

St. Elias' East Ridge

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W

E took off from Yakutat in a Cessna 180 and climbed through broken clouds, heading for Mount St. Elias. Four of us were squeezed in with packs, ropes, food, hardware, and as we droned toward the incredible St. Elias Mountains, I thought of the chaos of decisions and preparations in the last few months that had brought us here. It's the airplane of course that's mechanically carrying us across Yakutat Bay, I mused, but it's our commitment and our actions that moves us. Even without the airplane we would be in this sort of situation, because it is our nature to live this way. Then we banked around the southeast ridge and suddenly our ridge was right in front of us, a steep, narrow ridge leading 9000 feet straight for the summit, much steeper than the photos had suggested. We gawked and clicked and shouted for long minutes while banking and turning among the gigantic walls, then turned and began the long descent to the coast. I was scared, scared of what we had gotten into and of what it could do to us; my knees still shook as we got out of the plane at an abandoned airstrip on the coast, but as the others came in two by two, the old commitment returned.

In a week of overcast, rain, and snow we skied and snowshoed 45 miles up the Malaspina, Agassiz, and Newton glaciers. Halfway up the Newton is a huge icefall whose intricacies were solved only by interminable weaving, tiptoeing over feathery bridges, and finally jumping and hauling all our equipment over a last moat. At ten P.M. we arrived utterly exhausted at our base camp site on the butt end of the ridge (8900 feet), eight hours after the arrival of the first airdrop. In whiteout and blizzard, Craig McKibben and I dug the boxes out of deep powder; then all crawled into our tents and slept for twelve hours. The next morning was clear but with a solid undercast, and in the afternoon the fog and snow and wind returned and held us there for eight days.

We lie in deepening trenches as the snow piles up, waiting. We have invented an absurd variation on Monopoly called the Strawberry Ridge Game, in honor of the 70 pounds of strawberries we intended to carry us up the ridge. As we finish, Craig mumbles about the redeeming social value of this sort of activity, Gary calculates the number of days needed to climb the ridge if the weather were perfect, and Chuck begins a long discourse on the history of Nepal. Gary and I finalize

the details of a future "Expeditions Anonymous," and I half wonder what will happen if my down parka and double boots don't arrive in the other airdrop. There is a sudden snort from the other tent as Mike sneers "Keep your feet on the moving yellow line, and keep your hands to yourself. THANK you!" Kurt has been on St. Elias before and takes it all philosophically, and John calculates how soon we should retreat. The images run together.

On the eighth day it cleared, and within half an hour after the clearing Jerry Wells came riding in in a big Aero Commander and dropped us the groceries. We ate and danced and wasted film, but the euphoria was short-lived as Gary Ullin's thorough inventory showed that sure enough three personal equipment boxes and some food boxes were missing. Incredulous, we searched again the entire drop zone and combed a thousand square yards in the most likely place, but the boxes must have been lost in the earlier airdrop in the whiteout, now under six feet of powder. I went away from camp, stood a long time looking at the mountains, and at the place where my friend Stan Adamson was killed last year, and tried to draw some wisdom from the mountains.

We spent all day organizing and drying equipment, and slowly the commitment returned again. To continue up the ridge with three people's high-altitude equipment missing, particularly my double boots and down parka, was really hanging it out, so we decided that higher up we would consolidate all the equipment on half the party at a time and attempt the summit in two separate teams.

We switched to a night schedule and slogged all evening 2000 feet up the deep snow of the ridge to Camp I. Craig and Gary and I installed a tent next to a nice ice wall and stayed to work on the steepest part of the ridge during the next few nights. Euphoria caught us up as we set up camp in the clear dawn; after all that time stuck in Base Camp we were suddenly camped part way up the ridge, the weather was clear, and the sun poured in over Mount Newton and Jeannette. By the time we fell asleep in the sun, the other four were back in Base.

The following evening Gary led up past the ice wall and out onto the incredible knife edge. By shovelling several feet of snow off the crest or side of this plume, then stamping down several feet more, he packed a ledge just solid enough to hold body weight (usually). Slowly this route teetered out over the tightrope, and I thought of Allen Steck on Hummingbird Ridge: "Unspeakable three-dimensional horrors." We were experimenting with Gary's theory for using three climbers for placing fixed rope: the first does the engineering and places anchors, the second belays and pays out the fixed rope behind him, and the third attaches the fixed rope to the intermediate anchors, without a belay since he clips his Jumar to the tied-off climbing rope. It was spooky, in fog and silence and semi-darkness, snaking out onto a twisting tightrope of rotten snow.

