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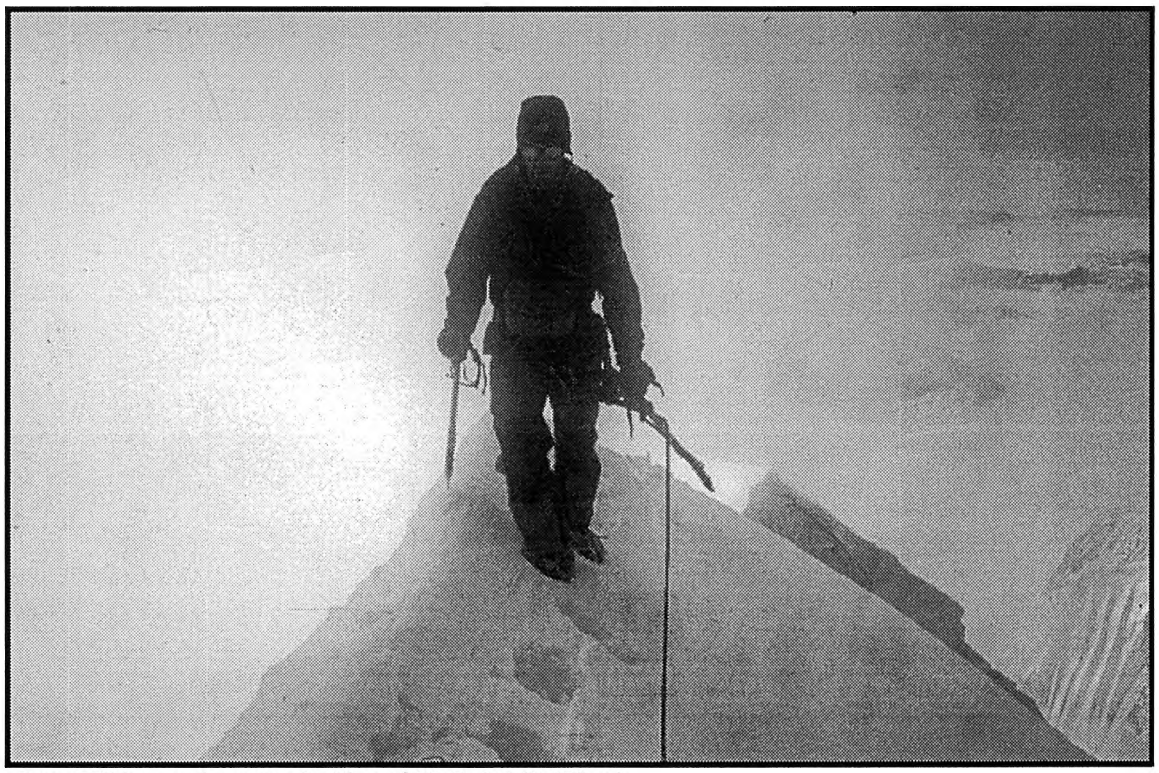
MOUNT EVEREST FOUNDATION

Expedition Report

Mt Baird: British – Canadian St Elias Expedition

SEA TO SKY, ST ELIAS, 2000

7 July - 14 August, 2000



Dave Hildes on the summit ridge of Mt Baird (3,650 m).

compiled by:

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Expedition Synopsis:

