

Rooster Comb, Huntington

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WITH A HIMALAYAN expedition looming in the fall, we decided we must climb somewhere in the spring. Tim Leach suggested Alaska, not only for the fantastic potential for climbing but also because it would give us the chance to test out ideas and equipment for the autumn. We had to find an objective. Steve Bell had raved about a line he had seen on the Rooster Comb. Looking at pictures gave us many other ideas, the most appealing being the west face of Huntington, and of course the north buttress of Hunter.

Since we had heard horror tales of the weather, we hoped to get one route in and if we were lucky, a second. The idea was to climb alpine-style and with an alpine-style attitude. We would be flexible and shift our aims according to conditions and weather. We also decided to attempt the climbs with the lowest altitude first and then the next lowest.

We set up camp on the west fork of the Ruth Glacier on April 3. There were four climbers already at the camp. Two of them had ideas on the Rooster Comb. As we looked at the face from the glacier, the line was painfully obvious; such a line would be a classic in Europe. Because the weather seemed settled and good, we went for it the very next day.

We left camp in the darkness, snowshoed to the foot of the route and put on crampons. One of my new, unworn crampon straps snapped, probably due to the cold. One person would lead all day and then we would switch the next day. Tim had used this system on Gaurishankar.

Tim took the first day's lead. The climbing was Scottish in character, usually about Grade III to IV (Scottish ice grades). However the gully ran with spindrift all day making things unpleasant at times. That night we hacked a ledge out of the ice to have a reasonable night's sleep; but the spindrift ran all night and try as we might, we could not stop it from getting into our sleeping bags.

Having had my other crampon strap snap, we thought it would be safer for Tim to continue leading. After a poor night, the first pitch on the second day was purgatory. Everything was cold, especially the hands. The climbing became harder, usually grade IV to V, the last pitch of the day being the crux. It started with four nuts for direct aid, continued for a short while with slings on axes and then finished with poorly protected free-climbing to a good belay.

During the first day and the early part of the second, we found evidences of other attempts, usually rappel points. The third day we

