

# Mount Hunter Traversed Solo

JOHN WATERMAN

**M**Y VENDETTA WITH Mount Hunter started in the late 1960's with Bradford Washburn's pictures in the American Alpine Journal. Mount Hunter, the third highest summit in the immediate environs of Mount McKinley, or better Denali, and I, a recent high school graduate in 1970, were an unlucky combination until after mistrials in 1969 and 1973. The mountain and I finally met on our own terms in March of 1978. On March 24, I stood alone in a cirque of the Tokositna Glacier at 8000 feet below the south face of Mount Hunter. The 4700-foot central buttress of the south face rose abruptly before me.

After a few days on short rations and a few more landings of Cliff Hudson's Super Cub, my supplies were increased to 3600 feet of rope and seventy-four 5000-calorie-per-day units of food, 800 pounds in all. My plans called for a complete solo traverse of the mountain south-to-north and descent of a route on the north side to a fly-out from the north fork of the Tokositna Glacier.

I would do this route in the most expedition-like style, ferrying my entire 600-pound Base Camp of reserve equipment up each section of the mountain. By re-using my rope as I went along, pulling it up again and again after I had moved supplies up each section, I could climb a route requiring 12,000 feet of rope with only 3600 feet. To complete the traverse, there were twelve camps. I took an average of twelve round trips on each section, to shuttle gear, though only ten on the descent. My earlier plans to take from 80 to 100 days proved completely inaccurate.

The first four sections were up the central buttress of the south face. It began a quarter-mile from my landing site and was the major unknown factor of the trip. Only the first section had been climbed. The buttress is almost wholly a snow-and-ice arête except for a series of rock steps and a 350-foot rock cliff in the first third. The buttress joins the mountain's ridge at 12,700 feet. This ridge, which I had climbed previously, makes up the next two sections, the first of which is a half-mile-long corniced ridge with a knife-edged fin of ice almost precluding passage in the middle. The next section (the sixth in all) is an arête of ice 700 feet high which joins the summit plateau at 13,500 feet. Its steepness made the conclusion of the ascent doubtful. In this article, I shall describe only the first part of the climb, the first six sections.

