The Western Rib of Mount McKinley's South Face*

WILLIAM J. BUCKINGHAM

The little red and yellow airplane disappeared around a bend of the Kahiltna Glacier for the last time. As the hum of its motor faded and the deep silence of the mountains settled around us, we knew that our little expedition had at last become a reality.

It had all begun on an afternoon some nine months previous. Four of us were lying about relaxing after a particularly fine Teton climb when someone enthusiastically suggested, "Let's climb the south face of McKinley next summer!" To attempt a new and difficult route on North America's highest mountain seemed a most worthwhile enterprise; without further ado, we cemented the proposal with a great and ceremonious toast. During the winter our plans progressed and our expedition grew in size, but by the time the real business of organizing arrived, there remained only the original four: Jake Breitenbach, leader; Barry Corbet, Pete Sinclair, and myself. With the exception of Jake, who had successfully climbed Mount McKinley via the West Buttress Route in 1958, none of us had been in really big mountains before, and with an average age of 23, ours would be one of the youngest expeditions ever to attempt an undertaking of this kind; nevertheless, we felt that the party was a strong one and that we had good reason to be optimistic about our chances for success.

On June 1, midst a flurry of last-minute preparations, we left Seattle, Alaska-bound, in two old and decrepit automobiles. Four days later we arrived, miraculously, in Anchorage, where the remainder of the day was

*Editor's Note: The first suggestion of this route appears in the Mountain World, 1956/57, route III, page 78.

PLATE 1

PHOTO BY LEIGH ORTENBERGER

PANORAMA OF THE PEAKS OF THE UPPER QUEBRADA ALPAMAYO, taken from Santa Cruz high camp, ca. 18,100 feet: (left to right) two unnamed, unclimbed peaks on ridge extending north from Alpamayo, three peaks (Nevado Washington, Nevado Angeles, North Pucahirca) of the Pucahirca group, Alpamayo, Loyacjirca, and Quitaraju.
spent in hurried final organization. Next morning, along with 40 assorted bundles of gear, we took the train to Talkeetna, to be met by Don Sheldon, who was to be our pilot for the flight in to the mountain. Here, for the first time, we could see the giants of the Alaska Range, McKinley, Hunter, and Foraker, soaring cold and distant, high above the clouds which swathed their lower reaches. Eager to get started, we nevertheless had to wait until Sheldon had finished various other commitments. We amused ourselves with such few diversions as Talkeetna had to offer.

On June 7 things got underway as Sheldon took off in his ski-equipped Super Cub with Jake aboard and headed out towards the mountains. By early next morning the whole party had been transported to Landing Camp, located near the mouth of a small tributary valley on the east side of the Kahiltna Glacier, northwest of Mount Hunter and just outside the boundary of McKinley Park. Leaving a cache of food and fuel, we loaded our packs, strapped on our snowshoes, and started off up the eastern edge of the main Kahiltna Glacier for a few miles before turning right up the long, gentle slope which leads into the deep glacier valley or cwm between Mount McKinley and the Kahiltna Peaks. Intermediate Camp was established just below a badly crevassed section near the lower end of this valley at about 8500 feet. While Pete and Jake returned for another load, Barry and I worked out a route through the crevasses and carried loads a couple of miles farther on up the valley.

Towards evening the clouds, which had been hanging low all day, began to rise, revealing a magnificent view of the brutal immensity of Mount McKinley’s south face. Our proposed route, the rib at the western edge of the face, was graphically laid out before us: first, a great rock buttress rising abruptly out of the glacier; above, an apparently gentle but heavily corniced snow ridge; and then, sweeping steeply upwards again, the final 5000-foot upper face consisting of numerous shallow snow gullies and narrow ridges of bare rock. It seemed likely that the rock buttress would present the greatest problems—a direct route would involve extremely difficult rock-climbing under almost constant exposure to rockfall. We would therefore have to find a way through the jumbled, chaotic icefall leading to the upper basin between the central and western ribs of the south face and hope to find a practical route onto the buttress from there.