PLATE 2

Photo by Bradford Washburn

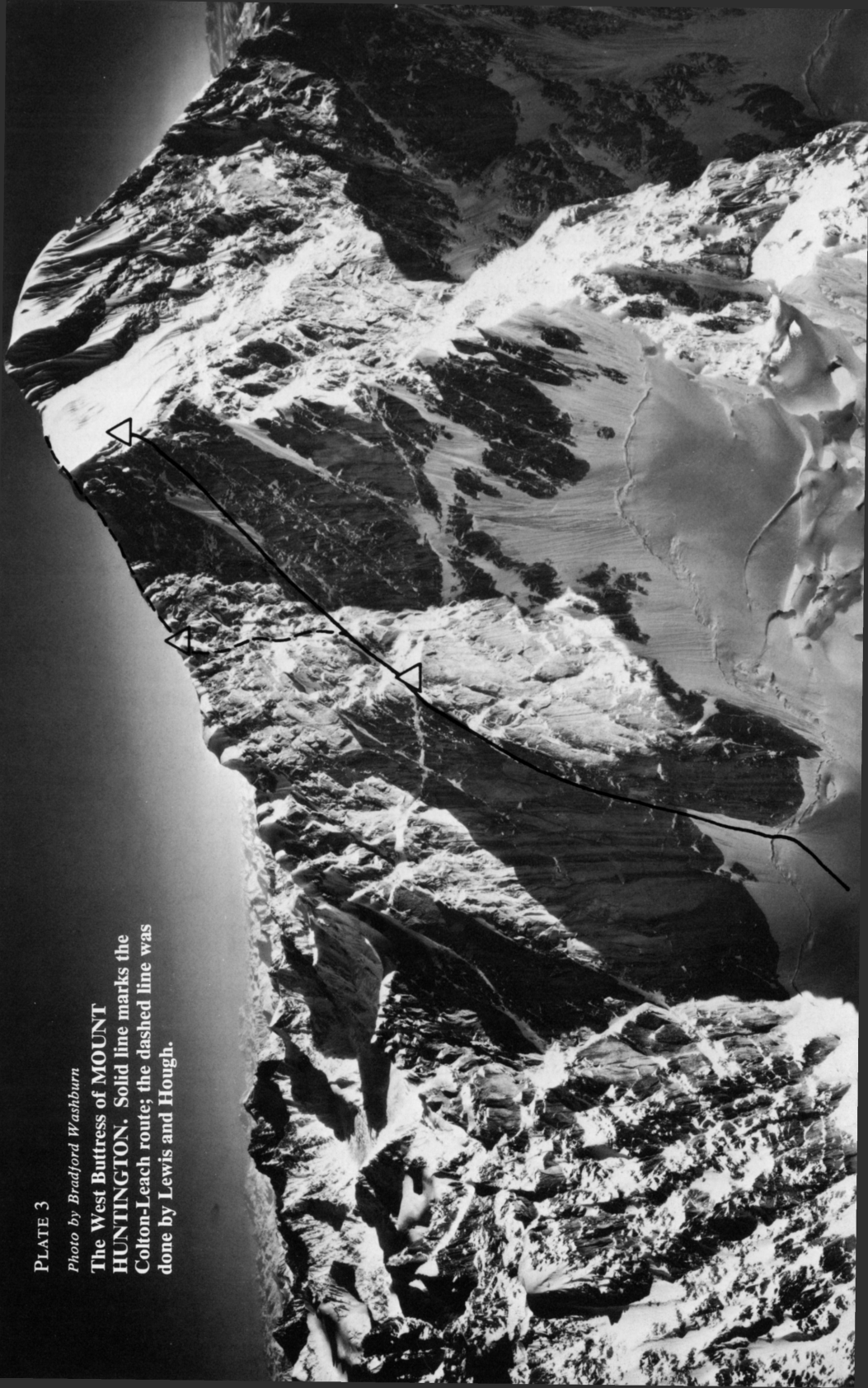
**THE ROOSTER COMB'S North
Buttress.**



PLATE 3

Photo by Bradford Washburn

The West Buttress of **MOUNT HUNTINGTON**. Solid line marks the Colton-Leach route; the dashed line was done by Lewis and Hough.



continued up the same line except for a small detour which gained us fifty feet for some five hours' toil. Tim fell off a rotten bulge but managed it on his second attempt. We bivouacked at the obvious snow ramp under a protective overhang. Our sleeping bags were now practically useless after that first night, but we were happy because we knew that all the difficulties had passed.

We gained the summit at noon the next day. The weather seemed to be deteriorating. We traversed the twin summit of the Rooster Comb until the wind forced us to dig in for the night. The next morning the wind abated slightly, but it was snowing lightly and visibility was almost nonexistent. We spent all day picking our way back to the glacier, the worst part being the descent from the col between the Rooster Comb and Huntington.

Jay Kerr and Keith Roysters repeated the route later that week and confirmed its quality. They moved quicker than we and took four days for the round-trip as opposed to our five days.

We spent the next four days resting and gathering our wits. Being successful so early on was unexpected. The west face of Huntington was next on the agenda. We had heard that a party had been over on that side but we were unsure about what they had done.

On April 13 we crossed over to the Tokositna Glacier via the French Icefall. We dug a new hole and stocked it with several days' supplies in case we were stranded on that side. There were tracks all over the glacier from the previous party which had now departed. We could not tell which route they had done, if any. Even if they had done our route, it looked such a good line that we proposed to do it anyhow.

The line is well left of the Harvard and the west-couloir routes. Tucked in on the left side of a prominent spur is a steep ice runnel ending in snow ramps. These snow ramps lead to a junction with the Harvard Ridge just before that route joins the French Ridge.

We crossed the bergschrund just before dawn on April 14. It was my lead day. After a tricky bergschrund, a steep snow slope led to the beginning of the ice which rose steeply for four pitches at 70° to 75° and then dropped back to 60° to 65° for most of its length with a short section of 80° to 85°. The couloir was wide and open, unlike the Rooster Comb. We followed the couloir until it forced left under the cornice onto the snow ramps. During the day I once again had trouble with a snapping crampon strap but continued to lead because the other stayed secure.

Once on the ramp we dug a spacious ledge in the snow. It was not quite deep enough for a snow cave.

Next morning we moved together, with Tim in the lead, up easy rightwards-slanting snow. We kept on for half a day like that until we were below an obvious snow arête, which was difficult to gain. The route passed just below the arête and became difficult, perhaps grade IV,

