

An Alpine Traverse of Fairweather and Quincy Adams

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FOR several years I had regarded Mount Fairweather as a formless blob of snow, but on a flight to Anchorage last February I caught a close but fleeting glance of sharply defined ice ridges and complexities hitherto unsuspected. But Niels Andersen and I considered other attractive Alaskan goals. Finding that other expeditions would probably beat us to them, we thought again of the Fairweather Range. In mid-March I heard that Fred Beckey was trying to put together an expedition to what, for several years, he had thought to be perhaps the finest unclimbed mountain in Alaska: Mount Salisbury, a 12,170-foot outlier of Mount Fairweather in Glacier Bay National Monument. Salisbury, together with a new route on Fairweather, would be a highly suitable substitute for Hunter, Deborah or others.

The few photos I had from the winter fly-by showed two good new routes on Fairweather: a long southwest ridge terminating in a shoulder 1900 feet below the summit and a shorter but steeper east ridge rising from a high col between Fairweather and Quincy Adams (13,560 feet). The expedition would also provide the opportunity for my first climbing with Beckey, an almost legendary figure in American mountaineering. I contacted him and soon we had a team of Beckey, Andersen, Dusan Jagersky, Greg Markov¹ and me.

Several Austin Post aerial photos of Salisbury revealed two route possibilities: the northwest face and the north ridge, long and apparently easy except for two rock towers about 1000 feet below the highest of the mountain's twin summits. Dave Bohn's party had unsuccessfully attempted this ridge in 1962, describing it as "fierce."² Although Fred had eyes only for the ridge, Dusan, Niels and I were impressed with Salisbury's northwest face, a 50° ice slope rising 4500 feet above the upper reaches of the Fairweather Glacier. The only serious problem appeared

¹ Recipient of a grant from The Boyd N. Everett Climbing Fellowship Fund.

² *A.A.J.*, 1963, 13:2, pp. 396-402.

to be ice cliffs in lower- and mid-face. As we later learned, aerial photographs can be deceiving.

In early May Niels told me that because of the notorious weather and what he called a "lack of hard ice climbing," he had decided to go to Europe instead to do the major north faces. It was only after our expedition we learned that he and Warren Bleser were tragically killed descending the Matterhorn in a storm after having ascended the mountain's north face.

On June 20 Ken Loken flew us to the snout of the 22-mile-long Fairweather Glacier, which abuts the Pacific. We soon began the laborious process of transporting our food and gear up the glacier. On the way we bypassed two broken icefalls and walked past Fairweather's massive south face—nearly 11,000 feet high. Allen Carpé's party had made the remarkable first ascent of the mountain in 1931 up one of the ridges on this face³—a wall on a grander scale than even McKinley's famed south face. We eventually reached the cirque formed by Salisbury and its equally impressive neighbor, unclimbed, unnamed Peak 12,606 feet. Our Base Camp at 7200 feet was spectacularly located with Salisbury's north-west face a short distance away, beautiful Lituya as a backdrop to the south and Fairweather, the crown peak of the range, dominating the sky to the west.

With two previous consecutive summers of fine weather in the Fairweathers, we foolishly hoped for a third. During rainstorms and generally unsettled weather on the approach, Dusan, a veteran of difficult new routes on La Pérouse and Bertha⁴ at the eastern end of the range, kept telling us, "Just wait until July!"

Salisbury at close quarters was far more imposing than in Post's aerial photos. The two now snow-plastered towers on the north ridge appeared particularly nasty. The ice face was even worse, not for its inherent difficulties, but for its many dangerous ice cliffs, including one which surrounded the summit pyramid like a medieval moat. Fred, the wily old mountaineer, didn't like the looks of Salisbury. "It won't be in shape for at least ten days, if then." We focused attention on nearby P 12,606. Overweening confidence convinced us we could make a one-day jaunt up this tantalizingly close virgin peak.

