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'British Denali/Hunter Experience 2000'

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(14 May-29 June 2000)

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Final Report
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Objectives

The expedition had two main objectives,

- A, Climb a new line on the North Buttress of Mount Hunter (14,570ft) situated off the S.E. Fork Kahiltna Glacier
- B, Climb a new line on the Washburn Wall (N.W. Face) Denali (20,320ft)

Our plan was to attempt the line on Hunter in the last two weeks of May and then move onto Denali in June. All attempts on the N. Buttress of Hunter are made in April and May as the warmer month of June makes for unacceptable levels of objective danger in the form of falling ice and snow mushrooms. Also the conditions for ice climbing tend to be better in these two months. This tactic had the bonus of climbing the lower peak first so as to gain acclimatization and fitness for the attempt on Denali. We would then attempt the line on Denali in the warmer month of June.

Style

We were going to attempt both lines in 'alpine style' but in very different ways.

The N. Buttress of Hunter is 1200m high and is made up of a series of steep rock walls (often vertical) broken by easier angled snow and ice slopes (50 degrees). We expected technical ice, mixed and aid climbing that would restrict speed somewhat so came up with the following novel approach. We would take a small haulbag (60L) for the heavier items and a single portaledge for bivouacs. This meant that we would be able to sit out sustained bad weather if need be. The second would carry a rucksack with only down gear inside, making it very light, and the leader would climb unencumbered making it possible to free climb to a higher standard.

Our plan for the Washburn Wall was in complete contrast to this. The wall itself is 2000m from the Upper Peters Glacier to its junction with the popular West Buttress route on Denali. Our plan for this was to acclimatize further by climbing the West Buttress route to a height of 16,000ft and then wait at the 14,000ft camp for a spell of good weather. We wanted to climb the Washburn Wall in a single lightweight push of around 30 hours. From the 14,000ft camp we would drop down to the top of 'Motorcycle Hill' and then abseil and down climb into the Upper Peters Glacier.

Logistics

Getting to and from Britain to our Base Camp on the Southeast Fork of Kahiltna Glacier (see map), is very simple and quick. International flights will take you to Anchorage airport, (Hostel accommodation is available in Anchorage but book in advance if you are staying in peak season, May & June), from where you can take any number of shuttle services for the 3 hour ride to Talkeetna. Talkeetna is a quaint frontier style town that has many small ski-plane operators that will fly you into your chosen destination. (Note, By the end of June the glaciers are starting to open up, making landing to dangerous. It is therefore advisable to make sure your planned trip is going to end by this time or you're in for a long walk!)

Getting around on the glaciers is very simple as well, as they are generally fairly flat and easy to ski, even for a complete novice. (If you are planning to traverse a mountain then it is worth considering having two sets each). Still some people do use snowshoes but miss out on the easy descents. For travel on the lower glaciers it is usually beneficial to travel at night as the snow is harder, making it safer but mainly to avoid the strong sun.

Hunter

The North Buttress of Hunter (commonly referred to as 'Moonflower Buttress') was in very good condition this year, holding plenty of ice, and snow on the easier angled sections. On our arrival at Base Camp on the Kahiltna Glacier on the 16 May we found there had already been an attempt on the Moonflower line and the second ascent of Deprivation had been completed. Gleaning knowledge off these teams that our planned descent line was now mostly equipped helped to psyche us up for our attempt.

Almost immediately the weather was good leaving us no option but to start climbing on the 17th. With the usual disorganisation of setting up base camp we were late getting started and suffered badly in the soft snow and hot sun of midday during the short 2h approach. We crossed the bergshund at 4pm heading for a line of ice runnels on the crest of the spur. By midnight we had climbed six pitches of ice and mixed up to 75 degrees in gradually worsening weather and decided to bivouac below a steep wall and the first real difficulties. It snowed solidly through the night and the next day, and at 5pm we decided to retreat, leaving most of the equipment in place. We were back in base by 11pm and prepared ourselves for the Alaskan waiting game. It snowed steadily over the next day and a half, but on the afternoon of the 20th I decided to ski up to a cash we had left under the face in a brief clear spell. On reaching the general area in near white out conditions I only just spotted the cash previously marked with a 1m wand. Only 2cm were still visible! (It is not advised to leave a cash under the face as snowfall and regular avalanches could bury it very quickly) I remarked it with a 3m wand and made quick time back to camp in beautiful powder conditions.

