THE LONGEST DAY EXPEDITION
ALASKA 2002

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Expedition Summary

The objectives of our expedition were a new route on the South East Face of Mount Foraker (17,406ft) to be followed by an attempt to repeat the Denali Diamond on the South West face of Denali (20,320ft) and hopefully climb it all free. After inspecting our proposed new route we decided the face was too threatened by seracs for a sane attempt. As a consolation prize we attempted to repeat the classic test piece The Infinite Spur on Foraker but failed even to complete the approach due to terrible snow conditions. We were however able to complete the second ascent of the Denali Diamond in 5 days, freeing the route except for one rest point and one tension point.

Expedition Members

Kenton Cool. British, 28, High access worker. 9 winter and 10 summer alpine seasons. Climbed 7b+, E5, Scottish VIII, M8, ED3 and A3+

First ascent Arwa Spire (6195m), Indian Garwhal
New route North Face Kusum Kanguru (6400m)
New route "Extra-terrestrial Brothers" on Denali ED2, Alaska
New route "Kiss me where the sun don't shine" on Mini Moonflower ED2, Alaska
6 new routes to E2, Torssuqatoq Spires, Southern Greenland
4 new routes to ED+, Switzerland area in East Greenland
New route NW Face Olan (Ecrins) ED 2/3
Winter ascent North Face Triglav, Slovenia
Shield and Zodiac, El Cap, Yosemite

Ian Parnell. British, 33, Writer and photographer. 3 winter and 5 summer alpine seasons. Climbed 7b onsight, E6 onsight, Scottish VIII, ED4 and A4

First ascent Arwa Spire.
New route "The Knowledge" on North Buttress, Mount Hunter ED4, Alaska
New route "Extra-terrestrial Brothers" on Denali ED2, Alaska
New route "Kiss me where the sun don't shine" on Mini Moonflower ED2, Alaska
First ascent The Thumbnail, Southern Greenland, 4450ft 31 pitches to E6 6b, no bolts
8 new routes Kara Su, Kyrgyzstan up to 1300m and E5, including "The isolationist" E2, 1300m first ascent solo in 5 hours.
3rd and fastest winter ascent Sphinx Route, North Face Triglav, Slovenia
8 grade VI routes in Yosemite including Wyoming Sheep Ranch and Shortest Straw both new wave A4.

Expedition Details

This was my third trip to the Central Alaskan Range and the second for Kenton. It's a fantastic set of mountains dominated by 3 hills in particular; Denali (20,320ft), Mount Foraker (17,406ft) and Mount Hunter (14,570ft). Together they present some of the finest mixed climbing challenges in world mountaineering on faces often 8-10,000ft with relatively simple hassle free access. I'd been lucky enough to climb a new route on Mount Hunter in 2000 with Jules Cartwright and then Kenton and I had a bumper season in 2001 climbing a new route on the Mini Moonflower (Mount Hunter) repeating the Moonflower on Hunter and adding a new route to Denali. Through this activity Kenton and I had achieved some familiarity with the style of climbing in the range and also a few ideas on how best to climb here. Our 2001 route on Denali was

climbed in single push style carrying little but a stove, a bothy bag and only a day sack between us. This enabled us to move quickly and ascend to 6500ft face in around 35 hours. In all our round trip from the 14,000ft camp took just under 47 hours including a 4-hour rest and brew stop. While tiring this approach seemed very effective with the huge scale of the Alaskan faces and taking advantage of the almost 24 hour daylight during the summer months.

For 2002 we had bigger plans aiming to take this single push approach to the 10,000ft South East face of Mount Foraker. Lying to the right of the legendary French Ridge this face consists of 1000m of moderate mixed climbing weaving through "serac-land" to a stunning steep diamond mixed ice and rock wall at least 1000m high followed by a further 800—1000m to reach the top of the French Ridge. The Ridge leads fairly directly to the summit before a long descent down the Sultana Ridge (at least 5 miles plus a finish UP and over Mount Crosson. For our single push attempt we were planning on at least 72 hours on the go with a stop every 10 hours for a brew and a meal. If we weren't too tired after that lot we hoped to make the second ascent of the Denali Diamond, a 9,000ft route on the South West face of Denali that had taken the first ascensionists an epic 17 days!

