

The Timeless Face: The North Face of Mount Huntington

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IN ALASKA THERE are many challenges. Climbers bored with the mountains of the lower 48 states leave to check out the noise they hear rumbling down from the north. Most return, and countless magazines and books emerge from countless coffee shops to bring countless readers the fears and joys and beauties they have found in that savage land. The word is out, climbing in Alaska in and the gold rush for classy new north faces on.

Huntington is classy all right—especially the 6000-foot north face—rivaled by few other Alaskan mountains for size, majesty and hidden arrogance. Black satin bands of rock balance on a dazzling white pyramid of ice and snow which flashes without being vulgar: a tapered silhouette with imposing corniced ridges to excite photographers and climbers alike.

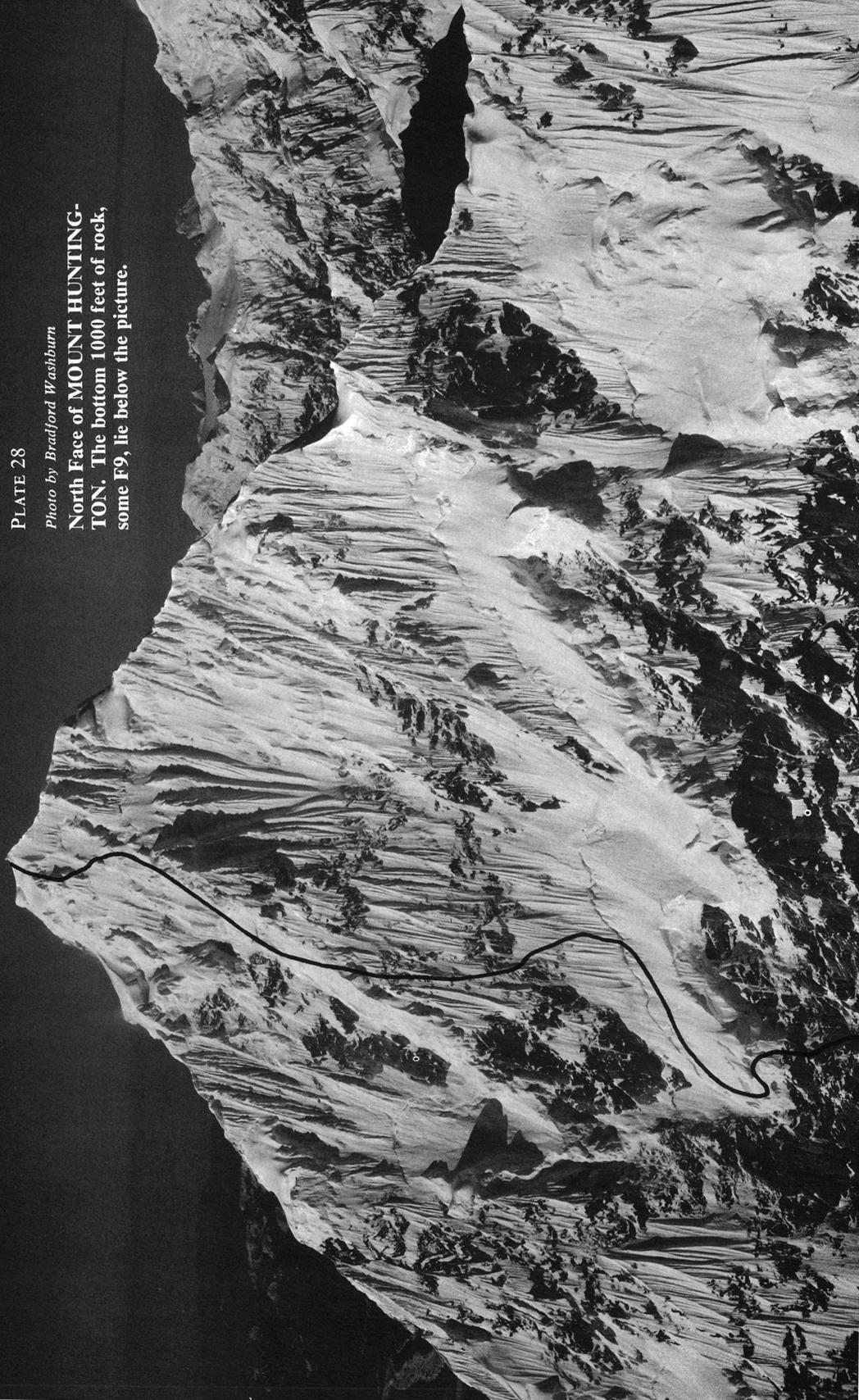
I was not prepared for what I would see or feel beneath this giant when suddenly our pilot, Jim Sharp, was gone and the two of us, Simon McCartney and I were alone. Well, we weren't exactly alone for we could see Charlie Porter's tent thirty feet away and the scarecrow he had erected in anticipation of our arrival. Two days later he appeared with Peter Sennhauser from a ski trip. We were to spend the next three weeks with them, for in the Land of Ice and Snow that is how long bad weather spells last. Talking, joking, and eating meals together, we were able to forget about the goal of our trip except when a false break in the weather deluded us into preparation for the climb.

