel traverse. Only 7000 feet of elevation yet to go! It was the first day of August.

Although there was rejoicing, there was still not much food. We had planned on a 4500-calorie a day allowance but earlier our progress had been so slow that even though we had skimped we now had only enough food for two storm days out of the ten days we figured it would take us to finish the climb.

Burning the Bridge . . . the Forward Retreat. *August 2-6.*

August 2 was exceedingly long, demanding, and profitable. Coale and Long again led. As before, evening found us frantically carving a tiny tent platform in the fading twilight, at the base of a sweeping sickle-shaped arc of snow. By ten P.M. Camp VI, our "Crescent Camp," was occupied.

We found the next day that much of the ridge that had looked so formidable from below was reasonably straightforward. The Sickle went without a hitch, though with a few ice screws at the upper part, and above, a messy looking couloir went fourth class, partly because of a lack of piton cracks. We fixed 2700 feet of line and carried loads to a mid-point dump. Bacon and Long pushed up another 1200 feet the following day, reaching the Upper Sickle at about 16,300 feet. Here they encountered the first and only stretch of the climb where we could move 200 feet unroped with reasonable safety. Camp VII, our "Windy Camp" was established at about 16,500 feet. On the 4th Wilson and I fixed a record 3400 feet of rope, despite a cornice which slipped quietly into the

void as my companion quickly shifted his weight onto the other foot. It was the hauling team, however, that really won the day. By eight P.M. all but three loads had been brought up to Camp VIII at 18,200 feet. We were at the base of a rocky buttress which we had hoped would be our last real climbing problem. Even though most of us were feeling the altitude, Long, Steck, and Bacon made the arduous descent for the remaining loads.

In the morning, Coale and Steck skirted the rather awesome rock over a 45° snow face some 2000-feet-long and composed of soft powder snow. They returned about five P.M. in great elation after fixing lines all the way to the summit plateau at 19,300 feet.

Summit Euphoria — Culmination Ad Nauseam. *August 6-7.*

We broke camp early on August 6 to cross the face before it got too sloppy, and at nine o'clock we had lunch on a sunny col at the top of our ridge. Now we had climbed it — almost 28,000 feet of fixed lines for carrying loads but no direct aid! An exposed snow slope led to a broad col some 500 feet away where we cached our packs and pushed for the east summit some two miles away. Weaker than we realized, we staggered like drunks, and often stumbled waist-deep into crevasses. Crossing the 500-foot-deep notch proved exceptionally arduous but the east summit granted us a view of our ridge that made the side-trip and the grind back well worthwhile.

High clouds were moving in when we reached the packs. After an all-too-brief rest we started up the slope toward the central summit. To our immense relief we found it much closer than anticipated and soon were congratulating each other on top of the second highest point in North America. The temperature was a pleasant 12° F. and the storm never materialized.

Reclaiming our packs, we descended to the broad col between the central and west summits where Bacon and I promptly passed out in the snow while our friends mercifully put up the tents. Long joined the ranks of the unwell that night, and had it not been for his "happy pills" the next morning we might not have moved at all. By the time we reached the west summit at eleven A.M. we all felt considerably better.

Camp X was at 17,000 feet. Another long and taxing day brought us to the base of the King Trench icefall in closing weather where we located the food and fuel that Coale had cached 34 days before. We had just enough time to put up our tents before another storm broke.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA. Mount Logan, St. Elias Range, Yukon Territory, Canada.

ASCENT: First ascent of the central South Ridge and traverse of Mount Logan, July 6-August 9, 1965.

East Summit, 19,600 feet, August 7; Central Peak, 19,850 feet, August 7; West Peak, 19,200 feet, August 8.

PERSONNEL: Richard Long, Allen Steck, Paul Bacon, Frank Coale, John Evans, James Wilson.