"Snake-Bit" in the Alaska Range

JACK TACKLE

THE EAST FACE OF MOUNT BARRILLE is the size of Half Dome and yet it is dwarfed by its neighbor, Mount Dickey. The center of the face had only one route, that done by Austrians in 1988 (*AAJ, 1989,* pages 74-82). This face has one major feature which stands out—a pillar shaped like a cobra standing on end and ready to strike, the "Cobra" Pillar. It is on the right of this pillar that the Austrian route follows a major right-facing corner system. From down-glacier, we could see another major system on its left side.

On June 10, 1989, Jim Donini and I had just survived the worst descent epic of our collective 35 years in the mountains. Nearby Mount Wake, almost too aptly named, was to have been a "warm-up" for more climbing on Mount Foraker. Even though I had been on more than a dozen previous Alaskan trips, three of them with Jim, we once again learned that there are no first ascents in the Alaska Range that are warm-ups.

Our initial attempts on Barrille took place only after sitting on the glacier in bad weather. We had then intended to go on over to Foraker, but the weather was so bad that we could not get there and were flown out to Talkeetna. There was no time left that year for Foraker and we returned again to Barrille. Four separate attempts were foiled by repeated storms. We flew out at the beginning of what turned out to be the most bombproof high pressure of the entire season. The sky was blue from there to Siberia for ten days after we left. That was round one.

Round two took place in June of 1990. I was unable to go, but Jim Donini and another partner got seventeen pitches up, only to be stopped by a blank headwall that needed to be drilled. They ended by doing another route on the face to the right, but the main line still remained undone.

The final round found Jim and me back in the Ruth Gorge in June of 1991, bound and determined to get up the wall this time. We came equipped with plenty of "tricks" in our bag, so as not to be repulsed another time. I was able to fly from my home in Montana to the landing site in the Ruth Amphitheater in less than fourteen hours.

The very next morning, Jim and I fixed four ropes on the first six pitches in perfect weather. We returned the following morning and went up on the wall for

