

## King Peak-Yukon Expedition, 1952

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THE primary purpose of organizing a group of climbers to visit the St. Elias Range in the summer of 1952, other than an interest in seeing new and different country, was a desire to search out climbing problems. Unclimbed peaks and routes are of course the best potential climbing problems, and summits like King Peak, Mount Augusta, Mount Cook, and Mount McArthur were immediately given consideration. In addition, an easterly approach to Mount Logan was considered a possibility. Although photographs and information describing the precipitous 17,000-foot King Peak led us to believe this fine summit beyond our capabilities, it was selected as the main objective. Secondary objectives were then investigated and selected according to their individual degree of lessening difficulty. King Peak was placed second to Mount Augusta, and Mount McArthur, another 14,000-foot mountain located to the east of Mount Logan, was placed third. With these possible objectives the proposed operation was christened the "King Peak-Yukon Expedition, 1952."

Members of the party were mainly from the Northwest, and included from Seattle: Vic Josendal, Dick McGowan, Bill Niendorff, Bob Yeasting, Dave Harrah, and the writer. All are members of the Seattle Mountaineers Inc. From Wenatchee, Washington, came red-headed Verl Rogers, who, prior to the trip, had been working in Juneau, Alaska. Our eastern enthusiasts were Gibson Reynolds (A.C.C.), of New York City, and Tom Morris, a graduate student of physics at Yale University.

Because of the remoteness of these mountains and the ruggedness of the surrounding territory, the problem of reaching the base of operations was of prime importance. Previous expeditions had used every means of advance, from walking to landing on the glaciers with ski-equipped airplanes. Not because we objected to walking but because we had a greater desire to utilize the available time for climbing, we chose to attempt ski landings on the surface of the glacier. The party could then be placed closer to the desired

objective and make successive attempts on the peak with available air support close at hand. Pilot Fred Melberg of Seattle, listening with enthusiasm to our intriguing logistical plan, offered to take on the job. To handle the operation he elected to use a three-place Piper Super Cruiser adapted with a ski-wheel arrangement which he hoped could successfully make the landings. The skis, made of laminated hickory by Wally Burr of Seattle, were attached by brackets to extend wheel axles in such a position that the wheels protruded about three inches through a hole cut in the middle of the ski. In this way the plane could effect landings either on the snow or on the bare ground. The skis, turned up at the tips, were 72 inches long, 16 inches wide, and weighed 81 pounds.

Through the foresight of Tony Thomas of Juneau and the cooperation of the J.I.R.P. personnel, field testing of this device was done on the Juneau Ice Cap. A practice landing near Camp 10 was only partially successful, for only under optimum conditions was Fred able to get the small craft off the glacier. Although landings could be made without difficulty, the drag developed by the small portion of wheel below the level of the ski was too great to enable sufficient take-off speed. Had the plane been more powerful, or the wheels retractable, the operation would have been feasible.

This last-minute development, of course, left the expedition in urgent need of some other means of reaching its objective. If transportation by plane were not to be possible, we were left with the only other alternative—to walk in. A few days prior to the time the expedition was scheduled to set out, we made a few reconnaissance flights in the hope of discovering new routes or of verifying old routes used by previous expeditions. The route offering the closest approach to King Peak required landing by plane on the Chitina River rock flats at the snout of the Chitina Glacier and then walking the 50 odd miles to the upper base of King Peak. This was the same approach used by the party which made the first ascent of Mount Logan in 1925. The approach was viewed with skepticism because of the extremely broken appearance of the lower Logan Glacier and the need for a special heavy-duty landing gear to make the rough landing on the rock flats. Another route would require hiking in from the head of Disenchantment Bay (upper Yakutat Bay), but the landing facilities were not the best in this area. Still another approach would have been via Icy Bay and up the Gayot

Glacier and around to the Columbus and Seward glaciers by passing just to the west of Mount Huxley and Mount St. Elias. However, the broken structure of the Gayot Glacier dampened any hopes. The one approach that did stand out as both feasible and practical, the route later used, began on the beach at the snout of the Malaspina Glacier and extended across this glacier, up the Seward Glacier trough, and on to the upper Seward Glacier ice fields. Here a base camp could be established with both Mount Augusta and Mount Cook close at hand, and the main objective, King Peak, and another alternative objective, Mount McArthur, within two or three days' travel. From Yakutat, Alaska, our base of operations chosen several months before, any of these routes could be used—providing there was airplane support.

