

# Harmony Ridge—Lucania's Southeast Ridge

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THE complex massif of Mount Lucania rises to 17,147 feet in the St. Elias Mountains, only 50 miles north of Mount Logan. Before we started, no route had yet been completed on its southeast face for obvious reasons. The ridges are all long and draped with hanging glaciers; the faces are forbidding and well fortified. Of the myriad of ridges which make up this side of the mountain, only one goes directly to the summit, the southeast ridge, rising above a tortured icefall in a perfect line toward the top. This was our objective.

Phil Raevsky, Mike Ruckhaus, my brother Craig\* and I landed on the upper Dennis Glacier on April 23, a perfect day which allowed us an unsurpassed view of the complex of St. Elias peaks, pinnacles and glaciers and especially of our entire route and planned traverse. We contemplated an alpine-style climb over Mount Lucania, across Mount Steele and finally down Steele's beautiful east ridge, followed by a 70-mile hike out to the Alaska Highway.

The mountain of equipment and food needed for the climb would make us ferry loads, at least up to the summit. By then we hoped to have reduced it to a load apiece.

We spent the first day carrying two loads each up the two-and-a-half miles to our first camp, Echo Flats, at the base of the icefall. The worst dangers of the climb start there. For the next two days of marginal weather, we threaded our way up through moving ice. Route-finding was difficult. We twisted and turned through deep snow to avoid the ice walls and crevasses, climbed up steep ice steps and around crevasses, always exposed to crashing séracs and ice walls. This section was the Crescendo.

Camp II was on a low knob at the base of the ridge in a huge cirque directly below the immense face. Our ridge rose 8000 feet above in a straight line, averaging over 45°. A continuous crashing of avalanches and falling ice gave the camp the name of Symphony Hall, though we often jokingly called it Avalanche Acres.

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\* Recipient of an AAC Boyd N. Everett Jr. Mountaineering Fellowship Grant.

PLATE 29

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

The Southeast Face of LUCANIA.  
Camps are marked. The descent  
followed the skyline to the right and  
ascended over Mount Steele.



Phil Raevsky and I climbed 1800 feet the first day to reach the foot of the rocks. Mike Ruckhaus and my brother Craig followed up the several leads of 65° ice and over other short ice steps, using line which we had fixed on the difficult sections. While we started a snow cave, they reconnoitered the rock band and soon returned, confident that a route could be found. After a little more digging, we all descended down Percussion Rib to our camp, bringing the rest of our supplies up the following day.

We spent five nights at Harmonica Hollow, Camp III, a large, three-roomed snow cave at 12,200 feet, just below the dominant rock band, while we worked on a route through the rocks and ice above. We hoped to find a flatter place for the next camp above.

The "rock" band had two distinct sections: the Menuetto, which was fifteen-and-a-half leads of mixed rock, snow and ice, topped by the Diminuendo, four leads of 70° hard, brittle ice with a 30-foot, 85° bulge guarding the exit. This crux contained difficult rock and long leads of extremely tiring, steep front-pointing all with heavy packs. Camp IV was just above the ice bulge, where we chipped out a platform and cut blocks to shelter the tent from wind.

Above, Mike Ruckhaus and I climbed a beautiful ridge through occasional mist. A perfect knife-edge, first of mixed rock and ice and soon entirely of good snow and ice, it curved gently upward through the clouds, dropping sheerly off either side into grey depths. After a superb day of climbing, Mike and I returned to camp, exuberant. Misty Arête rose 2000 feet to a small rock buttress, on top of which next day we placed our final camp before the summit, Windy Knoll. It caught the last sun and all the wind on the mountain. We built a cooking igloo and eight-foot snow walls around the tent and were glad to move on from this chilly place.

On May 5, our 13th day, Craig and I set out early, up the broad snowfields, to find a way through the final hoarfrost-encrusted rocks. Craig made two moderate leads through rotten rock and pushed over the frosted edge to emerge on the final steep snowfield. After two hours of easy cramponing, we were on top. Harmony Ridge had been climbed!

We had climbed into a strong wind. On the summit it howled, but the weather was crystal clear. St. Elias, Vancouver, Hubbard, Blackburn and thousands of other peaks, named and unnamed, stood out distinctly. Closest was Mount Steele (16,644 feet), North America's tenth-highest peak, over which we still had to climb before starting our final descent.

We went back to Windy Knoll and weathered a storm day before returning to the summit with Phil and Mike. In lovely, clear weather we picked up our cache and left the top to begin our traverse. We now each carried only one heavy pack. That night we camped at 16,600 feet on Lucania's east shoulder in a high, protected col. The next day after

descending a long crevassed slope to the high plateau which separates Lucania and Steele, we skied up the far side of this huge col as it gradually steepened to become Mount Steele and camped after a long, tiring day.

The weather cooperated for a superb summit day on Mount Steele. From the top we could see our descent route drop into the mists. Farther away the Steele Glacier wound toward the Donjek River. A sea of peaks floated above the clouds in all directions.

That afternoon we started our descent of Steele's beautiful east ridge, one curving line dropping 8000 feet to the Steele Glacier. Again in weather tolerant of life, we spent a lovely night halfway down on a small saddle which dropped off steeply on both sides. On May 9 we sadly finished our descent, which was marred only by the final 1000 feet of loose rock.

From the base of the ridge it took us five-and-a-half days to hike the 70 twisted miles to the highway: down the tortuous mess of the Steele Glacier, then the relative ease of Steele Creek, across the Donjek River, over a low pass in the Kluane Range to the Burwash Uplands and finally down Burwash Creek to the Alaska Highway.

It had been a superb climb: good friends and good times topped by great conditions and fine weather; a climb in perfect Harmony.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: St. Elias Mountains, Yukon Territory, Canada.

ASCENTS: Mount Lucania, 17,147 feet, new route via Southeast (Harmony) Ridge, May 5 and 7, 1977.

Mount Steele, 16,644 feet, via Lucania-Steele Col and descent via East Ridge, May 8, 1977.

DATA: 2000 feet of fixed line for load ferrying (all removed).

Placement of 25 pins and nuts, 35 ice screws, 20 snow pickets and 15 snow flukes.

PERSONNEL: Craig and Steven Gaskill, Philip Raevsky, Michael Ruckhaus.