

“Deprivation” on Mount Hunter

MARC FRANCIS TWIGHT



OUR NEW PSYCHO-MIXED CLIMB, “Deprivation,” rises nearly 2000 vertical meters (6562 vertical feet) up the north buttress of Mount Hunter west of Mugs Stump’s and Paul Aubrey’s 1981 Moonflower Buttress route. Scott Backes and I followed a system of ice runnels and ledges through four major rock bands on the northwest-facing wall of the north buttress. In 1988, Nick Craddock and Lydia Brady from New Zealand climbed through the Third Rock Band but were forced to retreat from high on the wall. In previous and subsequent years to 1988, the route was apparently the scene of several attempts.

Scott and I left our skis on the southeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier at 8260 feet at one A.M. on May 15 and crossed the bergschrund at 2:30 A.M. We simul-climbed 150 meters of moderate ice with one 75° crux below three distinctly visible parallel runnels of ice. Scott climbed the lefthand one to a ledge, traversed across and belayed me up the righthand runnel, which had an 80° crux. Another 75° pitch up and left gave access to three hard pitches of climbing, where we hauled the leader’s pack. These three pitches all had questionable belays; we had only one or two good pieces of protection per rope-length. The first two had 90° passages on thin ice; the third featured totally psychotic mixed climbing, dry-tooling on rounded edges, bad protection, a bad belay and “ice” like the stuff in the freezer at home that didn’t hold picks very well.

The First Icefield passed by in a 20-minute simul-climbing burst to the base of a prominent left-facing ramp. The ramp pitches were easy in comparison to those below with 70° to 80° cruxes and emptied us out onto 65° black ice. The “alpine vacuum cleaner” sucked us into runnels—the line of least resistance—eventually spitting us out onto a 50° ice arête which we more or less followed up the Second Icefield to a bivouac ledge chopped out of the ice beneath the Third Icefield. We quit climbing for the day at 7:30 P.M., having managed about 2500 feet of upward progress.

On the morning of May 16, a 100-meter traverse to the right brought us to a mixed passage with a 75° or 80° crux. We climbed onto a ledge system leading left and then back right, allowing us to avoid about 25 meters of artificial climbing, which would have slowed us down unnecessarily. We simul-climbed 200 meters up and left on 45° to 50° terrain. As the ground steepened, we belayed five pitches on ice back right, which was mostly 60° with one 75° mixed

section, to the base of the obvious waterfall cutting through the Fourth Rock Band. This pitch had two 95° cruxes and the ice was black, hard and evil. One more 75° ice-and-mixed pitch got us through the Fourth Rock Band and onto the slopes leading to the top of the buttress proper. We negotiated three mixed pitches, moderate but with several viciously steep (90°) passages. Darkness—false night actually—came at eleven P.M., but we continued climbing as temperatures fell to -20°F. All the gear was frozen; the carabiners wouldn't close, the camming devices wouldn't operate and two of our five ice screws were choked and unusable. We tried melting the cores out with a lighter to no avail. That left us with three screws to protect ourselves on the five 60-meter pitches of black ice which separated us from the cornice. We crawled through the icecream roll on the top of the buttress at six A.M. and stopped to brew until 9:30. Clouds brewing in the west inspired us then to move quickly. We simul-climbed through two 80° sérac walls and rushed up perfect sastrugi toward the summit. Reaching the plateau after two hours, we traversed south of the summit pyramid, climbing upward nonetheless, forced higher than we would have liked by an extensive series of bergschrunds. We turned the corner at an altitude of 14,490 feet, twenty feet higher than the actual summit—so much for our altimeter—and dropped off the plateau towards the west ridge.

In a gathering storm and white-out conditions, we managed to find the out-off into the northwest basin. This turned out to be the most dangerous place I have ever been. With a little radio information from Steve Mascioli, we descended the west ridge and reached 6500 feet on the Kahiltna Glacier at eleven P.M. We were met by Michael Kennedy, Greg Child, Joe Josephson and Ken Wiley, who had retrieved our skis and brought them along with hot drinks, food and powerful morale-boosting camaraderie. At one A.M., we were all back at the Airstrip, enjoying Annie's company and cooking in the radio tent. [Anne Marie Duquette was the radio operator and flight coordinator at the Airstrip.—*Editor.*]

The ascent of the north buttress and the descent of the west ridge in 72 hours—three days faster than the second quickest round-trip—reflect an attitude defined by years of climbing in the Alps and a willingness to accept a certain amount of risk, although different risks were taken by previous parties on the same wall. Our ethic was to climb between storms rather than counting on being hit by one and sitting it out. Our plan was to climb as fast as we could until something went wrong, even the slightest detail, at which point we would promptly retreat and attempt the wall again in better conditions or with the appropriate gear. For me, alpine climbing is about movement and freedom and defining my own rules.

