

# Northwest Ridge of Mount St. Elias

BOYD N. EVERETT, JR.

MOUNT ST. ELIAS, the first major peak in Alaska or the Yukon to be climbed, has been a jinx mountain. Through 1964 only three expeditions had reached its summit.\* While one American party did climb the peak in 1946, at least nine American expeditions, including one I led in 1963, have failed to get to the top. No mountain in Alaska or the Yukon has a higher rate of expedition failure. That St. Elias has caused climbers so much difficulty is not surprising. Much bigger than its 18,008-foot elevation might suggest, on its south side it rises out of the Pacific Ocean, which lies only 20 miles from the summit. Because of its proximity to the sea, the peak bears the brunt of storms and the prevailing winds off the ocean. Bad weather must be expected. Unlike McKinley or Logan, St. Elias has no easy route to its summit. Even the Duke of the Abruzzi's 1897 route would now be difficult because of crevasse problems. No summit in North America over 16,000 feet is harder to reach.

When a proposed expedition of mine to Mount Logan fell through, I suggested to the Harvard Mountaineering Club that they hold their 1965 Climbing Camp on Mount St. Elias. Since the HMC had planned to go to the Kaskawulsh Glacier about 60 miles east of St. Elias, it was not too difficult to change the objective of the Camp. Our proposed route was the unclimbed northwest ridge, which my party had attempted in 1963. A shortage of time, complicated by two major earthquakes, had stopped us that year at 15,000 feet after we had solved most of the technical problems on the route. Though an ambitious project for the HMC Climbing Camp, the ten-man group worked better and more efficiently than any expedition group I have ever been with. Members of the expe-

\*1. Duke Luigi Amedeo of the Abruzzi, Vittorio Sella, Filippo De Filippi, V. Cagni, F. Gonella, Joseph Petigax, J. A. Maquignaz, A. Croux, E. Botta and A. Pelissier on July 31, 1897; 2. Benjamin Ferris, Elizabeth and Andrew Kauffman, William Latady, Maynard M. Miller, Cornelius and Dee Molenaar on July 16, 1946 (*A.A.J.*, 1947, 6:3 pp. 257-268); 3. Shiro Nishimae and Takaaki Yamane on July 17, 1964 (*A.A.J.*, 1965, 14:2 pp. 303-308).

dition included: James Alt, Dr. Gordon Benner, Edwin Bernbaum, Joseph Davidson, Dennis Eberl, James Given, David Redmond, Leon Story, William Van de Graaff and myself. Six of the party were HMC members and the other four represented Dartmouth, Yale and Ohio State.

On July 10 and 11 we were flown to a good landing site at 7000 feet on the Columbus Glacier by Jack Wilson of Glennallen, Alaska. Over the years circumstances have forced me to use three other Alaskan or Yukon bush pilots. Each time I fly with another pilot I appreciate the capabilities of Jack more. There is no man of greater experience in the St. Elias Mountains. Most important of all he has a sense of responsibility for climbing parties that no other pilot has demonstrated to me.

Early on the 12th it started to rain and continued to pour for three days. In preparing for the expedition I had advised everyone to leave rain gear behind "as it never rains in the St. Elias Mountains" and we were totally unprepared. We could have solved New York's water problem with what we bailed out of our tents.

After this inauspicious start we had several days of good weather. By July 16 the entire party was at Camp II (12,000 feet) on a col between the main northwest ridge and a 13,200-foot subpeak which we tentatively named "Toland Peak" in honor of David Toland, a Harvard student who suffocated in his tent on St. Elias in 1958. Up to this point there were no technical difficulties except a bergschrund at 11,800 feet, which forced the route under some moderately dangerous seracs and up a 50-foot section of 60° to 70° ice which we fixed with rope.

The crux of the northwest ridge is a rock and ice face that rises 1500 vertical feet above Camp II at an angle of 50°. Some is steeper, up to 60°, but none is less than 45°. In 1963, except for a few rock pitches, most of the face was not too difficult, hard-packed snow, but two dry winters had replaced the snow with black ice. This required step cutting and was slow work. The total actual lead time for climbing 21 consecutive pitches and fixing 3100 feet of rope was 20 hours spread over three days. Dennis Eberl and I shared the lead on this face, and Dennis did the two best rock pitches. The rotten 55° to 60° rock, at least fourth class under good conditions, was not trivial when led at night with crampons and heavy gloves.

