

The East Buttress of Mount McKinley

WILLIAM A. READ

MOUNT MCKINLEY, or Denali, a far more deserving title, had for each of us been a long kindled ambition. Through the years most of us had been involved in some preparation to climb the mountain and one of our number had made an attempt. All these previous aspirations, however, were either squelched at infancy or destroyed by the mountain itself. During the fall of 1962 the idea was again brought to light and this time success seemed probable. Six months prior to our departure we all agreed to deposit a considerable unrefundable sum in the expedition "kitty", thus making a late drop-out unprofitable and unlikely. With the material and expert advice offered by Bradford Washburn, Director of the Boston Museum of Science and an expert on Mount McKinley, we decided to attempt the unclimbed East Buttress. This prospect appeared to offer what we desired, a uniformly difficult climb in the most magnificent surroundings. Never once did the route fail to live up to our expectations.

The final party consisted of Pete Lev, Rod Newcomb, Fred Wright and myself, all guides with the Exum Guide Service in the Tetons; Jed Williamson, a Rainier Guide; and Warren Bleser, a one time Canadian Guide. Jim Greig, one of the original organizers, was injured in a ski mishap only two weeks prior to our Alaskan departure. He was responsible for a huge portion of food organization and equipment procurement. His loss was truly regretted. The problem of leadership was eliminated merely by eliminating a leader. The expedition leadership was entirely a cooperative effort. It worked to perfection. All assumed the burdens of leadership and all reaped its rewards.

The Teton contingent purchased a 1948 Dodge especially for the trip up the Alaska Highway. We left Jackson, Wyoming on April 9, and through some act of fortune, the Dodge, a trailer full of gear, and ourselves drove into Fairbanks on April 14. Here we met Williamson and Bleser for the last-minute organization. We arrived by train in Talkeetna at dawn on April 18. Don Sheldon immediately began flying us and our fifteen hundred pounds of gear one hundred miles into the incredible Ruth Gorge landing at the south end of the Ruth Amphitheater. This site became Airdrome Camp (5600 feet) and by the morning of April 19,

we had all landed. Snow and crevasse conditions prevented Sheldon from landing us some eight miles higher on the northwest fork of the Ruth Glacier much closer to the foot of the East Buttress. He agreed, however, to return the following day to shuttle and drop gear at the higher level.

The site of Airdrome Camp was completely magnificent. The vast Ruth Amphitheater and Great Gorge are staggering in magnitude and beauty. Unclimbed peaks are beyond counting, dominated by Huntington and Moose's Tooth, each worthy of a first-class expedition.

The next day brought a storm that was to last intermittently for ten days. We decided to begin moving gear up the glacier rather than waiting for Sheldon in the impossible flying weather. We established a wanded snowshoe trail from Airdrome Camp to Alpsport Camp (6400 feet), a depot halfway to the base of the East Buttress. Later a site for Base Camp (8500 feet) was located by Lev and Wright immediately beneath the proposed route. We were happy to be active and the heavy shuttles were placing us in top shape. On April 28, Sheldon at last arrived and was able to fly the now depleted remaining gear to the drop site at Base Camp. The wands of the lower trails were retrieved, and by April 30, in clearing weather, we were all in our fully supplied Base Camp and ready to begin the climb.

On April 30, Bleser and I reconnoitered the route to its first difficulties. By dawn of May 1, Lev, Newcomb, Williamson and Wright began work on the first steep section which we called the "Bulge", a 450-foot bulge of windslab snow underlain with sugar ice. The area averaged 65° for the first 300 feet. The pitch proved quite exacting due to poor ice and resulting difficulties in placing iron. By noon, however, the area had been surmounted and strongly fixed. Throughout the day avalanches broke off the Southeast Spur and East Face, thundering into the basin but stopping far short of Base Camp.

