ac1 27755

01/04

Eastern Buttresses of Mount Hunter Expedition 2001

MEF Reference 01/04

Members: Malcolm Bass and Paul Figg

Summary

First ascent of The Prey, East Face of Mount Hunter (900m, Alaskan Grade 5, Scottish V, Ungradeable mushrooms)

15May-18May 2001 to junction with East Ridge

North summit reached 19 May (First ascent from West Fork of Tokositna)

Descent via West Ridge (19-24May) achieving a complete East -West traverse of Hunter.

Expedition dates: 12 May - 29 May 2001

Background

The East Face of Mount Hunter's North peak lies at the head of the West Fork of the Tokositna glacier. The West fork is separated from the main glacier by a steep icefall. The potential for new routes on the East Face is evident in Bradford Washburn's photographs, but exploration has been hampered by the difficulty of accessing the cirque. An approach up the icefall by foot would be, in Jack Tackle's words, "an expedition in itself"

Jack Tackle knows the cirque well. It was he and Jim Donini who were the first climbers ever to set foot in the cirque in 1985. They were flown in, and their pilot said he wouldn't come back to pick them up. Irrevocably committed they climbed the magnificent Diamond Arete. This is a hard (Alaskan 6) mixed climb taking the left (southern) arete of the huge rock wall they called The Diamond after the feature on Long's Peak. They had a great adventure. They dropped a rope during the ascent, suffered consistently bad weather, set off numerous avalanches in an epic descent down the North East ridge, and Tackle was hit and concussed by falling ice. They arrived at Kahiltna base camp after ten days out. Diamond Arete remains unrepeated, and with the current vogue in the UK for Alaskan climbing, it would seem a compelling objective. (One pair tried it whilst we were on The Prey, but they backed off and were still waiting in the cirque to be flown out when we left the Range).

The ground to the left (South East) of Diamond is lethal. Extremely active hanging glaciers pour from the summit plateau and at times the roar of avalanches and serac fall is constant. This bombardment is a further drawback to climbing from this

+44

cirque. Big falls can sweep the cirque clean: its not a place to linger. This avalanche risk, combined with crevasses and a tight landing area, makes plane access to the cirque a tricky business, another deterrent to exploration.

To the right (North East) of the Diamond two buttresses stand proud of the hanging glaciers and seracs. Both of these lead out of the cirque to the upper section of the seldom climbed East Ridge. It was these buttresses that enticed Paul Figg and I out to Alaska on as the Eastern buttresses of Hunter Expedition.

The problem of access was solved by getting in touch with Paul Roderick of Talkeetna Air Taxis, who is pioneering a whole series of tight and improbable landing sites throughout the range. He'd previously touched down in the cirque and was happy to give it another shot. We went for a spotter flight, circled the buttresses, chose the rightmost one, and made a practice landing ("put in some tracks" in pilot speak).

The route

The day after the recce. flight we were back in the cirque. Despite making the landing look easy Paul had said "Don't make me come back to collect you". Our plan was to climb the buttress to the East Ridge, summit, then descend the West Ridge to the Kahiltna glacier and the landing strip base camp. We took 7 days scant food, and 9 days gas.

Thirty minutes after landing we crossed the bergshund after a short walk across the glacier. The route began at the foot of a couloir (possible route) to the right (North East) of the buttress. Snow slopes led from here to a couloir on the right hand side of the buttress. This gave moderate snow and ice climbing, with a good rocky groove (Scottish IV). We then followed a short, steep gully up onto the crest. Now on the left (South West) of the crest we climbed easy snow slopes, interspersed with short rock walls. A narrow chimney cutting through one of these walls gave our hardest climbing yet, steep and constricted. Above the chimney we traversed left under a blank wall to enter an ice gully. As it was getting late, we climbed out of the gully, back towards the crest, and found a superb bivouac site under a solid blue serac. We reached the bivouac at midnight without needing our headtorches. The next day we climbed up onto the crest through unconsolidated mushroom snow with far too much air in the mixture. Once on the crest, which was liberally adorned with mushrooms and both way cornices, it was quite apparent that it wasn't feasible, so we abseiled back into the gully. This soon developed into a broad couloir running under the left side of the crest and gave moderate snow climbing. It was now snowing and spindrift avalanches hissed down the couloir, so we hugged the rocky sides to place gear as we moved together.

