

# The West Ridge to Logan

BOYD N. EVERETT, JR.

DURING June and July of 1966 the St. Elias Mountains had unprecedented good weather — some say the best this region has ever had. I can not dispute this statement. Of the twenty-nine days we were on Mount Logan last summer only three were unclimbable. On only one day did more than three inches of snow fall. For those of us who had been on St. Elias the year before it was like being in a different mountain region and at a different season of the year.

Nothing contributed to our success on the west ridge of Logan so much as the weather and the physical condition in which we found the mountain. Good weather meant no delays or changes in organizational plans, an important factor in maintaining morale. It also meant fewer climbing problems. Potential avalanche problems were at a minimum. Cornices did not form on the thousands of feet of knife-edged ridges. Even the 70° rock, free of *verglas*, for once went smoothly in crampons. All of this is not to imply that the west ridge is a trivial route. Indeed, even as we found it, the route required over 10,000 feet of fixed rope and nearly 100 pitons. Nevertheless what problems there were went more easily than could normally be expected. We moved with a speed and efficiency that I have long hoped for but never before achieved. The west ridge is a long climb, so long in fact that in normal conditions we might easily have run out of food.

What is the west ridge of Logan? Essentially it is an eight-mile, west-to-east traverse of King Peak followed by a ten-mile glacier walk to the summit of Logan. The 16,971-foot King Peak is a western subsidiary of Logan. Although there is a 4000-foot drop to King Col between the two, King Peak is definitely a part of the Logan massif. When seen from the east or west, its north and south faces give King Peak the most spectacular and distinctive appearance in the St. Elias Mountains. From the west it looks remarkably like the Matterhorn. From the north or south, however, the illusion is broken and King Peak appears to be what it really is, namely the west ridge of Logan.

Many people have asked how we chose this route. With perhaps a dozen new possibilities left on Logan this would not seem to be the most obvious one. Quite simply our choice was dictated by the fact that customs regulations prevented us from landing in Canada in 1966 and the west ridge was the only new route that was practical, in our time limit, from a landing site on the border. Was this an esthetic route on Logan? In all honesty it was not. An eighteen-mile traverse with a 4000-foot drop — no matter

how interesting technically—is hardly a direct line. It was, however, a fine route on King Peak and it was a new one to Logan.

The expedition consisted of ten men in two groups. The first six, Jim Birney, Art Davidson, Joe Davidson, Dennis Eberl, Gray Thompson and I, traversed King Peak. The second four, Pete Hall, Tom Hall, Emile Nava and Ed Nester, walked up the standard King Glacier route. (The two routes parallel each other.) This second group acted as a support party for those on the west ridge, and also carried food and supplies to King Col at 13,000 feet, from which we all climbed Logan together.

The entire party was landed on the Sella Glacier near the border at about 8000 feet on June 21 by Jack Wilson of Glennallen, Alaska, who did his usual expert job of putting us on the glacier. With the aid of an Arctic Cat, Model 100, in one day we were able to move all of our equipment several miles to Camp I at 10,000 feet. We used this mechanized equivalent of the dog team on the King Glacier up to King Col. While everyone had had to walk the route at least once, this machine saved several days of boring load relaying. After reaching Camp I, a place also known as Sella Cache, we split up, not to reunite for seventeen days.

Gaining the west ridge up a snow and ice face was fairly easy; only the last 400 feet were steep enough ( $45^{\circ}$  to  $50^{\circ}$ ) to require fixed rope. We climbed this face at night, as usual, to get the best snow conditions, but I remember thinking that the snow "felt" unstable. It went well, however, and early the next afternoon Art and Gray climbed the face to put more of the route in along the ridge itself. When they were only 200 feet along the narrow ridge crest, a clean fracture line suddenly opened in the wind-slab crust under Gray's left foot. Instantly a 200-foot-wide section of the face avalanched, obliterating a good part of the route which they had just come up. Although most of the snow we encountered on the expedition was solid, several times we intentionally had to break away wind-slab surfaces on the north side before we could pass safely. Even in good weather, northward-facing slopes seemed to consolidate slowly. It was unnerving at first to watch a foot or more of snow break cleanly from underfoot, but we got used to it after a while. On the very ridge top there was no danger.

