

The West Ridge of Mount Fairweather

WALTER GOVE and LOREN ADKINS, *Unaffiliated*

IN SOUTHEASTERN ALASKA there is a peninsula, at one point only fifteen miles wide, where a dozen peaks tower more than two miles high above the sea. Half are unclimbed. Flanking their awesome brothers are thirty or more lesser peaks of between 6000 and 10,000 feet, almost all unnamed and unclimbed. The Fairweather Range is subject to tremendous and almost continual snowfall. Avalanches constantly pour off the mountains, sometimes with a deafening roar and sometimes with an almost deafening silence. On the high peaks, only the steepest rock, which is generally rotten, is exposed and even here it is frequently overhung by ice. From thick icefields flow numerous glaciers, jumbled, active and crevassed. To the west major glaciers enter the not-so-peaceful Pacific, while to the east they push into the quieter waters of Glacier Bay.

The range is dominated by Mount Fairweather (15,300 feet), with its spectacular 14,000-foot vertical rise, standing two to three thousand feet above its neighbors. Fairweather was first attempted by its west ridge in 1926 by W. S. Ladd, Allen Carpé and Andrew Taylor; they turned back at 9100 feet.¹ This ridge was attempted again by Bradford Washburn and party in 1930.² Finally, in 1931 Fairweather was climbed by Carpé and Terris Moore, supported by Ladd and Taylor, after almost two months of effort.³ Following this ascent, the summit had been reached only once again, this time in 1958 by a Canadian party as a part of British Columbia's centennial celebration.⁴ Both parties had climbed the ridge that lies south-southeast of the summit, starting from 4500 feet on the Fairweather Glacier. Both parties had suffered from a lack of campsites high on the ridge.

We pondered these facts for months, periodically switching mountains and routes, type of transportation (boat or plane), and airdrop sites.

1. See Allen Carpé: "An Attempt on Mount Fairweather," *Appalachia*, Dec., 1926, p. 442.

2. See Bradford Washburn, *Bradford on Mount Fairweather*, G. Putnam and Sons, 1930.

3. See Carpé: "The Conquest of Mount Fairweather," *Alpine Journal*, Nov., 1931, v. 43, p. 221 and Ladd: "The Fairweather Climb," *American Alpine Journal*, 1932, 1:4, p. 429.

4. See Paddy Sherman: "Fairweather," *A.A.J.*, 1959, 11:2, p. 297.

Finally we settled on the west ridge of Fairweather. Our party consisted of Loren Adkins, Walt Gove, Paul Myhre, John Neal, and Kent Stokes.

On June 2, we assembled for the first time as a complete group at Loren's home in Juneau. Some of the gear still had to be packaged for our airdrop, and the chaotic scene could have been lifted from a Laurel and Hardy movie. But somehow, shortly after noon, we were launched. The five of us and our gear filled three of Channel Flying's Cessna 180 float planes. Under a 3500-foot ceiling, we headed towards our hidden mountain, 100 miles to the northwest. In spite of marginal flying conditions, veteran pilot Ken Loken calmly made an airdrop at 3000 feet on the small subsidiary glacier which abuts the foot of the west ridge. We were landed in Desolation Valley, just south of the Sea Otter Glacier, on a pretty lake at 1200 feet. A few days earlier, we would have been unable to land on the lake, which was still half-covered with ice.

While Stokes, Neal, and Myhre attempted to establish radio contact—a dismal and tedious affair that was never really successful—the two of us headed toward the airdrop four miles away. The first two miles on the Sea Otter Glacier were easy. The glacier then became more jumbled. After climbing up, around, or under séracs of varying degrees of stability, we eventually were forced off the glacier and over a 4000-foot ridge. Late that night, in a driving rain, we stopped far short of the airdrop—hungry and unaccountably without food. Back at the lake the others almost lost their tent in the wind. Under way early under clearing skies, we had our first real view of this magnificent country as we topped the ridge: rugged, unclimbed peaks left and right, and in front, the icefall—which we would eventually have to climb—grinding down 6000 vertical feet to our drop site. It was noon before we reached the drop to set up Base Camp. The others arrived around nine in the evening.

Late the following morning we set out to locate a route and to ferry loads to Camp I. We decided to avoid the lower part of the icefall by going left and up a spur of the west ridge to 5500 feet. A fixed line was placed in a steep, dirty gully on the first pitch leading onto the spur. Soon we found ourselves wandering around in deep, slushy snow in a white-out. A big avalanche had already swept the route and smaller slides continued to threaten us. We finally dumped our loads at 5000 feet and headed down at about 10:45 P.M., when the snow was starting to set up. From then on, most of our climbing was done at night.

