

# A Ribbon on Edge — Deborah's East Ridge

ROGER MEAR, *Alpine Climbing Group*

HERE ARE TWO mountains in Alaska that have always seemed to me like sisters—Huntington and Deborah. A cold flame, bright and sharp, Huntington has been described as 'Alaska's hidden jewel'. If this is true of Huntington, it is equally applicable to Deborah, though she is a darker stone, sinister and forbidding.

"In a glance that lasted a few moments, the expedition seemed to end . . . What I saw . . . was a serpentine wisp of snow, like the curl of a ribbon on edge . . . I could see the double cornice—the whole of the little bridge was undercut incredibly on both sides, so that it looked as if a strong wind might topple it. It was only ten feet below me and thirty feet long. The last ten feet of it were impossibly thin. Next, I saw the face of the mountain beyond. The crumbly brown rock towered, flat and crackless, a few degrees less than vertical. A thin, splotchy coating of ice overlay most of the rock. Where the rock overhung, great icicles grew. A few vertical columns of plastered snow, like frozen snakes, stuck to the coating of the ice. And above, blocking out half the sky, was that terrible black cliff, the six-hundred-foot wall that we had once blithely . . . allowed three days to climb . . . I had never seen a mountain sight so numbing, so haunted with impossibility and danger."

From Dave Roberts' *A Wilderness Narrative*

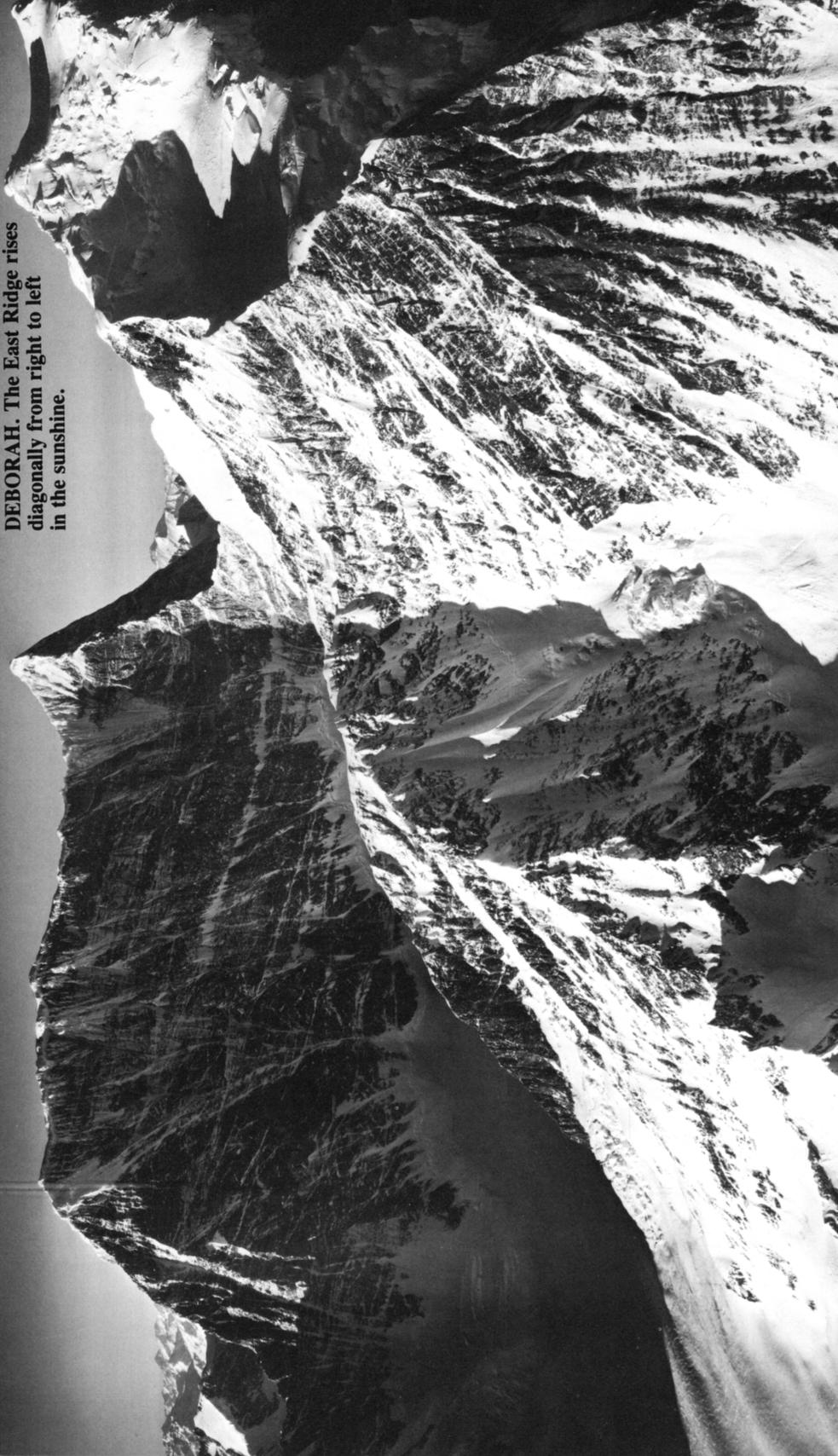
John Barry proffered a photograph of the unclimbed east ridge of Mount Deborah with malefic enthusiasm. I could not immediately share his glee at the prospect of such a climb. I think I had heard more than he of Deborah's rotting shales and knew at first hand the terrors of Alaskan cornices.

