Alone on Denali's South Face

MARK HESSE

I WAS AT AN IMPASSE. Seated on my pack with my elbows on my knees and my chin buried in the palms of my hands, I stared intently at the face. I had ventured out across the glacier only two hundred yards before fearfully retreating back to Michael Covington's South Buttress party. Despite their preoccupation with crossing a large crevasse, they no doubt sensed my indecisiveness. I sat for a moment and then, on an impulse, stood, shouldered my pack, adjusted the twelve-foot aluminum pole that I had fashioned to protect me on my solo treks across the glaciers, and began again the final mile to the base of the face. I carried with me 55 pounds of food and equipment, one rope, my ice tools, and one thousand questions and fears. A solo ascent of any magnitude demands a certain mindset. One must be mentally ripe for it. As I strode up the valley below the tremendous objective that I had so audaciously come to climb, I wondered if it was for me such a time.

I had arrived at Denali in late April. After a futile attempt at the West Buttress with my brother Jon, I reorganized my gear for an attempt at the mountain's South Face. My plan was an ambitious one. The 9000-foot face was first climbed in 1967 by an American team over the course of one month. They employed 7000 feet of fixed rope. In 1976, Dougal Haston and Doug Scott, fresh from Mount Everest, followed the first-ascent party's route to 16,800 feet, then ventured out across and up the upper icefield to the summit ridge. They completed the route in six-and-a-half days. Their ascent was the harbinger of a new standard on Denali and in the Alaska Range, the climbing of major faces and ridges alpine-style. The South Face was climbed twice after the 1976 ascent, by the Japanese in 1977, who made a new direct start to the American route, and by the Slovaks in 1980, between the American direct and the South Buttress. It was my intention to push the standards on the face one step farther by following in Haston's and Scott's footsteps, alone.

The initial problems that I had encountered were negotiating the long approach up the east fork on the Kahiltna and finding the face in proper condition. Michael Covington invited me to join his team for the approach which solved my first problem. And I was fortunate enough to find the face in

excellent shape. The mountain appeared to be at rest, tranquil in mood. The fury that had enveloped the peak during the previous weeks and which had spelled defeat for my brother and me had subsided. It appeared that there had been but a dusting of new snow above 12,000 feet and that the arctic winds which had blown incessantly until that time had worked to sweep and tightly pack the face.

I was standing in the bergschrund at the base of my route when I heard the ominous sound of falling séracs. Great billows of snow and ice fell from the sky, swept out across the entire breadth of the valley, rose high into the air and slowly settled back onto the glacier. After leaving Michael's company, I had kept to the east side of the valley, moving as quickly as the weight of my pack would allow me. I reached the safety of the schrund only moments before Big Bertha, the tremendous icefall situated halfway up the South Face, let her true might be known. I had never been so close to an avalanche so large. Fortunately, I was well out of harm's way. Nonetheless, it left me extremely shaken and even more anxious about the coming days. As I shoveled out a platform for my tent, I tried often to locate Michael's party, but in vain.

The following morning I forced myself from my sleeping bag as soon as possible and was soon ready for my first day of climbing. A short step over the schrund brought me onto the expansive lower icefields. The snow that covered the ice was unconsolidated in places and, consequently, the climbing was tedious. Much of my apprehension, however, was lost as the overall enormity of the climb was reduced to a series of individual moves. I climbed throughout the day, reaching the first rock band late in the afternoon.

I had anticipated some difficulty in finding spots where I could bivouac, especially on the first half of the route. As I expected, there was not a ledge that wasn't encased in ice. Despite the fact that I had several hours of daylight left, I stopped early to begin my search for an accessible sleeping site. I soon located a small step and after an hour and a half of chopping, managed to fashion a small trench large enough to lie down in. As I peered out across the arctic wasteland from my tiny ledge, the protection afforded me by my sleeping bag and bivy sack seemed ever so meager.

Early the next day, I descended from my perch and back onto the icefield. As I climbed higher and the glacier slowly fell away below me, the exposure grew more taxing. Continuous front-pointing on the 55° to 60° ice with my heavy pack worked me into a state of acute physical and mental exhaustion. The afternoon of my second day found me scrambling around once again on steep rock and ice at 14,000 feet, looking for a ledge on which to situate myself for the night. After some difficult mixed climbing, I gained a small bench and began the task of shaping out a trough.