Mt Baird - 7 July - 14 August, 2000

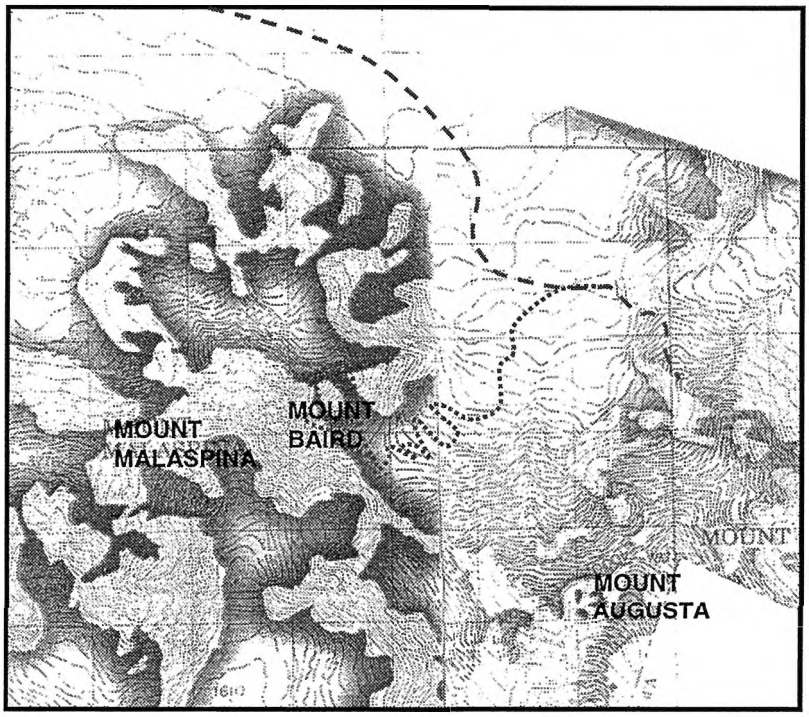
Climbers & Crew: Alun Hubbard (U.K.), Dave Hildes (Canada), Jon Millar (U.K.), Jay Burbee (Canada).

After failing to push a route through the icefalls on the North Ridge of Augusta from the Seward Glacier, we managed to thread a lead up to the Augusta – Baird Col from which we made the first ascent of Mt Baird – 3,650 m via its East Ridge, descending via its East Face. Alaskan Grade III+.

Summary:

Eight days of good southerly winds from Vancouver, *Gambo,* our boat, took a most unfortunate high speed knock from a fishing boat in her only vulnerable spot whilst refuelling at Prince Rupert, B.C. The collision to her rear-end (rudder and trim-tab) rendered her effectively unsteerable and after realising that the necessary haul out and work could not be complete within the month, the expedition made the pragmatic decision to continue the expedition by the much less satisfactory medium of on-land rented vehicle to Kluane via Prince George and Whitehorse.

Once in Kluane, we arranged for Andy Williams to air drop us and our kit at the base of the Seward Glacier as soon as the weather cleared. This unfortunately, was rather a lot longer than expected - after nearly a week-long wait we established base camp – (1600 m) on the Seward Glacier on the west side of the St Elias icefields. Mixed weather with much whiteout made the next days very frustrating as we weaved and backtracked through the icefalls of the N Ridge of Mt Augusta. After attaining a high point of around 2900 m we realised that we were just too late in the season to successfully navigate a route through the maze. Somewhat peeved, we retreated and then attempted to push a route through the icefalls guarding the Augusta – Baird Col. Being much gentler in slope this did, after some exciting overhanging snow – ice climbing give way – to allow us to establish a camp at the Col at c. 2,800 m. It was a straight forward 40 – 50 degree snow slog up the east ridge of Mt Baird the next day. The final two pitches gave some very exposed and interesting climbing on steep – 70 degree snow but thankfully the arrete was devoid of the usual mass of huge cornices associated with such exposed ridges on the west side of the St Elias. From the summit we continued down the west ridge and descended via the relatively safer east face to our previously established camp at the Col.



From the Col – with a further deterioration in the weather we retreated down the icefall our previous tracks were completely obliterated and from there headed back to Base Camp. Apart from a foray on the steep ice of the lower slopes of Mt Malaspina, bad weather kept us pinned down at Base Camp for the next 5 days, after which with food and time running low, we requested an air pickup.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are most grateful to the Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council for support for this expedition. Thanks also to Andy Williams at Kluane for flying us out in difficult conditions and for the hospitality offered to us at the Arctic Research Institute. We are also very grateful to Tissman Marine for their efforts in trying to get *Gambo* on her way north again after the collision.

Continued Adventures Peak Bagging in the Canadian St Elias –

THE SEA TO THE SKY, ST ELIAS, EXPEDITION, 2000.