On the evening of the second day the couloir veered off right up to the crest, which at this point was a grotesque fantasy of elaborate and insubstantial snow shapes. We abandoned the couloir and climbed direct to a steep headwall. This would provide the best climbing, and the crux of the route. Trenching tactics (digging the snow away

above our heads) took us to the foot of the headwall. A steep, snowy chimney provided a brutal struggle up an overhanging step to gain a more open groove. The groove began with tenuous snowed up rock climbing, then developed into thin icy rivulets over compact granite, before turning into 80 degree ice climbing up solid blue ice. This section of the route (four pitches) was climbed through the early hours of the morning of the third day and was sustained Scottish V, well protected by rock gear and ice screws. The climbing felt highly Scottish, and not dissimilar to Sticil Face in nature, with steep, helpful granite chimneys interspersed with ice pitches.

Breaking through the headwall took us onto the crest as the sun came up. We'd been on the go too long and needed to rehydrate and rest, but didn't dare stop on the crest for fear it would collapse in the sun. We found the mushroomed crest desperate, nothing was substantial, everything was frothy and fragile. Our feet punched holes right through the crest. Belays were none existent. A fall, the threat of which was ever present, would have ripped us both from the mountain. Eventually at three in the afternoon on the third day, we made it to the security of a rocky outcrop below the crest. We'd been on the go for 24 hours since we abseiled from our first bivouac. We chopped a totally inadequate ledge in the ice and perched half our tent on it.

The fourth day began with an excellent ice pitch up a groove in the outcrop, but then we were back onto insubstantial snow. Four pitches later we joined the East Ridge at about 11,300 feet (3450m), to be rewarded with massive views across to the South Face of Denali. The climb up the ridge to the North Summit was straighthtforward, with one bivouac en route. We reached the summit at 8.15 pm on Day 5 and hurried down to the western plateau and the start of the West Ridge. We were the first party to reach the summit from the West Fork of the Tokositna (Tackle and Donini had to skirt the summit in bad weather)

The descent of the 5 mile long West ridge proved tiring and complex in the bad weather which began on Day 6. Much of the descent was done blind on compass bearings in thick cloud and light snow. We both fell 60 feet down an ice pitch in 6 foot visibility. Often the visibility was too poor to allow us to move safely and we had to bivouac early. Our food ran out at the end of Day 8. We didn't reach the Kahiltna glacier until late afternoon on Day 10, and trudged slowly round to Kahiltna base and the gluttonous joys of a cache bag of bagels, cheese, eggs and smoked salmon.

Future possibilities

1) The buttress between the Prey and Diamond Arete. A steep ice gully cuts the steep lower half of the buttress on its right (North East) side. This could be followed to the crest. The middle section of the crest was highly mushroomed on our trip. The top section looks rockier and safer.

2) The couloir to the right (North east) of the Prey could give a rapid ascent to a fast, fit party. Its not too steep, but did have some avalanche debris at its foot. A night ascent?

Finances

Costs:

Equipment

High altitude boots	£363
Sleeping bag	65
Gloves, thermals etc	182
Spare picks	52
Duffle bags	180
Hardware	92
Single skin Bibler tent	445
Hardware used up on descent (ice screws, krabs, nuts, cams etc)	337
Insurance	238
Travel	
Airfares	1338
Air taxis	835
Shuttle bus	196
Trains in UK	100
Accommodation	142
Gas and food supplies (including specialist hill food and drinks and meals/beverages during travel and in towns. Not including alcohol)	826
	£5391