Later John produced a sample of eloquent descriptive writing from the pen of Dave Roberts, who had attempted the ridge in 1964. One year later Roberts had successfully climbed the west face of Huntington. Having descended the Harvard route in two days of storm, I knew it for the stupendous climb it was. Yet there is nothing in his writing that comes near that chilling description of Mount Deborah. Did I really want to climb the object of such inspiration?

PLATE 26

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**DEBORAH.** The East Ridge rises diagonally from right to left in the sunshine.



The team was enlarged to four, much to my relief, with the addition of Rob Collister and Malcolm Campbell. We were a diverse bunch, red neck and socialist, hedonists and aesthete, devourers of meat and chewers of seed, with not much in common but a love of mountains and a thirst for adventure. Eventually, suffering greatly from jet lag, we found ourselves in Anchorage.

"Some guys from Fairbanks climbed the east ridge of Deborah last year." The words resounded around a yawning abyss of despondency. I was ashamed that I felt so aggrieved and struggled to hide the overwhelming feeling of dejection. John looked equally crest fallen and stared fixedly into his pint. That the words proved false did not change the realization that being first was a major prerequisite to our planned climb.

Uncertainty of success is perhaps the measure of the adventure. That others had failed before us, the photographs and the vivid words of Dave Roberts reinforced the doubts. Standing in the deep tracks of the Cessna, now a black mote disassociated from the sound of its own engine, those doubts grew in the minds of us all, until I, at least, had no doubts at all. I would not have given twopence for our chances. Each of us, I think, saw at once, reflected in the mirror of that monstrous, soaring ethereal ridge, a beast beyond his ken. Each, in private, weighed his confidence and found the balance tipped. But none expressed the true depth of his doubts, not then at any rate, and so the team proved in the end stronger than its parts. We set about the details of the task and shelved the fears until we met the problems face to face.

It was our intention to establish ourselves in a cave on the airy col separating Mount Deborah from South Hess. Then by means, both fair and foul, to climb the ridge and descend by way of the Beckey-Harrer route to the Yanert Glacier and so trudge back to Base on the West Fork Glacier.

In three days we were all comfortably settled in a spacious hole in the upper basin 2000 feet below the col in the area of the camp named by Roberts, Desolation. Rob and John had skied from Base some six miles under the south face of Deborah to a low pass above the Yanert Glacier. There they had deposited food and snow shoes in optimistic preparation for our descent. We had carried 20 days of food and fuel, at first on skis, and then on foot above the bergschrund, up the snow slopes on the west spur of South Hess.

The morning of April 29 saw us packed and ready for the push up to the col. Rob and John went on ahead, whilst a quiet and pensive Malcolm and I sealed the cave with the sledges and blocks of snow. The skis were left below the bergschrund standing like a cone of rifles for our return. The way across the schrund was made easy by the piled debris of an avalanche. The simple step from glacier to mountain marked the beginning of our climb, and though disregarded by Rob, John and me, this symbol loomed large in Malcolm's mind. Embodied in that step was commitment to all the questions that Deborah had in store. It was a step Malcolm felt himself unable to make. Though we talked for many anguished minutes, it was not a problem that could be resolved by reason,

and in the end I sadly watched my friend collect his skis and begin a long and lonely vigil.