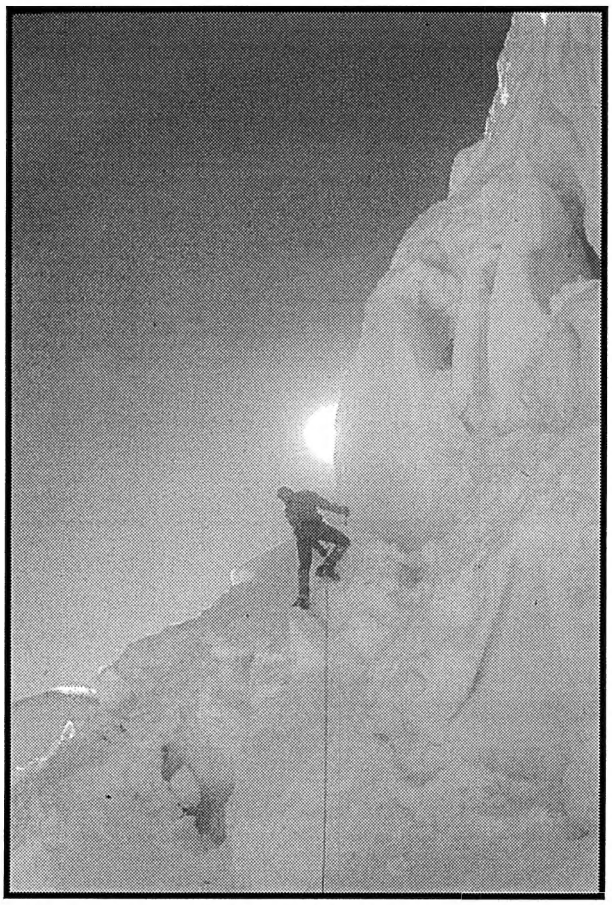
I'd be lost without the St Elias; these coastal sentinels of Alaska and the Canadian arctic – beholders of native myth and Cook's ambitious explorations - they have opened the doors to a new world for me. I am in their debt, and this coming year – with no summer expedition plans – I am going to miss the annual pilgrimage north. Having approached them reverently by boat, by ski and on the back of scientific research, I felt somewhat apprehensive and extremely idle last summer to be plonked unceremoniously on the ice-plateau at the foot of Mt Augusta on the seaward side of the range, by the antediluvian ski-equipped Helio-Courier bush plane piloted by Andy Williams, manager of the Arctic Research Institute on Kluane Lake. Such an abrupt approach was not through design nor effort though. Unfortunately, *Gambo* the sailboat on which we'd planned a considerably more serene approach to these mountains was sadly shacked up on the hard in Prince Rupert, halfway between her home port of Vancouver and our intended destination, Icy Bay, after a collision with an over-zealous fishing boat at the fuel dock on the frantic first day of the short Alaskan fishing season which rendered her only weak spot – the outboard trim-tab which drives the rudder, completely bent over and the vessel practically unsteerable. After a week of compounded frustrations involving aborted haul-outs and unsuccessful temporary fixes, and with the Alaskan climbing season drawing swiftly on, we reluctantly but pragmatically agreed to abandon the boat for the considerably faster but somewhat less comfortable rent-a-wreck mode of transport via 2,000 km's of the Stuart-Cassier and Alaskan Highways north to the Yukon and the leeward side of the St Elias range.

Still, when we eventually pulled up 30 back-rattling/arse numbing hours later into the all familiar Arctic Research Station - it was marvellous to be back - to stretch out on the shore of Kluane Lake with its endless crystal skies, clear air and perpetual sunset and twilight. Unfortunately, despite the uncomfortably heat, mosquito infested days we experienced sitting it out at Kluane, the icefield itself was getting a complete blasting from an unsettled system in the Gulf of Alaska and we were unable to fly. There thus being some conciliation for the most unfortunate turn of events on the maritime leg of the adventure – since it would have been hell in the Gulf of Alaska at this time with the winds off Yukatat reported to be sustained in excess of 80 mph – ie storm force, throughout this period.

