

Foraker's Highway of Diamonds

PETER METCALF

IT WAS THE EASE with which I accepted the realization, not the realization itself, which perturbed me so. Was it the altitude? The numbed, tired state of my body? Or was it the need to concentrate on immediate survival that prompted my passive acceptance of the notion of Glenn's death? Or had I become so cold and stoic after a dozen years of climbing that my best friend's death elicited no more than a mechanical response? At 16,000 feet on Foraker's southeast ridge it was no place to probe for an answer. The late hour and worsening weather required descent, and my futile searching had convinced me that Glenn had slid down the north face of the southeast ridge. I headed down.

April 17: The mining town of Kantishna, north of Wonder Lake, is about as far from Foraker's north side as Talkeetna is from McKinley's south side. Landing on a snowed-over gravel strip in Kantishna seemed a strange way to utilize the services of a Talkeetna-based pilot, since we had flown as far beyond the heart of the Alaska Range as we had flown in. With air support illegal within National Park boundaries, there was little alternative.

Glenn Randall and I were to forego load-ferrying and the assistance of horses and were to ski the 75 miles of tundra, hills, rivers and glaciers to the base of Foraker's north face and attempt its unclimbed western spur. Rather than to deal with the additional food and fuel needed to ski out—the spring break-up might have rendered such a plan inoperable—we had a cache dropped at the base of the southeast ridge. Reversing our approach would not be an alternative.

We split our loads equally between our packs and five-dollar kiddie sleds. Early that afternoon we headed up-river and across Wonder Lake. Over eight miles passed under our skis before we made camp that evening on a frozen slough just north of the McKinley River. The views were not only impressive; they were overwhelming. McKinley's Wickersham Wall rose some 16,500 feet above us while Foraker's north face showed some 15,000 feet of relief.

April 18: The day began on a depressing note. Early morning saw us skiing, west along the McKinley River and then south up the Muddy River. Within hours our skis were balling up badly and our sleds were plowing a trench a foot



PLATE 29

Photo by Bradford Washburn

FORAKER from the North.
Bivouacs are marked: 1 = 8,000 feet; 2 = 11,300 feet; 3 = 14,000 feet; 4 = 15,000 feet.

deep and two feet wide. We camped early in hope of finding better conditions by traveling at night.

That evening we awoke at ten, cooked by headlamp and were underway by midnight. To our disgust, the snow had not solidified and the cruising conditions were a cruel joke. In two hours of heart-breaking labor we covered but a half mile. On a hunch, Glenn headed toward the center of the river and our progress slowly improved. By evening we had done eight miles.

It was painfully obvious that our original approach estimate of five or six days was inadequate, and nine days was a much more realistic estimate. Having begun the trip with 15 days' food, we would have enough to allow only six days for the climb. We immediately began cutting rations.

Our worst fears became reality the next morning when we left the Muddy River and climbed into the foothills. Barely enough snow remained to ski on and we were often dragging our skis across bare ground. The downhill portions were of little consolation, as the sleds would accelerate from behind us, deliver a perfect clip to the ankles and take either Glen or me with them.

The next four days were a continuation of rotten snow, bare hillsides, open streams, willow thrashing and taking skis on and off. Rapid skiing was the exception. The climb down to the Foraker Glacier epitomized those four days at their worst. We descended through waist-high boulders that were intermingled with rotten, thigh-deep snow and unyielding willow thickets. If the sleds failed to knock us down, the willows did. The first half of the Foraker Glacier was no dream as we picked our way through the rock moraines, melt-water streams and crevasses on its bare, icy surface. The scene on this dry side of the range reminded me much more of the Baltoro than anything I had ever seen in Alaska. An afternoon rainstorm reinforced this observation all too well.

April 25: In the amber light of pre-dawn, we rapidly skied up the remaining five miles to the base of the north face. Skis, poles, sleds, etc. were jettisoned in favor of crampons and ice tools. We followed an easy snow slope and ridge to a little col at 7700 feet, the last possible campsite before the crux knife-edged ice cliff.

The knife-edge proved to be far different from anything we had encountered in the Alaska Range before. There was little deep snow and there were no wild cornices to climb delicately on or around. Instead, we discovered solid blue ice, firm snow and a complete lack of cornices. When the climbing became too difficult on one side of the ridge, we simply switched to the other and continued with marvelous climbing which allowed us to move more quickly than we had expected.

The ridge ended in a vertical-to-overhanging ice cliff before it joined the north face proper. Although we had thought we would tackle this on the second or third day, after only eight hours of continuous climbing we were directly below the cliff. An obvious cleft on the left was the only possible route and the ice went rapidly from 60° to over 70°. The vertical and overhanging bulge at its



PLATE 30

Photo by Peter Metcalf

**Glenn Randall near the top of the
exit gullies on FORAKER.**

end forced me to hang my pack from a screw before continuing. Above, the angle relented and we chopped a ledge for our tent at 11,300 feet.