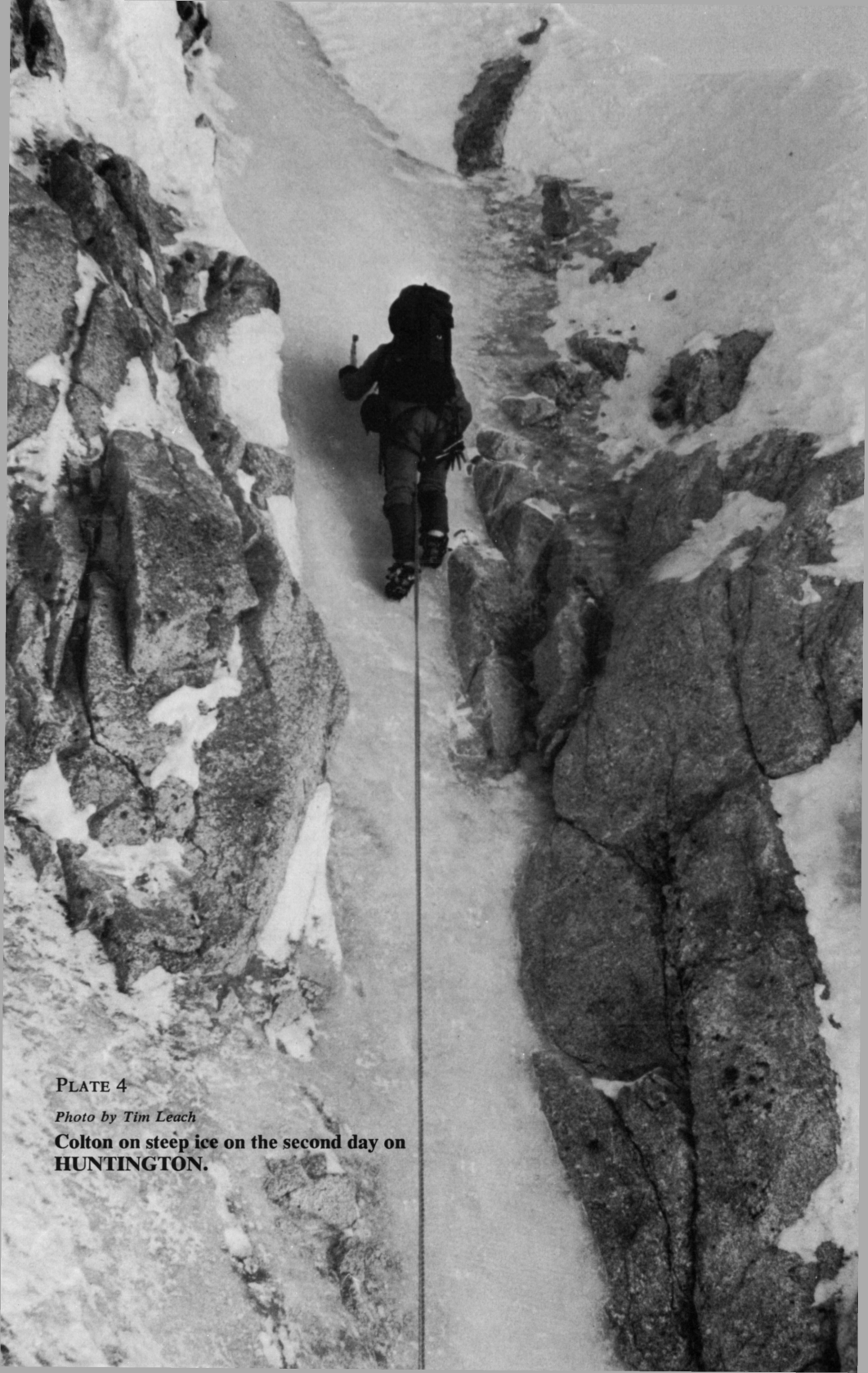


PLATE 4

Photo by Tim Leach

**Colton on steep ice on the second day on
HUNTINGTON.**

to the junction with the Harvard route. A pitch up the Harvard route took us to a protected bivouac below an overhanging block.

To protect the bivouac, we rigged a rail with one rope. This rope twice knocked the stove over. Eventually we got to sleep at midnight after a good meal. Next morning we woke up late with swirling clouds all around. Should we go for the summit and risk being caught in a storm? We decided that the route had been completed and that even though we wanted to stand on the summit of Huntington, it was not necessary. With clear consciences we abseiled down the Harvard route. Soon we came across fixed ropes and used their anchor points in our descent. It took six hours to descend from our high point to the glacier, during which time the clouds lifted and the sun came out. If we had waited a little longer, we would have made the summit, but if the weather had got worse, we would have been in a tight spot.

We met a party, Jack Lewis and Dave Hough, who had just flown onto the Tokositna Glacier. (See *Climbs and Expeditions*.—Editor.) They gave us water and antibiotics for an infected wrist where my watch strap had been cutting in. Back in the snow hole, we ate like kings so as not to carry the food back over the col. Next day in poor visibility we crossed back to the west fork of the Ruth in a fraction of the time it had taken us to get over to the Tokositna.

With all the front-pointing on these two climbs, our toes had become bruised and tender. The cold obviously had not helped; possibly we also had a bit of frost-nip. We couldn't climb for a week or two. We changed camps and flew our gear out to the Kahiltna airstrip. We were elated with our two new routes and yet we could still fit in another as soon as our feet healed. We were longing to go to Hunter, but a spell of bad weather was predicted.

Every day people came in who wanted to do McKinley, giving us the idea to do it too. The summit was not that important but the altitude experience was. As it turned out, we had a most enjoyable time on the West Buttress. We made the summit and learned just how big McKinley is. Thus ended our Alaskan climbing holiday. We can dream of the many great lines we saw which still have to be climbed.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENTS: Rooster Comb, 10,180 feet, via a new route, the North Buttress, April 4 to 8, 1981.

Mount Huntington, 12,240 feet, to just below the summit via a new route on the West Buttress, April 14 to 16, 1981.

Mount McKinley, 20,320 feet, via West Buttress, April 26 to May 6, 1981.

PERSONNEL: Nicholas Colton, Timothy Leach.