Huntington's Southeast Spur

ANGUS M. THUERMER, JR.

WHEN KENT MENEGHIN, Glenn Randall, Joe Kaelin, and I planned a route on Mount Huntington (12,240 feet), we wanted to keep pace with the trend in Alaskan climbing towards fast, lightweight ascents. Few of the routes being pioneered today could be climbed safely in any other than an alpine-style.

On June 12 the blue and yellow Alaska Railroad cars left us sorting boxes with other expeditions on the Talkeetna platform. We were as pleased as our bush pilot, Jim Sharp, that our equipment packed into two loads each. Jim was going to have fun, too. Instead of flying the milk run to the Kahiltna, he was going to make his first landings on the "Backside Glacier," a branch of the Ruth, three-and-a-half miles southwest of Mount Dickey and seven miles by skis from our Base Camp.

Grey clouds smothered Talkeetna. For eight days our small tents stayed pitched on the runway. As postponed flights made the town a bottleneck to the glaciers, international tent cities and their attendant softball leagues developed along the grassy fringes of the runways.

We flew out of limbo on June 20. I pointed to the Tokositna Glacier and shouted in Sharp's ear, "That's where we'll be walking out." He shouted back: "Have you ever seen that glacier?" and made a reconnaissance flight over the 100-foot-high mounds of boulders that snaked sixteen miles north to Huntington.

That day we skied our two loads two miles up the Backside Glacier from the landing site at 4500 feet to the base of a 300-foot snow couloir. This was our pass west into the Tokositna drainage. That night the light moved with us. First the sun glowed behind Huntington's ridges. Later, its pale fire was beaming off the low moon. A yellow sunrise raked across the flutings on Hunter's east side as we set up camp for a day's rest.

On our fifth day we reached 4500 feet on the crest of a muddy icefall a mile south of the toe of Huntington's south ridge. We climbed the right (east) border of the icefall on gravel-pitted ice and wet rock. On June 26 we dried our gear and built a Base-Camp igloo at 5000 feet, half a mile from the beginning of our route.

Skiing to Base Camp we had met a jovial group of thirteen Japanese

PLATE 32

Photo by Bradford Washburn

Huntington Icefall and beginning of the Southeast Spur Route.

