

# The Winter 1967 Mount McKinley Expedition

GREGG BLOMBERG

IT WAS still a dream. The roar of the plane winging its way toward McKinley seemed to make it more unreal. Below, the last traces of Alaska's white forests gave way to snow-covered foothills. A year's fervent planning had preceded this moment. The press of gear on my lap and the ebullience of Dave Johnston in the seat behind me brought reality into focus.

The usual "what have we forgotten" thoughts did not plague me. I knew if we had forgotten some item of equipment it was because it had not yet been made. I felt sure our gear was adequate in quality and quantity. The only uncertainty was the weather. With reasonable weather and snow conditions, we could not help but make the summit.

Banking into the southeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier, we flew over a ridge with fantastic ice flutings clinging tenaciously to its steep sides. The plane shook loose an avalanche Mount Hunter had prepared for our arrival. A few moments later we stepped into the crisp, invigorating world we would inhabit for the next 40-odd days. Dave and I enthusiastically shook hands; the adventure was at last under way. Two by two, the men arrived with loads of equipment and we set to work establishing our first foothold on the peak. We would attempt to climb Mount McKinley by its oft-trodden West Buttress, feeling that the lack of technical difficulty would be compensated for by the weather. The odds seemed so unfair. Against the awesome scale and indifference of such a magnificent peak, we hoped to prevail with eight men and a puny pile of equipment.

The crew was a study in differences. Dave Johnston: a six-foot-seven, smiling, happy mountaineer with an impressive list of successful mountaineering ventures to his credit. Art Davidson: the amiable, intense fellow, who established the idea and brought the crew together. Jacques "Farine" Batkin: a first-rate French alpinist—quiet, unobtrusive, but the strongest of the party. Shiro Nishimae: a solid five-foot-three Japanese whose quiet methodical approach was an invaluable asset. George Wichman: our German-born physician whose chief preoccupation when

not climbing was kidding us all unmercifully. John Edwards: a biologist from New Zealand with an intense love for the mountains. Switzerland's contribution was Ray Genet, a compact, powerful, determined, happy member of the team. And myself: organizer and entrepreneur.

The darkness of our first night was no match for the intense happiness and comradeship inside the tents. Our laughter spilled out onto the snow with the light of the Coleman lanterns. The jabber of the group in their many accents was music to my ears.

The weather was superb, the firm snow far better than we had dared hope for. We felt it essential to take every advantage the mountain afforded us. By mutual agreement, we climbed unroped on the flat open expanse of the Kahiltna Glacier. We would resort to the rope when we felt conditions warranted it. It was beautiful to pack along at your own pace, thinking your own thoughts, stopping to enjoy the magnificent panorama. It was not only beautiful, it was effective. In three days we had moved five miles to a new camp. It was not only effective, it was deadly. Our press release read:

**On January 31, 1967, Jacques (Farine) Batkin, mountaineer from Paris, France, died in an unroped fall into a crevasse while attempting the first winter ascent of Mt. McKinley.**

Bringing his last load up to camp, Johnston dropped his pack, noticing Jacques about a quarter-mile behind. Dave joined the others setting up the camp. After a bit, he glanced back down the slope. He could see me, moving with the heaviness of a good day's end, but where was Farine? Perplexed, all at the camp began nervously casting about for ropes and rescue gear. Those watching saw my pace quicken. My first shout electrified the camp. In an instant, the others were at the crevasse, Dave was lowered into it and Farine was hauled out, the whole cycle taking less than half an hour.

That evening there were seven of us in the two tents, yet how very alone each of us felt.

We awoke to a storm which made it necessary to move down-glacier a mile and consolidate our position. We were too busy to think, building an igloo and moving supplies up to the camp. During the storm, we discovered we could still function effectively as a team. Our statement to the press continued:

**Jacques Batkin died in the pursuit of a winter ascent in which he truly believed. We will continue the attempt with his spirit and presence very much in mind.**

Three days after Farine's accident, John Edwards and I, while packing loads, spied a raven happily exercising his freedom high on the peak.

We had discussed the ravens, who had ripped open some of our food caches, and had decided they were a bad omen. Seeing the giant bird's seeming mastery of his fate, I asked John if he thought ravens were a bad sign. He said he thought not, and an instant later disappeared in a puff of snow, taking a 40-foot header into a completely covered crevasse in an area we considered safe. The rope caught him in mid-flight; luckily he was uninjured. The rescue, complicated by soft snow, took nearly three hours. That evening John again reassessed his opinion of ravens.

A few days of mediocre weather were followed by eight glorious days and crisp nights. At the beginning of this period, we established a three-unit igloo-plex at 10,300 feet below Kahiltna Pass and christened it Camp III. By the end of it, we were installed in Camp V at 14,200 feet below the West Buttress.

At Camp V we built two igloos. Our technique was steadily improving and the igloos at this camp were the warmest yet, each taking about four hours to build. They were constructed almost entirely above the snow, with entrances below floor level. Illuminated by Coleman lanterns and candles, they were a cheery environment indeed. The igloo camps were an important facet of our tactics. They provided a safe, warm retreat regardless of the weather and were permanent camps for our descent.

