

CONTINUING EDUCATION

*Severely tested on the first ascent of the 8,500-foot southwest spur
of University Peak, Alaska.*

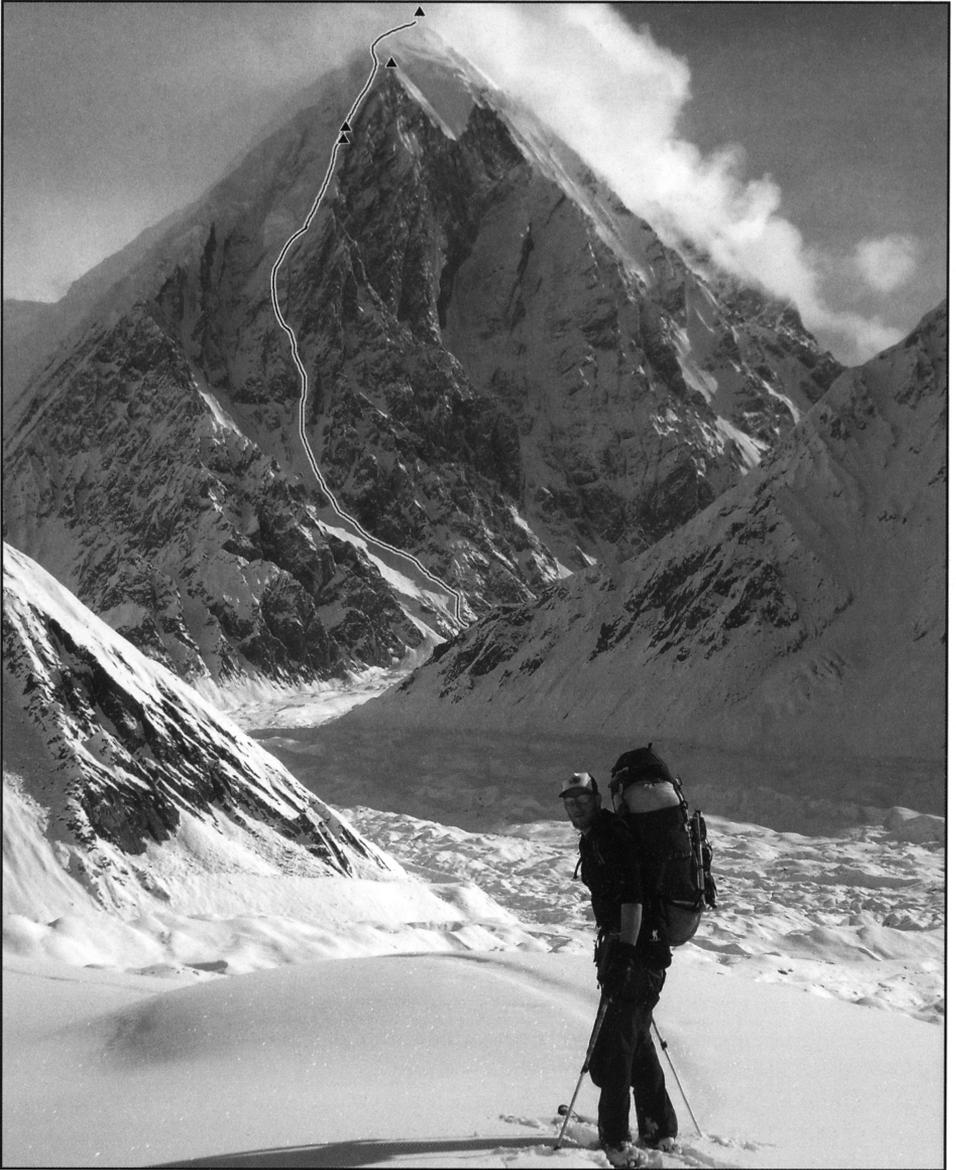
KEVIN DITZLER

I first laid eyes on 14,470-foot University Peak in 2007. Daily views of the massive south face from low on the Hawkins Glacier were like a drug that wraps itself around the base of your brain and haunts your dreams. But it was out of my league. So I did the only logical thing: I moved to Alaska. Over the next four years of living and climbing in the Wrangell Mountains I brought home aerial photos of University Peak. Its storied history slowly revealed itself as I met its pioneering climbers.