But first we had to get to the icefall, and our second day was spent relaying loads up to the level-floored bowl at the foot of the icefall. Here Base Camp was located at 9600 feet, safely out of reach of the avalanches which obviously poured, from time to time, off the cliffs of the Kahiltna Peaks. This was to be Base Camp in name only—it indicated the beginning of the
difficult climbing, but it was no more a base of operations than any of our other camps.

Sometime during the night the arrival of our prearranged airdrop ended sleep. The several boxes of food and 1700-foot coil of rope all landed within a few yards of the tents. Despite the early hour, the sun was up and bright, and so we got up to begin the job of sorting through the airdrop items. To our great relief, except for a few split polyethylene bags, everything had come through in perfect condition.

After a relaxed breakfast, Barry and I started off with light loads to try to push a route through the icefall. The lower section, a great bulging slope, offered no serious difficulties. Above, an uncrevassed peninsula led onwards between areas of huge tumbled blocks and wildly contorted crevasses, finally ending abruptly at a deep crevasse or chasm separating us from a large, semi-detached sérac from which a route might possibly continue. Furthermore, it was entirely obvious that there existed no other route into the upper basin, so we had to somehow get across to the sérac. At one point, a thin blade of ice descended about 15 feet on the near side of the crevasse before almost meeting the far side. We changed from snowshoes to crampons, and Barry half-lowered me down the sliver of ice. I began chopping out a ledge up through the overhanging upper wall of the crevasse and after the better part of an hour pulled myself over the lip onto the sérac. Leaving a short fixed rope down the lower side, Barry quickly came across. A zig-zag route over numerous frail and precarious snow bridges led to the south edge of the glacier, where we could follow along the base of the avalanche-strewn slopes into the upper basin. Here we were able to cross deviously back to the north side of the glacier where a small bergschrund at the base of the rock buttress provided our next campsite. Exuberant at having solved the first major problem, we left our loads and started back to Base Camp. At the troublesome crevasse we met Jake and Pete, who had carried heavy loads up that far. They dropped their loads and we all returned to Base Camp.

So far our luck was holding incredibly well—we had a route through the icefall, the rock buttress seemed to offer numerous possibilities, and the weather was beautiful.

Next morning we broke camp and, leaving behind a large cache of food and miscellaneous gear, retraced our route through the icefall to the little bergschrund below the rock buttress, on the floor of which we erected Icefall Camp (10,800 feet). After luxuriating briefly in our new home over lunch, Jake and Pete set off to reconnoiter a route up the buttress. Meanwhile, Barry and I returned for the remaining loads which had been left at the detached sérac. It was still early afternoon when we again reached Icefall
Camp, so we decided to start up the buttress with moderate loads. After a couple of hours, we met Jake and Pete under a great overhanging gendarme of yellow granite. Up to this point their route had been on steep rotten rock interspersed with patches of rotten snow and ice on the southwest face of the buttress, whereas Barry's and my route had been more or less directly up the crest and had involved a fair amount of moderately difficult rock-climbing and considerable hauling of the packs. However, the gendarme appeared to be a grave problem. A direct route over it was obviously out of the question, and the only reasonable possibility seemed to be a downward traverse to the east into what seemed to be a steep snow gully. But because of the late hour, further reconnaissance would have to wait, so we left our loads and climbed and rappelled back down to camp.

In the morning we decided to split up again; Jake and Pete would try the traverse below the gendarme, and Barry and I would attempt a route up the snow couloir we had seen beyond the gendarme. We easily found the bottom of the couloir and rapidly climbed to its intersection with the ridge, chopping only an occasional step here and there. The ridge continued as a great succession of shattered towers, steep walls, and sloping scree-covered ledges, interspersed with patches of steep rotten ice. But by noon we had reached the beginning of the snow ridge at about 12,300 feet. We ate lunch and discussed the possibilities; the route we had just come up could perhaps be climbed with heavy packs, but the loads would have to be hauled frequently, many hundreds of feet of fixed rope would have to be placed, and the vast quantities of loose rock would render the whole proceedings exceedingly hazardous. Directly below, on the east, a steep snow gully funnelled down toward the glacier. We could not determine whether it actually connected with the glacier, and it appeared appallingly steep, but it was a more attractive alternative and worth careful consideration. However, since it seemed more prudent to reconnoiter the gully from the bottom up, we climbed and rappelled down the way we had come.

