False Dawn—Foraker

JOHN PHELAN, *Whizzo Climbers*

THE MYRIAD REASONS and justifications for alpine climbing are as personal as the sweaty palms of the practitioner's, but disappointment and despair were new to me as a driving force of alpinism. As we stubbornly forced our way up a new route on Mount Foraker, I began to see what had brought me there. We formed our trip to Alaska on the rubble of suddenly canceled plans for the Karakoram. Dreams of the Himalaya, the big time, new routes and my name in print died hard. Disappointment drove my research towards an Alaskan route worthy to make a name with. It was my idea to have one of the hardest routes in the range as our new primary goal, the Infinite Spur on Foraker. Still at home, quiet desperation made me bold and perhaps foolish.

God did not play along with our ambitions. After landing on the Kahiltna Glacier, three crystal clear days were followed by three weeks of nagging storm. Anticipating dangerous conditions and challenging climbing was not the same as the sensation of playing the lottery with my life. The west ridge of Mount Hunter introduced David Sharman and me to the vagaries of Alaskan ice and snow and sent me on a 35-foot tumble into a bergschrund that logic says could not exist. After a brief rest in Base Camp, the approach to the Infinite Spur found us plunging chest-deep into ball-bearing avalanche slabs. Our success on the Spur was limited to glimpses of the route plastered with snow and ice. Returning silently to Base Camp, we tried joking to break the spell of depression. Despair drove me to suggest an attempt on the imaginary line David had traced between storms on the southeast face of Foraker. Why not?

A deeply held faith gives me confidence to enable me to climb, a faith in living and the ability to make correct decisions. These decisions vary in scale from where to swing my tools, where to belay or bivouac, to the sense of doom in a slope, and ultimately to the route itself. With hindsight, I see that my decision-making ability and intuition remained intact in the details of climbing. However, my decision to be there at all was influenced by past events and current emotions. It was deeply disturbing to understand that it was despair, not desire, that brought me to the base of False Dawn.

Camped on the glacier below the 10,000-foot-high southeast face, we were awakened suddenly by the familiar crack and ensuing roar. David peeked outside to see the remains of a sérac thundering towards us from 3000 feet above. His unintelligible shout was lost in the raging noise, before the blast of

wind and debris hit the tent in the semi-darkness of May in Alaska. We did not see until morning that the avalanche had split 150 feet above the tent and poured down on either side. I wondered and wondered, "Why am I here? This is foolish and stupid."

We climbed 4000 vertical feet in twelve hours on our first night of climbing. After the bergschrund, we traversed exposed to the looming séracs of the French Ridge. David climbed strongly in contrast to my feelings of weakness, cold and nausea. Endless 50° snow, ice and rock passed by. Alaska's scale sank in. We had climbed so much so fast and still had 6000 feet to go. During that night and as we rested the next day, I realized I was there more because I said I would climb than because I wanted to be there.

The climbing continued nightly. The avalanches continued daily. Our second night began in a waist-deep trench up to the hanging glacier where we found the joy of real névé to sink our tools into. Timing the avalanches which the morning brought, we dashed across a gully to camp beneath a sérac. Séracs in Alaska come in two varieties. There are the friendly kind, such as the one which protected us from the daily deluge, and the unfriendly kind, which loomed above, threatening to tumble us off the mountain at any time. The catch is that I don't think they knew the difference.

Rested, but nervous about the obscurity of the line above, we began our third "day" of climbing after waking for the eight P.M. radio call. That night we proved that we could get off-route on a new route. The obvious ice tongue we had seen from the glacier looked more like the focal point of Foraker's game of ice bowling. Traversing right, we moved through a rock band and I led my first truly mixed ground which David rated at Scottish 5. I sharpened my focus as the route steepened and faith gave me confidence. Or was faith merely adrenalin? Days later as we perused the route, we saw that the hardest climbing was a mistake. The ice tongue ran right through the rock band. Still, those two pitches were the highlight for me, where I had to use all I had learned in 13 years of climbing.

The hard climbing slowed us. Captured by the sun, we were punished by the terminal moraine of the upper snowfields, piece by piece. I screamed at David to hurry as I belayed, dodging rocks which apparently did not have my name written on them. In contrast to his usual speed and precision, he suddenly seemed slow and unsure. As we later perched on a miserable, tiny, dirty bivouac ledge, I thought to myself, "His nerves are shattered." In the commitment and risk of the climb, I learned that we were not both strong and confident all the time. Emotion and confidence remained collectively consistent as they waxed and waned between us. We traded off; one would drop the ball and the other pick it up. On the fourth night, we seemed to have overcome the difficulties as we wandered through the icefalls of the upper slopes, cold and tired.

No amount of experience stops the game of anticipating the summit, nor dealing with the false ones. Having no photograph of the face, we assumed the gigantic snow gargoyles above to be on the southeast ridge. Although on our fifth night we were prepared for a long ordeal, we were on the summit plateau in

PLATE 30

Photo by Bradford Washburn

MOUNT FORAKER's Southeast Face, showing False Dawn Route. Bivouacs are marked.

PLATE 31

Photo by Bradford Washburn

False Dawn Route on FORAKER's Southeast Face.

PLATE 32

Photo by John Phelan

David Sharman finishing the Steep Chutes which led to the Hanging Glacier on Foraker.

PLATE 33

Photo by John Phelan

Sharman above the Hanging Glacier on FORAKER.

only a few hours. Two more hours saw us just below the true summit. A bitterly cold wind whipped around us. With my glasses iced, I had to close my eyes the last ten feet. We may have spent ten seconds on the summit, just long enough for the film in my camera to snap. Rime ice coated us in the severe cold of the Alaskan night.

We raced down the first 3000 feet of the southeast ridge, watching the sun briefly rise above the horizon, only to disappear behind Denali. Remembering the horror stories we had read and heard about this descent, we spent one day of brief but essential rest.

Our climb down was an ordeal. Blind in a white-out, we crawled down the corniced ridge, using our tools and senses as a blind man uses his cane. After picking our way down shattered rock to avoid the avalanche slope where eight have lost their lives in past years, we plodded on auto-pilot into camp. It was a 29-hour day.

Others tell us we have done a world-class climb, Himalayan in scale, severity and commitment. Our egos grow. I don't perceive myself as a different climber but my résumé now says I am. Remembering our intentions, I feel a little like an imposter. The name we have given to the route, *False Dawn*, comes from this feeling as well as the double dawn as the sun slipped around Denali.

For the first time, I can accept the validity of my fears and despair, as well as the selective memory of adrenalin-filled confidence. I trust both sides of the coin. Guided sometimes by desperate emotions, climbing connects an endless series of rational choices towards an ultimately irrational aim. Although I may have the ability for hard alpinism, my desire is tempered by wanting to stay alive. Death energizes the venture, though I want to stay on the side which allows me to laugh at the foolishness. "Choose your routes *very* carefully," I tell myself.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount Foraker, 5303 meters, 17,400 feet, via False Dawn on the southeast face; start on May 22, 1990 and summit reached on May 27, 1990 (American John Phelan, Briton David Sharman).