Now three, we ferried loads to a point above 10,000 feet on the flank of Hess where the slopes receded. Here we cached most of our supplies and then began a long, slowly rising traverse which we marked with wands. The day grew long, and the weather, so benign till now, seemed set to storm. Fleeting glimpses of Deborah thinly veiled showed an aspect which grew ever more severe as we approached the ridge. Cold and tired, we hacked a pitiful hole in quiet desperation. There we sank with cramps and mirth, locking out the frigid world with many brews of tea.

Saturday brought warm sun and welcome stress-free work in a magnificent arena. Twice we trotted along the sparsely wanded track to bring up the cache. Following another brew of tea, we descended the west ridge of South Hess for 1000 feet to the col. The anticipated sunny promenade was made eventful by an unexpected sérac wall that cut across the ridge. This we negotiated by a wild abseil. The ropes were anchored to a snow mushroom cut into the depth hoar and reinforced by strips torn from a cardboard box. The first day of summer. It was great fun lowering all the food and gear in a bulging bivy tent over the sérac. The shapeless bag was then dragged without incident to the col. In a sunny ha-ha we cut a cave of luxurious proportions. Enormous blocks of wind slab formed the linteel entrance. Rob, between bouts of sunbathing, demonstrated the art of drystone walling and built a wind break to make any Welsh farmer proud.

That afternoon we made a tentative reconnaissance along huge cornices towards the east ridge proper. We had brought with us two 100-metre ropes especially for this belayless terrain in the hope that the greater distance between each man would give us greater assurance. We crossed the switchbacks of this frozen wave 2000 feet above the glacier, with heart in mouth. It was impossible to avoid these cornices for they were all the ridge — great spirals of curling snow like unfolding ferns. We called a halt at a vantage point some 200 feet from the base of the first rock buttress. From here it was possible to discern something of the ground that lay ahead. Steep walls of frost-shattered shale, plastered with the most improbable structures of rime and wind-impacted snow. More cornices creamed in all directions and above these loomed the cliff that Roberts had named the Nemesis Wall, the biggest question mark of all, guarding access to the upper ridge.