Time passed easily enough though and at noon on the sixth day we got that wry smile and the accompanying nod from Andy and within the hour we were loaded up with 18 days fodder and kit and rattling down the dirt-runway trailing clouds of dust – tally ho. Some 90 minutes later and over three weeks after setting sail out of False Creek Harbour, Vancouver; Dave, Jay and myself found ourselves in that somewhat dislocated state which comes with the calm after much frenetic activity at the foot of Augusta facing our objective in complete awe as the last imperceptibly faint buzz of the plane faded into the infinite solitude of the icefield and its splendour descended upon us.

We spent the next hours examining possibilities on Augusta, discussing strategy and, deciding what to leave cached and what to take for the climb. Despite feeling intimidated by the open crevasses and seracs of the icefall that barred our way to the upper slopes of the North Ridge of Augusta we decided we'd go as light as we dared, with ten days food and hope to push a route through the icefall and then descend as planned via the Northwest Ridge which looked pretty serious and committed. The idea was to link up all seven of the seaward peaks which make up the long untrodden and tenuous 25 km ridge from Mt Augusta to Mt St Elias. It was an audacious plan which we were psyched on but one which with the limited amount of time, the late season and unsettled weather we also felt was quite a commitment with some major unknown quantities involved. In our favour, we knew that once established on the ridge, there existed a series of ridges providing potential escape to the icefield plateau and hence with a long walk, access back to our cache with food, skis and the SSB radio transceiver if needed. There was a problem though in that the exceptional amount of melt that had occurred this year compared to previous had left many exposed icefalls, seracs and open crevasses on these 'escape routes' including the planned North Ridge ascent route for Mt Augusta - making them a serious and somewhat dubious fall-back option if a real 'situation' were to develop. However, we'd had plenty of experience in the trial and error route finding that this climbing entailed and after a hearty late evening meal with the ice surface beginning to refreeze into a decent crust we started off on the 10 km trek towards Augusta.

In the faint twilight with thick cloud rolling in from the west again – we eventually camped off the base of a long concave ice slope which we had noted was crossed by a series of large bergshunds and ice-steps and was strewn with rotten avalanche debris which marked the beginning of the west side of the North Ridge proper. We woke early but it was socked in - visibility was too poor to consider the maze of crevasses ahead. By afternoon however, the cloud had lifted sufficiently for us to at least work a route up the snow slope and onto the ridge and the icefall. I led up the 250 m of snow slope weaving a route across a number of small slots until we reached a 50 m overhanging ice-wall formed by the fault-line of a large bergshund that ran across our slope from some nasty and steep friable rock to the left. Jay took the lead on this gnarly ice face – and after an hour with many diversions, dead ends, some tenuous ice screws and much snow covered rotten crud cascading down onto our belay – he topped out onto a 55 degree snow slope in which he set up a couple of ice stakes in good T slots and belayed up Dave who made quick work of it. After the farce of attempting to haul and getting all three rucksacks stuck on the overhanging ice lip followed by my enjoyably epic 'directisma' route, the weather had deteriorated once again. We plodded up the snow slope for another 40 m or so and dug in a camp in the lee hollow of another smaller ice wall.

