

# Deborah's North Face

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THE MOUNTAIN. Getting there is never part of the fun. The car is crammed with gear, the occupants tucked in as afterthoughts. The urge to climb smoulders somewhere beneath a numbing apathy and the dust of the road. Perhaps the Alaska Highway is the first test of an Alaskan expedition.

On Alaskan pavement at last, the pace quickens a bit as the foothills of the Hayes group begin to form in the distance. Though the high mountains are obscured by cloud this year, I can remember the peaks from previous trips. Moffit with its northwest face embraced by two crisp ridges. Hayes, twin-summitted and dominating, the long north ridge weaving down through the clouds to the glacier. And finally this year's objective, the pointy summit of Mount Deborah, the culmination of its 7500-foot north face. Wherever we are for the next few days, that face will be looking at us; on the highway, in Delta, on the campus in Fairbanks.

*The First Attempt.* It had been my hope that we would sit around Base Camp for a few days, observe the face and perhaps learn a bit of its character. But at four A.M. of our first morning, April 14, Eric Reynolds, ever enthusiastic, was up crunching in the snow. The rare perfect weather could not be passed up and we were soon skiing towards the base of the mountain. We had thoroughly discussed the route, equipment and style of ascent during the months of preparation and were now only putting into action the decisions we had made. Light packs with a minimum of bivouac gear, two 300-foot 9mm ropes and moderate racks were supposed to let us climb quickly. The ten day's worth of food seemed adequate for the ascent and return to Base Camp. The descent was not settled but we soon realized that rappelling the face was such a terrifying prospect that the alternate traverse of the mountain via the Becky-Harrer-Meybohm route was the only sane course.

The route up was uncompromisingly clear. A ridge rising for 4500 feet from the glacier steepens and narrows, passing through a rock band and an awesome hanging glacier. The final 3000 feet, the true face, is pierced by an ice gully to within 1000 feet of the summit. Routes through the upper rock band were only conjecture from the glacier. We were to eventually bypass the thing by traversing to the far right end of

the face on a snow-and-ice band, turning the corner and traversing back towards the summit.

Three days after stepping out from Base Camp we had dug in on top of the hanging glacier, nicknamed the Midriff Bulge. The climbing, straightforward and usually easy, required only seven belayed pitches. One of those though, leading out and over the nose of the Bulge, compensated for all the tedious snow slogging. Stepping off the narrow ridge onto the vertical ice with its dramatic exposure brought the flush of excitement and rush of adrenalin needed to overcome our intimidation.

*Waiting.* Deborah holds a reputation for atrocious weather. Ever since David Roberts' book on the east ridge attempt we have associated the mountain with suffocating snowfall, with an image of a tent ridge pole barely protruding above a windswept plain of snow. Eric Reynolds and Dave Davis on a north face attempt in 1975 had substantiated the reputation when a wind storm destroyed their tents. We too did not escape the storms and our first three days of perfect weather gave way to five of snowfall. We were to learn this pattern of a short good stretch followed by days of heavy snowfall, sometimes four feet in twenty-four hours. And it was in our snow cave on the Bulge that we were to play the waiting game, stretching our fuel by sleeping with snow-filled water bottles, stretching our food on half rations.

But on this, our first attempt, the weather outlasted the food supply and on the ninth day out we retreated to Base Camp to restock. The day-long descent of rappelling and downclimbing passed glumly as the hard-won elevation passed by. We were acutely aware of the effort wasted to reach our high point on the mountain.

In Base Camp the weather closed down once again, and for five days we ate, read, wrote and worried. It was clear that the upper face, the 3000-feet we had not climbed, would be the crux of the route. Steep and broad, overhung by cornices, the line running up avalanche gullies rather than ridges, it was the difficult and dangerous part of the route. Base Camp is usually a place of total rest, an escape from the mountain, but here the mountain followed us. Our mood was somber, almost gloomy, as we waited out the storm in the shadow of our undone task.