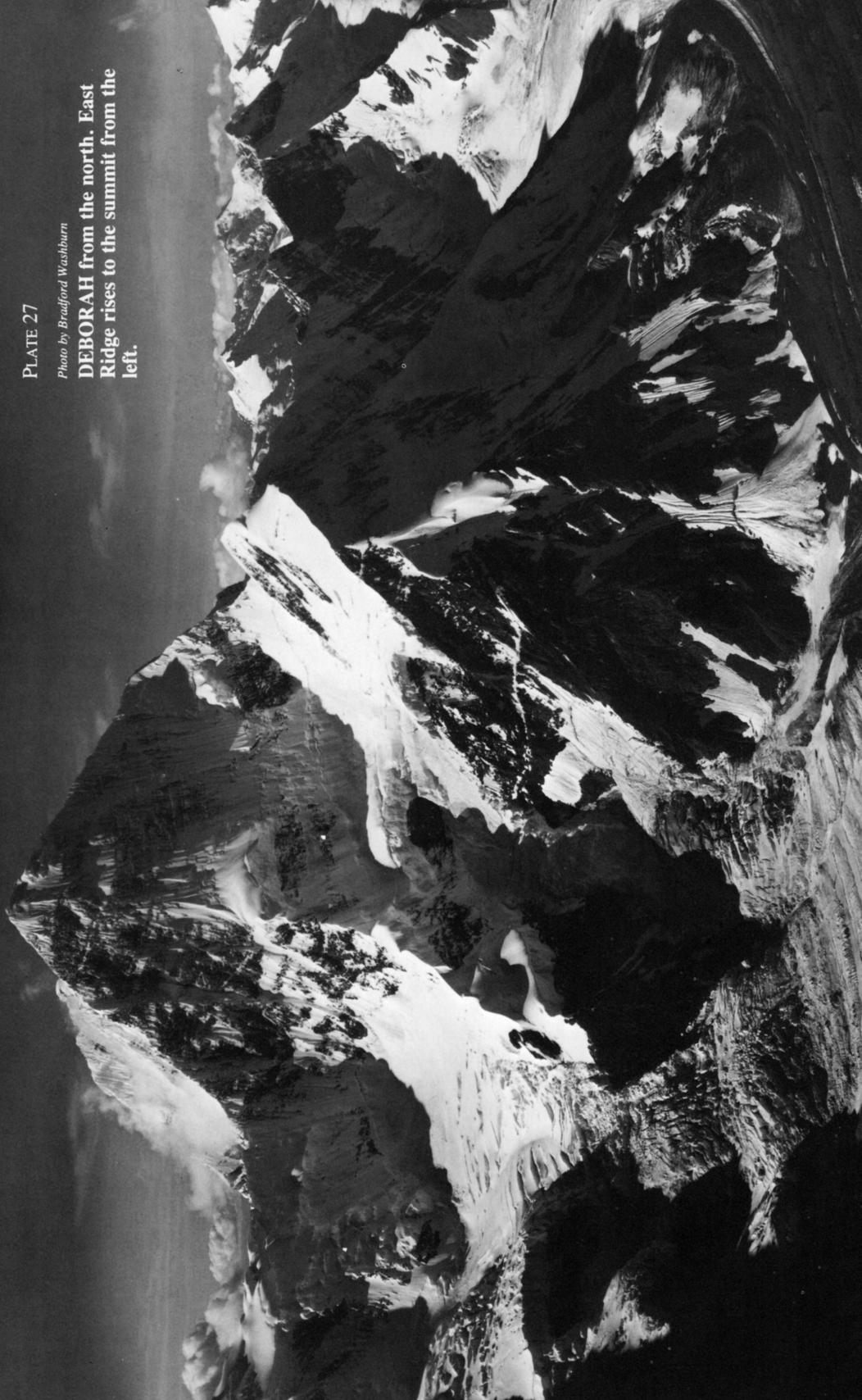
During the next four days we saw the ridge but fleetingly. Rob's wall sank without trace on the first day under feet of snow and we only left our sanctuary to dig out the entrance or perform our morning duties. Anecdotes and parlour games and John's Irish rebel songs punctuated the dreaming. Yet always present was the thought that Don Jensen and his chums had spent 24 storm-bound days on this same col.

The repose was shattered on the sixth day by the thunder of an aircraft. At each low pass, the red Cessna consigned some of its cargo to the gentle snow slope on the northwest corner of the col. Then it would be lost against the vast

PLATE 27

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**DEBORAH** from the north. East Ridge rises to the summit from the left.



south ridge of Deborah, become visible as it turned to begin its circle over Hess, and explode the silence of our world as it roared again only feet above our heads. Tranquility returned as suddenly as it had been broken. We saw the plane land for a moment at our Base Camp and then it was gone. There was much conjecture as to the meaning of this event and what our response should be. In the end we decided to retrieve the airdrop in case it should be lost under further falls of snow. We hauled the boxes from their craters amidst crevasses and carried them to our cave. Attached to one was a cryptic note from Carl and Dave, that gave their destination as "Hess S. Ridge." Thank God, we thought, that these guys were not intent on Deborah.

That afternoon in sunshine and swirling cloud we had our first encounter with the rotting rock of Deborah. John led the initial buttress aided in parts by a decrepit fixed line remnant of a previous attempt. Broken slates and chunks of rotten ice cascaded down. Short outcrops of horizontally bedded shale were linked together by knife-edge arêtes of snow or more improbable cornicing. Breaking trail on this terrain was extremely harrowing, as we expected each step to trigger the collapse of these tensile structures and listened with intent for those sounds that tell of equilibrium disturbed.

We returned to the col having fixed our ropes on the rock steps and the worst of the cornices. John and Rob had led nearly 1000 feet and yet we had found no suitable site for our next bivouac. John was in fine form that evening having completed some hard pitches and we were all satisfied to have the serpent by the tail at last.

In the early hours, we were awakened by the arrival of two gaunt figures, Dave Cheesmond, exiled South African, and the gently lunatic, Carl Tobin. Over tea we learnt of their intentions, and it was with mixed feelings that we greeted these contenders for the east ridge of Deborah.