Finally however time came to say goodbye and, turning our backs on our friends, we set off upwards to the sky and gathering clouds. Hoping that the weather would continue to improve, we ascended the first 1500 feet in seven hours. Battling our way through iced rock, avalanching snow, vertical pitches of ice, we began to wonder about the wisdom of our decision. But we could not retreat; our small rack of hardware, eight screws, twelve nuts and pins, one deadman, would not

PLATE 28

Photo by Bradford Washburn

North Face of MOUNT HUNTINGTON. The bottom 1000 feet of rock, some F9, lie below the picture.



allow us that privilege. And so, totally committed, we continued to climb, dodging blocks of ice and snow.

We lost the route numerous times and stopped occasionally to regroup, rest and brew tea, deriving extra inspiration from the philosophical quotations printed by Salada on the tea-bag labels. This particular time we read: "We often discover what will do by finding out what will not do," "When the situation becomes impossible, there is nothing to worry about," and "The hardest tumble one can take is to fall over one's own bluff." We were definitely bluffing our way up this mountain without a clue where we were going. The only thing that was certain was that the correct way off was up. Uninterested in anything except survival, Simon and I fled from one sheltered spot to another. Now on a steep pitch. I felt the mountain had a mind of its own. The ice would suddenly become extremely soft only to harden higher up. Bulges materialized out of the mist where I expected none. Too far out beyond my protection, I was sweating, panting, tired. I had taken only two ice screws, these for the belay at the top of this never-ending pitch. About 110 feet up the corridor, I accepted the first opportunity to rest, burying for support my North Wall hammer in a small patch of snow. Below was Simon, further than the deception of height had led me to believe. Although I couldn't see the sun, I felt through clouds and snow that it was kneeling on the doorsill of the west and I sensed cold night whispering on my neck. On again and, moving higher, I was puzzled, a trifle alarmed. The belay stance was supposed to be here; it must have moved. Deciding not to sound panic-stricken, I yelled down to Simon. "No belay here. Move the belay 15 feet more."

Simon didn't understand. "Here I come. Got me on?"

For a while we climbed roped together without belays. Simon was climbing so close behind at times that I was practically prodded by his ice hammers.

However eventually we had to rope up for another steep section of ice. It was during one of Simon's excursions into the vertical wilderness that a single thought worked into the murky depths of my mind. Climbers who choose to pioneer first ascents up difficult and dangerous faces on high mountains have chosen to be crazy—people such as Simon and I. For my part I have chosen to be crazy in order to cope with a crazy world and have adopted craziness as a lifestyle. Only on becoming convinced that the world I left behind in Los Angeles is sane, could I give up my craziness. And that cannot be done. A climber entering the subculture of a climbing community accepts his alienation from larger society and proclaims he is a full fledged "normal" person—that it is others who are abnormal.

