Mount Huntington—East Ridge and North Face

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SEEING the mass of Mount Huntington standing up from the glacier like a snow-covered, jagged knife, I thought, "That's what a mountain should look like." By the time our party had made the Catacomb-East Ridge ascent of McKinley, I had etched Huntington on my mind, had begun probing its defenses and had taken a lot of photographs from our vantage on the other side of the glacier. It was a challenge; not only a mountain that "looked like a mountain," extremely well defended, with no "easy way" up, but one that through a combination of sub-arctic weather, continual avalanche dangers and difficult technical problems had kept all but the most stalwart of climbers away.

In 1964 a French team led by Lionel Terray had made the summit after an extremely grueling ascent up the northwest ridge.[1] Their ascent had been stalled again and again by avalanche and weather conditions, was threatened when Terray's arm was injured in a fall, had demanded everything the party had to give, and had rewarded them with a few minutes' view of fog-like clouds from the summit. Huntington's only other conquest was in 1965[2], when Dave Roberts led a Harvard team to the summit after forty-two days of effort up a beautifully conceived rock and ice route that intercepted the French ridge near the top. That climb, recorded in the book, *Mountain of My Fear,* was marred by the death of one party member in a rapelling accident.

In his book, Roberts dismissed the east ridge as a route that could "put a party in a perpetual state of nervousness." He continued by saying that "the east ridge, though perhaps not more difficult than the French route, was bound to be more hazardous: huge hanging glaciers, the most dangerous formations imaginable, sprawled obscenely down the ridge." The possibilities for a first ascent following this hazardous route of the east ridge did not seem remote from my vantage across the glacier. Roughly I sketched out a route than began with a landing on the south side of Huntington, leading to an easy access to the east ridge, then up the ridge and onto the north face to the summit. That was in 1969.

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[1] See *A.A.J.*, 1965, 14:2, pages 289 to 298.

[2] See *A.A.J.*, 1966, 15:1, pages 1 to 7.

My slides of the mountain from McKinley generated interest for the 1971 Huntington expedition and I easily put together a party. The drive to Alaska from Seattle was little more than a gearing-up for the let-down. Six of us, packed in one car, made the long haul in four exhausting days. The pilot had written that he would land us on the south side of Huntington but once in the air said it would be impossible. He set us down on the north side, much steeper and avalanche prone. Base Camp was on the Ruth Glacier. After a couple of days of scouting, the route was fixed from the Ruth up the north face to a col that links the Rooster Comb to Huntington. We made a carry to the col before it began to snow heavily. Then, at Base Camp, we built igloos, read and waited. When the sun finally came out five days later, heavy avalanching began. That night, as we were preparing to climb, an avalanche roared into Base, ripping one tent to shreds, blowing the other two and their occupants across the glacier and into the latrine hole, scattering equipment over three-quarters of a mile, and covering everything with a layer of snow. One sewn-together tent had to serve for the entire party, none of them seriously injured. The next day we all finally made it to the col and established a camp with five days of food. After scouting the ridge, which had bad snow conditions, we got together on the col to discuss the route. Morale was low, and the majority voted to abandon the climb.

When I put out feelers for a 1972 Huntington expedition, I learned that Frank Zahar was putting a party together and we joined forces. He had already persuaded Rocky Keeler to come. Roger Derryberry went to film the climb and to test equipment designs. We found a fifth member in John Waterman.

After our arrival in Alaska, the weather was clear, but our pilot, Cliff Hudson, from Talkeetna, was for twelve days unable to land despite several attempts. Clouds were piled up against the south side of McKinley, obscuring the glacier below Huntington's north face.

The clouds finally lifted on June 25 and the expedition began. John and I were landed on the Ruth Glacier, near the previous year's site at about 6000 feet. Frank and Roger arrived next and we spent the rest of the day carrying equipment two miles up the glacier to our Base Camp, away from the north face avalanche danger. Rocky flew in the next day, and Hudson solemnly shook each of our hands, saying, "I hope to see you guys again. Good luck!" He had a clear idea of what we were up against. It was perfect weather for sun tans, but the heat was playing hell with the snow; Huntington was avalanching continually. This, an echo of the previous year, was to be a problem throughout the climb.

On Monday John and Frank began the climb, moving up towards the col and fixing seven leads of 200 feet. On Tuesday Rocky and I extended the lead up to the col while the others carried to a cache at the previous day's high point. Two vertical bulges in the icefall were free-climbed, using the Chouinard hammer and ice-axe method.

The following day John and I were carrying heavy loads on the lower slopes. While traversing not clipped into the fixed line, I slipped. We had been about fifteen feet apart with 200 feet of slack rope between us. Hard ice foiled my first two attempts at self-arrest. By the time my third self-arrest succeeded, the rope had almost completely paid out. I had stopped at the edge of a 120-foot vertical drop-off, over which I would obviously have pulled John.