On the afternoon of June 26 the skies cleared. An all-night effort on P 12,606 would be a good warm-up for Salisbury and Fairweather. Discarding an ominous ice couloir leading to a snow plateau west of the peak's symmetrical summit, we concentrated on the south face. Most inviting was a broad ice couloir left of a rib on the face. From Base Camp we could not see the bottom of the couloir and assumed, wrongly,

³ *A.A.J.*, 1932, 1:4, pp. 429-444. This route was repeated by Canadians in 1958 as part of Centennial festivities. *A.A.J.*, 1959, 11:2, pp. 297-8.

⁴ *A.A.J.*, 1973, 18:2, pp. 303-6.

that it could be reached from a small glacier paralleling the rib. Beckey, not feeling well, turned back a few hundred feet above camp. In what would ultimately become the pattern on the expedition, Greg, Dusan and I continued higher as a threesome. Steepening ice slopes led to a bergschrund below a ridge crest at 9300 feet. There was no link between the rib and broad couloir, only a yawning gap 2000 feet deep! We retreated to camp as another storm blew in from the southeast.

Should we tackle Salisbury or Fairweather? You can not climb these mountains in a day or so. Our debate resulted in a decision to move camp to 6000 feet at the foot of Quincy Adams' long south ridge two miles down-glacier to place ourselves in position for Fairweather. To the ridge's left was a broken, crevassed glacier leading north from the main Fairweather Glacier to the high col separating Fairweather from Quincy Adams. Above the col, Fairweather's east ridge rose steeply for 1500 feet before easing off toward the summit. Although short by the standards of the mountain's two existing routes (the Carpe⁵ and the west ridge⁵), the east ridge would test us with far greater difficulties.

We had initially favored the long, unclimbed southwest ridge, but incredibly, a team of young climbers from the East led by Lincoln Stoller flew in two days ahead of us with the same objective. All our efforts to avoid peak-crowding were to no avail! With Salisbury as our first choice and Fairweather's east ridge close by, it made sense to avoid competition and for Stoller's group to have a go at the southwest ridge.⁶

After more unsettled weather, a plethora of blue sky appeared again on June 28. Hope soared that it would last. As time went by, Salisbury had gradually receded from our minds.⁷ The side glacier leading to the Fairweather-Quincy Adams col had looked feasible from the air, but I was apprehensive. When on the morning of June 29 Greg developed severe eye irritation from a dried-out contact lens, Fred, Dusan and I reconnoitered the glacier to carry fuel and hardware to an anticipated drop at 9500 feet. Dusan led up the glacier, adroitly weaving his way around the crevasses. A long snow ramp got us through the lowest broken section, but at 8000 feet impassable crevasses stopped us short. A probe to one side, then the other revealed no connecting snow bridge. The col above seemed very close, but there was no way to get there unless, as Dusan pointed out, we were to climb the south ridge of Quincy Adams to reach the col. We decided to leave the next morning on what we thought would be, at most, a five-day alpine-style effort.

That evening Beckey decided to stay behind, citing his lack of con-

⁵ *A.A.J.*, 1969, 16:2, pp. 304-7.

⁶ See account elsewhere in this Journal. They were successful.

⁷ The most probable route up Salisbury is on the mountain's east side; however, because of a prohibition against glacier landings in the national monument, it is most difficult of access.

ditioning and absence of interest in our proposed route. Our feelings were mixed, but our desire to climb outweighed our qualms about leaving him alone. His movement, of course, would be restricted as both visible and hidden crevasses surrounded our camp.

Off at four A.M., we quickly reached the base of the ridge despite heavy packs. Bohn, who had made the first ascent of Quincy Adams, started on a glacier east of the south ridge's base and did not reach the true ridge until 8000 feet. The prospect of 2000 feet of new ground and an opportunity to straighten the Bohn route led us to a steep 1000-foot-high couloir which split the lowest rock buttress.

