

through mixed rock towers. The route gains 4,300' vertical and was climbed in a 24-hour round trip from the base (15 hours base-summit). Aside from the two crux pitches (AI6 and M6), which we pitched out, we found moderate terrain (with a few short, tricky spots) that we simul-climbed throughout.

Upon gaining the low-angled summit ridge, we were hit by a storm and punched through numerous crevasses en route to the summit. We descended by rappel. While skiing from the base in a whiteout, I fell into a crevasse, but we returned safely.

KELLY CORDES, AAC

*Mt. Hunter, first ski descent.* This was my first trip to Alaska. I was invited to attempt a ski descent of Mt. Hunter during May with Lorne Glick, John "Weedy" Whedon, and Andrew McLean. Our intended route was a variation of the West Ridge from the south, via the Ramen Couloir, which reaches the West Ridge route at 11,000'. The Ramen Couloir was climbed in the early 90s.

After three days of waiting for weather, Lorne, Weedy, Andrew, and I received a beautiful day for our flight onto the Kahiltna Glacier. We established a comfortable base camp and punched a route up through the icefall to our advanced camp. We stashed tent, stove, ice tools, coffee, and rum, and took a look at our intended route, before descending to base camp for the evening.

I awoke to the sound of snow hitting the tent. By morning there were 8 inches of fresh snow, and it was still snowing. The storm was on us for four days and produced 16 inches of new snow. We were packing gear for the trip through the icefall to our upper camp when we heard and felt a distinctive "thwack!" Tons of ice calved off the upper plateau of Hunter and raked down the 5,000-vertical-foot wall, gathering speed and snow. With a powder cloud thousands of feet high it barreled across the mile-wide valley and blasted the opposing wall. Clearly we needed to wait for conditions to stabilize.

Two frigid days later we worked through the maze of ice towers to advanced base camp. Our gear stash had been spared by the avalanche. We decided to head up the next day, after one more cold day for snow stabilization and caloric power loading. The next night, May 14 at 9:00, after eating and relaxing, we began the ascent.

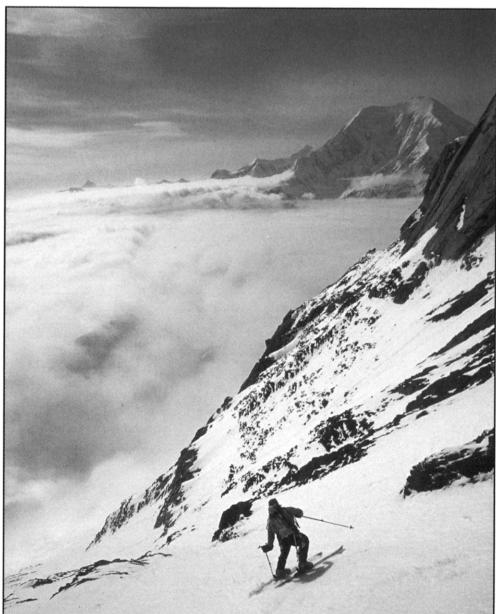
We breached the Ramen Couloir and reached the west ridge at 11,000'. The sun set an hour before, and the reality of an Alaskan night without bivi gear set in. It was cold, so cold that stopping for more than a few minutes became uncomfortable. We were skinning now, as the angle had relaxed considerably. Nearing Mt. Hunter's 13,000'-plateau lip, we were forced to trade skis for crampons for a few hundred feet. We gained the plateau as surrounding peaks began to bathe in creamy pink predawn alpenglow.

We hit the summit ridge at about 14,200' and received our first sunshine for the day. On top we were rewarded with remarkable views of Denali and Foraker. All other peaks were insignificant in comparison. Soon reality set in. It was time to ski this sucker. I have never been more exhausted trying to ski. The snow on the summit ridge was wind-scoured hell, the kind that loosens your dental work. Soon we found ourselves at the saddle where we exited the west face. A 1,000', 45° face, garnished with a massive cornice, leads down to the 13,000' plateau. We skied down to the plateau without wasting time. At the lip of the plateau we took a break to brew up and power down food.

Starting again, we were faced with the most heinous part of the ski descent. Right off the lip, with 5,000' of exposure, sat 30' of blue ice. We skied carefully. Together again we gazed down the next 2,000' of the northwest side of the west ridge: dessert time, with boot-top to knee-deep recrystallized powder with surface hoar. The snow was so good it felt like we were cheating, but with every pristine-powder turn we were forced closer to the 3,000' south-facing, glop-plastered icy moment of truth.

One at a time we worked down the convex, increasingly steep headwall that caps the final couloir. The exposure was dizzying. Like fingernails on a chalkboard we scratched our way down to safety. Finally we skied out onto the flats. We congratulated each other and started celebrating when, seconds after we exited the couloir, a raging wet slide blasted over cliffs and dumped into our line, erasing the lower 1,200' of our tracks. We said, "Let's get the hell out of here." Feeling very lucky, we scooted on to advanced base camp and finished our fifth of rum. No one stopped smiling as we kicked back in the sun and let what we pulled off set in. It took 16 hours from our 8,000' ABC to the 14,575' summit and back.

ARMOND DUBUQUE



Descending the west face of Thunder Mountain. Lorne Glick

*Mt. Hunter, South Ridge, third ascent.* In mid-June Forrest Murphy and I climbed Mt. Hunter's South Ridge. It was likely the third ascent. We opted for the "direct start variation," made by the 1986 second ascent. Here we found high-quality mixed climbing to M5-, with long stretches of moderate mixed ice terrain. After a psychologically demanding journey across the Happy Cowboy Pinnacles and up the Changabang Arête, we visited the South Summit and descended the West Ridge, reaching Kahiltna base camp five days after leaving our camp on the Tokositna Glacier.

Previous traverses of Hunter to Kahiltna base camp via the South Ridge or the adjoining Southeast Spur took a minimum of 12 days and 13 days, respectively. The difference in our case was stable weather. (A major buttress located between these routes was climbed in 2001 [AAJ 2002, pp. 230-231]; this team descended the Southwest Ridge route, reaching the Thunder Glacier after 10 days on the mountain). The technical difficulties of the South Ridge were not extreme, but we found the route to be committing, consistently challenging, and requiring almost every alpine skill imaginable. This somewhat forgotten route has some of the finest rock in the Alaska Range, and offers a grand course in all aspects of Alaskan alpine climbing.

MARK WESTMAN