None of us welcomed the idea of engaging in a long journey afoot in order to get close to the objectives. So when a local pilot at Yakutat, Mr. C. E. Kirk, offered to land on the glacier with his Grumman Duck, we leaped at the suggestion, and less than three hours after the arrival of the complete party on June 19th, Kirk had loaded his plane with over 1200 pounds and was ready for the take-off. This capacity load included Rogers, Morris, Harrah, and myself, in addition to food and equipment, with some of us stuffed into the pontoon. The novel operation resulted in a successful landing and unloading of the plane on the Seward Glacier, midway between the summits of Augusta and Logan. Unfortunately, when a return take-off was attempted, the drag of the pontoons on the snow prevented sufficient speed from developing even with the over 1000 HP engine. After the sickening trial run down the glacier, Kirk calmly climbed out of the big plane, quietly remarking that he would probably have to wait for a little wind to help in the take-off. Five days later, after a slight wind had arisen in the night, Kirk emerged from the base camp tent and climbed into his machine, accompanied by Harrah, who had had indications that his feet might give him trouble. The take-off was accomplished amid swirling clouds for the uncertain "socked in" flight back to Yakutat. Kirk's apparently casual attitude is typical of that of many an Alaskan flier.

At the time the "Duck" landed on the glacier, the expedition was in an embarrassing situation; half the party was at Yakutat and the other half comfortably situated on the Seward Glacier. Our earlier reconnaissance work now proved invaluable. On June 20th, Josendal,

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KING PEAK (ca. 15,500 FT.) FROM END OF EAST SHOULDER

Route was directly up the ridge with traverses to the right or north side when necessary to avoid cornices and the major portions of the rock

*Photo, P. K. Schoening*

Yeasting, Niendorff, McGowan, and Reynolds were shuttled across Yakutat Bay and landed on the beach at the edge of the Malaspina Glacier, near the site of a wrecked Japanese schooner washed up on the shore in 1907. Of the approximately 60 miles to base camp, 25 were covered in crossing the Malaspina Glacier to Seward Rock, the junction where the Seward flows into the Malaspina. This required a one-mile tramp through morainal brush, followed by a few miles of rocky surface moraine. The last 15 miles on the Malaspina were mostly smooth glacier traveling where sleds could be used to advantage. After Seward Rock, the route was along the east or right side of the Seward trough for 20 miles, where it was found possible to cross the glacier and climb the upper Seward trough icefall on the west, or left, side. Once above this icefall, the travel was again easy for the remaining five or six miles to base camp. This route required five days' traveling time.

Once at base camp, the party assembled for the assault on beautiful, 14,000-foot Mount Augusta, located about eight miles to the southwest. Photographs, correspondence with persons familiar with the area and the type of climbing, and our own observations all concluded that the two practical routes would be either the north ridge or the west ridges. Because of its closer proximity to base camp and the fact that it actually looked the easier of the two routes, the north ridge was selected as the first choice. This ridge extends down from the summit as a long shoulder to approximately 11,500 feet, where it drops off sharply to the glaciers which are about 7000 feet in elevation. A spur ridge extending northwest intersects this abrupt drop at about 10,000 feet, leaving nearly 1500 feet of steep ice to negotiate in order to reach the upper shoulder.

For the attempt, our group was broken into two parties. One was the advance or climbing party, and the other, the supply and support party. On June 24th, the four members of the advance party left base camp very early in the morning to take advantage of the hard snow crust for easy walking and sledging. The advance group included Josendal, Yeasting, Rogers, and Reynolds.