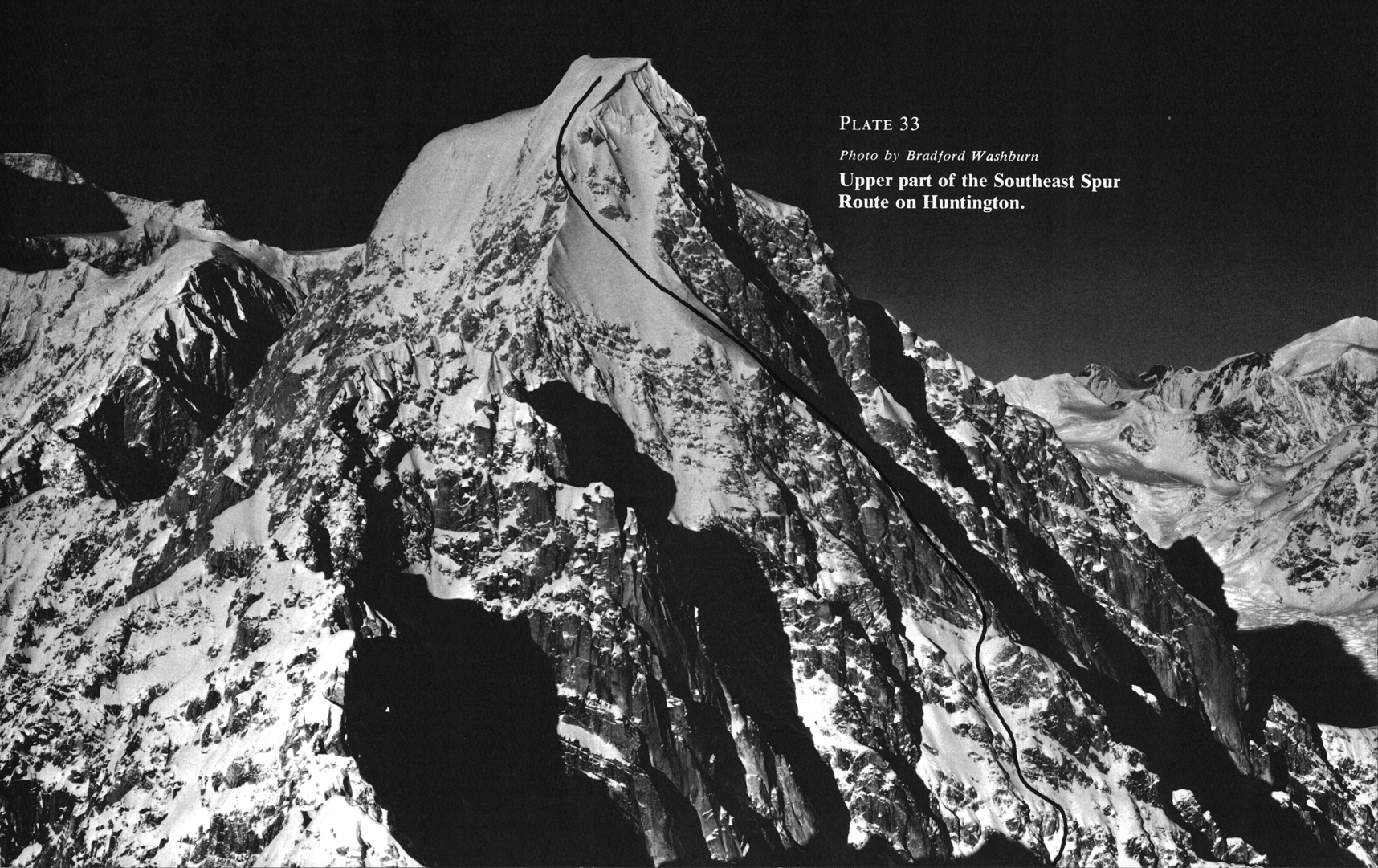

PLATE 33

Photo by Bradford Washburn

Upper part of the Southeast Spur Route on Huntington.

from Sapporo who had been turned back on Huntington's south ridge. Over ceremonial coffee we tried to communicate. Queries had to be rephrased before we drew their response: "Stone good, snow bad."

The surrounding walls echoed their laughter when we told of our plan to climb the southeast spur in a couple of days. But the next evening there was no laughter and little talking as we scrambled, breathless with excitement, up a broad 1000-foot-high snow couloir—the beginning of our 8000-foot climb.

We had planned our intricate route using Bradford Washburn's aerial photographs and his detailed McKinley map. The couloir we were climbing was on a face on the Rooster Comb, parallel to a dangerous icefall that separated the Comb from Mount Huntington. Climbing at night, we cramponed up the solid névé in five-foot-deep gutters scoured by daily avalanches. At the couloir's top we traversed up and left on a long snow ramp that ended on the west ridge of the Rooster Comb's south peak (P 9800). Descending 500 feet from the Comb into an amphitheater at 7000 feet, just above the dangerous icefall, was easy, but our route here was threatened by séracs and deep unconsolidated snow. Objective danger and concentration demanded by unbelayed climbing added tension to our ten-hour workout. I was tired—yet we had 1000 feet to climb to our campsite.

We crossed the amphitheater to the base of the southeast spur. On the spur's south flank was a 1000-foot icefall; we climbed the first couloir to its north. This couloir, like the broad couloir below, averaged 45° to 50° but near its top was pinched by a band of rock, plastered by steep flow ice.

Glenn Randall jumped to the challenge of climbing through the spindrift and chunks of ice which occasionally fell down this monster icicle. He flashed up this pitch. A few hundred more feet of steep snow and we were on the crest on the southeast spur looking into our campsite in an 8000-foot basin embraced by a cirque of frosted granite towers. If snow accumulated, we thought retreat might be impossible down gutters obviously dug by large snow slides.