The next few days were spent putting the route in and carrying loads to Camp II (11,000 feet) on the ridge, Camp III (12,200 feet) in a small icefall and Camp IV (14,200 feet) at the top of a prominent snow dome. The route between Camps II and III was interesting, with mixed snow, ice and rock on a generally narrow ridge. An occasional bit of ice or rock was fixed with rope. While none of these pitches was severely difficult by purely rock-climbing standards, the rope was needed for speed and safety

while carrying loads. These fixed-rope pitches began to add up. It is a little appalling to realize that by the end we had strung 10,300 feet of rope on this route. Since we were carrying only 6000 feet, we eventually had to retrieve the rope behind us, a practice that I do not like or recommend.

The snow dome to Camp IV was easy but long and tedious, particularly with loads. The one consolation was the magnificent view of King Peak from the top of the dome. Before, the summit of King Peak had been hidden or badly foreshortened, but from Camp IV the Matterhorn character of King Peak was most striking.

The first seven days of the expedition were beautifully clear and windless. Sometimes during the day a heat fog would rise from the Ogilvy Glacier but the only problem this caused was in photography. Finally on June 28 it snowed—for twelve hours. The following two days cleared off so brilliantly that we could pick out routes on mountains 100 miles away. Aside from the foot-and-a-half snowfall of June 28 it never snowed more than three inches at a time on the entire expedition. What an incredible change from the reputation of the mountain and my own previous experience on it!

From the snow dome (Camp IV) there was a mile-and-a-half traverse at 14,000 feet before the final steep rise to the summit of King Peak. This was the one part of the route whose character we did not know before we started. Even Brad Washburn's excellent pictures blank out this section. My own telephotos from St. Elias showed the south side heavily fluted right up to the ridge crest, and we assumed that the ridge was knife-edged and corniced like the traverse at 13,000 feet on Hummingbird Ridge. The first half-mile of the traverse was indeed along a crest mostly less than a foot wide, which dropped off at a 45° to 60° angle on both sides. Amazingly, however, there were almost no cornices. The few there were overhung the south face by only two feet and could easily be knocked off leaving an easy and safe, though sometimes airy, route on the ridge crest. On this whole traverse only one fixed rope was needed. I have no idea why this section was devoid of cornices, or whether it would be in other years. This long section could definitely have given us a lot of trouble had conditions been different.

Camp V (14,400 feet) was placed at the end of the traverse. From this point on both the climbing and the weather altered considerably. A definite weather change set in on July 1 and the next twelve days were continuously very windy and stormy. Even "bad" weather was a relative term, however, since we never had a significant snowfall. Although our efficiency was reduced by the wind on several days, only two days, the 4th and the 12th,

were completely unclimbable.

By July 3 we had put in Camp VI (15,100 feet) and had pushed the route and several loads to a cache at 16,000 feet. There had been another knife-edged ridge followed by a good rock pitch at 14,000 feet, one ice face near 14,900 feet and another at 15,600 feet, and two splendid pitches of clean rock at 16,000 feet. In general we stayed close to the crest of the ridge with occasional detours out onto the ice of the north face. There was no shortage of step-cutting.

We were now ready for the summit of King Peak. At ten o'clock in the morning of July 5 Joe and Art Davidson set off in uncertain weather from Camp VI to put in the route to the top. They moved quickly to our highest point, then slowed as they began to chop steps in an ice face at 16,400 feet. By mid-afternoon they had passed out of sight at about 16,700 feet. Although it was a bright sunny day, it was very windy at Camp VI. Those of us in camp used the wind as an excuse most of the day but eventually we decided that if Joe and Art could climb, we could carry loads too. Gray and Dennis started off but were stopped within a few hundred feet of camp by the most violent winds of the expedition. (My guess is at least 60 mph.) Our movie shows Gray flattened by great slabs of snow three to six inches thick which were peeled from the surface and sent flying by the wind. Retreat to Camp VI was quick.

