

## King Peak

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**K**ING Peak, 17,130 feet, occupies a remote position in the St. Elias Range. It opposes the north slopes of Mount Logan across the intervening King Glacier and overlooks the Seward icefields stretching toward the Gulf of Alaska. Yakutat, 70 miles distant, is the nearest coastal village. McCarthy, 150 miles distant and a relic of copper boom days, is the nearest interior settlement.

Although King Peak itself had remained untried, its environs had been penetrated three times by expeditions to Mount Logan. As a consequence of these, interest in the possibilities of the peak developed. Our interest actually began with the 1950 University of Alaska Mt. Logan Expedition. Not until the spring of 1952, however, did conditions favor a realization of that interest.

Expedition personnel consisted of Alston Paige (previously on Mount Logan), Bill Atwood, Keith Hart, and the writer, all students at the University of Alaska and affiliated with the Alaska Alpine Club.

The planning phases were patterned essentially on the experiences of the Logan expeditions. Our interior route of approach would begin at Chitina, the nearest Alaskan village with a connected road. From Chitina we would be flown 100 miles southeast to an improvised airstrip at the terminus of the Chitina Glacier. With two weeks' rations and limited equipment, we would then travel by foot up the Chitina Glacier on to the Logan Glacier and the tributary Ogilvie Glacier to its confluence with the King Glacier (Quartz Ridge), a total distance of 50 miles. Following an air drop, we would then trace the course of the King Glacier 10 miles to the base of King Peak, in a series of relays. From this point, an assault would be launched on the peak. A minimum of four weeks was anticipated for the entire operation. By mid-May, the expedition was ready to set out.

Personnel and limited supplies were flown into the Chitina Glacier terminus strip on May 18th. This makeshift strip, though usable, is somewhat treacherous. Actually it is a selected portion of

a stream outwash deposit and, as such, is subject to erosion and alteration. Herb Haley, pilot for Cordova Air Service, performed the flying with a tandem-gear equipped Piper Pacer. The journey for the peak began that afternoon.

A week's traveling enabled us to reach the predesignated air-drop site, the base of Quartz Ridge (7800 ft.) on the upper Ogilvie Glacier. Although an air-drop site on the King Glacier would have shortened our relays, the fact that clouds habitually hang in the King Glacier Trough, when the Ogilvie Glacier is concurrently clear, dispelled the idea. Our trip to this point had been fairly rapid. The first two days we utilized in bypassing the moraine litter zone of the lower Chitina and Logan glaciers. The third day we encountered active, unlittered ice ridges on the Logan Glacier. These afforded excellent travelling. We found heavy snow on the Ogilvie Glacier but negotiated it with snowshoes. The weather, however, had not been particularly cooperative. Overcast conditions and limited visibility prevailed. During the first three days on the Ogilvie Glacier, we were frequently beset by snowstorms. May 25th, however, was ideal, the first of only four such days during the month's operation. The 26th was the prearranged air-drop date. We settled down to await it.

The 26th came and went. The morning of the 27th was not very reassuring either. The sky was cloudy and snow flurries enveloped our camp intermittently. But at about 2.00 P.M. the upper Ogilvie cleared, and the sun shone through. At 3.00 P.M. we heard the distant drone of an aircraft engine. Joy and jubilation ran rampant in the camp. An hour after the drop, a canopy of clouds had again obscured the sun. We relayed one load of supplies to the top of Quartz Ridge and returned to camp.

The King Glacier Trough proved to be as stormy as its appearance. On May 28th, we were still stormbound at the base of Quartz Ridge. The next day was something of an improvement; we were able to advance camp to the top of Quartz Ridge (9000 ft.), detouring to the east and above the icefalls tumbling down from King Glacier on to the Ogilvie Glacier. That night it stormed again. Intermittent snow flurries hampered the next day's relaying, but we succeeded in progressing on up the trough somewhat past the King Glacier Nunatak. Here we established base camp. On the following day we relayed the rest of the supplies up to base camp. Deep snow

above Quartz Ridge made snowshoeing difficult. Once we were abreast of the nunatak, King Peak burst into view. We all felt humbled. June 1st was a stormbound day again.

The route to the summit was still unselected. From base camp, we carefully scrutinized the west ridge extension. Although a possibility, this ridge route was long and would necessitate climbing an intervening high subsidiary peak (ca. 15,500 ft.) of King Peak proper. We decided against it, nurturing the hope that a feasible route could be located near King Col, the head of the King Glacier. From King Col we believed it possible to ascend King Peak via either the east ridge (a route later used by the Seattle Mountaineers) or the north face.

Accordingly we planned to advance to King Col. On June 2nd, we cached an outgoing food supply at the base camp site and continued up the trough. That afternoon we reached the icefalls of the upper King Glacier where we were compelled to remove snowshoes and attach crampons to surmount the ice blocks. The wind rose steadily, and by the time we had gained the lower crest of the icefalls, it had become a veritable tempest. We pitched the tents with difficulty on a flattened ice block. Camp I had become a reality (ca. 13,000 ft.).

From this vantage point, we could see what appeared to be a feasible route up the north face of the peak. This proposed route extended from Camp I directly up the steep, crusted snow slope underlying the great north face of sheer rock, thence west via a narrow snow shelf to a high saddle (ca. 15,000 ft.) between King Peak proper and the earlier mentioned subsidiary peak on the west ridge, and finally to the summit by way of the upper west ridge. We planned to place Camp II, our final camp, in the high saddle. The most disturbing factor was the masses of ice which partially overhung the shelf, the portion of our route involving a traverse. The most appealing factor was the directness of the route, a consideration forcibly brought to mind by the time limit and the prevailing weather conditions. We decided to attempt the route on the first ideal day.

