

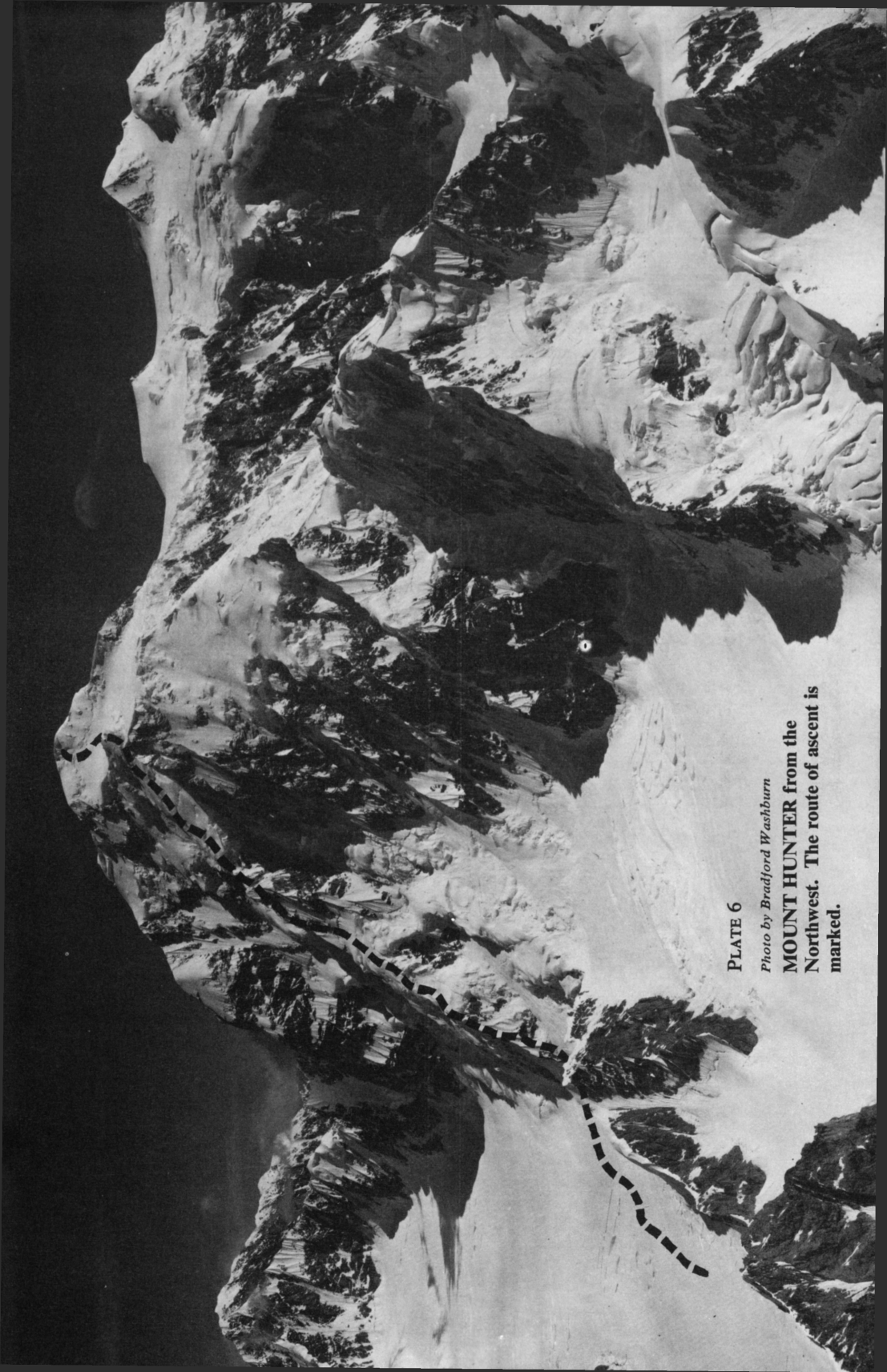
# Hunter and Foraker

MICHAEL KENNEDY

SITTING next to our big tent we were unlikely candidates for the Alpine Hall of Fame. Jeff Lowe looked quite natty in a white shirt, glacier hat and army-surplus woolies, and kept us amused with his Don Juan fantasies and ribald jokes. George Lowe tried to inject a note of seriousness into the proceedings by playing the elder statesman, veteran of many harsh epics in the great ranges of the world . . . after all, he *was* over 30, mumbling about quitting, and had certain rights as the nominal “leader” of the “team.” Meanwhile, I attempted to play down the role of young upstart and tiger that I had been relegated to, although my compulsive organizational efforts merely reinforced this misrepresentation.