Dawn brought wind, clouds, blowing snow and our first taste of sub-zero temperatures. With the valleys below obscured, the isolation came home to us. The summit ridge at 15,000 feet could have been ours that day, but fear of altitude sickness dictated a camp at 14,000 feet, which was squeezed between two stable-looking séracs on the face.

The tent-snapping wind continued through the night and by morning we wanted to get out of there in a hurry. The ice slopes above ended in an array of exit gullies that broke the rock wall which guarded the entrance to the summit ridge. In the unstable snow overlying rotten ice, none of our snow-and-ice anchors would hold. Care was our only safeguard. As I followed Glenn's final lead onto the ridge, I was blasted by gale-force winds. We hacked out a tent platform behind boulders that offered marginal protection. My intense altitude headache made us decide on a rest for the next day.

The winds did not abate during the evening, although my headache did. Conversely, Glenn began to lose his appetite and acquired a dull throb in his head. By midday, his lungs gurgled, a sure sign of pulmonary edema. Our options were few and poor.

Our minimal food and fuel persuaded us late that evening to opt for the summit and then to make haste down the southeast ridge, the easiest and safest way down. Glenn felt he could make it, although the fluid accumulation kept increasing, worsening his condition.

The climbing was simple, though strenuous. If we were to succeed, I'd have to ferry both the packs. The morning was an eternity. I wondered if Glenn could pull it off, but by late afternoon, we sat on the summit. There was no elation, no joy—just an underlying urge to get down as quickly as possible.

The previous spring, Glenn and I had run up and down the descent route basically unroped and so we did not even pull the rope out of the pack. I rapidly headed down and waited and then headed down again. At the second rest I turned and saw no sign of Glenn, only slide marks below a small crevasse that headed down the abyss on the ridge's north side.

I had just started to head down, giving Glenn up for dead when I saw a packless figure crawl back onto the ridge. As the distance between us narrowed, I was shocked at what I saw. Where his face was not caked with blood, it was sickly white. Glenn had broken through a crevasse, extricated himself and then fallen. I got him into my sleeping bag. Both shock and hypothermia were setting in. I then traversed off the ridge, searching for the shelf of soft snow which had miraculously stopped his plunge into eternity. Above where his pack lay was a 15-foot-high vertical sérac wall, only one of many he had tumbled over. The three-foot-wide shelf was the last horizontal ground for 7000 feet.

With Glenn's pack recovered, I hastily returned to the ridge and set up our tent. I tried to assess his injuries. The gurgling in his lungs and spewing of blood heightened my anxiety. He was suffering from life-threatening pulmonary and

PLATE 31

Photo by Glenn Randall

Peter Metcalf leading the crux ice pitch on FORAKER's Highway of Diamonds.



cerebral edema, along with a myriad of fall-related injuries: cracked ribs, a broken leg, badly twisted ankles, an array of contusions.

I had two unappealing choices. One was to take the stove, leaving Glenn in the tent, and head down to get help. Alone, I could not possibly get him down. It would take at least two days to reach the radio on the Kahiltna. How long it would take to get assistance to Glenn after that was impossible to predict. And how long could Glenn survive unattended, especially in a storm? Or I could remain. If I stayed, we'd soon run out of the small amount of food and fuel we had left. I felt I should do something more than melt snow and watch Glenn, I feared that his condition would grow worse and I would be unable to help, and I was concerned for my own ultimate safety.

The unstable weather and my concern for Glenn's ability to care for himself kept me with him for four days. Our supplies were about gone. I had to seek help if one or both of us were to survive. As I flung my pack on my back, suddenly I heard the sound of an aircraft. Its upward-circling pattern made it obvious that it was trying to find us. An attempted airdrop missed and crashed to the glacier below. Two hours later an Alouette Three jet helicopter appeared and amazingly landed on our tiny site. In a matter of minutes we had Glenn aboard and were airborne. As the warmth from the chopper's heater began to sink in, I realized that our survival nightmare was over.

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Final Note. Glenn was taken directly to Providence Hospital in Anchorage where he was diagnosed as having both pulmonary and cerebral edema and the array of injuries already mentioned. The examining doctors were incredulous that his edemas had not worsened and brought death during the four-and-a-half days he remained at 16,000 feet.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Foraker, 5303 meters, 17,400 feet, via the Western Spur of the North Face from the Foraker Glacier. Summit reached on April 29, 1983 (Peter Metcalf, Glenn Randall).