The weather relented. June 2nd dawned clear and instilled us with hope. Storing another small cache at Camp I, we left for the high saddle. Skirting a little to the east of some gigantic ice slabs and a trail of avalanche debris from the ice masses above the traverse,

we began climbing the slope. The gradient was extremely steep, but the hard crust provided excellent purchase for the crampons. Shortly after mid-day, we reached the rock face and began the traverse.

In vain we searched the traverse route ahead for the shelf. This feature, which had appeared so prominent from Camp I, was practically non-existent at this point. The slope, tilting down precipitously, still offered good crampon purchase but was extremely tiring on ankles turned out at an awkward angle for prolonged periods. Several gullies were encountered which were devoid of snow but contained a thin veneer of ice over rocks. These gullies and occasional patches of ice required us to cut steps frequently, in that way losing considerable time. For perhaps three hours, the traverse continued in this fashion. We finally passed under the overhanging ice without incident and emerged on the long-awaited shelf. Though sloping outward at a fairly steep angle, it was filled with deep, uncompacted snow. Its upper limit was demarked by a bergschrund and a continuous lip of ice. Conscious of a different but renewed avalanche danger, we moved with caution along the upper margin of the shelf. Walking was fatiguing as we often sank into the snow to our thighs. At last the shelf merged with the west ridge and the saddle lay before us. A small, flattened area at the saddle offered a satisfactory campsite. This we took advantage of to set up Camp II. The enveloping blueness of the arctic twilight had settled over the panorama of the St. Elias wilderness. The Seward Icefields lay vast and silent. Mount St. Elias and its satellites loomed up to the south. To the west and north, Bona, Steele, and Lucania formed an impressive skyline. The great bulk of Mount Logan rose directly across the King Glacier. Slowly, the sombre-gray twilight obscured the scene, marking the end of a memorable day.

During the ensuing two days, snowstorms pelted our small tents perched on the ridge at Camp II. In the lulls in the weather we made short reconnaissances up the west ridge. It appeared feasible.

The dawn of June 6th ushered in the climactic day. Not a cloud speck was to be seen anywhere. Paige, Hart, and I readied light packs for the final effort. Atwood had been having trouble with his knee and felt that he would only hold the party back on a summit attempt. Finally it had been agreed that he would remain at Camp II and await our return. For some distance above camp,

the ridge was fairly wide, covered with a moderate layer of light snow. The first interesting feature was a sudden narrowing of the ridge to an edge of ice. A few cut steps enabled us to cross fairly easily, however. We then climbed down a short distance into a narrow rock notch in the ridge. A rock tower rose above the ridge on the opposite side of the notch. These features were lightly draped with snow. A considerable time and several belays later brought us across the notch and above the tower, the first of several along the ridge which always demanded careful and time-consuming handling. Some we were able to traverse around by the north side on the snow slope. Others would require that we go directly over them. This was always interesting as the light snow mantle over the rocks was insufficient for crampons yet enough to discourage conventional rock technique. Frequently frost-loosened slabs would peel off so that holds had to be selected with the greatest caution.

Above the first tower, we encountered crusted snow. The ridge proper at this point was corniced but broken, so that a sharp edge resulted. We consequently traversed along the north side immediately below the ridge crest. This type of terrain extended upward in the form of three gigantic steps. A small depression appeared at the top of the last step. Here we tarried briefly for lunch. Another rock tower rose immediately above the depression. This we ascended via a narrow chute of snow. The greater part of the ridge from here to near the summit was a series of rock towers and intermittent crusted snow crest.

Finally, after reaching the base of what appeared to be the last snow ridge to the summit, we discovered that it wasn't. Beyond this pseudo-summit, an indescribable 150-yard knife-edged snow ridge extended out and merged with another rock tower. The true summit lay somewhere above and beyond. We advanced along the knife-edge a step at a time. Although the snow was merely compacted snow, each step had to be laboriously stamped out or cut with the axe. Feeling somewhat like tightrope walkers, we gazed down at King Col on one side and the Seward Icefields on the other. Both seemed very remote and distant. At last we were safely across. The tower beyond was the most formidable we had had to tackle. After several futile attempts to find holds, Paige, who was then in the lead, finally located one above his head and pulled himself diagonally up and into a small chute. Soon afterward, the tower

yielded. A short snow ridge now led gently to the summit, where we paused only for a brief time. The wind had risen perceptibly, the cold was intense, and we felt exhausted. At the moment, exultation was superfluous.

The descent was replete with incident. By the time we had reached high camp, the wind had gained maximum velocity. Cloud scud collected rapidly. That night, the next day, and the following night, wind-driven snow buffeted the camp almost continuously. The following day, the storm abated somewhat. The time seemed opportune to conclude the descent. We had just crossed the most threatening avalanche portion of the traverse when a hissing reached our ears. A moment later, broken ice fragments and powder slithered across our back trail and plunged on down toward the King Glacier. Shortly after, Atwood suffered a bad fall in an ice gully. The belay point held, but he was dazed and bruised. When he had finally collected his senses, we continued the descent. It was then that one of my crampons broke. Perhaps the "King" was retaliating for our imposition on his dignity. With mixed feelings of relief and belated joy, we fell easily to sleep at Camp I that night.

The trip out went quickly. With reduced loads and an easier gradient, we reached the air strip six days later, one month after our departure. Another season of mountaineering had come to an end, leaving us much for reminiscence.