Mount McKinley, 1976

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HAVING decided to visit Mount McKinley, Dougal Haston and I consulted the Alaskan pioneer climber, Bradford Washburn, and scrutinized his wonderfully sharp aerial photographs of the South Face. There seemed to be a possible line up the face between the Cassin and the Direct routes that would take us up a main feature of the face directly to the summit. It might even be easier than the other two routes, for it was nearly all on snow and ice. We would make up for the lack of technical difficulty by climbing in alpine-style without the use of fixed ropes, which had played a big part in the 1961 and 1967 climbs. Then there would be only two of us climbing at the end of April when although the weather may be more settled, it can also be bitterly cold.

On April 29 we flew in a light ski-plane from Anchorage to within 17 miles of the South Face. The plane flew away, leaving us standing on the southeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier, eager for unknown adventures.

DOUG SCOTT

We spent the first few hours on the glacier tuning into our new environment, arranging equipment and talking to the other parties around. Surrounded by piles of equipment, there were four British to attempt the Western Rib and eight Japanese for the Cassin Ridge. They had long days of transportation ahead. It felt good looking at our small pile of gear. Slowly our sacks filled and by four in the afternoon, charged with 60 pounds each, we were ready to move, Doug on snowshoes and I on skis. It is totally necessary to have either of these means hereabouts as it can snow as much as ten feet in a night. The only alternative to skis or snowshoes would be snorkelling and swimming in the snow. On foot you simply cannot move.

By eight P.M. we had made a dump a long way up the southeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. By ten P.M. we were back in camp with the advantages of skis making themselves apparent as I glided away from Doug.

The next day saw us ready to evacuate Base Camp, reckoning we

* Killed by an avalanche in Switzerland in January, 1977.

could shift the rest in one push, albeit a heavy one. Two very bowed and stooped figures gained the dump in the late afternoon. Two days more of heavy loading and one day of storm-enforced rest later, we were sitting underneath the South Face, watching its moods from a providential igloo left by Coloradans forced to retreat from the Cassin Ridge a week before. As well as shelter, they had abandoned some reasonable food to which we staked a claim.

Although still a few hours from the start of the climbing, our route could be seen in good detail. What we saw, we liked, and what we liked even more was the lack of evidence of much avalanche debris on the snow slopes at the foot. Feeling itchy to get working on the real problems, we slid into a good, tired sleep, only to be wakened a little later by a roaring around the igloo door. A storm had arrived in a way we had been told to expect: fast and violent. All night and most of the next day it smashed around and then departed as quickly, leaving three feet of snow behind.

The next day's approach to the foot of the wall was a sinking wade even on snowshoes. By late afternoon we were at the place where the climbing would start and squinted contemplatively at the way ahead. The foreshortening was enormous. Above was 10,000 feet vertical: two Eiger North Walls. Yet it looked as if one could put out a hand and touch the summit. Quickly climbing three rope-lengths on the 50° ice-field, the last and only roping to the ground we would do, we left a heavy sack at the high point and rambled easily back to the igloo. After scrutinizing the photos, we realized that we were following the American Direct Route. It was the logical way and we would follow it to half its height and then strike out on our own.

Reaching our high point the next morning, we prepared to climb under an overcast sky. One could see the sun's shape through the cloud. Blue sky was not too far away, but what was to become a steady pattern in the next few days now showed itself. Whenever there is a cloud in the vicinity of McKinley, it contains snow. In most ranges one can climb in a cloud without being troubled by its annoying contents except in an actual storm. But there were no simply fluffy clouds here; it nearly always snowed when we were climbing, going through the range of little storms, average storms to big savage storms. The day was uniform on an icefield of 50° to 55°: often powder snow with hard water ice beneath. At first our system was to have the leader climb unladen to the end of the rope-length and tie off the rope to an ice piton; he then hauled the heavy sack on a separate rope while the second man came up the fixed line on Jümars.

Late evening found us on a narrow ledge beneath a rock buttress. We had come a long way but still were not happy with the progress. The sacks were too heavy and hauling and carrying had been more of

a problem than the actual climbing. Reckoning that we had been too conservative in our food estimate, we decided to jettison as much as possible, working on the principle that with lighter loads we could travel faster and use less energy.