On the 22nd the barometer started to rise slowly, and after a long clear spell on the 24th we decided to start the following day. A slow ski in deep snow saw us at the cash under a buttress in very Scottish conditions. Two pitches in, Ian (Parnell) leading an interesting mixed pitch, bent the pick of one axe 90 degrees but managed to hammer it out at the next belay. We reached our previous high point in good time to start on the impending wall above. I took over the lead for this icy crack that was going to need aid. The climbing was time consuming and insecure, having to clean hard ice from the cracks in order to make any progress, and 40m out I took a 12m fall. The weather turned nasty again by the time I reached a belay 4 hours later so we decided to bivouac in the relative shelter of a large corner. Ian took over the gauntlet the following day (26th) aiding up the rather loose corner, only having to switch lines when he also took a fall (5m) narrowly missing landing on my head. Finishing the pitch he was forced into cutting his daisies in order to make tricky mantelshelf moves onto a loose ledge. Two more mixed pitches with a short aid corner brought us to the bottom of the prominent snow arret on the first ice band. Finding the now expected deep powder here made for a slow three rope lengths up this in strong winds, but brought us to our second bivi, below a series of icy ramps leading rightwards.

Day three saw us climb these to a belay below a large left facing corner laced with thin ice. I lead this finding no gear in the 80-90 degree, 20m crux section where the ice had melted off the wall and refrozen leaving a large air gap behind, (free climbing crux, pitch 16). Ian followed through, climbing a continuation runnel and then aiding around a large roof with a threatening snow mushroom. The next pitch had always been the ? in our minds as it was the only section that had looked blank on inspection from the glacier. Our luck was in though, as the headwall was split by a crack and groove system. 5m into this I was cleaning ice and snow when I accidentally knocked a small snow mushroom off that then landed on Ian crushing him into the belay. Ian was hurt with two suspected cracked ribs. Bravely he decided he could manage if only to follow for a while! Four hours later I had still not finished this crux aid pitch and decided to fix the rope and descend back to the belay and bivouac. Ian was still in pain just from breathing, confirming the diagnosis of fractured ribs. I felt unsure if we should not retreat, but Ian still seemed keen to carry on.

The day of the 28th set fine again, so we decided to continue and see what happened. We knew we could retreat easily enough if Ian's ribs became too painful. So I ascended the fixed line and continued to do battle. The crux turned out to be the last three moves up an ice choked off-width, requiring several hours of excavation and 4 falls up to 7m, before a mixture of aid and fist jamming took me onto the second ice band. Jummaring this pitch Ian was evidently in much pain. That evening we climbed to the bottom of the next rock band and fixed a rope up this. Ian's ribs were slightly improved on the 29th, enabling him to lead an ice pitch, leaving the final 50m rock wall for me. This, thankfully, succumbed more easily than we thought it might, placing us within easy ground of the Moonflower on the third ice band. Whilst setting the ledge

up, two North Japanese climbers (Koji Ito & Hiroyuki Nagagawa), who had started the Moonflower on the 26th passed us and bivouacked 70m higher.

That night it started snowing hard, keeping us pinned down for 40 hours. On the 30th the Japanese decided to retreat, but on finding us sitting tight changed their mind, climbing over to us and digging out a bivi spot for their hammocks. Over 1m of new snow had fallen giving us cause for concern as to the conditions on the final ice slope and a possible summit attempt. We had originally decided on the increasingly popular tactic of bivouacking on top of the buttress and then going to the summit and back in a day, but this now looked impractical. The prevailing weather had been coming from the south and the easy summit slopes face north. They would be in prime windslab condition so we decided to forgo the summit but make a push to the top of the buttress ('Cornice Bivi') and back instead.

