

Foraker, Pink Panther Route

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WHILE RETURNING from a short trip to the Shawangunks, Julien Dery made the mistake of pronouncing the prophetic remark, "Well, I think I'm about due for something like Peru before I retire from climbing." These words didn't fall onto deaf ears. I handed him the book, *Fifty Classic Climbs*, and zigzagged down the superhighway with my eyes half on the road and half on the book. Our expedition was being born.

Jean-François Gagnon called me one day on the telephone, looking for a climbing partner. Since he was an ideal target, I offered him an invitation as third member. For lack of a fourth, my girlfriend gave me a stuffed animal, *La Panthère Rose* (Pink Panther), which became our mascot.

We arrived at Talkeetna with fifty days of food, hoping to climb Denali's Cassin Ridge and Hunter's west ridge. On April 25 we were landed on the Kahiltna Glacier. Appalled by the immensity of the mountains, we decided on a climb to set us on our feet. We ascended Mount Crosson in two days by its southeast ridge. An acclimatization climb to 17,500 feet on Denali's West Buttress confirmed that we were ready for altitude. Mount Foraker attracted us. The southeast ridge is esthetic and would complete our acclimatization.

At Kahiltna Base Camp Mugs Stump spoke to us of the possibility of a route on the huge, still unclimbed east face of Foraker, imposing because of its steepness and its gigantic avalanches. After a careful observation, Julien spied a route, the only possible one. When he compared his route with that of Mugs, he discovered that they were the same. I reassured him that what we really wanted to do was the southeast ridge and that his route was too tough and so he could sleep in peace.

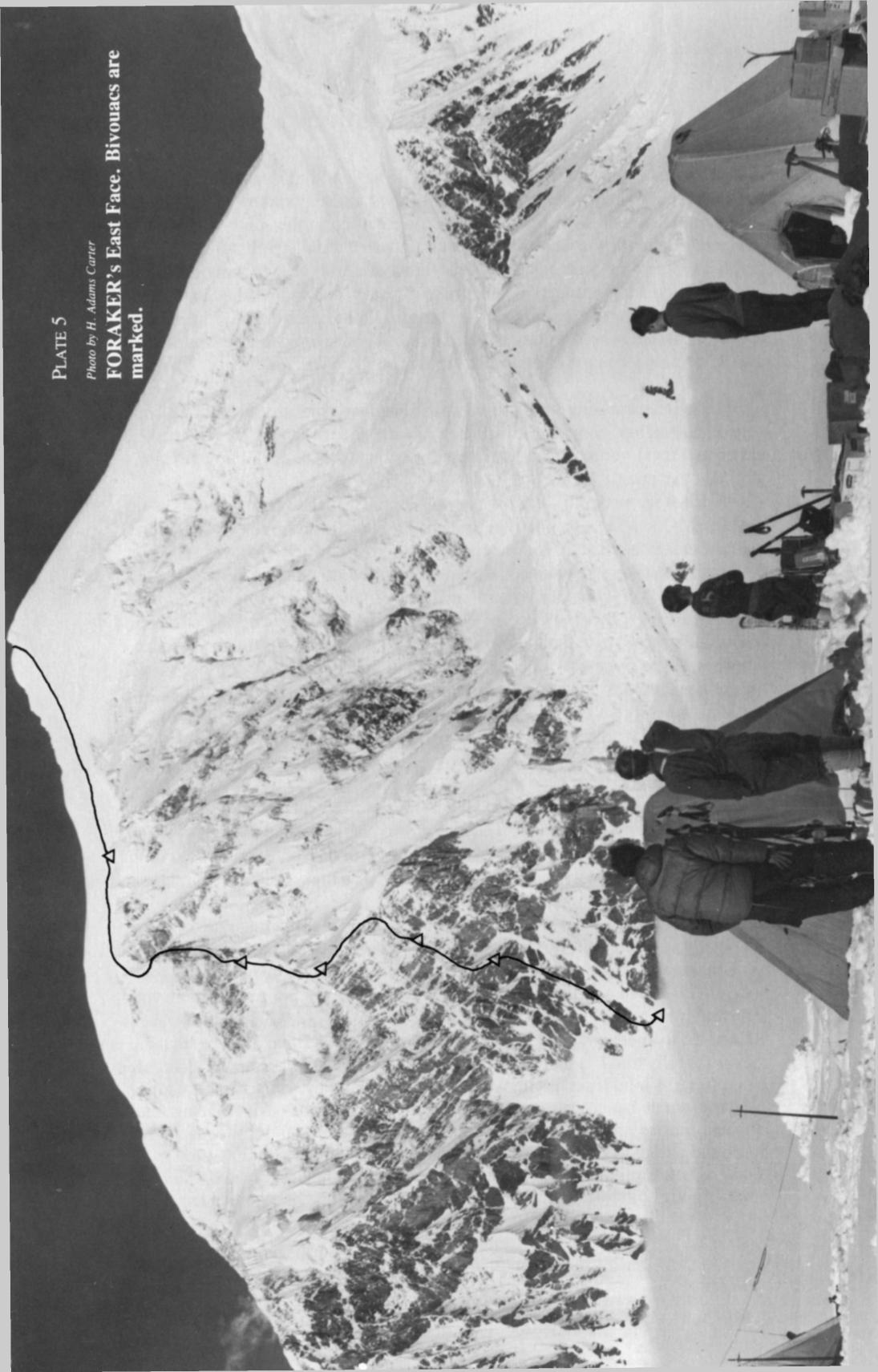
At this time our team had grafted onto it an Australian, Graham Sanders, whose good humor only increased as we approached the face.

