

Mount Crillon—Sixty-One Years Ago

BRADFORD WASHBURN

(Mount Crillon lies on a peninsula immediately west of Glacier Bay in the Alaskan Panhandle. Its summit rises to 3879 meters or 12,727 feet, ten miles above the Pacific Ocean on the west and eleven miles above Glacier Bay on the east. Brad Washburn organized three expeditions to explore and ascend Crillon before the peak was finally climbed in 1934. On the first, the complicated route to the peak was reconnoitered and determined. A year later, Washburn, Bob Bates and Walt Everett failed high on the final peak while Charlie Houston, Bill Child and Adams Carter, who had accompanied them up the Ice Cliff, made the first ascent of neighboring Mount Dagelet. It should also be emphasized that the 1934 expedition was half mountaineering and half scientific. Dick Goldthwait and his assistants carried out a complex glaciological program, which included making the first seismic depth soundings ever taken on an Alaskan Glacier. This was the first mountaineering expedition to have reliable radio communications not only between the high camps and Base Camp but also to the outside world. The following is an unedited account that was written at the time in Brad Washburn's log book which describes the actual summit climb on July 19, 1934.)

WHEN WE LEFT CAMP AT TWO A.M.

on hard crust, we planned only to have a try at roping the Ice Cliff and then, if plans failed, to make a trip to False Dagelet for movies. In fact, the original plan had been to try False Dagelet and never try the Cliff at all on account of all the loose snow from this last storm, but the weather was so *perfect* and the night so clear and cold and the crust so hard when we reached the South Col at 3:10 A.M., we decided to make a whole-hearted stab at the Cliff. After changing to ski boots in the grey dawn, we packed up 200 willow wands, all the rations, 1 box of still film, 900 feet of "fixed rope," 3 rappel pickets, crampons and a few other necessities such as a shovel for cornice excavation.

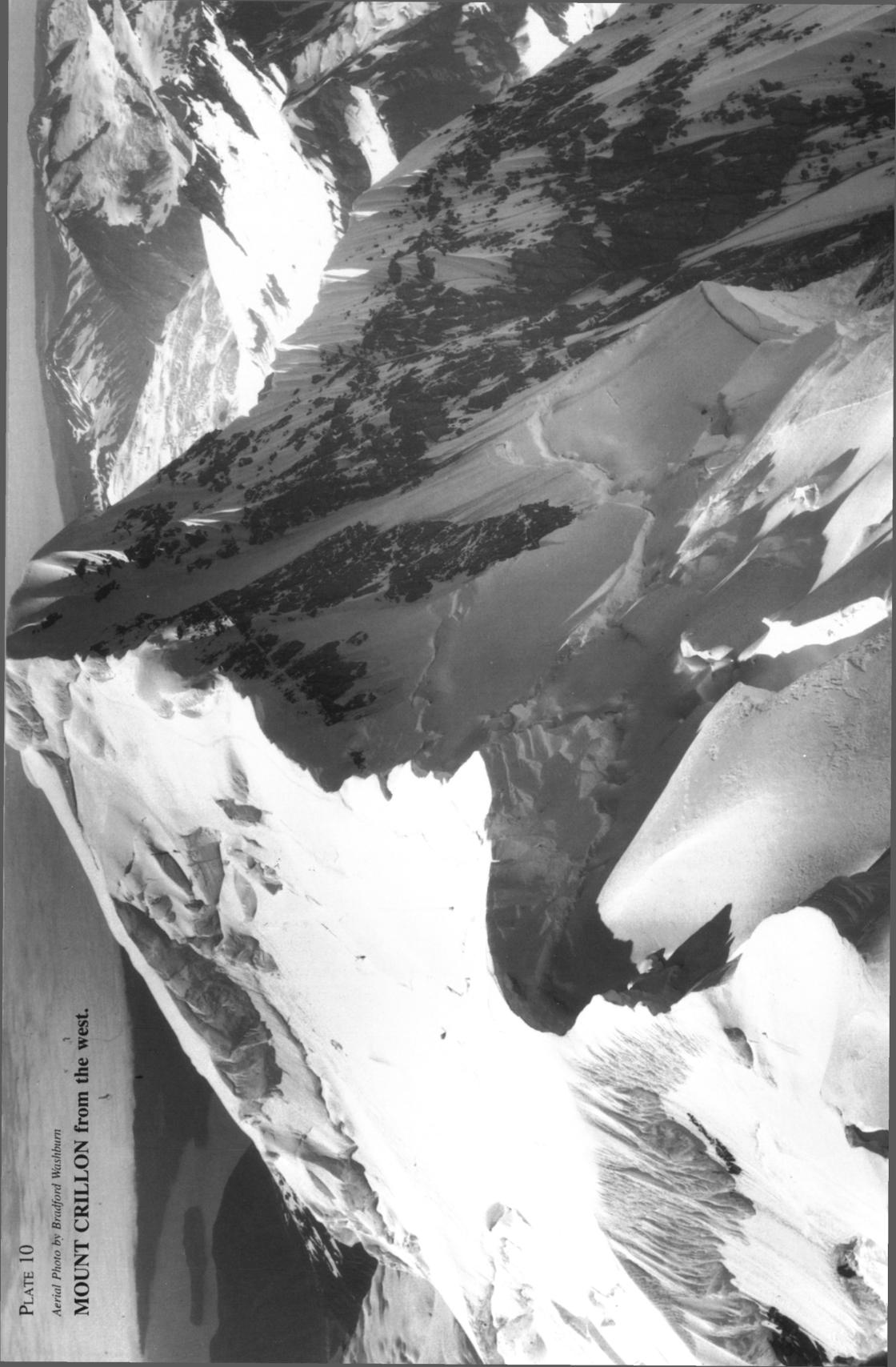
We skied to the base of the Cliff over the most divine snow imaginable—a hard crust with about 2 millionths of an inch of soft, fluffy frost surface. It was a curious sensation just to *fly* through the almost darkness and not have *any* idea of the contours ahead. All we knew was that it was safe to take it straight—and we did.