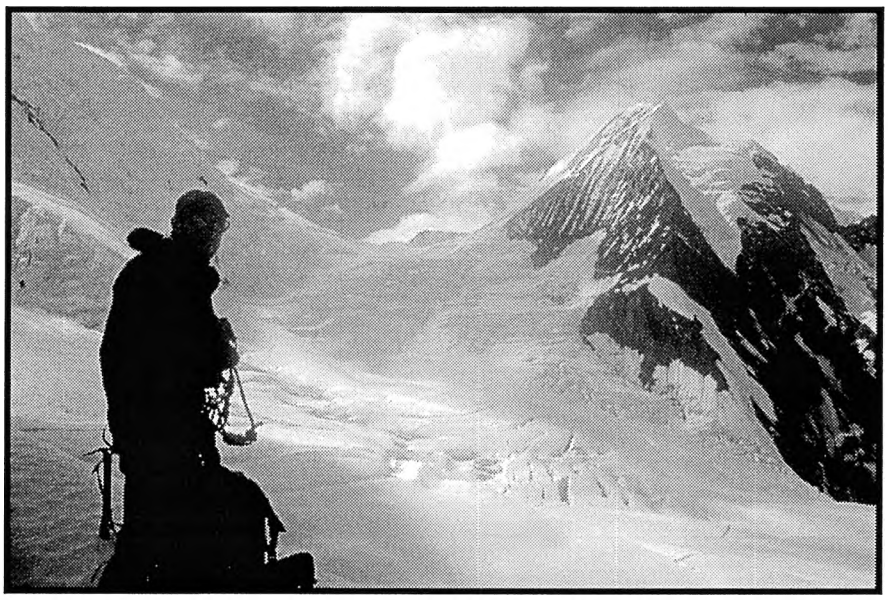


Jay on the North Ridge of Mt Augusta.

The following morning was fine – high wispy cloud, but no wind and blue sky. We headed up and to the right across a 60 – 65 degree ice slope making for the serac blocks of the NW ridge proper. The ice slope was in mixed condition but felt safe and we continued up for about 100 m to the beginnings of the ice fall where we roped up. Here, across some cruddy snow, we could access the first of the big, main blocks of the ice fall on the ridge and hopefully once established on these we hoped to find sufficient snow bridges for us to weave a route through the maze and onto the second upper slopes of the North Ridge to the summit. After some 50 m of nicely exposed steep snow/ice climbing, we came to the apex of the first block and Dave tackled the 30 m pitch to its flat top up a steep but solid corner. At the top of this block was a small platform with impressive exposure down either side of the ridge. To the east, along its left apex lay an impressive wall of seracs and steep blocks and to the west along its right apex an overhanging ice wall formed by the tilting of the block above which we were perched upon. I led up and to the side of this block for a 40 m pitch, which to my dismay terminated in an intimidating chasm, 10 m across and which seemed to me quite untenable with the kit that we had. However, I belayed Dave and Jay up to have a look and given our dwindling options it seemed pragmatic to have a go at being lowered into the slot, either attempting to swing or scurry across to the opposite wall to have a bash at it. The worries that we had regarding the lack of sufficient snow cover, even at 2,900 m, were being realised.

After setting up a decent belay, Dave lowered me over the lip of the block. For the first 10 m the wall was vertical, but then the side receded back and I was soon being lowered hanging completely free in the oppressive guts of this of this mighty, somewhat unstable and precarious icefall. At about 25 m deep, I could make out where the opposite wall was met by ice debris at the bottom – but the wall was gnarly and overhanging and with the intimidating gunshot echoes of brittle ice fracturing in my ears I, for better or worse lost my nerve and called out to Dave to lock me off and started the slow process of prussiking back up to the stance.

Meanwhile, Jay had been mooching around to the left side of the block and thought it might go. We roped back up and he led the way through the tortured, contorted mass of the lower ice fall. There were a few steep serac pitches but after skirting around for about 400 m we could see no route through that would give decent access to the upper ice plateau. What's more, from the top of one serac blade we could clearly see that there was still no snow cover on the broad ice shoulder of the East Ridge and thus there would be a further kilometre of open crevasses and difficulties barring the way ahead. We retreated back to our exposed corner block and dug in the tent feeling fairly defeated. However, after a luxurious meal accompanied by a gorgeous evening sunset from one of my more airy and precarious camp-sites our resolve returned and we scanned out an alternative route up through the gentler Baird icefall which stretched out in front of us which would provide access to the Augusta – Baird Col.

