

Deborah

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WHEN Fred Beckey, Heinrich Harrer, and Henry Meybohm stepped onto the summit of Deborah twenty-one years ago for a first ascent, they came to the “unanimous conclusion that Deborah was the most sensational ice climb anyone of us had ever undertaken.” (See *A.A.J.*, 1955, 9:2, pp. 39-50.) The beautiful, awe inspiring, pyramidal mass of Deborah (12,339-feet) located in the Hayes Group of the Alaska Range has since then repulsed many expeditions on her numerous flanks due to bad weather and technical difficulties. Such were the thoughts of our all-Alaskan party, consisting of Pat Condran, Mark Hottman, Dave Pettigrew, Pat Stuart, Toby Wheeler, and myself, as we walked to the preeminent Mount Deborah.

It was on April 2 that we said good-bye to friends and stepped off the Anchorage-Fairbanks Highway at mile 229 to begin our 60-mile slog up the Yanert Fork to Base Camp. Each of us was well loaded down with gear, both on our backs and tagging behind in plastic sleds, but the vast majority of our equipment was hauled by Dennis Kogl and Ford Reeve with their dog teams. With the invaluable help of these two hard-core dog mushers we were able to establish Base Camp without airdrops. Four long days up the braided channels of the Yanert River, now frozen, brought us to the Yanert Glacier. We skirted the lower moraines on the north side in a couple of days, then found ourselves grounded by a three-day storm twelve miles short of intended Base Camp. Was this a hint of the days to come? Late on the twelfth we finally arrived at 6400 feet on the Yanert Glacier, site of Base Camp. With the mushers and dogs gone, we stood alone with Deborah bathed in the pink of a setting sun; the climb had begun!

Our route would be one Pettigrew and Stuart had attempted the year before, but due to the loss of vital equipment in a storm the climb had to be aborted at 11,700 feet. We'd go up the west buttress of the south summit (11,700 feet), then along the crest of the south ridge via the middle summit (12,000 feet) to the 12,339-foot mushroomed top of the north summit. At the saddle between the middle and north summits we would intersect Beckey's route. The route would be long, but not littered with objective dangers.

We spent the next six days under the grip of wind and snow storms trying to force the route to the site of Camp I at 8500 feet.

"Little windy ain't it!"

"Damn fixed rope is a mess."

"Hang on, another slough avalanche is coming!"

"Hey Pettigrew, your pack just blew off the cornice!"

"What the hell! Can you see it?"

"Not since it fell off that big cliff."

"Man, the first couple of years out of prep school are always the toughest."

"I give up, the fluke won't stay in."

"Up, up, always up!"

To safeguard load hauling, we used 200 feet of fixed rope up through a cornice; and another 600 feet up an exposed snow-filled gully system and 200-foot ice bulge, the best climbing so far. For several days 8000 feet was as high as we could get as bad weather kept pushing us back to camp. Finally as the snow got deeper, the wind stronger, and the slough avalanches more frequent, we were forced to spend two days in camp. As we lay around the depressing interiors of the storm-bound tents, periodically going out to shovel away the accumulating snow, we began to kid each other on how this was turning out to be "the most sensational snow slog anyone of us had ever undertaken." Finally the skies cleared and we swam and jūmared our way up the slope to Camp I.

For four days the weather remained perfect (this was the longest stretch of good weather we had on the trip) and we began to gain altitude a little faster. The snow remained deep though, in one place taking two hours to break 300 feet of trail through armpit-deep, wind-crusted snow.

"This is absurd!"

"Want a shovel?"

"Wheeze, gasp; made it another step."

"Up, up, always up!"

At least we didn't have to rebreak trail this time. A total of 1300 feet of fixed rope was placed on questionable avalanche slopes before reaching a small, well-protected bowl at 10,200 feet where we placed Camp II.

