

“Thunder Mountain”

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ONE OF THE BEAUTIES OF CLIMBING in the central Alaska Range is the ease of access to the mountains in terms of time and the tremendous potential for exploration, first ascents and new routes. This, however, is only possible if you remove your blinkers and allow your imagination a little freedom. Close scrutiny of maps and journals cross-referenced with photographs available in libraries and ranger stations can lead to hidden treasures in almost every part of the range.

I wanted to climb “Thunder Mountain” ever since I saw a photo of it taken from the north. Arguably the most important unclimbed summit in the range, it stands on the divide between the Kahiltna and Tokositna glacier systems. Other peaks on the divide, such as Avalanche Spire, had received ascents over the years, but Thunder Mountain offers no easy line of ascent from either the north or the west.

Originally its name was suggested by Alan Kearney, who observed the tremendous sérac falls and avalanches from its north face whilst camped beneath it during his reconnaissance of Mount Hunter. Despite the mistaken reference to it on page 368 in Jonathan Waterman’s *High Alaska* as having been climbed, it remained unascended despite a valiant attempt by Kearney and Steve Mascioli, who succeeded in climbing P 10,600 via a serious four-day push up the western edge of the north face in 1983.

In 1992, David Barlow and I were flown by Doug Geeting onto the glacier between the start of Mount Hunter’s southwest ridge and the north face of Thunder Mountain with the intention of bagging this fine peak. The only feasible option looked to be a circuitous route around further west than the Kearney attempt and then up the steep ice wall leading to the summit of P 10,600 followed by a long ridge traverse of the many minor summits.

Our first serious attempt was blessed with a three-day good-weather report from our glacier pilot and we rapidly climbed 2500 feet up nasty slopes and avalanche debris, through séracs and around icefalls to gain the col between Thunder Mountain and P 9070, where we camped. As we put up the tent, our pilot returned and circled overhead, gesticulating wildly. Little did we know that our remaining two *days* of good weather had somehow been reduced to two *hours*.

We awoke as the tent collapsed flat and the wind buffeted us. We quickly broke out and retreated, knowing that the heavily falling snow would make our

location serious. The descent was fine apart from my falling twenty feet over a sérac wall in a white-out. I had felt we were practically down. I had tramped on the end of the rope down steep slopes, weaving through crevasses and séracs, peering into the gloom and falling snow, trying to remember each turn and drop. Dave had shouted that we should be further right. What did he know? He was young and inexperienced! Suddenly, I was old and airborne. As the rope jerked tight, halting my head-first plunge, I hung in space. Peering up, I noted that the rope had cut deep into the sérac lip and climbing up looked impossible. Below was soft snow with an easy route out onto the snowfield. I climbed a short bit up the rope, untied and jumped. It gave Dave a fright when he pulled up the slack end, but we soon got our act back together and continued the descent. Those ropes earn their money!

Four days later, we regained our high point, bagged the first ascent of P9070 before scurrying away in the face of another storm. The remaining 1800 feet of the Kearney route looked much steeper than in the photo and a cornice had formed since their ascent and it would be potentially very difficult to descend. Enthusiasm to regain that col a third time was low and so we looked for another project.

In April, 1992, the fierce winter was running late and strong winds blew continuously above 13,000 feet. No one was summiting in the range and lenticular clouds were constant on the summits of Hunter. We elected to ski across the Kahiltna Glacier past the southeast toe of Foraker to make a two-day round-trip ascent of Crosson via its southeast ridge. This pleasant and straightforward climb is becoming popular as against the trampled-to-death Denali West Buttress. After another big storm, we went back to civilization.

There is a saying that goes, "Prior planning prevents piss-poor performance" and it rang through my brain as I listened to Park Ranger Roger Robinson say that he thought Thunder Mountain might have a reasonable line up its south face. That winter, I pored over every possible photo I could find taken from the Tokositna Glacier. None showed the entire south face but one gave enough suggestions as to the potential for me to persuade David Barlow to return in 1993 for a second foray, but this time starting from the Tokositna side.

Doug Geeting dropped us off in early May on a shelf directly below Thunder Mountain, at the drop-off point for the routes on Hunter's south face.

Going in blind was a big risk, given the time and expenditure, but I was confident, having seen the grin of anticipation on Roger Robinson's face as we departed. Well it paid off. We climbed the 4000 feet to the central summit in a single push up a route very similar to the Couturier Couloir on the Aiguille Verte. Mixed snow and ice averaging 50° with sections up to 60° wound through rock buttresses heading for a narrow gully between two spires, one of good granite and the other of rotten shale, which ended abruptly on the knife-edged summit ridge. We topped the peak in a white-out with snow beginning to fall. Dave was very cold and tired due to having punched it out up the last thousand feet, but he reacted well to hot jello and chocolate, so well in fact that I could hardly keep up with him on the climb down. The last hour of the descent was accompanied

PLATE 30

Photo (5838) by Bradford Washburn

**Southeast Face of South Peak of
MOUNT HUNTER.**



by snow slides and small avalanches generated by the deteriorating weather. We jumped the bergschrund before the first big avalanches appeared. Although it wasn't the greatest alpine route I'd done, the research, the solitude, the exploration and ultimately the summit were more than ample reward.

With the Thunder Mountain project completed, we radioed for Geeting Aviation to ferry us across to the Kahiltna Glacier. Going from cheerful, pristine isolation to the heaving Kahiltna Base with its West Buttress punters was a culture shock. We watched them turn onto the Denali highway and turned away up toward the north side of Hunter. Joined by Scots Mark Sinclair and Chris Rawlins, we started up an obvious line toward the South Buttress over a couple of 12,000-foot peaks, but nasty, unsettled slopes and a crevasse fall counseled retreat.

We next elected to attempt to reach the south summit of Mount Hunter by the southwest ridge, which starts after an easy five-hour walk from Kahiltna Base. Though we believe it had been climbed only twice since the 1978 first ascent, it was ascended in 1993 by two American pairs and two British teams. (The other two British climbers were Neil Main and Chris Schiller.) Because of the unusually warm temperatures, we climbed the route at night. Our ascent was made over two nights and one morning with the descent in one long further night, spread across five days due to a bout with snowfall, which called for a time out at the top of the main couloir. Considering the lack of attention that this route has, it was a remarkable occasion when seven met on top of the buttress at the base of the coxcomb arête to share information and candy bars in the late evening sunshine. It is a fine climb with excellent campsites on the top of the initial couloir and at the crest of the coxcomb where it meets the sérac band. The main couloir should be treated with respect after snowfall and its condition seemed to be different with every ascent and descent made over that week, which all of us found a little disturbing.

Good times with good friends off the beaten track. As you Americans would say—the way to go, dudes!

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range, South of McKinley

FIRST ASCENTS: P 9070, 2765 meters, gaining the col between "Thunder Mountain" and P 9070 from the north side, April 20, 1992 (David Barlow, Geoff Hornby).

"Thunder Mountain," 3328 meters, 10,920 feet, from the south, May 5, 1993 (Barlow, Hornby).

OTHER ASCENTS: Crosson, 3902 meters, 12,800 feet, via southeast ridge, April 1992 (Barlow, Hornby).

Hunter South Summit, 4257 meters, 13,966 feet, via southwest ridge, May 1993 (Barlow, Hornby, Mark Sinclair).