

## Mount Hunter Via the West Ridge, a Proposed Ascent

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**M**OUNT HUNTER<sup>1</sup> is the highest unclimbed peak in the Alaska Range and doubtless the most outstanding virgin peak in Alaska. No party has ever attempted to climb Hunter, and I do not know of any group which had seriously developed plans to attack it before 1953.

Unlike many of Alaska's great peaks, there is no easy route up the mountain. Its twin summits rise to altitudes of 14,580 feet (North Peak) and 13,970 feet (South Peak), two miles apart and at opposite extremes of a 13,000-foot ice plateau. This extraordinary plateau varies in width from half to three-quarters of a mile, with a smaller central peak (13,470 ft.) dividing it roughly in half. Its edges are an almost unbroken fringe of spectacular ice cliffs from 200 to 400 feet thick, cascading avalanches down an equally savage barrier of granite cliffs which range from 4000 to 5000 feet in height.

The ascent of all three peaks would be relatively easy from the surface of the plateau. The ridges which lead directly without intersecting the plateau to the summits of the North and South peaks from the east, southeast, and south are extremely steep, rugged and difficult. The Tokositna<sup>1</sup> Glacier, which is the only practical means of access to the eastern face of Hunter and the beginning of the east and southeast ridges, is so rough and broken up itself that the approach alone to this side of the mountain would be a major undertaking.

After several flights near and over the peak, I am reasonably convinced that the one practical route of ascent is via the great ridge which drops nearly 8000 feet from the North Peak to the

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<sup>1</sup> Mount Hunter was originally named by Robert Dunn (for his aunt, Anna F. Hunter of Newport, R. I.) during Dr. Cook's expedition to Mount McKinley in 1903, when the party was at its 10,800-foot camp on the W. buttress of the N. Peak of McKinley. The Government later surveyed the present Mount Hunter which is 9 miles S.E. of the 12,515-foot snow dome originally named by Dunn. This error in nomenclature was not discovered till 1950. The original Mount Hunter has no name at present. Dunn could not possibly have seen the present Mount Hunter from his camp on McKinley!

surface of the vast central amphitheatre of Kahiltna Glacier. But, despite the fact that this ridge appears to be climbable, it is certain to present some real difficulties and, in two or three spots, problems of a really high technical order. Mount Hunter should not be attempted by any but a team of climbers with extended practical experience on both steep ice and rock, as well as a capacity for glacier camping.

### *The Approach:*

The North Peak of Mount Hunter lies 9 miles S. of Mount McKinley and 54 miles northwest of Talkeetna.<sup>2</sup> The pronged lower end of the west ridge is 35 miles from the snout of Kahiltna Glacier and 38 miles by air from the small gravel landing field at the S. end of Chelatna Lake—the nearest airport. Although there is no doubt that, if landed on one of the broad gravel bars at its end, a patient and powerful party might relay supplies all the way up the Kahiltna, the best way to get both into and out from Mount Hunter would be by plane. Hunter most assuredly would have been attempted and climbed long since if it had not been for its extreme inaccessibility. The best map on which to study this problem is the new 1951 Talkeetna sheet (1:250,000) of the Alaska Reconnaissance Topographic Series (U.S.G.S.).

The ascent of the Kahiltna Glacier on foot would require a very careful study of the vertical photographs of the area recently taken (July 1952) by the U.S. Air Force, in order to work out a practical route. Suffice it to say that to reach even its snout would require a 20-mile walk from the nearest road (no trail), and that the problem of relaying sufficient supplies up the glacier by back-packing would be a staggering project. If a landing were made at its end (an easy 38-mile flight from Talkeetna), an experienced group operating on a shoestring and with unusually good snow conditions might make a dash up the glacier, in the hope of receiving a large air drop at the base of Hunter. But even a brief spell of bad weather might turn such a plan into a serious débacle.

The ideal time of year for the climb and the best method of approach would be to fly in to Hunter early in April from Talkeetna in a ski-equipped plane and land right at the foot of the climbing

<sup>1</sup> Spelling (Tokichitna) incorrect on recent maps.

<sup>2</sup> Talkeetna is 78 miles N. of Anchorage.

ridge. This flight is only 75 miles each way, and the landing area at the base of Hunter is incredibly large and level—big enough to permit a safe landing even by a big twin-motored transport (C-47) on skis. Air support and airplane landings are not prohibited in this area, as it is just outside the S. boundary of Mount McKinley National Park (see photo opp. page 480). The climb would have to be completed in April and the return flight made before the first of May in order to assure a safe ski-landing in the lowlands. Needless to say, if the climb has to be made during the summer months, an airplane equipped with ski-wheels or a helicopter would provide the only practical ways of flying in.