While a-foot-and-a-half of snow fell during two days, we endured a fast, waiting for a break in the weather. Finally we ate a dinner and prepared to bolt for the top but, out in the storm, we reconsidered. Just reaching Base Camp was going to be enough of an adventure. However, retreating wasn't as difficult as we expected; we glissaded in deep snow down parts of our route.

For a week at Base the weather remained stable—daily precipitation—but the climate began to change. The summer melt zone had now moved up to 5000 feet and was rising as July progressed. The walls around began to avalanche regularly, each with its distinct sound. Our broad couloir hissed as its gutters overflowed with waves of snow and ice bowl-

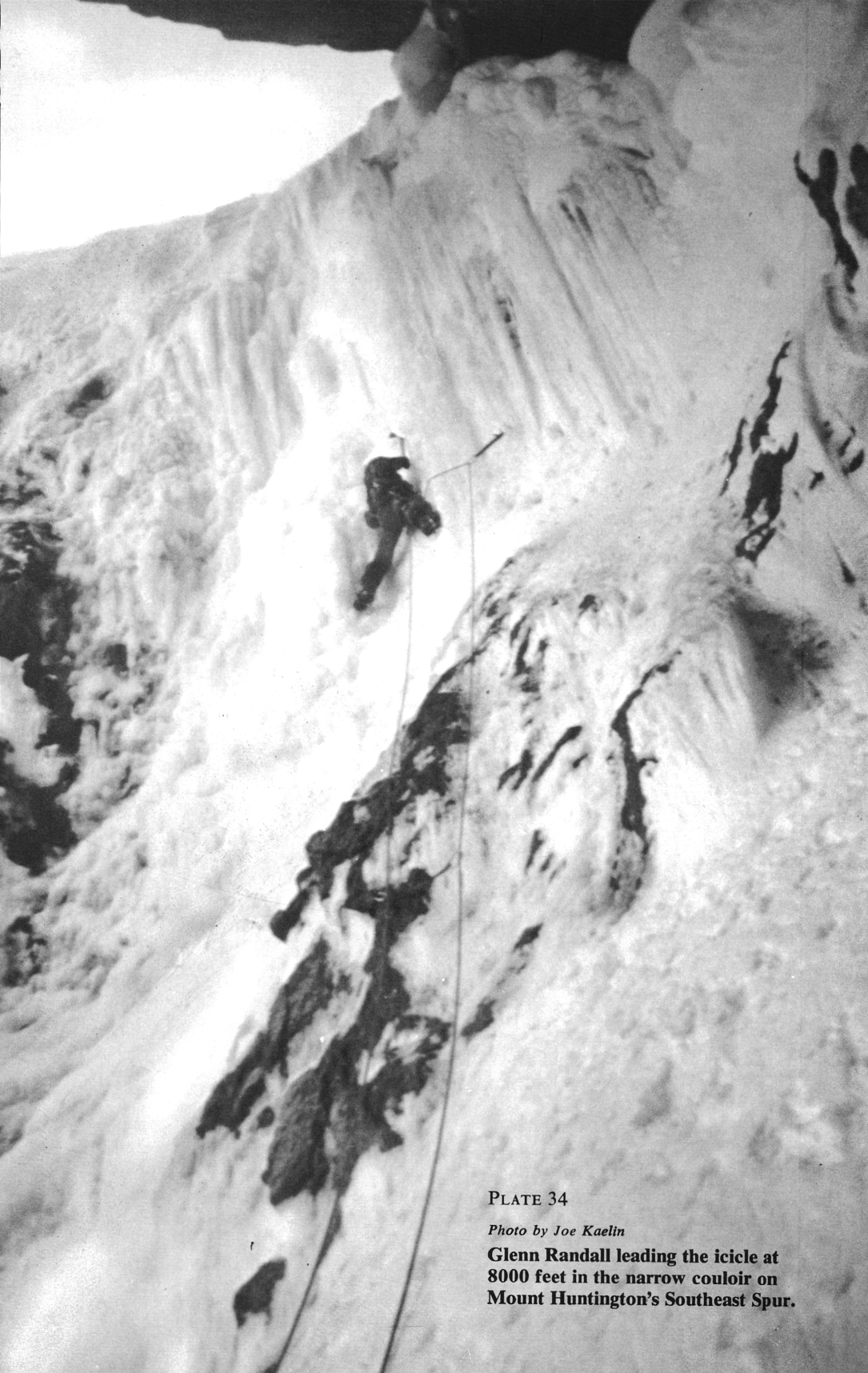

PLATE 34

Photo by Joe Kaelin

Glenn Randall leading the icicle at 8000 feet in the narrow couloir on Mount Huntington's Southeast Spur.

ing balls. The sound from other faces was sharper as rocks whizzed and exploded. The collapsing icefall made its own distinct thunder. The thaw caved in our igloo and forced us back into the tents.

After a week at Base Camp, early on July 8, we left again and climbed to our 8000-foot campsite in 10 hours. The rope we left on Glenn's icicle saved time. We were ready to continue that night if the weather stayed good. Not counting our landing day, we had seen two 12-hour clear spells in 19 days. We saw no reason to expect any more.

At nine that evening, as normal, we couldn't see thirty feet through the clouds. By ten we were in the clear. We grabbed our light racks, spare sweaters, and lunches and took off.

Ignoring the crest of the southeast spur—we would have faced the tall rock towers which studded the ridge for 1500 feet—we chose a route farther west along the mountain's south face. We wanted to climb mostly on snow and ice, weaving between cliffs to gain the ridge crest at a notch at 9500 feet.

Route-finding through the cliffs on this face was critical. After short rock steps, a mush-ice pitch, and a lot of good cramponing névé, we were stopped on a snow face by a thick cloud. Ice axe and Terrordactyl can overcome the steepest ice pitch but against fog they are useless. After grim minutes the cloud blew past and we saw our route to the notch above.

