

Mount Huntington

LIONEL TERRAY, *Club Alpin Français*

Translated by H. Adams Carter

AFTER seeing superb photographs by Bradford Washburn in a mountaineering journal, I realized what a magnificent field of action the McKinley Range would be for an enthusiast of *grand alpinisme*. Immediately I began to dream about the possibility of climbing some of these peaks. As early as 1955 I got in touch with Bradford Washburn, Bob Bates, Fred Beckey and other American climbers.

It soon struck me that although great new routes were waiting to be pioneered on McKinley and Foraker and even on Hunter, all of Alaska's main summits had already been conquered. Therein lay a serious obstacle to a French expedition. In our country it is extremely difficult to arouse interest for the first ascent of a wall, no matter how beautiful and difficult.

Luckily, thanks to photographs sent me by helpful American climbers, I could see that despite its rather modest altitude, Mount Huntington was a beautiful, spectacular and difficult peak, completely worthy of a costly journey across the Atlantic. Unfortunately, mounting an expedition is hard work, which requires both time and energy. Moreover, between 1955 and 1962, aside from my normal duties, I was constantly absorbed in the preparation and realization of three expeditions to the Andes and three others to the Himalaya. From year to year I had to postpone this beautiful Alaskan adventure. Each autumn I felt real relief when news came from America that Huntington was still virgin.

After the conquest of Jannu in 1962, the Expeditions Committee of the *Fédération Française de la Montagne*, temporarily renouncing any major undertakings, decided to organize a series of expeditions which had as objectives relatively low peaks with great technical difficulties. Huntington fitted the qualifications exactly, and luckily I had several free months in 1964. My plan was adopted and even expanded. Thus the Alaskan expedition became a national undertaking, directly organized by the F.F.M. The number of climbers was raised to eight and we were, in case

we conquered Huntington rapidly, to try a second objective, possibly the south face of Mount McKinley or the Moose's Tooth.

In December, 1963, I began actively to prepare for the expedition. As always, unforeseen difficulties cropped up, but thanks to Bradford Washburn and Mrs. Helga Bading of Anchorage all the American problems were quickly solved. Finally on April 28, 1964, Jacques Soubis and I landed at Anchorage Airport with a ton and a half of equipment and food. The next week was spent clearing customs, buying more food and making a first aerial reconnaissance around Huntington.

On May 5 the other six members of the team arrived and the next day the picturesque Fairbanks train carried us to Talkeetna. Deluged by rain, the streets of the miniscule town were a quagmire of mud and melting snow. After a depressing day of waiting, the weather finally cleared.

It was child's play for the famous bush pilot, Don Sheldon, to land us on the Ruth Glacier, right at the foot of the northeast face of Mount Huntington. Without transition we had been plunged into the great bath of adventure. The site was grandiose, the peaks as impressive and majestic as the most beautiful of the Himalaya. Unfortunately the thermometer hovered stubbornly around -10°F. and the wind whipped up enormous whirls of powder snow. Under these conditions we installed Base Camp in the heroic surroundings of a polar expedition. Remembering Patagonian tempests, I was haunted by the fear that the already strong wind could become a hurricane and snatch our tents away. Prudently I had a big igloo built where we could take refuge in case of need.

After two days of hard work, the camp is suitably established and we can finally think about the climb. The weather is clear but cold and gusty. According to plan we are to attack the steep glacial slope which leads to the northwest ridge. The first team begins to climb a gully, somewhat endangered by a line of *séracs*. The snow is thigh-deep and progress terribly slow. From Base Camp, not without anxiety, I scan their painful ascent, doubtless threatened by avalanches. Vexed, I recall that we shall be obliged to climb up and down this slope a great many times! As they advance, the climbers prepare the route and fix ropes, which will make subsequent trips faster and safer. Exhausted, the four men stop at the foot of the final couloir and after dropping their loads, descend rapidly.

The next day, May 10, Paul Gendre, Marc Martinetti, Maurice Gicquel and Jacques Batkin leave with light loads to climb fast and prepare the route up the couloir. Jean-Louis Bernezat, Sylvain Sarthou, Jacques Soubis and I follow, loaded like mules. We climb the first couloir slowly, pulling ourselves up the fixed ropes helped by our Jümars: that metal

handle which clamps perfectly onto a rope when under tension but slides up easily when pushed without pressure. The wind gusts bite and nearly efface the tracks of the first climbers. Soubis leads; grimacing from his effort, he tramples the deep snow with a scowl on his southern face. Suddenly I hear an anguished cry and at the same time the whole center of the couloir starts to plunge downward. Like lightning I realize that a wind-slab has broken loose. Luckily Soubis remains clinging to the fixed rope. Bernezat, Sarthou and I are at the edge of the couloir so that the avalanche passes within inches without touching us.