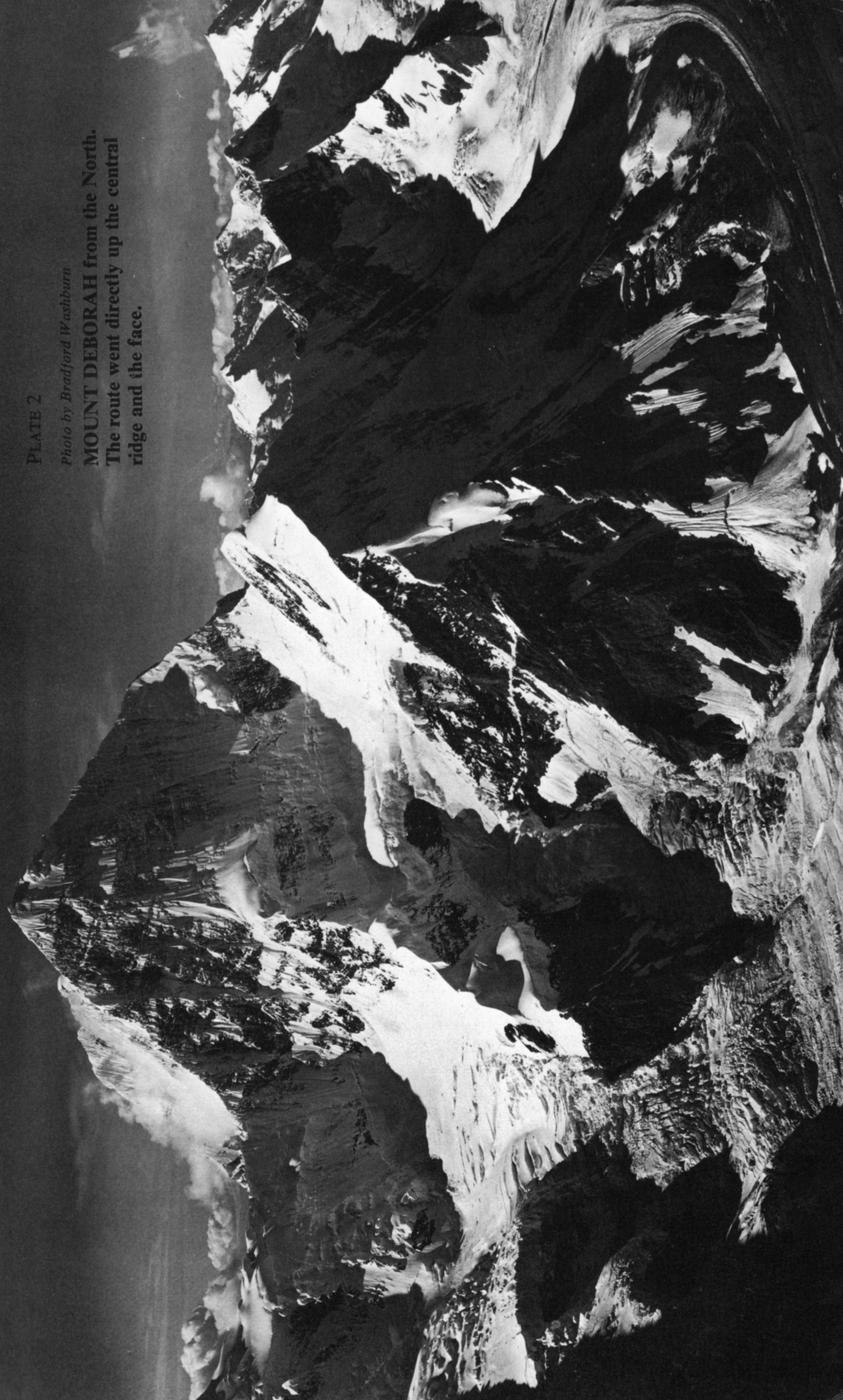
*The Second Attempt.* On April 28 Chas Macquarie and I returned to the climb. Our party of four had been halved as Dave and Eric had arranged to fly out early. The eight days of food and fuel we carried added to the six days stashed on the Bulge from our first attempt allowed us over two weeks of waiting time, adequate, we hoped, for even Deborah's fickle weather.