Glenn Randall raced the mist up the slope to attack the right-hand of three couloirs. This ice pitch started with an eight-foot bulge, then mellowed to some classic 55° water ice which snaked between cliffs to the notch.

There I could see the east side of Huntington, but that view wasn't as exciting as the sight I had of Glenn leading the next mixed pitch. We had thought this might be the crux. Washburn's photos showed a thin white line through the rock on the high side of the notch. This suggested a flaw—perhaps a chimney where snow could accumulate—a single pitch, but what a pitch!

"Desperate!" shouted Glenn from the top of his lead. Kent Meneghin led our rope up the crux open-book. Following, I stemmed and bridged for thirty feet on the steep rock to the beginning of an ice smear. First I hooked my hammer in the frozen veneer. Then I kicked in one set of frontpoints, swung my axe high into the thicker ice, and moved my other foot onto the fragile 70° surface.

The sunrise struck us as we ran farther up the ridge on firm snow. At 10,000 feet the ridge blended into a long slope we called the hanging glacier. We stopped when we reached the bottom of this. Just beneath us was the lip of the hanging glacier and 3000 feet below, the sun backlit the low clouds on the Ruth. It was a warm balcony to enjoy breakfast on.

Kent kicked steps to nearly 11,000 feet and I took over as we turned onto the sweeping snowfield at the top of the south face. Above us a 100-foot ice cliff bulged over the slope and a long sharp cornice fringed the apex like the barb of an arrow. We traversed on firm snow which deteriorated as we reached the south ridge, 500 feet below the summit. We belayed the last pitch on the ridge. The ever eager Joe Kaelin led, placing three screws in the hard ice, covered by eight inches of standard Alaskan snow. If the snow on the rest of the south ridge were as deep and unconsolidated as this, anyone attempting that route might find a grain shovel more appropriate than a nice axe. As it was, Joe had his own hybrid tool. He fitted his special deadboy snugly on his ice-axe pick—like an entrenching tool—and began to dig into the barbed cornice.