The bivouac site under an overhang was adequate to give shelter, but the snow ledge was too narrow for us to sit together in the bivouac sack. We settled in, Doug right under the overhang; I was down below slightly more exposed, claiming the tent sack and its forfeit, the cooking. By the time we had food and drink it was midnight. Exhausted, we had no problem falling asleep, but the peace of the night did not last long. I awoke as Doug swore, and with a dull thump a powder-snow avalanche dumped its contents onto my head and into the tent sack. It was snowing heavily. Knowing our site was safe—what had hit us was a minor slide —I cleared out the tent, closed the entrance and settled back. Sleep now was not easy, as heavy avalanches rushed down the main couloir. So it continued, blocking us until late afternoon the next day when it cleared enough to fix 450 feet of rope above before sliding back to our wet sleeping bags. Yet the wet down, fibre-pile suits and woolen underwear made life bearable. Morning came gray as it snowed lightly. The sun teased but gave no warmth.

The climbing became varied and interesting. Our progress quickened as we left behind food, some rock pitons and a rope. Only one piece of real nastiness stands out: the 300-foot crossing of the main avalanche couloir, done in as close to a run as one can on 50° ice. This led to a long narrow couloir, where both steep and absorbing rock and ice climbing brought us by evening onto a narrow ridge and, we hoped, a comfortable bivouac site. Forlorn hope! After digging a step in the lee side somewhat out of the violent wind, we crouched together in the tent sack and amazingly slept for six hours.

No bright dawn. The wind cracked against the ridge, spilled over and blasted around our heads. It had actually stopped snowing, but the wind was lifting off enough powder to make it seem as if it were still snowing. A struggle gained us a pot of tea. Its warmth led to contemplation. All rational signs pointed downwards. We were less than halfway up. The weather was worsening again. There would be no possible help if we got into trouble higher up. It was reasonable to descend, but maybe we were in an unreasonable state. Physically and mentally the team form was wonderful. The unanimous vote was for upwards. Five pitches of great climbing in a maelstrom of wind and powder brought us at last to a clear sight of the upper field. Though it looked close, we stopped in the early afternoon. Our reasons? A good bivouac had been uncovered under an overhanging boulder. A long rest with lots of food and drink would make us recuperate from three bad bivouacs behind. For once the nightly snow and wind went around

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Aerial Photo by Bradford Washburn

The upper portion of the SOUTH FACE of MOUNT McKINLEY, showing the new part of the Haston-Scott route.

instead of attacking directly. We felt fresh in the morning. There was light snowfall with no wind. The climbing was mixed, difficult and original, for at this point we left the 1967 American Direct Route and made an upward swing out left and on for the top.

What had looked like a few pitches to the big icefield was in fact many. Arrival there was at first no relief. Crevasses were hidden and open. Very real windslab-avalanche danger and little snow slides made progress tortuous and wearisome. As we were traversing at six P.M. towards where we could strike upwards into the final couloir, a miracle seemed to take place. The wind stopped; the clouds rolled away, revealing a staggering view of the Alaskan wilderness. In the evening sun we brewed a hot drink beside an ice block and sat there marvelling. Though the peaks below were less high and less spectacular than those seen from the top of Everest, the loneliness and wilderness made this just as impressive. White and black; no other colour relief. Rock, snow and glaciers like frozen rivers stretched for hundreds of miles in all directions. I felt we had a right to be there. Our compact, homogeneous twosome was still playing the survival game and playing it well.

We cramponed out of the sun into the vicious pre-night cold. Right into the arctic twilight we front-pointed upwards on beautiful snow-ice till tiredness and cold forced a halt. I poked into a crevasse lip. It was a day of miracles. There was an almost ready-made snow cave. A little digging and we were in. Another open bivouac in the frigid cold would have sapped our strength. Inside the cave it was almost warm. This night it was only hot drinks and sleep; freeze-dried food had lost its attraction.

Looking at our face photos, we felt we could reach the summit quickly in the morning. We should have known better. True, we did exit from the face in the late afternoon but with indelible memories of a 55° to 60° ice slope that went on and on. We had climbed roped but simultaneously, front-pointing forever into a revived storm and relentless wind. Everything was cold, even our souls. Frostbite was waiting to jump at the slightest weakness, but both of us played our own winning game with it. McKinley's climate is tough. We were drawing heavily on all our Himalayan experience just to survive and it was a respectful pair that finally stood on the summit ridge. It took a few hours to dig a miserable little hole, but free from wind and spindrift, and there we spent an equally miserable night. We had climbed the mountain too quickly to acclimatize and now we were suffering!

