

# The Southeast Face of Mount Dickey

DAVID S. ROBERTS

WHAT fun it was. All spring, in the gloom of planning, we had grumbled about this next 400 feet. The crux of the whole route, we had prophesied, reason enough to justify fixing the first day's leads. At our ages—Ed Ward and I over the hill at 30 and 31, Galen Rowell plugging creakily away at 34—we tended to congratulate ourselves just for getting out every summer. Let alone meddling with a big Alaskan wall.

But here we were, on that 75° slab, having a fine old time puzzling our way from one orange knob to another, the protection decent and the weather faultless! We took turns like gentlemen: my lead a stodgy flirtation either side of a vertical crack, Galen's nastier but still free, up to a cozy roof, Ed's a clever semi-circle out of sight that landed us in a gear-dump niche 900 feet above the glacier. All day we had sunned ourselves in T-shirts, sniffed flowers and stroked moss on belay ledges; Ed had counted six different kinds of insects. Alaska? No, a summer afternoon misplaced by the Wind Rivers.

This day was only the rehearsal. We'd sleep in Base Camp tonight, next to our glacial stream and our sun-basking cache-stacking rock. The ropes were fixed below us, our packs minimal compared to what we'd haul up here in a few days. If we got no higher than this, I rationalized to myself, we'd have had one great day of climbing, the like of which whole expeditions starve themselves for in the Alaska Range.

It was the perspective of the next few days, while rain and hail moved in and out with a fickleness proper to Kansas, and we fretted in our sleeping bags, that restored a reasonable dread to our thoughts about the future. In the binoculars the little dot of a cache looked pitiful, a bare sixth of the way up the huge complicated wall. We sipped our Base-Camp brandy and procrastinated. Our gear lay packed, our cameras loaded, while we slept troubled by the threat of a clear sky at two A.M. Had we planned right? Would we be able to find the cache we'd left near the summit a week before? Should we take a pair of crampons and an axe up the wall? Could we even find water in the first 3000 feet?

On July 17 there was no avoiding it. Only a few stringy clouds competed with the blue of the pre-dawn sky. If we believed in omens, we had a bad one: on the way down the glacier, staring up at the route, Galen



PLATE 10

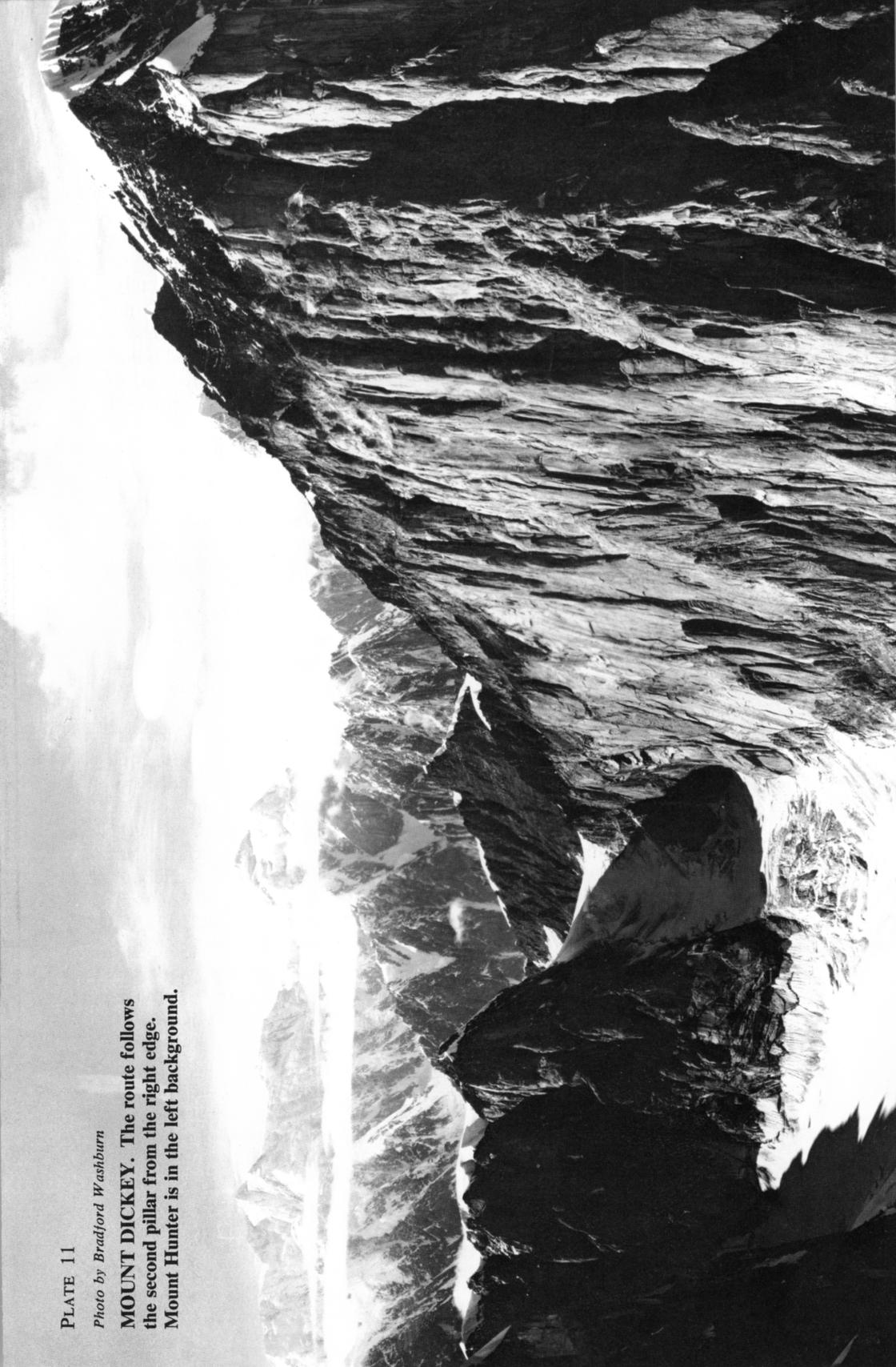
*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**The Southeast Face of MOUNT  
DICKEY. The route follows the pillar  
directly above the airplane.**