Jim Sharp had landed us on the southeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier several hours before, and since then we had managed to do nothing more than drag ourselves and what little food and gear we possessed fifty yards from the airstrip. Jeff had taken a reconnaissance flight to check out the routes and had returned bubbling over with enthusiasm. The weather was clearing, the tent was up and a brew on, and we lay about in a happy confusion of tattered ropes, bent pitons, worn slings, and two large boxes of food more suitable to a convention of Winnebago owners than a “lightweight” climbing expedition.

We had come to Alaska with two routes in mind, and our ideas on climbing them, while not new, were perhaps a bit radical. Major Alaskan climbs have traditionally been undertaken in ponderous Himalayan style, with large teams of climbers, fixed ropes and camps, and extended siege tactics. But in recent years this has been changing to a more classical alpine approach; speed, commitment and technical competence have become the new idiom of Alaskan climbing. Such climbs as those on the Moose’s Tooth, the Cathedral Spires, Devil’s Thumb, Mount Dickey, Mount Deborah and particularly Charlie Porter’s solo ascent of the Cassin Ridge on McKinley stand out as landmarks in this development. This type of climbing involves a certain amount of risk, and we were well aware of the chances we took: a storm high on the mountain could leave us stranded without the comforting umbilical cord of fixed ropes to safety, and with only three climbers, every step would count even more than usual. Accident or illness would create serious problems of



**PLATE 6**

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**MOUNT HUNTER from the Northwest. The route of ascent is marked.**

retreat and evacuation. In addition, all supplies for the climbs would have to be carried along, and we couldn't afford to take an ounce too little or too much.

I wonder even now how we ever hoped to complete our program, for it was a very ambitious one. The north face of Mount Hunter (14,573 feet) was our first objective; it would give us all a chance to acclimatize and would at least give us one good climb should our other plans fail to materialize. This face had been tried two or three times previously. Rising 7000 feet from the glacier in full view of the landing strip, it was a tempting prize. The initial section consists of a moderate snow and ice rib in the center of the face, after which a steeper ice-face (the Triangle) is encountered. At the apex of the Triangle comes what would be the crux of the route, a horizontal ridge, extremely steep on both sides and heavily corniced. This is followed by an ice cliff, then easy snow slopes continue to the summit. We planned to descend via the four-mile-long west ridge, which Fred Beckey and Heinrich Harrer had climbed to make the first ascent of the peak in 1954.

Hunter was appealing enough, but our main objective was the central spur on the south face of Mount Foraker (17,400 feet). This lies between the ridge climbed by Alex Bertulis and party in 1968 and that climbed by the French in 1976; Bertulis' party had originally intended to do the spur from the Lacuna Glacier, but turned back after a few hundred feet in the face of rockfall. Another party, this time approaching via the Kahiltna Glacier (as we intended to do), had intentions on the route in 1975 but hardly reached the base due to avalanche danger.

This route had an entirely different character from that on Hunter. Instead of being almost all snow, it is almost all rock; the initial third of the route looked the steepest, largely bare rock with some ice mixed in, the second third consisted of a prominent ice rib with a very steep mixed section at the top, and in the last third a corniced ridge led back to a hanging glacier below the south summit. From the glacier to the south summit is a vertical rise of almost 9000 feet, at an average angle of 54°. From here we would have to follow an easy ridge one-and-a-half miles and another 1000 feet to the main summit, and then down the southeast ridge (Adams Carter and party, 1963). Due to its length and classic beauty, we had christened the route the Infinite Spur.

On the evening of our arrival we skied up the glacier to visit Tom Bauman and Wayne Errington, who were about to leave for the north buttress of Mount Hunter, a magnificent 4000-foot rock spur rising left of the central snow and ice slopes that we planned on. After wishing them luck, we returned to camp and slept. The next day in perfect weather we prepared food and gear for the climb: a small tent, full-length sleeping bags, winter clothing, food and fuel for five days, two ropes and a small selection of pickets, deadmen and ice-screws.

We planned to climb the lower slopes by night, for the cold would solidify the snow and reduce the avalanche hazard. At 10:30 P.M. on June 14 we left camp and skied to the bottom of the face. By midnight we were climbing, roped in case of crevasses but moving simultaneously for speed. The climbing itself was mostly moderate snow, although George did lead one pitch past a steep sérac. By six A.M. we had reached a flat area below the Triangle.

After a short rest and a bite to eat, we continued on, belaying now on higher-angle ice. Pitch followed pitch. As soon as the leader had put in his anchors, the second climbed through, as the third came up, using a Gibbs ascender as a belay. We could thus climb as quickly with three people as with two, but the slope still felt endless.

Following the line of least resistance, we hoped to intersect what had appeared to be an easy ridge leading left to the apex of the Triangle. Unfortunately it was anything but easy: steep and dangerously corniced. The sun made the snow wet and unstable. George teetered over several cornices before dropping back down on the face and traversing below them. Jeff continued traversing. Then I led the last pitch of the day to the apex. I was in for a shock.