After a day of baking in the sun, we broke camp at midnight. By seven A.M. we had passed our cache and arrived at the site of Camp I at 5300 feet. In marginal weather, Myhre and Neal set out to reconnoiter

the icefall while the rest of us ferried loads from the cache. After one load, Gove collapsed with some sort of malady which was to strike periodically throughout the entire climb.

When the clouds finally lifted, the view from Camp I was superb. Two alternate routes which we had picked out on the topographical map now made us shudder. One—a 40° to 50° , 6000-foot ridge from the main Sea Otter cirque to high on the west ridge—would make an excellent climb if you do not mind an occasional vertical ice wall.

For this country, where snowfall is measured in feet and not inches, the weather was consistently mild. Nightly lows averaged 7°F . Good and bad days alternated. We generally put in the route and relayed loads on the fine days and moved camp during snowstorms and white-outs. In this manner we were able to climb every day.

Camp II, at 7900 feet in the icefall, and Camp III, at 9100 feet on the rounded ridge crest above, were placed with only an occasional delicate snowbridge or airy step punched into an unseen crevasse. We had planned to establish Camp III higher, but our first carry above Camp II abruptly halted at a nearly vertical 400-foot drop in the ridge line composed of loose and extremely dangerous rock.⁵ Late that afternoon Myhre managed to climb down without a pack, but it was obvious that an easier and safer alternative would have to be found. Though worried about the gap, the next day we moved up the rest of the gear and established Camp III during a blizzard. Finally, on June 10 we tackled it in earnest. Some twelve hours of debate and search yielded a usable route; double-fixed lines insured against weakening from rockfall.

The carry to Camp IV, our high camp, was made in one trip. Climbing at night, in a snow storm, we found the first 1700 feet on the steep and corniced ridge tense. Toward dawn we could not see beyond the shaft of the constantly probing ice axe. After we had decided to wait and spent two hours hacking out a tent platform, the weather immediately improved. Reluctantly we got underway. Soon we were struggling with our 80-pound packs up an exhausting 600-foot, 45° to 50° snow and ice slope. Eventually, at 11,600 feet, we topped out on a small but stable ice dome, where we set up camp. Far below, the summits of the smaller mountains were barely poking through the clouds. To the north, Logan, St. Elias, and other giants were clear.

After trying to sleep during the oppressively hot day, we finally emerged from our sleeping bags to a more appropriate temperature of 3°F . The summit climb, begun at 1:30 A.M., was not technically difficult. The day

5. Obviously the Ladd-Carpé-Taylor high point in 1926.—*Editor*.

was perfect—clear, calm and cold—and the snow was stable and firm. We reached the summit of the western shoulder just in time to be bathed in the first rays of the sun. Below us was a sea of clouds, studded with a thousand islands of jutting peaks.

The steep, symmetrical summit massif dominated the scene. After a brief snack, we dropped down past striking séracs on the ridge crest and traversed over the wide saddle between the peaks. On the long and moderately steep 2300-foot rise to the summit, there were no serious difficulties, and we reached the rather flat summit by ten A.M. The commanding and impressive view somehow did not compare with the vistas we had had of the rugged mountain on which we now stood. During the uneventful return to our high camp, we moved as if in slow motion, dehydrated and tired.

Early the next morning we started the more eventful descent from high camp. First, climbing up the far side of the 400-foot gap, one of Stokes' handholds—a 300-pound block—came loose and plunged by his head. Then, each of our stoves, in turn, failed. While the rising blanket of clouds enveloped the sun, our descent turned into a forced retreat, since we could no longer melt snow for drinking water. Below 9000 feet, the snow was bottomless slush. Adkins led the party down the icefall in the eerie light of an overcast, foggy sub-arctic summer night. The snow-bridges were narrow, thin and sagging. We wallowed to our waist at every step. Stopping briefly at Camp II, we revitalized a defunct stove cached there and alternately ate, drank and burst into fits of uncontrollable laughter as Stokes auctioned off various personal items to the Sea Otter Glacier. We then continued on to Base Camp, arriving after 29 hours without any real rest. There we found most of our cached food ruined by gas fumes. After a few hours sleep, we moved on to the lake.

The west ridge of Fairweather is esthetic, not only because of the route and the beauty of the mountains but also thanks to the sea. From nearly anywhere on the ridge you can look down and see the surf rolling in just a few miles away. Aside from the nearly vertical 400-foot gap in the ridge, the route is varied and just difficult enough to be consistently interesting and enjoyable.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Fairweather Range, Southeastern Alaskan Coast.

ASCENT: Mount Fairweather, 15,300 feet, third ascent by a new route, the West Ridge, June 12, 1968 by Loren Adkins, Walter Gove, Paul Myhre, John Neal, Kent Stokes.