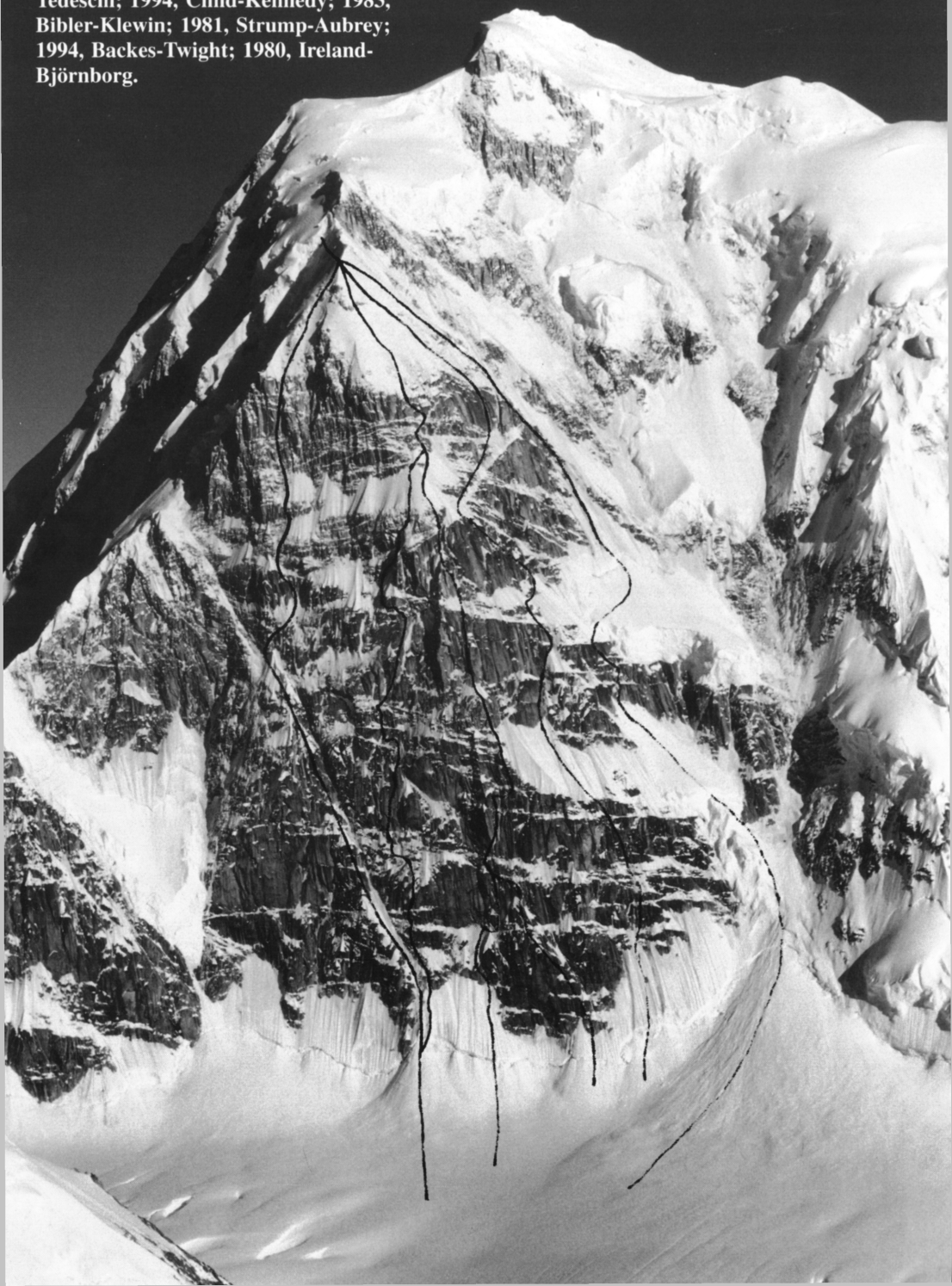
We had previously attempted what was to become "The Wall of Shadows" and realized that our lightweight, speed-dependent style would only end in despair and failure on that wall. We retreated after six pitches. On "Deprivation," we climbed at what we consider the minimum (a subjective term which would mean far too much gear for some and unjustifiably slim for others). We carried enough food and fuel for two bivouacs—the food already stretched and

PLATE 5

Aerial Photo by Bradford Washburn

North Face of MOUNT HUNTER.

From left to right: 1984, Grison-Tedeschi; 1994, Child-Kennedy; 1983, Bibler-Klewin; 1981, Strump-Aubrey; 1994, Backes-Twight; 1980, Ireland-Björnborg.



rationed. We had no tent, only bivy sacks, which actually meant a saving of energy when we chopped the bivy ledge, as a long shallow head-to-head ledge takes an hour to chop and a tent platform for even the smallest tent requires a minimum of three hours' determined work. Counting on movement to keep us warm, we wore little clothing and carried but "belay jackets" to wear over our shell gear when we stopped. Factoring the jackets, climbing suits and Shake-n-Warms into our sleeping systems allowed me to use a synthetic sleeping bag rated to 20°F, while Scott wisely opted for a 10°F bag. The packs, without the hardware and ropes in them, weighed more than 25 pounds but less than 30. Our rack of hardware was pared down to just enough gear to rappel from the top of the buttress, should it have come to that: 7 cams, pitons, 9 nuts, 5 ice screws. We had 40 feet of 5mm perlon rope and a coat hanger to make Abalakov rappel anchors in the ice and figured that 26 or 28 60-meter rappels could get us off from the cornice. Above there, the fail-safe point, we were committed and could only "fail upwards."

I do not recommend our style of climbing to other alpinists—it is just the way I do things. I am willing to accept the necessary "deprivation" and risk. But it isn't for everyone. Having said that, it is my opinion, however, that it is the future of Alaskan climbing. I believe that many great walls can be climbed non-stop as long as teams wait for perfect conditions and are willing and able to fail, and as long as they are not dependent on victory and the summit as a definition of success. Coming home alive is succeeding; the summit is a gift. Good, hard climbing and man striving for his utmost perfection should be the definition of a successful Alaskan adventure.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range

NEW ROUTE: Mount Hunter, 4441 meters; 14,470 feet, via "Deprivation," a 2000-meter-high route west of the Moonflower Buttress route on the northwest-facing wall of the North Buttress; Rating Alaskan Grade 6, Alpine ED+, 90° ice; May 15-17, 1994 (Scott Backes, Marc Francis Twight).