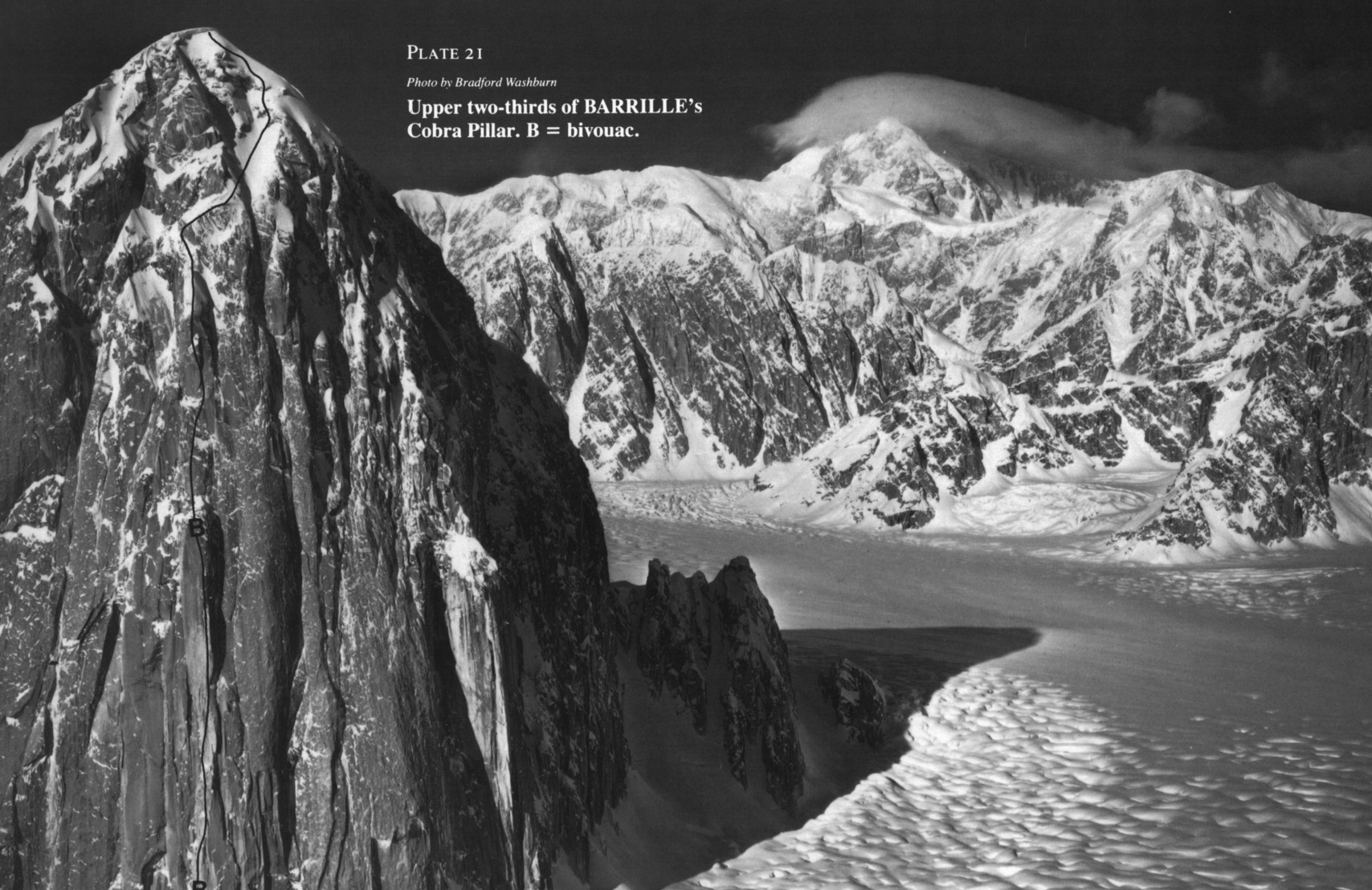

PLATE 21

Photo by Bradford Washburn

Upper two-thirds of BARRILLE's Cobra Pillar. B = bivouac.

good. We had learned in earlier attempts that taking enough gear to be "comfortable" is too much. We took no tent, just bivouac sacks, lightweight bags, one Northwall hammer each, a lightweight stove and hardware for a long free climb. For the upper part of the face were crampons, onesport presles and gaiters. The heavy metal selection consisted of a generous bolt kit and a healthy pin rack.

The rock is very good for the most part, especially for the Ruth Gorge. We encountered only short sections of bad rock, the wonderful crackerjack variety, but they were not major obstacles, just temporary inconveniences. The rock climbing consisted of 23 pitches, with seven mixed pitches of snow and ice. A long section of snow up high allowed us to move together for a considerable distance. The final pitch involved aid off of ice tools shoved into unstable snow which repeatedly gave way.

The weather pattern was unstable, but not horrible. It would be good for 12 to 36 hours and then snow for 12 to 16 hours. Once it cleared, we could be climbing on dry rock in very little time.

Eight pitches up was a ledge where we had spent a lot of time in 1989. This was home for the first two of the four nights we spent on the face. The other bivouac was at Pitch 17, also a two-night affair.

Above the first bivouac, both in 1989 and 1990, we had followed the left side of the pillar in a big corner system. This had led Jim in 1990 to the blank headwall which turned them back. Since we had the gear to deal with a temporary lack of crack systems, we focused undaunted on the headwall, but after hours of drilling and hooking, I lost my enthusiasm for the line. It was not only because of the bad esthetics, but also because the route up to now had gone all free except for 40 feet.

Just before starting up the wall for good, I had seen from the base a series of cracks in the middle of the pillar. While still lower down, we had attempted to get into these cracks, but at that point the rock was too friable. We decided to rappel down two rope-lengths and try to gain access to the cracks out in the middle of the pillar. A 5.9 traverse with one bolt for added protection got us to the system in the center of the "Cobra." This was the key to the route and provided some of the best and most spectacular climbing on the face. Being out there in the middle of this beautiful rock, following a single crack for hundreds of feet and peering down onto the Ruth Glacier flowing below us was as good as it gets.

