

# Mount Logan's West Ridge

ROGER HIRT

MY WILDEST IMAGININGS had not prepared me for the tremendous scale of Mount Logan. As it appeared over the horizon, it dwarfed everything else in sight. I wonder how many worried faces our pilot Phil Upton has seen in his fifteen years of flying climbers into the St. Elias Mountains. I don't think mine was the first.

With the first glimpse of the west ridge, it became apparent that we would not be able to approach the ridge from the north side as originally planned. Instead we would land in the King Trench and ascend a 2500-foot couloir. We camped below it for a few days and a few storms and talked tactics. We would do it semi-alpine style. We had a lot of fixed rope but since we planned to come down the east ridge, we wouldn't leave anything behind.

We climbed the couloir in the coldest part of the day, pushing the route up and caching food. It was a fine ice climb in its own right with several moderate pitches of New England quality. Fourteen days and three birthdays later, we four climbers had all our gear on the ridge crest.

Totally at the mercy of the elements, we were already being slowed by storms. The three-mile-long ridge posed the longest access route to the summit, not steep, rising from here only 3000 feet, but from its top we would have to cross the fifteen-mile summit plateau in order to come down the east ridge. Despite food for a month, we should have to hurry.

The ridge was straightforward enough at first, but we soon came to a huge overhanging cornice on the north side while the south side was steep ice. George Seivwright and Jon Waterman shed packs and fixed 750 feet of rope, all they had with them, while Steve Davis and I hauled gear and dug a snow cave.

The wind was a constant worry. A tent fly had been destroyed in a storm at our first ridge camp. George and Jon were in their tent fully dressed and ready to self-arrest in case they were blown off the ridge. Our snow cave was a real treat, where for the first time we slept soundly out of the wind.

