Hesperus

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MOUNT HESPERUS shone bold and beautiful in the 1983 Alaska Mountaineering and Hiking Calendar, beckoning me to its slopes. We began talking about attempting it after coming off Denali in June of 1984. After research, we realized that our best bet was to fly out to the mountain and look at it. I did three separate flights in September, January and March, but each time foul weather turned us back. Perhaps this was a prelude to our weather conditions.

By the middle of April the team had been formed. Yet near the end of April, a week before departure, two of the foursome had to bow out, due to new jobs and lack of finances. While Karl Swanson and I were picking up the pieces, we met the third member of our party, Justin Lesueur of New Zealand.

On April 26 we took off from Talkeetna with nasty weather ahead and strong turbulence throughout the passes. I felt so sick on the flight that when, two hours later, we landed on the northeast side of Hesperus, on the snow-covered waters of Big River, I was happy to be out of that plane and on solid ground.

We established our first Base Camp at 1800 feet on the Big River side of Hesperus. Then we snowshoed up the valley three miles to look at the east face. A possible route would be straight up mixed snow and rock. Once we could get to a notch at 8000 feet, it looked fairly negotiable.

The next morning we snowshoed to the face with a ceiling 1000 feet above us and then kicked steps up the snow into a white-out. By compass we were able to get a general idea of the direction to go. Suddenly the glacier above roared, showering debris down around us. Luckily none of the ice connected, but it did indicate that we were off course. We veered sharply to the right and up to the beginning of a rock buttress. After lunch we hoped in vain that the clouds would clear. After a few free pitches on solid but sometimes snow-covered granite, Karl began aid climbing. The clouds emptied their bellies of snow on us. The rock turned slick. At 5:30 P.M. we had reached 5900 feet. Without enough aid-climbing gear, we decided to try later. It was an eerie rappel down the face.

Two days later at four A.M. the three of us began a second route to the long northeast snow ridge. The rock was crumbly, weathered and loose. By noon we were on the ridge in high spirits, but the next four hours were on treacherous ground. The unstable, narrow ridge afforded almost no places for protecting the route. One false move and we would plunge thousands of feet. We quit at 6050

PLATE 29

Photo by Stephen Spalding

MOUNT HESPERUS from the Revelation Glacier. The route is on the left skyline.

feet. Above us loomed towers of rotten rock coated with loose snow. The ridge itself had become a mass of crumbling menacing rock.

On the other side of the valley from our camp eight frozen waterfalls lured us the next day. We spent playful hours and climbed one of 80 meters. But we had come to climb mighty Hesperus. Maybe a route could be found on the Revelation Glacier side of the peak.

At six A.M. we began a six-mile slog with sleds around the base of Hesperus to Base Camp II, a mile from the terminus of the Revelation Glacier. Once camp was established, we caught five hours of sleep to rest up for the night climb. At eight P.M. on May 1 our third attempt on Hesperus began.

We snowshoed to a snow gully on the southwest face, where we cached the snowshoes. The hard snow was ideal for crampons. Continuing up the snow gully, we came to a splendid frozen waterfall glistening in the moonlight, which we climbed unroped, feeling that we were in climbers' heaven. Above a 75-meter waterfall, a wide snowfield beckoned us upward. The first rock band was just a moonlit scramble on crampons. On the second rock band a four-meter fall of the snow-covered rock shook me up but did not hurt me. I found a less hazardous route up the snow to the right.

The Revelation Mountains are young and still growing. Though their rate of growth is very slow, while we were climbing the snow, Hesperus appeared to be lunging upwards, growing a meter for every two meters we climbed. Finally, late in the day, we skirted the last rock band and climbed out of the snow onto the massive Hesperus icecap.

We hoped to find a bivouac site when we reached the top of the ridge above us. I continued on my own straight up the ice trying to reach the ridge directly, while Karl and Justin roped up and traversed to the right to the ridge. The lack of sound sleep for over twenty-four hours was taking its toll on my body. After I gained the ridge, I was shocked with what I found. I could have fallen from the heavily corniced ridge for close to a mile before I hit. I traversed over to Karl and Justin, with the sun ebbing over my shoulder. Exhausted and fearing I might fall, I had to get onto the rope.

We rigged a system for climbing the steep, narrow, icy ridge. Karl led while Justin or I belayed him. Then Justin and I climbed across to Karl with five meters of rope between us. All seemed fine until one of Justin's crampons sprang loose. At first he was unable to put it back on, hanging on the precipitous wall of ice. I set an ice-screw anchor while Karl belayed. Finally he was able to hang from his tools and strap it back on. This happened once more before we got to where we thought we could bivouac. There our spirits plummeted. We could stand and cook, but we could not lie down.

A quick meal revived us somewhat, giving us the energy to climb more than ten pitches of ice. We could finally see the proud pinnacle of the summit, but it seemed an hour away across a crevasse-riven glacier. Karl led off and suddenly was at the base of a ten-meter pinnacle, Hesperus' summit. It had been an illusion; what had looked far off was right before us. The three of us crowded the summit, our eyes in awe of the sights below. This was the evening of the second

of three days of clear weather. That cycle was not repeated during our twenty-six days in the Revelation Mountains.

Mount Hesperus is the highest in the Revelation Mountains. Looking across the Revelation Glacier, we could see bulky rock masses: the Apocalypse and the Angel, and snow-capped peaks: the South Buttress and Babel Tower. However, now our main endeavor was to make it back down to camp safe and sound.

Since Karl was the most experienced on ice, he would anchor while Justin and I down-climbed. Then he would climb down to us. Back at the bivy spot I boiled water for drinks, while Karl scouted the first rock pitch. I was so tired that my helmet slumped on the pot until burning steam woke me.

We picked our way down the rocks to a 100-meter section of vertical ice. Each of us climbed down on his own to save time and energy. Justin slipped fifteen feet before he made a self-arrest with hammers and crampons. Once off the ice, we were treated to a climbers' heaven, 2000-foot glissade in the early morning moonlight. Finally the glissade ran out at the highest rock band. I traversed across and waited for Justin and Karl in order to show them the route through the rocks. From there we climbed down together to the second rock band, but since we were confused about the route down, we decided to wait on the rock an hour for dawn. A bit later a pot of water boiled over unseen by weary eyes.

When it was light enough to see a route down through the rocks and cliffs, we set off. Once we were down the lowest snowfield, the waterfall was our last obstacle. A piton placement for the rappel required a bit of search. We were rewarded by fresh water drizzling off the waterfall's flanks. In the valley the tent appeared to run from us as we sleepily slogged on snowshoes. At the tent, we peeled off boots. Our toes were numb from thirty-six hours of climbing without rest and with little food. Cans of mandarin oranges specially saved for the occasion were like nectar.

After we had accomplished our main objective, we turned to other peaks up the Revelation Glacier. As the season changed into spring breakup, the avalanches began pounding and there was a constant rumble of rockfall. Our route to the summit of Hesperus was frequently swept.

We tried Babel Tower three times but on each attempt we were driven back by avalanches. Karl tried unsuccessfully to solo the Apocalypse. We finally packed our gear one day early and headed for the pick-up site. Foul weather delayed the plane's arrival for two days and we skimped with one meal a day. We were brought back to every-day life when our pilot announced we would have to land short of town and wait for another pilot to bring us gas.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Revelation Mountains, Alaska Range.

FIRST ASCENT: Mount Hesperus, 9828 feet, 2996 meters, via Southwest Face, Summit reached on May 2, 1985 (New Zealander Justin Lesueur, Alaskans Karl Swanson and Stephen Spalding).