

# The Centennial Climb on Mount Vancouver

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IN 1874 W. H. Dall and Marcus Baker of the U. S. Coast Survey named Mounts Cook and Vancouver from the sea, but somehow the names and elevations must have gotten scrambled, as they mapped Cook's approximate elevation on Vancouver and Vancouver's approximate elevation on Cook, and surely they had intended the higher mountain to bear Cook's name, for he was the more famous of the two British navigators. At any rate, the names stuck where they first appeared on the maps and the elevations were soon applied to the right mountains. At the time of the Klondike gold rush the need was seen to determine the Alaska-Canada boundary more precisely, as the old Russian-British Treaty of 1825 had merely said for this section, "the chain of mountains which follow, at a very small distance, the winding of the coast." The crests and interior of the Saint Elias Mountains were quite unknown around 1900 and "a very small distance" was taken to be within 10 marine leagues, so it was decided to connect prominent peaks no more than  $34\frac{1}{2}$  miles from the sea to form the boundary between the head of Portland Canal and the 141st meridian. Mount Vancouver was used as Boundary Peak 181, but the surveyors went in no further than the sea in this area, hence they used the south-southeast summit rather than the higher one hidden behind it.

Mount Vancouver is a significant landmark and by 1948 it attracted mountaineers from Project Snow Cornice on the Seward Glacier who attempted the northwest ridge to about 13,000 feet (see *Appalachia* 27: pp. 321-333). The next year Walter Wood organized the first-ascent party that followed the same ridge, Alan Bruce Robertson, William Hainsworth, Robert McCarter, and Noel E. Odell reaching the summit July 5 (see *A.A.J.*, 1950, 7:4, pp. 367-378.) They had to climb up through a cloud cap, so there was no view at all when they arrived at 4:30 in the afternoon to tell if they had reached the right summit. Views from other mountains or planes through the years tended to support the belief that they had indeed climbed the highest of Vancouver's five peaks, but the border summit is a close second and remained the highest unclimbed point on the boundary for 70 years, Mount Saint Elias being the only higher border peak.

Thus, when a mountaineering centennial celebration was proposed to mark the 100th anniversary of the Confederation of Canada and the U. S. purchase of Alaska, this border peak of Mount Vancouver was the best choice for the principal climb and was referred to as "Good Neighbor Peak." Its elevation has been officially listed on twentieth century maps as 15,700 feet, but determinations of 15,666 and 15,673 feet during that time indicate that an accurate measurement would be closer to those figures. For this centennial climb the Alpine Club of Canada chose to be represented by Monty Alford, Dr. Alan Bruce-Robertson (veteran of the 1949 climb), Glen Boles, and Les McDonald. The American Alpine Club chose Dan Davis, George Denton, Jed Williamson, and myself. Monty and I were designated co-leaders. Almost none of us had ever climbed together, some had not even met a single one of the other seven before the day we started flying in from Kluane Lake.

This was the evening of June 18, and Monty, Alan, George, and I comprised the first group traveling in two ski-wheel heliocourier aircraft from Kluane Lake headquarters of the Icefield Ranges Research Project up the Kaskawulsh Glacier and down the Hubbard Glacier to land at 7000 feet on the Alaskan side of Mount Vancouver. It was at the head of the Valerie Glacier, an area never before penetrated by mountaineers, where we set up Base Camp. The clouds closed over us as the planes left, and the next day George was left to man the radio in case it should clear enough to bring the others in while Monty, Alan, and I on snowshoes wanded a route through an easy icefall to the base of our chosen south ridge of the southeast buttress of the border peak. Not till noon on the 20th did the clouds lift enough to permit the other four men to be flown in. That afternoon these four, George, and I snowshoed with loads up the route of the day before and we climbed a 20-foot vertical bergschrund wall to gain our ridge. We cached our loads there and fixed 50 feet of rope to facilitate further relays onto the ridge.

On June 21 we abandoned Base Camp and carried what we needed of it with us as we continued beyond our cache over a quarter mile of shattered rock ridge, in some places nearly knife-edged. This required care with our heavy loads, but eventually we reached a humped tongue of glacier at 10,300 feet and set up Camp I with excellent views not only of our route, but of the south face of the border peak. We noted that the south rib would make a steep but not too dangerous rock route with a hanging glacier finish, an aesthetically direct route to the border summit.

However, our route was a pleasing one and the next day we ferried loads from the ridge cache to Camp I. In the evening Les and I recon-

noitered ahead setting up 500 feet of fixed rope and locating the site for Camp II at 11,800 feet while the others brought loads part way. This was the steepest section of the climb, but almost no step-cutting was required as the surface was good for crampons.