With the route to the col completed and ropes fixed, Frank, Roger and Rocky spent the next two days carrying from Base to a cache halfway up to the col and established Col Camp at 8800 feet. They said that avalanches were falling so continuously that it sounded like a waterfall. Meanwhile John and I worked above the col, the most arduous section of the climb, a series of wind-moulded ice and snow flutings extending up to the main east ridge. The slope varied mostly from 50° to 70° but occasionally reached the vertical, with soft, deep snow on the steeper slopes. The deep snow was tiresome. Front-pointing on other sections of extremely hard ice required strong ankles. We cached our loads on the top of a ten-foot double cornice that offered a good resting spot. While we rappelled down, the rising sun flashed on all the neighboring peaks while the glacier was blanketed by clouds.

Two nights later, when Roger, John and I carried the last loads to the col, we found four of our 200-foot fixed ropes wiped out. Avalanches, the continued warm weather and the difficult flutings above were narrowing our chances.

That night Rocky and Frank worked further up the flutings, finding similar conditions to what we had. Eventually they climbed a long couloir to a cornice at 9700 feet and returned to the col. They had carried the lead up to the most difficult obstacle, a series of cornices and couloirs which ended near a corniced wall which defended the east ridge proper. Despite the extreme difficulties, I felt encouraged. In my journal I remarked on the consistently high standard of climbing shown by everyone thus far.

John and I left on Sunday night for what we hoped would be the final push through the flutings and onto the easier slopes of the east ridge proper. We jümared the fixed rope pitches to reach the cornice where progress had ended the day before. For three hours I belayed, shivering with cold, while John moved around two cornices, using direct aid up a 40-foot hard blue ice wall and climbed onto more flutings. I took the lead, traversed around a fluting and into a gully which ended at a corniced fluting below the final corniced ridge. I shinnied up the 80° fluting and traversed to below a vertical wall blocked by a cornice mushroom. The soft, unstable snow on the wall made it awkward to pass or stand on while attempting to knock away at the cornice. After I had placed both pickets and ice screws for protection, John took the lead, placed even more points of protection and finally jammed one arm

into a hole under the cornice so that he could balance and punch a hole in the cornice. He then wormed has way through the hole and out onto the main ridge. The hole through the defending cornice proved to be the crux of the climb. At first it was too small even to maneuver the pack through, and John had to enlarge it.

Although John and the pack were up, he wanted to hammer a rock piton in before bringing me up. He disappeared, leaving me on the edge of nowhere. When forty-five minutes later he had not returned, I began edging up without protection. Just then he came back and lowered me a fixed line to jümar up. He had traversed along the side of the ridge to a zigzagging couloir leading to a rock formation with piton cracks. I led up the couloir to a cornice and traversed under it along a shelf. I fixed a line for John, who dropped down under a rock formation and front-pointed up *verglas* to soft snow and another rock. I then led up some hard ice over a slight bulge to the top of a domed cornice at 10,400 feet, the site for High Camp.

The sun made the descent dangerously exciting. Most of the anchors had to be replaced before rappelling. On the aid section we had a tricky pendulum to the flutings. During our well-earned rest at the col, Frank, Roger and Rocky carried supplies to our new High Camp. On Monday we made a final carry to High Camp, settled in and rested in preparation for the push to the summit.

High Camp, two tents and a snow wall atop a huge cornice, was a good spot to spend a long day resting. The sunny, unobscured view gave Roger the opportunity to do a lot of filming. With the exception of the deteriorating snow conditions, everything was going for us. Above us lay the crossing onto the north face from the ridge, and the summit.

We made a staggered start for the top. Frank, Roger and Rocky left two hours ahead. They led up and around a series of up and down cornices that continued for five or six 200-foot pitches. The route then moved under a large cornice wall onto a lip between two crevasses. We jumped one and then traversed out onto the north face proper, 1000 feet from the summit. The slope angled steeply upward, and so we front-pointed, exchanging leads every 200 feet until we came to an overhanging wall. John traversed across its base to a notch. Rocky, with the use of aid, climbed a slightly overhanging snow and ice pitch out of the notch and onto a steep slope which continued to a large crevasse below the final summit pyramid. Frank led the final pitch up to a large flat cornice fifty feet below the highest summit cornice. After a fourteen-hour push and ten days of climbing we walked together the final yard to the summit.

The anticlimatic descent proved difficult, mainly because of the work of the sun and avalanches on our fixed ropes and anchors. We spent a night and a day at High Camp, beginning to realize that something

grand in our lives was already an experience, a memory rather than imagination.

Much of the rope was anchored only at the top and bottom since all the middle anchors had melted out and could not be reset. The snow flowed all around us as we rappelled down.

We rested at the col, discussing whether or not to attempt the Rooster Comb on the other side of the col. Mistakenly thinking the French had done it the year before, we passed up a "grand finale." The bottom section was in worse shape. The avalanching had been steady during the days of our ascent, obliterating most of the fixed line and forcing us to free climb down the final slopes. The rest at Base Camp lasted only a few hours before Cliff Hudson flew in with congratulations and a couple of six-packs.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range, South of Mount McKinley.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Huntington, 12,240 feet, via the East Ridge and the North Face, July 5, 1972.

TECHNICAL DATA: 7000 feet of fixed rope, 40 pickets, 4 rock pitons, 40 ice screws and ice pitons, 7 snow flukes.

PERSONNEL: Niels-Henrik Andersen and Frank E. Zahar, co-leaders; Rockwell J. Keeler, Roger Derryberry, John M. Waterman.