Good weather ended with a snow storm on the 18th. During a lull on the 22nd we carried loads over fixed ropes to Camp III on top of the face at 13,500 feet before the blizzard returned with renewed force.

On the 24th we braved the seventh day of snow and wind to push on another 500 vertical feet to Camp IV on a large plateau at 14,000

feet. Although this section would normally have been easy snow provided you took care to avoid large cornices on the ridge crest, we struck an unexpected 150-foot pitch of  $45^\circ$  ice, which required step cutting. The rope leader received a practical demonstration of why Alaskan ice slopes should not be cramponed when he made a short, self-arrested fall. Later a snow bridge over a peculiar crevasse running *parallel* to the fall line collapsed under Jim Given after several of us had already crossed it. He extricated himself and his wedged pack from the three-foot-wide crack with difficulty. Gus Benner and Ed Bernbaum tried to put the route in to a proposed Camp V at 15,000 feet in continuing snowfall but were stopped when a small slide nearly buried Ed at the base of a steep 500-foot face.

A temporary twelve-hour clearing on the 27th let us get to work again, first breaking trail through a five-foot-deep trench in new snow. A bergschrund marked the beginning of a steep face, and the first two leads went quickly on good snow. Toward the end of the third pitch, where the angle of the face increased from  $45^\circ$  to  $55^\circ$ , Ed Bernbaum and I hit ice and had to cut steps. It took four and a half hours of utterly exhausting chopping to climb the next three pitches. Considerable effort went into each minuscule dent in the rock-hard ice, and on almost every third step, just when it was nearly usable, the whole layer would flake off leaving the same blank face that we started with. Seventy-five feet from the top of the face, the angle steepened to over  $60^\circ$ . From a piton I made a tension traverse on crampon points forty feet to the left to a ridge with an apparent snow surface. But this, too, proved to be ice with the last twenty-five feet a mess of unconsolidated snow and  $70^\circ$  ice. After chopping through the three-foot overhanging cornice, I flopped gasping on the far side before bringing Ed up.

The climb of this face had taken nearly all day. Between us and intended Camp V remained several hundred yards of steep corniced ridge and two rock gendarmes, the most difficult rock climbing of the 1963 expedition. Four of the climbers set up a temporary camp in a crevasse on the ridge while Dennis Eberl and I finished the route to Camp V. The first gendarme was not too difficult to reach, but it did require traversing the most spectacular cornice of the expedition. The second one was harder. At midnight with snow falling we could hardly see. Dennis rappelled into the col between the two gendarmes and climbed up snow to the nearly vertical rock of the second one. Driving four pitons for protection, he traversed forty feet to the left to a less steep angle and went straight up. Fighting rope-drag on a  $60^\circ$  rock slab while perched

on crampon points, he delicately pulled his back rope through and moved to the top of the gendarme to finish the most difficult lead of the climb. Since the rest of the route to Camp V was easy, we returned to Camp IV, getting there at four A.M.

We slept through part of the heaviest snowfall of the expedition, a foot and a half in fifteen hours, on the eleventh consecutive day of snow. At the height of the blizzard, at three P.M., five of us started with our final loads for Camp V. Although none too happy about avalanche possibilities on the face above Camp IV, I felt that the fixed ropes would make us safe. The walk to the base of the face was incredible. Where before we had a five-foot trench to plow, we now sank in so that its top was above our heads. In the last 300 feet it was eight feet deep! Our route was a catch basin for snow slides off the face above, which often swept over our hard-won trench, sometimes covering us. With considerable relief I finally got hold of the fixed rope and attached my Jümar.

Snow conditions on the face were much better and we moved up without trouble. The fixed rope gave us plenty of support to withstand an occasional small surface slide. About six P.M. our position was as follows. I was on the third fixed rope about 20 feet above the second rappel picket with my second, Jim Alt, on the second fixed rope 20 feet above the first rappel picket. The leader of the second rope, Dennis Eberl, was on the first fixed rope 50 feet below the first rappel picket. His rope partners, Redmond and Bernbaum, were below the bergschrund. Eberl was also using a Jümar for protection.