We had expected a flat area to bivouac on; there was nothing. No decent anchors, no place to sit, let alone set up the tent, and after almost 18 hours of climbing, no energy left to think straight. But the worse was yet to come: the ridge ahead looked impossible, or at best, suicidal. It was not just steep and corniced, but *horribly* steep and corniced. Huge snow mushrooms sat on top of a knife-edge of ice, in places overhanging on both sides. In no condition to make any rational judgment, we left the anchors at the last stance, wrapped the rope around a lump of snow at the apex for additional security and chopped a small ledge for a bivouac.

We discussed the position that our over-confidence had placed us in. The crest of the ridge seemed impossible, but going down 4000 feet was unthinkable. The only alternative, a 300-foot rappel down the left side of the ridge and a traverse below the threatening cornices, was too dangerous. Sleep that evening was restless and short, punctuated by the dull rumble of ice falling and the contortions necessary for the three of us to stay on the ledge. Two A.M. saw us awake and ready to go. By the time I had returned with the ice-screws from the last stance, Jeff was ready to start.

He made rapid progress along the top of the ridge; it looked as if we might actually have an easier time of it than expected. After one rope-length I started out. With few anchors and stances available, it would be safer and faster for both of us to move together. George belayed us from the bivouac.

I had gone perhaps twenty feet and was waiting for the gentle tug



PLATE 7

*Photo by Michael Kennedy*

**Looking back onto the corniced crux  
on the North Face of HUNTER.**

that was my cue to move on. But this time it wasn't so gentle. Suddenly, the rope came tight, jerking me into the air; blue and grey flashed by, all was a blur, and just as suddenly I came to a halt, bent over and straddling the ridge with 4000 feet of space on either side. Jeff had fallen almost 60 feet. As he came to a halt, the front-points of his crampons had snagged in the ice, shattering his left ankle.

The whole complexion of the climb changed drastically. All of our fine concepts of light and fast were dust in the face of an all-too-real situation: we were 4000 feet up a hard route with one member seriously injured, with no backup, no fixed ropes, no radio, and no one to depend on but ourselves. Even in the best of conditions, there would have been no chance of a rescue. The weather was taking a turn for the worse. Fortunately Jeff managed to hobble, using his one good leg and an ice axe for support.

We immediately set off down the Triangle. George went first, setting up the rappel anchors, then Jeff, and myself last. I took out the extra anchors at each stance, leaving one behind; we hadn't enough to leave the normal doubled anchors. Many hours later we reached the flat area where we had stopped the day before. Thick mist obscured everything, and we were tired and wet as we set up the bivouac.

The next morning we splinted Jeff's leg. He could put some weight on it now, not much, but enough greatly to speed progress. We would lower or rappel on the steeper sections, and where the angle wasn't so great Jeff would hobble along, occasionally sinking into the snow when the pain became too great. The only suitable anchors we had were dead-men; we had but two and so the last man had to climb down.

Early in the afternoon of June 17 we reached the glacier, and within a few hours Jeff had flown out to the Anchorage hospital for treatment. It was a sad parting. We were all glad to be alive and relatively unscathed, but these climbs were Jeff's idea. He had provided most of the energy and drive behind them, and now he was gone. How much I wished that I had been leading that day!

George and I were left. A day of storm depressed us even further. Late that afternoon, Bauman and Errington came down, having climbed only 1500 feet of their route and surviving an epic retreat in the storm. Things looked bleak; I wondered if yet another great climbing trip was about to go down the drain. All signs seemed to point south, back to Colorado and the safety of home.

We were still determined at least to finish the route on Hunter. Having been up a large part of the hard climbing, we almost had to complete it in Jeff's honor. The accident had shaken us badly, but oddly enough had also given us a great deal of confidence. There were no ego-games between George and me, no competition, and the experiences of the last few days had brought us very close.

June 19 it started to clear, and once again we made a midnight start. The fresh snow hampered us, but our old tracks often helped. This time we took a more direct line up the center of the Triangle. It was steeper, but we avoided the bad ridge which had slowed us so much before, and by one P.M. on June 20 we had regained the bivouac.

The ridge ahead looked as evil as ever, and we were if anything even more afraid of it. We slept fitfully, warmed by the sun but anxious about the night ahead, and started out at two A.M. on June 21.

The first few feet were the hardest; I felt as though I were going into a totally alien world, each step taking me further and further from home, friends, and a life in the past. We moved together, silent, carefully probing the way ahead, separated and bonded by the rope between us. Near the end we shared a stance for a few moments. Ahead lay the most absurd mushroom yet, but we were almost there. A rappel onto the steep ice below was the only answer; I slid down on one rope as George belayed me on the other, and at the end traversed straight left. The ice was very steep, rock-hard and brittle, and I could barely maintain contact. Just as I ran out of rope, the ice ran out into snow, and in a few steps I was on flat ground. The ridge was done.