Whoever has gone to the Kahiltna Base Camp will understand that the latrine is the most fabulous place for reveries; it is open and faces Foraker's east face. Who can avoid letting his imagination soar while regarding this immense ice and

PLATE 5

Photo by H. Adams Carter

FORAKER's East Face. Bivouacs are marked.



rock wall. It happened on the day we were to set out that Graham came back from that spot more excited than normal. "Guys, we've got to try the east face. If it should turn out to be too tough, then we can go to the southeast ridge as planned." Believing he was trying me out, I glanced at Julien. His smile told me that if I refused, he'd strangle me. Jean-François, who was cooking *crêpes* in pure Québécois style, understood nothing of what was being hatched until then. He thought that he too should catch a glimpse. I told Graham that if he wanted to become famous, he'd better do such a climb. He answered that he was dreaming of becoming famous in Australia surfing, but here was his chance. *En route pour la Gloire.*

The glacier crossing was stuffed with imaginary pitfalls but nothing happened. Our camp, moved forward beneath the face, seemed nearly crushed under the 7000 vertical feet. Our apprehension was great; our imaginations worked overtime.

The face seemed to have grown as we slept. The bergschrund caused us no problems. Our route ascended an S-shaped couloir to the right of the central couloir. Ours started at 50° but steepened to 65° or 70° after 2000 feet. The first day made no history (except for stones that zinged down the couloir), but the climbing was very impressive and we felt overwhelmed by the face, which dominated us. At the first bend of the S, the angle was 70° and the late hour forced me to head up to tie into the rock right above me. It was time to bivouac, but where? The slope was hideously steep, and under six inches of loose snow, the ice beneath was blue. We had to chop. Four hours later, it was done. Not being of the sort that bivouac sitting up, we had dug an immense slit and reinforced the ends with a sustaining wall. We were learning something new: how to live on a wall. "Look out! Don't move. I'm right behind you," or "Are my boots still hanging there?"

There was a late start on the second day. Two steep ice pitches led us to the first real difficulty, a vertical ice step. There were two alternatives: at the left, to climb 60 vertical feet followed by 15 overhanging ones, or else on the right, to climb 20 vertical feet followed by an 80° slope that ended on rock. Jean-François chose the first. Graham and I did our best to dissuade him. "Jean-François, I know it's more esthetic, but with fifty pounds on your back, it's a different kettle of fish." We finally succeeded in bringing our straying sheep back onto the right path.

Graham was a bit shaken by how we moved. He praised the merits of a good belay. With that in mind, I agreed to tie off my half-driven piton. That pitch was followed by a rock band that led to another 500-foot icefield, which averaged 70° and led to another rock step. A fruitless try by Graham revealed to us that the rock was really tough. I then tried my luck. The rock was vertical. The compact rock offered a minuscule fissure which let me place a tiny stopper horizontally, great for morale but useless to hold a fall. I progressed laboriously, placing a nut between the ice and rock. My ice tools left me hanging and my confounded 50-pound pack made this 5.7 pitch much more difficult. I couldn't keep from thinking how similar pitches in Québec would be with similar gear. After another frightful pitch, I placed a piton to anchor the rope and descended on it.

PLATE 6

Photo by H. Adams Carter

FORAKER from the Kahiltna
Glacier.



We had to bivouac under the rock band. The options were minimal, obliging us to chop in a 65° slope. Five hours later, we had a big enough slit for the four of us.

