

McKinley from the Traleika

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AS I wallowed waist deep through the slush ice of yet another overflow stream, I could only think this was insanity. It seemed like madness that our homeward journey was proving more of a hellish nightmare than any other part of the climb. Even the knowledge that we had done a new route failed to provide much of a "high" to dull the misery of packing out during the worst of interior Alaska's spring breakup period.

On April 12, almost two months before, Dave Pettigrew, Pat Stewart and I had started our 95-mile approach march towards Mount McKinley from Mile 13 on the park road where we strapped on our webs, hitched up in our toboggan-pulling harnesses and started plodding towards our planned Base Camp on the Traleika glacier.

Johnny Johnson, Craig "Shorty" Schmidt and Jock Jacober flew to Kantishna, an abandoned gold-mining town just outside the Park, and started their 40-mile walk-in from there.

All of us had originally planned to participate in the long approach and had viewed the slog-in with enthusiastic anticipation. Mushing in on webs over some of North America's most outstanding scenic wilderness—what a way to get in shape we told ourselves! However, last-minute logistical problems due to summer-job commitments dictated that we split our approach into two parties, the "pioneers" and the "aviators". The "aviators" could gain time by setting up Base, receiving the airdrop, and starting to lead the route.

We anticipated that our longer hoof-in would take eight days. We quickly found however that in knee-deep snow our anticipated 12 miles per day often shrank to a grueling eight. Only one storm broke our routine as cold nights and clear sunny days enabled steady slogging. The high point of our approach was an airdrop of a half-gallon of ice cream from Don Sheldon as we trudged the final nine miles up the Traleika glacier towards Base.

The others had also experienced slow going on their approach and some ominous signs. A slab avalanche nearly buried their tent and winds blew them off of McGonagall Pass. The bad omens continued as they started leading the route before our arrival. Jock fell 40 feet into a crevasse and all three were caught in a powder avalanche while trying to ferry the first load above Base. There was much elation and good spirits when we were all together again at Base Camp. The airdrop

from Don Sheldon had gone well. Miraculously even a half-gallon of burgundy survived the fall but not our thirst as we celebrated that first night in Base.

The Traleika spur is the nearly four-mile, 12,000-foot ridge which separates the main Traleika from the West Fork Traleika glacier. We located Base Camp at 7000 feet about a half-mile north of the natural avalanche chute on the northeast point of the spur. "Bertha", as we were to call the chute, was extremely active, cutting loose randomly three or four times a day. Out of necessity our route crossed the base of the chute and as John, Jock and Shorty had already been engulfed in one avalanche, we wasted no time crossing the zone.

It was great to be above Base and moving. A huge wall of blue ice towered above, a mammoth ice cave beckoned, and the rubble of an icefall zone made us feel as if we were treading through a magnificent gem field of giant turquoise and emeralds. Day after day of brilliant weather had us in high spirits. As four of us completed our fifth and last day of relaying to camp at 8500 feet, Pat and Dave were on the wall high above, leading the route to Camp II. Throughout the ascent we would free two of our number from the tedium of the last day of hauling for the more rewarding lead to the next camp.

On the steep pitches above Camp I we fixed three of our 100-foot lengths of manila for Jumar aid and hand lines. The upper lead to 10,000 feet was steep but on good snow.

We established Camp II at the southern end of the 10,000-foot plateau to the east of P 12,060. We anticipated following route 3 as described by Washburn in the *A.A.J.*, 1963, but a reconnaissance by Jock and Dave convinced us to try the south ridge of P 12,200.

Our fantastic weather finally ended on the morning of May 3 as sudden winds whipped across the plateau and started battering our tents. Soon they were in jeopardy. The three-man collapsed as we attempted to secure the four-man McKinley tent. Snow felt like sand behind the 65-mph winds. With snow blocks from the partially completed igloo, the building of which we never quite mastered, we hurriedly buttressed the tents with a protective wall. Winds increased and visibility dropped to zero. Even behind the wall the tents were buffeted to the ripping point. But the wall undoubtedly saved the tents and us as the storm raged without letup for the next four days.

So here it was, one of the full-fledged McKinley storms that we had read about. For the first couple of days we joked about low-mountain lassitude, made and lost fortunes over a deck of cards and wistfully recalled the lung capacity of the girl who sat in the next seat in English class. As the storm intensified, empty fuel bottles lessened the need to leave the tent but no amount of squirming would yield a comfortable position. Even with zero temperatures our bags soaked through with condensation. Half rations and oatmeal twice a day did little to help morale.

The incessant screaming wind gave visions of ripping tents. Each of us receded taciturnly into a world of personal thoughts.

On the fifth day we woke jubilantly to a calm, dazzlingly clear sky above and the grandeur of fresh, shining, snow-covered peaks. Happy to be off our backs, we made double carries and established Camp III on the south edge of the 11,000-foot basin beneath P 12,200.

Above Camp III was the ridge we had all been waiting for. The corniced and craggy great East Buttress loomed immediately to the south while beyond, the stark granite of the Moose's Tooth rose above the Susitna flats. To the north stretched Karstens Ridge, with Mount Koven, Carpe and Tatum. Directly ahead lay our route to the upper Traleika icefall and Thayer Basin. Above everything towered the bulwark of the South Peak. Our entire route lay visible before us. It is no place for absent-mindedness but it was hard to concentrate on the route, so grand were the sights. Two lengths of fixed line and a half-dozen screws gave comfort to the mind-blowing mile of exposure on the traverse of P 12,200. Camp IV was established in the col.