PLATE 11

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**MOUNT DICKEY.** The route follows the second pillar from the right edge. Mount Hunter is in the left background.



walked armpit-deep into an open crevasse. We started jümaring up the fixed ropes at 5:45 A.M. Gone was the insouciance of three days before. We were going for good, packing up and leaving home, and who knew where we'd be three days from now?

On the eighth pitch—the last one we'd fixed—we got the first taste of what would turn out to be the most serious hazard throughout the climb. Jümaring second, I kept hearing the rock creak and move above me. Just as I got to it, a boulder too heavy for me to lift dislodged under the pressure from the rope and came to rest on my shoulder. I yelled to Galen, who came down to rescue me from it. Ed, below, remained oblivious.

With the next pitch, we entered new ground. All through the warm middle hours of the day, from pitch nine to pitch nineteen, we moved efficiently upward on easy and moderate ground; the few aid moves were pleasant, the free climbing joyful. We had three packs: the leader would climb with the light one if the pitch wasn't too hard; the second and third would jümar with the heavier packs. On the harder pitches, the third had to jümar with the leader's pack and clean, rappel back to the start of the pitch, and jümar again with his own pack. That was the job we hated; leading was the real fun. We didn't dare haul loads—too many rocks lay waiting for the rope to nudge them loose. We found we couldn't even tie in to the end of the rope we were jümaring on: the loop below would catch up predictably on every pitch.

A dirty patch of ice on pitch 13 provided the only water in the first 2000 feet. We left a little food and a few Bleuets cartridges there, pretending it was a retreat cache. But our psyches soared above. The wispy clouds grew into mare's tails; Galen muttered about them and scolded us for not leaving the day before. Yet the Ruth Glacier stretched magnificently down the Great Gorge south of us, always just behind our shoulders, and it was hard to conceive of this wilderness as unfriendly.

Then, on the twentieth pitch, we came abruptly into a zone of very bad rock. The granite here was all crumbly; a pitch that looked fourth-class would turn out to be desperate and unprotected. This was the stuff of the Mooses Tooth, Galen said, and I had seen similar junk in the Revelations. We wound our skeptical way through it, as the afternoon crept on. All day we had eaten nothing, stolen only a few quick sips from the water bottles. The day, the climb, the labyrinth utterly absorbed us. Galen probed around a corner and found a way out of the bad rock, into a chimney where, passing a chockstone, he did what he thought was the hardest free move he'd done all year. Ed pushed us farther up the chimney, crawling like a spelunker behind another huge chockstone, at last emerging with impossible rope drag at a possible bivy site.