It takes some minutes to recover and discuss the event. But we all know that if the conquest of a great peak brings moments of exultation and bliss, which in the monotonous, materialistic existence of modern times nothing else can approach, it also presents great dangers. It is not the goal of *grand alpinisme* to face peril, but it is one of the tests one must undergo to deserve the joy of rising for an instant above the state of crawling grubs.

Bent beneath our loads we set out again. After six hours of toil we emerge onto the sharp ridge where we find our companions. Dominating an immense rock face about 6500 feet high, the whole northwest crest of Huntington unfolds before our eyes. Here hung with gigantic cornices, there chiseled into delicate lacework, this ridge seems much longer than any I had even imagined. The little shoulder where we are seated is rather favorable for a camp, but nothing protects it from the wind. In a gale, life would be hellish, and tents could easily be hurled off into space. Without hesitation I decide to dig a cave in the snow and ice. Thus we can live safely and manage to sleep in the worst tempests. We immediately set to work in the hard snow that yields only to the ice axe. Late in the afternoon when we have to descend to Base Camp the work is just begun.

The next morning we again leave early, carrying enormous loads. The wind having fallen, the tracks are good and we reach the shoulder at about ten o'clock. By working all day like convicts we manage to dig a cave deep enough for four.

After a miserable night, Martinetti, Gicquel, Soubis and I attack the arête. For over an hour and a half we follow a relatively easy crest before reaching the first big step. A hundred feet on a slope of hard ice leads us to the foot of a forbidding wall. Martinetti worms his way forward, patiently cutting hand and foot holds. To climb the last six feet he has to plant a piton in the ice. Soubis and I follow the other two, fixing ropes and enlarging the holds. After two rope-lengths scarcely less difficult, we are stopped by a 60-foot-high rock wall. Gicquel takes the lead. The holds

are all more or less covered with snow and so he has great trouble climbing to the base of an overhang. Then, thanks to seven or eight pitons, he surmounts this obstacle; but he emerges on a *verglas*-covered slab which he cannot cross without crampons. He is obliged to rappel. Using the rappel rope to prusik up on my Jümars, I climb the pitch on crampons. After exhausting work, I finally get a good stance. I belay Soubis and then, taking advantage of the last hours of the afternoon, we continue along the corniced ridge. Luckily the ice is covered by a film of hard snow and so, despite the steepness of the slope, I find that I can climb without cutting steps. After two rope-lengths we agree that it is too late to continue.

On our return to Camp I we find the cave considerably enlarged by the rest of the team. This time six of us can sleep there and only Sarthou and Batkin have to descend to Base Camp. When at one o'clock I go out to look at the weather, it is snowing and the wind howls violently. I have to return to the warmth of my down bed. The weather does not improve and we find ourselves trapped all day in the cave. We organize our accommodations: to the right of the entry we place the kitchen and pantry; on the left is the bedroom where we can stretch out on the carpet of foam rubber. Granted that in order to see we have to leave the door open. The temperature inside varies between 15° and 20°F., which somewhat mars the comfort of our excellent hotel!

During the next night the snow stops but a polar cold reigns, made almost insufferable by a moderate wind. Despite these rude conditions, we four leave at three-thirty. Thanks to fixed ropes, we are at our high point in two and a half hours. From there a delicate traverse onto the west face and an ascent up a gully-chimney leads us to a snowy col that separates the first step from the second. Seen from the distance, the latter had seemed forbidding, but from nearby it appears even worse. It is an airy slope, frightfully steep, whose top part is of black ice. There is no doubt that this slope is the crux of the Huntington climb. Only a formidable step-cutting job will let us by.