I arose the following morning still fatigued. My night's sleep had done little to assuage the strain of the previous day. As I rappelled down from my bivouac ledge, I became particularly anxious about the next section of the icefield. It was entirely free of snow and glistened in the morning sun. After 300 to 400 feet, I began to question my endurance and sought out a variation through the

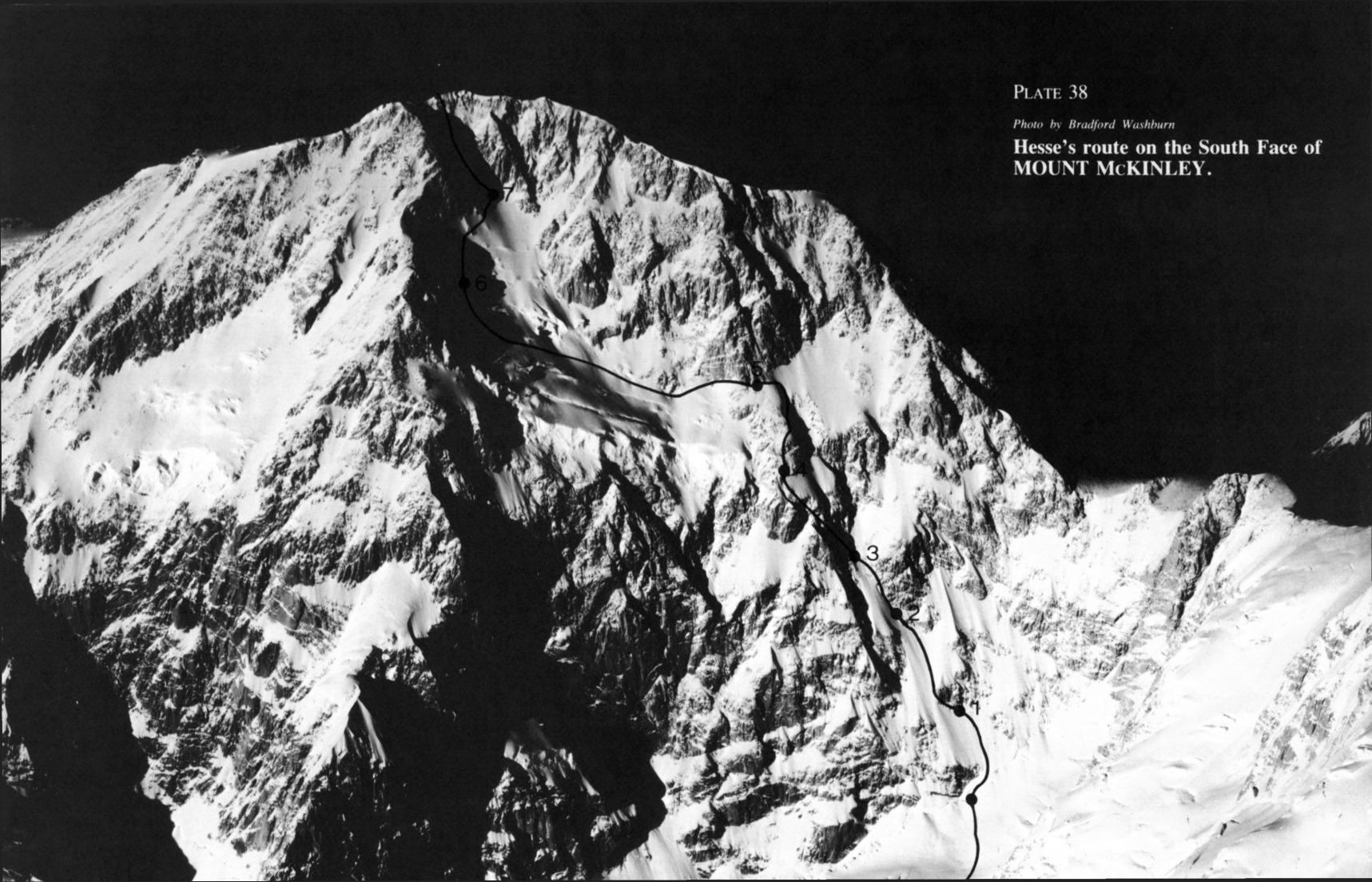

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Photo by Bradford Washburn

Hesse's route on the South Face of MOUNT McKINLEY.

rocks. It was a costly decision for I spent the next two-and-a-half hours belaying myself and hauling my pack up a series of short vertical cracks. I was finally able to traverse to a ledge at the edge of the icefield. My confidence was battered and I began to contemplate the extraordinary position in which I had succeeded in placing myself. I had expected to complete the climb in four or five days, in approximately the same time that Chris Reveley and I had taken on the Cassin Ridge three years before. Based on my progress, I estimated that it would take me two to three days longer than I had originally predicted. With only ten days of food, I would not be in the position to sit out a storm should one occur. I was also nearing the point of no return. A retreat from much higher on the face would be extremely difficult, given the conditions and my limited amount of equipment. The next section involved a traverse to a narrow couloir. It was impossible to see into it from my vantage point. An hour later I still sat, locked in indecision.