The Cliff looked more formidable than ever, all studded with buttresses of rock that had never been there at all last year. But, although the snow slopes themselves were badly scarred by avalanches, not a single one had recently

PLATE 10

Aerial Photo by Bradford Washburn

MOUNT CRILLON from the west.



crossed the schrund. The cornice was *vast*. We started with the dawn at four A.M., I with the determination that this climb was to decide the whole of the expedition's success or failure. I must do my utmost to try to break some way through the cornice at the top. Bem [Woods] went with me. Abner [Ad Carter] and Hal [Kellogg] followed close behind. Wok [Holcombe] and Ted [Edward] Streeter awaited instructions below. Bem carried a fixed rope. Ad and Hal each had another rope plus the three pickets and the shovel. That was all we took, except for three bars of chocolate and some lemon drops, planning to be back at the col for lunch.

The schrund was our first surprise. The avalanche trough that had looked so easy a few days ago turned out to be a veritable terror of thin blue ice that we couldn't cross without a fixed rope from above. A short try convinced me of that. The left side looked better, so we traversed and cut across a place where the avalanches had almost filled the trough. As Bem belayed, I climbed ahead. The lip of the schrund was vertical ice and it meant chopping both foot- and handholds. At 4:30, I'd at last succeeded in stretching my foot around the corner and into the avalanche chute. Zeus! What a feeling of comfort after that sheer wall of ice! Bem followed on belay and then we simply *rushed* up the chute. He let me out full rope, and then I belayed the rope and he pulled himself up it. All went perfectly. Two-thirds of the way to the rocks, Bem stopped, threw a fixed rope to Abner, who swarmed up. Then we went ahead, Bem with another fixed rope tied to his belt, till we reached the first rock ledge to the right of the avalanche trough. Then we made it to just below the big overhanging rock, as the other two followed. Bem took another fixed rope tied to his belt and we continued upwards, this time up the steep rock, always to the right of last year's route and parallel to it.