As we dropped into the couloir above the great gendarme, we met Pete and Jake, who had spent a discouraging morning completing the difficult traverse of the gendarme and recovering the loads we had left there the evening before. We all returned to Icefall Camp and brewed a pot of tea. Barry and I then left to explore the snow gully. Winding in and out among the crevasses and occasionally falling through insubstantial snow bridges, we traversed along the eastern base of the rock buttress. We bypassed one gully as being too completely ridiculous, but when no more gullies presented themselves, it appeared that this must, indeed, have been the one we had seen from above. Because almost anything seemed preferable to the route
on the ridge crest, we decided to give the gully a try. Barry made short work of an ugly icicle-hung berschrund at the base of the gully. Fifty feet above the berschrund the snow turned to solid ice with a half-inch of snow on the surface, and we began the slow work of chopping steps up the 55 to 60 degree slope. Belaying constantly from rock pitons in the left wall of the gully, we were lure by the deceptive appearance of the ice, which always looked as if it would change to snow within a half rope-length ahead, but it never did. After several hours we had placed 800 feet of fixed rope above the berschrund and were still scarcely halfway up the gully. Nevertheless we had reached a point where we could determine that the gully was continuous and that the route would go. So we rappelled back down the fixed ropes and returned to camp bearing the good news that we had a feasible route onto the rock buttress.

With the arrival of another beautiful day and the ingestion of another unsavory breakfast, we broke camp, relayed loads to the base of the ice chute, and started up the fixed ropes. The warm morning sun had transformed the center of the gully into a continual avalanche of slush, and rocks frequently plummeted down beside us, but we were relatively safe on the edge of the gully, although once a large rock, ricocheting from side to side, very nearly wiped out the entire expedition, one by one. At our high point of the previous evening, Jake and Pete returned for more loads, while Barry and I chopped steps up the remainder of the chute. The slope became increasingly steeper and we continued to belay from the rock wall of the gully. We placed another 800 feet of fixed rope before coming out onto the crest of the buttress, just a short scramble below the snow ridge. We then all relieved loads up, and evening found us assembled at the base of the snow ridge with nothing that remotely resembled a campsite—so we began hacking away at the steep ice slope. Three hours of hard labor resulted in a level platform barely large enough to accommodate our Logan tent, which we anchored in place with ice pitons. Concentration Camp (12,300 feet), as we called it, was a miserable, cramped spot, with nothing to recommend it save a lovely view and excellent garbage disposal facilities.

The ridge above rose in two great white domes or bumps before leveling off onto a narrow plateau leading into the upper face. Pete and I went out on the first reconnaissance. Shortly above camp, the slope turned to hard, deep blue ice, too steep for crampons alone, and we began chopping steps and using ice piton belays. About noon we reached the level, corniced ridge between the two bumps, where we obtained a close view of the second bump. Rising steep and glassy, it appeared difficult, indeed; and the only possibility was a direct route up its face. These were unexpected difficulties—from
nowhere, not even from Concentration Camp directly below, had the ice bumps appeared particularly steep, but it was now obvious that to reach the plateau above would be, at the very best, an enormous undertaking. We returned to camp, discouraged.

Next day Barry and Pete again climbed to the top of the first ice bump, and, after negotiating a small cornice, chopped steps up the second bump far enough to determine that the route would be feasible. When they returned to camp, we gathered in the tent for a council of war. If we were to continue, we would have to place fixed ropes on nearly the entire route to the top of the second bump for the relaying of loads; nearly all of our rope now lay dangling down the ice gully and would have to be retrieved. Already we were in a very exposed position and hesitated to extend ourselves further. But the weather continued to hold, we had with us nearly a three weeks' supply of food, and our morale, which had been low for the last day or so, was rising again. In the end, we decided to push on.