George rappelled, and I managed to pull him over a good part of the traverse with the belay rope. We were tremendously relieved, and the ice cliff was anti-climactic. An easy ramp led through it onto the upper snow slopes, and we plodded up these to bivouac on flat ground at 13,500 feet.

Sleep came easily, but when we awoke all was white. A storm had set in, and although we were only 1000 feet from the top, we couldn't see enough to move. After the better part of a day, we were blessed with a brief clearing, and another couple of hours saw us on the summit at three P.M. on June 22.

We raced back to the bivouac, packed the gear and set off, but by this time the clouds had closed in again. We had to navigate the broad upper plateau by compass in order to find the west ridge proper. It was slow and nerve-wracking work, plodding along, unable to tell up from down, constantly worried about crevasses and cornices.

The next 24 hours remain a kaleidoscope of imagery as we alternated between the whiteout and stunning views of the glaciers and peaks all around. The climbing was continuous and exposed; although never very difficult, every step required caution, and several sections had to be belayed. George fell when a small cornice broke, and later I plunged into my first crevasse. The sky cleared as night approached, illuminating the fantastic ice forms with the subtle velvet colors of the Alaskan summer twilight. We climbed throughout the night. By mid-morning we had passed the rocky section which was the crux of Beckey's and Harrer's route. A few hours later we reached an impasse; the snow of the obvious