The rock was very steep in places, but we just roared ahead to where we fixed the new rope to another ledge two-thirds of the way to the top. Sunrise was on Dagelet and the sea of clouds over the ocean was flooded with light—and shadows of the great peaks with the curious “western darkness” above them. The peak of Crillon had appeared over the ridge to our left. At last we were as high as the lower lip of the Plateau and going strong. To our left, we suddenly saw *last year's rappel pickets still standing* at a rather cock-eyed angle in the snow between two rock ledges. I remember what a relief it had been to reach that Gibraltar. Now, however, we were on a narrow rib *completely safe* from avalanches that would course down the gullies to our right and left and never come near to us. We believed the rib to be impossible last year, and maybe it was when covered with deep new snow.

After fixing this second rope, we continued as fast as possible to the top of the rib, where at 6:20 a fine rock ledge gave us a corking view of the cornice. Two bits of delicate rock held us up for only a few minutes. Above us, the edges of the Plateau sharply cut the pale blue sky of early morning. To our left rose Crillon, crystal-like, defiant and sparkling, and to our right towered the massive summit of Dagelet, its peak bathed in the full rays of the sun. Behind us, the sea of clouds stretched endlessly to the horizon. The cornice was fine; the slope

between it and us *short* and *easy*. I gasped for joy. We'd *made it!* Five minutes of easy unbelayed climbing on perfect hard snow brought us to a sort of grotto beneath the cornice. After twenty minutes of careful excavating, we were ready to make a try for the Plateau.

I clambered onto Bem's shoulders, tottering gently as I tried to get an axe-hold in the slope above a tiny gap in the overhanging snow. But I could find no firm spot into which to jam my axe. I had to descend to my original place beside him and scratch my head for another solution. I chopped handholds in the vertical snow above us and then thrust my axe in above them for a handhold as we slowly rose again in our tumbler's act. This time we were more secure and I jammed my axe deeply in the snow several feet back from the edge of the cornice. The sun caught me full in the face. The ranges behind Glacier Bay burst into view. The Plateau glittered before me once again. I clambered into that mystic country that Walt, Bob and I had left a year ago, expecting never to return. What a feeling! It was inexpressibly marvelous to be there on the great plateau once more, face to face with the grandest old hill of them all! Bem followed quickly on my fixed rope and handed up my crampons that I'd taken off to stand on his shoulders. We wasted no time. Abner and Hal were hot on our heels.

A council of war changed our plans quickly. The crust on the Plateau was solid and smooth. It was only 6:45 in the morning and such a chance for Crillon could not be overlooked. Ad and I were the logical ones for the attack. We *must* get *someone* up that old hill this year or bust! The other two showed their stuff. They excavated with the shovel a deep trench through the cornice to make the uphill route safer. We yelled to Wok and Ted and they hurried to the South Col for more supplies. Not a cloud in the sky and scarcely a breath of wind. We could talk clearly to the men 600 feet below us at the bottom of the cliff. The other four were to act as the support party and follow Ad and me across the Plateau with food and willow wands.

The assault now began in earnest. Ad and I took all the chocolate and lemon drops and I borrowed Bem's goggles. Then we started for Crillon at *top* speed. As we rushed across the Plateau, all glittering in the brilliant early sun, we planned our route of attack on the summit cone. The great snowfield seemed to melt away as we dashed ahead. Our only thought was on that icy final pyramid that rose above us, ever nearer and ever higher it seemed. At 8:15 A.M., we rested a few minutes at 9600 feet at the foot of the summit slope. Then we started upward, Ad leading. I followed to save myself for any difficulties that might arise higher up. All went *perfectly*. Details are useless. The slope was in utterly perfect shape, hard as rock and, except for one wide crevasse at 10,500 feet, quite free of avalanche danger. The slope above here steepened rapidly and by 9:20 o'clock we reached the upper lip of the great barrier crack that we had seen from the plane. That plane trip saved us a long detour, for I had the whole route perfectly imprinted on my mind. The grade lessened, cracks followed each other faster, but always covered deep with firm snow. The walking got harder: thick semi-windpacked snow that broke through ankle deep. Ad led us

with a superb pace—slow, steady, short steps, the kind that get you up fast. The summit cone now rose in a staggering mass of blue ice, white snow and frost feathers to our left. The route that we'd chosen directly up the ridge looked possible, but we were not yet sure of it. An alternative lay to the left with a traverse 300 feet below the top and the final ascent up the west ridge. This we planned to avoid unless necessary, as the traverse to it was very steep and there was obvious danger of starting an avalanche in these loose-snow conditions.