After a short night at Camp I, Batkin, Sarthou, Soubis and I are again at the foot of the second step some twenty hours later. I attack immediately. With two ice axes on which I shamelessly pull, I am soon across the bergschrund. Above, the slope is steep but covered with good hard snow, allowing a full rope-length of cramponing. A vertical bulge makes me traverse right. After several meters. I find bare ice, and what ice! It is smooth as a mirror and hard as glass. I have never struck such ice! Following the technique taught me by my master, Armand Charlet, I progress methodically, holding my axe in both hands and cutting large

but well-placed steps. This is really the only way which makes it possible to cut for long hours without excessive fatigue. Every 35 feet I plant an ice piton to which I attach the 6-mm. line that I drag after me to be used later as a fixed rope. The ice screw, so handy to use, refuses to penetrate into the ice of Huntington. Fortunately I also have same tubular ice pitons, and pounding like a demon I succeed in forcing them in.*

Everything would be fine were it not so cold, especially if the wind were less violent. Never have I made so difficult a climb under such conditions! The wind gnaws my face and the gusts keep knocking me off balance. Despite Himalayan overboots and double felt boots, my feet are icy cold.

A bulge, which for some yards approaches 70°, slows my progress for a moment. Eventually, at full rope-length, I reach a rock where I can stop rather comfortably. Sarthou soon joins me; his kindly eyes of guileless blue radiate joy but he is too frozen to smile. A hundred feet of rather favorable rock, now delicate because of *verglas* and snow, lead us to the foot of a precipitous slope of gleaming dark green ice. After 135 feet of the most difficult step-cutting I have ever lived through, I manage to reach a small rocky island. The slope is now a little less steep. About 65 feet above me I catch sight of the thread of the arête which seems covered with favorable snow. Doubtless we could finish climbing the second step but our supply of fixed rope is used up and, moreover, we are exhausted from the buffeting of this inhuman gale and cold. By common accord, we slip back down the fixed lines.

The next day, May 16, is equally clear but just as frigid and windy. Gicquel, Martinetti, Gendre and Bernezat pick up the bâton but, literally paralyzed by the cold, they cannot do more than finish climbing the second step and continue another hundred feet up the third.

Decidedly Huntington is valiantly defending its virginity. On May 17, determined to make a big jump ahead, along with Soubis, Batkin and Sarthou I leave camp at 2:30 A.M. We force our pace to the maximum and it is scarcely 8:30 when we reach the previous high point. Thanks to a series of snow pickets, I ascend a vertical 20-foot wall artificially. After an easy slope I am again slowed by a very steep section of hard ice, but higher up the snow becomes favorable and at ten o'clock we reach a kind of little dome which forms the summit of the third step. Though the weather is no better than it has been during the past ten days, I find my will is of iron and I am determined to suffer the tortures of the damned to get as high as possible.

When the gusts disperse the clouds for an instant, I glimpse the sec-

*These are typical Alaskan ice conditions at this season and at this altitude. — Editor.

tion of the ridge we are going to attack. Though nearly horizontal, it bristles with a long series of sawteeth, which inspire us to call it the "Lacework". From here it does not seem too formidable and we estimate that if the snow is good we can reach the fourth step in two or three hours. For an instant I foresee the possibility of reaching the summit today! With this in mind I feel relaxed and boiling with energy. I begin to descend towards the next gap. On my left a small crevasse slits the cornice from the mountain. On my right the icy slope plunges to the abyss of the west face. Like a tight-rope-walker I balance along the thin crest between the crevasse and the slope. Suddenly the snow breaks under my crampons. For a split second I lose my balance and, to keep from falling into the crevasse, I make a little jump. How many times in the Alps I have done the same thing! Unhappily the ice is too hard and my crampons do not bite. Utterly helpless I shoot down the slope. Instinctively I try a self-arrest but in vain on this wall, slick as a skating rink, and I hurtle toward the chasm. I try desperately to check my fall and do not even feel afraid. . . .

Finally a brutal wrench shoots a hideous pain through my right elbow. I hang from the *Meraklon* line which has been dragging behind me in order to be attached as a fixed rope. Two snow pickets hitched to the top of my pack have passed over my shoulder and pin my right arm back in an intolerable position. Not without difficulty I free myself and get back on my feet. Then, using a Jümar with my left hand I painfully climb back to the crest.