In two days we had reached our previous high point on the Bulge and once again the weather broke forcing us to wait. The tension felt in Base Camp returned as we lay in our snow cave. I had an increasingly difficult time going to sleep and would helplessly review the route pos-

PLATE 2

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**MOUNT DEBORAH** from the North.  
The route went directly up the central  
ridge and the face.



sibilities when I shut my eyes. The snowfall was unbelievable. We sometimes had to dig out from under six feet of powder in the morning. When the weather cleared on the fifth day we were relieved not only to be free of the snow cave but also to bury our apprehension in action. My journal cryptically records that action: "Up at 2:30, away at 5:30, cross schrund at 6:00. Big slides coming down and stuff we are on unstable. Retreat for face to clear and start again at 10:00. Up avalanche cone for 800-feet where belayed climbing begins. Mixed pitch through 30-feet of rock. Up snow yielding to ice at base of gully and first rock band. Try to bypass gully by mixed chimney on right but no go. Waste 90 minutes. Lots of spindrift slides coming down. I lead out on vertical ice, break my axe, borrow Chas' and am 30-feet out from only screw when am enveloped by slide. I stick on but Chas is knocked onto anchors: two tied-off blades. Lucky. At end of pitch I notice one crampon is broken and I jury-rig the thing. I set off on self-belay while Chas jümars. In a panic I move right and out of gully to avoid more avalanches. A huge one peels off to our right and fills the entire basin below us. Chas up to me, traverses back into gully and up. We have no choice but to expose ourselves. The slides are caused by huge snow banners on summit which deposit on lee slopes under cornices, then slide. Me up one more pitch. I'm exhausted. For no good reason I urge Chas left. At 12:30 stop climbing and crawl into bivy sacs on small seats on exposed but protected drift. Avalanches build again and fall on each side of us. In my sack I doze, oblivious to the chaos outside. 19-hour day."

The next day we were confronted by the sure signs of another storm. We had no choice but to retreat to the safety of our snow cave on the Bulge.

*The Summit.* On May 8 at 2:30 A.M., we set out once again, determined to reach the summit on this try. We had rested up and crudely mended our broken gear during two days of storm. The ice gully, such a sinister place just three days before, was tranquil, the climbing as enjoyable as a frozen Colorado waterfall. By two P.M. we had reached our previous high point, the end of the gully, the start of the upper rock band.

Chas, an engineer by profession, rigged a tension traverse right to gain the ice band cutting across the face. I followed and with a sense of heady glee, pulled the ropes and committed us to the summit.

We bivouacked at 12:30 A.M., exhausted after 22 hours of climbing. Our platform, hacked out of névé on a 55° slope, gave use a sense of what we had climbed with 6000-feet of exposure plunging down to the glacier. Above us lay the summit cornices, below us the rock band which we had finally turned that day, the last obstacle to bar us from the summit. We dozed confident of the weather, confident we could complete the route.





**PLATE 3**

*Photo by Charles Macquarie*

**Setting out from Base Camp on  
DEBORAH.**

At 3:30 P.M. on May 9 we stood briefly on the top of Mount Deborah. Our urge to climb the north face was replaced by an even stronger urge to get off the mountain, down to a less hostile world where life was accepted. Our drive was intensified when, to our total astonishment, we spotted climbers descending the northwest ridge-Yanert Glacier route. We greedily anticipated the hot food and drinks they might offer us when our routes joined on the Yanert Glacier.

The following day we were doing just that. And as we indulged ourselves in a day of gluttony, we could look up at our tracks on the descent route, the Becky-Harrer-Meybohm route. The gigantic cornices and mushrooms that we had threaded the day before were insignificant in the distance. But the north face, invisible on the other side of the mountain, was burned into my memory, the details living large.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Eastern Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Deborah, 12,339 feet, via North Face, summit reached on May 8, 1977, descent via Becky-Harrer-Meybohm (first-ascent) route (Gowans, Macquarrie).

PERSONNEL: David Davis, Dakers Gowans, Charles Macquarrie, Eric Reynolds.