I climbed around a break in the bergschrund and front-pointed half-way up the 45° ice of the couloir. Dusan took the lead. As he front-pointed above me, I heard a guttural curse followed by the clatter of a crampon falling downslope. Unbelievably it caught on the only rock outcrop fifty feet below me! I retrieved the crampon. The straps were still buckled! How could it have come off? A few feet higher the same thing happened again. By intertwining the crampon straps with his boot laces, he solved the problem.

Up to our first camp at 9600 feet we had perfect conditions. It was narrow and exposed in places but fairly easy. Above, at 10,500 feet, a 250-foot ice cliff blocked the ridge. We would have to traverse left directly beneath it and then up a steep ramp alongside an even larger ice cliff on the far side.

The next morning, July 1, as I was looking upwards, a complete vertical section of the larger ice cliff dropped noiselessly to the deep couloir below. Why would ice avalanche so early in the day? Then a loud, continuous roar penetrated my senses. Dusan yelled from a nearby rock outcrop, "The ground is shaking. An earthquake!" In an awesome display of natural forces, tons of snow and ice fell simultaneously from every snow face and ice cliff of the peaks of the Fairweather range.

The glacier which we had probed two days before was enveloped with avalanches. Had we still been there, we could not have survived. A giant slab avalanche broke away in mid-face on Salisbury, carrying debris all the way across the cirque and over our first Base Camp. The earthquake was 5.9 magnitude on the Richter scale with the epicenter in our immediate vicinity. I recalled the Canadians' close scrape in 1958 when an earthquake-induced tidal wave swept the beach in Lituya Bay a scant two hours and 17 minutes after they had left it.

Dark cloud masses boiled just off the coastline. Dusan climbed gingerly across the 45° slope just below the lower ice cliff, broken only by two sets of rock ribs and shallow couloirs. Greatly relieved to reach the far side, I led the ramp between the two ice cliffs—good cramponing on steep snow.

Because of terrible visibility three hours later, Greg suggested camping in a glacial basin there, but Dusan insisted that we could not go wrong

on the ridge crest. Almost immediately we encountered exhausting breakable crust. Fuming and cursing, we eventually got through the worst area. For another two hours as it snowed lightly, Dusan kicked steps to a level place in the ridge, where, not knowing what was above, we camped. A storm blew through during the night. Though somewhat clearer by morning, to the southeast we could see another storm system moving toward us. By the time we were climbing, Crillon—only fifteen miles away—had vanished.

Dusan kicked steps through deep snow up the final 700 feet of the ridge. The south peak, only 25 feet lower than Quincy Adams' main summit, was not difficult to reach, but we were in a white-out with increasing wind. We continued along the narrow connecting ridge and arrived at the higher summit (13,560 feet) an hour later, at 1:30 P.M.

Greg led along the west ridge, staying well away from dangerous cornices. We could see nothing in the storm but the jagged edge to our right. Later as I led across and beyond a rocky section, I found myself on thin snow over hard 50° ice. It wasn't going to be easy to get off the ridge.

I belayed Greg on an ice screw to a point sixty feet below me. The ice slope plunged off into an unseen void. Snow conditions had to be better a few leads below. But no! For several hours, wrapped in storm mists, we front-pointed down the ice, anchoring each belay with one or more ice screws. Following last on most of the pitches, I found it perhaps the hardest ice climbing I have experienced. Finally, after an interminable time, we saw a bergschrund. We could rappel on a double rope, thereby saving our precious supply. We had brought only two 200-foot sections of ¼" polypropylene and 150 feet of 7mm perlon hauling line. Once off the 1000-foot face, we found ourselves in a flat basin, a good place to camp with the Fairweather-Quincy Adams col just around the corner—or so we thought.

On July 3 the weather continued poor and so we took a rest day. Two more milder earthquakes hit the area in midmorning. I suggested a plan: instead of ascending and descending Fairweather's east ridge and then going back over Quincy Adams, wouldn't it make sense (and be more sporting) to traverse both mountains, descending the Carpe ridge to the Fairweather Glacier? From a mountaineering standpoint, the alpine-style double traverse of Fairweather and Quincy Adams would be much better. A descent of the Carpe ridge would eliminate the need for fixing the east ridge for the return, we would not have to traverse the basin south of us to reach Quincy Adams' south ridge, and we would avoid the dangerous passage beneath the ice cliff on the lower ridge.