Crawling out into a cold, cold morning we scurried briefly to the top and then started to descend as quickly as possible. We knew that with increased warmth and more oxygen all the impressions would catch up and we'd float downwards in a beautiful, retrospective cloud. Or so we thought!

DOUGAL HASTON

We moved down across a plateau of wind-swept snow towards Archdeacon's Tower. There, two climbers sat in the snow amid strewn equipment. Our first reaction of surprise quickly turned to one of horror. They were young lads of about 20 years, and one had a black silk glove ripped apart revealing solidly frozen yellow fingers. The other just sat in the snow stupified, bowed over his own useless frozen hands. Yellow Fingers was chirpy, joking over our meeting near the summit. Dougal's question of why his hands were exposed received a flip reply. We told him that he had frostbite and would probably lose his fingers if not his whole hand if he did not look after them. "Wait a minute. What do you mean, frostbite?" said Yellow Fingers. We patiently explained and pulled his gloves and other clothing out of his sack. They told us that eight other members of their team were below at Denali Pass at 18,200 feet. We were so wrapped in our own personal survival, so near the end of our own strength, that we could neither wait around nor help them down. We'd warn their friends of their predicament and suggested they put on all their clothing and climb into their sleeping bags. We descended into Denali Pass within half an hour, but their friends were not there. We had to go down to 17,000 feet to find *four* of them. We traversed to their camp and collapsed onto the snow, too exhausted to speak at first. After a long hot drink of fruit juice, we told them about their friends. They must bring them down without delay.

Only two of the group were fit enough to go, so whilst they went off in the direction of Denali Pass, we descended further to arrive by evening at the camp of the other four. Their leader immediately radioed the Park Service for a helicopter. The available helicopter could not reach the lads at 19,000 feet. All casualties had to be brought down to 14,000 feet. Dougal and I groaned inwardly, for we knew we would have to return to 17,000 feet and help the lads down the difficult part of the West Buttress. After a restful eight hours' sleep we drove ourselves in a high wind and snow back up to the 17,000-foot camp. There we found all now together, for the two injured climbers had been brought down by two even younger lads. A 19-year-old had put up a very impressive performance. His companion was frostbitten. We three brought the other three frostbitten climbers down the West Buttress to 14,000 feet. The next morning four climbers were evacuated by helicopter. The two lads we first found lost most of their fingers, toes and two feet, despite the finest treatment at the Anchorage Hospital.

The leader said it was divine providence that had brought us to the lado. We told him that they had been bloody lucky and that the two lads would probably not have survived another night. They were so strongly motivated for the summit that they had ignored all warning signs and had continued past the point of no return.

How do inexperienced climbers come to the notoriously super-severe

weather of North America's highest summit? Possibly risks are taken in the McKinley National Park because of the very presence of the Park Service. The National Park Service strongly points out to visiting climbers that their "own group is the best and only source of rescue aid." They insist on a two-way radio. They indicate that on receiving a radio request, helicopter rescue may be available and also a ground party could carry out a rescue although it might take several days. It seems to me that here as in other mountain ranges taken over by the authorities, they can lull climbers, especially inexperienced ones, into a false sense of security. When the inexperienced party is too goal oriented, it needs only a slight deterioration in the weather for a potential disaster. In 1974 eight Russian women died from hypothermia on Pik Lenin. They too were in radio contact with rescue teams, but when the crunch came, no one could help them but themselves. They had not the experience to survive and they perished as the two lads on Mount McKinley nearly did.

As it turned out, of the last five expeditions to McKinley Dougal and I were the first *not* to be rescued, and yet we had climbed as a pair one of the hardest routes on the mountain, sitting out storms with minimal equipment. All over Alaska, much steeper climbs than ours are being made up the granite buttresses and steep ice couloirs which abound in such places as the Ruth Gorge. They are being climbed in the most adventurous style, without fixed ropes and without ground support or radios. Every climber has the right to climb this way, provided he too has accumulated sufficient experience on other mountains over years of climbing. There is no short-cut to safe climbing at high altitudes, for it is a long and painful apprenticeship.

DOUG SCOTT

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Mount McKinley, Alaska

ASCENT: Mount McKinley, 20,320 feet, via a direct and, in the upper part, new route up the South Face, from April 29 to May 12, 1976; the summit reached on May 12 (Dougal Haston, Doug Scott).