And still the weather remained tranquil. Stepping out of the bowl put us onto the narrowing, wind-exposed ridge that would take us to the "blow hole" (the south summit so named because Deborah appears as the silhouette of a whale from the west, the north summit being its tail and the middle summit its hump) and eventually to the top of Deborah. Luckily, the exhausting powder turned to hard, wind-packed snow on the ridge. In one day, with this much-improved condition, Dave and Toby were able to fix and mark the route all the way to the middle summit where we were going to establish our High Camp. That evening they were in a state of simple elation as they told us of the incredibly corniced summit ridge. We couldn't wait to give it a go!

The ridge walk between the blow hole and middle summit was absolutely fantastic, offering grand views in all directions. Although it is relatively level for a full mile, it has spectacular drops off either side. Where it wasn't corniced we could look straight down through rime-heavy flutings, curled in upon each other, to the crevassed surface of the West Fork Glacier on Deborah's east side 5000 feet below! When I peeked over the middle summit and saw the full sweep of the summit ridge, fantastic wind sculptures of wild-looking cornices met my eyes. It was indeed incredible! Unreal!

We had cached a few loads at the middle summit and the blow hole and were ready to move to Camp III on the twenty-fifth, but instead we were once again storm-bound; this time for three days.

On the twenty-eighth we broke camp and began our move to Camp III in what appeared to be stable weather, but was actually only a lull in the eye of a hurricane. Although wind, clouds, and snow began their attack upon the ridge well before we arrived at our destination, we pushed on. Digging in was first on the agenda when we reached the middle summit. That night three slept in an unfinished cave and three tried to sleep in a wind-battered tent. The following night we were all in the cave, headquarters for the next eleven days. We had been eating half rations every storm day to stretch our food supply, and were once again on half rats. To say the least it was getting old! The monotony of cave life was broken by tall tales, chopping of convex drip demons off the ceiling, the do's and don'ts of the next expy, and herculean struggles to the outside world through a snow-clogged entrance.

Our first impression upon seeing the summit-ridge basal cornices was "incredible"; the second "they'll be slow." It would be necessary to fix the route across them to hasten our try for the summit when the day came. So when it cleared a bit on May 1, Hottman and Stuart took off to do some spectacular ice work. Our intuition proved correct when they labored for the day to fix 300 feet. After falling through the cornices' unstable crest several times, they turned to the painfully slow traversing of 65° ice along the fracture line. Seeing Pat and Mark only as two tiny specks on the huge curled pinnacles made us appreciate the cornices' tremendous size. Another 300-foot section of fixed rope would be needed to complete our hand rail along the basal cornices. When the clouds dissipated the next day Toby and I were off for our stint on the ridge. We found the same slow going as we worked our way across the exposed cornices on ice that was none too perfect: brittle or honeycombed ice prevailed. Poor protection and scratchy were names of the game. In places tube pickets replaced alpine hammers. The airy belays atop protruding cornices were darn near as exhilarating as the climbing. Under the glow of a setting sun we stepped past these huge pinnacles of ice and snow to the somewhat easier ridge beyond. Even though the cornices remained