By the end of the third day this group had established high camp at 11,500 feet, at the end of the prominent shoulder along the north ridge. As anticipated, the portion of the mountain just below the tip of the nose presented reasonably difficult climbing which required the use of 12 pitons, most of them ice pitons. Since these

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Top: MOUNT AUGUSTA FROM BASE CAMP (6000 FT.)

Base of North ridge behind tent

*Photo, P. K. Schoening*

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Bottom: PAIGE AND THAYER LOOKING AT KING PEAK BEYOND  
SUBSIDIARY PEAK FROM BASE CAMP ON KING GLACIER

*Photo, E. Thayer*

slopes were largely hard-packed (water) ice but covered with a few inches of rather loose snow, an attempt was made to keep as much as possible to the rock outcrops to lessen possible danger of avalanching.

As could be expected after the five days of good weather just passed, the clouds began to roll in from the south. Even though the supply group had reached high camp and the advance group was making the final attempt on the summit, it was evident that a retreat would be necessary. With a strong eight-man party, it was decided that only the supply group should descend to lower camps and, in addition to relaying up additional supplies, they could act as support for the advance group. At this time the advance group had a slender three and a half days' food supply. The subsequent storm, which lasted three days, illustrates the importance of either an immediately available support party or well supplied camps. Though this storm seemed quite mild, had it continued another day the advance group would have had to descend, if that had been possible, and resupply before making the summit attempt. Realizing that the advance food supply would probably be about depleted, on the morning of the third day, McGowan and I left the camp at 9400 feet only intending to relay food to the upper group. However, as the morning advanced, the weather became progressively better and, before long, the remaining two members of our group were beginning the airy ascent to high camp. By mid-morning we had reached the high camp and were able to watch the advance group who, taking advantage of the weather, were now working on the ridge above. After a short nap, we, too, began the tedious climb to the summit, exchanging greetings with the jubilant advance group at 13,000 feet on their way down. The summit was reached on the Fourth of July. During the descent a Brocken was seen and a peculiar sun spot which appeared to focus in a thin cloud formation.

Unfortunately, after only one week of climbing, the members of the expedition who had to return to their jobs or other responsibilities turned backward for the long journey down to the Yakutat beach and home. These members included Rogers, Josendal, Yeasting, and Morris. Their departure left McGowan, Reynolds, Nien-dorff, and myself to tangle with our main objective, 17,000-foot King Peak.

Although the original plan included landing on the west side of

King, on the Quintino Sella Glacier, the most obvious and seemingly easiest approach to the upper slopes of King, we were now located southeast of the peak. To continue the planned approach would necessitate some 50 to 60 miles of glacier travel—a depressing thought. The possibility of using the southern approach had been considered before plans had been laid for trying this seemingly more intriguing route.

Our first project was to get the supplies close in to the southern base of the peak. After a reconnaissance trip, during which McGowan and I spotted a desirable place with a bright yellow tarp, we contacted Fred Melberg by radio and, within a matter of hours, 70 man days of food, in addition to extra rope and gasoline, had been dropped. Without delay and on the morning of July 11th, we packed the sled and made the 15-mile trip to the air-drop site and still another mile to the base of a small rock nunatak which served as the King Peak base camp. The elevation there was approximately 6500 feet.

Although this camp was christened Nunatak Camp, it actually was located on the rocky surface moraine some 50 yards south of the actual nunatak. The location was verified by the continuous movement of the rocks, especially those neatly stacked to make up our boudoir. The movement sometimes became annoying during the night when we were asleep.

The nunatak temporarily split two of the small glaciers that pour from the south face of Mount Logan, the most westerly one of which begins just below the King-Logan Col. Farther to the west are two more glaciers, one fed from the tip of the long south ridge of King, the other originating at the base of the sheer 7000-foot southeast face of King. These small glaciers all join into one large one just below the nunatak and empty into the upper Seward Glacier ice field. We named this glacier system the Hall Glacier after Henry Hall.

