

# A New Route on Mount Dickey's Southeast Face

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MOUNT DICKEY has one of the largest and steepest rock faces in the Alaska Range and no doubt this was the reason why Tomas Gross picked it. The only previous route on the face was climbed by Rowell, Roberts, and Ward on the buttress to the left of the one we chose (*A.A.J.*, 1975, pages 17-25.)

On May 22 we and our heap of gear were almost at the foot of the climb. The weather deteriorated right away and the next day was spent moving everything over from the middle of the Ruth Glacier. Next morning we started out—at ten o'clock—and fixed three pitches. Another day, another pitch, and then one day of repacking the gear and food in anticipation of an imminent departure for the face. Eighteen-days' worth of ample food rations should be enough (we thought). We packed fifteen gas cartridges, two stoves, two ice axes, two pairs of crampons, down parkas, pants, sleeping bags, a hanging tent (similar to the LOWE design), and quite a few nuts, pitons, and bolts. Altogether a big pile of stuff!

The weather was fine the last two days and lots of snow was coming off the ledges, once burying me and our belay set-up under an inch of wet snow. How were the cornices going to hold? We spent another day climbing pitch 5 and hauling gear. (Most of our hauling was done on the third jümar, although we used pulleys on a few pitches.) We fixed the tent platform just off our last belay ledge. Already, both 300-foot 9-mm ropes had two deep cuts; our remaining two 150-foot 9-mm ropes remained intact. (Tomas led on a double 9-mm rope most of the time.)

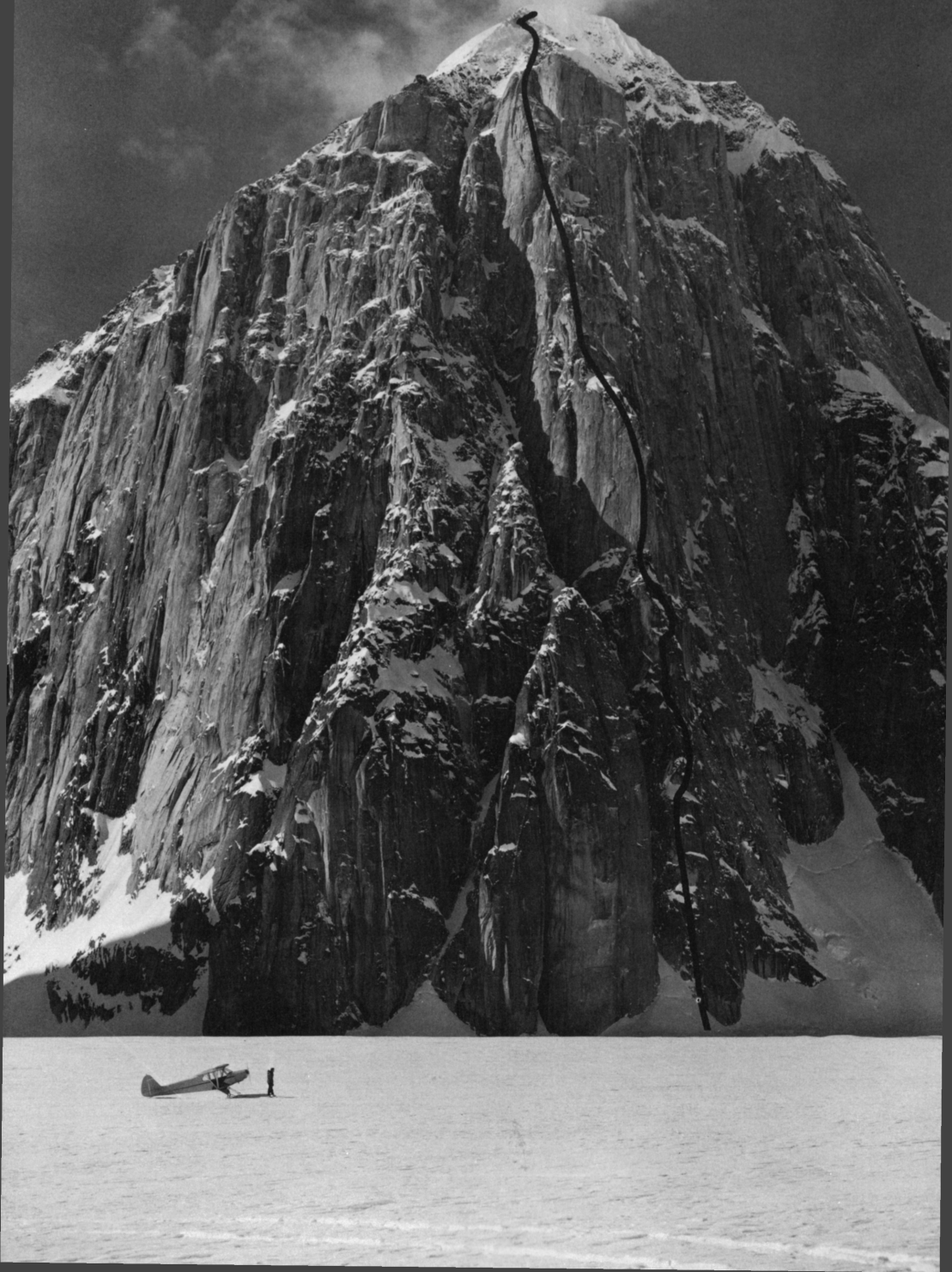
Finally, on the 28th, we left for the face—an exciting feeling to pull the ropes up behind us. Our regular tent remained on the glacier as the means of communication with the pilot in our absence—we were to move the tent back to the center of the glacier when we were ready to be picked up. When we arrived at the tent platform on the face, we decided to move up one more pitch; our new campsite on the top of a fat snowpatch with enough room even for a regular tent was great.