A combination of the two modes of approach would be to arrange to have a large cache of supplies flown from Talkeetna to the base of the mountain in April by a local pilot and then cached there pending arrival on foot by the party several weeks later. A second cache could also be set up this way, at the same time, in order to simplify the speculative and lengthy ascent or descent of Kahiltna Glacier on foot later in the summer.

This lengthy and complex discussion about the approach may be summed up briefly by saying that unless you have at your disposal a helicopter or airplane equipped with ski-wheels, or unless you can make the climb in the early spring, the very approach to Mount Hunter will be a major project which should be given extremely careful consideration before it is attempted.

### *The Climb:*

The ascent of Mount Hunter's west ridge, as can easily be seen from a careful study of the illustrations, is divided into two parts. The first section, rising from the level 6700-foot landing area to the eastern end of the long 10,800-foot shoulder, is three miles long and presents the major climbing difficulties. The landing spot is 4 miles from the top of the N. Peak, as the crow flies, and the entire climbing route is 5.25 miles long.

The second half of the climb, above the shoulder, can probably be done in a single day—the major problem being the discovery of a way through the spectacular ice-barrier where the ridge meets the edge of the Plateau at 13,200 feet.

The rock which underlies this ridge is McKinley granite. Elsewhere in the Alaska range it is strong and reasonably well

#### UPPER KAHILTNA LANDING AREA

Upper Kahiltna Basin seen vertically from 30,000 feet. Kahiltna Pass lies 5 miles up glacier out of picture to lower left. Approximate scale at 7000-foot level (center snowfields) is 1.15 inches per mile

*Photo, U. S. Air Force*

broken up for climbing. Except for short sections of rock at the very start, at 9100 feet, and from 9400 to about 9800 feet, the ridge is an ice-and-snow climb. In the spring, the snow should be firm and reliable, but after early June (particularly in July and August) a common problem on Alaskan ridges of this type, below 12,000 feet, is a veneer of slush and corn-snow on top of the ice. The major snow pitches of the ridge all occur below 11,500 feet, and most of them face slightly south of west. A hot noon-day sun could convert them into exceedingly delicate going, unless an ample supply of  $\frac{1}{4}$ " fixed ropes is set on early-morning reconnaissances.

It appears as if at least two advanced camps would have to be set up on the ridge, carefully related to the major points of difficulty. The first (Camp II) should probably be located on the broad snowfield just west of the 9100 foot-rock tower (see illustration opposite page 481). If this tower proves at all difficult to traverse or turn, this camp should be relayed around to the east side of it (Camp II A) before further progress up the ridge is attempted. This will obviate the need for delicate rock climbing at the end of the day, after tiring trips on the upper ridge. It will also simplify and speed early morning starts and assure that the party is fresh for the difficult pitches above 9500 feet. Camp III, if possible, should be located just east of Peak 10,800, at the very foot of the long slope leading to the edge of the Plateau.

From Base Camp (6700 ft.) to Camp II (9000 ft.) there are several possible routes. Three are indicated in the picture opposite page 480. The left route circles the little pronged buttress at the lower end of the west ridge and zig-zags through the icefall of a small subsidiary glacier to its upper basin at approximately 8000 feet. Active hanging glaciers on both sides of this narrow valley would probably force the route out as near as possible to the middle of the little glacier (if the many large crevasses permit this at all). The notch on the east side of Peak 9100 could then be reached directly by a *very* steep but short ice slope, eliminating the need of climbing around or over Peak 9100. The success or failure of this route will depend: 1) on the extent of crevassing of the little glacier at the time of year it is encountered; 2) on the degree of activity of the adjacent ice cliffs; 3) on the condition of the steep slope leading into the 8900-foot notch.

The central route follows the crest of the northernmost prong

NORTH PEAK AND WEST RIDGE OF MOUNT HUNTER SEEN FROM AIR  
The massive southwest face of Mount McKinley rises in upper left background  
(9 AM, 19 August 1944)

*Photo, B. Washburn*



(mostly snow before mid-July; photo was taken in mid-August) of the buttress to a sharp ice ridge which begins about 1200 feet above Base Camp. Three hundred feet of very steep ragged rocks lie just below this ridge. At its upper end a short, ticklish bit of ice and snow will have to be surmounted to gain the end of the plateau (8800 ft.) which can then be traversed easily to Camp II at the foot of Peak 9100.

The third route follows the central prong of the 9100-foot buttress and joins the second route just at the top of the little ice ridge (8500 ft.). This route appears easier than the second, but might entail some danger from small avalanches from the cliffs to the right after a heavy fall of fresh snow.