Simon meanwhile is gripped speechless above me, unaware that his faithful belayer is spacing out on crystals of ice and snow. There is

PLATE 29

Photo by Bradford Washburn
**Close-up of the Summit and North
Face of HUNTINGTON.**



some comfort to know that I am tied onto somebody who is also crazy.

Following Simon's pitch was no piece of cake. It had the texture of granola, honey and chopped nuts. I was glad to reach the sanctuary of belay. We were both tired.

"The next section doesn't look too hard; not very steep either." We both leaned back and strained our neck muscles to check out the next 100 feet of verglased ice. Though in no hurry to leave our sheltering rock overhang, I soon found myself climbing again—up a blue bulge that had reared its frozen head out of the smokey haze. Leaning out precariously on hammer blades, I scrutinized the polished, monolithic wall of seemingly unclimbable ice. An occasional jutting of irregular ice offered dizzy assistance. Hanging from wrist loops, I coaxed icy holds into the overhanging groove and, exchanging ice screw protection for courage, surmounted the obstacle.

By now my brain needed the easy life and began to ask me questions. "What are you doing to protect me?" Why should it wonder now, wasting its precious energy inside a climber's head? Why, it could be inside the head of a poet or a porno king, lavishing in forbidden delights. "Simon, you've been down there so long you're pale, pale as a ghost among lacy curtains, pale as the foam on a mad dog's mouth." Always a bad sign. . . Energy crisis! Evening air is cooling the snow and the sun has finished the last of its infrequent appearances. We find a sheltered spot, dig a snow hole and put on a brew.

Simon has become quite understanding. So have I. We don't interrupt each other's thoughts any more. We speak some, but mostly we just clutch the hot mug of tea in frost-nipped hands, greedily gulping the warmth. I sit on the pack that holds my survival. It feels as if I will stay in this new life forever: forever climbing and dodging ice cliffs and walls, forever lost in the sizzling silence of our very own energy crisis. Too soon the hot liquid is finished and we clamber into sleeping bags before its warmth disappears. A final brew and I stretch minutes into hours to prolong my daily ration of two Tiger Milk bars. Tea finished, we both disappear into our own worlds.

In the morning powdered snow pricks my bearded face. Twenty feet into the next pitch, Simon yells down, "You're convinced then that the future is bleak?"

I squint up at him. An amused smile wrinkles his face. He places a long ice screw into the ice. "Yep," I say. "We're in one helluva mess."

Time was moving slowly. I stared at my watch, seeing the minutes chase the hours around, but they seemed frozen; the minutes were crawling. In the blur of hours that followed we heard shouts rise up from the nameless depth below: climbers attempting an alpine-style ascent of the French ridge of Huntington. As it turned out, they were turned back 600 feet below the top by continuing storms, crumbling steep snow and



PLATE 30

Photo by Bradford Washburn

**Detail of some of the upper part of
the North Face Route on Huntington.**

a lack of food. On one of the clearer moments we could see their retreat through a hole in the surrounding storm.

Getting into motion was becoming harder. The time required to climb a given distance seemed longer. Einstein observed motion and learned that space and time are relative. I had committed myself to moving and learned that I could alter reality by my perception of it; it was this discovery that allowed me to smile away fatigue and doubt. Einstein must have been an ice climber.

Our pace was slow but consistent. One of us would lead when the other was too tired to make the life-saving decisions. Every morning we would awaken cold, the lichen on the rock and gear inside the cave frosted. Water froze on the ice hammers, hardware and packs outside, leaving a glaze of streaked glass. Silence arrived one morning. The avalanches stopped, and even though the storm continued, we had to leave.

"Do you want to lead?" I sheepishly inquired. My words were frosted and vaporous in the air.

"Well, ah, not really," Simon replied thoughtfully. Neither of us had slept well the night before.

