

Mount Foraker's South Ridge

WARREN BLESER AND ALEX BERTULIS

TWO close calls with horrendous rock avalanches at the base of the 8000-foot south wall of Mount Foraker (17,400 feet) led to the unanimous decision to concentrate our efforts on the virgin ridge that flanked the wall's left side. During the period of approach and reconnaissance we had established a cache low on the ridge and we were in a favorable position for its ascent. A storm prevented any movement for still another three days and nights, but finally on July 11 the weather cleared. At midnight we abandoned Base Camp at 7200 feet on the Lacuna Glacier and began the climb.

A fixed rope in a couloir helped us keep good balance on the 35° slope of sheet ice leading to the crest of the ridge 1500 feet up. Along the knife-edged crest of the ridge itself, travel was unpleasant at best. The snow was soft and fresh, and the limits of the profusely overhanging cornices were often uncertain. Occasionally we encountered quick rock scrambles; yet for the most part we found the going over precipitous fresh snow slow. Tired, we pushed late into the morning in search of an adequate campsite. Due to illusion, the next crest higher always seemed flatter than the present one. Pete Williamson* and Warren Bleaser, out in front, finally settled for a large but heavily overhanging cornice, much to the skepticism of their teammates. Hans Baer and Alex Bertulis started the task of digging a snow cave in this wave of snow; its location was carefully calculated not to extend into the overhang on one side, nor onto the rapidly steepening down-slope on the other. Warren and Pete headed back to the cache for more loads, safeguarding the more difficult parts of the route with fixed ropes. Meanwhile, the snow-cave digging had turned into ice-hacking. After several hours an icy hole four feet by six by three feet high was finished. With the sun still high, Baer and Bertulis wearily settled into their down bags. During the night an attempt

* Recipient of an American Alpine Club Climbing Fellowship grant.

to crawl outside was repulsed by high winds and loose snow drifting at the entrance hole. Outside the cave there was the danger of kicking off and perhaps getting caught in an avalanche. Even movement in the entrance caused snow to scatter into the most unwelcome areas of the shelter. Rather than to risk getting the last dry articles of insulation wet, they decided to remain in the cave. Since the ceiling was too low to sit up, housekeeping for the next four days was accomplished lying down. With portable transceivers radio contact was maintained with Warren and Pete, who, faced with the sudden change of weather, retreated to Base Camp.

Around ten on the morning of July 17, Hans and Alex were aroused from their slumber by the shouts of their companions approaching from below. In the brilliant sun equipment was aired, part of the cornice was leveled for a two-man tent, and Alex's birthday was celebrated in fine style with rare Scotch whiskey. That night the last of the supplies were brought up from the cache. During the several passes over the ridge below, it was remarkable how radically the snow conditions on the ridge changed, making a stretch that was difficult before almost impossible later and vice versa.

Above Camp I the next thousand-foot stretch of ridge involved the usual cornices but in the middle a lead of nearly vertical rock had to be scaled. In pushing the route, two men would climb and deposit substantial loads as high as possible while the other two slept in the tent tied to a safety line. The tent was perched well over the limits of the cornice overhang. At a later date the cornice did collapse, taking half of the tent platform 2000 feet down the 60° face. The final obstacle below Camp II was a 500-foot wall. Peter, in particular, did some fine leading on this ice-plastered face of granite.

Beyond Camp II the route took on more of the character of a 1500-foot wall with a rock band midway up. Above the rock, the snow swept upward, culminating in a final, nearly vertical pitch of ice. Near the top of this lead, probing yielded a cavity in the wall; Warren gained the crest via this small hole that led into the bottom of a crevasse belonging to the hanging glacier which sprawled across the ridge. In front was a maze of crevasses, séracs, overhanging ice faces and heaving masses of snow that were on their way down the mountain but not yet tumbling. A few tricky bridges and a jump or two preceded a full lead of exposed 50° ice, which Hans climbed with assurance and speed. Soon we reached a small plateau, but it was not far enough advanced for a camp. "Misty Gap" was within sight, but a steep snow and ice

pinnacle shaped like a rooster's tail prevented easy access to the desired "Dome" at the gap. Since we could find a route around neither side of the Rooster, we proceeded to climb directly over this obstacle. The first lead ended in exhausting step-cutting on 55° ice. The second followed the extremely thin crest, while the third landed us on the Dome, a comfortable, relatively flat expanse of snow with softly curving shoulders. Besides offering an unforgettable panorama of the Alaska Range, with the Lacuna Glacier forging its way past virgin peaks, Camp III was free from objective hazards.