The next night was my turn, and on the third night Craig led on, finally to where the ridge broadens out at 12,100 feet, where we decided to place Camp II. We had fixed over 2000 feet of rope and smugly agreed that must be what was holding the whole sand castle together. When we returned to Camp I in the morning sun, we found that the others had moved in with the last of the loads. The next evening we all seven made two long carries over the knife edge, installing the entire expedition in Camp II.

As the wind threatened to destroy our tents after less than a day at Camp II, we occupied the super-snow-cave that we had spent all day constructing: a textbook escape from a roaring storm to silence and stillness. The cave also put us together again where we could talk as one group and plan strategy. For two days the wind ripped by outside, and we decided to consolidate equipment now on a few people and only half of us attempt the summit at once.

Switching back to a day schedule, Kurt Wehbring and Gary left early on June 14 to put in the route and fix ropes where necessary on the ridge above. They shrank upwards and disappeared in the overcast like Mallory and Irvine. Several hours later the rest of us followed with loads through scattered clouds. The ridge climbs steadily but is not absurdly narrow here, only occasional pitches requiring fixed rope. Under the clouds we could see a patchwork of sun and shadows on the Newton glacier two miles below. We caught up with Gary and Kurt at a steep ice traverse that never did allow decent protection, and above broken rocks everyone dumped loads in wind and fog. Immediately the others left for Camp II as it was cold and late. Craig, Gary and I hurriedly searched for a ledge for camp, hacking away at hard snow and loose rock, and finally found an excellent place between two seracs several hundred feet higher, at 15,000 feet. Camp III was *high*, higher than we expected, way above Russell Col, above the summit of Augusta. We chortled and went inside with our eight days of food and thought about the summit.

The morning of the 15th was the same—wind, snow, and fog—so we thankfully slept in, ate a leisurely breakfast, and reread chapters 12 and 13 of the good book, *Medicine for Mountaineering*. But by noon we were antsy already and so decided to do a recon up the ridge. We packed down parkas because it was cold, and without saying anything, each of us put in extra food and extra film. Within 500 feet we were breaking out of the blowing clouds, and by the time we reached 16,000 feet it was all clear and we knew this was it. There were no technical difficulties here, so we trudged steadily up from the undercast, in bright sun and ripping wind. When we reached the summit ridge we put on down parkas and watched the wind roaring over the cornices and out into the void over the south face, then trudged over a false summit to the top at five P.M. Despite some twenty-five unsuccessful attempts on

many routes on Mount St. Elias, we were only the eighth party to reach the summit of this wiley old mountain. We were a loosely organized party with no named leader, and all members of the party completed this first ascent with no accident or injury.

Twenty feet down the other side of the summit we were out of the wind (and 5°F. temp.), and we shouted and grinned for an hour and a half. Only the summits of a few other giants (Logan, Cook, Vancouver) were visible above the sea of clouds; we could only see down the top few thousand feet of the other routes on St. Elias, the Duke's route from Russell Col, the steep south ridge from Haydon Col, and out onto the shoulder of the northwest ridge. When we finally left, it took only an hour and twenty minutes to descend to Camp III at 15,000 feet. The cloud layer had dropped and was breaking, and for a long time we shivered outside the tent, watching the sunset and the gigantic peaks and the clouds drifting majestically below us, then suddenly jumped inside and laughed and cooked up a huge victory glop.

Next day we three went down and the others came up and two days later they completed the ascent. The following day and night we descended the same route all the way down to Base.

The long trip out to the coast was enlivened by two rappels for ourselves and a tyrolean traverse for the packs across crevasses in the chaotic Newton icefall, a valley fog which retreated before us all night just at walking speed, and the same cloud enveloping us the next night as we slogged for hours by map and compass across a *corner* of the immense Malaspina glacier. Trudging through the murk, we hit the right nunatak and found again the awe that expedition climbers know, when they step onto the flowering earth after a month on ice.

The end of the climb really came two nights later on the tongue of the glacier near the coast. Craig and I were on skis and thus several hours ahead of the snowshoe-waddlers. We took skis off for the last two miles of rock-strewn, crevasse-riddled bare ice, my crampons broke and my Kelty broke in half, and suddenly we staggered down the last slope and were out of it. We looked at each other and saw what we had done; everything since has been anticlimax.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: St. Elias Mountains, Yukon-Alaska border.

NEW ROUTE: East Ridge of Mount St. Elias, 18,008 feet, June 15 and 18, 1972.

PERSONNEL: Charles Bailey, Craig McKibben, Malcolm Moore, John Neal, Gary Ullin, Michael Vensel, Kurt Wehbring.