It was my turn to carry the torch and so, in a frosty haze, I left the pit and entered a narrow couloir. It became steeper and steeper, blue ice so compressed and cleaned by countless tons of avalanching snow that I could see my reflection in its texture, the vivid colors entombed within. Life was becoming rough, abusing; and I was getting punchy. We had been on the face for three-and-a-half or four days, moving steadily for 22 hours straight. Sneaky and invisible, the storm continued, never getting worse, never better, until we forgot that any better weather existed.

All this only reinforced our faith in each other and in our style of climbing. A sense of urgency had crept in. Whereas in the past we had kept up our pace out of sheer exhilaration at being free and unique, we now continued because we were afraid to stop. We had planned for only three bivouacs, two on the way up and one on the way down. Obviously we had been naive in our estimation of the difficulties. The first 1600 feet had F9 rock-climbing in an iced-up chimney and vertical Canadian-type waterfall climbing as well as fifty feet of gently overhanging ice. Every day had similar sections with incessant bad weather. Now we were down to our last four Tiger Milk bars. Four days of snow, weariness, regret, enchantment and frustration had eaten away our arrogance. Today thirty-two pitches had been climbed and now, possessed by the mist, I could hear the sirens singing. I wanted to dance with them, but I couldn't; driven by hunger, I denied them all. The rope was coiled at my feet with one end still tied to my harness. With eyes closed, I listened as Simon enlarged the ledge that was to become

our last bivouac. Patience dominated our way of life. Simon slept hard after we finished drinking the honeyed tea. Somewhere up above, the sound of an object fluttering through space could be heard but not seen. It was only a sound. The absence of sight made it easy to imagine as unreal, more like a fairy tale.

But the day came when the Timeless Face leaned back and easy-angled slopes replaced the vertical bulges and walls which had entombed us below and had become the only world we knew. Wading through thigh-deep snow, we reached the top. Our aching limbs collapsed from weariness. We had made the summit.

Still we had to get down, and it looked as if it was to be down the French ridge. For 600 feet the descent was uneventful. We walked cheerfully on the right side of the cornices, and all seemed well. Then, when the clouds momentarily parted, we saw the whole picture. Cornices overhung *both* sides, leering at us with the froth of a mad dog on their mouths. I would lower Simon down a cornice on tension and then he would dig in while I jumped, flew through the air and waited for him to catch me. Once. Twice. The third time Simon fell fifty feet through a cornice onto the north face. When he returned, many minutes later, he was a shadow of his former self, defeated, worn-out, his ankle badly twisted. Then, when I fell up to my waist through another cornice, we decided to find the west-face route.