Bleser and I went ahead on May 1 and began establishing the route above the "Bulge". The climbing was steep but presented few problems other than hidden crevasses and rotten ice. Williamson, Newcomb and Lev followed, fixing ropes. As the lower party was climbing the "Bulge", it avalanched. A two-foot slab, 300 feet wide and 200 feet long, broke off immediately in front of Lev and plunged over Williamson's back. The fixed ropes were effective, however, and no one came off. As we climbed higher in the beautiful, but all too warm day, huge walls of ice, hundreds of feet thick, began peeling off the Southeast Spur and East Face. These unnerving avalanches fell from three to seven thousand feet, and their gigantic explosions triggered other avalanches. The whole northwest fork of the Ruth was alive and roaring. At such times we felt our own slope

split, shake, and settle. By now we were hotly descending, convinced that our buttress would be next to go. When nearly down, a great wall separated from the Southeast Spur and began a roaring descent toward our "safe" Base Camp. We sickened as the mass fell 5000 feet and began advancing across the glacier toward Base Camp and Wright, who had remained there throughout the day. Both disappeared in the cloud. We waited anxiously as the cloud dissipated. Fortunately the blocks stopped slightly short of camp and no serious damage was done.

The following morning we moved our Base Camp to a knoll beneath the "Bulge" completely out of danger. A day later, Wright, Lev and I ascended to our previous high point and traversed to the site of Camp I (11,100 feet) perched on a bergschrund lip at the east edge of the buttress. We felt the steep traverse to Camp I to be exceedingly avalanche-prone due to its slab condition, threatening icefalls above, and lack of run-out below. It was decided to cross it only in the very earliest hours of the morning. Even so, it gave us considerable anxiety and bothered us more than any other section of the climb. Later that day we reconnoitered the ridge above Camp I, believing this to be a far safer route than the buttress' central gully. About midday several ice blocks broke off and avalanched the lower part of the buttress but missed our fixed ropes.

The next several days, which again brought deteriorating weather, consisted of early morning shuttles to Camp I and exploration of the ridge above. The ridge proved too difficult to seriously consider for load hauling. A mail drop from Sheldon included some very recent route photos from Bradford Washburn, showing plainly that the ridge led only to exceedingly difficult terrain. Thanks to the efforts of Bleser and Newcomb, the central gully was ascended to a 150-foot vertical ice wall. This pitch, technically the most difficult of the climb, was surmounted and fixed by the same pair in storm and miserable conditions. It was necessary to haul loads hand over hand up the wall as it was quite out of the question to carry them.

Camp II (12,400 feet) was established at the west edge of the buttress on a small ridge that diverted to either side the numerous slides from the steep ice above. The fixed ropes and iron were retrieved from the ice wall as had been done below Camp I. In the process Lev and Williamson were nearly carried away and I was all but covered by the constant powder slides resulting from the lengthy storm.

The storm that had been with us since May 4 now made operations unsafe, and we spent the next two days in the tents. By noon of May 16, Lev, Newcomb, Bleser and I reconnoitered and fixed several hundred feet of the route above. On the 17th, the weather was perfect. As the others

fixed rope below, Williamson and I went ahead and found beautiful climbing for 800 feet to a point where the route was blocked by an overhanging ice cliff. This we climbed by a chimney formed by a large block gradually separating from the overhanging cliff above, an awkward pitch, exceedingly exposed and poorly protected because of the hollow ice on the steep slopes above. We also had considerable doubt about the permanency of the block. Two hundred feet beyond we reached the bergschrund below the rock cap of the buttress and traversed left looking for a route to the buttress summit. A chimney and ledge system looked promising, but the rock proved friable and impractical for load hauling. Wright and Newcomb meanwhile were trying the ice ramps just west of the rock buttress. The ice here was exceptionally hard and, in combination with the adjacent rock, offered excellent protection.

On May 18 and 19, through the efforts of Newcomb and Lev and later Newcomb and Bleser, 800 feet of these ice ramps were climbed and fixed. The slopes (averaging from 60° — 65°) ended on a knife-edged ridge blending into the last roundings of the buttress summit. The climbing was sustained and consistently difficult but always well protected. We placed Camp III at 13,700 feet in the bergschrund below the rocks. We occupied this airy spot only one night, and on May 20 broke camp, cached all unnecessary gear, packed eleven days food and carried 70-pound packs to the top of the buttress. This reduction in equipment made further shuttling unnecessary although the heavy packs were very difficult to handle on such terrain.