While we huddled ingloriously in the tents with the poles down, Joe and Art were reaching the summit of King Peak. They too had to contend with the wind but kept moving anyway. Their final climb to the summit included a spectacular 300-foot traverse with drop-offs of over 60° on both sides at 16,700 feet, followed by a climactic rock pitch, which Joe led. It was difficult under perfect conditions and a superb lead in that wind. Reaching the summit around seven P.M. they were rewarded with spectacular sunset views in all directions. There is hardly a better place from which to see Logan and the other major peaks of the St. Elias Mountains.

The wind continued for the next few days but at a diminished velocity. On the 6th the whole party crossed over the summit of King Peak and set up Camp VII just beyond the summit (16,900 feet). The next two days were spent bringing up loads from the cache at 16,000 feet and in preparing the route for our eventual 4000-foot descent from King Peak to King Col.

Meanwhile the King Glacier party of four was getting restless at King Col. They considered climbing King Peak from King Col but we had not left them fixed rope or pitons—without which any ascent of King Peak

would be a marginal undertaking. Therefore they turned their attention instead to a prominent but unclimbed 17,300-foot peak on the Logan massif directly north of King Peak, which we later named "Queen Peak." Ed Nester and Pete and Tom Hall climbed the mountain on July 8. Their route took them up the glacier to 15,500 feet and then up the southeast ridge. The 14-hour climb was not difficult technically but it was a first and was a consolation prize for being coolies in support of our climb.

On King Peak we had some excitement of a different nature on July 8. Joe and Gray were putting in the descent route while the rest of us were working near the summit. After rappelling a nearly vertical 200-foot rock wall at 16,500 feet, the pair traversed along a less exposed snow and rock ridge, climbing continuously in order to conserve fixed rope. Underlying a thin layer of surface snow was hard ice, on which crampons would not hold. Gray suddenly found himself on his rear end sliding down the 60° north face. Although Joe was hardly in an ideal stance for belaying, somehow he caught the fall from a standing position — though not before Gray had fallen 50 feet down the rocky face. Gray remembers every bump of the fall but he blacked out for five minutes after stopping. Fortunately he suffered no permanent head injury. He had a dandy hip bruise and a slightly sprained ankle, but these did not interfere with his later ascent of Logan. No further attempt was made to conserve fixed rope.

July 9 was the most eventful day of the expedition, the day we hoped to descend from King Peak. We had fixed ropes to the altitude of 16,200 feet at the top of a 60° ice face that can be prominently seen in all pictures of King Peak from the east. From pictures and articles it had appeared that this face was about 600 vertical feet high.\* It was closer to 1600 feet. Art and I started off in the morning with 1800 feet of rope, which we assumed was more than enough to finish the route. The other four were to follow with all their personal gear at noon, the fixed ropes presumably being set up by them. Though windless for the first time in several days, heat fog limited our visibility all morning. Art and I started descending the ice face, confident that a few rappels would get us down to cramponable snow.

By two P.M. we had descended about 1200 feet of rope and were beginning to wonder whether the rope (and our hardware) would last. The angle had eased from 60° plus to some 45° and the solid blue ice had changed to snow but this was so hard that steps could not be kicked in it. Further rappels were needed. In the fog the bottom of the face seemed no

---

\*We were particularly misled by the picture of King Peak in *A.A.J.*, 1953, 8:3, opposite p. 418, taken at about 14,500 feet and not 15,500 feet as stated.

closer than before although we thought the easier ground visible in the photos could not be far away.

