

Neacola

JAMES GARRETT

THE NEACOLA RANGE, neatly tucked into the Lake Clark National Park in Alaska, has effortlessly kept climbers from converting it into a mountaineering goal. Neacola, its highest peak at 9426 feet, had spurned two previous attempts. The only published report was in the 1980 *American Alpine Journal* and described a try on the 4500-foot-high shattered northeast face in 1979. Fred Beckey had, however, visited the area in the early 1970s, but Neacola had repelled his efforts as well. Almost twenty years passed before he shared the secret. His photos and enthusiasm were intoxicating and plans were laid for May of 1991.

I easily recruited Lorne Glick and Kennan Harvey. Though neophytes to Alaska, they were hungry for adventure. Uneventfully, we arrived in Kenai to bland and cloudy weather with only occasional glimpses of Iliamna and Mount Spurr across the sound. Our young, though experienced pilot, Doug Brewer, had never landed in the Neacola Mountains and wanted to wait for a bluebird weather day. He and Fred shared an affinity for lengthy weather discussions. While Doug busied himself with the routine flying of fishermen, oilmen and firefighters, we camped in his hangar. We lounged in the local library by day and crawled through the haunt at night. For eleven days, we were an enigma to the townspeople of Kenai. Most had met few, if any, climbers. Kennan and Lorne, with the impatience of youth, were like whinnying thoroughbreds quivering in the starting gate, salivating and bucking to get on with it. Fred held the reins taut, repeating accounts of his many epic waits and approaches to climbs throughout Alaska. He told us, "When the weather is good, we'll know it."

Hardly too soon, and just before spending our last coins, Doug deftly landed us on the unnamed glacier below the east face of Neacola. Our sullen mood transformed chameleon-like with the dramatic change of scenery. Unbridled, we skied with heavy loads up the Lobsterclaw Glacier to cache the first of the gear at Advance Base Camp. The next day, we set out with a final load to Advance Base. Fred, frustrated by the ineffectiveness of his snowshoes through the icefall, bowed out and remained at the landing strip.

Four days of poor weather ensued. An occasional glimpse of the western flanks of Neacola showed an enticing slash ending on a saddle just below the summit. Avalanches scoured the face, but a sense of comradery developed amongst us. We held little doubt about if, only when.

Early on the morning of May 20, I was tossing and turning as gusts pounded the flapping tent. I mentally prepared myself for another day in the waiting



PLATE 25

Photo by James Garrett
NEACOLA.

game. Lorne ventured a look outside. A sea of clouds swirled and splashed up, obscuring the view, but Lorne's bit had long since been chomped through. We held a vote and democracy ruled. Within two hours, we were uncoiling two 100-meters ropes. We frontpointed and banged our tools up the smooth, icy gash. The winds abated, sunshine crept up the adjacent walls and Lorne smiled about the decision.

On unconsolidated snow over bulletproof ice, we worked our way up the right edge along the rock. The hard ice provided secure belays, although it was a wrenching effort to get the anchors in. Rock placements yielded little protection in rock unlike so much of the beautiful granite on surrounding peaks. The angle steepened to 65° as evening neared. We hacked our way up. Even when rockfall started, a certain tranquility enveloped us. In accord with each other, we knew we would not be trampled.

Ice clogged many of the screws and they became difficult to place; long runouts followed. Kennan led the last pitch through the ice bulges below the saddle. Three hundred feet, two ice screws! Lorne and I cheered him on. He was in his own private Hell. Having underestimated the route when he looked at photos in Utah, he had brought a dull, old, 80cm ice axe to complement his ice hammer.

By eleven P.M., in the sinking alpenglow, we marveled at the spectacular Kichatnas, the Revelations, the seaside volcanoes and the immense Denali massif. During our first real pause of the day, we wolfed down salami, cheese, bread and tepid tea. Two quick, dreamlike pitches later, we straddled the narrow, snowy summit. Hoarsely, we yelled greetings to Fred, warmly ensconced in his tent 5000 feet below in the dark shadows of the east face. It was futile—we barely could hear each other.

After rappelling back to the saddle, we shivered and drank more tea in a makeshift snow shelter, organizing anchors for the descent and waiting for morning light. With long ropes and a slick surface, we were back at Advance Base by ten A.M. Sleeping bag to sleeping bag in 36 hours! If not for good friends, Neacola would have been a lonely and desolate place.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Neacola Range, Lake Clark National Park, Alaska.

FIRST ASCENTS: Neacola, 2873 meters, 9426 feet, via the West Face Couloir, May 20, 1991 (Garrett, Glick, Harvey).

P 7020, 2140 meters, via the 55° West Face, May 24, 1991 (Garrett).

P 6920, 2109 meters, via the clean granite of the West Ridge, May 25, 1991 (Garrett, Glick, Harvey).

PERSONNEL: Fred Beckey, spiritual leader; James Garrett, Lorne Glick, Kennan Harvey.