## Moose's Tooth and Huntington

JAMES QUIRK, Unaffiliated

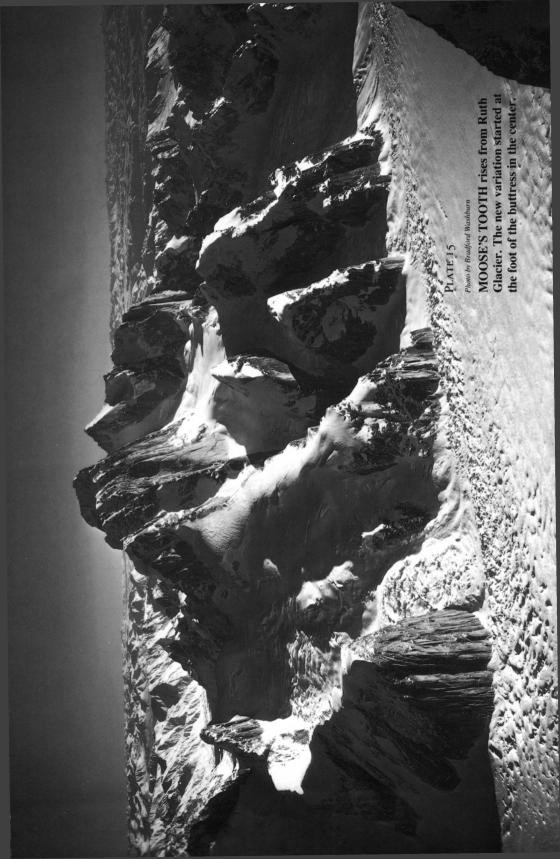
AVE NETTLE AND I hadn't been in Talkeetna for more than ten minutes when we descended on the bar at the Fairview Inn. One of the folks present was Doug Geeting, our pilot. We mentioned to him that we were going to climb Mount Huntington and that he would be flying us to the Upper Tokositna Glacier. His eyes narrowed and he launched into a rubber-faced account of a flight to the Tokositna in winter. The story ended with Doug looking me straight in the eye and saying, "I thought I was going to die." With Doug's last words ringing in our ears, all the planning, scheming and dreaming ended, and our Alaskan adventure began. Our plan had been to climb Mount Huntington's west face via the Harvard route, made famous by Dave Roberts' book, *Mountain of My Fears*, and the tragic death of Ed Bernd on the first ascent.

While we still remembered what the sun looked like, we were waiting, like everyone else, to be flown into Denali National Park. The droning of planes awakened us from a peaceful slumber on Day Two in Talkeetna. Getting a flight to the Tokositna Glacier requires perfect weather, and Doug assured us that this was not going to happen soon. We decided to settle on flying into the Sheldon Amphitheater below the Moose's Tooth and give that peak's west ridge a shot rather than hanging off bar stools in Talkeetna for another night.

Immediately after landing, Dave and I began to fidget, unable to sit out the day on the glacier. Promising ourselves to take it easy, we started climbing. Since the Moose's Tooth was not our main objective, we hadn't studied the route description. Traveling past the original start, we opted for a couloir that rises on the south side of the west ridge. From there we would follow the entire ridge. Ten hours later, after quivering up some 5.7 snow-covered slag, we decided to sleep.

Day Two on the west ridge found us tired and unmotivated after the long sprint from Talkeetna. Having joined the German route at 7600 feet, we meandered up the ridge, shooting for a 9000-foot col which looked within easy striking distance and a likely bivouac spot. In the col, we found 50° to 65° alpine ice and not a flat spot in sight. We ended up climbing simultaneously for two hours before we found rocks to bivouac under. We had hoped for an easy day and discovered that Alaskan "easy" is still damned hard.





The next morning was perfectly clear. After about 350 feet of moderate climbing, we were on the west summit of the Moose's Tooth. We knew from the route description in *The Fifty Classic Climbs* that the Germans who made the first ascent had left ropes at a couple of key spots where they had rappelled to make climbing back a possibility. Slowly, we began to realize that this maneuver requires at least two ropes. We had only one!

As we dropped into Englishman's Col, our sense of commitment increased exponentially with each step. Dave climbed down into the col to search for a way around rappelling into it. I watched his form disapppear over a small rise, hoping beyond hope that one of us would have the guts to call this climb folly. I heard a shout for me to follow. Four years of college and all I could think was, "Oh hell!"

After Dave had put his foot through a cornice and almost fallen 3000 feet onto the Buckskin Glacier, we started to climb out of the col. Now I don't mean to complain, but my ice-climbing experience was limited to screwing around on ice "boogers" in the Tahoe region. Peering at Dave's butt disappearing over a small rise on 80° ice, I realized that I'd traveled a long way to learn how to ice climb, a real initiation under fire.

After surmounting the ice bulge, we emerged on the ridge and from here moved together towards the true summit. Climbing this ridge will go down as one of the most incredible experiences of my entire life. It was like standing on the biggest wave in the world, suspended by clouds and fear, listening to Hendrix's version of *Kiss the Sky*, naked. And people wonder why we climb!