Previous reconnaissance had indicated that the most feasible route was up the small tributary glacier formed in the cirque at the base of the southeast wall of King Peak. From its head at 9500 feet, we were somewhat skeptical but still reasonably confident of ascending the spur ridge that juts out just south of the tip of the east shoulder of King and eventually gaining this shoulder at an elevation of over 14,500 feet.

With 250 pounds of food and a mountain of equipment, we begin the long process of relaying supplies. Speed and timing were ever important factors and, depending upon the uncertainty of the weather, it was easy to visualize the possibility of being held up in our tents for one or more days. Consequently the party was divided into two teams of two climbers each, one group to reconnoiter and the other to bring up supplies. In case of bad weather, with the path ahead marked, the teams could still be active in supplying the route. This was good in theory but poor in practice, for after two days' packing, we unanimously agreed with the time-tested rule of three or more men on a rope for glacier travel and thereafter stayed together and roped together. Hidden crevasses, many of them impossible to predict, were very plentiful and, even with the support of the long 58 by 10 inch trapper snowshoes, were dangerous to negotiate.

Four days found us well established at the head of the glacier at 9500 feet and in another four days camps and supplies had been pushed to the end of the long east shoulder of King Peak, which is apparently about 13,000 feet. The route from the head of the glacier was up the spur ridge that extends south from the eastern tip of the King shoulder. From the high camp on the tip of this shoulder, the summit of our objective was an amazing spectacle. We vividly recollect this spot as being usually windy and quite cold, but most of all, just plain beautiful. Majestic King to the west, Mount Logan to the east, and the huge ice fields on either side were magnificently scenic, and even the unpleasantness of the weather and altitude could not lessen our appreciation.

Though only 2000 feet remained to the summit, some five days were required to get the entire party on top. The route was directly up the east ridge, but traverses were necessary on the steep snow along the north face to eliminate climbing the rock on the ridge. The prominent gendarme about 200 feet below the summit was circled on the right, or north, side.

The first two days were spent reaching points only about 300 and 400 feet below the summit where, in addition to the lateness of the day, cramps and cold feet took their toll and made return journeys to high camp mandatory. The cold feet were aggravated by inadequate boots and inactivity. Two of the members of the party used the new insulated rubber combat boots (developed

by the Quartermaster Corps, U.S. Army), which proved very successful for this colder type of climbing. The other two of us wore a modified felt boot which after the many days of travel on crampons had become torn and twisted out of shape. Needless to say, these felt boots produced trouble—but only after the climber was inactive. On King the climbing was slow and, while the lead climber was able to keep physically active, the remainder of the party was relatively inactive in belay positions. For the most part our clothing was sufficient, but the combination of torn and distorted felt boots and our physical inactivity understandably resulted in cold feet. Luckily, most of our feet were about the same size, so trading of boots on two occasions lessened the problem. Feet warming by the stomach method was also used.

The third day was spent in resting, after the party had arrived at the high camp during the early hours of the morning following the second attempt. Early again on the fourth day, Reynolds and I quickly retraced the route previously established and reached the windy but clear summit. The 600 or more feet of fixed rope and two rappel pickets made the ascents and descents safer and more rapid.

Returning to high camp, we found Niendorff and McGowan eager to attempt the ascent on the following day, July 24th. Although the day proved semi-stormy, they completed their climb by noon and the return to high camp was made by late afternoon.

The primary objectives of the expedition had been accomplished. The fact that two peaks, Mount Augusta and King Peak, had been climbed was indeed satisfying, but of more significance to me and—I believe to the other members of the group—was the achievement of the second and equally important goal. Everyone attempting the climbs had reached the summits. Aside from this, we found these mountains extremely fascinating. Generally speaking, the climbs were not technically severe, but as other climbers in this range have observed, such problems as weather, supplies, and the always changing snow and ice conditions, call for first-class mountaineering—mountaineering that will always beckon our return.