

Winter Madness and Joy— Mount Hunter in Winter

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INTER ASCENTS of high mountains in Alaska can be a mixture of absurdity and attractiveness. Daylight is in very short supply, and the nights are endless, especially in an exposed bivouac. Temperatures can be frigid: -30° to -50° are not uncommon; plus the added chill factor. And the wind does seem to blow more often in winter! But Alaska's winter weather patterns are usually more stable than in spring or summer. February and March usually offer long periods of good weather: clear, cold and windy. With all this cold and windy weather, the steep mountain faces form superb blue ice. And with this winter weather there seems to be an absence of sound: both human and natural! So in conditions much like these, we set off to climb the northwest spur (Lowe-Kennedy route) of Mount Hunter!

The first few days on the Kahiltna were spent examining the route and sorting through our food and equipment: trying to go as light as possible, but still to maintain some margin of safety. Our basic plan was to carry a load of supplies to the base of the Triangle Face (a few thousand feet above Base Camp), and establish an advanced camp. And above this camp it would be in one push, everything on our backs, alpine style.

We decided on four days' worth of goodies and food, making sure to have a good supply of Hello Dollies. (Hello Dollies are homemade super-goodies!) We hoped the mostly-clear and not-too-cold weather would continue, especially since we did not bring much extra food.

It took us over eight hours of floundering in snow seldom less than thigh deep (oh yes, there was one pitch of ice!) to get us to the base of the Triangle Face. The route above was fantastic and intimidating: almost 2000 feet of steep, blue ice! The Triangle looked in perfect condition! Back to Base, for we'd be up again the following day.

We attempted an early, before-light start, but couldn't really get it all together much before ten A.M. The hour ski to the base of the route