The second bivouac site was at the top of the initial section of the pillar, 17 pitches up. We occupied this veranda for two nights. Again, as had been the case below, we were driven back to this retreat temporarily because of storms. But the site was spacious and had a good supply of snow for water. We could see the Austrian route off to the right. It was wet with snow melting up high; and we wanted to continue our line if possible.

Two pitches straight above the bivouac we could see another gorgeous corner system heading on up our pillar. Once into that, we were sure it would lead us on up to the top. For three rope-lengths it was classic crack climbing. All of a sudden, the cracks ended in a totally blank 60-foot-high headwall at the top of

which the rock climbing ended. The snow was so close I could smell it. We tried either side but no cracks were to be found. A classic Alaskan situation, especially in the Ruth Gorge. Out came the drill. Jim hooked and bolted the headwall in an horrendously cold wind. We placed only three bolts for protection, hooking in between. The rock was so hard that it took 30 minutes to place each bolt. In typical Ruth Gorge fashion, as soon as the rock leaned back at the top of this headwall, it turned to the rottenest of the entire wall. In ten feet, it went from being marble-hard to decomposed garbage that you could use your ice tools in.

It was late on the fifth day when we stepped into the snow that led us to the summit of Barrille. The climbing above the rock was easy with the exception of the summit cornice. The view from the top was absolutely stunning. The only major peak we couldn't see was Foraker, our next objective. The descent off the back side was just a matter of following steps to our tent in the twilight.

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After a day and a half of rest and relaxation at the Mountain House landing site, we flew to our other objective, a new route on Foraker. So much for the fun-in-the-sun rock climbing! Jim Okonek landed us on the southwest fork of the Kahiltna Glacier, a short 30-minute hop from the Ruth.

A few years back, Jim Donini and I had unsuccessfully tried to make the second ascent of the Infinite Spur. Bad weather forced us off after we had sat out storms for three days. I had always wanted to climb Foraker. It is so massive and imposing. From the Kahiltna it looks more ominous and impressive than Denali. I had always dreamed of doing a new route on all three of the major peaks in the range. Denali and Hunter were out of the way, but Foraker remained.

Some years ago, Chip Farrow had shown me this major unclimbed rib on the south side of the mountain. The ridge runs for 6000 feet straight up to the southeast ridge, joining it at 13,500 feet. It bypasses the dangerous terrain which has killed climbers through the years. The ridge looked straightforward except near the top where an ice cliff hung over the ridge. This had been responsible for making climbers think the ridge was dangerous, when in actuality it is not only safe but safer by a long shot than the southeast ridge.

We spent seven days on this ridge, calling it "Viper Ridge." The ice cliff looks like the head of a viper peering over the rock buttress high up.

The ridge has three distinct sections. The first segment was easy snow climbing to around 9500 feet. The middle section was a spectacular 14-pitch, knife-edged traverse of a corniced ridge. Above that lay the crux, a 1000-foot rock buttress with the ice cliff on top of it. The hard part ended at 12,500 feet.

We actually spent only three-and-a-half days climbing on the ridge. Bad weather was hammering Foraker. We had to bivouac three nights in a row only a few hundred feet apart in the middle of the climb. The mixed-climbing crux in the rock section took place during a full-fledged storm. We just wanted to get up the ridge and be done with it. After we were past the difficulties, we were faced with going to the summit in poor conditions with few supplies or with bailing out before the weather caught us high and pinned us. And two or three feet of snow