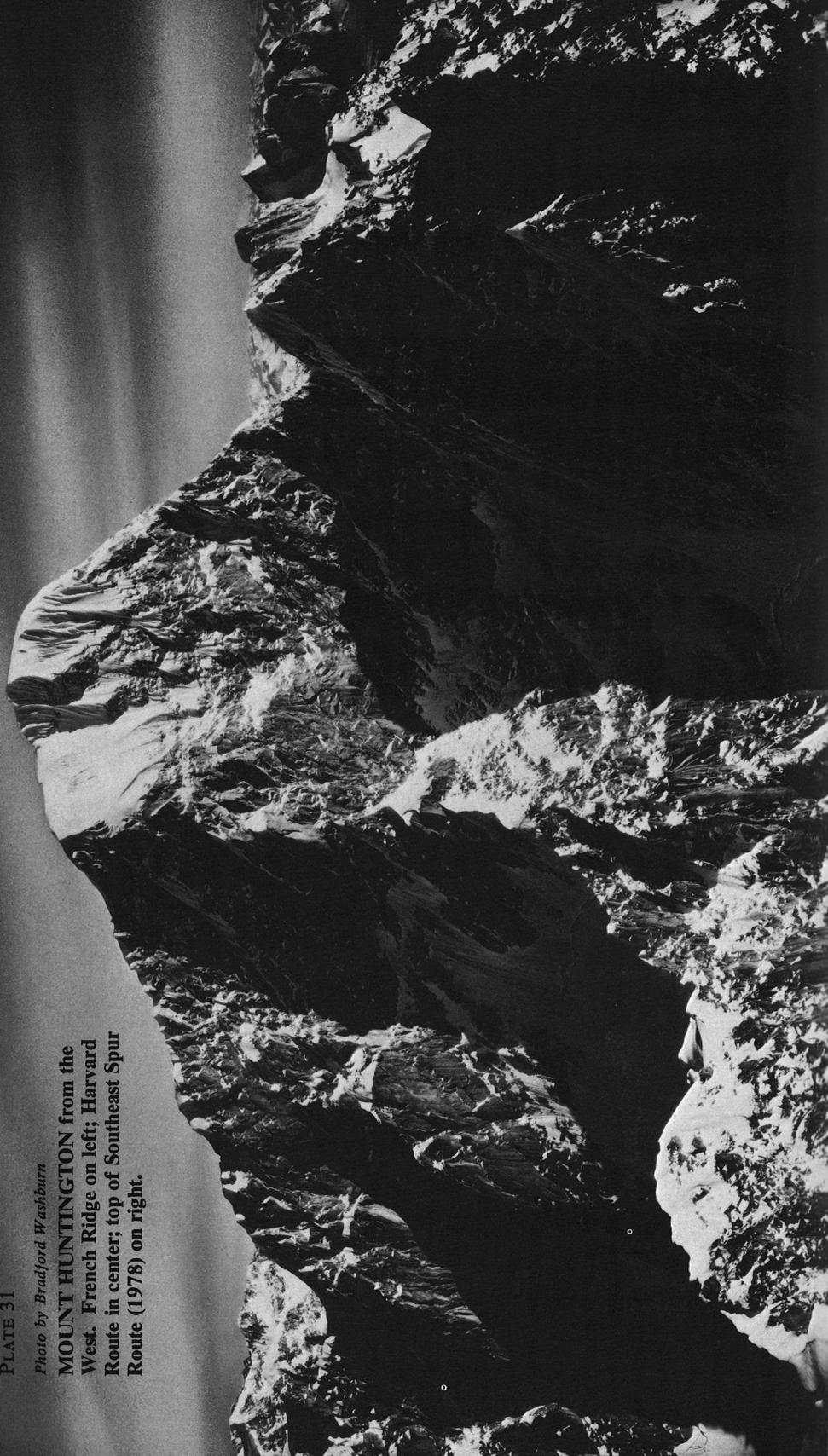
Out of the gloom appeared a steep wide slope. Surely this had to be it, but we couldn't be sure. The storm resumed and visibility again became a real problem. We used a single ice screw on each of six rappels, new Chouinards, too. Finally we hit rock outcrops and could conserve by chopping our slings in half and by using these got more mileage out of our meager gear selection. Rappel followed rappel. Then we came on the tell-tale sign of a fixed rope—and pitons pounded into cracks everywhere. We took out the pitons for use lower on the face and continued our escape.

Just above *The Nose* we lost both ropes. Simon led a rappel. Below me, out of sight, he slipped, ending up hanging upside down in space twenty feet out from the rock and thirty feet above the snow ledge with only twenty-five feet of rope left. But I did not know about that until two hours later. Right then I just waited, freezing my butt off. When finally I got down and Simon pulled me into his stance, the ropes wedged somewhere above and we couldn't retrieve them. Maybe it was because we had gone non-stop for over 44 hours; maybe it was the lack of anything substantial to eat in three days; maybe we just didn't have the energy. At any rate I couldn't get them and so I chopped off forty feet and said goodbye to the rest. We had some warm water and tried to fall asleep. We couldn't even warm our bodies enough to have the energy to shiver. Later we packed the remaining gear, all fifteen pounds

PLATE 31

Photo by Bradford Washburn

MOUNT HUNTINGTON from the West. French Ridge on left; Harvard Route in center; top of Southeast Spur Route (1978) on right.



of it, and began the retreat once again. Simon's ankle was really bad by this time. He could not support his weight at all but he didn't complain. We both knew it wouldn't do any good.

