

Mount Hunter, South Face and Ridge

DEAN RAU

A voice shattered the feelings of unreality that had plagued me during my sixth night alone in the ice cave. I stepped outside and after a moment of silence heard either Don Black, John Waterman, or Dave Carman as they descended the lower ridge. Nearly three hours passed before they stood together by the cave. "Amigo," Don had called as he rappelled over the bergschrund above the cave. John said, "We made it! Yep, Dean, we climbed Mount Hunter." Dave joined in telling the story. Two days before, after twenty hours of continuous technical climbing on the upper south ridge of Mount Hunter's south peak, they had reached the top. A storm hurried their return to a bivouac site beneath the upper ridge. Thirty-six hours had passed during their summit push. We descended from the south col at 10,500 feet through an upper and lower icefall to Base Camp at 7400 feet on the Tokositna Glacier. The following morning, Don Sheldon flew us back to Talkeetna. Suddenly we were left only with recollections and memories of our month on Mount Hunter.

The climbing was consistently more difficult than we had expected. From the south col, the route broke into three parts: a lower rock ridge, a middle mixed face, and an upper snow-ice ridge. Where the lower ridge was easy, it remained devious and consumed a lot of rope and effort. Over 3000 feet of line and forty anchors were placed in this section. From a distance the middle face looked low-angle, but it proved steep. John led the first pitch of this part masterfully, climbing free and with aid in ice-filled cracks on snowy granite slab. The upper ridge was as insecure as the lower ridge with its many rock belays was secure. It became a nightmare of steep rotten ice and absent belays on a knife-edge dropping 6000 feet on one side to the Kahiltna and 5000 feet on the other to the Tokositna. A middle pitch in this section, "Happy Cowboy" pitch, had them straddling the ridge for lack of any other way to move along it.

But much more transpired on this expedition than the climbing. Although close friends, we were a polarized group from the start. Johnny Waterman is an outstanding climber on all media but on the mixed ground of Alaska's difficult mountains, his climbing becomes superb. He has enormous drive and ambition as well. My moderate ability and instinct stronger for survival than for a summit clashed almost immediately with John. Don Black and Dave Carman stood somewhere between the ex-

tremes of John and me. Don was a veteran of a difficult and dangerous McKinley climb. His easy-going manner concealed intensity. Dave, for the first time in Alaska, found the climbing less pleasant than he had hoped, but schooled in the masochistic tradition, he remained determined to reach Mount Hunter's summit. To this day I don't know if misconception or a feeling of completeness made me decide to stop trying to climb Hunter. Yet one evening at the junction of the lower ridge and middle face, with much of Alaska spread before me and the rosy alpenglow on the glaciers below, I knew my struggle with Hunter was over.

The decision did not fit with the apparent obsession I had for Hunter's south summit. John had been afflicted too. I met him in Talkeetna in 1969 after I had been part of an abortive attempt on Hunter. We made plans then to return in 1970 but failed in an attempt. Others shared our obsession. No less than four prior attempts had been made to do a "direct" route on Hunter's south peak. The obsession was not unwarranted. Unclimbed sides of major Alaska Range peaks are becoming rare. The beautiful pink granite of the McKinley group belied the concept of big Alaskan peaks being all ice and snow. The achievement of Dave Carman, John Waterman and Don Black in climbing the south face and ridge of Mount Hunter's south peak is an outstanding one in mountaineering annals.

But there is more to our experience with Mount Hunter. The Alaska Range seen from the Susitna River near Talkeetna fifty miles away seems like a dreamland standing aloof behind the vast sweep of tundra and foothills. Thinking about the months I have spent on Mount Hunter, the flights in, and even looking at my pictures, I realize that closeby I have never even seen the south peak. Somehow the summit has always been behind another ridge or covered with clouds. For me, Mount Hunter has remained enigmatic. By a twist of fate, my partners have come to share my feeling. After flying out, we hurried to look back at the mountain before the morning clouds obscured it. We oriented ourselves on the twin summits. Then we realized that Dave, Don and John had stopped on a spectacular gendarme a few hundred feet short of the actual south summit of Mount Hunter. In a race with an oncoming storm, they had mistaken what was actually the south peak for the higher north summit. Our story of Mount Hunter is an unfinished one. Rather than the earthy accomplishment of reaching another summit, we are left with something less tangible, perhaps of greater value. A mountain has become a myth.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENT: Mount Hunter by the South Face and Ridge to within 200 feet of the South Summit, 13,966 feet, May 29, 1973 (Black, Carman, Waterman).

PERSONNEL: Don Black, David Carman, Dean Rau, John Waterman.