

McKinley, 1981

MICHAEL KENNEDY

THIN MIST veiled the weak sun; another gust of wind-driven snow swept the rocks above as I zipped up my pants and returned to the tent. Another brew, a bit of cheese, a few crackers; more time to think, to brood, more time for my confidence to erode.

Yesterday, all had seemed right: two hours for the Japanese Couloir (generally considered the crux of the route), even with full winter gear and five days' food. Then, in the gathering storm, a route-finding error put me far out on steep, poor rock, grasping at snowy holds, crampons screeching on tiny flakes, spindrift flowing by coldly, silently as the pack pulled inexorably back, down into the greasy gray depths. And no rope, no partner with whom to commiserate; stupid, to die alone like this.

The drama passed, but the toll was great, nearly two hours for a single pitch! I was disgusted with myself for having made such a foolish mistake. With modern gear, the steep ice of the couloir had been straightforward and relatively secure, but the rock was far less forgiving. I spent a fitful night at 14,500 feet below the hanging glacier, calves aching and cramped, mind churning.

The morning dawned gray, windy. Clouds of spindrift obscured the route through the rock band, and I decided to rest a day and await better conditions. Having no route description or topo, no rope for a retreat, and only a vague idea of where the route went, I felt it best to be able to see. Besides, the rock still worried me.

Cocooned in the tent, my mind drifted back over the past few weeks. Greg Davis, John Pigue, Bob Street, Chris Landry and I had made a pleasant and uneventful ascent of the West Buttress; good weather, good food, good skiing and good company had made for a memorable trip, but the mid-May cold had taken its toll on Greg. His feet, abused by too many years in ski boots, were numb from 14,000 feet up, so he very reluctantly bowed out of the Cassin Ridge climb. Chris had designs on the West Rib—to solo up to a cache we placed at 15,500 feet, pick up skis and boots there, continue on to the summit and then

to ski the route. The West Buttress had been a training climb, as had his ski descent of the Headwall in horrible conditions midway through the climb. Greg and I planned to climb the Cassin Ridge at the same time, meet up with Chris on the summit plateau, and then descend the West Rib to support and photograph him.

Soloing is not my thing. I'd done a few rock climbs, some easy snow and ice, but never anything major; climbing with a rope and partner had always been enough of a challenge. Nevertheless, the Cassin seemed reasonable, and the idea gradually grew on me. It would be great to be alone on such a beautiful route; at the same time, two failures in the Karakoram and another in Alaska had left me with the need for a climb I could really call my own, where I could rely solely on my own resources and not have to worry about anyone else.

Greg, John and Bob flew out while Chris and I cached his extra gear and food. We returned to the airstrip to pick up two radios, and, while drinking tea with Francis Randall, Park Ranger on the Kahiltna Glacier, were approached by a rather ratty-looking, bearded climber speaking in an odd sort of English accent. He was Dave Cheesmond, a South African; we had heard the name, as just two weeks previously he had soloed the West Rib in three-and-a-half days, including a new variation at the start. After a rest and a visit with his wife Jill at the airstrip, he made an abortive attempt on Mount Hunter with some Americans, and was now keen to solo the Cassin as well. He wanted to rope up with us for the approach up the Northeast Fork; he seemed a pleasant enough fellow, so we agreed. I'm not sure either one of us fancied company on the route itself, but it seemed that something would work out.

We met that afternoon at our camp near the junction of the main glacier and the Northeast Fork, and the next day made the long slog up to the foot of the two routes. After a bivouac there, Dave graciously allowed me to go ahead. He planned to start up several hours later, after I was well above the Japanese Couloir, in order to avoid potential falling rock and ice. I wondered now where he was, thinking that perhaps the stormy weather had delayed his departure. I knew that Chris was at his cache, waiting to make our rendezvous on the summit; for some reason, our radios didn't allow direct contact, but we were able to relay messages through Francis down at the airstrip. The day wore on, and the weather improved, as did my spirits. I could finally see where to go, and my mind gradually calmed, confidence returned.

Having slept lightly but well, I rose early to a perfect day. Brewing up and dressing took as long as usual, and I was just packing up when a shouted greeting startled me. It was Dave! We were both surprised to see each other. He had started up the couloir on schedule, but just below the top his crampon strap broke and the front half of his crampon went bounding down the slope into the mist. Banging in a quick screw, he managed to retreat, using his own rope and some old fixed rope to



PLATE 6

Photo by Michael Kennedy

**Dave Cheesmond at 17,000 feet on the
Cassin Ridge of MOUNT MCKINLEY.**

rappel with, thinking that the climb, for him, was over. Miraculously enough, he found the crampon half sitting in the snow at the bottom. After a bivouac in the bergschrund, during which he jury-rigged a new strap, Dave reclimbed the couloir and bivouacked not 100 feet from my site in a crevasse below the ridge. Sheltered from the wind and unable to see the rock band, he assumed that I was well on my way to the summit.

Dave started up the hanging glacier as I finished packing. Perfect snow and ice conditions allowed for rapid progress, but just below the first rocks the tip of one of my experimental axes broke off in the ice. Not a good sign, but I figured that there wouldn't be too much more steep ice anyway.

I went ahead onto the rock. The climbing was varied, interesting, always hard enough to demand attention but never so difficult as to be frightening. Pitch after pitch flashed by, bits of fixed rope and old pitons occasionally marking the way. At one point, I stepped in a sling to avoid an insecure mantle; at the top of the Rib Pitch a little later, the pick of my second axe broke off. This provided a few anxious moments later in an icy couloir, as dulled blades bounced uselessly off the brittle surface.

Dave was climbing within a hundred feet for the most part, catching up to me when I encountered a harder pitch, patiently waiting to avoid the falling ice and snow. We spoke little, each absorbed in his own world, but it was comforting to have someone else around.