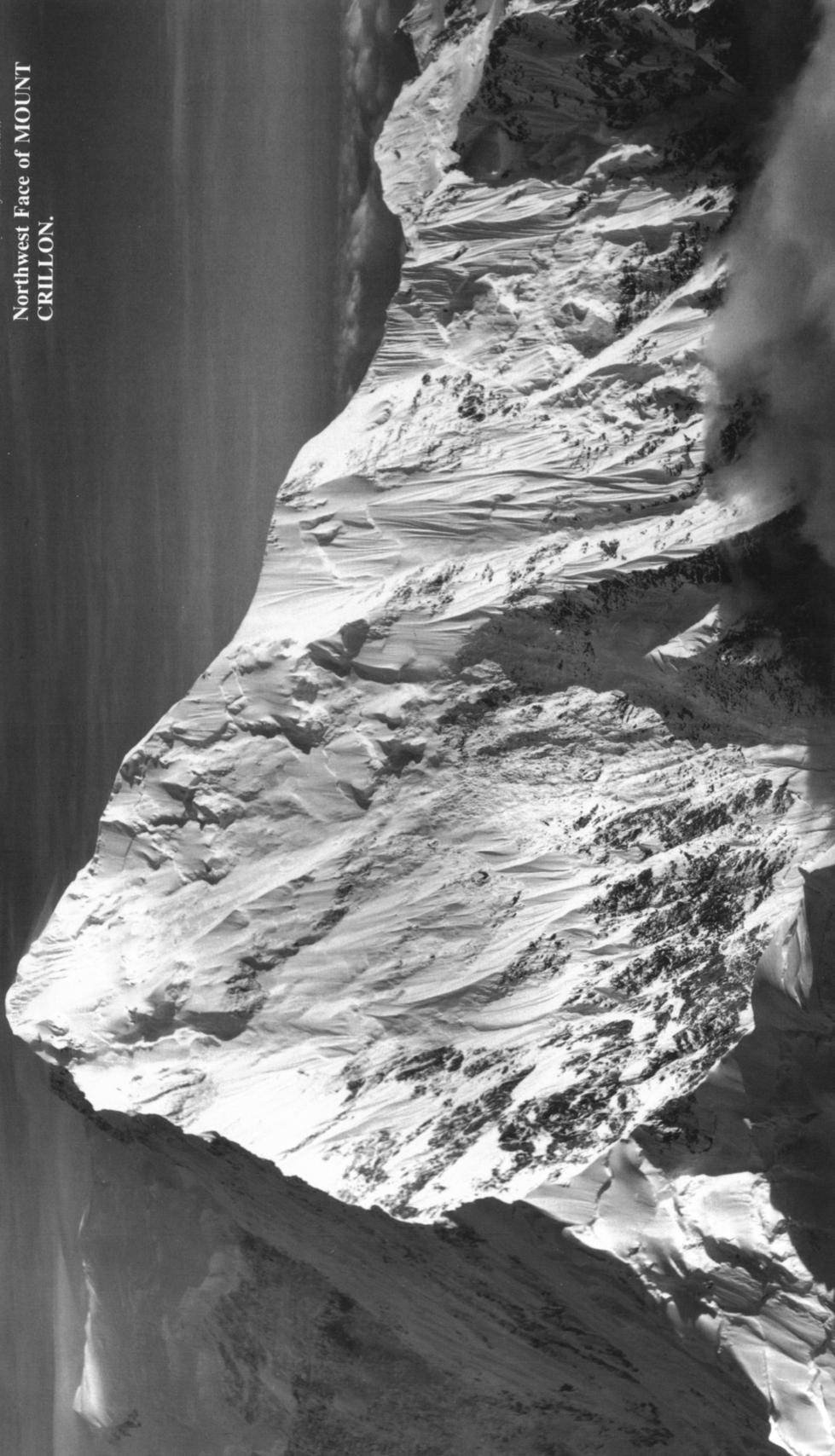
We made the ridge at 10:35—a good 25 minutes ahead of my predicted time from the top of the Ice Cliff and phenomenal time for that walk of at least four miles and a vertical climb of 3100 feet!—and we had gained 6000 vertical feet from camp! We never rested but kept relentlessly ahead, always fearing a change in weather and not wishing to risk the loss of the top by lingering too long anywhere. The trail breaking became stiffer. The powder snow on top became considerably deeper—a foot or so—but Ad kept nobly on. Here and there a bulge of blue ice under the snow warned us that Crillon was much the same as a year ago. At eleven o'clock, we had traversed under the two bulbous gendarmes of frost feathers that lie between the col and the summit and were resting in a deep grotto, studded with a myriad of fantastic frost feathers beneath its sheltered, overhanging southern wall. A tiny outcrop of granite here showed us that the whole peak is solid rock, despite its icy appearance from this side. It was bitterly cold with a hard north wind. Powder snow swirled by us. The wind hummed through the frost feathers and blew little eddies of them down our necks. Clouds were rolling in, making an endless ceiling to the north. Fairweather's peak had disappeared. We must hurry fast and not waste a moment.

