Mount Huntington—West Face

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IT WAS darker than dusk. The two of us stood in the gloom of Alaskan midnight on the last day of July. Ed said, "How do you feel?"

"Pretty tired. I feel I'm getting overcautious. How about you?"

"No," he answered. "I feel great, as if I could go all night."

I handed him a carabiner and he set up the rappel. We unroped and threw down the ends of the rope. Ed clipped the rope in and got in rappel position.

"Just this pitch," I said, "and it's easy going down to camp."

He leaned back and there was a scraping noise and he flew into space. Fifty feet below me he met the ice and, tangled in the rope, slid and bounced out of sight, though I could hear his body falling and knew he would not stop for 4000 feet.

I shouted Ed's name, but there was no answer.

Thus Mount Huntington, one might say, avenged the profanation of our climbing it. How much simpler it would be to deal with death, to prepare for it, if it struck with even that trace of purpose! But our accident came, unexpected and freakish, near the end of a successful expedition, and we can blame it neither on the mountain, nor on ourselves, but perhaps only on the mindless whim of a carabiner.

Ed was killed the same day we had reached the top of Mount Huntington, after more than a month on its west face. Only a French party in 1964, by a different route, the northwest ridge, had climbed to its 12,240-foot summit before us. (See *A.A.J.*, 1965, 14:2, pages 289-298.)

There are not many unclimbed prizes left in Alaska, or for that matter anywhere. But there are hundreds of new routes to be done, direct, challenging lines that thrill the mountaineer's heart. Of all the peaks in that great land, only McKinley, with eleven routes climbed and another tried, has received proper attention. Three southwest ridges lie waiting

PLATE 1
Photo by Bradford Washburn

MOUNT HUNTINGTON showing West Ridge (French route) in center and Harvard route rising from white spur (the Stegosaur) at the center right.

on Foraker, two steep buttresses on Hunter beg to be climbed, and men have tried other ways up the Moose's Tooth than that by which it was finally ascended — why not Huntington, then, the gem of the range, "the most beautiful mountain in Alaska?"

We chose the west face for several reasons. The route appeared as safe as any difficult route on a big mountain could be. It was not threatened by hanging glaciers or cornices, and it was not so long that retreat would be impossible. Furthermore, from all indications, the rock would be sound: the south face of McKinley and most of Hunter are of solid granite, and the French compared the rock they encountered to that of the Chamonix aiguilles. Our route was aesthetically perfect, an arrow splitting the face, pointing straight to the summit. We were aware that the upper Tokositna basin, from which the west face rose, and where no man had ever been, offered any number of challenging climbs we might try in the event that Huntington did not prove feasible.

We had hoped to walk in, but Don Sheldon had little trouble dissuading us. A seventy-mile hike, including an unknown icefall, would take too long; thanks to an overloaded microbus we were well behind schedule. Thus on June 29 Sheldon landed Ed Bernd, Matt Hale, Don Jensen, and me beneath the northeast face of Mount Hunter, high on the Tokositna Glacier and four miles west of our projected Base Camp. We were all members of the Harvard Mountaineering Club, climbing partners in the past and hence close friends, and because of that, a close-knit expedition. As compatible as we were, we differed fundamentally. Without doing too great a violence to the complexities of personality, it could be said that we were proof of medieval physiology, each epitomizing one of the four humours: Ed sanguine, Matt melancholy, Don phlegmatic, and I choleric.

Five uneventful days of packing — enlivened only by an abortive attempt at a sled — established us at the foot of our route. From here an icefall led to a col at 8900 feet, between Huntington and a small peak to the west. From the col, a steep, knife-edged ridge (the lower portion of which we named the "Stegosaur," because of its sharp, jagged shape), rose to two snowfields of about 45°: the "Lower" and "Upper Parks," separated by a snow chute we called the "Alley." At 10,100 feet the Upper Park merged into the west face proper, and in the next 1400 feet lay the crux of the route — a steep rock and snow wall, a true face averaging just under 70°. Above that, a steep snow slope led to the summit ridge at 11,900 feet; from there a corniced quarter mile would take us to the summit.

The icefall to the col proved easy. We bypassed its gaping crevasses and spent several stormy days packing loads over it. The Stegosaur, however, did not yield so easily. Its north side was heavily corniced; its south side was bordered by vertical rock faces and near-vertical snow gullies that plunged to the floor of the Lower Tokositna, 3000 feet below.

