

Hunter's Southeast Spur— Alpine Style

PETER ATHANS*

THERE IS LITTLE left to do. Glenn Randall* relaxes back onto the hotel-room bed, his eyelids slowly falling shut. I have finished bandaging his frostbitten hands and the bulky dressings lie at his sides. Pete Metcalf towels himself dry from the shower and his emaciated figure tells of Mount Hunter's demands. A relieved smile on his blistered lips expresses that the climb and the escape are over. Though we were on the mountain only hours ago, I feel it to be very distant now that we are in the warmth of the hotel. The mirror of the bathroom medicine chest reflects my gaunt face and eyes that have grown large in their sockets. I want to go over the experience of the climb in my memory, but I am simply too weary. Survival is my satisfaction for now. The warm drizzle of the shower falls onto my sinewy shoulders where there was, only a short time ago, the burden of fear and doubt.

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Hudson's Cessna roared down the Tokositna Glacier at the foot of Hunter's southeast spur, gathered momentum, and with the tail rising off the snow, was airborne. We were alone and independent.

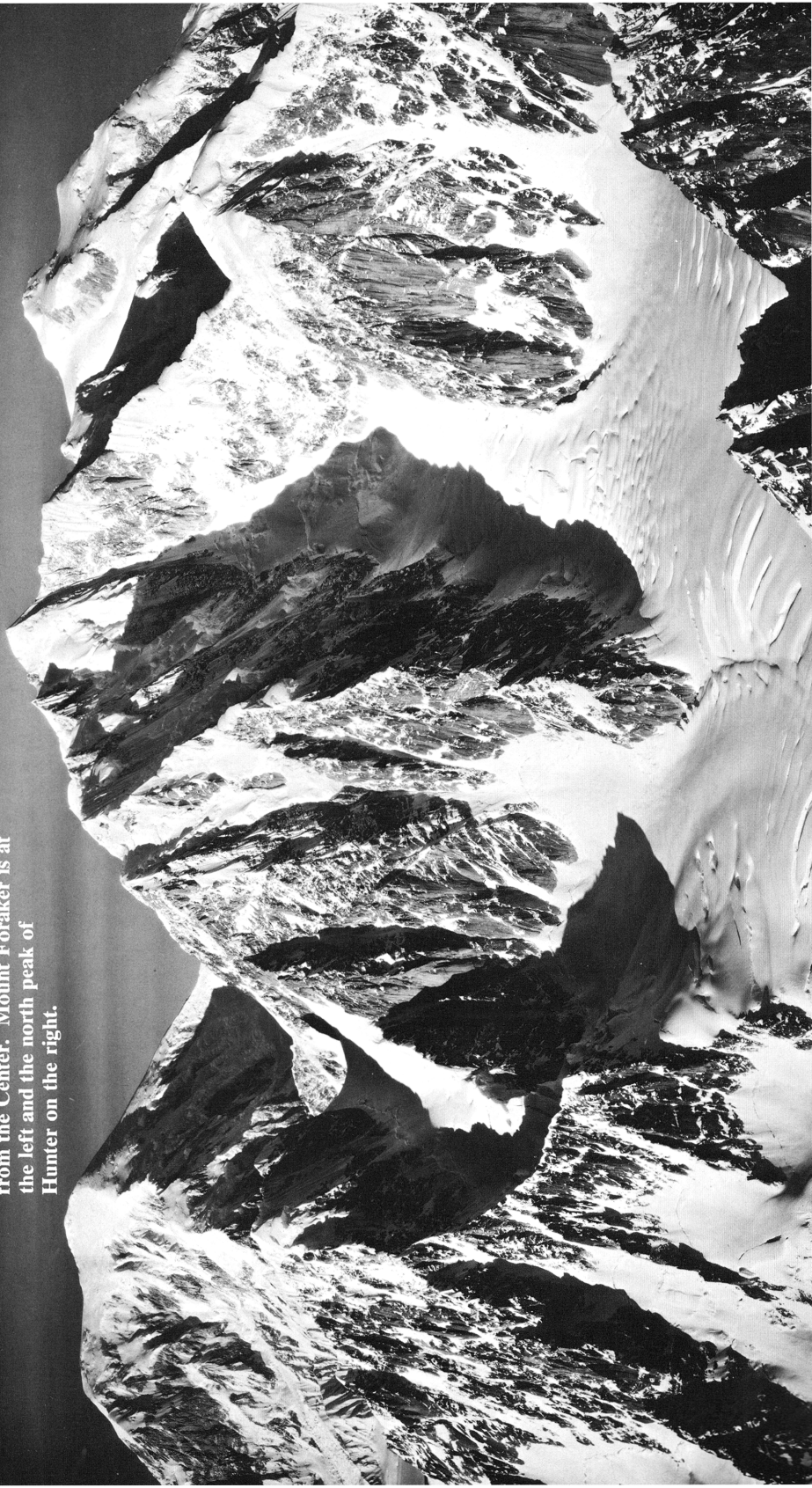
Our first four days on the mountain provided an initiation to both Mount Hunter and each other. The images in the daylight were punctuated by brief Alaskan nights as the days ran one into another. Peter had been on a disappointing expedition to this spot in 1977 and seemed pleased in returning to settle the vendetta. Glenn's enthusiasm was an amphetamine to my energy. With six days of food that were to sustain us for thirteen, we climbed the snow couloir that gave access to the wind-sculptured ridge.