The many details of an Alaskan expedition fell into place on April 4. Once again I stood at the base of University Peak. Along for the adventure was John Kelley, an Alaskan hard man with roots in my hometown of Durango, Colorado. We have been climbing hard, scrappy lines in the Chugach together for the last two winters. The Chugach in December is a cold and dark endeavor, a place where approaches are torturous and protection is a state of mind. A handful of quiet locals have been ticking off superb modern alpine lines on the steepest faces in the range. John and I have reached that vital level where we don't need to talk much, and we've frozen our asses off enough to know the other guy can suffer and smile.

Paul Claus of Ultima Thule Lodge had landed us on a small side glacier west of the upper Hawkins Glacier and southeast of Hobbs Peak. We dug in a base camp and spent a week skiing and observing conditions. Toying with different objectives, we discovered complex faces riddled with objective hazards. Unpredictable bouts of snowfall and poor visibility weren't encouraging. In the end, however, the biggest face proved irresistible, and we began planning for the next break in the weather. We were focused on a spur that splits the southwest face. A narrow path up ice seemed the only option protected from serac falls to either side. Our descent would be the complex and broken north ridge, pioneered in 1955 by a six-man team lead by Keith Hart. The peak did not see another summiting until 1997, when Paul Claus, Ruedi Homberger, Danny Kost, and Dave Staehli landed in Beaver Basin, a high cirque at 10,000 feet, and made the second ascent of the peak, also via the north ridge.

The only people to descend this ridge without first climbing it were Carlos Buhler and Charlie Sassara, in 1997. They had just finished their 8,500-foot line on the east face, and Claus surprised them with an unexpected air drop of food on the summit. While descending the north ridge, they found a handful of wands marking the Claus party's route; their luck held when they were picked up immediately on arrival in Beaver Basin. (See AAJs 1954, 1955, and 1998 for previous climbs and good descriptions of the peak's character.) While the north ridge is arguably the best descent route, its downsides are that Beaver Basin is a dead end ringed with active serac fall, and it lies at the edge of a 4,000-foot icefall that would be a roll of the dice to descend. The first ascentionists had walked 20 miles up the Hawkins Glacier from the Chitina River and climbed the icefall into Beaver Basin before climbing the north ridge to the summit. They were either far braver than we, or the ice fall has changed since 1955. John and I were content with being "spoiled by a Supercub," as Ruedi Homberger would say.



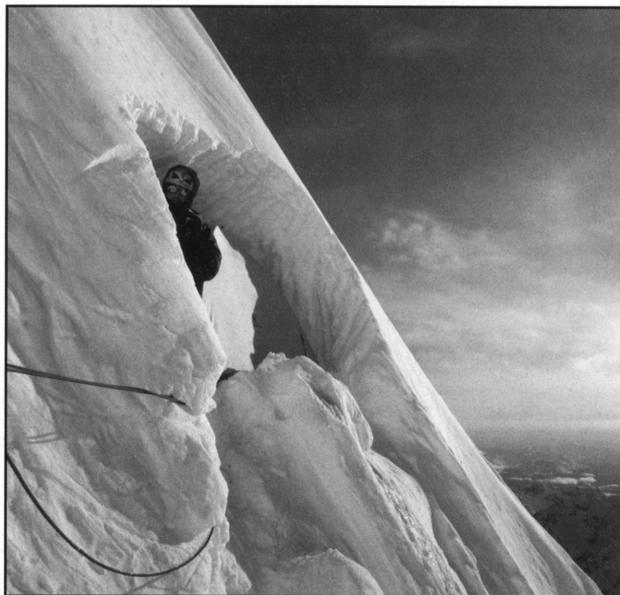
Kevin Ditzler starting the approach to University Peak, with their route line on the southwest spur. *John Kelley*

The only other ascent by a new line was by Lorne Glick, Bob Kingsley, Lance McDonald, and John Whedon in 2002. After climbing the open south face in ideal booting conditions, the four skied the 7,000-foot run (AAJ 2003). This “day trip” earned them a remarkable virgin ski line but left them a quarter mile and 300 vertical feet shy of the summit.

On April 8 in improving weather John and I left a note in our base camp tents with route information and pick up instructions, per our agreement with Paul. We had decided to climb the line, traverse the peak, and wait a week in Beaver Basin until our scheduled pick up on April 24.