The hardest part of the climb still lay before us. We could never tell how long it would take. Crillon was a tough customer to the last inch. We hastily ate a bar of chocolate, our next-to-last, munched a few fruit drops and put on our crampons. [At that time, tricouni nails allowed us the luxury of waiting to put on our crampons, as the nails were almost semi-crampons in themselves.—*Editor.*] Ad's hands were so cold that I had to put his crampons on for him. I had no parka. That was at the bottom of the Cliff. My ski jacket had always been warm enough before and this time it got an acid test. I pulled my light sun hat down tight over my ears. (My béret was in Wok's sack coming up!) We started up through knee-deep powder snow, I now in the lead. Below on the Plateau, in the hot morning sun, we could see four tiny specks approaching the base of the mass of Crillon. They were far behind us and the walking must be an ordeal in the morning thaw. The sun looked hot down there! Circling the base of our second gendarme, we crossed a narrow bridge of snow on a steeply inclined span of ice across a deep green crack that acts as a sort of moat or schrund around the summit pyramid. The col between the gendarme and the peak was smooth, hard and safe. The wind hit us there with a blast, laden heavily with cutting snow and frost feathers. The clouds dropped lower. Mists swirled above us, ripped off the peak by the frigid wind.

PLATE 11

Aerial Photo by Bradford Washburn

**Northwest Face of MOUNT
CRILLON.**



For the first time we could look over the other side of Crillon. The Johns Hopkins Glacier wormed its tortuous way below us to Glacier Bay, a mass of jagged ice pinnacles and fearful, bottomless cracks. The precipice that plunged down to it was stupendous—such a drop I'd never seen before: one vast unending slope of jagged rock, ice and snow.

The summit rose now only 200 feet above us to the left. Its lower end was abrupt and vertical for a dozen feet. A short delicate traverse above the void was necessary before we could actually start the ridge itself. Powder snow, a foot deep, covered the lower layers of blue ice. The snow must be brushed aside before the steps could be chopped. This I did leaning over, while Ad belayed me from our last tiny col. Ten minutes of work and we were on the ridge. Here the work was slow and steady. The danger would have been great unless we took enormous care. The whole crest was buried under an eight-inch coating of light powder and frost feathers. The *actual* crest of the arête was not where it seemed to be and was a good foot further to the left on the south side. The wind had built up a false crest of treacherous frost and powder. Every time I brushed the layer away, first with my axe, then with my hand, to lay bare the smooth ice below, a swirl of nasty, cold snow blew up into my face, filtered down my neck and speckled my goggles. We progressed by inches. With Ad constantly belaying, I cut steps slowly first balanced on one foot, then on the other. Ten minutes above the col we could barely see the others below us, well on their way up the Plateau. Then the cold mist closed in on us. All we could see was swirling snow and a narrow knife-like arête rising before us and melting out of sight in the fog. But it wasn't long and we knew it. We kept steadily on; Crillon was to lose this time. She was doing her best to stop us, but she'd started too late.