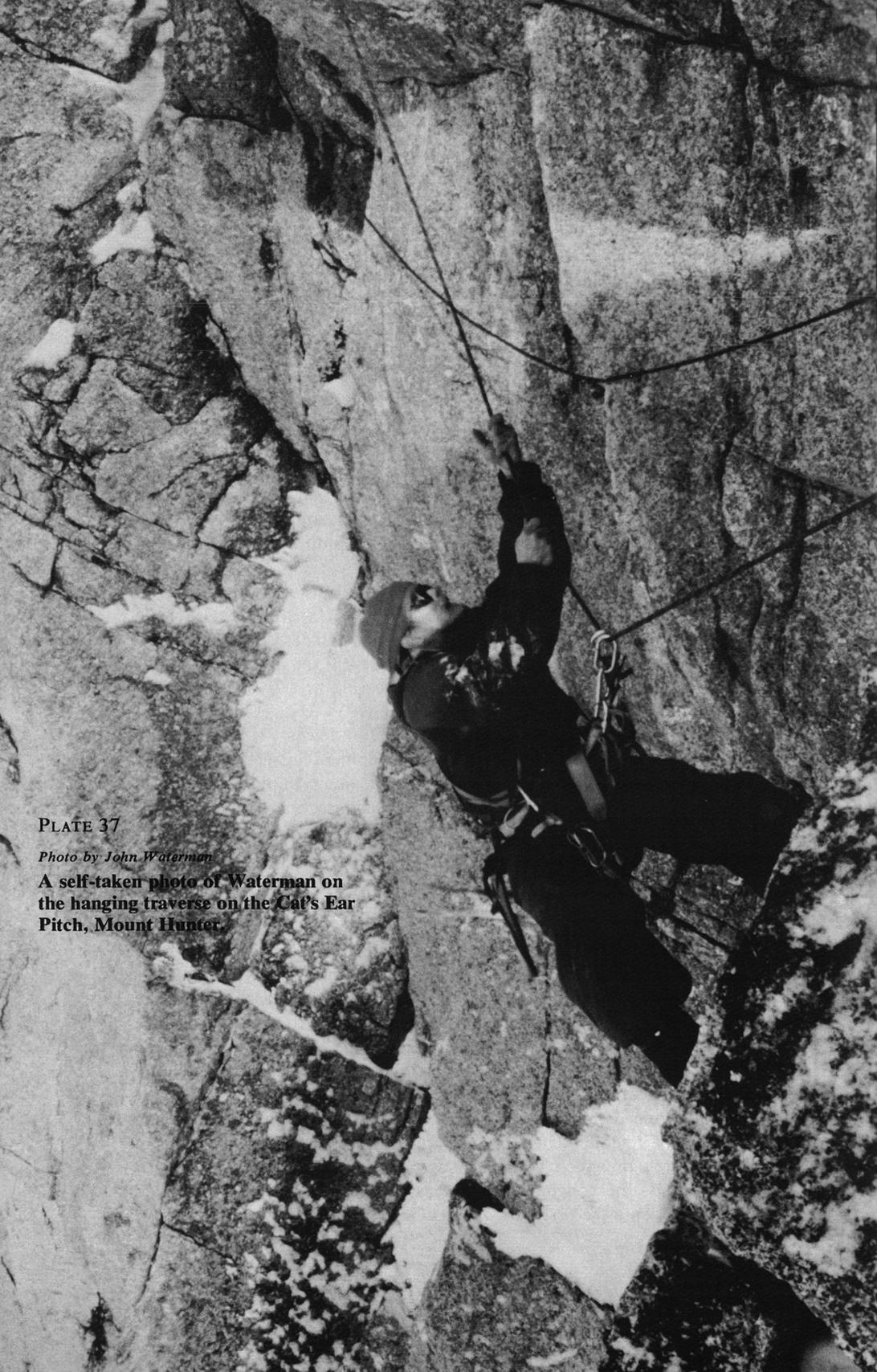


PLATE 37

*Photo by John Waterman*

**A self-taken photo of Waterman on the hanging traverse on the Cat's Ear Pitch, Mount Hunter.**

The seventh and eighth sections were the traverse of the summit plateau, which runs north to south, and is two miles long and a half-mile wide. There were no technical difficulties to speak of on these sections or on the ascents to Hunter's three summits, the highest of which is the north one. The descent of the north spur occupied the last three sections.

On the night of March 24, I set out from camp in the bergschrund beneath a gully some 1200 feet long on the east side of the lower buttress. Despite a lost contact lens and frost bitten fingers, I made rapid progress up the gully which avoided the first 700 feet of the ridge crest. Two-hundred-and-fifty feet higher, I reached the top of the second rock step. The step was narrow but snow-covered and I found a suitable place for a Camp II next to a four-foot spike of rock that anchored line left by a previous party. The climbing was fourth class in the gully and had a few fifth-class moves on the rock step.

The next 500 feet were the crux of the technical climbing. I traversed the step with only one fifth-class move where I spotted a sling, the last sign of the previous party. The traverse led to the 350-foot cliff. It was blank to the right and with an overhanging bulge running up obliquely to the left from the point where the step touched the cliff. There an 80-foot pinnacle jutted out of the face like a cat's ear. The corner formed on its left side above the overhang had a thin crack in it. Level with the top of the spire and fifty feet to the left across a blank slab, a snow ledge led to a 300-foot gully, which in turn led to the left side of the top of the cliff. With so many loads to bring up, the snow ledge and gully were the obvious choices for the route. Getting there was not so easy.

After a few free moves, I nailed the crack to a chockstone which went free to the snow in back of the pinnacle. While ferrying loads, I worried about the fraying of the rope here since it dangled free below the overhang. Forty feet higher, I was up against the blank slab. By angling off to the right I reached a beautiful half-inch crack which crossed to the left above the slab. I aided out on this for forty feet and lowered myself to the closest spot on the snow ledge, which was big enough for two-foot midgets. That was enough for one day. Returning, in two more days I pushed the route partially on aid up the steep gully to the top of the pyramidal cliff, 1500 feet up the buttress, at the end of section two and the site of Camp III. I reached this point, a third of the way up the buttress, on April 11, the 18th day out. Despite some expanding flakes, the rock was generally excellent Yosemite-type granite.

On April 19, I received my last flight from Cliff, who flew out some unnecessary rock pitons since I was above the rock now. I wasn't to see another human being for a hundred days. I got all my supplies and ropes pulled up to the top of section two by May 2.



PLATE 38

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**MOUNT HUNTER'S South (in center) and North Peaks** traversed by Waterman, five of whose camps are marked.