Upon reaching the true summit along with the afternoon clouds, we looked back and could reminisce about the climbing of the day. We sat smugly on the summit, visually panning the mile-long ridge and noting all the high points of the day, or the places we almost turned back; take your pick. Our ascent appears to be the third of the whole west ridge to the main peak. Actually the direct start had been done before, but we were the first to climb this variation and go on to the main summit.

Suddenly, like a slap across the face, it dawned on me that we had to go back over the same ridge. Arghh! However, the ground we had to return on was now familiar and, for the first time all day, we were heading toward food and sleep, which made a big difference in motivation and velocity.

Returning to Base Camp on the Ruth Glacier under perfect skies we heard a rumor that two other climbers had been flown to the Tokositna Glacier the day before. Armed with this knowledge, we successfully "sand-bagged" Doug Geeting into giving the thumbs up for flying us to the upper Tokositna. The flight went without a hitch, but there is something incredibly disconcerting about your pilot jumping up and down in the snow, much happier than you are about having made a safe landing.

Once in the Tokositna basin, our thoughts immediately strayed from the Harvard route and to a magnificent ramp system to the left of the Harvard route and to the right of the Coulton-Leach route. It looked as if this ramp linked with the Harvard route but, as usual, we didn't have a clue. After a short discussion, Dave said, "Jim, I think we should go there." "Oh . . . OK," I replied.



At 8:30 on the bitterly cold morning of May 23, we started up the initial snow slopes with four days of food and bivouac gear. The first part of the route above the schrund, which looked easy from below, turned into steep ice climbing. We wondered what the ramp would be like.

The weather had been perfect: clear and cold. However, small clouds began moving in and a light snow started to fall. I looked back at Denali and whistled to myself at the top two-thirds which were covered with huge lenticular clouds. Alaskan weather anxiety began to set in and eat away at my fortitude.

After climbing the lower snowfield, we traversed left for 200 feet. We then ascended the snowfield, which was at least 50°, and ended at the base of the prominent ramp system that angles up and right to join the Harvard route. The first four rope-lengths of the ramp were actually steep steps with sections of vertical and 75° water ice.

A short section of vertical and then  $50^\circ$  ice led to a narrow gully with  $55^\circ$  black ice that was on the outside half of the ramp. Dave led off. Sixty feet into his lead, the tinkling of icy snow could be heard far above us. I looked up to see a white wave of snow engulf Dave and thought, "This is what it feels like just before you die . . ." The snow hissed all around us and the pressure built up on the anchors and on Dave, hanging precariously from his tools, twenty feet above his last screw. Dave claims to this day he couldn't tell what was tighter, the grip on his tools or his sphincter. Three big spindrift avalanches swept over us before we could climb out of this chute. As I pulled up to the belay, all I could think about was going down. I looked at Dave and with a demonic gleam in his eye he said, "Well, it looks as if we're in for all fifteen rounds now."

The next seven pitches climbed the left side of the ramp gradually steepening and hugging a rock wall. From there we could see the spindrift avalanches like clockwork shoot down the gully to where we had been. Emotionally and physically drained, we reached the top of the ramp and angled up and right to a rocky section where we found an old bolt anchor and other signs of the Harvard route. Searching in vain for a place to lie down that wasn't being bombarded by spindrift, we decided to move in the only direction that made any sense: up.

Continuing right at the top of the ramp and then climbing straight up through a rock band brought us to the base of the summit icefield. We moved together to the only rocks we could see on the face, hoping we would be able to bivouac there. It was our last option aside from the summit. Finding a ledge on these rocks, we began to chop away at the ice as another spindrift avalanche swept over us. We reached this spot at 6:30 A.M. on May 24 in a full-blown storm. At this bivy, I fell asleep and dreamed that people had rented my sleeping bag. They were really happy; they had gotten a room with a view.

We rested and brewed for seven hours and then decided to go for the summit. On top, two hours later, instead of exultation, all I felt was relief and dread. Brutally tired and looking forward to a long, intricate descent, the specter of Ed Bernd played across my mind. Below us, an avalanche swept down the face.

Many hours later, we made the last rappel down our ascent route. Our tracks on the glacier had been covered by numerous avalanches. We wallowed through

waist-deep snow and collapsed. That night the weather socked in and it was ten days before we even made radio contact with anyone. It was another four before a plane could fly in and pick us up.

Dave and I played a lot of cribbage in those two weeks. I ended up losing the thirty-second game of our tournament and had to buy the beer when we were flown out. The route on Huntington had taken us 36 hours to complete and we waited 336 hours on the glacier to be flown out. The wait was worth it, but it would have been better if I had brought marked cards.

## Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENTS: Moose's Tooth, 3150 meters, 10,335 feet, via Entire West Ridge, Third Ascent of the Main Summit, May 14 to 16, 1989.

Mount Huntington, 3731 meters, 12,240 feet, via a new route between the Harvard and the Colton-Leach routes, May 23 and 24, 1989.

PERSONNEL: David Nettle, James Quirk.