PLATE 11

Photo by Brian Okonek

**Wheeler on the basal cornices of
DEBORAH. The summit is 1000 feet
higher and a half mile away.**

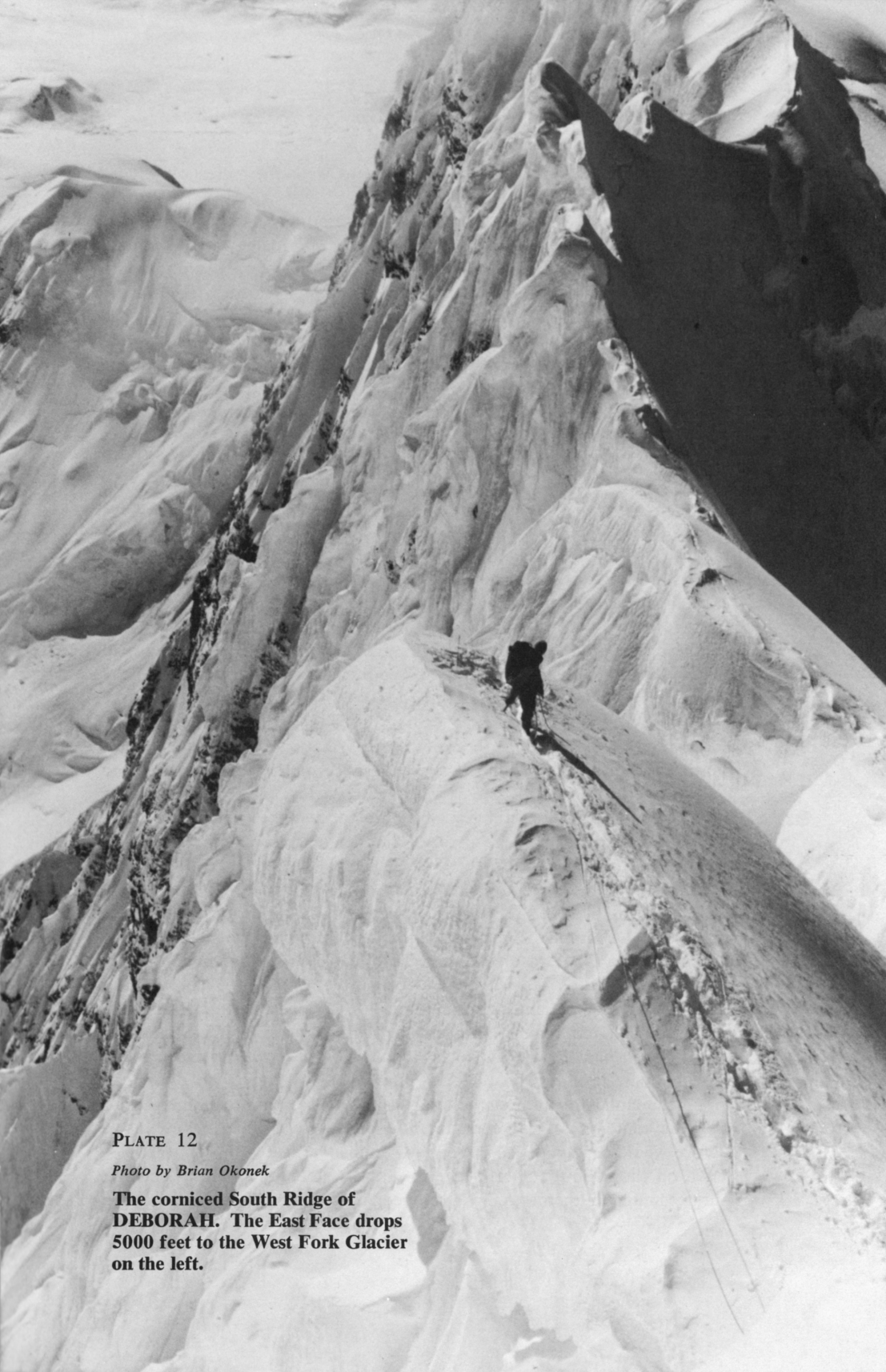


PLATE 12

Photo by Brian Okonek

**The corniced South Ridge of
DEBORAH. The East Face drops
5000 feet to the West Fork Glacier
on the left.**

overhanging, from here we would be able to walk their crest. Perhaps tomorrow would be summit day.

Early the next morning Pettigrew and Condran emerged from the cave, found favorable weather, and began their pilgrimage to the summit. The rest of us were to follow in an hour, but before we got underway Deborah was swallowed by the fury of yet another storm. Disgruntled we crawled back into the cave; we knew Dave and Pat would be back soon. Ten-and-one-half hours later they dragged their tired, snow-encrusted bodies into the cave after being all but lost in the blizzard between the basal cornices and camp! So much for that summit day.