After 30 minutes Joe was on the summit plateau and we climbed his prepared route. Wind blew mist along as we crossed the hundred yards of nearly level snow, to the summit. It was eleven A.M.—34 hours after we had left Base Camp. I was amazed. We started at least 2000 feet below Huntington's other four routes and had belayed only six pitches in 8000 feet.

We couldn't rest. Our descent might be easy but we would still be climbing unbelayed down long slopes on the mountain. After a glimpse of the arctic panorama we started descending.

After down-climbing the top pitch and napping for three hours on the south ridge, we brewed hot chocolate as the sun moved off the face. At six P.M. we continued down-climbing and rappelled six times to reach our tents and sleeping bags at 8000 feet. After a day's rest we continued down but our good luck began to change.

Glenn had the first encounter. While descending the narrow couloir just below the icicle, he slipped and fell 400 feet. Miraculously he stopped uninjured. The next day, when we were leaving an intermediate camp at 7000 feet, Kent dropped 30 feet into a bottomless crevasse. Joe's forte was dodging snow slides; three times he had to scamper across the slopes. I came unglued lower down and toppled backwards 40 feet into a crevasse.

In the 7000-foot amphitheater we saw footprints leading from the crest of the dangerous icefall to the back of the amphitheater half a mile away. Who were our visitors? How dangerous was the icefall we had carefully avoided by climbing the broad couloir and ramp? Months before Bradford Washburn had said, pointing to one of his photos: "Anybody who goes up that thing deserves to get knocked on the head."

Kent and Joe hiked north to meet Jeb Schenck and Dave Holsworth at their airdrop site beneath the Huntington-Rooster Comb. col. A block of ice had hit Dave on the arm and almost immobilized it. The two were not going to give Washburn's prophecy a second chance. They asked us to wand our route up to the ramp for their descent.

PLATE 35

Photo by Bradford Washburn

Summit of MOUNT HUNTINGTON, showing the top of the Southeast Spur Route. Mount McKinley is at the top left.

Climbing back up to the ramp we crossed a snow slope with a two-foot slab fracture across our old steps. Lower, parts of the ramp were bare of snow and we rappelled three times to get to the top of the broad couloir. Four days after leaving the summit we ate our victory cheesecake in Base Camp.

On July 18, we began our journey home. From the bottom of the muddy icefall at 3800 feet, it took us four days to reach the Petersville road. We crossed country that must be some of the wildest in the world. We spent day one crossing ten miles of blue ice strewn with boulders and sand. Rivers cut deep channels in the glacier before plunging into bottomless caverns. On the second day, the surface began to buckle into moraine-covered hills five miles before the Tokositna Glacier's terminus; we climbed onto the west bank to walk among grass and plants for the first time since Talkeetna. Large gorges in the bank forced us to detour farther west. Our most difficult obstacle was the half-mile of jungle just before the Tokositna River. For two hours we tripped and slipped down through dense, thorned plants and alder branches which grew sideways.

Camp on a gravel bar was as depressing as it was wet. Between the Petersville road and us were the 2000 vertical feet of the Dutch Hills. If the jungle ahead was thick, we could expect a whole day of uphill hand-to-branch combat. And so we followed the river downstream for a few miles, but we weren't prepared for that route either. Thigh-deep swamps stretched over acres of rich beaver land, and like the beaver, we had to swim across parts of it. We turned into the trees and climbed through the 5.8 bushes. Our jungle camp was halfway up the hills.

The 34th and last dawn was brilliant with the Alaska Range jutting into the blue. It was our fourth day of clear weather. We climbed through the last trees and onto some alpine meadows on the hillcrest. Huntington was tucked beneath Denali but I immediately recognized its distinct symmetry. The four of us could see landmarks on our route, the southeast spur, the big rock in the center of the south face, and the curled summit cornice. I turned and took my memories with me. A tractor trail in the meadow led down to shacks—an abandoned gold mine. Re-entry began.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Huntington, 12,240 feet, via the Southeast Spur; summit reached on July 9, 1978 (whole party).

PERSONNEL: Joseph Kaelin, Kent Meneghin, Glenn Randall, Angus M. Thuermer, Jr.