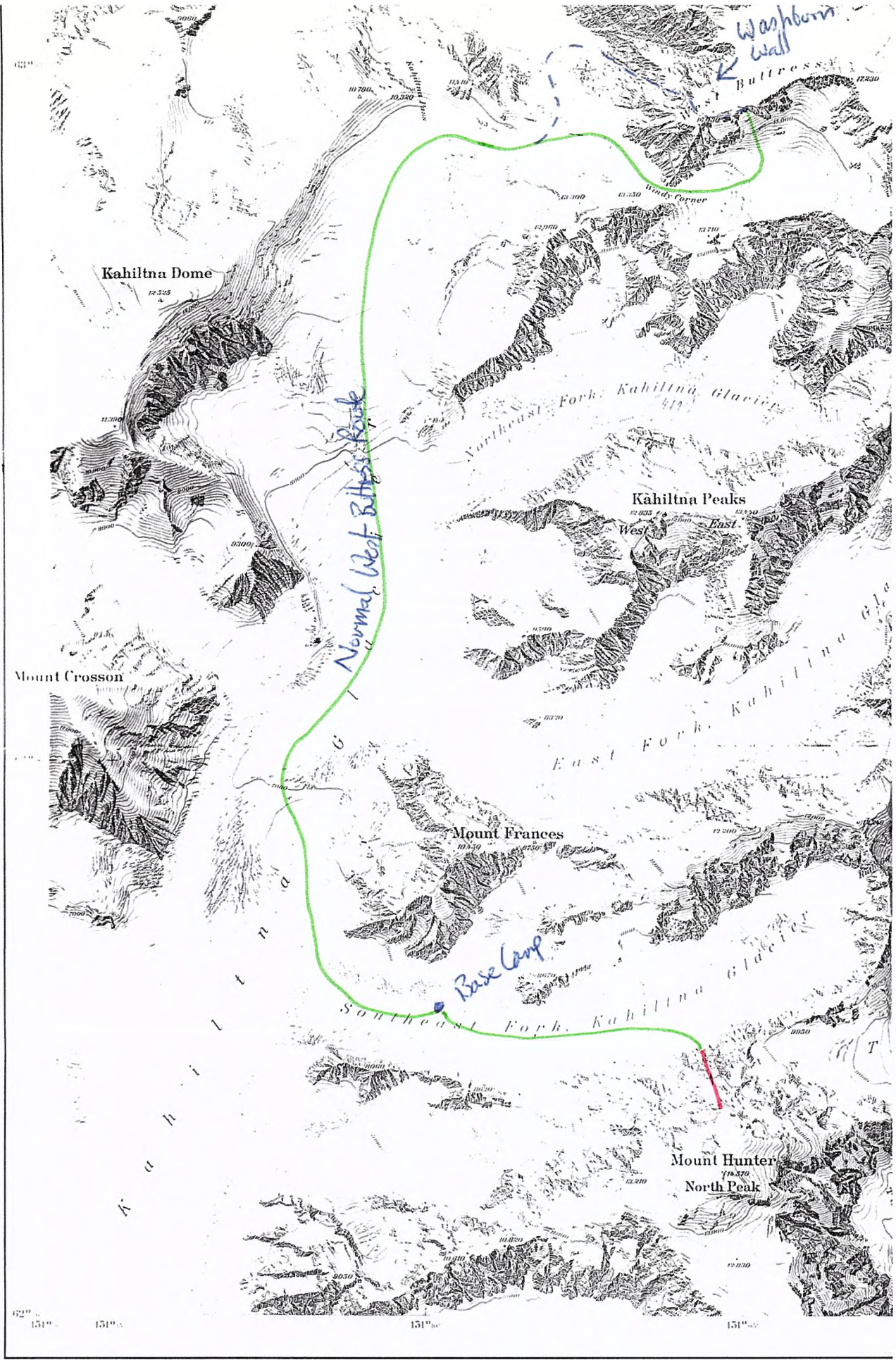
On the 31st we made our break followed by the Japanese. The weather was fine with a spectacular cloud inversion some 500m below us that lasted for two days. The going was very slow though in the deep snow on hard ice. We breached the final rockband via the 'Bibler come again exit' common with the Moonflower, reaching the 'Cornice bivi' in early afternoon. Due to the dangerous conditions that we had suspected on the final slope we were forced to head for a rock outcrop on the left and then the safer continuation ridge. (This final 300m slope is usually hard blue ice, but we found it more than 1.5m deep in snow!) We made 10 abseils of V threads to regain our high camp.

The 1st of June dawned fine with the same cloud inversion in place below us. We joined forces with the Japanese for the long descent of the Moonflower. Both of us were amazed at the number and quality of anchors already in place down this route, many being two independent points equalised and with a crab, and so would recommend this as a quick and easy descent route for any of the climbs in this area. Leapfrogging ropes made for a fast descent until ours became stuck in a feature called the 'Shaft' at about a third height. We could not free them, and with Nakagawa standing patiently under the very same mushroom that had killed Steve Mascioli a few years previously, the decision was made to continue the retreat on the remaining set. We arrived back on the horizontal at 4pm and were back in camp a couple of hours later.

On descending into the cloud layer, the temperature had increased massively and was above 0 centigrade causing melt and falling mushrooms. On the glacier, looking back at the face, we saw one completely clean the bottom third of the Moonflower that we had just descended. Not a place you want to be in anything less than very cold conditions!