We reached the technical crux of the route early on. A triangular citadel of rock soared skyward, vertical and overhanging. Glenn put

* Recipients of American Alpine Club Mountaineering Fellowship grants.

Photo by Bradford Washburn

MOUNT HUNTER from the Southeast. The Southeast Spur rises from the Center. Mount Foraker is at the left and the north peak of Hunter on the right.



himself to task with a song on his sun-baked lips. The snow sparkled in the brilliant sun as he used aid and free-climbed in crampons to a secure belay. I followed on Jümars and pumped myself up for the next 150-foot mixed pitch. After the excavation of an ocean of snow, some aid moves, and free bits, I slung a horn and hammered a pin into a reluctant seam. The rope stretched with tension as Pete jümarked to join me. Another half day was required to finish the headwall and we were all relieved with the hope of moving fast above. Cornices, poor ice conditions, and very deep snow led me to believe that we had only exchanged one set of difficulties for another. I felt a bit uneasy with the slowness but there seemed to be a kind of uplifting benevolent spirit guarding us. That spirit would ebb and flow throughout the route and at times I was convinced of its presence; yet in hostile and adverse climbing conditions, I thought this spirit was an illusion of my murky, romantic imagination.

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The wind howled at the base of a short couloir and snow piled up on the tiny belay. Glenn emerged from around a blind corner and traversed the diamond-hard ice I had passed moments before. The cold pierced my clothing as if I were naked and I began to shiver violently. I saw Glenn and Peter climbing towards me like ghostly apparitions in the storm. I looked back to the snow shoulder several hundred feet below and imagined us digging a cave, brewing up, and passing out. That dream was deferred like so many others because we continued to climb.

A powder avalanche rushed down the couloir engulfing my body to the waist. A fist-sized ice chunk fired out of nowhere and cracked my goggles, wrenching my neck into an awful contortion. Snow poured in through the cracks in my goggles and my eyelids started to freeze shut.

The rope coursed a serpentine pattern in the snowy air as I pounded my ice-tools over a small bulge. The next section involved climbing around an almost free-standing fin of delicate, unstable snow-ice. The fin swept out to the left in a wide arc and down below was the dark abyss of night. What depraved natural process created this misshapen thing? The rope from my waist spanned the arc and in the waning light I could detect the figure of Glenn who methodically belayed. He dropped the coils of taken-in rope in a business-like, orderly manner at his feet. The sight of Glenn cheered me on and I hacked a path around the fin to join my two friends. After two hours of digging we settled into a snow cave and prepared for supper, sleep, and the anxious dreams we did not remember the next day.

The warmth of a brilliant sun greeted me at the cave's mouth the next morning. A bit bleary with lack of sleep, I staked out my damp sleeping bag to my ice-axe. I sat alone, watching the loft of the down slowly revive. We had planned to be on the summit on the sixth day, but the ridge continued on with the top not even close. We had been on the

route almost a week, and I began to think. On Hunter, away from a society that seems to emphasize becoming something, we were allowed to be. When one is caught up in the moment, aspirations for the future and worry of the past fall away and the notion of time has little value. On Hunter, we measured time with the swing of an ice-axe and the kick of dull front-points in hard ice. Seconds, minutes, hours were too abstract to have meaning.

We resumed climbing on the seventh day with Pete in the lead on fine ice. He wove the rope around a cavernous ice hollow onto a 60° slide of glossy water-ice. Superb climbing conditions then led into the old familiar insecure ice that offered only a prayer for protection. Off to my left I spotted an old strand of blue polypropylene rope disappearing into a cornice. That old remnant of the Hunter south ridge expedition vindicated the suspicion that we were on the south ridge and that our southeast spur was beneath us*. Elated, I punched my way up the relenting snow and ice to the whale-backed ridge. Slogging along the ridge-top in the pending evening was almost relaxing, and I saw the great col in the ridge that marked the last eight hundred feet of climbing to the summit. At that point finishing the route and beginning the descent took on real dimensions and my spirits took flight, prematurely. The following two days on the Happy Cowboy Pinnacles and the remaining ridge stripped me of the folly in anticipating success too early.

The Happy Cowboy Pinnacles were surrealistic formations that challenged the imagination. Small wind-sculpted towers sat on the friable, knife-edged ridge, defying us to climb them. The delicate conditions required us to straddle the ridge and spur ourselves along as a cowboy might prod a reluctant mount. We may have imitated cowboys surmounting that problem, yet it seemed to me that the name these towers have won is a misnomer; I was rarely happy following Pete's lead. The ridge then became broad again and we raced along with Glenn champing at the bit in the lead. Digging another cave at the col for our eighth night on the mountain, we watched the weather gradually deteriorate as night innocently fell.