In the afternoon we moved easily over the flat expanse of the buttress summit and began our descent into Thayer Basin. Behind the sunken desolation of the Thayer Basin the summit still rose another 6000 feet above. Camp IV (14,000 feet) was located in the bottom of the basin. On May 21 we followed Thayer's route out of the basin and established Camp V in a niche at 17,450 feet.

On May 22, although the weather was threatening, we decided to try for the summit. A long storm could easily end all chance of success. We traversed to the Harper Glacier*, wandering all the way, and climbed rapidly toward Denali Pass. At 18,200 feet Wright developed symptoms of pulmonary edema, although at the time we failed to recognize it as such. Lev and I helped him back to Camp V while the others continued toward the summit. The weather soon deteriorated into a violent wind storm and white-out. Bleser, slightly above Newcomb and Williamson, reached a point where the ridge leveled, which he thought was the summit (It was later discovered that although this was not the true summit, it was quite

*The Thayer party climbed directly to the summit from here without detouring via Denali Pass. The latter route is $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles longer.—*Editor*.

close). The party then beat a hasty retreat in the worsening conditions. Fortunately we had wanded the route sufficiently and Camp V was reached at 7:30 P.M.

The storm came from the north rather than the usual southwest. It brought little snow but violent winds and very cold temperatures. Rapidly, it became an effort even to stand outside. In spite of our concern, the tents did not rip although several guys severed.

On the afternoon of the 24th, the winds subsided. Lev, Newcomb and I decided to try a night ascent directly up the northeast ridge. We ate a huge meal and departed at nine P.M. just as the sun set in the north. Our long acclimatization allowed us to climb quickly feeling few effects of exertion or altitude. The night was astonishingly beautiful. The sun traversed just below the northern horizon producing a stark red glow. The ice and wildly shaped wind hummocks appeared deep blue, almost as a phosphorescent glow against the jet black southern sky. As we neared the summit, the sun rose and instantly transformed the snow hummocks to bright gold, blazing against the black south. The wind increased until the rope stood straight out and we were often knocked down. It was a bitter morning but beautiful beyond our wildest imagination. We reached the summit at 3:10 A.M.

The well-known land marks were still on the summit, including the Japanese tent, still standing but with various poles broken off at the base. We surveyed the magnificent panorama and peered over the appalling South Face. The temperature was about -20° F. This and the force of the wind made our stay necessarily quite short.

We descended via Denali Pass reaching Camp V at seven. We rested throughout the morning, ate dinner at two and descended into Thayer Basin and Camp IV, arriving at seven P.M. By then Wright had recovered completely. Within two days we arrived at Base Camp. The perfect weather, excellent snow conditions and 3000 feet of fixed rope left on the upper part of the route made the rapid descent possible. At Base Camp we satiated ourselves quite disgustingly, but we felt we had something to celebrate.

To avoid carrying heavy packs to our cache at Airdrome Camp, we split our party in half. Bleser, who had suffered a mild attack of heat exhaustion upon arrival at Base Camp, along with Lev and Wright descended three miles to a proposed 7500-foot landing site. Williamson, Newcomb and I continued to Airdrome Camp.

Sheldon arrived in the afternoon of May 28, and by nine o'clock Newcomb, Williamson and I had been evacuated from Airdrome Camp and flown to Talkeetna. Sheldon was to return for the others at the higher

camp the following morning. But for the next ten days it snowed! The upper camp waited in the single Himalayan tent going without food for three days. They were finally flown out on June 8.

Denali had the last word, but its toll of discomfort was a small price indeed for such perfect adventure.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENT: Mount McKinley, 20,320 feet, May 25, 1963 (Lev, Newcomb, Read) — First ascent via the East Buttress.

PERSONNEL: Warren Bleser, Peter Lev, Rod Newcomb, William A. Read, John E. Williamson, Fred E. Wright.