Because of Ian's ribs we decided that a rest period was needed. Luckily we managed to strike a deal with one of the pilots to fly us out for a very small sum. So on the 2nd of June we left our camp and flew back to Talkeetna for some R&R.

The new route climbed was of very high quality with a wide range of disciplines needed. The majority of the climbing was not difficult with just a few hard free and aid pitches. It would be a good target for an all free ascent by a strong party, but would have to be less icy. We used a portaledge, but as it turned out you could have had a small bivi tent and managed as there are several likely tent spots. The line is shown overleaf along with a topo.

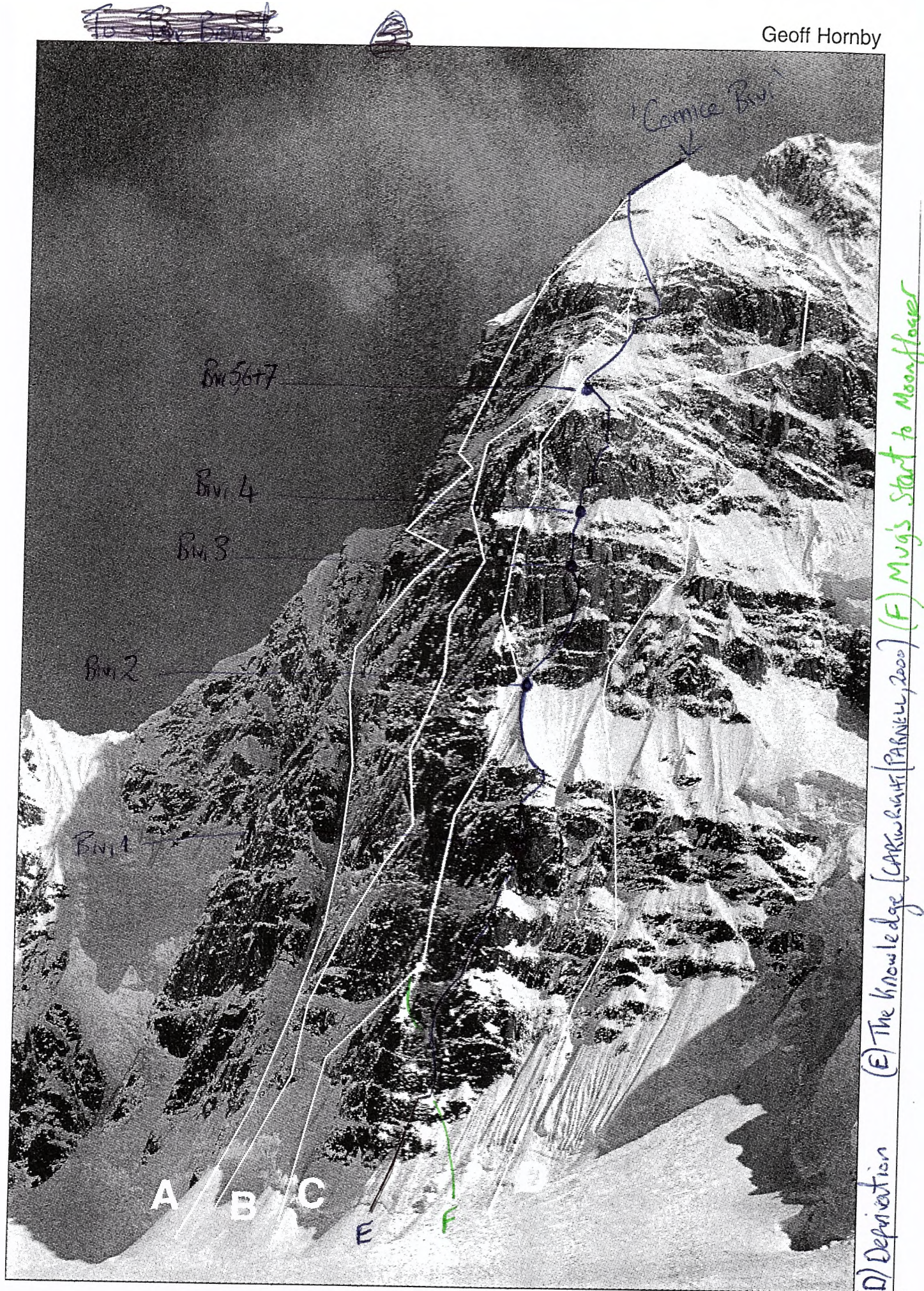


Penal Summit

Surveyed in 1947, '49, '51, '53, '55, '59 by Boston Museum of Science expeditions led by Bradford Washburn. Special gratitude is hereby expressed to: Mrs. Barbara Washburn, G. R. Lange, W. D. Hackett, James E. Gale, Terris Moore, Don Sheldon, Othmar Gurtner. Also the U. S. G. S. and the U. S. C. & G. S.