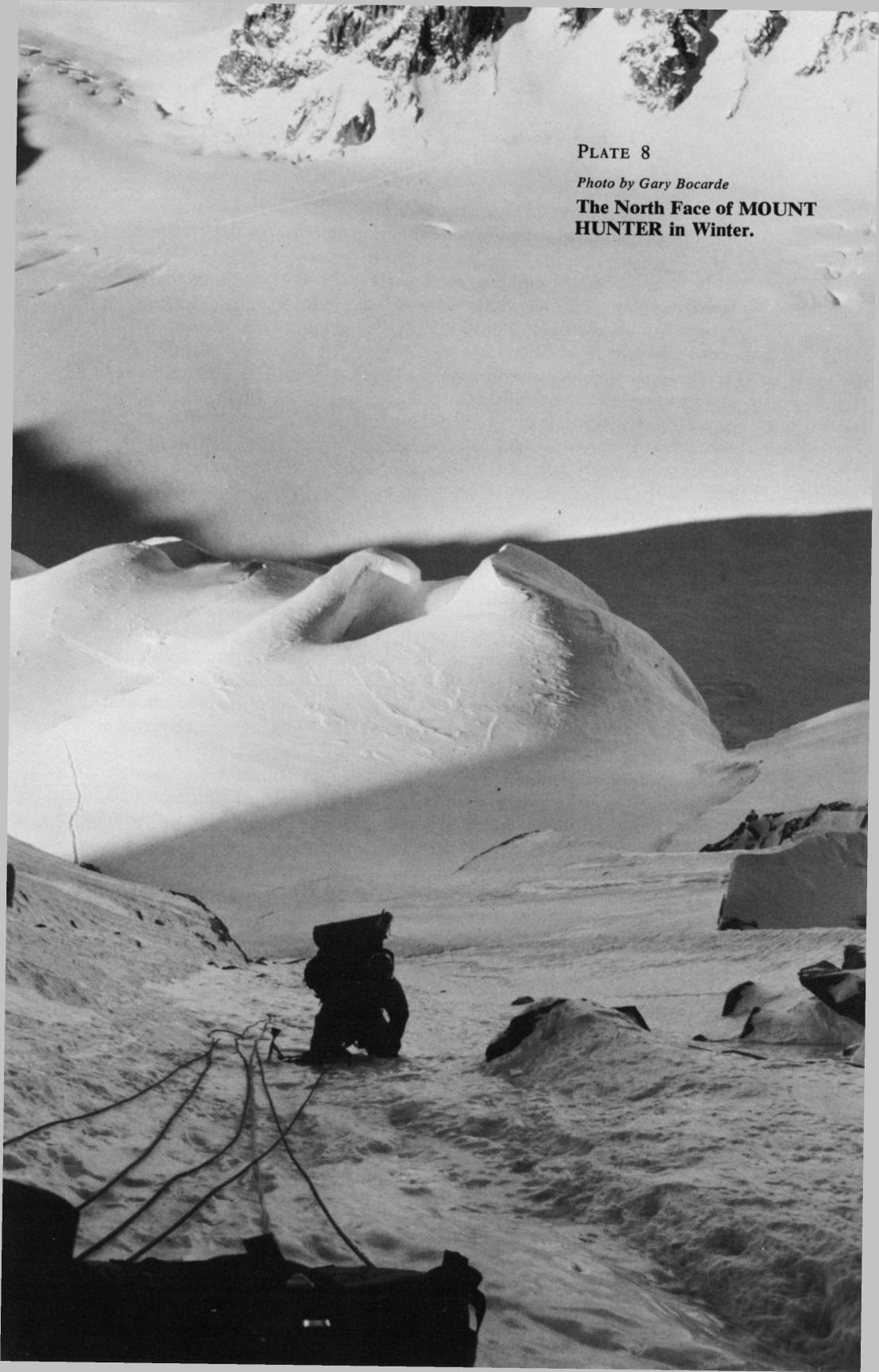


PLATE 8

Photo by Gary Bocarde

**The North Face of MOUNT
HUNTER in Winter.**

was against the wind, and then an avalanche tried to divert us from our goal. But after such a slow and trying beginning, we ascended our tracks in half the time; just in time to watch the sun set on Mount Foraker and Mount Russell.

In winter climbing darkness and cold make it difficult to get moving in the morning. You just don't want to leave the warmth of your cave or bag. We usually tried to have the stoves going by six A.M., but rarely were we moving by eight or nine.

We began climbing the Triangle Face after a very late start. The ice was almost perfect—one whack of the ice tool—with only a little brittle ice on top, which would always find the heads of those below. The ice was smooth, with no ledges or bulges to rest one's calf muscles. The lower pitches were mostly 50° to 70°, whereas the upper section got as steep as 90°. In the twelve pitches of ice, only one belay was a little shaky; the others were A1.

For the sake of speed, we decided to have me lead the ice pitches, haul my pack and the food bag; have Paul Denkewalter clean the pitches, and have Vern Tejas jümar. This system worked well, but pitches still took over an hour to complete, and so with twelve pitches to climb, it appeared doubtful that we would reach the top of the Triangle by nightfall. Pitch followed pitch, and in fading light we found ourselves only about two-thirds of the way up the face. But we were able to find some rock-and-ice ledges where we could chop out enough space to sit out the night. So we settled in for one of those boots on, tied in, shiver-all-night bivies.

By morning the weather had changed: clouds had moved in and it began to snow lightly. After a cold and almost sleepless night, it felt good to move again. We continued upwards on more sustained blue ice, with one bad section of unconsolidated snow. The final two pitches of the Triangle approached 90° and had a deeper layer of brittle ice.

Once finished with the Triangle Face, we encountered the impassable-looking Mushroom Ridge. We searched in vain for a suitable bivy spot and ended up chopping out the underside of a mushroom, large enough for us all to lie down in marginal comfort.

The Mushroom Ridge is the crux of the climb. The Triangle may have its technically difficult pitches, but the Mushroom ridge is just plain insane. The mushroom cornices form a blockade, so one has to climb beneath them on bottomless, sugar snow that does not appear to be attached to the mountain. The climbing became less desperate as we progressed across the ridge, with darkness and the end of the ridge occurring together. We floundered around in darkness, with headlamps blinking like strobe lights, until we discovered a relatively flat spot at the end of the ridge. Tonight comfort; tomorrow the summit?

After a wet and restful night, we began our climb to the summit in thickening clouds and falling snow, but as we continued upwards, the

clouds began to dissipate, bringing Denali and Foraker into view. The climbing to the summit was straight forward: breaking trail through soft snow and some low-angle ice. As we approached the summit plateau, high winds and thick clouds prevailed. In an almost total white-out, Paul led the final pitches to the summit. We had a difficult time finding the summit, and with the help of Vern and a brief clearing it was located. With cold, high winds, our stay on top was brief, but we all felt very good about our success! We had climbed Mount Hunter in winter via a challenging route, and we had enjoyed it. We still had to get down.

We descended the route, down-climbing and rappelling for two days. The climb had been a fantastic experience for all of us. But we did not get away unscarred: Paul had severe frostbite on two toes, putting an end to his climbing for six months.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range

FIRST WINTER ASCENT: Mount Hunter, 14,573 feet, via the Northwest Spur (Lowe-Kennedy Route), March 1980 (Gary Bocarde, Paul Denkewalter, Vern Tejas).