PLATE 39

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**MOUNT HUNTER from the north.  
Waterman's descent route is marked.**

Section three, the next 1600 feet of the route, was a spectacular corniced arête. The principle difficulties were continuous cornices and occasional knife-edges, a 100-foot headwall that ended on a three-foot-thick fin of ice, a twenty-foot-high block of rock, which forced me to the face on the left for 200 feet and a final three-foot-thick ice pinnacle to balance over before the ridge merged into a massive two-tiered snow formation, the "First Judge." This section ended 300 feet higher, at a second smaller formation I called the "Second Judge."

I climbed this section in four days in bunny boots and crampons and reached the "Second Judge" on the evening of May 6 by doing without the formality of a belay on the arête connecting the Judges. I used a stich belay plate and a 200-foot  $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch Goldline to do most of my leading; when in a hurry I used the belay plate on a 600-foot  $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch polypropylene. I seldom placed protection closer than at 100-foot intervals for the sake of speed. Mostly I could kick steps into the backs of cornices, but I had to crampon up snow-covered ice sheets on the headwall rockblock and the arête to "Second Judge."

My morale was low at this point. I was forty-three days out and was obviously not going to reach the summit plateau with any reserve of food even on two-thirds rations. In addition, I noticed I was infested with lice. It was some comfort to know at least I was not alone. My gloomy feelings grew as my food supply diminished over the next forty-five days before re-supply.

Trying to remain oblivious to misfortunes, I moved the twelve carries over the section with the usual number of near misses at total disaster. Making progress on section four, I finally got around to pulling up my ropes from section three on May 22, day 59. The weather, which had not hampered me much this far, seemed now to conspire against me. Frequent snow covered Camp IV and filled my footsteps.

The way up the fourth and last 1500-foot section of the buttress ran up a steep corniced arête and headwalls with the most spectacular ice fin yet to a large easy ridge. This ridge, the "Third Judge," was 500 feet up the last section. A triangular face, the "Little Prince," occupied the better part of the next 500 feet. I approached the face through a gash in a 30-foot ice cliff at its base. The last 500 feet were on a ridge broken by a 50° ice step; I joined the south ridge at 12,700 feet. On May 26, day 63, I passed old lines we had left in 1973 beneath a large cornice fifty feet to my left and stood on top of the corniced buttress, looking at Mount Foraker. It had been hidden from my view until now. After some seconds, I descended the farther side to the gentler west flank of the ridge and plodded 80 feet to a campsite on a precarious but broad cornice back.

The less said about my carries on this last section the better. The ropes became frozen and Jümars worked only after considerable thawing

with my exhaled breath. My mood was hardly improved after learning by radio of the two deaths on Foraker on May 30. On June 6, all my gear and ropes were up. On the 7th, I was attempting to cross a place near the knife-edge when a twelve-foot section of cornice broke underneath me, giving me a 40-foot leader fall. I was surprised to be held by my belay system. Completing the traverse of the knife-edge with more caution, I reached the summit arête in short order, concluding section five. Due to cornice danger, I used all 3600 feet of rope on this mostly third-class part. By June 12 all my equipment and ropes were across.

I had eight days of food left at two-thirds rations. The next day, despite losing a mitten and taking another leader-fall, I reached the summit plateau. I had fixed some 1000 feet of rope on this sixth section. Though shorter, it was as hard as any part of the buttress. What a thrill when I felt the edge of that plateau although my body was still on a 60° slope!

On June 15 in the worst storm to date, I made three carries up the arête with my camp and all remaining food, consuming three days of food in the process. I set up my tent on what was surely the windiest spot on earth. A partial clearing prompted me to relax and eat an extra day or two of food, but on the 17th, I divided my last two 3600-calorie units into ten units of less than 1000 calories each. If only the deteriorating weather didn't signal a two-week storm! On my third full day on this scant food, June 20, day 88, Cliff dropped me 36 days of full rations, plus a gallon of ice cream and ten pounds of potatoes. Calculations that I would run out of this food before I even began my descent, disrupted my newfound sense of security.

Despite continued icing of my Jümars, I completed all my carries up by June 28. I didn't climb the dangerous arête in bad weather. I used my completely sunburned upper torso as an excuse for not load carrying and went to the south summit on July 2, day 101. At 1:50 P.M., I walked onto the broad summit. Who would have known that it would take me another forty-three days to reach my fly-out site.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Alaska range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Hunter, 14,573 feet, solo. Central Buttress of the South Face, Upper South Ridge, Traverse of Summit Plateau and Descent of North Spur to the Tokositna Glacier. North Summit reached July 26, 1978 (145 day expedition).

TECHNICAL DATA: 3600 feet of rope, 40 ice pitons, pickets, and flukes, 20 rock anchors.

PERSONNEL: John Waterman.