On our first attempt on the ridge, I broke off a gigantic cornice. A little disheartened, we turned to the construction of a snow cave. However only two could work on the cave at one time, and Don began to eye the gap where the cornice had been. Soon, with him belaying, Matt led up a fifteen-foot wall of hard ice, tunnelled through the residual cornice, and emerged on the far side. A steep snow traverse brought him to the first rock of our route. It was all we had hoped for, clean, sharp-edged granite.

We progressed at a very slow and irregular rate. On July 6 Don and I put in two and a half pitches of steep snow and rock, which included some aid on a 60° *verglased* slab. The following day Ed and Matt could place only two more pitches, despite ten hours of climbing. On the fourth pitch Ed led a nearly vertical stretch of hard ice plastered with a few inches of snow.

Steep snow traverses were quite tedious to put in. The crust had first to be chopped or cut off, and hip-deep snow stamped flat. To keep from disappearing, the leader occasionally had to build up his steps with snow from above. Warm weather avalanched the steps off and new snow filled them. Several times we had to completely replace many of the pitches. To compound our problems, the temperature for a long while rarely dropped below freezing, and on many nights the saturated snow made climbing inadvisable. Snow structures that had grown all winter began to collapse in the warmest weather of the year. In the cave we waited, read, and played Monopoly. Ed and Don won all the first games, and just as Matt and I were about to file anti-trust suits he broke into the winners' column. "I guess it's a game of skill after all," he said. I agreed after winning the next game.

Putting in only a few pitches on those rare nights when we could climb, we had by July 15 completed only fifteen pitches, all consistently difficult and exposed. Half our allotted time was up and we were not one third of the way up our route. We had not even reached the Alley, and the face above remained a mystery. Obviously, to succeed, we would have to place a camp as soon as possible. Finally on the 16th, the weather was a little colder and we could proceed. Don and I put in two pitches, cached a food box, and returned. Ed and Matt, carrying a minimum

camp, passed us on our way down, and reached the Alley in two more rope lengths. They were disappointed but not surprised to find no natural campsites. In hopes of a better site they continued. Wind and blowing snow made communications difficult and chilled them, but they rapidly placed six pitches to the foot of the "Spiral," a 200-foot rock and ice buttress, the first problem of the face. After twelve hours of climbing, they had found no good campsite, and resigned themselves to the laborious task of descending and chopping a platform at the Alley. It took them seven more hours to get a two-man tent pitched and anchored to rock pitons.

Three days of snow confined them in their spectacular camp. Late on the third day Don and I were able to reach them after a slow climb through the treacherous snow. Matt and I returned to the cave, leaving Don and Ed to work on the route.

On July 20 Don and Ed attacked the Spiral. Like the rock of the Stegosaur, it was beautiful, clean granite. Blocks which had no right to be there were frozen into the face, providing excellent holds. On the twenty-sixth pitch Don led an icy slab topped by twenty vertical feet, all free. What would have been a difficult lead under any circumstances became magnificent under these: iced-up cracks, snowy holds, and the necessity for crampons. Ed's pitch was only slightly less difficult, but more exposed, as he climbed high-angle slabs and surmounted a final vertical bit with a stirrup. A short ice gully, and the route was in to the top of the Spiral.

We had finally made a dent in the face, but the weather refused to cooperate. Two days of snow intervened before Matt and I could move up to the Alley Camp on the 23rd and take over the lead from Don and Ed. A few days before, we had rappelled off the Stegosaur to reach the basin above the icefall. Now we could use the rappel rope for prusiking and thus short-cut past the first nine pitches. On the 25th Don and Ed were able to remove all the fixed ropes and pitons from those nine pitches, so that we could eventually use them above.

With time growing short, the weather underwent just the dramatic change we needed. Under a cloudless sky Matt and I packed loads up to Don's and Ed's high point. Even with stirrups and fixed ropes, we could not carry our loads over these pitches, but had to haul them.

On the 26th, again cloudless, Matt led the twenty-ninth pitch, a steep icy chimney at the top of which he hung a stirrup from a piton driven precariously between rock and ice. On the next pitch I crossed a prominent avalanche chute, down which rocks and ice, loosened by two days

of sun, occasionally swept. Excited by the good rock and our progress, we put pitch after pitch behind us. Shortly we stood on steep snow beneath a fifty-foot ceiling, a feature we had called the "Nose" for its prominence on the face. We decided to attack the Nose head on. From our route pictures we knew that once above it we would be in very good position for the summit. The ceiling was made for climbing, and the weather held perfect. Matt, undeterred by dripping water, nailed up an expanding vertical crack. On the ceiling itself, he managed a series of long but not uncomfortable reaches, and soon hung from his stirrups at the lip. I saw him retable quickly, and knew he was on the snow above. We had passed the greatest obstacle.