Suddenly from high above us and to the right crashed a heavy wind-slab avalanche, which swept to the right of Alt and me but hit Eberl with full force. Though he was knocked off his stance, the Jümar held him to the fixed rope, but the weight bent the four-foot rappel picket 120° and pulled it out. The second fixed rope, around which Alt had his hand wrapped for support, went taut and its three-foot rappel picket also bent into a uniformly curved quarter circle and pulled out. With that my fixed rope went tight, but fortunately the anchor point, an ice piton, held. The second fixed rope, quarter-inch nylon with 1800-pound breaking strength, however, broke above Alt thus removing his and Eberl's support. Both slipped. Eberl fell about 300 feet until his climbing rope pulled him up, unhurt. The sudden jerk from Jim Alt pulled me off my stance and my Jümar, probably iced up, slid until it jammed against the now loose rappel picket. We fell only about 20 feet and were unhurt in the fall. The fixed rope had squeezed Jim's left hand and sprained



his wrist. The wrist, an ice axe broken at Camp IV that morning and a food box lost in the avalanche forced Alt, Bernbaum, Given and Redmond to descend to Base Camp on the 29th.

July 29 was the first clear day in twelve. We used it to ferry loads to Camp V and to prepare 1200 feet of the route above Camp V towards the summit. From Camp V the route rose 1500 feet up the corniced north-west ridge to a broad three-mile-long summit plateau at 16,500 feet. From the end of the plateau a crevassed but not too steep cone led another 1500 feet up to the summit.

July 30 was the scheduled summit day. We started at seven o'clock in uncertain weather. The route that Joe Davidson and Bill Van de Graaff had prepared the day before in six hours, we made in less than two hours. In the next two, we belayed along the corniced ridge with our heels above the spectacular 12,000-foot south face. As we reached the plateau, threatening clouds completely covered us. In white-out and storm our three ropes separated and were not united until 3:30 that afternoon. The three-mile plateau was an easy walk, but route-finding on the summit cone became a problem. We headed blindly straight uphill and this worked fine except where we stumbled onto a few small crevasses. Trail breaking was slow in the heavy snow. Face masks protected us against a moderately strong wind. The 1500-foot cone required over five hours.

Finally at seven P.M. tired, with faces caked with ice, but elated, all six of us reached the summit together. This comfortably large area was marked by a rappel picket left by the Japanese in 1964, on which Gus Benner left his drinking cup. After a few quick group pictures we turned to descend.

This descent proved to be worse than the ascent. The wind increased sharply in violence. Gusts easily reached 60-mph, strong enough to knock us over. Retracing our trail marked with four-foot willow wands was not easy in the blinding brightness of the storm, but Gus Benner did a fine job wandering back and forth to locate one wand after another. The violent wind lessened somewhat after two hours and visibility improved, but that two-hour period was enough, following as it did a twelve-hour ascent, to tire all of us. Beyond the plateau and at the top of the ridge two of the group were dog tired and could not consider further descent in the darkness. With ice axes and hands only we dug two pitifully small snow caves. There was one bivouac sack for two people. Four of us huddled in our down jackets until four o'clock, when the sun rose on a magnificent day. The temperature was 2° F. Either

the rest or the sun completely changed the disposition of our companions, and thus we were able to descend uneventfully to the safety and comforts of Camp V by eight A.M. By August 3 we were off the mountain.

The northwest ridge is probably the most interesting route yet done on St. Elias. The route required 56 pitons and 4900 feet of fixed rope, an unusual amount of hardware for an Alaskan climb prior to 1965. The climb is more difficult than the Southeast Spur of McKinley, the only climb I can compare it with. For a reasonably competent party, however, the northwest ridge is a fine ascent route with both good rock and ice climbing. Campsites are good and suitable for a large party. There is a good airplane landing site at the base of the climb. In spite of our avalanche on July 28, the route does not have unreasonable objective hazards. While there are several possibilities for new routes on St. Elias, expeditions may eventually find the northwest ridge the most satisfying. I predict that in years to come it will be the most often repeated route.

*Summary of Statistics.*

AREA: St. Elias Mountains on Alaskan-Yukon border.

ASCENT: Mount St. Elias, 18,008 feet, July 30, 1965 (Everett, Benner, Davidson, Eberl, Story, Van de Graaff) — fourth ascent of mountain; first ascent of northwest ridge.

PERSONNEL: Boyd N. Everett, Jr., *leader*; James Alt, Dr. Gordon Benner, Edwin Bernbaum, Joseph Davidson, Dennis Eberl, James Given, David Redmond, Leon Story, William Van de Graaff.