An unexpected blast hit me in the middle of a rappel. It was immediately followed by a steady wind as strong as any we had yet encountered. Within seconds the fog blew clear, revealing a sunny but violently wind-swept King Peak above us. Setting up the next rappels was not easy. Once the wind had begun, there was no question about returning to Camp VII on the summit of King Peak—even for Art and me who had no sleeping gear with us. We had to get down. We ran out of fixed rope and were still on the face. It looked as though one more rope length would get us down to easier ground. Art and I untied from the climbing rope and tied it into the fixed-rope system. It was still not enough. The other four caught up to us and we all bunched up on the face, hanging to the fixed rope, with our backs to the wind. Luckily Jim Birney had retrieved 300 feet of line for his personal use after the expedition and was carrying it in his pack, but did not keep "his" rope very long. This one more length was enough.

We were on the face exposed to the wind for nearly six hours. Finally off the fixed rope and on easier ground, everyone felt a tremendous let-down. Although we could see the tentsite of our friends at King Col 1500 apparently easy feet below us, it did not take much persuasion to stop and set up a temporary camp (Camp VIII) at 14,500 feet. Not even the fact that we had almost no food was enough to push us on. The physical and emotional drain showed in the few photos that we took that night and the following morning. Until he experiences it, the non-expedition climber may find it difficult to understand how only six hours of wind can be such a strain, but wind remains the one environmental factor against which modern equipment gives inadequate protection.

The temperature during the night was a mild 0° and the bivouac for Art and me in two down jackets each was quite comfortable. The morning dawned clear, boosting the morale of our hungry, tired party. A leisurely, sunny walk down to King Col was enlivened only when Gray fell 15 feet into a small hidden crevasse.

Our next objective was the ascent of Logan, but first, the gear remaining on the summit of King Peak had to be retrieved. This gave Tom and Pete Hall a chance to make the climb, which they did on July 13 with Art Davidson. Even with fixed ropes and moderate packs their ascent took eighteen hours, proof, if any is needed, that an ascent of King Peak from the east is not trivial.

The weather from July 13 to the end of the expedition was almost con-

tinuously perfect. From King Col (Camp IX) we moved steadily up the original 1925 route to camps at 15,500 feet (Camp X), 17,400 feet (Camp XI) and finally 17,500 feet (Camp XII) beneath the west summit of Logan and about four miles horizontally from the central and highest summit.

July 17 was the summit day. With everyone well acclimatized and the weather favorable, we moved easily across the hard-packed summit plateau. Even with two lengthy rest stops we reached the top in a little over six hours at 1:30 P.M. The first to near the actual top waited so that all ten of us could go to the highest point together. Because the summit of Logan is quite small, this took a little manipulation. We stayed on top nearly two hours, photographing and playing a now famous hand of bridge. A light breeze and a mild 10° temperature were not uncomfortable in the afternoon sun. Originally we had considered climbing all three of Logan's summits, but sitting on the highest point, somehow we lost our motivation. And so we stayed a little longer and enjoyed the magnificent view in all directions.

The ascent of Logan took twenty-seven days. The descent was accomplished via the King Glacier in one long day that extended far into the night. After unloading our packs onto the snowcat at King Col, we wandered down the mountain at leisure. The walk in the cool quiet evening, unburdened by a load, was a very relaxing and satisfying way to end an expedition successful in all ways. Every climbing goal had been achieved and achieved safely. While the traverse of King Peak was the major climbing accomplishment of the expedition, the most satisfying thing for me as leader was the fact that all ten men, the largest party ever to have climbed Logan, reached the summit together.

*Summary of Statistics.*

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

ASCENTS: King Peak, 16,971 feet, July 5 and 6, 1966 (whole King Peak party), first ascent by west ridge: first traverse completed on July 10; July 13, 1966 (A. Davidson, P. and T. Hall), third ascent from the east.

"Queen Peak", 17,300 feet, July 8, 1966 (E. Nester, P. and T. Hall), first ascent.

Mount Logan, 19,850 feet, July 17, 1966 (whole party).

PERSONNEL: Boyd N. Everett, Jr., *leader*; Joseph K. Davidson, *co-leader*; James M. Birney, Arthur L. Davidson, Jr., Dennis Eberl, Graham R. Thompson (King Peak party); Minard (Pete) L. Hall, Thomas H. Hall, Emile B. Nava, Edward O. Nester (King Glacier party).