The time schedule and a diminishing food supply indicated that this should be the final camp. The 5000 vertical feet still ahead would have to be climbed in one sustained effort, alpine style. A serpentine stretch of ridge, corniced or nearly vertical on one side and 70° on the other, awaited us at Misty Gap. Pete Williamson and Warren Bleser spent twelve hours fixing rope on the first 1000 feet of ridge while the other two rested as the advance team for the final push. Warren recounts:

"On the night of July 23, while Alex and Hans slept, Pete and I left Camp III with the last 1000 feet of fixed rope. An easy walk around the flank of the Dome brought us face to face with a thin suspension of ridge connecting the Dome with the main mountain mass above. This section, the 'Peruvian Way,' involved me for the next twelve hours in the most demanding climbing I have ever done.

"On the first lead, I found myself on a shell of a former snow-and-ice formation; the sun had reduced it to emptiness—a rotten skeleton about to fall apart. The corn snow under the surface acted like a pile of marbles, which tumbled and scattered underfoot. Without good ice anywhere, it was impossible to get in a solid piton or picket for protection. Part way up, I paused to reconsider. One mistake in these tricky conditions would mean a long plunge before the rope would come into play. Somehow I did not have the heart to tell Pete we were licked. The second lead, more a long traverse in nature, had greater problems. The ridge crest was much like a double cornice, two or three feet wide near the top and narrower below. Expecting the whole formation would fall out from under me, I moved slowly across the long traverse as daintily as possible and continued upward. Pete and I were stringing rope on the way up this time; the idea was not to delay the other pair if they came through before we had completed our task. A major snarl of hundreds of feet of rope consumed a terrible amount of time. The next two leads were endless problems of cutting up through cornices or cutting down them. Once suddenly a cornice broke under my feet and I was left

momentarily clinging to an inserted ice axe, thankfully not high above my belayer. By the end of the fourth lead I was fatigued. Perhaps it was time for the new generation to take over. Pete's rejection of the lead was inwardly flattering and reassured me that the climbing was as demanding as it seemed to my tired mind. By morning we neared the end of the Peruvian Way and anchored the end of the fixed rope securely with aluminum discs. Though it had been quite a night, the path was now open for the summit bid. Pete and I returned to Camp III."

Alex Bertulis describes the advance push for the summit: "On the morning of the twenty-fourth, Hans Baer and I each took a two-day ration of food, bivouac gear and started up. The warm sun softened the snow but the fixed rope provided some security. Occasional anchors, however, were strictly psychological. Above the Peruvian Way the terrain became increasingly steeper, alternating with snow, ice and rock. At times it was simpler to shave off the entire length of a peaked cornice ridge and follow the narrow crest like a tight-rope artist. Once during the night we crouched on a tiny platform sheltered by a granite outcropping and drank soup warmed by gas stoves. Low temperature prevented any extended rest periods. The thought of limited good weather and the last chance to reach the summit was enough to keep us moving constantly. By the following morning the ridge eased off. The sun once again softened the snow, slowing upward progress considerably. Both of us were tired and Hans' stomach was aching. We sought a bivouac site but found no letup of the slope. The left side of the ridge dropped off sharply into the basin 8000 feet below, while the right sloped gradually into the south wall. At 15,500 feet, we settled into two tiny platforms carved on the crest of the ridge. No sooner had we finished our meal than the figures of our two companions appeared just a few feet below. Following in our tracks, Pete and Warren had taken just *ten* hours to cover the distance we had covered in *twenty-eight!* Still left with energy they pushed ahead for another thousand feet of elevation, to just below the south summit, where they dug a cave for the cold night. Unable to sleep on our miserable perches, but having rested, we joined our companions above. At the cave site the air was too thin and cold for Hans and me to continue. Having left our sleeping bags at the last stop, we shared one nylon bivouac sack and crawled into a narrow hole dug in the snow bank that forced us to sleep wedged together, aborigine style, for added warmth though at the cost of comfort.