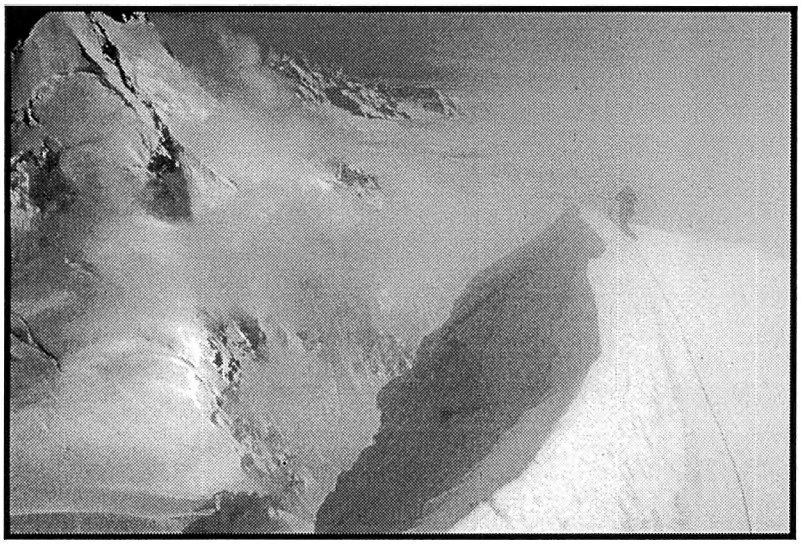


Jay on the North Ridge of Mt Augusta with Mt Baird in the background. Our eventual route to the summit followed the skyline up from the Col along the East Ridge. We descended via the snow slope above the rock.

The good weather held and by 6 am next morning we were packed up and commenced the retreat back through the seracs and after a couple of complicated but uneventful rappels, we were back at the foot of Augusta and started the slog up to the Baird Icefall. By midday though the cloud had descended, and although we'd carefully traced in our minds our route the night before we were soon struggling on a 40 degree slope, in deep snow through a maze of ice blocks and crevasses. When the cloud lifted briefly we could work out enough to justify pushing on though we'd climbed too much to the left and had to backtrack a few hundred meters of hard won ground. By 4 pm we were well within the guts of the icefall but with tiredness compounded by a further deterioration of visibility and light snowfall leading to a route finding nightmare with the number of frustrating blind alleys well exceeding any good ones, we called it a day, avalanche probed a small snow platform in the lee of a serac block and levelled it off for the perfect sized and protected tent pitch. This was just as well, as a full storm developed that night and despite our sheltered position we were buffeted by strong winds and heavy snowfall.

Conditions had little improved the following morning and we resigned ourselves to a day dug in - confined to sleeping bags, endless brews, a very dull book and thankfully inspired conversation. Unfortunately, the following day saw no improvement, a deterioration if anything into a full blizzard and with it an unsurprising concomitant decline in conversation and increase boredom level. Still what could you expect of the St Elias in August? Well, how about clear skies and calm, which thankfully is what we got on our third morning in the icefall; by 5:30 am we were up and moving but the recent snowfall meant conditions were pretty hairy and it was slow going underfoot. The morning passed wading thigh deep through the drifts, weaving back and fore within the guts of the icefall – with many false and frustrating leads interspersed with moments of terror as we each in turn dropped into yawning snow covered crevasses. However, by mid-afternoon we successfully picked a route up through to the lip of the Col c. 2,800 m formed by the low-point between the West Ridge of Mt Augusta and the East Ridge of Mt Baird. The afternoon was perfect, but the fresh avalanche scars and debris piled off Mt Baird looked ominous and after checking out a snow pit at the base of the East Ridge we decided to camp a safe distance from these slopes and aim for an early start the following morning when the top snow layer would have a chance to stabilise.