There are several spots on these three routes which could be made miserable by deep slush in July and August. The first route is the best, if avalanche danger is not too great. The third would probably be second best. If either of the last two routes are used, Peak 9100 will have to be passed. Available pictures are not on a large enough scale to permit close study of this problem, but the *very* steep N. face of the pinnacle of Peak 9100 is probably impossible to traverse across. A direct traverse over the tower would require a long rappel on the east side, after an easy approach to the top from the west. There is a chance that small ledges might be found on the south face to permit a traverse of this very steep granite wall into the 8900-foot notch. It is obvious that a direct route to this notch is the best, if it can be forced. Otherwise, a camp on each side of Peak 9100 would facilitate relaying supplies around or over it. At least ten days' supplies should be packed to this point.

Once past Peak 9100, a very narrow snow ridge (cornices to left) must be followed over Peak 9550 and down into Notch 9400 on its opposite side. Here begins a succession of rock ledges and steep snow pitches which continue with no respite for about 1200 vertical feet. Past experience on this sort of climbing in the Alaska Range leads me to be less concerned by the rock than the snow. The bad rock pitches are immediately above Notch 9400 and they can be strung with fixed rope, no matter how bad they may be. But at about 10,000 feet and at 10,600 feet there are two *extremely* steep, short ice pitches which cannot possibly be turned either to right or left and which could be very difficult except under perfect condi-

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DETAIL OF LOWER END OF WEST RIDGE OF MOUNT HUNTER

Compare this photo with vertical view of same area in first picture of series (9 AM, 19 August 1944)

Photo, B. Washburn

tions. The ice pitch leading to the crest of Peak 10,600 must have a grade of at least 70°.

Several hundred horizontal feet of easy, level walking on a broad snow shoulder lead to another brief, steep struggle with Peak 10,800, immediately beyond which Camp III should be pitched. This ridge should be thoroughly reconnoitred and roped before packing starts. Some spots are so steep that loads will almost surely have to be handlined up them, one by one.

Immediately after leaving Camp III (10,700 ft.) another *very* steep ice slope rises for about 400 feet to the crest of another gently-inclined but narrow snow gable. A rock ledge cuts across this slope just below its top, presenting possibly one of the most exposed bits of climbing in the whole ascent. Here again, fixed rope should be used in order to facilitate a quick early-morning start and a safe late-afternoon descent. This slope should have been reconnoitred and roped on the day before the final climb, and the steps should have been chopped out.

From here on to an altitude of about 12,300 feet, a series of snow-and-ice hummocks, followed by a steep snow slope, should present no undue difficulties. Then 500 feet of steep ice ridge is encountered, with some very steep humps at its upper end. Here the grade briefly lessens and the sérac barrier of the Great Plateau is reached.

Under certain conditions, this barrier can be passed easily. Under others it might actually prove impassable. Careful aerial reconnaissance in advance would greatly help in planning this part of the climb and the traverse of Peak 9100. If a slow Cub airplane is used and the weather calm (evening or very early morning are best), it is surprising how closely details of this sort can be studied from the air. In September 1938, when the photo opposite page 483 was made, the Plateau could have been reached with scarcely a step to chop. In August 1949, when the picture opposite page 481 was made, the barrier was virtually impregnable.

Up to the Great Plateau, *with the exception of two or three short stretches, trail markers would be of little value. From here on to the summit, they should be used religiously.*

Once on the Plateau, it is a level half-mile walk to the base of the summit pyramid of the North Peak of Mount Hunter. The best approach to the top is via the southwest ridge, now the right

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NORTH AND CENTRAL PEAKS OF MOUNT HUNTER FROM AIR

Photograph shows upper part of west ridge above approximately 12,000 feet (1040 AM, 18 September 1938)

*Photo, B. Washburn*

skyline. In order to minimize descent, a short, steep traverse will be required to attain the base of the rocks at the bottom of this ridge. These rocks can be heavily encrusted with frost feathers after a warm storm. If they are in bad condition, a descent around and below the end of the ridge will be necessary in order to reach climbable going on the south face of the summit pyramid. If the steep gully just east of the ridge presents avalanche danger, a lengthy detour around a hump of séracs and cracks will be needed before the ridge can be reached again, above the rocks, at an altitude of about 14,000 feet. A really determined effort should be made to climb this rock ridge, as the detour would be extremely long in relation to the net gain in altitude on the ridge.

Hunter's last defense is a very steep 200-foot ridge from about 14,100 to 14,300 feet. This step is clearly visible on the skyline, just to the right of the top in the photo opposite page 483. It cannot be evaded by a traverse to the left, and a traverse to the right might lead into deep, treacherous snow.

Above this, the summit cap can be attacked directly with a traverse to the right – probably necessary in order to get over the final crack. This rift always seems present, about 100 feet below the top. Beware of treacherous cracks in this last two or three hundred yards. All photographs indicate a number of bad ones, deeply covered with snow and frost feathers.

In conclusion, I must repeat my conviction that this is a long, steep difficult climb which should not be undertaken by any but experienced climbers with carefully-planned air support.