Mount Seattle—From Sea to Summit

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"WHEN I saw the look on the pilot's face, I really got scared." Herb Staley spoke for all of us after our wild ride under the great tidewater ice-cliffs of the Hubbard Glacier. Our converted World-War-II landing barge had been helpless in the iceberg-infested tidal rip as along with the rest of the Pacific Ocean we swept into Russell Fjord. We had barely cleared the channel when a great pillar of ice had toppled off the glacier face and fallen some 300 feet into the sea. The surge rode over icebergs as large as our barge. The craft had looked sturdy enough when we chartered it in Yakutat, but when we finally anchored off the big, snow-covered alluvial plain to the east of the Hubbard Glacier, we discovered that the double hull had been pierced by the ice, Titanic fashion, and we were sinking. We unloaded our gear as fast as we could to unweight the hull and ferried it ashore in a skiff. Our tidewater Base Camp looked bleak to us already, but to make matters worse, it began to rain.

So started the second stage of our expedition to the St. Elias Range, in which we hoped to make the first ascent of 10,185-foot Mount Seattle. The first stage had been in Yakutat, Alaska, where we sat for five days in almost continual bad weather. There were six climbers: leader Fred Beckey, Eric Bjornstad, Herb Staley, Jim Stuart and I, all of Seattle, and Art Davidson of Anchorage. In addition, two members of a Seattle broadcasting company were with us: cameraman Al Stenson and radioman Stan Carlson, to make a color documentary film and maintain radio contact with Seattle during the course of the climb. Sponsorship from Seattle was partly attributable to the name of the peak, which sounded like a gag but actually had been adopted by the International Boundary Commission in the 1906-1908 border surveys. Mount Seattle is located about ten miles from tidewater at the head of Disenchantment Bay and is a pivotal point on the Alaska-Yukon frontier. Though not a high peak by St. Elias standards, it has the unique advantage of being accessible from a base camp at sea level. We all felt this was the most adventurous way to make the ascent. In 1897 the Duke of the Abruzzi first climbed Mount St. Elias, also starting from Yakutat by fishing boat. Mount Seattle had been approached on two

previous occasions from the sea, and Bradford Washburn's party had skirted it from the inland (north) side during its 1935 survey.

From our few aerial photos, it had first appeared that the most feasible route was the north ridge, and actually until we arrived in Yakutat, this was our intended approach. There were no ski-wheel planes in Yakutat and in the time it takes a pilot to fly down from another port, the fickle local weather could change drastically. During a brief clearing shortly after our arrival, on a reconnaissance flight we discovered two things: first, the north ridge was heavily corniced, exposed to the wind, and barren of campsites; and second, the south ridge could possibly be reached overland from Russell Fjord. This approach required crossing a feeder glacier called the Variegated, which was known to be surging, but a narrow channel existed between its terminus and the rampaging Hubbard Glacier. (The latter is a huge ice sheet, 90 miles long, 10 miles wide in places, and with six miles of tidewater cliffs over 300-feet high.) The approach had several unknowns, and the south ridge itself was technically more difficult than the north. Yet it would make us independent of bush pilots, and it offered us a chance to make a major ascent right from salt water. We accordingly changed our strategy and went about Yakutat looking for a fishing boat, Abruzzi fashion. On Friday, May 7, our Base Camp was established on the shore of Russell Fjord.

The change in strategy created problems, of course. For one thing we had neither the raingear nor the tents for a tidewater base camp. We had to scrounge tarps and old plastic sheets to make the camp livable. Al Stenson and Stan Carlson were to spend the next two weeks in this damp, dreary spot as the rest of us moved off up the mountain. Wasting as little time here as possible, on Saturday the six climbers set off in freezing rain to ferry food and equipment across the alluvial plain to Camp I. Its site was to be as far as we could reach that day, and it turned out to be at 1600 feet about six miles from Base Camp. It was an important day because we were able to find a route over the surging Variegated Glacier and to work our way along its lateral edge for over three miles with little difficulty. After covering our cache as best we could, we beat a fast retreat to Base Camp and spent the evening trying to dry out over Primus stoves. Our snowshoes were a mess after one day in deep, wet snow and in the slushy bogs in the alluvial plain. From then on, snowshoe repair became an almost daily chore. On Sunday it rained even harder, but the weather pattern began to reveal itself to us on Monday, when it became warm and clear. The succeeding days were half good, half bad weather in roughly three-day cycles.

