

Denali's Complete Pioneer Ridge

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ACCORDING TO THE STATISTICS, the 5000th climber will step on Denali's summit this summer. Incredible! Also, according to the statistics, no one had yet climbed Denali's complete elegant Pioneer Ridge from the very bottom. This is unbelievable, as Pioneer Ridge is without doubt the most beautiful, finely sculptured ridge on the mountain. It starts at Gunsight Pass at 6560 feet and curves and bends its way for nearly eleven miles and rises almost 13,000 feet up to Denali's North Peak. The upper part of Pioneer Ridge had been climbed by gaining it via the Flatiron. This approach cuts off a full half of the ridge.

Our interest in the ridge started almost three years ago, but it wasn't until last winter that we got the trip together. In February, Denali Dog Tours sledged our supplies to the Muldrow Glacier's lower icefall. It was June before we were ready to start our adventure. Our intentions were to put a ten-day cache at 12,400 feet on Pioneer Ridge via the Flatiron route. Then we would return to Gunsight Pass and start up from there. In that way, we could climb with relatively light packs. I guess that would make this an expeditionary-alpine whitepoint ascent!

Our team consisted of four good friends: Australian Rowan Laver and Chuck Maffei, Jim Cancroft and me from western Montana.

The first leg of our journey must be the most treacherous part of a climb on Denali's north side. The infamous six-hour ride to Wonder Lake, in a bus overflowing with "Camera People," has discouraged many a mountaineer. Luckily, fate was on our side. We were invited to ride on June 10 to Wonder Lake with a NOLS group. They were heading for Denali's Karstens Ridge with the entire bus to themselves and enough room for us. What a break!

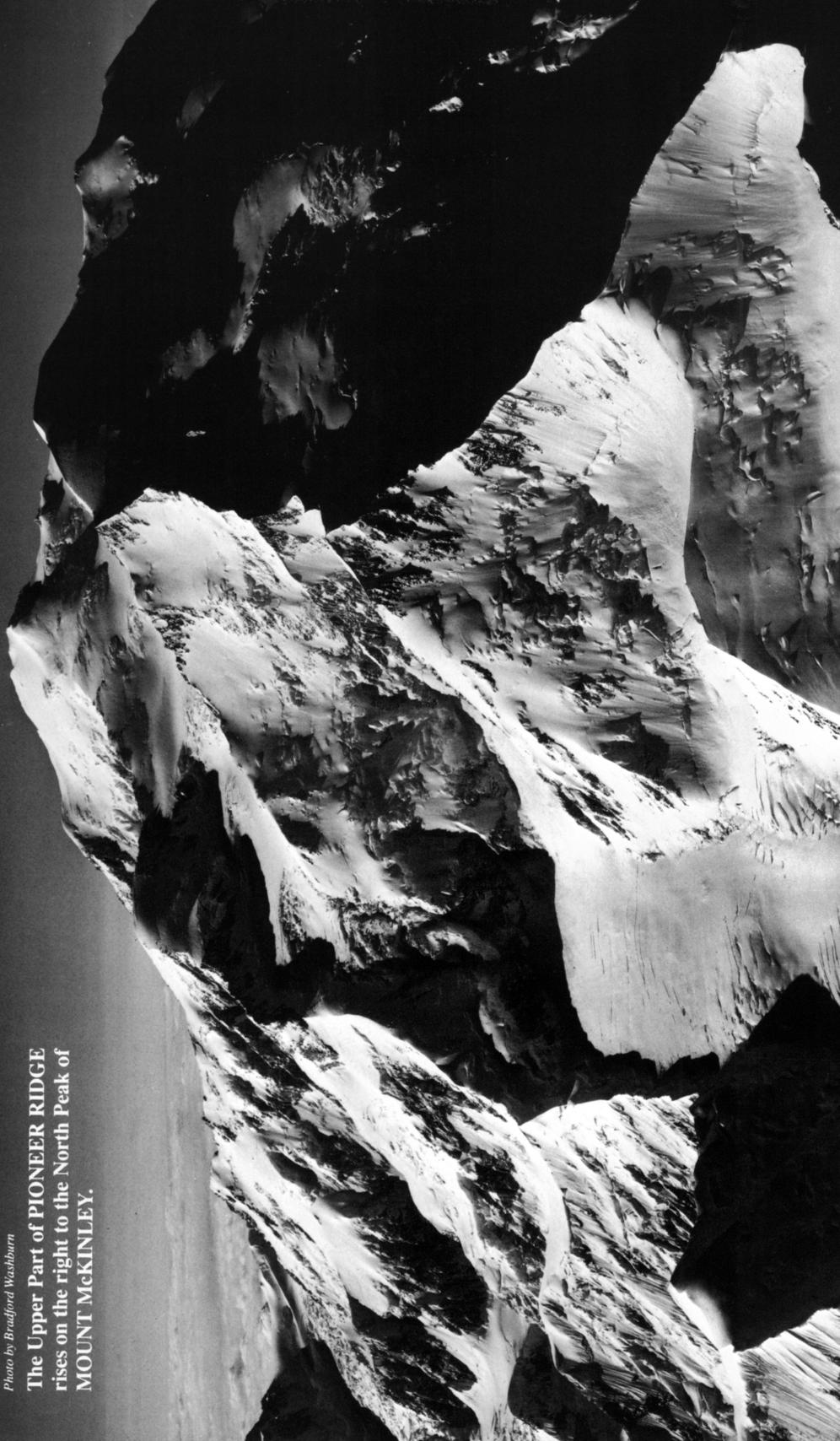
That first day, we made it across the icy cold and wildly braided McKinley River. The flow is quite low at this time of the year and we had no problems crossing. The hike to McGonagall Pass was very pleasant. We saw moose, caribou and a grizzly bear. We also had three more river crossings on our way there. The view from the pass is magnificent! The pass separates the lush, green tundra from a land of towering, white, glaciated peaks. It was like Dorothy opening the door and looking out into Munchkin Land. Only here, you go from color to black-and white.

