Huntington's East Face

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ON MAY 3 Steve Bell and I waved goodbye to Hudson and his Cessna. We erected our mini box tent on the Ruth Glacier below the north face of Mount Huntington. For training we repeated the Japanese route on the southwest spur of P 11,300 with one bivouac, and descended via the snowfields and short rock buttress of the southeast ridge to complete a traverse of the mountain. Contrary to our information which described difficulties of F9, we were pleased to find, on perfect red granite, a beautiful classic 4000-foot route of about Scottish II with short sections of F6. A total of four rappels were made on the descent.

At midnight on May 12 after a week of continuous snowfall, we climbed the 1800-foot, sérac-threatened, ice wall which divides Mount Huntington from the Rooster Comb. After three hours of unbelayed climbing we emerged onto a shoulder a hundred feet below the col, only to sink into a morass of unconsolidated snow which required four hours of "swimming" to negotiate. An excellent bivouac site was found beneath a sérac at the base of Mount Huntington's east ridge. Further storms kept us here until late the following day when a glimpse of blue sky to the south tempted us to descend to the basin below the east face.

The face is dominated by a 4000-foot pillar reminiscent of the Walker Spur and flanked by couloir systems with enormous ice cliffs. Our first intention was to attempt the pillar but the poor weather (only five of the 28 days we spent on the Ruth were without snowfall) persuaded us to attempt something less ambitious. We therefore turned our attention to the couloir system left of the pillar. To avoid the threat of sérac fall, we climbed a narrow 1000-foot gully on the side of the pillar that emerges into the main couloir just below the ice cliffs. More snowfall resulting in torrents of powder forced us to spend 14 hours in a snow cave dug a few hundred feet above the Tokositna basin.

On May 15 we climbed the couloir and traversed snow-covered slabs to emerge into the main couloir. The view above was not reassuring. We had left most of the equipment selected for the pillar at the col and had cut our supplies down to four rock pegs, four nuts and six ice screws. Above us loomed what appeared to be 3000 feet of granite wall. Fortu-

nately at each apparent impasse little ice pitches and snow ramps miraculously presented themselves, enabling us to skirt most of the major rock difficulties.

At the end of the day we spent four hours forcing a pitch onto a steep snow-covered ramp which led into the upper couloir and out of the labyrinth.

After a few hours sleep we followed a broad snowfield which led up under the topmost rock wall. A series of ice ribs and arêtes took us to the cornice that guarded the summit plateau. It was now apparent that the fine weather that had allowed us to climb the face would soon be gone, so we abandoned our plan to descend the heavily corniced east ridge in favour of the Harvard route. We were granted fine views from the summit and Steve had a close look down the north face when a cornice broke at the top of the French Ridge. Visibility was down to a few feet by the time we had traversed the summit icefields and we were unable to locate the top of the west face.

Next morning the weather had deteriorated still further and we decided to descend even though we were unsure of the direction. Fortunately after a few hundred feet I unearthed a cluster of old pitons—Steve said it was luck but I have other ideas. We were soon racing down tangles of decrepit fixed ropes, periodically being engulfed by slides of powder pouring off the summit snowfields. At the Upper Park snowfield we were unable to find the continuation of the descent down to the Stegosaur. Early next morning the cloud allowed us a short glimpse of the Tokositna Glacier and the lower section of the west buttress.

Snow conditions on the ridge were very poor with our passage releasing large slabs. We were able to avoid half of the Stegosaur by a free rappel off a large cornice.

All that remained was for us to cross the Tokositna Glacier and the French Ridge to the Ruth. The east face gives a beautiful and tenuously linked classic ice climb: Scottish III/IV with one section of F9 mixed climbing. There was no stonefall. The descent via the Harvard route, apart from enabling us to relive a piece of history, seemed much the safest proposition in bad weather, though it does mean a long walk home.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENTS: P 11,300, via Southwest Ridge, 4000 vertical feet, Scottish Grade II, F6, 13 hours of climbing, May 5, 1980.

Mount Huntington, 12,240 feet, via a new route on the East Face, 4500 vertical feet, Scottish Grade III/IV, F7, 24 hours on the face, six days total from the Ruth Glacier and back, May 13 to 19, 1980.

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