

Northwest Face of Denali's West Buttress

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YEARS AGO, I FIRST BECAME aware of the face, the perfect hard Denali route: no hanging ice above, too steep and windswept to collect snow and with easy access to the West Buttress highway. On the West Buttress proper, it starts from the lower Peters Glacier and rises 7000 feet to the top of the buttress at 16,200 feet. The climbing looked pretty straightforward, mostly ice slabs and mixed climbing, but the rock band in the middle looked interesting.

I set about researching the route and pestering friends for slides that might show the face. I was not in a hurry until I saw, to my horror, that Jon Waterman's new book *High Alaska* had a dashed line, signifying "unclimbed," running up the face. I imagined a throng at the base of the route, books in hand, queuing up for the route.

Determined at least to be near the head of the line, I geared up for an attempt in early May of 1990 with a friend from Anchorage, John Tuckey. We acclimatized at 14,000 feet on the West Buttress route until we felt confident with the weather. When we got a close-up view, we were disheartened—it was bitterly cold, windswept and the ice was a glistening brittle blue. We abandoned the attempt.

In late June of 1991, I returned with the "Wyoming hired guns," Greg Collins and Phil Powers. They were good friends with whom I had shared many climbs although I had not seen them for years. Both Phil and I were due to get married later in the summer and so the trip turned out to be a good reacquaintance/bachelor party.

Two days after flying in, we were at the 14,000-foot West Buttress camp. At the top of Motorcycle Hill, I again got a view across the face. This time, to my relief, temperatures were much warmer and the ice had a more hospitable, whiter look. We waited a day at 14,000 feet before Greg and Phil, fit after guiding in the Rockies, went to the summit via the West Rib in a ten-hour round trip.

After another rest day, confident with the weather, we headed down over Kahiltna Pass to the base of the route, carrying only a two-person bivouac tent and food for three days. Much to our surprise, a big thunderhead rolled in that

PLATE 24

Photo by Bradford Washburn

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evening and it poured rain for most of the night. With three of us tangled up in the tiny tent, we got little sleep. The next night, we headed up the face. We wanted to get up and off the climb before the weather broke. It was no place to be caught in the high southerly winds that commonly scour the face.

And that, essentially, is how it turned out. Conditions were as perfect as they could be. Temperatures never dipped below 25°, the ice was reasonably soft and the winds remained calm during the 39 hours we were on the face. Most of the climbing was either about 55° ice or moderate mixed climbing where we could climb quickly with running belays. The six pitches of fifth-class climbing on the rock band slowed us, but it was so warm that we could climb comfortably without gloves.

After twenty hours without a remotely hospitable bivouac spot, we were forced to hack ledges in the ice, where we stole seven hours of sleep. When we topped out the next morning, we were all almost too exhausted to move. Greg and Phil remembered what they had experienced after a summit attempt on K2 the year before. When we reached the fixed ropes at 16,200 feet on the West Buttress route, we decided on descent. We had all been to the summit before—Greg and Phil just a few days earlier. The next evening, we were back in Talkeetna, a mere ten days after we had flown in.

I strongly suspect that the conventional wisdom about climbing Denali—that earlier is better—is suspect. In my experience, the weather pattern is always hit-or-miss between April and July. You might as well go late when the temperatures approach the livable. Our climb would have been much more difficult in colder weather.

In honor of Bradford Washburn's contributions to American mountaineering—his routes, his aerial photographs and beautiful maps—we suggest that at some time Denali's west face be known as the Washburn Face.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount McKinley, Northwest Face of the West Buttress from 7000 feet on the Peters Glacier to the West Buttress at 16,200 feet, June 22-July 1, 1991 (Gregory Collins, Philip Powers, Thomas Walter).