Cartographic artwork and printing by the Federal Office of Topography, 3084 Wabern, Switzerland
 General supervision of preparation and printing by Prof. Dr. Simon Bertschmann, Dr. Ernst Huber and Dr. Daniel Chervat

- Approach
- Climb on N. Buttress Hinder
- Proposed Line on Washburn wall



(D) Deprivation (E) The knowledge (CARROLL & HUNT (PARNELL, 2000) (F) Mvg's start to Moonflower

Above: The North Buttress of Mount Hunter. The main summit is a further 600m above the top of the picture. (A) French Couloir (Grison/ Tedeschi, 1983). (B) Wall of Shadows (Child/Kennedy, 1994) (C) Moonflower

Denali (Washburn Wall)

On the 5th of June we flew back in to our Base Camp. The weather was perfect and had been for the last three days. Unfortunately this did not last, with more snow for the following two days putting back our departure for the West Buttress route on Denali for acclimatisation. On the evening of the 8th the sun came out and we took the opportunity to start the climb. For the next five days we made steady progress up to 16,000ft and back down to 14,000ft to wait for a suitable weather slot to attempt our second objective. Through this time it had snowed every day and seemed to be getting worse every day. On the 15th we decided to go down to the 11,000ft camp, happy with our acclimatisation, so as to be nearer the descent into the Upper Peters Glacier. This also meant we could keep a close eye on conditions on the face itself.

After two more frustrating days here we were starting to run out of food and more importantly motivation. The forecast spoke of another major front coming in the following day expected to put down yet more snow. Even at present the descent into the Peters basin was in poor condition and would need a couple of days of good weather to make it safe. We were also getting mildly concerned about our cut off point concerning our flights home. We decided to bail the next day, and possibly try one of the smaller new lines we had spotted on our approach.

The line on the Washburn Wall looked fantastic and objectively safe, but is always going to need a period of fine weather to make the approach safe. It would certainly be a fine project in its own right.

Kahiltna West (W.Face)

On the lower section of the West Buttress route on Denali you ski close to the west face of Kahiltna West Peak. This face is unclimbed and looks to hold many Chamonix style ice and mixed lines. Unfortunately the majority of the face is threatened by a line of seracs at the junction between the technical ground and the summit slopes. But on the right hand side there is a subsidiary buttress that is objectively safe and holds several likely mixed and one outstanding ice line. So this is what we decided to have a go at. After replenishing our stomachs with food we set out on the evening of the 20th. It became obvious now that we had used our entire weather and luck quota up on Hunter as one hour up the glacier it started to snow again, reducing visibility to 60-70m. We had had enough! This was the last date that we could justify starting even a small route, leaving a small weather margin for the flight out.

Other Objectives in the Area

It would be impossible to even start trying to list some of the untapped potential in this range. So I will just say this. We climbed in the most populated and climbed out area of the whole of Alaska, yet there is such massive potential for safe new lines of all grades, lengths and styles that the population of Chamonix would not even scratch the surface in twenty years! As for the Ruth Gorge, Little Switzerland, Cathedral spires, etc, etc.... So get cracking!

Conclusion

We were anything but disappointed, as we had climbed our main objective and enjoyed it so much. The Alaskan range is notorious for its fickle weather and you take your chances when and if they come. It is one of the grandest mountain environments to climb in and both of us, I'm sure, will be back!

Note, the compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research.

Financial Details,

Income

MEF	£1300
BMC	£1600
Personal Cont.	£1000
(Lyon Equip. Award, £2000 Equip.)	
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Expenditure

International Flights	£1300
Glacier Flights	£600
Equip. Bought	£1000
Food	£300
Park Reg. & Fee	£200
Insurance	£200
Land Travel/Accom./Other	£300

Total Income	£3900
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Total Expenditure	£3900
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* A few items of equipment were also given from PHD, DMM & HB.

The expedition could have been considerably less expensive if less equipment had had to be bought, but overall we were fairly expedient in most other areas. We also incurred extra costs having to fly out in the middle of the trip for Ian to get a proper rest period for his cracked ribs.

A two-man expedition planning to climb peaks outside the National Park and not needing extra equipment could certainly manage on £3000 for a 6-8 week trip.