The next morning I awoke, covered with wind-blown snow and uneasy with doubt. I had expressed my fears to Glenn and Pete during the night. We would be out of food soon and had been on half-rations at best for the last three days. I was weak for lack of sleep and my damp bag was

* The south face and south ridge of Mount Hunter was climbed in 1973 by Don Black, John Waterman and Dave Carman to a gendarme 200 feet below the south summit. It was they who named the "Happy Cowboy Pinnacles." (See *A.A.J.*, 1974, pages 23-24.) The southeast ridge, ascended by the Dartmouth climbers also in 1973, lies well to the northeast of the southeast spur. The southeast spur rises abruptly to join the south ridge high up but below the Happy Cowboy Pinnacles. It was first climbed in 1978 solo by John Waterman, using siege techniques. (See *A.A.J.*, 1979, pages 91-97.)

PLATE 10

Photo by Peter Metcalf

**On MOUNT HUNTER's Southeast
Spur.**



hardly comforting. Glenn responded optimistically and cheered me up with a convincing pep talk that reassured all three of us.

The weather was marginal at best; cold, snowing, the wind in a frenzy. Glenn lead the initial mixed climbing while Pete and I in vain flapped our arms to keep warm. It was a wonder we were climbing at all in that weather, but the nearly empty food sack in my pack reminded me why. Pete had returned to the cave to warm his numb toes as Glenn moved slowly above. Finally the rope tugged expectantly at my harness and, grateful to be moving, I started up into the blizzard.

Glenn had led brilliantly throughout the entire climb, and he demonstrated once again his confidence and competence. The wind seemed to multiply the problems of climbing, blowing snow in my eyes, freezing the lids shut. Little pauses to clear goggles or to warm wooden fingers add up, I thought, and I pushed myself to climb as fast as safety would allow. I had become familiar with rotten conditions after eight days on the mountain and felt strong despite poor tool placements and dubious crampon purchases. I reached Glenn who belayed from good anchors after five hours of fine leading. When Pete joined us, I collected the remaining three screws and deadmen and began to assault the ice between us and the summit.

After a foolish plunge through a cornice, I climbed the steep but solid ice, placing an occasional screw, paying strict attention to tool placements. Dull crampon points did not bite the ice well and my calves ballooned with the repeated kicks. But rhythm and strength returned to me on this lead, dispelling the doubts of the night before. Nothing was simpler than the swing of an axe and the subsequent movements. After four hours of continuous climbing, I belayed from a deadman one pitch below the summit plateau.

After Glenn led across the ice toward the final headwall, I noticed him kicking repeatedly but uselessly. His crampon post had broken. He tied into his tools and fumbled mittenless in the cold. As I belayed, Pete almost sprinted across the ice to help. Chopping through the final headwall was a problem, but within moments Pete had established a belay on the summit plateau. I followed, cold and tired, and then Glenn, impaired by the faulty crampon. We all dug in once more and concentrated our thoughts on the descent. We had climbed well in difficult conditions but had not emerged unscathed. Glenn's fingers were wooden-feeling and white and I warmed Pete's feet against my abdomen.

The descent was a confluence of images and emotions. We crossed the summit plateau in a thorough white-out and were forced to dig in again as the west ridge, our escape, was concealed in storm. The dawn of the next day was brilliantly clear and with a cup of weak tea and a bit of dexedrine we began the descent. Pete, climbing as if immortal, lowered Glenn and me, then down-climbed the usually steep ice. Another bivouac, a sleepless night, and a long day of climbing finally saw us to our final

camp not far from the glacier. Dexedrine and hot water do not sustain a body for long and the thirteenth afternoon brought three weary, snow-shoed figures to the landing area on the Kahiltna Glacier. Our friends hardly recognized our gaunt faces but provided for our nourishment with great kindness. Those good folks helped load our equipment into two planes and, in an impending white-out, pilots Geeting and Hudson made the journey complete. The landing strip was the welcoming red-carpet back to civilization.

Our success on Hunter mixed bitterness with ecstasy; we had achieved what we planned to, but did not anticipate the aftermath in Anchorage's Providence hospital with frostbite. After two days I reluctantly left my two friends, breaking the bond that had become exceedingly firm in the past two weeks. I did not want to leave them but my mind needed more freedom than a hospital bed could offer. I needed freedom to walk about in a warm climate and to contemplate why the climb was invaluable to me. And it was indeed invaluable for reasons that sometimes seem murky and romantic, yet important nonetheless. It's funny though, with a climb like Hunter and with life itself, the experience is a bit of an enigma that holds me in a quandary even today.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENT: Mount Hunter, 14,573 feet, via the Southwest Spur of the South Ridge of the South Peak, alpine-style, second ascent, May 1 to 13, 1980.

PERSONNEL: Peter Athans, Peter Metcalf, Glenn Randall.

*Climbers will also be interested in subscribing to **MOUNTAIN**, the foremost international bi-monthly mountaineering magazine published in English on climbing in all parts of the world, including the USA. There are six issues each year and a subscription costs \$17.50. For a subscription send to Mountain Magazine Ltd., PO Box 184, Sheffield S11 9DL, England.*