In the same fashion that I had ventured out across the glacier to the base of the face three days before, I finally struck out across the ice. Never had I felt so extended on a climb; however, despite the degree to which I was pushing myself, I could not in the end turn from the challenges above.

The further out I climbed, the more the couloir came into view. Despite its 70° to 75° angle, it appeared to be chocked with snow. A tension traverse through a rock-and-ice section brought me to a platform at the base of the couloir where I chopped out a bivy ledge. As during the two previous evenings, the air was still and the peaks to the south presented themselves in full grandeur in the setting sun. The day had been without question my nadir up to that point and I had come ever so close to retreating.

The following day was magnificent: clear and warm. The climbing up the couloir was varied in nature and its complexity kept me absorbed. After 500 to 600 feet the couloir steepened in a nearly vertical headwall that brought me to a rather large platform. It was here in this place at 15,000 feet that Haston and Scott spent their horrid night, ravaged by the wind. They described it as the most difficult night that either of them had experienced in the mountains. From my past experiences, I knew full well what misery the weather on Denali can inflict. I remembered the day and night that Chris and I spent at 17,500 feet on the Cassin in our bivy sacks huddled amongst the rocks in similar conditions. The wind and severe temperature, which combined have earned the peak the reputation as being one of the coldest major mountains in the world, are a constant threat. I had been extremely fortunate in most respects. The weather had remained clear and stable.

The spiral couloir branched out left from the platform. It presented the most difficult climbing that I had yet encountered. Encased in hard, brittle ice, it steepened to nearly 80° at the top. I attacked it full on, reaching a snowy knife-edged ridge, close to total exhaustion. I rested briefly then continued on in the fading daylight, as at peace as I have ever been in the mountains. I reached a large overhanging boulder and climbed under it for the night. It grew horribly cold. Later I learned from a party on the West Buttress, who were at

roughly the same elevation as I, that the ambient air temperature on that evening at 10:30 P.M. was −50° F. Who knows to what ungodly depths it fell later that night!

I slept into the next day, waiting until the sun was fully upon me before crawling from my sack. I elected to climb up to the First Buttress, the large triangular shaped rock at 16,800 feet, rather than traverse out across the top of Big Bertha. I hoped that the buttress would afford me room and protection enough to set my tent. The climbing proved difficult in sections but most interesting. As I meandered in and out of the rocks on the ice my ascent began to take on a new perspective. The difficult ground was for the most part behind me and for the first time success, though at best two days away, seemed less a pipe dream and more a reality. Once below the buttress, I was able, as I had hoped, to erect my tent and was soon settled in for the night.

The next day I traversed down and left across the snow to rejoin Scott and Haston's line of ascent. The snow was firm and in excellent condition. There was little avalanche danger and the crevasses were easy to negotiate. After a full day of climbing, I set my tent in a crevasse at about 17,500 feet. Just before sundown, as I was finishing my dinner, I heard the distant drone of a small engine. I soon spotted a plane several thousand feet below me. I guessed that it was Doug Geeting out checking on my progress. His visit exacerbated the great loneliness that I was beginning to feel. In that moment I felt as if I had left the entire world behind me.

I had hoped to reach the summit the following day. The climb, however, was taking its toll. The altitude was now robbing me of the opportunity fully to recuperate at night. What I thought was going to be an easy day turned into a most trying one as I labored up the frozen snow. I reached 19,200 feet before exhaustion overcame me. I made my bivy site on a small ledge and crawled into my sack with everything on save my crampons.

I awoke the following day to blowing snow. A storm had developed during the night and was growing in intensity with each passing moment. It was as if my challenge to gain the summit had awakened this sleeping giant from its repose. Fear grew inside me, usurping my fatigue and driving me to action. Never had I felt so utterly vulnerable. I had no choice but to make my bid for the top and within minutes I was off the ledge and out onto the snow. I could see absolutely nothing as I front-pointed up the couloir. Up and up I climbed into the thick of the storm. My fingers and toes grew numb and the fear of frostbite entered my mind. I struggled on in desperation. After three to four hours of toil the angle of the slope steepened and I realized that at last I was nearing the end of my ascent. Indeed, within a short distance, I found myself standing on what I presumed was the summit ridge. After a few moments I recognized the very place where Chris and I had stood so proudly years before. After a few moments, I located the route down the West Buttress and immediately began my descent.

Tears welled into my eyes as I scrambled from the top of North America, half frozen by the storm. In that moment, despite a most fleeting return visit

to a summit that I couldn't even see, I knew that it would be a long time before I would truly descend from the height to which the mountain had once again pushed me.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

SOLO ASCENT: Mount McKinley, 6193 meters, 20,320 feet, via the Scott-Haston route on the South Face, May 12 to May 19, 1982 (Mark Hesse).