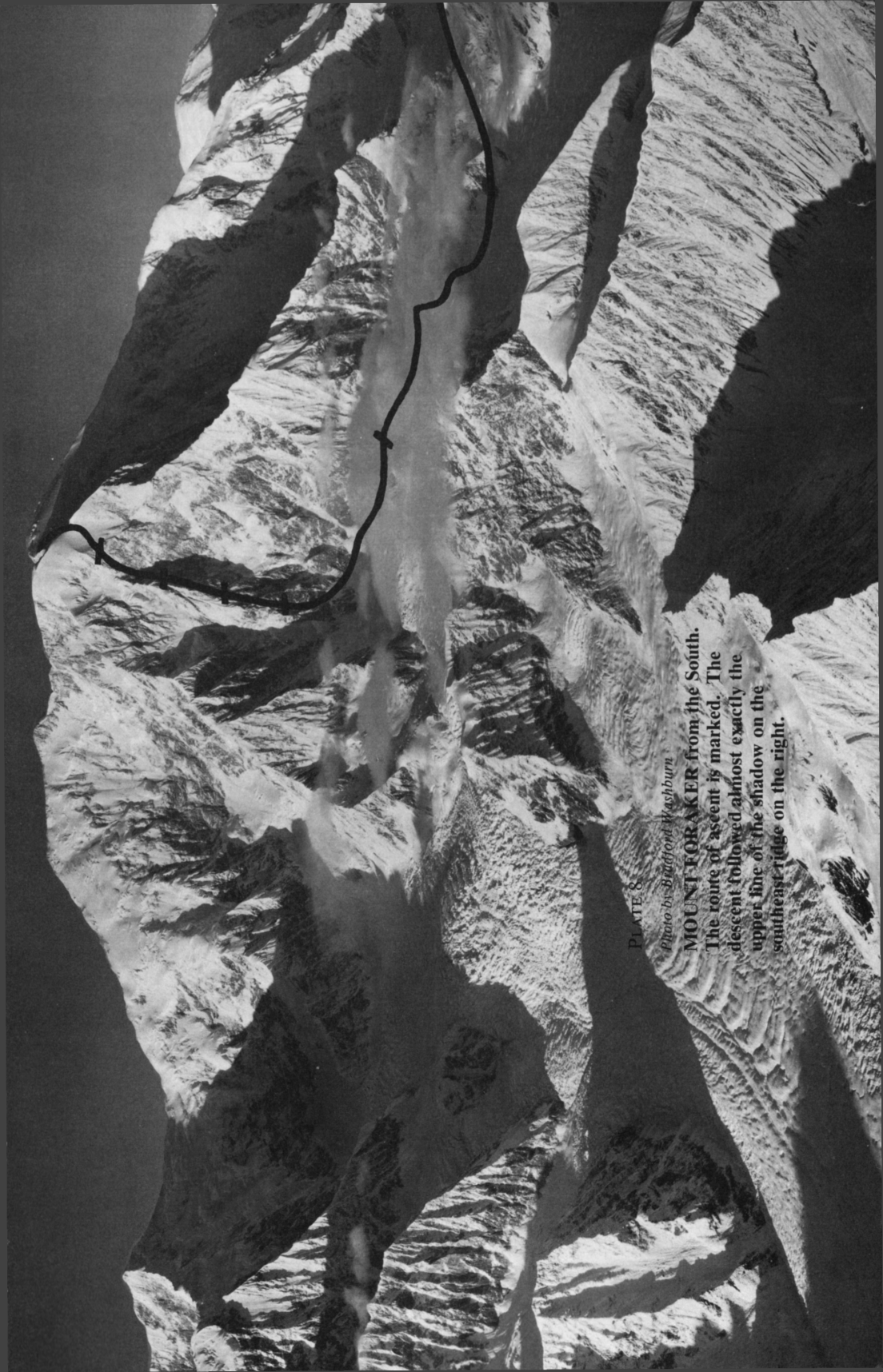


PLATE 8

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**MOUNT FORAKER from the South.**

The route of ascent is marked. The descent followed almost exactly the upper line of the shadow on the southeast ridge on the right.



easy route was dangerously wet and avalanche-prone, so we bypassed it on the rocks to the left. There was flat ground at the end of the rock and, mercifully, we slept.

The morning of June 24 dawned perfectly clear, cold and windy, and we raced down the concrete-hard snow to the glacier and Base Camp: we had made it!

The possibility of doing Foraker had been on the edge of my consciousness ever since the completion of the corniced ridge. The idea seemed mad even then, but slowly the route began to dominate my thoughts. Could we do it, and should we even try? We were weaker as a team without Jeff, but perhaps two could move quicker than three. We had maps and a Washburn photo of the route, but Jeff had taken the reconnaissance flight. Most importantly, the commitment would be enormous: every act, from packing at the start to our eventual return to Base Camp, would require our fullest attention, concentration on detail, and consciousness. We were fully aware of the implications of the climb, and even more aware of our fear, doubts and hesitation.

Finally the risks and uncertainty of Foraker seemed to be too much; we decided on the Cassin Ridge of Mount McKinley instead. It was a relief to have made the decision, but a nagging doubt still persisted. As great a route as the Cassin is, it was not what we had come for. An hour before leaving, we made the final decision: Foraker it would be. Otherwise, we would never know. . . .

George retired to the tent to write to his children. I pattered about, cooked dinner, anxious and relieved at once. Part of me hoped that we could now honorably fail, perhaps burning up enough time and energy in the process to justify a quick consolation romp up the West Buttress; another part could just dimly visualize the possibilities of the route, a fantasy of rock and ice, mist and wind.

Silently skiing through the night, we passed the base of the south-east ridge, leaving a small cache of food and our extra skis. A pass, an icefall, a strange stagnant glacier of dripping séracs, another pass: at ten A.M. on June 26 we reached a snow shoulder and our first view of the route.

It looked immense and beautiful, almost powerful in the crystal morning air. This close, features opened up: a huge blank-looking area appeared more reasonable close up than in the photographs, and on the whole the climbing didn't look quite as hard and sustained as we had expected. We set up our tiny tent and spent the day resting and observing the face. No rocks fell, and the weather was still good. It seemed that we had no good reason to turn back.

We set out at three A.M. on June 27. Our heavy packs slowed progress, and after a few hundred feet of moving together we started belaying; the climbing was still easy, but at least this way we could rest

and take off the packs after each pitch. George led a hard pitch of mixed rock and snow, and then we were on the rock proper.

And very good rock it was, massively fractured, but solid, rough in texture and a delight to climb on. Mist rose as the sun warmed the glacier, enveloping us in a secure grey shroud. Alternating leads, we climbed until ten P.M., then shovelled snow from a ledge and set up the tent.

We were exhausted, but things seemed fine. So far, we were a day-and-a-half ahead of our most optimistic schedule, and had already passed what we thought would be the hardest rock-climbing of the route. The weather remained good, but our elation was tempered with apprehension, for climbing much above this point would commit us totally to going for the top.

The night was clear and cold, but within a few hours the next day the mist had returned. We continued up interesting mixed rock and ice and finally reached the bottom of the ice rib. Mist had turned to snow, but the clouds looked thin; perhaps it was just a small local storm. Several pitches up the ice we bivouacked, cutting small ledges out of the slope on which to sleep. It was a cold and uncomfortable night, and my thoughts turned once again to home and friends. We were really committed now.

Morning brought more clouds and snow. As we continued on, the weather worsened. It got very cold, and often we couldn't see each other at the other end of the rope; snow fell and built up on the slopes above, inundating us with spindrift avalanches. Soon rocks appeared on our left. We were nearing the top of the ice rib and knew that somehow, somewhere, we would have to break through these rocks and onto the ridge leading back to the hanging glacier. But where? The rock here was grim, black, loose and horribly steep.