Should we sleep here? No, higher. I led the 25th pitch, Galen the 26th. We were extremely tired, but what a piece of work! At least half the route climbed, all in one day. We'd gone for 17 hours without even a lunch break. In a ten P.M. gloom, Ed led our 27th pitch and

fixed a rope down it for the morning, while Galen and I carved sleeping-places on an otherworldly ledge. Water was a 20-foot jumar below. We dangled our gear from the anchoring crack and stretched out to sleep. The intensity of it all had made us edgy. Later, in my diary, I found I had written of Galen's lead on the 26th pitch: "He has a dramatic way of screaming and cursing, and on this pitch he really did some yelling."

We were not really given a night, only four hours of shallow sleep, waking to cramped limbs and the raw soreness of knuckles and fingertips. In the morning, what we had feared was true: the fugitive clouds had coalesced into a solid fog-bank that was creeping up the Ruth toward us. Ill-rested, we got going with almost panicky haste. As confused as our gear was our conversation. I remember a hodge-podge of maledictions, disembodied from their speakers:

"I knew those high cirrus were a bad sign."

"How could you manage to snore, even up here?"

"Should we change the Bleuet cartridge?"

"It's a hell of a long way down."

"Maybe the sun'll burn it off."

"Or maybe it's a real sock-in five-day storm."

"Let's get going, for Christ's sake."

The beginning deceived us. At the top of the 28th pitch, I thought for a while that we were out of the woods, even though the mist climbed suddenly and swallowed us. The ground was easier, low-angle, multifarious. Why was it taking Galen so long on the next lead, then, and why was he knocking loose all those rocks so clumsily? It turned out that we were back in the bad stuff, rough and pebbly decomposed granite, the elusive line of our route full of temptations toward serious error. We moved slowly in a blind chilliness. I grew paranoid: you could almost get lost up here in the white-out, with thirty devious pitches below. At the top of thirty-one I was in despair. There was virtually nowhere to go; the rock steepened sharply on all sides, there were no aid cracks, my ledge looked like a dead-end. I talked to myself while I wasted time searching for an anchor. The impatient call came through the fog: "Are the ropes fixed?" "Wait a minute, god damn it!" I yelled back, knocking in a fifth bad piton.

To my annoyance, Ed seemed happy, as if this dubiety were what he had looked forward to all year. "I see what you mean," Galen said, and launched out on the atrocious terrain, pulling loose holds like a miner digging through a cave-in. He went around a corner; I heard the crashing of big loose things, and Galen seemed to yell, "Rock!" I gripped the rope, envisioning large chunks of the face coming free with Galen. It turned out he was yelling, "Slack!" He cursed me roundly later for imprisoning him on a 5.8 move.

It was an amazing pitch. Jumaring up it, I flinched at the gouges the rockfall had made in our two good ropes. Worst of all, the ledge



PLATE 13 (right)

*Photo by Galen Rowell*

**David Roberts leading  
as Ed Ward belays  
on Dickey's sixth  
pitch.**



PLATE 12

*Photo by Galen Rowell*

**David Roberts peers into a crevasse on  
the west side of Mount Dickey, where  
Rowell has just fallen.**



PLATE 14

*Photo by Galen Rowell*

**The middle section of  
the route on  
MOUNT DICKEY  
lies just right of the  
left profile.**

at the top seemed even more hopeless and isolated than the one we had just left. A blank crumbly wall loomed into the white-out above. Galen sat at the far end, as gravel trickled between us into the void. "Where's Ed?" I wanted to say, and "What now?" Would Galen admit it, that we had run out of choices? Or would he keep that blithe, cheerful countenance to the end?

Ed, it seemed, had allowed himself to be lowered blindly around the corner. And Galen's hunch paid off. Here was the crux of the whole show, on pitches 32 and 33, not down at the bottom. Ed found the good rock again, deep in another chimney, and aided his way back up to Galen's level and above. Itself a fantastic pitch, it was the hardest of all to jümar: even with a bolt anchor (our only one), Galen barely managed to let himself out around the corner and resume the vertical. To make things worse, the rope pulled loose a big rock which narrowly missed him. Ed and I heard his scream of disapproval above the roar of other rocks, below, exhorted by the first one to join in the apocalyptic plunge.