The ridge widened out of Camp IV and our route led on the north side, under and over giant cornices, topped P 12,355, then meandered down to Camp V about a mile from the base of the upper icefall. Though the wind bellowed above and snow plumes raced off the ridge beyond, we stripped to the waist to enjoy the heat of the sun in this strangely quiet and serene basin between the icefalls.

Serenity is not one of the features of the upper icefall. Nearly a mile in length and 2000 feet high, it is a maze of contorted ice, shifting crevasses, séracs and precariously balanced giant ice blocks. We faced a major route decision out of the icefall basin. The eastern slope of the eastern rim of Thayer Basin (route 3b as described by Washburn in the *A.A.J.*, 1963) held strong appeal but it also seems very changed and would be a difficult and lengthy ice route. After much debate we opted for the south side of the icefall. After two exhausting days we reached the lip of Thayer Basin and placed Camp V at 13,900 feet. Our good luck held as we crossed snow bridges and jumped crevasses, completing two hauls without mishap.

The long slog across Thayer Basin to establish Camp VII at the base of Thayer Ridge was complicated by the flat monotony of the giant amphitheater and the rapidly deteriorating weather. Fifty mph south winds ripped across the basin and another whiteout engulfed us as we dug in the tents at 14,700 feet. With cups of hot jello and the refuge of the tents, morale was high. Even though 35 days into the climb, we had nine days of food and gas left and felt that, weather providing, the summit could be ours in three days. The weather did not improve. In marginal conditions the following day it quickly became apparent that the route to the ridge was formidable. A nearly unbroken sheet of smooth 50° ice was covered with a thin layer of snow. Ice screws proved useless

in the layered ice of the lower portion, bollards providing our sole protection. After we gained 300 vertical feet, deteriorating weather and a broken crampon forced a retreat.

Another three-day storm followed, not as severe as the lower storm in winds or temperature but harder to weather psychologically.

Our closest call with disaster came the day after the storm. Jock was leading the devilish upper section to the col on sheer ice. Shorty, following at a rope-length with full load, peeled off. A split second later Jock hurtled down the ice. At opposite ends of a 55-meter rope, held by a questionable single screw, they clanged together in a mass of flailing crampons and ice axes. Incredibly, except for a few crampon punctures and bruises, both were unhurt. The following day Pat, Dave and Jock reached the col north of P 15,720, putting in points of protection along the entire route including a 165-foot fixed line for Jümar aid.

We had outgrown the need for relays, so it was with exhilaration that we ate lunch on Thayer Ridge the following day, that ridge of great proportions and beauty. An amazing amount of exposed granite caused us to wind our way among the huge blocks and outcroppings.

Camp VIII (16,400 feet) was located at the base of the slope beneath P 17,425. Deciding to establish one more camp above rather than risk a single attempt from 16,400 feet, we pared equipment to the minimum and left the three-man tent behind. Our progress over P 17,425 was agonizingly slow in the increasing altitude. Nearly totally exhausted, we collapsed at the site of Camp IX at 18,400 feet on the north of the ridge.

Four A.M. came early, but the sun was bright and the South Peak clear and calm. Our hopes were high. We would take the direct route over Farthing Horn to the summit. After some steady progress, rapidly deteriorating conditions forced an abort.

Total exhaustion gripped everyone as we all collapsed in the tent in a fatigue-numbed stupor until evening. Half-hearted attempts to cook dinner met with even less ability to stomach it.

A night-time bid might present that clear weather that often comes early. As we started up in the pale midnight light, everything below 12,000 feet was cloud covered, but it seemed to be clearing above. For the first time there were no extra clothes in the packs nor damp socks in the Korean boots. Simple adjustments of equipment took on gross proportions in the thin air.

Six hours later we all stood on the summit in a calm —20° air bathed in the golden glow of the early morning sun. We embraced and laughed. The unique personal event was indelibly imprinted in our minds.

It was done; or was it?

There was still the desperate struggle down the icefall in a stormy whiteout. Reduced to the last bouillon cubes and tea, we wondered how long the final storm at 11,000 feet would last. The joy of reaching the food cache at Base was followed by the insane four-day ordeal of the

walk out on depleted rations and empty stomachs. But while heavily trudging over the last of the tundra, I could only think of Shorty's prophesy of 52 days before, "It's gonna be one helluva fine time."

Airdrops are no longer permitted in the Park. Logistics for northern routes will thus be difficult due to the distance from the road head (25 miles). Dog teams and horses can be hired locally to freight the bulk of supplies. Doing the overland approach on snowshoes or cross-country skis in conjunction with dog teams would lend a unique and authentic atmosphere of original mountaineering on Mount McKinley.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Mount McKinley, Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount McKinley, 20,320 feet, via the Traleika Spur, May 25, 1972 (whole party).

PERSONNEL: Jock Jacober, John G. Johnson, David Pettigrew, William Ruth, Craig Schmidt, Pat Stewart.

EQUIPMENT: Fixed line: 700 feet; 18 Salewa ice screws; 24 "coathangers"; 5 pickets; 6 deadmen.