At 12:20, the grade seemed to lessen. A spectral ridge of white appeared from the clouds to our right. We must be nearing our goal. Our steps could now be further apart. My left leg no longer swung in free air between footholds, nor did I lean precariously any more against the icy ridge. I planted my axe securely for the last time. Ad came to my side from the narrow ridge below. I pointed ahead and grinned. "Oh, if Bob Bates and Walt Everett and Harald Paumgarten could only be with us now!" we both thought at the same moment. Then, too exhausted from the strain of the ridge to make a dash for it, we slowly plodded a hundred feet up a gently rolling surface of deep feathery snow. At 12:29:50 by my trusty Ingersoll (which I'm sure was at least a half-hour off at that time), we planted our axes on the peak of Crillon and shook hands until our wrists ached.

The stay on the top was short. Sheltered as we were by an updraft of the wind, it was clear that the storm was increasing rather than diminishing. We took a couple of jubilant pictures with Ad's little camera—mine was somewhere on the slope at least a thousand feet below us! Then we started the descent after only ten minutes of the grandest exultation that two men have ever had. The ridge was worse descending than climbing. We took more care than I ever had in my life before, as we backed off from the spacious summit. The

steps had already filled with powder snow again, and while I belayed Ad to the end of the rope, he kicked each one free again. Then I followed while he belayed. The belays were excellent, sunk deep in hard snow beneath the outer layer of frost, hard powder and ice. At one o'clock, we were once more on terra firma in our little grotto, and at 1:30 we'd reached the East Col once more. Crillon was conquered and we could say so safely now! The ridge was behind us and the only obstacles that now lay before us were the miles of weary Plateau, followed by the climbing down the Ice Cliff. Fixed ropes were there, but even with them, a slip is dangerous and weary feet are apt to knock off many loose rocks unless one is *terribly* careful.

We met the others at the barrier crack at 11,300 feet or so. The weather clearly made it unwise for them to go on. Plunging downward, we finally came out of the mist just below the big crack at 11,000 feet. There we all sat down on the now deep, sticky snow and ate a huge meal. The ocean lay below us, and all the rest of the range was as clear as crystal. The storm, just like last year, only enveloped the tip-top of Crillon.

The support party was a godsend. Bem had come all the way without goggles, for they had failed to bring mine. He had had a handkerchief first over one eye and then over the other all the way. We ate for forty minutes and then continued through the blistering heat across the Plateau to the cornice, where we arrived at 4:35. We lay around and started down the Cliff at 5:10. The descent was Hell. We climbed on two ropes of three. The others went first and we simply crept downward for fear of hitting them with loose stones. Slush avalanches coursed all around us. One huge block of ice fell to our right with a terrific concussion that shook the whole mountain and loosed dozens of small avalanches and a few big ones. The Cliff is nerve-racking at best and we all heaved a sigh of relief when we finally reached our skis. At 7:50 we had our skis on and were off for the South Col with the glaring sun shining full in our faces, glittering down from a cloudless sky, cloudless except for the storm cloud on Crillon. We constantly shifted goggles so that no one was without them for more than twenty minutes. At last, we came to a stop in front of camp at nine P.M., the end of a marvelous day.

(Two days later, Brad Washburn, Ad Carter and Wok Holcombe set out at 12:35 A.M. and retraced their steps in order to photograph the climb. On July 21, the weather was brilliantly clear, but unmercifully hot. They emerged on the summit at 10:45 A.M., this time getting a chance to peer down the whole 8000-foot northern precipice.)

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaskan Coast Range

FIRST ASCENT: Mount Crillon, 3879 meters, 12,727 feet, via the East Ridge above the Plateau, July 19, 1934 (Washburn, Carter) and July 21 (Washburn, Carter, Holcombe).

PERSONNEL: Bradford Washburn, leader; H. Adams (Ad or Abner) Carter, Waldo (Wok) Holcombe, Henry (Bem) Woods, Howard (Hal) Kellogg, Edward (Ted) Streeter.