On the seventh pitch Tomas had his only fall, a 12-footer, when a skyhook popped out on a traverse. Fortunately, a hexentric below held. I sat restlessly in a hanging belay below the particularly nasty ninth pitch,

PLATE 15

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**MOUNT DICKEY from the  
Ruth Gorge.**



a rotten snowfield. Then came one good belay ledge and another hanging belay on top of overhanging pitch 10 before we could traverse off the first obvious tower. When we finished fixing ropes on pitch 11, we were ready to move from our first campsite after five days there. "It about averages one pitch a day, doesn't it?" we thought, thinking of our food. We started out early, but the move from the first to the second campsite turned out to be one of the longest days on the climb. Since the ledge at the end of pitch 11 was small and under a cornice, we decided to climb further, with all the gear. We had to climb another three pitches that night on account of the cornices right above us on the buttress edge. At the end we were rewarded with another very comfortable campsite at the foot of the conspicuous prow which ends about halfway up the buttress. It was 2:30 in the morning and it took another hour to put the tent together. We'd *never* take the tent platform apart again! Darkless arctic nights were miserable. Luckily it snowed the next day to give us needed rest: for our bodies in the sleeping bags, and for our eyes in the green universe of our Gore-Tex tent.

Above, we could not continue on the very edge of the buttress as the rock on and to the left of it was of yellowish, very rotten granite. We stayed on the right face of the ridge, avoiding the cornices at the same time. After two slightly overhanging pitches we pendulumed into a gully leading to a steep snowfield which dropped off directly to the glacier. This we climbed on the day we moved again to establish Camp III on the top of it; regretfully, in a place exposed to both the cornices and snow from the gully above us. Tomas placed another bolt for the tent (we put in approximately a dozen bolts on the route, most of them for the tent on the campsites), but it was not too reassuring. After we climbed three more pitches (19 to 21) the next day, it snowed again. We sat for a day in our truly hanging tent this time, listening to the noise of small snow avalanches on the tent fabric.

Thanks to the falling snow we left at the first opportunity next morning, although we had no idea of where to camp higher in the steep terrain. After an icy chimney we exited on a ridge crest around a cornice but had to traverse, edging left to reach the next small tower on the buttress. In the evening we ended up on the airiest small ledge on top of pitch 23, at our one-night Camp IV.

Sensing a better campsite not far above, we packed right away in the morning. Pitch 24 was one of the hardest on the climb, on crackless yellow granite again, but there was no way of avoiding it. The slabs to the right were forbidding and on our left an avalanche gully separated us from the buttress climbed earlier. The belay Tomas made on the top of this pitch was something exceptional—I jumared up on a couple of  $\frac{3}{4}$ " angles driven directly into the rock. After another similar pitch, not quite as steep, we got to a fine Camp V on a small flat snowpatch next to a boulder below the next to last tower.

We were getting hungry, having been on half-rations for several days. We spent a welcome snowstorm-rest day, waiting three or four hours between bites of chocolate or half a can of sardines. This was our sixteenth day on the buttress. We still had a dozen days of food if we really stretched it, but we must have been getting anxious since we started taking sleeping pills.

After the rest day we made good progress, climbing three steep pitches and moving camp to a balcony near the top of the tower, where water dripped fast enough to collect it and save fuel. The next day we fixed four pitches of partly lower-angle, rotten rock, some steep rock with loose flakes, and snow, but snowfall prevented for a day the move to Camp VII on the top of pitch 33. Big avalanches swept the couloir between our buttress and the Roberts-Rowell-Ward route. We nearly got a taste of one which hurtled towards Tomas as he was getting to the top of the snowfield right below Camp VII. Fortunately, he could jump aside. For two days of bad weather, we cringed there, fearing we would be swept away. Our food was running low but we were not far from the last tower and the end of the rock. After the snow stopped, we climbed one-and-a-half pitches and moved the camp to get out of the spot.

June 20 was a long day again. We climbed three pitches (34 to 37) and had hauled everything to the end of the rock part of the climb by ten P.M. After eating, we worked, fixing all six ropes along the steep snow and broken rocks until three A.M., suspecting that we would be plowing the snow with our loads the next day. We were right; the snow was soggy and soft and it was warm. We got to the end of the fixed ropes in the evening and climbed another three pitches and then over a tiny cornice. At one o'clock in the morning we had finally emerged on the summit with all our stuff. A frigid bivouac followed; too cold to sleep, we watched a spectacular sunrise on Mount McKinley.

In the morning we packed all the things on the tent platform and pulled it down the glacier on the other side of the mountain. Although it first stuck in a large snow-filled crevasse, it slid nicely until three in the afternoon when the snow was too soft to continue. We finished the descent during the night and ate our last food in a camp of another party in the Ruth Amphitheater in the morning. We arrived at our starting place at noon and got picked up by Cliff Hudson the same afternoon.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Ruth Glacier, Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Dickey's southeast face above the Great Gorge of the Ruth Glacier. Ropes were fixed on the first 750 feet from May 22 to 27, 1977. The ascent lasted from May 28 to June 22. 47 pitches. In the first 37 pitches, 40% was direct aid. NCCS VI, F8, A3. (Tomas Gross, Vera Komarkova).