The sun sank with a sob and Alaskan darkness waded in from all sides, dissolving all landmarks. The weather was good for a few minutes and then it clouded up again; at least it wasn't snowing hard and the wind had died down. I had forgotten that there was any reality outside of what we had been doing and would have to continue doing until we made it back to the Ruth Glacier. Even achieving the summit was just a slur in the tide. We had given ourselves only fifteen minutes on top before the descent. I began to feel cheated. I hadn't felt joy or relief on top, merely the acknowledgement that one obstacle was done with and another begun. The summit haunted me for months later.

We spent an uncomfortable, hungry, cold night. We didn't sleep but waited instead for the sun magically to appear. It didn't. We had a difficult time pulling on frozen boots and all our clothes and committing ourselves once again to the descent. It had been easy before when all we had to do was rappel on 300 feet of rope and then pull it down to begin another rappel. Now without any rope it was different. The snow conditions were bad. A full foot-and-a-half of snow covered the ice and rock everywhere. We tried to move continuously at first, but Simon's foot and our fatigue dictated that we move slower than a snail until we reached the fixed ropes.

I would follow a fixed rope until it disappeared into the ice and then would have to chop it out. Sometimes it was just below the surface and it took little effort. At other times it was covered by two feet and the labor was horrendous. The saving grace was that I could concentrate on the task at hand. If Simon complained, it was because he didn't have anything to do. He would have to wait for hours until I had liberated enough rope to enable us to rappel another forty feet or so. Thank God for 7mm Japanese plastic rope. On it went: twenty, thirty, fifty feet. Finally we had enough sections of rope to tie together to make a single 300-foot rope of polypropylene and 50 feet of old 9mm perlon.

Fifty-four hours after reaching the summit we began to sense that the glacier had to be near. Soon the clouds parted; miraculously the snow stopped and the sky turned blue. We could see the French ridge and what was in store for us. Leaving the last 300 feet of rope tied to our second to last ice screw, we turned to face yet another bivouac, foodless, but still alive and strong in determination. If I were going to die, it surely wasn't going to be here. When the sun came out, the heat was almost more than either of us could stand—or understand for that matter. For two weeks we had not had any sun. Our clothes dried. We slept. We got warm. And we waited for the sun to set so that the snow would harden and let us cross the Tokositna Glacier, climb 1500 feet

up to the top of the French ridge and then descend back down to camp.

The worst was over, I thought, as I kicked steps across the glacier. We decided to try a couloir that Simon had spotted. Three hours later we were up it. It seemed easy, but after only three hours of climbing we were again exhausted and had to bivouac out of the wind in the shelter of rocks. We slept for an eternity. The tension and nervousness, held so long at bay, invaded my body. I was annoyed that after twelve hours of sleep we were still climbing so poorly, still so cold. We waded in the snow, unbelayed, seeming not to care, knowing we were almost down. When we found the rappel point that was to let us down onto the Ruth Glacier, we realized that there would be no more hard climbing, but not until we actually saw our camp just a couple of hours' walk away on the glacier did I truly know we could make it. I began to appreciate the weather, not a cloud in a windless sky.

Nine days of struggle, exultation, triumph and pain suddenly overwhelmed me and I lay in the snow laughing at our good fortune, crying at a sense of loss. Here we could relax. There was no need to rope up. Another sea of images and feelings suppressed on the climb welled up uncontrolled and swept over me.

In our caved-in snow cave remained three weeks' supply of food. We hadn't eaten for four days. I tried to eat everything in sight and got sick. Soon we radioed for our pilot, Jim Sharp, who promised to fly us out in the morning. (It says a lot for Jim Sharp that he had been so concerned for our safety that he had flown over Huntington each day to check on us two loonies, risking his life and losing money.)

The flight out, like everything else we had encountered, was overwhelming. Yet nothing had changed except my point of view, myself. The face had not changed; it would be forever the same: timeless.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Huntington, 12,240 feet, via the north face; summit reached on July 6, 1978; whole climb from July 1 to 10.

PERSONNEL: Simon McCartney, Jack Roberts.