My pitch, too, was crucial: tricky aid on a patch of lousy rock over a small overhang, then two short leader-falls on a rump and a cliff-hanger before I made the last move free. It grew late; the storm seemed due. I had to jümar the 35th pitch four times, when both ropes snagged in the same 11mm crack. We were becoming exhausted. Somewhere up there lay the "Exit Ledge," the end of the granite, above which less than a thousand feet of schist interfered with a clear road to the summit. We rejoiced as the ground started to lie back, broken, easy. Then 200 feet of difficult cliff materialized out of the fog, and it began to rain. Galen and I managed the two pitches, moving a little desperately on dripping rock, and we reached the Exit Ledge. But there was no exit. We traversed hundreds of feet left, then found, to our dismay, more hard rock above. Galen led a 41st pitch and we called it quits. We'd been going 15 hours straight, an even more intense day than the previous one. We were about 800 feet, we guessed, below the summit.

I excavated a site which, covered with a tent fly, became our dinner and breakfast nook. Ed lay down on a rock, wrapped himself in a bivy sack, held his mitten in front of his face, and slept. In the morning he looked like a victim's body discovered by rescuers. Galen crawled into a natural coffin and lay unmoving through the night. "I kept imagining," he said, "that if the rock shifted half an inch, I'd never get out."

We were ready to wait it through. The rain turned to snow, the wind increased, and by morning we were in a full-scale Alaskan blizzard. We had a few days' food, but I felt nervous. The rock was coating up with rime ice, the storm intensifying. It didn't take much prodding to convince Ed and Galen to set off.

But what a poor beginning. Trying to jümar the iced-up fixed rope, Ed fell ten feet. We re-led the pitch, and managed to traverse off the granite for good. "Thank God we got to the Exit Ledge before the

storm," Galen said. Yes, I thought, picturing us still down among yesterday's difficult leads.

We were suddenly on new terrain, loose schist frozen in place mixed with snow and ice. The one pair of crampons we had reluctantly brought fit my feet, so I took the only axe and led all day. As I moved wearily upwards, a feeling of immense happiness crept over me. I was sure we were going to make it. I could keep only the vaguest of correlations between the Washburn photo in my pocket and the next band of schist coming to life out of the blizzard, but I knew that the worst of the wall lay behind us. We moved continuously, as I placed a piton every other pitch or so. Isolated by the roaring storm, each of us retreated into private thoughts.

Then came doubt. The comforting rock seemed to disappear. I saw what looked like a 40-foot ice wall above. Chopping steps for Ed and Galen, I led 150 feet up it, with bad rock pins in the ice for protection, and saw no end in sight. The ice I chopped bombarded Galen and Ed; when I gave up and descended, they seemed surly and chilled to the bone. We went on, angling left for eight or ten scary rope-lengths. Leading on crampons, it was hard for me to judge what made a decent chopped step for an unaided boot. Scarcely a single pin that I placed would have held a real fall, and several times I had to give tension for the others to get up. At one point Ed said, "I don't like this. It seems real dangerous." We belayed more carefully, tried to take our time.

Yet in my tiredness everything struck me as funny—the ice in our beards as we met on belay ledges, the contrived pictures we snapped, the frozen mélange of gear we were lugging. I was still happy, totally absorbed. One of the best climbs of our lives lay in the wake of the swings of my axe.

Then there was a pitch like the other pitches, except that it seemed to shade off less steeply at the top. To my astonishment, the all-surrounding whiteness assumed, for the first time in three days, a horizontal perspective. I stuck my axe shaft-deep in the snow. Galen came up. "It must be the top," I said. "It feels level here." "Goddamn," he concurred. "Congratulations." We shook hands. Ed appeared out of the maelstrom. "Where are we?" "Which way is the cache?" one of us answered. The ropes lay wet and tangled around us, as bursts of wind cuffed us about. The joy that so eludes our everyday affairs was there in abundance: we had done exactly what we had set out to do. We threw off our packs, sat down on them, and ate our candy bars.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: The 5100-foot southeast face of Mount Dickey, in the Great Gorge of the Ruth Glacier. Ropes fixed on first 900 feet on July 14, ascent from July 17-19, descent July 20. (Galen Rowell, Ed Ward, David Roberts.) NCCS VI, F9, A3.