On June 13, we were in Base Camp at the lower icefall. A huge wind-blast, we assumed, had scattered our cache, as well as the NOLS one, all over the

PLATE 33

Photo by Bradford Washburn

The Upper Part of PIONEER RIDGE rises on the right to the North Peak of MOUNT MCKINLEY.



Muldrow Glacier. A quick inventory showed us that we were missing half our supplies! Still, we had to cache ten days of supplies at 12,400 feet and just eat less for the rest of the trip. The next four days we skied up the glacier, climbed to the Flatiron, put in our cache and returned to Base Camp. We would leave our skis there and walk to Gunsight Pass, the real beginning of Pioneer Ridge.

However, the next six days found us sitting in the tents, reading books and hanging out in the "Land of Rain." It seemed pretty gloomy, but it couldn't have worked out better. The heavy melting of the snowpack enabled us to find almost all our missing supplies, some of which were a quarter of a mile away.

On June 24, our 15th day out, we finally started up Pioneer Ridge. Crossing the glacier en route to the ridge was hair-raising. Not having skis any more, we continuously plunged to our thighs in water-saturated crud. Crevasses looked back at us maliciously as we pulled our legs out of the holes. Completely worn out, we made it to our first camp on the ridge.

After sitting out another day of rain, we moved up to Camp II. From there we could look out at the infamous Sharp Ridge section of our climb. This was the crux! We were more than a little intimidated. Stretching out and away were wave after wave of wildly corniced horizontal ridge. This part had been dismissed by two earlier expeditions as impossible!

We found the exact opposite. This section proved to be some of the finest climbing any of us had ever done. It was exposed but solid. We had good protection with ice screws and pickets, and all went safely. We used running belays on all but the hardest parts and the day passed quickly. In fourteen hours, we had passed the Sharp Ridge and were psyched. Camp III was under a huge cornice at 10,500 feet.