Before breakfast Barry and I made a quick trip down the ice gully and recovered the ropes from the upper half. After breakfast Pete and Jake broke camp while Barry and I strung 1000 feet of fixed rope to the top of the first ice bump. We then relayed loads up the fixed ropes. With the last loads we happily bid farewell to the tiny niche that had been Concentration Camp and brought the ropes up after us. Jake and Barry went ahead to put in the route up the second bump while Pete and I carried the loads up the short, gentle section of ridge between the bumps. The second bump proved to be every bit as steep as it had looked, though somewhat shorter, and Barry and Jake returned a couple of hours later, after having placed an additional 700 feet of fixed rope. Again shouldering packs, we rapidly disposed of this last immediate obstacle.

Breaking over the top of the second bump, a delightful sight confronted us—the broad ridge stretching away, almost level for nearly half a mile and gradually blending into the steeper face above. We continued on easily to where the slope began to steepen, and there made camp at 13,900 feet. Pitching both tents, we built as luxurious and comfortable a camp as possible. A sense of complete well-being settled over our party as evening fell. For the first time in several days we felt secure and able to relax. The route above looked good and we now suddenly felt quite confident that, with a certain amount of luck, success was possible. We were well above the Kahiltna Peaks and enjoyed a magnificent view of Mounts Hunter and Foraker to the south. As the alpenglow on the peaks deepened, we went to bed with a deep feeling of satisfaction. This was Camp Paradise!

June 16 dawned clear and warm, and we set wet and frozen gear out to
dry. Jake and I went off to reconnoiter the route above and locate a place for the next camp. The snow slopes above gradually became increasingly steeper, but the firm snow offered easy going to a bergschrund extending across the entire width of the face. With little difficulty we found a place to cross into a broad, shallow couloir of steep glare-ice. Belaying and chopping steps, we set 500 feet of fixed rope up and diagonally across the couloir to a small outcropping or terrace, above which a rocky rib led upwards. Directly overlooking the site of Base Camp, which was more than a mile below, this spot, at 14,800 feet, appeared a suitable location for another camp, so we returned to pick up the loads which Pete and Barry had meanwhile carried halfway up to the bergschrund. Somehow all the gear combined into four exceptionally heavy packs. The effects of the altitude began to creep up on us; the sun beat down mercilessly. The result was that we arrived nearly exhausted at the campsite, which was promptly named Camp Fatigue.

The weather, which had so far remained unbelievably perfect, was now beginning to take a turn for the worse—clouds poured in from the southwest over the low col between Peak Z and Mount Crosson, rising to about 13,000 feet before dissipating in the evening. It was clear that only a few more days of good weather could be counted on.

From the first we had considered descending the mountain by a traverse onto the West Buttress Route at about 16,000 feet if such a traverse could be made. This possibility now became especially desirable in view of the recent warm days, which had almost certainly caused the collapse of many of the frail snow bridges in the icefall. As we ate dinner, the following plan evolved: we would split the gear up into eight loads and next morning follow the arête above until we either found a place where we could make the traverse onto the West Buttress or could determine that such a traverse was impossible, deposit our loads there, return for the remaining ones and then carry a minimal camp as high as possible. From there we would launch a summit assault on the following day.

Fifty yards above Camp Fatigue, the rock-climbing became moderately difficult, but, with our relatively light packs, progress was not unduly hindered. About 500 feet above camp our route came out onto a small shoulder with a view across the west face of the mountain. Above were great ice-coated cliffs; below a huge icefall plunged sharply off towards the Kahiltna. But between these a relatively smooth corridor of snow led diagonally down into the West Buttress Route. Sure that the traverse would go, we made a quick trip back for the other loads. Then, selecting only the most
essential items and three days’ of food, we cached the rest, marking the spot with the spare ice axe.