We thinned the rack, added fuel and food, and I foolishly convinced John to leave the file. We would have to carry too much gear already.

At 1 a.m. on April 11 we crossed the schrund at 6,000 feet and began simul-soloing. Soon we fell into rhythm and moved well despite the oppressing packs. Early in the day we passed through a steep gorge with bizarre echoes—we screamed various nonsenses at the walls, just to hear them repeated and magnified seven or eight times before they bounced away down the face. In the afternoon we stopped for



After 42 hours on the go, the climbers found snow soft enough to excavate camp one. *Kevin Ditzler*

our first brew. Just as we relaxed on our stomped platform and began enjoying the perfect sunny weather, a powder avalanche tore down a gully near us. We grabbed everything we could, as the powder blast hit us. When it finally passed, we were shivering. Snow packed every opening in our clothing, packs, and helmets, but we didn't lose anything. After finishing the brew, we were again soloing upward, finally putting on the rope to simul ever-steepening mixed terrain.

Three thousand feet up, at the time we should have been looking for a camp, the snow couloir ended, exiting right onto a 60-degree ice face. From there I could see the next thousand feet. I could also see the fractured face of a hanging serac leaning precariously near. I had studied it from the ground, tracing fall lines to see if we could steer clear of any debris it might fire, and convinced myself that we could safely squeak by on the right. Now, though, it was my voice that was squeaking, caught in my throat as my heart pounded. I started motoring up the ice. I could feel John at the end of the rope, out of sight in the couloir, stepping it up to meet my pace. I continued climbing until I ran out of gear, where I paused, looking from the serac to John and back to the serac. I really didn't want to stop here. I called down the face and started climbing again. When he reached the last piece of pro, he racked it, and we continued, still tied together but soloing steepening blue ice.

Finally, I pulled right of the hanging behemoth and out of the fall line. Breathing hard, I plugged my only screw and began bringing John up. Wordlessly, he pulled into the belay as twilight dwindled. Before either of us spoke, the behemoth cracked, expelling a crashing cascade of ice down the face. Startled but safe, we watched the tumbling avalanche until it faded into gray light out of sight. I traced its fall line back up the face. John and I exchanged grimaces.

We had run out of light and could see nothing resembling a ledge, nor any feature to shelter us. So we strapped on our headlamps, and I took off, hoping to find protected terrain. Soon it began to snow, which the 4,000-plus feet of 60-degree blue ice above us shed regularly. The spindrift slides increased as we continued upward, some pounding us for minutes. Sometime during that tortuous night I reached my limit. Calves on the verge of rupturing like overripe watermelons, I kneeled against the wall of ice, head bowed.

"I don't think I can lead anymore," I told John when he reached me. John replied but I didn't really listen. I knew he was telling me he couldn't lead. I closed my eyes as another spindrift slide tore into our belay. Cold powder breathed into my lungs. When the deluge stopped, I opened my eyes. The prospect of an open camp in this weather convinced us the only option was up—up to some ledge, some protection, someplace to rest away from the avalanches. In a spasm of will that I can only compare to rearranging an internal organ, I resigned myself to my fate, my penance. I stood, kicking front points into the frozen monolith.

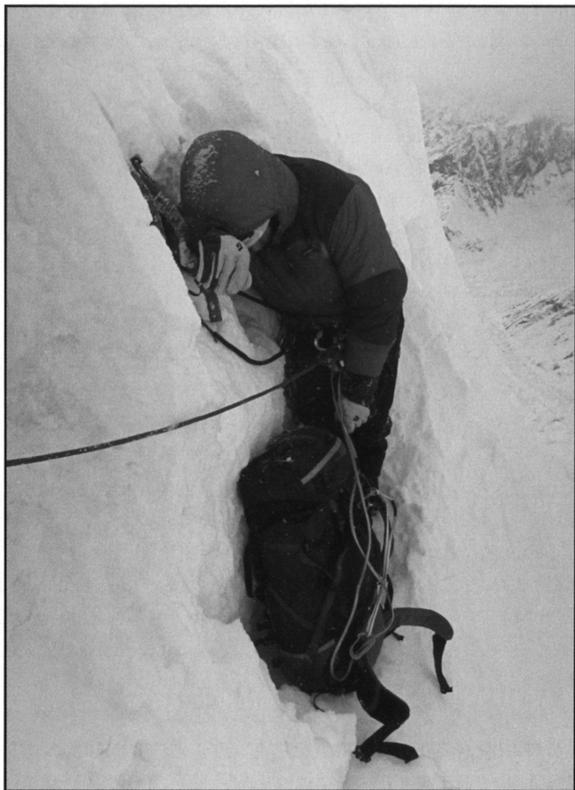
"Fine, but I'm not carrying this fucking pack any farther."