Next morning we packed six days of food, sealed the cave and departed for the hill. It was thirteen days since we had landed on the Northwest Fork and seven days since we had first gained the col. I felt aggrieved and a little foolish that these two guys had achieved the same position in one long day with the expedient use of aircraft. Carl and Dave, after their long yesterday, lay abed awhile soaking up the sun and had yet to sort their airdrop before they joined us on the ridge.

We made a quick passage to our high point. A few feet higher we cut a ledge in the crest of a large double cornice. It seemed reasonable enough, until we noticed from above that our platform was on the wrong side of the scarp face, so much did the structure overhang. The remnant of fixed line on the first 50-foot rock step was the only indication we had found of previous attempts. We knew, however, that both Roberts and Jensen had retreated from the section of horizontal ridge that now lay before us. The Nemesis Wall still 1000 feet above and this pitch represented question marks that had loomed large since the conception of our climb. Up until this point the reassurance that others had passed this way had

pacified the voice that murmured in the ear. Now our spectral helpers stood behind us.

Above, a short snow arête led to the crest of a billowing cornice, an airy diving board cantilevered into space, which hid from view the turmoil of the ridge beyond. I belayed John from axes and the counter-weight of Rob, who was prusiking the pitch below. Timorous is not a term that could ever describe a charging bull, and John, in the heat of battle, is an awe-inspiring sight, able to shake most mountain obstacles into submission. But here, peering through a window hacked in the cornice edge, his gaze fell upon a china shop of sails and webs all which way, and shaking was not a thing advisable. John returned to reconsider the problem and we retreated a little and moved the belay as far from the edge as the edge would allow. I went for a look and John lowered me through the window on a rope, and then, with heart-in-mouth and tongue-in-cheek, up and around, over and through all the crests and plumbs, expecting all the while to trip the trigger and set the house of cards a tumbling. The Cornish wreckers used to beat to death with clubs the shipwrecked mariners as they struggled from the pounding surf, prematurely praising God that they had made it safely to the shore. But here none of the waves had crashed and I found myself landed upon a steeply shelving beach of ice and shale and soon ran safely into the arms of a long fat 'snarg.'

We gathered together beneath the next imponderable, a grossly bulging mushroom of rime, its crystal lattice too brittle for pick or axe shaft. To the left, a steep rotting wall of red shale. Between the two was formed a shallow cleft. Though this chimney offered the obvious passage, it looked vile enough for us to consider, though briefly, the alternatives on either side. After a number of false starts, and with the aid of a fortuitously jammed nut, I found myself lodged some way up this odious conformation. Good ice above, unfortunately still as yet out of reach, invited further progress. A small saucer of ice provided the key but it was with feelings of mortification and not relief that I felt first one chagal, and then the other, gain dubious purchase. For although I knew each placement was enough, I wanted more. Disintegrating footholds and weakening arms prompted movement until each tool quivered home, like long arrows in an oaken door.

The chimney led to a macabre cul-de-sac. The way ahead was barred by yet another bulging wall of culm clothed in a mantle of rime feathers. To either side great vertical fins of rime jutted into the white clouded space. Like a mouse brought up short in its journey through a cardboard maze which breaks the rules set by its unseen observers and begins to gnaw through the walls of the passage, I tensioned across the steep face of the right fin and cut a notch in its vertical edge, gaining entry into the adjacent scoop.

Leading on 100-metre ropes is a lonely business and soon I found myself thinking that this particular pitch had continued long enough and should in all fairness be brought to some sort of conclusion. My thoughts remained much the same, though they gained a little urgency as I progressed up a rotting bookcase

of shale, each shelf piled with volumes laid flat and loosely covered with soft snow. I dared not pull but only push until I'd had enough and excavated some cracks that did not move and a pathetic spike around which I hung a sling. All these nuts and things were tied together with the rope and called a belay.

It was snowing lightly as we slid down the ropes and recrossed the cornice ridge, which now appeared quite amiable. Carl and Dave had pitched their tiny Bibler tent in the most improbable of places, perched precariously on the crest of the ridge a few hundred feet above our own camp. It was conjecture as to which position offered the occupants the most piece of mind.