The good weather held over night and at 5 am we set out to make rapid progress up the 40 – 50 degree snow slope which abutted on to the East Ridge of Baird. Given the recent snowfall, conditions were pretty ideal with a good clear night bringing freezing temperatures and a solid top layer to the previous day's deep drifts. Occasionally we broke through, into frustrating thigh-deep wallowing, but for the most part the ground conditions were firm and we bombed up to about 3400 m. At this elevation the East Face just off the corniced ridge that we were climbing steepened considerably and a set of semi snow-covered crevasses running across the slope became apparent. We stopped, took a short break and roped up to the magnificent morning panorama which had unfolded: the massive bulk of Mt Logan and the icefields stretched out to the east, round to the majestic beauty of Mt Augusta and its elusive north ridge and then, most appropriately round to Disenchantment and Icy Bays and the Pacific – our intended marine destination, which fell away to the west – all bathed in the most glorious light. There were traces of high cloud, haze and low sea fog moving in from the Pacific, which gave some foreboding but for that moment the spectacle before us was perfect.



Looking back at Dave Hildes on the penultimate pitch on the East Ridge of Mt Baird with the West Ridge of Mt Augusta to the left.

I led off the next snow pitch which after tackling the 2 m wide gnarly crevasses with somewhat thin and dodgy snow-cover, turned into an enjoyable wall of 60 – 70 degrees in perfect condition to give 45 m of fun climbing, above which it levelled out into a 10 m platform of the East Ridge proper. I set up a belay and brought Dave and Jay up. From this point, we traversed along the top of the corniced ridge for 300 m, occasionally dropping onto the steep angled face to by-pass the worst cornices, but snow conditions remained favourable; we were able to make firm foot placements for steady, if not that rapid progress. By 8 am we were poised in position before the last pitch of the summit arrete, but by now the haze and high cloud that was evident earlier in the west had dropped and developed into swirling mist and the occasional snow flurry; maritime conditions proving to be as fickle and changeable as ever on the seaward side of the range. Jay led the last pitch traversing out on the west face of a most impressive knife edged snow-ridge which led to the summit of Baird. The two slopes which formed the arrete were spectacularly exposed at about 70 degrees and the swirling mist gave the situation a most surreal mood. After about 50 m of firm snow and ice giving ideal foot and tool placements, the ground conditions deteriorated to a cruddy mush overlaying rotten ice. Jay backed off, placed a snow picket and then proceeded, much to our amusement, to head-butt and smash his way through this cruddy ridge to eventually force his way through to the East Face. Here, conditions improved and he continued on for the last 30 m where the summit ridge broadened out slightly with us following on behind.

There was just enough space for us all to perch on the summit and after some light-hearted banter and a few photos we continue down on the North Ridge to recce the potential for continuing this route on to Mt Malaspina. The ridge down was considerably easier than the route up and after dropping about 100 m, it opened up into a broad shoulder about 30 m wide which fell off to steep faces on either side. The visibility had cleared enough to eyeball a route down the steep Northwest slope off this shoulder which looked as if it would join up with the Col which marked the beginning of the long traverse to the NE ridge of Malaspina. However, after about 15 m down this slope, Dave triggered a slab avalanche which swept him down some 5 m before the rope came taught and the belay took the weight. This was warming enough for us to leave this slope well alone for the time being and it was good to see Dave's sheepish grin as he climbed over the lip back to our stance on the shoulder. Given these snow conditions coupled with the fact that it was now completely overcast indicating another

system moving in, we decided to retreat to back to our Col via a line diagonally down and across the east face which looked relatively gentle at 40 – 50 degrees and which was stabilised by the odd rock outcrop and had firm snow without the stratification of the west face on which we had just been tested. Our thinking was that with just 2 days food left, if we stayed put and it snowed hard then we may not be able to get safely off the mountain. As it was we would be unable to progress onto the westward facing snow-slopes with the present avalanche risk and so not much was lost. If the system failed to develop into a storm then we would return the following day and make a rapid all-out push for Mt Malaspina. If it did develop, then depending on visibility we would either sit tight or make a dash back through the icefall.