The next day, our 21st, I led out from Camp III in a fog. About 100 yards from camp, a cornice broke and I plunged towards the Peters Glacier. After 20 feet of freefall, the rope went tight and I inhaled a doubly deep breath of relief. Though Chuck Maffei, on the other side of the ridge, had barely felt a tug, he had saved me. After that little incident, we went back to Camp III to wait for better visibility, luckily, because that day and night we were hammered by an incredibly intense thunder-and-lightning storm. The flash and the thunder would happen all at once! We sat quivering in the tents, hoping not to get fried.

The day after was crystal clear. The climbing was more moderate. Later that day, we noticed a weird color in the sky and a strange smell in the air. The storm the day before had set thousands of acres of trees on fire in the Alaskan interior. The fires went on to burn more acreage in Alaska than all the fires in the lower forty-eight states combined. Even though the smoke made for very dry throats, it also brought on wonderfully colorful and eerie sunrises and sunsets.

The rest of the climbing up to the cache was really enjoyable. The ridge was broader and most of it was less exposed. About a half a mile from the cache, Jim Cancroft broke loose a fair-sized avalanche. The snow fractured right out from under his feet, but he was spared a quick descent. There was no lack of excitement here!

On our 24th day out, we reached our cache at 12,400 feet. We were happy to see all our supplies, as we had only half a meal left with us. What a relief! We had



PLATE 34

Photo by Bradford Washburn

**The Lower Section of PIONEER
RIDGE of MOUNT MCKINLEY**

just finished the unclimbed part of Pioneer Ridge. Now we could work on getting to the summit.

Two days of moderate climbing brought us to the top of Taylor Spur at 15,000 feet. What a stupendous camp site! We now looked right at the upper reaches of the route. It looked steeper than ever. On our 27th day out, we made it to our high camp at 16,000 feet on a not too large, little dish of a place. We were trapped there the next day as high winds had settled on the peak, shrouding the summit with a lenticular cloud.

Since the following morning was good enough for us, we ventured up. The climbing above our high camp was a real challenge and had the most rock climbing of the route. Though it was harder and more time-consuming, our light summit packs made it enjoyable. At 17,000 feet, the ridge lay back and we had no problem from there to the top of the North Peak. In perfect weather, we spent an hour and a half on the summit, taking it all in. It was Thursday, July 8, our 29th day out. Our summit day turned into a 16½-hour marathon, but back at our high camp we were all smiles.

After this, we headed down the ridge to the Flatiron and descended the Muldrow to Base Camp. Our stumble down the Muldrow was a nightmare on an enormously changed glacier. What had taken us four-and-a-half hours to get down on our cache carry now tested us for twelve hours. Without skis this time, we were constantly falling in up to our waists in unconsolidated slush. One time, after plunging in up to my armpits, I looked around to see my three companions in just as far. Talk about adrenaline! Many boot holes showed the black bottomlessness of huge crevasses, but no one fell all the way in. Completely exhausted, we shuffled back into Base Camp on July 11, our 31st day out.

Now all we had to do was to carry 80-pound loads some 20 miles back to Wonder Lake. Crossing McGonagall Pass again, we bowed deeply to the land of rock and ice and headed down into the world of lush green tundra.

This time, the McKinley River was waiting for us. The first crossing was the roughest. Chuck Maffei, who was nervous about the river anyway, turned into our token sacrifice to the river god. He slipped and was instantly in for the ice-cold swim of a lifetime. He careened down the river, paddled like crazy and finally managed to emerge on the right side, thoroughly soaked. After that, we carefully made our way through the rest of the braids of the McKinley and pushed on up to Wonder Lake. The legendary bus ride was surprisingly mellow with only 200 picture stops. We had done it! It was time to head back to Talkeetna to recuperate at the Fairview Inn.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount McKinley North Peak, 5934 meters, 19,470 feet, via the complete Pioneer Ridge, Summit reached on July 8, 1988 (whole party).

PERSONNEL: Australian Rowan Laver, Americans Chuck Maffei, Jim Cancroft, Randy Waitman.