The three of us spent a cramped and claustrophobic night in our two-man bivy tent. The morning dawned whitely and though the snow still fell, we decided to push the route as far as conditions allowed, rather than spend the day in miserable inactivity. Like a snail with two heads, the lads greeted us, as one by one we clambered past their little yellow shell, a mollusk high and dry waiting for the tide to turn.

John finished the pitch I had prematurely halted and landed us astride a little notch in a horribly exposed position. To circumnavigate the wall above, a way was manufactured with tact and guile and much jabbering. Though much shorter than its namesake, it could honourably be called the "Traverse of the Gods", placed as it was 4000 feet above the Gillam Glacier. To finish the day John stretched our 100-metre rope across the cornices and flutings that led to the base of the Nemesis Wall.

We vacated Cornice Camp at five o'clock the next morning. Carl and Dave had left some two hours earlier with the intention of forcing the route across the snowfields that led from the top of the ropes along the base of the Nemesis Wall.

After many hours of agonizingly slow progress through abominable snows, Carl excavated a passage to the point at which the cliff was at its lowest and breached by what appeared to be a gully. Hard climbing followed. Dave led a traverse across a steep snow-dusted wall with professional ease and John stepped in to force the last obstacle to the upper ridge, revelling in the opportunity to grapple with a pitch that was in character more Scottish than Alaskan. From the top of a small cone of snow, John's waving arm signalled success, and that the problem of the Nemesis Wall, uppermost in our minds for so long, had been resolved.

The snow slope above proved a deceptive nightmare. It was here in the twilight of Alaskan midnight that I felt closest to the edge of control. Three hours of floundering up a morass of unconsolidated snow that overlay ice on which crampons skated. Pushing down on axes laid horizontal in the snow, using knees and arms, and peering through the dusk, hoping every undulation in the slope indicated a favourable transformation of the snow. A small rib of snow, almost missed in the gloom, offered with a little readjustment, the promise of a haven. With relief I shouted of the long-awaited find, and one by one, as the sky began to lighten, dark figures wearily appeared.

We were awakened by the heat of the sun. The feelings of vulnerability evaporated in the warmth, as did any sense of urgency to be gone. Yet as I lay savouring the most glorious of mornings, I pondered on what would have been the outcome should we have awakened to a day of cloud and wind and snow.

The ridge led, amiable and spectacular, a white ribbon streaming in the sunlight, to the most absurd of obstacles. The underbelly of a great ice whale, clothed in barnacles of rime, overhung our path. The limestone dales of Yorkshire abound in such formations, relics of a day when climbers pounded steel in emulation of Comici on some vertiginous Dolomite wall.

Rob, being a father of three and the custodian of sanity, immediately abseiled off the ridge in search of more reasonable alternatives. Carl, with brain addled by years spent in pursuit of 'altered states', viewed the prospect with relish, and began to weave a web of possibility up the underside of the beast. After some debate, Rob was persuaded to return, much to his dismay. And so we sat and sipped tea and ate mackerel fillets, as the demented spider slowly rose up and out, and out of sight.

The ridge continued on above, never easy, never hard, all slopes and facets ever changing. Knife-edged arêtes, gaps and gullies and bulging flat-topped cauliflowers of rime, all helter-skelter to the top. We spent one more night with Deborah on the shallow saddle of her summit. Shadowy figures hugged and shook hands and whooped for joy, but I felt a little sad that the climb that had been shared by so many, had not been shared by all.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Deborah, 3761 meters, 12,339 feet, via East Ridge; Summit Reached on May 10, 1983 (Barry, Cheesmond, Collister, Mear, Tobin).

DETAILS: 4000 vertical feet; five days' climbing from col (May 6 to 10).

PERSONNEL: John Barry, Malcolm Campbell, Rob Collister, Roger Mear, *British*; David Cheesmond, *South African*; Carl Tobin, *American*.

*Many of our readers may be interested in getting regularly **MOUNTAIN**, the foremost bi-monthly mountaineering magazine published in England on climbing in all parts of the world, including the USA. There are six issues each year and a subscription costs \$17.50. To subscribe send to **MOUNTAIN MAGAZINE LTD.**, PO Box 184, Sheffield S11 9DL, England.*