

# South Ridge of Mount Huntington

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THE SOUTH RIDGE OF Mount Huntington is “not so much a ridge as five separate serrated peaks, each increasingly higher.” \* To climb the entire ridge was enticing, but it would be terribly difficult. There were other solutions. Bradford Washburn’s pictures showed that the towers could be avoided by gaining a large cirque on the east side of the ridge and by sprinting up a couloir between the last tower and the main summit. However, getting to the cirque looked worse than climbing the entire south ridge. The Tokositna Glacier on the east side of Huntington forms two icefalls which guard the cirque like medieval dragons.

In 1978 two parties solved the riddle of the Tokositna icefalls. Jeb Schenk and Dave Holsworth climbed the lower icefall leading to the basin below the Rooster Comb-Huntington col but considered themselves “very lucky to have made it.” (*A.A.J.*, 1979, p. 166.) Angus Thuermer and his party made end runs around the upper and lower icefalls by using couloirs to the right. (*A.A.J.*, 1979, pp. 81-89.) I was elated. Thuermer’s party had obviously found the way. The south ridge could be climbed by following in their footsteps. . . .

Or was there another way? In 1972 a party had climbed the east ridge of Mount Huntington by gaining the Rooster Comb-Huntington col from the west fork of the Ruth Glacier. Others had recently repeated that feat to climb the Rooster Comb. It is only 1000 feet from the col down to the head of the Tokositna below Huntington’s east face. Dave Jay, Jay Kerr, Scott Woolums and I decided to gain the head of the Tokositna from the west fork of the Ruth Glacier.

The trip did not start out auspiciously. Just before we flew in, an individual had come from the Kahiltna with tales of the worst avalanche conditions he had ever seen. We panicked and cancelled an airdrop into

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\* Roberts, David, *The Mountain of My Fear*, New York: Vanguard Press, 1968, p. 23.

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*  
**MOUNT HUNTINGTON** from the  
South. Mount McKinley rises behind  
at the right.



the head of the Tokositna until we had had time to survey our icefall. We decided to do a warm-up climb on the southwest ridge of P 11,300. The joke was on us.

February and April had been extremely windy and so much ice was showing on the faces that the Ruth was a hall of mirrors. As for P 11,300, the handle of Jay Kerr's brand new ice axe broke 800 feet below the summit. Disgusted, he hurled the useless shaft 3000 feet to the glacier. We soon followed *en rappel*. The situation went from bad to worse at Base Camp when the weather deteriorated and the pilot failed to return for our airdrop.

Tired of waiting, Scott Woolums and Dave Jay started up the icefall to the col on the night of May 15. They made it to the col in two days despite marginal weather and a wild 300-foot spill by Scott; he barely managed to self-arrest before yanking Dave off. Meanwhile, Jay Kerr and I benefited from patience, lighter loads and route finding and were able to gain the col in six hours. While we returned to Base Camp to make a second carry, Scott and Dave continued over to the Tokositna. After waiting for a day of bad weather, we returned, picked up parts of the first load and followed Dave and Scott's route over to the Tokositna. We descended the southern portion of the col, closest to Mount Huntington, with two 165-foot rappels and 700 feet of down-climbing in an avalanche couloir. Future parties will find it easier and safer to traverse the col toward the Rooster Comb and descend.

We had a choice of how to gain the upper cirque. We could either follow the "Colorado Couloir" pioneered by Thuermer's party or take the upper Tokositna icefall. Being Oregon volcano sloggers and not knowing better, we took the icefall.

First Dave Jay and Scott Woolums, then Jay Kerr and I treaded our respective ways on successive nights through a frozen horror. Wherever the slope was gradual enough to hold it, large collections of ice talus accumulated, letting us know how active the séracs which overhung us really were. In the upper section we went our separate ways, encountering equally terrifying pitches. Scott and Dave ended up crawling through a 70-foot tunnel created by a teetering sérac. Jay and I thrashed up a 90° wall stemming on large blobs of snow which at any second should have come off burying us both at the bottom. We decided that in retreat we would be wise to descend the Colorado Couloir.

By the time Jay and I reached the upper basin, Scott and Dave had climbed the 2000-foot couloir between the last tower and the summit and were bivouacking in a rock band at 10,500 feet. The weather did not look good, so Jay and I built an igloo and took a wait-and-see attitude. Scott and Dave pressed on, however, as they were short on food, dubious of the anchors which had secured that night's bivouac and fired by a can-do attitude. At 11,600 feet they ran out of good weather but ran

into the most beautiful bivy site imaginable. Not only was the sleeping area flat, sheltered and soft, but they had a separate space for the john. Six hundred feet from the summit, they crawled into the tiny bivouac tent to wait out the storm.

May 24 dawned fair. While Jay and I waited all day for the cold temperatures of night to make the couloir safe, Scott and Dave made quick work of the 70° to 80° ice pitches between the bivouac rock and the summit slopes. At noon they stood on the highest point of the summit cornice, well out over the 5000-foot north face. However, they were quickly on their way down as a storm was on the horizon.

At nine P.M., like ships in the night, Jay and I passed Scott and Dave as they rappelled and we fourth-classed up the couloir for our turn at the summit. I have forgotten the more painful aspects of the 31-hour round-trip to the top and back. Rather I remember Jay emerging from the rock band and the fog at 10,600 feet with the storm which had worried Dave and Scott rapidly disappearing in a glorious sunrise. I also remember Jay's incredible smile framed against the 7000-foot drop to the Tokositna at the top of the last ice pitch. We knew we had it in the bag. Exulting in the perfect weather, we spent two hours kibitzing and soaking up the sun on the summit. After four Alaskan expeditions and four summit white-outs, it was about time.

Our luck should have ended there. But after descending the Colorado Couloir, Dave and Scott managed the second ascent of the Rooster Comb's south summit (9800 feet) on the evening of the 27th. Meanwhile Jay and I climbed the west ridge of its middle summit on the morning of the 29th and gained one of the many high points. The ubiquitous Alaskan white-out prevented us from determining the true summit. (The "Guest Register" in Sheldon's Mountain House shows that at least one other party, Bill Pilling, Roger Gocking and Dave Meyers, climbed the same route in 1978 and were unable to gain the true summit (10,170 feet), claiming to have reached an altitude of 10,100 feet.) Back in Base Camp, we toasted our good fortune with a fine concoction of *tequila* and peach drink christened "Pink Ruthie" in honor of the glacier.

On the evening of July 8 we began the ski out, up to the head of the Ruth Glacier, over Denali's south buttress, down the Kahiltna Glacier and out through the Dutch and Peters Hills. If the peaks of the Ruth Glacier had not already persuaded us to return, the peaks on the way out confirmed it.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENTS: Mount Huntington, 12,240 feet, New Route via South Ridge, May 24 (Jay, Woolums) and May 25, 1979 (Kerr, Thomas).

Rooster Comb, South Summit, 9800 feet, Second Ascent, May 27, 1979 (Jay, Woolums).

Rooster Comb, Attempt on West Ridge of Middle Summit to 10,100 feet, May 29, 1979 (Kerr, Thomas).

PERSONNEL: David Jay, Jay Kerr, Jeff Thomas, Scott Woolums.