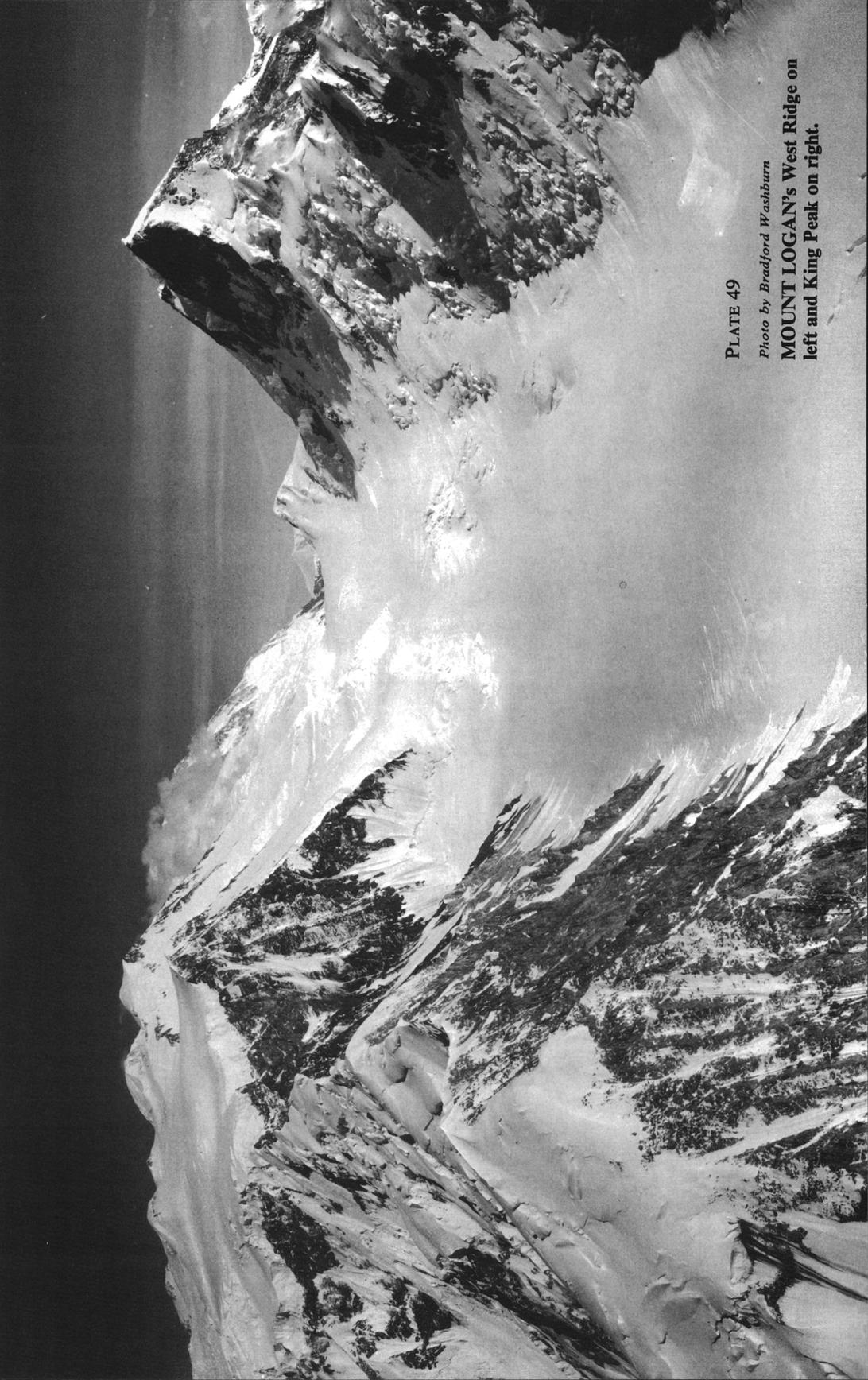


PLATE 49

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**MOUNT LOGAN's West Ridge on  
left and King Peak on right.**

Eventually the steepness of the ridge relented a bit and the going was easier. Cornices became our chief problem and we had to keep well below the edge of the ridge. While I was belaying Steve over an unstable area, a cornice abruptly broke inches in front of him. He froze as the Ogilvie Glacier suddenly flashed into view thousands of feet below. This middle section went pretty smoothly and we could see the summit slopes coming closer. Getting off the ridge to the plateau would be the crux. The intersection was steep, broken up and had three major rock gendarmes.

Jon Waterman led a spectacular 75° ice pitch, the steepest on the whole route. We fixed it with 9mm rope. In the middle of it George Seivwright's crampon broke. He thought that his hinged crampon had loosened under the heavy load and being on a Jümar, it would be an easy matter to re-attach it. Not realizing that the hinge had come apart, he loosened the binding. Half the crampon bounced twice and disappeared down a steep gully. Unperturbed, he made an étrier loop for his foot and finished the pitch on his ascender. I have never seen such a cool performance under pressure. The next morning he jury-rigged straps for the remaining four points and went to work on a new technique: "heel-pointing." I also noticed that one of my crampons had cracked between the front points. I put them back together with a small piece of bailing wire.

The ridge was taking its toll on our equipment and our nerves. The cut-down aluminum grain shovel was showing signs of wear and weakening. Every spare part we had for our two stoves was pressed into service. Eventually we had to rob parts from one to keep the other working.

The weather turned cold as we faced three giant granite towers, all that blocked the path to the plateau. Steve Davis and Jon Waterman wasted no time and sought a route around them. The secure sound of bomb-proof pitons rang out. Seven hours later they had fixed 750 feet of rope over and around some really unstable rock; the path to the plateau was clear above us.

On July 5 we were finally on the plateau. We had spent half of the 26 days since we had set out in foul weather. A full thirteen were used waiting out storms, wind or whiteouts. For one five-day period we hadn't seen the sun. Now less than a week's worth of food remained to cross the unfamiliar ground to the summit and to get down.

Making sleds out of plastic tarps, we pulled the gear we couldn't carry and set off across the plateau. The tremendous scale of Mount Logan played us tricks again. The plateau was an endless, broad expanse. With only a rough, hand-drawn map we had to find the northwest col, a key passage to the highest plateau and the summit. After pushing on for twelve hours, we stopped for the night. The next morning we realized that we had missed the col and would have to take a steeper, more

direct line to the higher plateau. We had wasted a day of good weather. We knew that we could get down the King Trench route quickly. With great disappointment, the east ridge descent was silently abandoned.

We made our highest camp on July 10 and left for the summit in deteriorating weather. Snow banners obscured the peaks. Lenticular clouds appeared out of nowhere. Our food supply demanded that we go to the summit that day. The higher we climbed, the worse the weather became. We groped our way to the west summit, 100 feet lower than the main summit and that was it! Wands guided us down to our camp in 40-foot visibility. We fell asleep in a stupor of exhaustion.

Two days later we had come full circle. Back in the King Trench we were ready to trade solitude and quiet for the Alaska Highway. Phil Upton, our pilot, reappeared. The greatest wilderness experience of my life was over.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: St. Elias Mountains, Yukon Territory, Canada.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Logan via the West Ridge, climb started on June 9, 1978 and West Summit reached on July 11, 1978.

PERSONNEL: Steven Davis, Roger Hirt, George Seivwright, Jonathan Waterman.