The route across the east face went well with no problems. It took about an hour and half to descend the 600 m, the only difficulties being a series of seracs and crevasses which ran across the middle and bottom of the face. Snow conditions were not ideal with a cruddy snow layer covering rotten ice in places, but for the most part, given the angle we felt secure enough to descend solo and only roped up to cross the bergshund at the base of the slope. We were back at the Col just after midday and now that the weather deteriorated considerably, we wasted no time getting the tent set up behind the previous evening's snow fortifications. By the time we were in, it was blowing hard with light snowfall and we cooked up a big lunch of pasta and once again deliberated options. It looked much like the system indeed was developing into a full blown storm and despite feeling that we could make decent attempt on Malaspina if it came good the following day, we were worried about the difficulties we would have to face in the icefall below if our tracks through the upper section of the icefall which was a labyrinth, were to become covered. After lunch, we decided to rest a few of hours - if there was any sign of improvement then we would stay otherwise we would descend back through the icefall whilst we had a good chance of picking up the route.

An hour and a half later the wind had picked up considerably and visibility was down to about 10 m. Snowfall was still relatively light but conditions were not good; we felt uncomfortable in the exposed position we were in and any previous reluctance completely evaporated once the decision to retreat was made. We had no qualms about packing up and by 4 pm we were on the move. Luckily enough, our tracks were just visible through the worst of the icefall. I still took a 5 m whipper as a dubious snow-bridge on which I'd made a wrong footing gave way, but apart for minor concussion, two hours later we were safely through the main dangers of the icefall. It was now snowing hard though and we pushed on to make rapid progress out of the Baird/Augusta basin in an attempt to clear the snow-laden slopes of Mt Baird. We were completely out of danger by 8pm and another hour and half, navigating in the whiteout and fading light by GPS and compass saw us back to base camp and at the end of a long day.

With over a week of food remaining, we still hoped to make a direct approach on the unclimbed Mt Malaspina via its Northeast ridge but apart from one decent morning when we played around on its 300 m high lower slopes under the guise of attempting the route, the weather remained frustratingly unstable – clagged-in, varied winds and sporadic snowfall. After the fifth day of these frustrations and the first morning when we were able to make decent SSB RT contact with Kluane, Andy Williams reported that conditions were decent enough for him to consider flying and with the prospect of another system rolling in from Alaska over the next 24 hours, it was not a difficult decision to call and with much work still awaiting us in Prince Rupert on the disabled boat – we requested the pick up. Two hours later, we heard the faint whine of the Hielo Courier once again, and soon we were packed up and headed out of the St Elias... until next time.

Other than continued frustrations with the lack of snow cover in icefalls, no real difficulties were encountered. One can only speculate that there was significantly enhanced melting coupled with less winter snowfall to expose the crevasses as high as 2,900 m on Augusta. In June the previous year, Jay had almost complete snow cover down to 2,500 m on this ridge, and indeed was able to make the ascent to our high point on skis alone. An attempt on the N Ridge and the approaches to the mountains on the seaward side of the St Elias should definitely be carried out earlier in the season. Unlike previous expeditions this late in the season, the weather experienced seemed less stable than usual, but this may reflect the more maritime climate of the seaward side of the St Elias. However, the weather experienced – about 50-50 good and bad, was not particularly worse than that reported as usual.

ACCOUNTS

Transport:	
1 x trans-atlantic flight:	£285.00
Refit, service, fuel & lubs for *Gambo*:	£350.00
2 x Icefields Expeditions flights:	£550.00
1 x month rent-a-wreck car rental	£250.00
Gas for car hire	£150.00
sub total:	***£1,585.00***
Equipment:	
Charts & maps:	£25.00
5 snow stakes & various tat:	£50.00
Snow shoes & crazy carpet sleds:	£180.00
55 m - 10.5 mm Dry Rope	£100.00
First Aid:	£30.00
SSB hire:	£20.00
sub total:	***£405.00***
Subsistence:	
150 man days of expedition supplies:	£450.00
5li of Coleman fuel:	£10.00
sub total:	***£460.00***
Miscellaneous:	
Insurance – boat & climbing:	£450.00
Park & Landing Permits	£95.00
Admin, phone, fax etc:	£30.00
sub total:	***£575.00***
TOTAL:	**£3,025.00**

Funds:	
Mount Everest Foundation:	**£750.00**
British Mountaineering Council:	**£800.00**
Personal contributions:	**£1,475.00**