Then I see Soubis climbing down towards me, apparently confused. I howl to him to wait. Soon I am near him. He does not know what has just happened. At the moment of the slip he was not belaying, but rather was calmly adjusting a crampon strap. What a surprise when the coils of rope he had placed in front of him reeled off rapidly! But still he did not understand why! We now realize what a happy series of circumstances kept us both from making the "big jump." A moment before I slipped, the second rope had finished attaching the *Meraklon* line to a firmly planted snow picket. Moreover, I was some fifty feet from the top of the line and would soon have cast it off. And this thin line was only tested for 880 pounds! This thread alone had stopped my fall and kept Soubis from being yanked off after me.

We have been indeed lucky in our misfortune, but I have a severe sprain of the elbow and my arm hurts frightfully. Moreover I am mortified! Now I am sure I shall never stand on the summit of Huntington. This is too unjust! I have worked for months to feel those peerless minutes of joy and exultation and now I am thrown back like a useless

beast. The descent is slow, but thanks to the fixed ropes I manage to get along better than I feared.

This accident is a catastrophe for me, but the expedition will not quit for that. By next morning at nine o'clock four men are back at the site of the accident, with a good chance for the summit. In order to find good snow, they try to keep to the crest of the ridge, but scarcely have they begun to climb the first point of the "Lacework" when a long cornice crumbles and tumbles towards the Ruth Glacier. Gicquel is inches away from hurtling down with it. The wind howls and the cold bites. The ridge is constantly cut by ice walls, short but vertical. Progress is at a snail's pace. Soon Martinetti complains that an inflammation of the eye, which has started the day before, is getting worse. He can now scarcely see and suffers hideously. Again the descent, but this time only a few score yards have been won and morale is shattered.

That evening at Camp I we hold a council of war. After a brief discussion we decide that the "Lacework" being much more difficult than we had thought and the last step not likely to be a "cow pasture", the top part of Huntington will call for several extra days of effort. In order not to lose time coming and going on the ridge, we plan to establish another camp at the foot of the second step.

Early, the six hale and hearty men descend to Base Camp to replenish food and supplies. Unfortunately in the afternoon they cannot climb back up in the tempest. Martinetti and I stay alone in the cave. What a pair we are! He is stone blind and my arm is stiff and useless. I can hardly cook and aid my helpless friend. Outside, the snow keeps falling. Our comrades at Base Camp tell us over the radio that more than three feet of snow have piled up in 24 hours on the Ruth Glacier. We remain cut off for two long days. To pass the time I try to read but cannot. I am "in the dumps" and very anxious. I have read somewhere that in this range the big storms can last for eight or ten consecutive days. We are nearly out of food and fuel and doubtless shall have to descend the cursed slope to Base Camp during the full tempest. With six feet of new snow, what could be more ideal for avalanches? For twenty-five years I have been poking through all the mountains of the world. Avalanches; I have seen too many of them rush past me, even over me, in the most improbable places. Just to think of setting foot on that slope fills me with brutish fear.

At dawn on the third day the storm stops but the sky remains cloudy and the temperature is milder. We must descend quickly before the snow gets warm and the mist returns. Martinetti has regained his sight and I can use my arm a little. The snow has slid out of the first couloir and we

descend rapidly. But below begins the exhausting struggle. We plow along up to the crotch or even to the waist. The mist envelops us, reducing visibility to a few feet. Many landmarks have disappeared and it is difficult not to lose our way. And then the threat of seeing the whole slope move and of feeling ourselves carried away like wisps of straw plunges us into grievous anguish. Luckily the snow has stayed cold, which diminishes the danger. At last we find the final couloir; here the snow has slid and we now have only to descend along the fixed ropes. Soon we are embracing our comrades.

The next day at dawn the wind is violent but the sky is a clear blue. My seven companions climb back up to Camp I with heavy loads of food and equipment. Their plan is to send one rope up to work on the ridge, and on the same day to establish Camp II from which they can launch the final assault. All morning, sick at heart, I watch my friends climb. Rarely in my entire life have I felt so lonely and miserable. I have not even the will to prepare lunch. During the night I can scarcely sleep, but by morning I have made up my mind. I am going to join my comrades and try to follow them to the summit. Yes, my arm still tortures me but by using the Jümar in my left hand, I shall get up there.