With the sun behind the mountains the temperature dropped severely. The persistent strong wind blew sharp snow pellets through the air.

While Warren and Pete slept in relative comfort, completely hidden in their down bags, Hans and I were bitterly cold, desperately trying to slumber off into badly needed sleep. Our efforts were in vain. Finally, Hans declared he was not feeling well and could remain like this no longer; it was either to the summit or down *now*. After a hot drink we continued sleepless over the almost flat south summit, skirting occasional crevasses. A slightly depressed snowfield, just a few hundred yards across, separated us from the main summit. Hans refused to go farther. He was suffering from altitude, cold, exhaustion, an upset stomach and two sleepless nights. Besides, Hans is no summit collector; the south ridge had been successfully climbed! I continued on alone. The south side of the summit pyramid rarely exceeded 25° but soft snow made the going slow. The summit was as big and flat as a football field. Majestic Mount McKinley loomed in the north while to the east, rising sharply out of the Kahiltna Glacier in a series of jutting ridges and buttresses, stood the twin-summitted Mount Hunter, framed by a sea of rugged peaks behind. To the west there was only a vast plain of velvety tundra, deep green or olive, interrupted by an occasional yellow ribbon winding its way to some sea hidden behind the horizon. A rusty haze and the smell of distant burning forest spiced the cold, clear air."

Pete and Warren reached the summit soon after Alex. Descending the ridge on one long rope, we made rapid progress in the beginning, climbing in unison. Then the snow ridges became a nightmare. In the warm weather snow foot-and-hand holds disintegrated upon contact, a condition not expected at 14,000 feet close to the Arctic Circle. It was a long, miserable, slow night aggravated by short but always spectacular falls by one climber or another. At the granite shelter used on the way up, we stopped to rest and to dine on a fine meal of dehydrated beef, eggs, Logan bread and cocoa. It was incongruous to struggle on the exposed ridge one moment and to be in this lap of luxury the next. Close to exhaustion, we reached Camp III during the morning of July 27. Hans and Alex, with a day's start on their companions, had been climbing continuously with little rest and no sleep for seventy hours!

The timing had been tight. Shortly after our return to Camp III, a warm summer storm moved in for three days, equal to the amount of food in camp. With a break in the weather we descended to Camp II, recovered some food and gear and continued. A major front from the southwest was approaching. We descended the final 3000 feet of cumbersome snow-and-rock ridge with limited visibility and wet snowfall. After

a 20-hour push we staggered into Base Camp, exhausted and soaked to the bone as well. Gear and camp were shifted to the airbase across the Lacuna Glacier, but inclement weather prevented aerial evacuation for yet another week.

Technical notes: 5000 feet of rope were fixed during the ascent. 4000 feet of $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch polypropylene line were left in place.

In addition to a standard assortment of rock and ice hardware, we carried tubular aluminum ice pickets, three feet long, with a movable ring attached to each. The pickets had limited use since snow and ice were either too soft or too shallow. Instead, 12-inch aluminum discs, $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch thick were used extensively and successfully, often providing anchors where no other form of safeguard was possible. Alpsport tents were used with satisfaction but we should have brought fly sheets against the moisture. Two Primus stoves were used with great efficiency at lower camps. Bluet gas stoves were more effective at higher elevations. Transceiver radios were provided by the American Alpine Club. They were successful over line of sight. We never contacted the pilot in Talkeetna but communicated with unexpected stations in Alaska.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENT: Mount Foraker, 17,400 feet, July 26, 1968. Fourth ascent and first ascent by the South Ridge.

PERSONNEL: Warren Bleser, Alex Bertulis, Hans Baer, Peter Williamson.