The advance team of Bjornstad and myself set out to try to reach Upham Col (5200 feet), our site for Camp II and the place we wished an airdrop. The distance was some nine miles and because of deep snow and heavy loads proved too much. After stopping for the night at the base of the 2000-foot slopes leading to the col, the next day we continued to Camp II just as the weather cycle was changing for the worse. There was barely time to radio for the airdrop before the ceiling began to lower. It was a lengthy procedure. A seaplane had to be radioed into Base Camp and the supplies transferred back to Yakutat to a landplane. (The seaplane's pusher propeller prevented its making the drop.) By the time the food and gear had been flung out, it was snowing. Consequently the airdrop covered some ten acres, but Bjornstad and I dug out all but one food can before the storm arrived in earnest and obliterated all marks.

The storm raged all night and most of the following day, but toward evening Art Davidson and Jim Stuart arrived out of the mist at Camp II. We decided that while Beckey and Staley would move up from Base to Camp II the next day, the rest of us would reconnoiter to the base of the south ridge itself, our proposed site for Camp III. After dropping 400 feet down the steep north slopes of Upham Col, we began a long swinging contour of the two tremendous cirques which are the source of the rugged unnamed glacier that flows beneath the 7000-foot south face of Mount Seattle. It was strikingly clear — a good day for exploration of this hidden country where no one had ever set foot. The second cirque was a thing of rare beauty. Above the site of Camp III, the south ridge was streaked with couloirs; great blue tongues of ice hung down from a shoulder 3000 feet above. Even veteran Fred Beckey later described these cirques as some of the most beautiful glacial scenery he had ever seen. Reconnaissance completed, the advance party checked radio contact with Base Camp and then carefully flagged the two-mile route back to Camp II. Meanwhile, Beckey and Staley performed the considerable achievement of marching from Base Camp to Camp II in one long day, arriving just before dark as the weather cycle again changed.

In the next 36 hours, two feet of snow fell and kept crowding the small two-man tents even more onto us. By this time we were so attuned to the three-day weather cycles that when Saturday brought its expected clearing, we were ready for it. We made two fast relays to Camp III, the second one with tents. Then on Sunday with the weather holding fair, we selected a couloir system and climbed to the exposed crest of the south ridge. After fixing some 400 feet of handlines to speed our descent, we returned that same day with a second relay to establish Camp IV, our high camp at 7200

feet. Knowing we were now at the mercy of savage winds, we anchored the tents with boulders pried from the ridge crest.

On Monday, May 16, we expected the weather to cycle for the worse, but at six A.M. it was reasonably clear. We therefore prepared ourselves for the attempt on the summit, some 3000 feet above, an anticipated ten-hours' climb. Since we could not keep to the crest above Camp IV without encountering precipitous rock, we traversed west off the ridge and followed some steep, Eiger-like, snow and ice-filled couloirs to regain the ridge crest at 8500 feet. It was now noon, and it appeared that the weather cycle was infallible after all. First a white-out and then it began to snow though fortunately without wind. A difficult rock step slowed us to a crawl; we chopped steps on the icy ridge crest above to a corniced knife edge just below the summit. It proved quite straightforward and the absence of wind was a blessing. More step-chopping on steep ice, and at four P.M. we were on the summit. The increasing storm hid the beauty of the St. Elias Range.

We speeded our descent by rappelling off the summit, the rock step, and for 450 feet down the couloir. The return to Camp IV was hazardous and once we lost our way coming out of the couloir. We found our tents finally at 9:30 as an eerie twilight briefly heralded the onslaught of the worst wind storm yet. It began in the night and blew all the next day. We feared for exploding tents and ate nothing but the powder snow that penetrated every pin hole to cover our sleeping bags. After fifteen hours the storm abated and Wednesday morning's skies were clear. We radioed Base Camp and requested Al Stenson to call for a plane to fly over the peak and photograph the route. After clearing out Camps III and II on our way, we staggered heavily loaded into Camp I, where we spent the night before continuing to Base Camp.

We left Base Camp the way we had come, but we made sure it was slack tide this time. Our adventure was successful, and to make it complete, we had some 4000 feet of 16-mm color film out of which was eventually made a high quality documentary movie. Mount Seattle, despite its civic connotations, was no joke. We feel that our ascent right from the sea should place Mount Seattle on the same honor roll as its loftier and better known neighbors.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Southeastern Alaska.

FIRST ASCENT: Mount Seattle, 10,185 feet, May 16, 1966.

PERSONNEL: Fred Beckey, *leader;* Eric Bjornstad, Arthur Davidson, Donald J. Liska, Herbert Staley, James Stuart.