The weather improved enough to allow us to move toward the col that night. As we turned the corner under the western end of Quincy Adams, the menacing east ridge loomed high above us in the eerie half-light of the Alaskan night. Just ahead was an unstable windslab slope

and beyond, a small fore-col and two bumps on a connecting ridge separating us from the col. More bad weather was on the way as Greg led across. A tricky detour took us around a sharply defined rock tower. Through a notch my companions stood silhouetted by the dying sun. Beyond, in mauve, muted tones were the far-distant St. Elias and Logan, the other monarchs of southeast Alaska. To their right, and much closer, Root and Watson, two unclimbed sentinels of the Fairweather range, lurked darkly in the remaining light.

By the time we had pitched the tent in the fore-col, another storm was upon us. This one and another on its heels lasted over sixty hours. Did we have enough food and fuel? Early on the evening of July 6, just ahead of another storm, we moved camp along the connecting ridge 300 yards closer to the col.

Finally on the afternoon of the 7th, it cleared. The col was really nothing more than a heavily corniced ridge with steep drops on either side. It was 5:30 P.M. when Greg clambered onto the steep rock buttress beyond. With only three rock pins, Greg carefully worked his way up the slabby 65° snow-and-ice-covered rock. With his crampons still on, he climbed slowly, but with a precision forged on Yosemite walls, and in two hours reached the top of the 225-foot entrance exam to the east ridge. To surmount the step's crest, Greg had to improvise by tying the hauling line to the climbing rope.

Greg had climbed packless, so Dusan had the unhappy task of jūmaring up the pitch with two packs lashed together on his back—a staggering load of ninety pounds.

Although the sun was still high in the northwest, it was cold. The night would be long. Six thousand feet below, I could barely make out Beckey's tent. Later we learned he had seen us through field glasses at this very moment. As we were eight days out at the time, sighting us allayed his fears.

If we had not already committed ourselves to the double traverse, going beyond the rock step would do it. Above, we got our first close view of the ridge's enormous difficulties. A narrow blade of ice snaked off in front of us, blunting into a steep ice and rock headwall. More of the same beyond, and finally above nearly everything, an incredibly long ice ridge as narrow and exposed as anything we had seen. It disappeared into mists that formed on the upper mountain. Dusan led off and brilliantly continued up pitch after pitch throughout the long night. Before the night's cold completely cloaked us, we were treated to an even more vivid sunset than the one from the fore-col. St. Elias and Logan again dominated the northwestern sky.

One pitch stands out. Dusan front-pointed up 55° boilerplate ice in the dark, traversed right on rotten ice beneath rock overhangs, and somehow got above them. Greg's removal of Dusan's ice screws with a light tug added to the pitch's distinction. Only once did we stop to don parkas

and munch a few chunks of beef jerky. Dusan's thermometer registered 5° F and we estimated the wind at 25 mph—most unpleasant during the few hours of semi-darkness.

Our last obstacle, the long ice ridge, was a seven-pitch affair, exposed but easier than expected. A few sharply rolling ice crests above it led to a saddle. The 1500 feet above the col had taken us 18½ hours of virtually continuous climbing.

After resting the remainder of the day in the saddle, we left on the long, exhausting trudge for the summit at 6:30 P.M. Even in the new snow, it was a joy to be closing in on the summit after nine days on the flanks of Quincy Adams and Fairweather. We might have made it to the top that night, but Greg's temporary exhaustion and another approaching storm at midnight dictated our sixth camp. The storm, like most of the others, was a less-than-one-day phenomenon.