The ice rib narrowed; I tried one line through the rock in search of a bivouac but gave up after 50 feet. While climbing back down, I slipped and fell a terrifying 20 feet down the ice. The rocks gradually squeezed the ice rib to nothing against the void to the right. We stopped here for a welcome cup of soup and a rest. It was three A.M. on June 30, and we had been climbing for 18 hours straight.

There was no bivouac in sight but a way opened up ahead that would bring us onto the corniced ridge. A steep, rotten traverse over snowy ledges gave access to an intimidating and *very* steep mixed gully; it looked desperate, but the rock all around was even worse. I led the traverse and belayed at the bottom of the gully, which poured almost continually with spindrift. George came across. Weak and exhausted, he felt incapable of leading safely but was willing to follow.

I was tired as well, but still felt strong. My mind was clear and surprisingly calm as I visualized the way ahead, keenly aware of the chalkboard-screech of crampons on rock, the rattling thud of an axe in

too-thin ice, a sling on a frozen-in spike, the dull ring of a bad piton behind a loose block, calf muscles screaming for relief, choking spindrift in eyes, throat, down the neck. A couple of pitches and we were back on easy ground, and another rope-length brought us to a point 50 feet from the crest of the ridge.

The sun broke over the skyline as I belayed George up this final stretch, and a slight wind stirred the air. The tension of the last few hours ebbed away like the snow crystals dancing in the new light before my eyes. Warmth returned, and with it a need for sleep. We again hacked ledges out of the ice, melted snow and cooked; the day was clear and we could lie in the blessed sun without sleeping bags.

July 1 dawned clear as well. We spent the day making an endless traverse below the cornices to the hanging glacier. It was almost twice as long as we had expected from the pictures; still tired from the previous day, and suffering some intestinal distress, I asked George to take over the lead for several pitches. At long last we reached the end and sat down for a welcome rest.

After a few hundred feet of slogging up deep snow, we found a convenient *sérac*, under which we collapsed. Soon the tent was up and the food was on. It was an incredible relief to be able to unrope and lie down flat without the constant worry about dropping a boot, or the stove, or something else equally important. It was even possible to fall down without sliding into the abyss.

All good things come to an end sooner or later. We awoke to the sound of wind and snow; another storm had set in, and it had turned bitterly cold. Snow slowly buried the tent as we spent many listless hours resting and trying to conserve our dwindling reserves. Exhausted from the strain of almost 80 pitches of climbing and a series of bad bivouacs, the altitude was beginning to effect us, and we had precious little food with which to build up our strength.

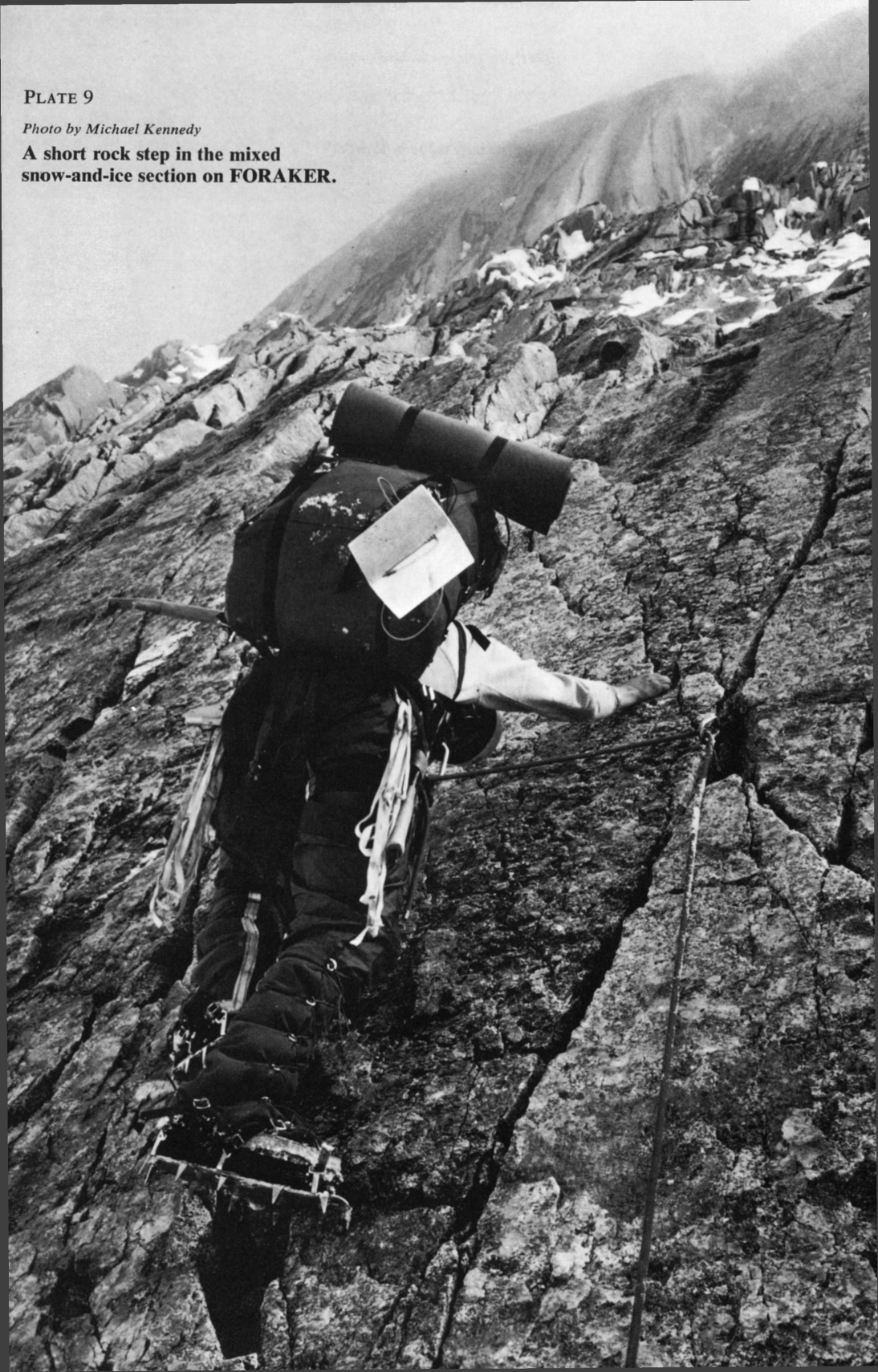
The storm continued through July 2. We began to worry . . . was this one of the legendary ten-day Alaskan blizzards. A closer look at the food bag revealed just how desperate things could become: we had four freeze-dried meals left, but little else; a few scraps of cheese, some margarine and logan bread, a few hard candies. We had already been on slim rations for a couple days, and what we had could be stretched for perhaps five more. But how would we ever make it over the summit and back down after that?