I take my time in my preparations. The track is still good, but I am heavily loaded and advance slowly. The bergschrund which bars the upper part of the route stops me for a long time, being wide and overhanging. With a single arm I can never prusik with the Jümar. Finally, thanks to a stirrup, I succeed with desperate effort. It is already five P.M. when I emerge on the crest. Soubis and Gendre greet me with a friendly smile which comforts me. I am tired and hungry and must regain strength before I can continue. While I eat, my two friends tell me that thanks to long hours of step-chopping Gicquel and Martinetti have succeeded in reaching the fourth step, while Batkin, Bernezat and Sarthou have established Camp II.

At six o'clock we are off again but in changing weather. It is snowing a little and the wind has picked up, blinding us with a swirl of snow. Knowing the instability of weather in this range we keep on in spite of it. I have regained my spirits and my energy. Thanks to Soubis, who helps me a great deal, I succeed in shinnying up the fixed ropes without slowing our pace. As we rise, the gale intensifies and when at eleven P.M. we reach Camp II it is a veritable hurricane.

While six climbers stack themselves on top of each other in the four-man Makalu tent, Soubis and I squeeze into a miserable bivouac tent, which soon is nearly buried in the snow. We spend a heroic night, struggling to feed and rest ourselves. By morning we realize that it is

impossible for all eight of us to wait out the storm. We have not enough space, food or fuel. I decide that Batkin and Sarthou, who until now have worked hard at the less glorious tasks, shall remain to try for the summit on the first clearing. The rest of us descend to Camp I. The storm is infernal but we are so tempered to the cold and wind that the battle with the elements now seems an exciting game.

The next day, May 25, when we come out of the cave, the weather is very mediocre. The wind has practically fallen and the snow has stopped. However, Huntington is completely enshrouded by heavy clouds. At ten o'clock when we get into radio contact with our two comrades, we are surprised to learn that they left for the attack early and despite the wind have just reached the foot of the fourth step. At noon a new contact tells us that Batkin and Sarthou have surmounted the last difficult wall and now are going to attack the final ridge. Wind, snow and mist hinder them but their determination is of steel and they have decided to reach the summit, cost what it may. We encourage but also caution them. To follow their progress by radio is incredibly exciting. Finally, at 4:30 P.M., Sarthou's voice, vibrant with emotion, announces that Batkin and he stand on the summit of Mount Huntington. We leap for joy and embrace each other like brothers. We experience one of those moments of sublime happiness which give a focus to mountaineering. I beg them to descend prudently, and every other hour I make contact with them. They are both tired and the wind has so obliterated their tracks that they can hardly find the steps. Under these conditions, their descent is slow and difficult. Having left Camp II at 2:30 A.M., they do not get back until 1:30 A.M. the next day! Despite the systematic preparation of the route with fixed ropes, they needed twenty-three hours of uninterrupted work to finish the conquest of Huntington. This tells simply enough what a tough, difficult fight it was.

On May 26, Gendre, Martinetti, Gicquel, Bernezat, Soubis and I leave Camp I at 2:30 under cloudy but windy skies with a more moderate temperature. At six o'clock we pass Camp II, where our companions wish us luck. Then we climb rapidly on. Happily the tracks have not been filled and I find I can use my left arm well enough so that we can nearly keep up with the first two ropes. At last we attack the elegant "Lacework" and I understand why it took so much time; each moment we bump against ice walls, short but vertical and even overhanging.

Now and again we yodel and shout for joy. After all the painful, gloomy days, we have a marvelous-sensation of liberation. We all feel strong, bouyant, and this climb from crest to crest seems like a triumphant cavalcade. At 11:30 we all stand together on the pointed summit. Unfor-

tunately the day has remained heavily overcast and we can see none of the great peaks that surround us. Joy is on all our faces. Each sings and shouts. An atmosphere of a country fair accompanies the traditional rites which mark the conquest of a summit.

But soon we have to start the descent. Suddenly I feel sad and despondent. I am well aware that a mountaineering victory is only a scratch in space, and for me, after the Himalaya and the Andes, Huntington is just another peak. But in spite of this, how sad I feel leaving that crest! On this proud and beautiful mountain we have lived hours of fraternal, warm and exalting nobility. Here for a few days we have ceased to be slaves and have really been men. It is hard to return to servitude.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Alaska Range.

FIRST ASCENT: Mount Huntington, 12,240 feet, May 25, 1964 (Jacques Batkin, Sylvain Sarthou); May 26, (Lionel Terray, leader; Jean-Louis Bernezat, Paul Gendre, Maurice Gicquel, Marc Martinetti, Jacques Soubis).