We knew we were close to the summit, but not how close until we spent 35 minutes early the next evening walking up onto the mountain's gracefully rounded top, above a cloud layer at 13,000 feet, which precluded a view of the nearby peaks. Dusan's altimeter exactly matched the peak's height of 15,300 feet. From this we deduced that our high camp was only 210 feet below. This was indeed a *high* camp, and we were back at the tent in less than two hours after leaving it.

The rest of the double traverse is a story of mistake, uncertainty and confusion. We hoped to descend the Carapé ridge. Except for troublesome hidden crevasses, the first part of the descent went like clockwork: down the summit ridge to a steep ice nose off which we rappelled. Below that, we walked along a broadening snow ridge to the prominent shoulder at 13,800 feet.

Our map and aerial photos showed two nearly parallel ridges descending from the shoulder, one due south and the other bending slightly southwest. A heavy cloud layer below prevented a direct view, but we reasoned that Carapé and his friends must have come up the south (or left) one, it being more pronounced and seemingly straightforward. And so with a due south compass reading, we went down into the fog. At 12,600 feet, on a flat, featureless slope, our anxieties mounted. Seeing nothing, we decided to camp. We could not agree about our precise location in that utterly depressing night. In the morning visibility improved, but the sky was black with ominous cloud masses. Almost out of food, we had to get down the 7500 feet to the Fairweather Glacier that day.

A snow ridge loomed out of the fog to the west. As we neared it, the clouds momentarily parted, revealing the straight south ridge to the left. We reversed our tracks. The first few hundred feet required front-pointing. As we descended, the lowering cloud layer kept pace, so that each succeeding section was a tantalizing question mark. Often heavily corniced, often a knife-edged catwalk, the ridge was continually interest-

ing. Dusan remarked, "Carpé must have been quite a climber to have come up this ridge in 1931."

Luckily the weather improved throughout the day. In mid-afternoon disconnected rock towers on the ridge crest forced us over an avalanche-battered headwall to the east. For 2000 feet we descended avalanche grooves and then into an amazing ice-debris-filled basin, completely blocked on three sides by the south ridge, the headwall and a subsidiary ridge. The only way out appeared to be a glacial spillover leading down to the Fairweather Glacier. Crevasses pushed us right and through a narrow notch back onto the south ridge. From there, an easy 1500-foot slope led us down nearly to the main glacier—a welcome sight after twelve days.

Our trials were not over, as nearly vertical rock buttresses cut us off 500 feet above the glacier. Despite our predicament we knew we were close; we bivouacked that night on the rocks, a surprisingly cold ordeal considering the low altitude. The following morning, Greg led us down twisting chimneys and ledges, and within three hours, we stepped off the rock onto the glacier.

A four-mile trudge took us to Base Camp and to a mixed reaction from Beckey, clearly miffed at his long, self-imposed exile. Greg concocted a fantastic culinary delight of freeze-dried dinners, soup, asparagus, mushrooms, parmesan cheese, onion flakes and margarine.

In the tent that night, Dusan and I pondered the descent. "You don't suppose we came down the wrong ridge?"—"I don't know; it was harder than I thought the Carpé would be."—"It would be no problem to get started on the other ridge and it looked easier." Suspicion led to open speculation, then virtual certitude. At home three days later, a quick check of the literature confirmed our error: we had descended an unclimbed ridge.

It took two days to walk out to the ocean, but only eight hours from Ken Loken's late afternoon pick-up on July 15 to reach Seattle. Streaking down the coast from Juneau that evening, we could just make out Fairweather in the twilight towering above the other peaks in one of the world's unique and great mountain ranges.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Fairweather Range, Southeastern Alaska.

NEW ROUTES: Mount Quincy Adams, 13,560 feet, alpine-style traverse up the complete South Ridge and down the West Ridge, July 2, 1973 (Jagersky, Markov, Wickwire).

Mount Fairweather, 15,300 feet, alpine-style traverse up the East Ridge and down the South Ridge, July 9, 1973 (Jagersky, Markov, Wickwire).

PERSONNEL: Fred Beckey, Dusan Jagersky, Greg Markov, James Wickwire.