We had stopped in a sheltered spot, but wind-blown snow built up all around; for several hours we couldn't get out to clear the tent or relieve ourselves. Opening the zipper even a half an inch brought a blast of powder inside, soaking our already-sodden gear even more. Lethargy set in, and every movement became an effort. It seemed we would never be able to leave.

PLATE 9

*Photo by Michael Kennedy*

**A short rock step in the mixed  
snow-and-ice section on FORAKER.**



The morning of July 3 was good enough for a dash to the summit. "Dash" is hardly the word; it took us three hours just to get going, and we got to the summit at four P.M. The high wind dropped, but  $-20^{\circ}$  temperatures at 17,000 feet chilled us to the bone and we both worried about frostbite. After a few moments on the summit for the obligatory victory photos we headed down.

The first section of the descent was so easy that we ran, losing a couple of thousand feet in elevation in a couple of hours. Each foot lost gave us new energy as the effects of altitude receded, but the easy going came to an end all too quickly. We did some tricky down-climbing, belaying occasionally, and the weather once again changed its mind. Big black clouds moved in from the north, south and east; Foraker blocked the western view, but we suspected that things would look bleak there as well. We simply couldn't afford to sit out another storm.

All went well until we hit a heavily-corniced section of the ridge, apparently the crux of the route. We were very leery of cornices, and moved slowly and carefully around them, well below the fracture line. But we weren't careful enough. Time slowed down; the next few seconds lasted an eternity. George was ahead, 30 feet from the crest of the ridge; he came across what he thought was a small crevasse, probed it and stepped across. There was a dull cracking sound, and a fracture ran along the ridge for 100 feet. The cornice disappeared, taking George with it, the rope came tight and jerked me off my feet: I flew down one side of the ridge as George plunged down the other in the midst of tons of ice. The rope pulled tighter, arching me up to the crest of the ridge, and I saw myself shooting over the edge and the two of us falling helplessly to the chaotic glacier 8000 feet below.

But we stopped. I was 20 feet from the edge, and rammed in a dead-man within seconds. The rope was still taut. I was sure that George was either dead or very seriously injured. Shouts brought no answers, then the rope slackened. I pulled up a few feet, then another few feet: miracle of miracles, he was at least in good enough shape to climb! We were soon reunited and set about gathering our shattered wits. George was bruised and shaken and had been cut on the nose, but that was it. We had been lucky once again.

We belayed every pitch from this point on, even ones we could walk across. We couldn't take any more chances. Mist enveloped us as we continued down to 11,000 feet and another welcome bivouac. It was eight A.M. on July 4. We had completed another long day.