Camp V lay in a south-facing basin, receiving the winter sun's full advantage. The temperature was frequently as warm as  $-10^{\circ}\text{F}$ . The views were incredibly beautiful. The sun's movement and low clouds gave us an ever-changing panorama of contrasting sunlight and shade. The sunsets commanded one's full attention.

Two days of inclement weather provided a chance for a needed rest. We sat comfortably in the igloos, reading, writing, chatting and resting for the push ahead.

Above camp was an 1800-foot  $30^{\circ}$  to  $40^{\circ}$  slope which culminated in 600 feet of ice of varying consistency. On this section fixed lines left by previous parties were still in usable condition. Relaying our supplies, we gradually worked our way to 17,300 feet where we established our highest camp, first using a tent and later chipping a snow cave into the almost rock-solid snow.

On February 26 we left Camp V late in the day. The West Buttress responded to our crampons with creaks and groans, as though it took pleasure in having its back scratched. Above the buttress we enjoyed a beautiful headlamp-lighted scramble along the ridge. That evening was easily one of the most perfect I have spent in the mountains. Moonlight

from behind the peak backlit the fantastic landscape of the Ruth Gorge. Far out on the plain the lights of Anchorage were visible in the clear still air. Arriving at camp we crammed into the snow cave and hoped for summit weather.

The sun brought with it good weather. Our spirits were not dampened by the cold ritual of strapping on crampons and roping up. The climb from the ridge to Denali Pass is a bit of a grind, a long sloping traverse which gradually gets steeper and more exposed. It is almost impossible to strap one's crampons onto the vapor-barrier boots tightly enough for this kind of ankle punishment, necessitating frequent stops for readjustment.

Above Denali Pass the climb is far more reasonable, but we noted with decreasing joy that the summit had clouded over. About 1000 feet from the summit, a conference was held in a whiteout. We had no alternative but descent. By the time we reached Denali Pass the peak was again clear . . . Man, that hurt! Too late to try again, we would have to hope for another chance on the morrow.

The peak had tricked us, and a depression set in that caused a late start the next morning. George Wichman and John Edwards decided to sit it out and spent the day enlarging the snow cave.

The five of us reached Denali Pass at 3:30 P.M. Shiro Nishimae did not feel fit and did not relish an almost certain bivouac, and so he and I, his rope-mate, prepared a bivouac site for the others and returned to camp.

The next morning, Shiro and I again set off for the summit, this time with more resolve. As we climbed, the reason the others had not yet descended became increasingly apparent. A high wind was funneling through the pass with a deafening roar. With the wind at our backs we climbed to within a few feet of the pass but the fury of the storm made it suicide to go further. Although Art, Ray and Dave were bivouacked a few yards away, we could not reach them.

Back at camp we assessed the situation. They were about to spend their second night bivouacked at 18,300 feet in frightful conditions. They had warm sleeping bags, a stove full of fuel but less than two days food. All in all, they were in a pretty grim predicament.

The wind blew continuously. On the fourth day, John and I began the descent to Base Camp. If the Base Camp radio would function, we would try to get a helicopter to take us up to the pass at the first opportunity. Shiro and George would follow us down in a day and a half. If the wind let up before we reached the radio, they could render assistance. Although this meant further fragmentation of the party, we felt it was the only practical plan.

We descended to Camp V where the storm forced us to wait yet another day. The following day we stamped a signal in the snow to call our bush pilot which was misread by another pilot as an emergency signal, starting a whole series of rescue operations, which culminated in thirteen Washington mountaineers coming to our rescue.

After a bivouac on March 5, we reached Base Camp and radioed out. On March 7 an Army plane sighted three climbers descending from the pass. The summit trio spent the night at Camp V and the following day they, and John and I were plucked from the peak by Army choppers and flown to Talkeetna. Shiro and George were picked up in Camp III on March 9.

Ray Genet, Dave Johnston and Art Davidson had reached the summit at approximately seven P.M. on February 28. There was a gusty wind of 35 to 40 miles per hour and the thermometer registered  $-62^{\circ}\text{F}$ . They hollowed out a hole in the snow and buried Jacques Batkin's hat as a tribute to him.

Returning to the pass around midnight, they decided to spend the night there. That decision began an ordeal which lasted seven days. During the storm their main sustenance was courage and determination. Their packs blew away with a portion of their food and Art's anorak, but they dug in behind some sheltering rocks, climbed into their bags and waited. During momentary lulls, Dave scavenged around and found a bottle of gas he had left at the pass in 1963 (the finest example of preplanning I have ever known), plus some scraps of Army K-rations. Though they all suffered frostbite, Art subsequently lost half a toe and Dave, portions of several toes.

We found Mount McKinley in winter to be no more difficult than we imagined. The climb, beginning on January 29, took a total of 40 days. Temperatures averaged approximately  $-20^{\circ}\text{F}$ . to and including our fifth camp at 14,200 feet. At Camp VI (17,300 feet) and above, the average was  $-35^{\circ}\text{F}$ . to  $-40^{\circ}\text{F}$ .

#### *Summary of Statistics.*

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENT: Mount McKinley, 20,320 feet, via West Buttress, First winter ascent, February 28, 1967 (Davidson, Genet, Johnston).

PERSONNEL: Gregg Blomberg, *leader*; Jacques Batkin, Arthur L. Davidson, John Edwards, Raymond Genet, David P. Johnston, Shiro Nishimae, George Wichman.