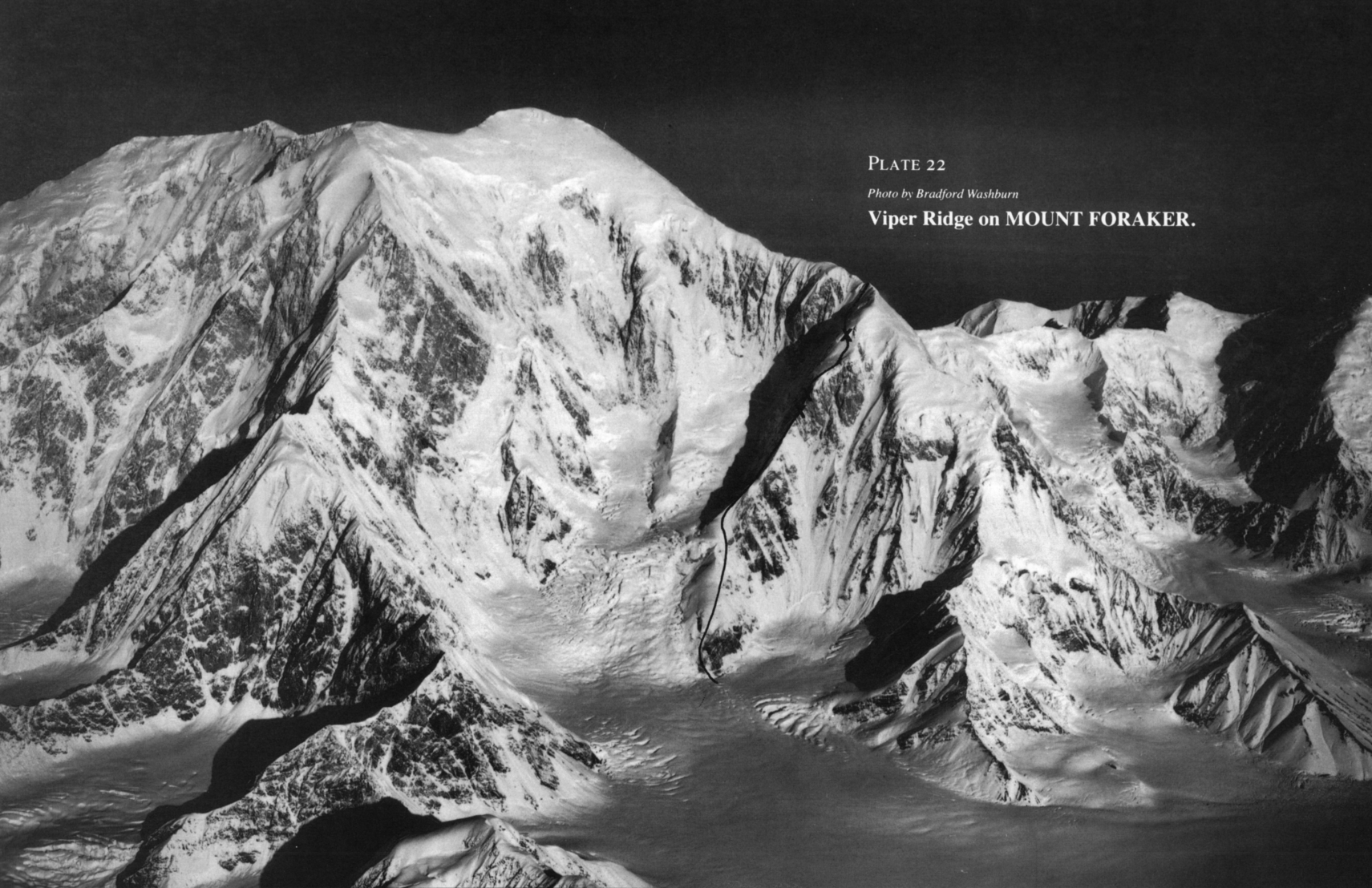

PLATE 22

Photo by Bradford Washburn

Viper Ridge on MOUNT FORAKER.

had already fallen. We bailed out. What had taken us seven *days* total to ascend took only five *hours* to rappel and down-climb. We did bypass the ice-ridge traverse and just down-climbed a gully system to the east of the ridge.

This ended my personal goal of routes on Denali, Hunter and Foraker. It does not end my interest and love of climbing in Alaska.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTES: Mount Barrille, 2332 meters, 7650 feet, "Cobra Pillar" on the East Face; 5.10+, A3, 100 feet of aid, 23 pitches and 7 pitches of ice and snow; June 5-10, 1991.

Mount Foraker, 5303 meters, 17,400 feet, "Viper Ridge," South Spur of Southeast Ridge; June 11-17, 1991.

PERSONNEL: Jim Donini, Jack Tackle.