On the 23rd the snowshoes that had been brought up the ridge were left behind, as we had decided a traverse down the 1949 route was logistically impractical. We moved on to Camp II whose site was on the lower lip of a big sérac-forming crevasse near where its end could be turned. In the evening the others returned for the cache while Les and I found a way up the slopes above to our final campsite in another large snow-filled crevasse at about 14,000 feet just below the crest of the southeast buttress. We set up another 100 feet of fixed rope. The following day we moved to Camp III, hoping for one more good day in our phenomenal streak of good weather while high cirrus cloud wisps and lowering atmospheric pressure were predicting an end to it. Low clouds were moving in to obscure Disenchantment Bay and the lower glaciers, though we could still see clearly from Mount Saint Elias to Mount Fairweather.

A bit of wind buffeted our tents in the night but was not strong the morning of June 25 and it was clear above a 12,000-foot gray cloud deck. We set out for the summits on three ropes, Les and I first, Dan-Jed-George second, Monty-Alan-Glen third, traversing from our camp to the col on the ridge. We found the ridge easier than it had looked from below since it was broad enough to bypass vertical steps to one side or the other.

About 11:30 the first rope reached the top and we looked across the three intervening summits at the north-northwest peak nearly two miles into Yukon Territory. It seemed slightly higher, and so we set out to double-traverse this summit ridge. The central of the three middle summits was the highest, but the one beyond it the most difficult to pass, with steep avalanche slopes to the east and rotten cornices to the west. Then a flat of soft snow where we dropped our emergency pack, a sastrugied slope, and finally at 3:25 the small top of Vancouver itself for a second ascent by a wholly new route. We looked down the long northwest ridge used in 1949, but could see an easier route from the north from the Hubbard Glacier, now the only still unclimbed side on Vancouver. We had seen everyone make the border summit, but only three were following us across. We met them midway. Dan and George continued all the way, but Monty turned back after attaining the central summit. It had been a long summit day, but Monty and I made a side trip as we returned to the top of the 14,300-foot southeast buttress to watch for our

last two companions. The wind was gusting and temperature dropping toward zero as the storm approached. How fortunate that this had been such a beautiful summit day! Dan and George returned late but satisfied. The altimeter Dan had carried showed 125 feet difference between the summits in favor of the north-northwest one.

The storm came in the night with snow and wind and continued for the next two days with periods of thick white-out. Our camps consisted of a Black's 4-man tent in which we gathered to cook, eat, and socialize (the latter in more ways than one with Les on hand to steer conversation) and three 2-man Meade tents. Doc Alan would make the rounds in any weather administering pills (sleeping pills termed "greenies" were in great demand for relief from flapping tents) and listening to "funny chests" with a cold stethoscope.

Finally the 28th we were able to wade down through accumulated fresh snow to Camp I and the next day carefully cross the newly snow-covered rock ridge. We found as we webbed through the icefall that several of our snowbridges had collapsed, but a partially new route with one spectacularly long bridge was made. We located our initial cache and re-established Base Camp. Ideas of a first ascent of Mount Foresta, 11,960 feet, among its tempting virgin matrix of peaks were thwarted by the distance and continued poor weather. Nor could the plane come. We packed a runway long enough for a jet and played many variations of "frisbies," sailing pie-plate tent-guy anchors. On July 3 the Yukon Alpine Centennial Expedition's hired De Havilland Beaver aircraft came to bear us and our memories of a fine association away from Mount Vancouver.

#### *Summary of Statistics.*

AREA: Saint Elias Mountains.

ASCENTS: "Good Neighbor Peak" (border summit of Mount Vancouver), 15,700 feet, first ascent, June 25, 1967 (whole party).

Central Peak, c. 15,700 feet, first ascent, double-traverse, June 25 (Alford, Davis, Denton, Hoeman, and McDonald).

Mount Vancouver, 15,825 feet, second ascent by new route, June 25 (Davis, Denton, Hoeman, McDonald).

Southeast Buttress, 14,300 feet, first ascent, June 25 (Alford and Hoeman).

PERSONNEL: Montague Ewart Alford and John Vincent Hoeman, *co-leaders*; Glendon Webber Boles, Dr. Alan Bruce-Robertson, and Leslie McDonald, *Canadians*; Daniel Roy Davis, George Henry Denton, and John Edward Williamson, *Americans*.