I unshouldered it, clipped it to the near-hanging belay, and lashed a haul line to it. John and I had seen a few darkest hours together, and we could dig deep when we needed to. My light turned upward, and my hands relaxed on my tools.

We climbed through the rest of the night and the following day. Light snow continued to fall, as did the spindrift. In daylight everything seems more manageable, though there was still no protected terrain, nor anything but 60- to 75-degree blue ice. I continued with gimping slow leads.



John Kelley leaving camp two, the chopped ledge visible below. *Kevin Ditzler*



John Kelley after 40 hours on the go. *Kevin Ditzler*

Forty-two hours after crossing the schrund, we reached the relative protection of a rock band and discovered a 60-degree snow rib just deep enough for excavating a protected tent site. As we finished an hour of chopping, I saw one of my picks rattling loosely on the head of the tool. We collapsed into our small tent, made a quick brew, and within an hour fell into the nauseous coma-like sleep of the utterly exhausted. The cave-like ledge enveloped our small tent, cocooning it into the folds of the mountain.

The next morning we peeled open our eyelids and saw that the weather had improved. We brewed and ate gluttonously, lightening our packs. I took a closer look at my axe: one of the two nuts holding the pick was gone. Before the climb I had replaced the hardware, torquing it hard. Should have used Lock-tite. We were halfway up the mountain with no spares. I went to work with

pitons, chiseling stainless aircraft tie wire into the void where the nut had been and folding layers of the aluminum head back onto the bolt and remaining nut. The pick was tight again; a few test swings implied it would work.

We finished breaking camp by 4 p.m., eager to move after the delay. I took the sharp end and began traversing left on ice and mixed pitches to 75 degrees. The protection was excellent in cold, old ice, but the climbing taxed our spent calves. After only five or six pitches of traversing left under the rock band, the light began to fade. Shit. The last thing we needed was another overnight epic trying to find a ledge. Although returning to the comfort of the last camp was tempting, neither of us was willing to give up hard-earned progress. I led a pitch to the rock band above, in hope of finding a snow pocket deep enough for a ledge. Out of light and options, we settled for another steep snow rib, hoping for dense snow and névé like the previous night.

Four and a half excruciating hours later, we finished chopping through bullet-hard ice and set up our tent. We slept well and long, and the next day, under sunny skies, we slept, brewed, and ate until the sun fell away. We enjoyed our day of leisure, drinking in mountains and sky.

The next day, April 15, we were up before the sun, rested and motivated. We would end this relentless ice face. We continued traversing up and left, looking for an opening in the rock band that might take us to the snowcap at 12,500 feet. By 5 p.m. we found a path through the rock band, and I surrendered the sharp end. John took the rack and dispatched the pitch. A snow-covered rock slab

with vertical bouldery rock moves through a chossy weakness took him into thin clouds and soft snowfall. Above the rock band John led through weaknesses in a labyrinth of polished overhanging ice and into a bitterly cold night. The final pitch was an unprotectable, rope-stretching, 70-degree snice face that cracked and settled as John climbed.

And then We rejoiced in all things flat and level: a small plateau at the apex of the southwest spur. Unroped we stretched tender calves (after 4,000 feet on front points), brewed, and watched the engorged blood moon quiver over an endless array of silent mountains.

The next morning we moved unroped up the massive ridge in clear, cold weather, until gaping crevasses and steepening terrain forced us to tie in and trade leads. We were soon back on our front points traversing under enormous, house-sized, rime conglomerations—hollow webs of ice, snow, and air. The 50- to 75-degree traverse was at best difficult to protect and at worst terrifying. Sometimes the ice would shoot cracks with each swing. We took to chiseling placements with our blunt tools and holding our breaths.