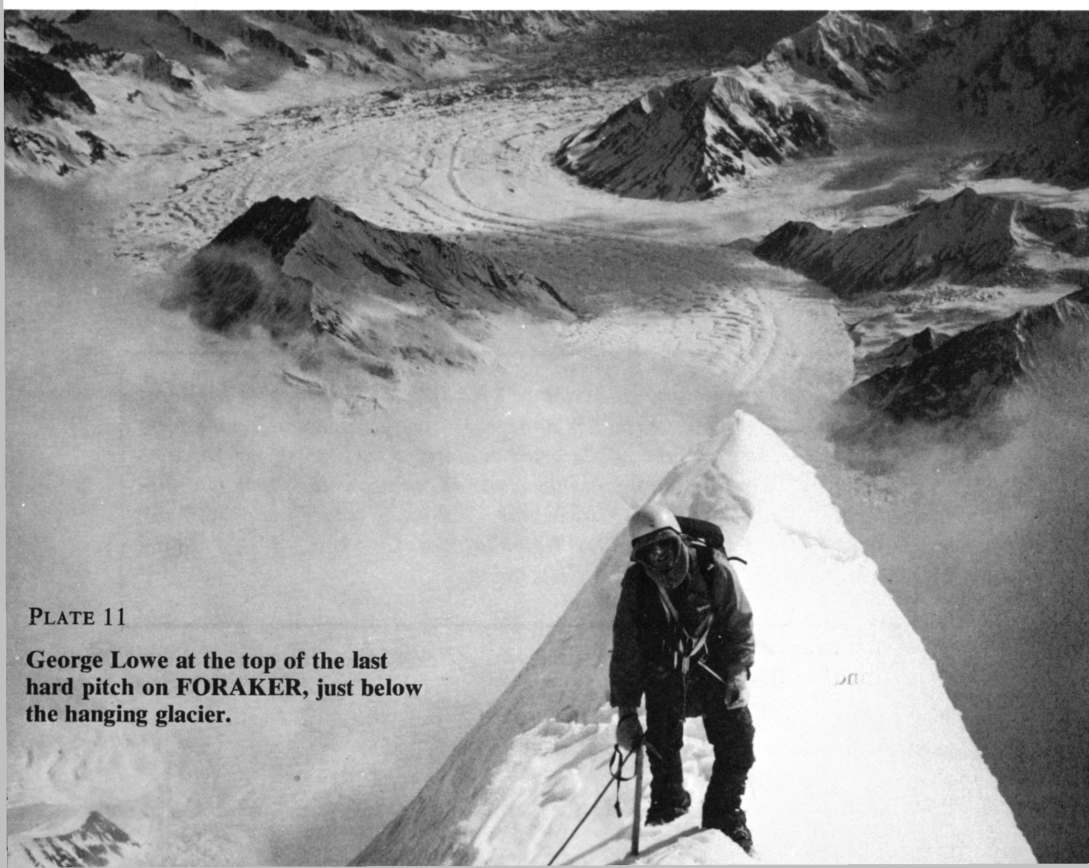
Once again we awoke to a whiteout and were forced to stay in the tent until eleven A.M. A short clearing gave us a glimpse of the way down; we had to take advantage of it, for we had only one dinner and a few scraps of food left. Almost as soon as we started the weather closed in, and we descended in a maelstrom of wind, rock, snow and ice. Very



**PLATE 10**

*Photos by Michael Kennedy*

**Looking down the crux gully on FORAKER at the end of a 24-hour day.**



**PLATE 11**

**George Lowe at the top of the last hard pitch on FORAKER, just below the hanging glacier.**

nearly at the end of our tether, we were only too conscious of the possibility of a fatal slip. Almost suddenly, it was over. We actually unroped to stumble down the muddy hill at the base of the ridge, laughing and joking about rock crevasses and mud cornices. The skis were only a hundred yards away on the glacier, but we prudently roped up again to get to them.

A quick feast on the cached food revived flagging energies.

It was almost warm, but the mountain gods weren't through with us yet. Mist crept in over the glacier, so we were forced to navigate by compass. The soft snow sucked at our skis, and every step required a conscious effort of will. Only the thought of canned food and banana bread at Base Camp kept us going. We arrived at three A.M. on July 6, gorged ourselves and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The morning dawned clear and warm. We aired our filthy bodies, ate, drank beer, talked to the other parties at the landing area; the sudden transition from the life-and-death struggles of the climb to the world of people, comfort and safety was overwhelming. That afternoon we flew out to the greenery and mosquitoes of Talkeetna.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTES: Mount Hunter, 14,573 feet, via North Face, from June 19 to June 24, 1977; summit reached on June 22; descent via West Ridge (Kennedy, G. Lowe).

Mount Foraker, 17,400 feet, via Central Spur of the South Face, from June 25 to July 6, 1977; summit reached on July 3; descent via Southeast Ridge (Kennedy, G. Lowe).

PERSONNEL: George Lowe, Jeff Lowe, Michael Kennedy.

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