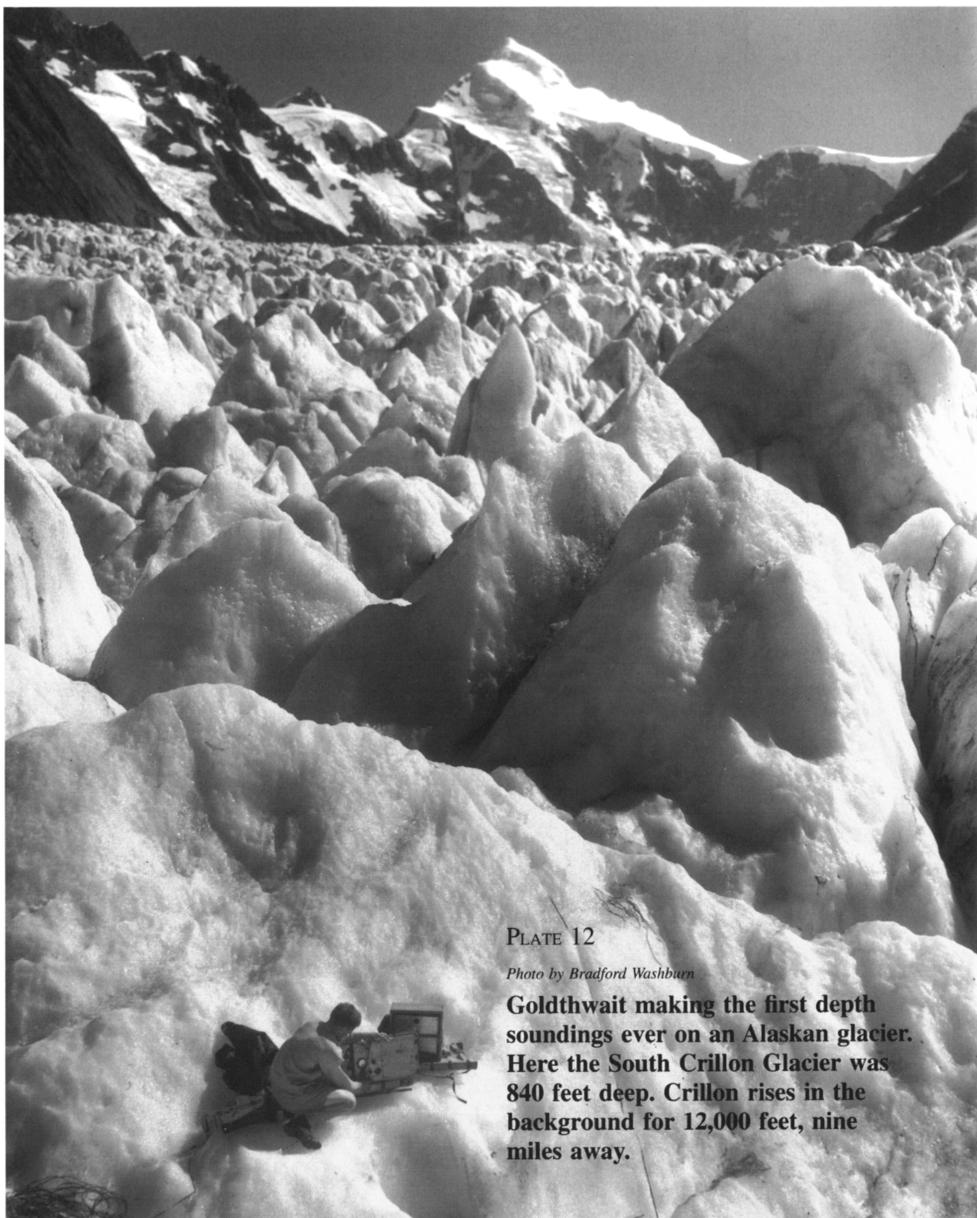


PLATE 12

Photo by Bradford Washburn

Goldthwait making the first depth soundings ever on an Alaskan glacier. Here the South Crillon Glacier was 840 feet deep. Crillon rises in the background for 12,000 feet, nine miles away.