We were back in the routine of climbing in the dark. The thermometer on my pack read -18°F , and the wind was picking up. After a few more hours of scary rime and hollow traversing, John once again brought us to flatter ground and our next camp, at the top of the south face. This was the spot where four years earlier Lorne Glick and gang had put on their skis to descend the south face. Looking down it now, I saw nothing but smooth polished blue for 7,000 feet.

The following day brought us to the top of a twin-steeped rime pinnacle within view of the summit. It was one of those places where it feels like you're clinging to a terrestrial focal point, a soaring apex above the planet. We rapped off the other side and began a quarter-mile slog through knee-deep snow toward our goal. The snow finally firmed on a wide, wind-compacted ridge, and we walked unroped to the broad summit. Under clear mid-day skies, -10°F temps, and healthy wind, we reveled in our first 360° view.

The descent began as an enjoyable stroll down a long, gentle hill, but we soon roped up to navigate through the convoluted maze of the north ridge. Near-vertical downclimbing, avalanche slopes, leg-punching bridges, and endless gaping crevasses kept our attention. About two-thirds of the way down, the light began to fade, and a strong turbulent wind spun around us. We kicked in a platform, set up the tent, and crawled in. We spent much of that night and the following morning using our backs to brace the walls against locomotive winds. The wind stopped by mid-day on the 18th, and we sleuthed our way through the last of the maze and post-holed into Beaver Basin.

The silence and stillness of the following six days was overwhelming. The climb had been an act of will. At times it was a mind-cleansing battle and at times a saturating pleasure. Now there was only waiting. Low on food, we went into hibernation mode.

I was physically and mentally drained, powerless to stop a creeping morbidity from wrapping itself around me; I allowed it to bend my thoughts toward hopelessness. I



Ditzler at camp 3 on the apex of the southwest spur, the first flat ground since crossing the shrund. *John Kelley*

had failed my partner and myself; I had backed myself into a corner with no options. Our lives were dependent on someone far away and on the luck of flyable weather. John did what he could to raise my spirits. We joked about stretching our remaining 2,000 calories and six ounces of fuel for six days or possibly longer. We laughed about the inedibility of modern synthetic boots. John passed the time telling climbing stories, detailing mountains he'd seen that had potential. We talked excitedly when we discovered a past climb or partner in common. In the end, however, I pulled back into my brooding gloom.

Everything I have done in the mountains has been governed by a philosophy of self-reliance, of knowing that every step and every decision carries the gravity of life and death. The most difficult part about waiting was knowing that it was out of my control. I was too tired, too weak to contemplate descending the icefall. Even in perfect health, it would have been difficult and objectively dangerous. The best option now, and the decision we had made before we set foot on this peak, was to wait, knowing that Paul would eventually get the message in our tent back in base camp and show up here.

I slept in stressful fits of nightmares, unable to dial back my thoughts. Late on the sixth day, April 24, our scheduled pick up date, the clouds began to accumulate, and I zipped the tent shut like I was closing a dark curtain over my mind. That's when the faint drone of an airplane whispered through the air. Afraid to breathe, I listened and prayed. Minutes later, Paul and his Cub burst through the clouds just in front of us and landed a stone's throw away.

We piled into the Cub and glided out of the basin. John and I pressed our foreheads to the vibrating windows, studying the hideously fractured icefalls below Beaver Basin. We exchanged smiling grimaces. Maybe waiting in Beaver Basin hadn't been so bad after all.

SUMMARY:

Area: St. Elias Mountains, Alaska.

Ascent: First ascent of the southwest spur of 14,470' University Peak. Kevin Ditzler and John Kelley climbed the 8,500-foot route in seven days, summiting on April 17, 2011. The climbing was "endless grade 3 ice with the occasional grade 4 step" on 4,000 feet of 60° to

75° ice, followed by a variously angled ice ridge to the summit. They descended the north ridge to Beaver Basin, where they waited six days for a pickup with almost no food or fuel.



Kevin Ditzler and John Kelley on the summit of University Peak. *John Kelley*

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kevin Ditzler likes imaginative adventures and aesthetic climbing lines. He and his wife Piper split their time between working in the remote Wrangell Mountains of Alaska and an arguably more "civilized" life during the winter in the city of Palmer, Alaska.