The next day Don and Ed assumed the lead. They climbed the pitches Matt and I had placed, and late that night they got a tent pitched on a tiny ice platform, again anchored by rock pitons, just below the Nose. Two days later the weather was still fine. This was the break we needed. Getting an early start, Don and Ed reclimbed the Nose and started work on the top of the face. Although they could afford only one or two pitons per pitch and were short on fixed rope as well, they climbed superbly. Now they were on very steep ice and snow, shallowly coating the rock beneath. In the early afternoon Don led over the final rock barrier below the summit icefield. The pitch was outstanding; twice he took aid from shaky pitons far above his protection. They emerged on the sweeping expanse of the summit icefield. The exposure, especially after climbing on rock and in chimneys, was terrific. They started up the 45° slope, but the snow was in poor shape. Reaching the last rock outcrop at 11,700 feet, they set up the bivouac tent Don had made and waited for night. They were going for the summit.

Meanwhile, Matt and I had been bringing up the last of the hardware and fixed ropes to the Nose Camp. On a hunch, we'd brought our down jackets and extra lunches. When we reached the camp, it was still early, so we decided to continue. Above the Nose, we marvelled at the leads Don and Ed had done, and placed extra protection to safeguard the descent. By early evening, we had caught up with them. It was the happiest of reunions. We had suspected that only two of us, if any, might have a chance for the summit. Now all four of us could go for it, together.

We joined as a rope of four. We'd been going twelve hours already, but this was our chance; the air was calm and still cloudless. Don led. We climbed through the night, watching the sun fade from the long tongue of the Tokositna, the bulk of McKinley grow dark, and at last the stars come out. A little after midnight, we reached the summit ridge.

I took over the lead. We surmounted two short, vertical flutings made out of crumbling snow. We could climb the second one, our fifty-third pitch, only by using an ice-axe shaft and our longest picket as daggers.

We reached the summit at 3:30 A.M., in the pink glow of sunrise. At last, after thirty-two days of effort, this was our reward. Now we stood above the confining walls of the upper Tokositna that had bound our world for the last month. We were very tired. Ed wanted to set off a firecracker that he'd brought all the way, but we were afraid of knocking loose the cornices. Even the summit was a cornice.

We were alone in that privileged place. As far as we could see, over the miles of mountain, glacier, and tundra, we witnessed no human act but our own. In the vast stillness nothing spoke of the other world, the world of men and machines we usually lived in and sometimes found sufficient. But not always, not now; life is not enough without some moment of challenge, solitude, grandeur.

Our descent went slowly. The ropes got tangled easily, and we simply left a lot of the expensive hardware we'd intended to retrieve. We were near exhaustion. Finally, after twenty-five straight hours of climbing, we rappelled into the Nose Camp. We spent the rest of the day sleeping, eating, and laughing. We were quite crowded, all in a two-man tent pitched narrow.

At ten P.M. Ed and I started down to the Alley Camp, where our other tent waited. Don and Matt would follow at their leisure. Just before midnight the accident happened.

When I could no longer see or hear Ed falling, I shouted up into the gloom for Matt and Don, but I knew they couldn't hear me.

What had happened? I looked at the piton; it was intact, but the carabiner and rope were gone with Ed. Apparently the 'biner had flipped, its gate opened against the rock, and come loose. Or the carabiner had broken. We shall never know, and it does not really matter.

I managed to climb down the seven pitches to camp without a rope, relying heavily on the fixed ropes. There I waited for two days, alone and nervous, until Matt and Don came on August 1. As Matt describes it, "From the top of the Alley I could see the tent, and Dave's head sticking out. As I neared the tent, his silence seemed foreboding, and I sensed that something was wrong. Looking down I saw only one pack. Just as the implications were coming home, Dave finally spoke: 'Matt, I'm alone.' "

A day later we completed the descent. The snow conditions were terrible, and we could not find our steps. In places a quarter-inch of ice coated

the fixed ropes. With three on the rope, the going was very awkward, and three times we stopped falls with the fixed ropes. At last we reached the rappel and got down to the cave.

We left some things there, like the Monopoly set. We left Ed, since there was no way to reach his body, no way even to look for it. Five days later we flew out with Sheldon. Already we were reaching an emotional balance. Ed's death had ended his happiness and ours in knowing him, but it did not cancel, and does not now, the joy of sharing a great experience with him, of responding to a challenge we could not have met without him.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENT: Mount Huntington, 12,240 feet, July 30, 1965 (Edward M. Bernd, Matthew Hale, Jr., Don C. Jensen, David S. Roberts) — Second ascent and a new route, the west face.