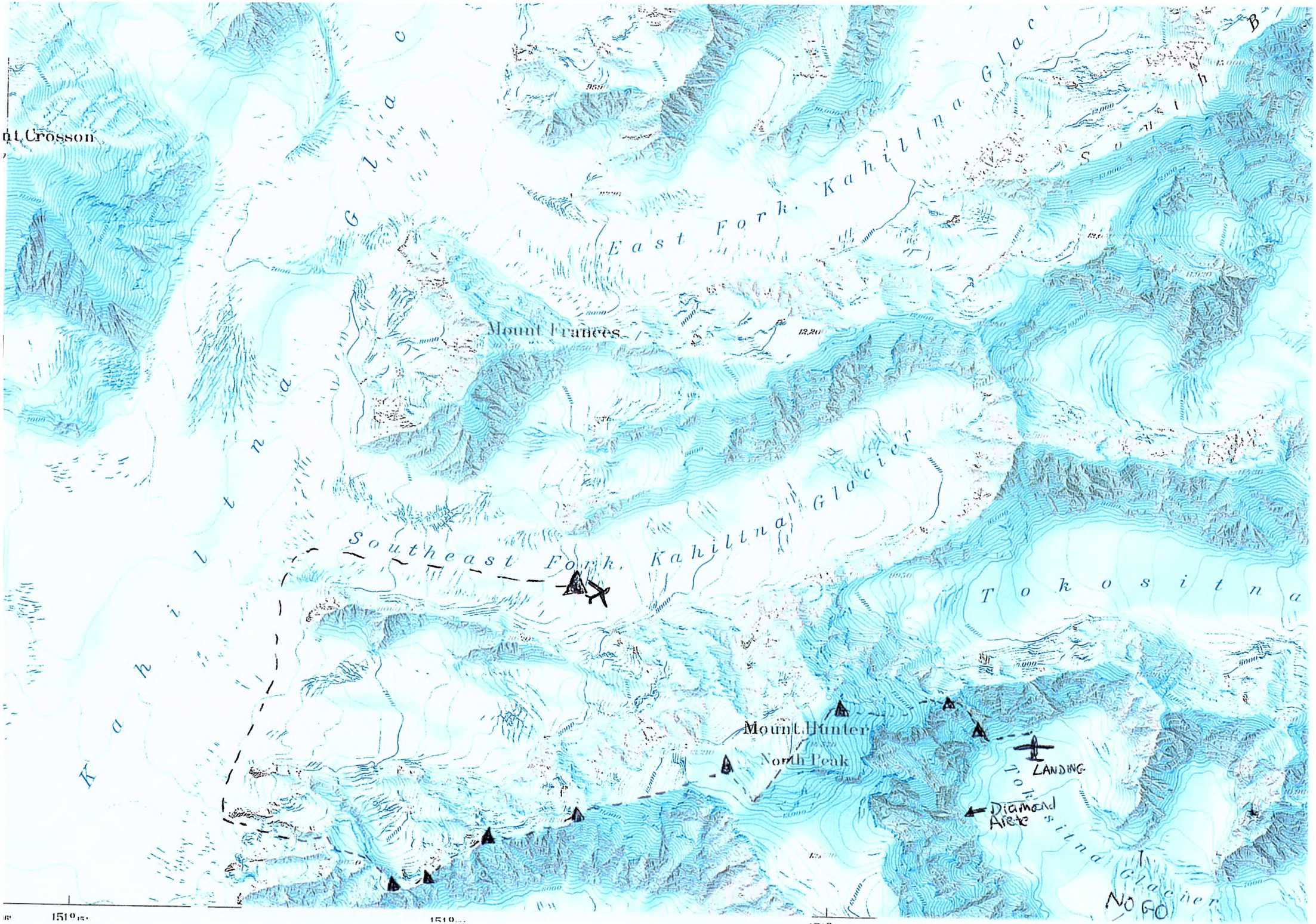
Income

MEF grant	750
BMC grant	1200
Swaledale Outdoor Club grant	250

Personal contributions	3191
	£5391

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the MEF and BMC whose generous grants made this trip possible. Swaledale Outdoor Club assisted the purchase of a lightweight tent. Jack Tackle and Paul Roderick gave us a great deal of useful information in advance of the trip. Thanks to you all.


Mt. Crosson
Kahiltna Glacier
East Fork, Kahiltna Glacier
Mount Frances
Southeast Fork, Kahiltna Glacier
Tokositna
Mount Hunter
North Peak
LANDING
Diamond Arete
Tokositna Glacier
NoGO

C
A
— — — route
. . . . behind crest
(A) Potential new route
steep gully approach to unclimbed line
(C) Lower part of the Diamond