Four days later the weather began to break. Once again we prepared for the summit push. Somehow we knew this was it, it had to be for our food supply was dwindling fast. On the eighth at 2:30 A.M. Pettigrew and Condran were heading for the summit. Watching their progress we judged the amount of time it would require to follow in their steps complete with belay points, and left accordingly so as not to get congested on the ridge; Hottman and Stuart at five A.M. and Wheeler and I at 9:30 A.M. The airy, corniced ridge was a little nerve racking at first, but as the hours clicked by and we became oblivious to the impressive overhangs it was just a little weird. Several ice pinnacles that had appeared troublesome were easily surmounted by the lead pair and we followed quickly in their chopped staircase. Three pitches below the summit Toby and I caught up with the others. Stuart and Hottman were taking over the lead after an heroic ten hours of leading by Pettigrew and Condran. The ridge was blocked by mushroomed cornices that overhung in all directions; Stuart headed out onto the relentless ice of the southwest face to find the secret to the top. Stuart was a pitch below the summit working out a route through the summit mushroom, Hottman was buried in a belay hole, and the rest of us were perched atop a cornice surveying the view, when Cliff Hudson, a bush pilot from Talkeetna, floated by in his Cessna 185 and tipped his wings to us. We waved back thinking how demoralizing it must be for Cliff's passengers if they were being dropped off for an attempt on Deborah. After a couple of dead-end leads Pat finally found a route through the "medieval gargoyles" that guarded the summit.

At 4:40 P.M. on May 8 we all stood on the summit of Deborah after thirty-six days of patient determination on the slopes of one of Alaska's more reputable mountains. Man what a "high," but the feeling came slowly as we still had the descent ahead of us. We gazed at our spectacular surroundings, Mounts Hess, Hayes, Moffit: ugh—they were disappearing in the clouds of an approaching front. We could see summer taking over the whiteness of winter in the low lands, it was time to head back. Before we descended, a section of the summit cornice with our tracks on it fell off the 6000-foot north face as if the "mountain gods" objected to our treading on them! As we climbed and rappelled down the ridge,

clouds moved in upon us obscuring all views. At 11:30 P.M. we reached camp just as the full force of storm number six hit. We had just squeezed in a summit day! Victory was celebrated with a satisfying double-ration supper.

This final storm lasted only twenty-four hours, but was the most violent. It began to erode away our snow cave threatening to expose us to the wild world outside. Deborah wasn't giving up easily!

The storm over, we descended in one long day to the warmth of Base Camp. It was hardly the same place, considerable melting had changed things in our absence. We spent the following day drying gear, reorganizing loads, and drawing cards for team-bought equipment that was divided into six equal-cost piles; what we won we could carry out. Late that afternoon we began our seven-day walk to the road on perfect snow conditions. But as we approached the end of the glacier the snow became rotten and fell out from beneath us until we were showshoeing and dragging sleds across rocks and tundra. "What do you expect in the middle of spring break-up?" We were in such a good mood that it didn't get anyone down. It felt so great to walk around uninhibited by a rope. Summer got closer around each bend of the Yanert River. On a small landing strip 28 miles from the road we cached all but the most necessary of our gear, after finding 100-plus-pound packs a little too heavy for fun. We'd have the stuff picked up later. With this load off our backs we had a most enjoyable trek out. As Deborah disappeared from sight behind us, the trip became a memory, one that will always remain vivid. It had been a spectacular climb!

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Hayes Group, Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Second ascent of Mount Deborah, 12,339 feet, via the west buttress of the south summit and south ridge and southwest face to the north summit, May 8, 1975.

TECHNICAL DATA: 3000 feet of fixed rope, 18 pickets, 21 ice screws, 23 snow flukes.

PERSONNEL: Pat Condran, Mark Hottman, Brian Okonek, Dave Pettigrew, Pat Stuart, Toby Wheeler.