In the afternoon the clouds again rolled in, somewhat higher this time, and only the summits of Hunter and Foraker remained, tiny, lonely islands rising out of the sea of clouds. The rib continued upward, sometimes as a narrow snow arête, sometimes as a rocky ridge with occasional steeper sections. By late afternoon we had reached the base of a 250-foot rock bastion, at about 16,500 feet. Further progress with packs seemed impracticable, and a little jutting promontory of rock looked possible, with a little remodeling, for a tent platform. Barry and Jake went ahead to find a route up the wall above, while Pete and I made the necessary excavations and set up camp. This was Balcony Camp, situated on a tiny perch overlooking thousands of feet of nothingness. As we crawled into our bags, the clouds again disappeared and we felt assured of a good day for the final climb.

On June 19, we arose at the unaccustomedly early hour of seven o’clock, gulped a cold breakfast, and stepped out into the clear, crisp morning air. The cold, solid granite of the first steep walls felt good to the hands, and we climbed rapidly. Above, a series of indistinct ribs and icy rock walls continued to about 18,000 feet, where a wide and shallow snow couloir swept steeply upwards as far as the eye could see. We changed to crampons and started up the firm snow, which offered easy going for a time. When the slope became too steep for comfort, we moved out onto the snow-covered rocks on the left side of the gully. As we climbed higher, the angle began gradually to decrease, and, stepping around a corner, we suddenly emerged onto the western edge of the great snow plateau which stretches from the top of the South Peak to the Archdeacon’s Tower. The long walk across the level 19,500-foot plateau and up the final snow face seemed in-terminable, but we all eventually reached the summit between four and five in the afternoon.

The sky above was brilliant and clear and scarcely a breath of wind stirred. But below, the clouds had once more moved in and almost totally obscured the view, increasing the sensation of height and remoteness. Our emotions were a mixture of intense satisfaction and slight disbelief as we relaxed briefly on the summit. But the hour was late and the distance yet far to go, so we regretfully turned our steps downward. When, half exhausted, we got back to Balcony Camp at about 10:30 P.M., snow was falling gently.

By morning nearly two feet of fresh snow had accumulated, and it was still falling. But there was no wind, and we decided to push on down the mountain. The landscape (or what little of it could be seen) had completely
changed and we spent some anxious moments trying to find the cache at 16,000 feet. What had seemed, on the ascent, to be a single arête, was now a whole network of intersecting ribs and couloirs. When, after much searching, we did finally find the cache, even the ice axe marking the spot was almost completely buried. Here we plunged blindly off the west side of the ridge and began the traverse down across the west face. Occasionally a crevasse would loom blue through the murk and momentarily block our way, but somehow we avoided the ugly difficulties which we knew lay to either side. As the slope levelled off, a brief, sudden, but fortunate clearing revealed that we had joined the West Buttress Route. As we continued down, the clouds slowly evaporated, and with the exception of an exciting crevasse incident, we easily reached Windy Corner (13,200 feet) by nightfall, and set up camp.

Again in the morning it was snowing and whiteout conditions prevailed, but we packed up and aimed ourselves downward. At every dubious turn in the route we were favored with a brief clearing of the clouds, and by early evening we had reached the main Kahiltna Glacier. A few miles below Kahiltna Pass we suddenly found ourselves hopelessly floundering in arm-pit-deep snow. There was nothing to do but set up a temporary camp and wait for the snow to freeze. Three days and many snowstorms later, we were still sitting idly in the same miserable spot, which came to be known as Frustration Camp. Finally, after midnight on the fourth day, we found the skies clear and the crust firm. We rapidly threw our packs together and set off down glacier to the place where Sheldon was to pick us up in a small cove below the northeast face of Mount Crosson. Here we spent the next two days lounging about and enjoying the superb view of our just-completed route. On June 27, we made a pre-dawn jaunt across the glacier to replenish our dwindling food supply from the cache at the site of Landing Camp. Finally, that same day, a mid-afternoon nap was disturbed by the unmistakable sound of an airplane. We rushed out to be greeted by the pleasant sight of the familiar red and yellow Super Cub nosing its way up the glacier toward us. Our fine adventure had come to an end!

Summary of Statistics
Area: Alaska Range, Alaska.
Personnel: Jake Breitenbach, leader; Bill Buckingham, Barry Corbet, Pete Sinclair.