

Mount Hunter's Southeast Ridge

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WE jumped out of the plane and threw out our gear. Pilot Cliff Hudson wished us good luck and took off. A sobering but thrilling silence fell on us. At last we could begin!

When the weather had finally broken on May 22, Cliff flew in the six of us and our gear in three trips. We, Paul Harrison, Dan Crowley, Chris Walker, John Cleary, Dave Hawley and I, were all Dartmouth students. Several routes on Mount Hunter had originally been suggested by Bradford Washburn in a 1968 *A.A.J.* article. Leader, Paul Harrison had taken part in a 1970 attempt on the prominent south buttress. (See *A.A.J.*, 1971, 17:2, pp. 327-8.) This time there was another group on that route so we turned our attention to the southeast ridge.

After several days of packing loads up the glacier, all food and gear were at Base Camp at 8100 feet. Our next step was somehow to get up to the southeast ridge. A 55° ill-defined gully went right from the glacier at 9500 feet to the low point in the ridge at 11,400 feet. There was one catch—a huge hanging glacier sat threateningly at the top of the gully, a real avalanche funnel. Unfortunately all other possible routes had similar or even greater objective dangers. After a day or two of observing the avalanche activity, we decided to go ahead up the gully “under the guillotine”; it never avalanched when we were looking and the gully showed little evidence of falling ice. To be on the safe side, we would only climb at night.

The first night Walker, Cleary and I led off; the others were going to set up a camp at 9300 feet that we could return to. The conditions to the base of the gully were horrendous. Even with snowshoes we sank in to our hips, but several hours of back-breaking work took us to the bergschrund. Walker led over a flimsy bridge and started up the gully in the fierce midnight chill. It was far from easy. Chris finally fixed a couple of ropes and came down. As it was starting to warm up, we hoofed back to the camp that the others had set up for us. The tent perched there on the slope and a small cook cave were a welcome sight.

The weather turned bad for the next few days and we all turned into snow sloths. Books on polar exploration were hardly appropriate. Some-

how reading about explorers freezing to death in snow storms didn't raise our spirits.

Clear and cold weather greeted us on the 28th. As night fell, Harrison, Crowley and Hawley headed up to the gully. Relaxing in camp, we followed their slow but steady progress. They soon got past our previous high point and in the twilight blended with the rocks in the gully. Having made excellent progress, they were back just as we got up the next morning. Several pitches up they had traversed left out from under the hanging glacier into a different gully.

That night four of us headed up. Hopefully we would get to the top of the gully and set up a small camp on the ridge. Walker and Cleary led off, taking fixed ropes for the hard pitches. Harrison and I followed with large loads; we wanted to leave the ridge camp well stocked. Harrison and I caught them about halfway up. It was bitterly cold and the climbing had turned difficult. Some pitches were water ice; some had loose snow on top of ice; on still others we swam through deep snow. At the tricky spots fixed ropes were left which we appreciated with our heavy packs. Finally we got to the heavily corniced, knife-edged ridge at 11,400 feet. Looming massively above us on the other side was McKinley; in the distance were Huntington, the Moose's Tooth and countless other peaks. Above us the ridge stretched up to the summit, tough but apparently possible. Leaving Cleary and Walker to dig out some sort of camp, Harrison and I blitzed down the route and got to the bottom just as the sun started things falling.

A few days later we were all established in the ridge camp with a week's food. Without the twelve-hour, avalanche-threatened night climb up the gully, we could climb around the clock when the weather permitted. A large cave dug into the ridge made us pretty secure. A few pitches were already fixed.

On the morning of June 4 Crowley and Hawley took off in windy weather. By the end of the day, they had climbed the 300 feet of very steep ice, a major obstacle on the route. Walker and I started early the next morning. We got past their high point and started what was to prove the worst part of the whole ridge. Before the weather soaked in, gigantic cornices forced us to climb two pitches without protection way below them on incredibly rotten, honey-combed ice.

It cleared the next day, but when Cleary and Harrison got back late, they were shaken. While Cleary was chopping steps, apparently well below the cornice fracture line, the whole ridge above him suddenly collapsed with a roar. He was suddenly standing on the very edge of the ridge. A house-sized section had broken off neatly along the line where he had been chopping steps. They still continued on for another pitch to cache climbing gear. Apparently all the major obstacles were passed but we had only four more days of food and fuel left.

The next morning although the weather did not look promising,

Walker and I started off and made good progress to the top of the steep ice. Then we crept across the rotten ridge to the base of a large rock buttress. Using the last of our fixed ropes, we placed them in the couloir behind the buttress. After twelve hours' climbing, as I joined Walker at the top of the couloir, Hawley and Crowley came into view. They were both feeling fresh and Crowley led up steep snow at a good pace. Just as we got started on the final knife-edged ridge to the summit, clouds rolled in. In zero visibility Hawley plunged through a cornice that left him dangling at the end of the rope. After he climbed back up, we took stock of the hopeless situation. If in an hour it didn't clear, we'd head back. Bitterly cold, we fought to keep circulation going in numbed toes. The hour passed; visibility: ten feet. Dejectedly we headed back, but we had hardly started when miraculously the clouds lifted. The summit was right above us. Once more we headed upwards to retrace our steps and by eleven P.M. regained our high point. The angle lessened as we approached the summit cone. Dog-tired, I brought up the rear. I forced myself around the corner and there they all were, standing together. "What's the matter?" Walker grinned, "We're hungry. Have a snack." Just as I began to get mad, I looked around; everything went down. This was the top! A full moon hung low in the sky to the left of Foraker. Huge glaciers meandered between awesomely beautiful mountains. We wolfed down nuts and dried fruit and drank the last of our unfrozen water. We summoned what was left of our physical and mental reserves for the long climb down, mechanically checking knots and belays. Finally as the sun rose over McKinley's flanks, we got back to Ridge Camp.

Harrison and Cleary were relieved to see us—we'd been away for over 24 hours. They decided to go for the summit and soon headed out. Unfortunately a frightful storm broke as they were climbing and they were lucky to make it back safely.

After the storm we headed down. An avalanche had buried Camp II and we lost a lot of gear. We managed to dig out our radio and antenna before continuing. Cliff was a welcome sight as he came in to pick us up the next day. It was indescribably wonderful to see trees, green, people. Even Talkeetna looked beautiful.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Hunter, South Peak, 13,966 feet, via Southeast Ridge, Midnight, June 7, 1973 (Corwin, Crowley, Hawley, Walker).

PERSONNEL: Paul Harrison, *leader*, John Cleary, Paul Corwin, Dan Crowley, Dave Hawley, Chris Walker.