We found a chopped-out tent platform under a rock wall at about 16,300 feet, just above a steep chimney. I thought we were higher, and as it appeared that the major difficulties were over, I radioed to Chris (via Francis) that we could meet on the summit the following afternoon.

Dave had only a bivouac sack for shelter. It seemed silly to deny him the minimal comfort of my tent, so we both squeezed in and spent a windy evening brewing up and getting to know each other, trading lies about horrible bivouacs and devious natives. It was really quite pleasant; the climb so far had all the advantages of soloing, as well as most of the advantages of climbing with a partner, such as someone to talk with!

The next day we alternated kicking steps up and right, then back left in a couloir leading up to the ridge proper. After six hours of this drudgery, I happened across another bivy site, this one chopped out of the ice beneath a boulder right on the crest of the ridge. It was a beautiful, but cold day, and we had made good progress, but it was obvious that the top was still at least 1500 feet away. Possible, but then I'd be too thrashed to solo back down the upper section of the West Rib. I tried to reach Chris on the radio at the regular hour, failed, and hoped that he'd understand.

The night was perfectly clear and calm, and unbelievably cold. It took every bit of willpower I possessed to melt water and cook, even

PLATE 7

Photo by Michael Kennedy

**Cheesmond on the Cassin Ridge at
17,000 feet on MOUNT MCKINLEY.
Foraker in the Background.**



wearing every stitch and snuggling deep inside my bag. We later found that people had recorded temperatures of -40° F at the 17,000-foot camp on the West Buttress that night; we were at least 1000 feet higher and that much colder.

We tried for an early start, but the cold was too much. Soon the wind picked up and wispy clouds moved in, a sure sign of bad weather; feet froze in boots, fingers lost all feeling. The climbing was easy, but tedious: kick, step up, kick, step up, kick, step up, the rhythm broken occasionally by a small rock step, a patch of unconsolidated snow, a pause to suck in frigid air. The pack felt like lead. Every few minutes I had to stop and swing my extremities madly to and fro, trying to restore some semblance of feeling to numb fingers and toes.

Dave had it worse; his ancient, broken-down leather double boots had gotten damp, frozen and now refused to warm up. We eventually stopped and put his feet against my stomach to warm them. Despite this, he still suffered some minor frostbite, but fortunately no permanent damage.

I slowly warmed up and continued on ahead. The weather deteriorated to a full-scale blizzard. None too soon, I popped up on the summit ridge and scrambled a few feet down the other side out of the wind. In the distance I could make out the faint outline of a party coming up the West Buttress, ghostly figures moving very slowly through the white-out. I had no desire for the summit, ten minutes along the ridge; I'd been there just a week before. Dave soon arrived and concurred. An hour later we were at the 17,000-foot camp, comfortably ensconced in a big Fantasy Ridge tent and enjoying Jon Waterman's hospitality.

Later that night I reached Chris, back at the 15,500-foot cache, in direct contact for the first time. He had skied there from the summit, but was giving up the rest of the descent because of bad conditions. We would meet the following day at the 14,000-foot camp on the West Buttress.

The night was again bitterly cold, and the next morning we made a rapid trip across the ridge and down the fixed ropes. Chris looked fine, but seemed tired and disappointed. He hadn't wanted to talk on the radio, but now the story came out. After getting to the summit and changing into ski boots in -20° weather, he skied from the very top onto the summit plateau at 19,000 feet, then dropped down into the West Rib proper. Conditions were as good as could be expected: inconsistent wind crust, ice, bits of powder snow here and there, and always the yawning drop 8000 feet to the Northeast Fork.

Occasionally, a thin crust of snow would break away beneath his feet, sliding on the wind-polished ice below, and it was one of these crusts that probably proved his undoing. There is little room for error in this kind of skiing, but Chris made one. He's still not sure exactly what hap-



PLATE 8

Photo by Michael Kennedy

**Chris Landry skiing the Headwall on the
West Buttress, MOUNT MCKINLEY.**

pened. He fell into the hill, lost his edge, then slid out of control, tumbling, losing hat, goggles, bindings finally releasing, for almost 1000 feet until, by some miracle, a drift of softer snow stopped him. Too shaken to ski further, he traversed off to the rocks, donned climbing gear and descended to the cache on foot.

It was good for our little group to be reunited. A long time seemed to have passed; we had all changed in some way. Chris, in spite of his disappointment, was content and relaxed, and no longer felt the need to push himself quite so hard. Dave had changed from a bearded, somewhat reserved stranger to a true friend. And I had vanquished a few ghosts of my own.

Dave and I allowed ourselves the luxury of roping up for the glacier, while Chris carved precise turns down perfect snow. After a few hours rest at the junction of the Main and Northeast Forks, Dave returned to the airstrip and Talkeetna to nurse his blackened toes. All that remained for Chris and me was the hardest day of the trip. We walked up the glacier to retrieve skis and extra gear; then back down, another few hours of rest at camp, the long, flat slog with overloaded packs and sleds to Kahiltna International, midnight beer with Francis, the flight out, showers at the Chevron station, the Teepee for dinner, the phone calls home, and suddenly it was all over.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Mount McKinley, Alaska Range.

ASCENTS: West Buttress, May 11 to May 23, 1981 (Davis, Pigue, Street, Kennedy).

West Rib (with new variation at start), May 15 to May 18, 1981 (Cheesmond, solo).

West Rib (solo ascent and attempted ski descent), May 30 to June 3, 1981 (Landry).

Cassin Ridge (simultaneous solo ascents) May 30 to June 3, 1981 (Cheesmond, Kennedy).

PERSONNEL: Greg Davis, John Pigue, Bob Street, Chris Landry, Dave Cheesmond, Michael Kennedy.

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