Toward six in the morning, the roar of a gas stove brought me from my sleep. I stuck my nose out from my bivouac sack far enough to see Graham starting to cook breakfast. I reasoned with him that here in Alaska the days are 23 hours long; we weren't in New Zealand. I finally persuaded him and sacked out again. You don't get a Québecois out of his sleeping bag when it isn't absolutely necessary.

We spent the third day climbing long, compact 70° icefields. The calves of our legs could hardly take it. We were on two ropes. The first placed the protection while the second rested. We progressed once more to below a nasty-looking rock band. This time we were anguished. I was the first one to reach it and I was, to say the least, impressed. I saw a vertical rock wall and a nearly perpendicular ice slope to the left. The others arrived; all remained silent. Jean-François headed toward the right where the rock seemed easiest. A traverse led him to mixed climbing which ended on a ramp that he called the "Crescent." After following it for 200 feet, we emerged on a ridge which led us to easier slopes in a zone two-thirds of the way up between hanging séracs. We were euphoric. An important part of the route was finished. We felt our commitment to the climb; now we had to exit upwards.

That night we discovered a crevasse in the face which for the first time provided a comfortable bivouac. But we called it the "Sword of Damocles" because of an enormous block that hung from the upper lip of the crevasse above the tent.

The fourth day promised to be beautiful and apparently was easier. The immense face above us was rather attractive, not too steep at 60° to 65° with very compact snow. A long diagonal traverse led us to a huge rock block that gave access to a ridge between two hanging glaciers. There, Jean-François and Graham decided to divide the team. They attacked the opposite side of the ridge and found an 80° slope of inconsistent snow.

Meanwhile, Julien and I confronted the most frightening part of the climb. We traversed horizontally on a mixture of unstable snow, verglased rock and ice which led to the foot of a vertical step of rock and ice. Protection was practically nonexistent. I was beside myself, standing on a single ice screw halfway in, scratching at the rock desperately searching for holds. Finally, two ice axes planted in ice that emerged from the rock let me climb a few precious feet upwards. Julien had to bring me back to my senses, for the situation was rapidly getting out of control. A slip at that moment would have been fatal. Those several moments of extreme intensity are the jewels which climbing offers to those who rub up against it.

That vertical band gave access to an ice couloir between the block and some séracs, with a belay in the bergschrund, the third on the route. I thought I had seen it all, but it was nothing yet. The following pitch was in bottomless granular sugar snow at 85°. I have no idea how it adhered to the slope. The rope-length

took me, terrified, to a very airy knife-edged ridge, which fell off for 4000 feet on both sides. The ridge was the only way to pass between the two hanging glaciers. After crawling along the ridge to a plateau, where Julien joined me, I noticed Jean-François and Graham behind on the ridge, both of them visibly shaken. From this plateau, an easy slope led to a final rock band. However, the slope was so steep that we had to look for a bivouac site in a zone of hanging séracs high on the face. Under a huge detached block, Jean-François found a flat space to put the tent.

The fourth day had been the most hair-raising of all, but the bivouac that night was devilish. During the day, we had often pulled the Devil by the tail. We had climbed very steep ice walls without protection, and given psychological belays, but the bivouac was the worst I had ever had. All night long the sérac which overhung us creaked, raising our blood pressure. Despite everything, we slept.

The slope above the bivouac was most pleasant, varying from 55° to 65°. The big snow face let us bypass the lower part of the rock band below the crest of the southeast ridge. The only part of the route which could not be seen from the Kahiltna Base Camp was the exit ramp. The ramp revealed itself to my eyes. A concave slope of smooth green ice, compact and hard as glass, ended vertically. Some 400 feet long, it was the major obstacle for the four of us, fatigued and apprehensive. It took me over 20 minutes to place an ice screw. Our crampons barely scratched the ice. The ice axe picks, which had banged so much rock on the mixed pitches, bit in only half an inch. Jean-François opted for a different exit on mixed terrain. A pitch of 5.6 led to a doubtful belay. Then a slope of very hard, steep snow brought us to the crest of the southeast ridge at 14,000 feet. We emerged from the huge face and, victorious, scampered along the ridge to a bivouac site.

The next day, windy and cold, saw the three Québécois and the Pink Panther on the summit. Graham decided to forego the top as he was afraid he might suffer from the altitude. We descended the southwest ridge in two more days.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Foraker, 5303 meters, 17,400 feet, via the East Face, five days on the face to the southeast ridge, one day to the summit, which was reached on May 28, 1984 by Dery, Gagnon, Vachon, two days on the descent of the southeast ridge.

PERSONNEL: Daniel Vachon, leader; Julien Dery, Jean-François Gagnon, *Québec, Canada*; Graham Sanders, *Australia*.