

# The Hubbard Affair

KENNETH ANDRASKO, *Harvard Mountaineering Club*

HUBBARD is such a tubby name, without serpentine or exception, no howling past or return to forever, just a designation. Its western countenance has that same schizophrenic symmetry as carvings of the Tlingit Indians, who frequented the St. Elias region: a holy trinity of flying buttresses. Randy Cerf had noticed it too, that first day of picture-looking, back in Boston with Bradford Washburn—the Florentine-nose central ridge that descends through a slender col that would nicely hold a *pince-nez* above the flaring, flat-nostriled hint of Asian heritage which runny-noses debris onto the Alverstone Glacier. It was an enticing face, so we wrote down its name and ordered several photos, just like from a catalog.

Out of the plane window was a frost-soufflé summit and whale-vertebrae, stained-tooth ridges, definitely carnivorous. Three heads cobraed up out of the perlon profusion of the cockpit to examine the immense carving. Since this was one of pilot John Nutchiak's first flights into the St. Elias Mountains, he was a bit gun-shy until Phil Upton, Arctic Institute pilot, flew by in his Helio Courier to allay John's suspicion; he planted us beneath the 8000-foot face.

Grisly prospectors all blue-spruced up for the meeting with our mail-order bride, we swaggered onto the glacier, awe-struck by her austere presence. That first evening was a dual reconnaissance up a buttress of alternating black-basaltic peat moss and white-feldspar firmness, through snow and ice gullies, 1200 feet to gain the ridge proper. It was so uncannily commonplace; *déjà vu*, we had seen it all before in this journal or that; hardware left hanging on a steep wall, fixed rope rappels in storm.

We fixed rope to homemade nuts up sluice-box couloirs. Finding no food cache from the Italian party that had previously attempted the ridge, Randy led the turtle pack up from Base each night to our first ridge camp, *Schia Kussiat*—"Cold Mountain" in Tlingit<sup>1</sup>, named on that first biting morning of occupancy. Meanwhile, the two of us already there did 30-hour days—15 to 20 leading hours of Mobius-coil ropes—before we returned in morning sun to food and half-zipped sleep.

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<sup>1</sup> Tlingit names throughout are from Frederica De Laguna, *Under Mount Saint Elias: the History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*, Washington, D.C., 1972 and Aurel Krause, *The Tlingit Indians*, translated by Erna Gunther, Seattle, 1956.

Just above camp was water-ice gleam. Then came those ten days of personal vendetta for Chris Field and me as we selfishly claimed this most difficult section up to the col as our own, a little blackboard and chalk problem. Its solution-pocket answer of big olivine crystals, white diorite giving way to pink orthoclase feldspar, was the gradual transition of rock types and personalities that had been hoped for from photos all along. Always the prediction—"There's got to be granite up in the col. It must come through from the Kennedy north ridge, right?"

After dinner was the Jumar/Gibbs trip to the high point, then a deft lead through an overhang, using some tied-off Lost Arrows; a pulled nut as Chris wiggled up and got hit by the big block that once supported it; snarled rucksacks as we haul, a descent into angry darkness to retrieve them; both ripped, we reconcile and wander on, each with a thousand feet of rope and numerous metallic trinkets. Face-in-the-snow exhaustion; ah, let him take over; he leads around the corner, for hours; don the down parka; I'm sleeping while belaying; an eerie voice: "The rope's fixed! Hey . . . Climb!" Oh! That must be Chris. Around the corner, Chris was hanging from a beautiful block of basalt in a slender ice hose. I hug myself there, so he could lead on.

This must be the crux: five hundred feet of a black-dike, smiling gendarme. Light as a feather through powder on ice and good steep rock, an anchor, a belay; my lead: verglas-covered first aid-section; a pin behind a suitcase-sized frozen block; a nut, too. Three A.M. Too cold for a two-hour hanging belay while Chris pendulums left. Through falling snow it's hard to see him thrutching, swinging to the corner, trying again, finally staying there, a kitten on a tall tree in the wind, slowly slipping. Ultimately he falls, too; two falls today. Chris hangs upside down thirty feet away, examining the crevasse slits 2500 feet below; I, a butterfly specimen pinned to the frozen block. We both explode with laughter; nothing else to do. Suddenly, we reach the big col.

Hubbard is an old Tlingit squaw, gnarled and greying, constantly complaining in avalanche groans of blueberry indigestion from wanton tundra wanderings. We become more intimate as a mutual tolerance evolves, a consent born of familiarity and acceptance of idiosyncrasy. The cosmetic powder-puffed vagueness, layered on last winter, begins to melt and trickle down wrinkles once concealed, exposing olivine varicose veins. After a few passes, a bridal path replaces that initial free-style approach to snow over icy rock, and load carrying becomes routine.

But old Mother Hubbard is no handsome, winsome lass of freckles and phobia, but one who has seen other suitors. The west side story began in 1970, when Italians led by Bermasconi had their highest camp swept away by the wind.<sup>2</sup> Unbeknownst to us, another party climbed the southwest ridge on June 15, the day before we flew in.

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<sup>2</sup> See *A.A.J.*, 1971, 17:2, pp. 338-9.

A wait and rest in Anacrusis Col, our second and last camp, 3500 feet below the top. Ours was a group born of proximity and circumstance, not affinity entirely, so there was the pre-summit debate, a nitty-gritty session of eloquence and emotion. It centered around one ratty 150-foot rope left in place by George Pugh and Randy Cerf on their difficult reconnaissance above camp, and pitted pure alpine-style aesthetics against pragmatism and safety. Tension, alienation, eventual compromise; the pitch would be led again on the summit push.

Place a screw, waltz up, place another; bang a picket in, shrug shoulders and move to the next step. A mini-bivi in the ice; the final front-pointing, back-pulling sections, the break-through to the plateau. The walk *en masse* to the summit, and the whole other side of the mountain we had never seen. A note; sticks of jasmine incense; and Doug Dolginow's awkward attempts to say something about the whole thing.

The ropes got really tangled as we turned to return, a reminder that there really were five other people involved in that moment of selfness. Ice-pin rappels to a collapse-bivouac in a mild snowstorm which aroused little interest, then back to the saddle again and camp after a forty-three-hour binge. Once again, we have only photographs of a mountain.

The Tlingit believe in transmigration of souls and think people move gradually clockwise during and after life around "Old People's Bay" (*can geyí*). Now, months after the Hubbard affair, old age seems to be affecting her, saying *can geyí tunAx' Ax yadE qusinuk'*—"Old People's Bay out-of my face-towards it's-gently-blowing." That's talking about the breeze from Disenchantment Bay, the wind that blows an old mail-order bride farther around the circle, to be reborn sometime later for someone else.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: St. Elias Mountains, Yukon-Alaskan border.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Hubbard, 15,015 feet, West Ridge and Face, July 5, 1973 (Kenneth Andrasko, J. Randolph Cerf, Douglas Dolginow, Christopher Field, George Pugh, William Silva).

TECHNICAL DATA: NCCS F7, A2; 7100 feet of fixed rope, 43 nuts, 58 rock pitons, 13 ice screws, 9 pickets.