This year we arrived 2 weeks earlier than usual at the beginning of May. We were hoping to give ourselves plenty of time to acclimatise and be ready for a serious attempt on Foraker by the third week of May before snow conditions deteriorated too much in the Alaskan summer heat. Acclimatisation followed the usual pattern of a trip up the west buttress route to the popular 14,000ft camp, where we helped the Rangers dig further latrine pits. This little bit of mountain "karma" and friendship with the Rangers would come back and stand us in good stead at the end of expedition. After a few days we pushed up to the 17,000ft camp (a god-awful windswept col) with Kenton continuing up to within a few hundred meters of the summit while I opted to descend.

Feeling fitter we skied round for a wee look at our Foraker objective. First sights were very dispiriting with several massive seracs threatening the approach. We pitched tent hoping that by morning the view might have somehow improved. All the morning brought was a hardening realisation that it just wasn't justifiable in its present state with over a dozen seracs menacing the first 1000m. It could be that in other years this threat isn't so bad, we were certainly finding out that this year the Alaskan season was behaving pretty strangely with a cold dry winter having left many faces bear of ice and much of the snow as bottomless granules. The spring was unseasonably warm meaning that any remaining ice was literally melting off the faces. Usually base camp is an inspiring hive of ambitions and motivation, while this season certainly started that way, with a very talented group of climbers with big plans, their increasing failures on out of condition routes built up a catalogue of frustration.

We weren't immune, after bagging our main goal we settled for a repeat of the classic Foraker testpiece The Infinite Spur. Unfortunately we failed even to approach the base, floundering in waist deep snow at 11pm on the night of our 2nd day on what should have been a 6-hour approach. By now it was obvious that pretty much anything but the higher slopes of Denali were out of condition. After another rest and re-psych (partly to let the 4inch blisters on my feet recover after a beginner's mistake with new boots) we got ready for the Denali Diamond. We had initially planned on a single push ascent but with the prevailing bad luck decided to opt for a slightly more sensible alpine style approach. Never the less we packed only 1 season sleeping bags and a small prototype tent made by Mountain Hardwear for Sherpa Babu Chiri. Babu Chiri was 5ft 2 whereas Kenton and I are 6ft so getting both of us inside the

tent proved quite a challenge it was however very lightweight. The first ascent of the Denali Diamond was something of an epic by Brian Becker and Rolf Graage with the pair taking 17 days and Graage having to be hospitalised with exhaustion and frostbite. The route was the first to be given the Alaskan grade 6+ and hadn't been attempted since 1983. The major feature of the route is a huge rock wall, which makes up the initial 3000ft of the line and involves sustained ice, rock and aid climbing. Above the upper 6000ft follows significantly easier snow ice and mixed slopes just left of the Cassin before finishing as for that route. We hoped that by going super light we might manage the ascent in maybe 3 days but took a few more days fuel just in case. We planned to rest during the afternoon hours when sun hit the face, sunbathing in our light sleeping bags and then climbing in cool of night and morning.

Following a good stable forecast we set off up the North East fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. This has a reputation as "a valley of death" but we saw little major avalanche threats and followed well wanded tracks to the base of the West Rib (This can also offer an alternative descent from the 14,0000ft camp). We eventually set up camp at lunchtime with a perfect view of the awesome rock wall of the South West face and settled down for a sleep (as much as our mini tent could manage) and brew in the afternoon sun.

Rested we set off around midnight climbing a little nervously up the small glacier below the South West face. This is threatened by seracs and perhaps the only seriously dangerous section of the approach/route. We didn't linger and were soon simul climbing up the initial ice slopes to the left of the Cassin start. After 300m easy climbing we hit more technical mixed ground and took turns to lead blocks of 4 pitches at a time. A combination of ice runnels threaded up towards steepening walls providing entertaining climbing at a moderate difficulty (Scottish 4) with the odd mixed step. After about 12 hours on the go we reached an ice field we had earmarked as a possible bivi. We eventually excavated a site almost big enough to pitch the tent on a small pinnacle at the base of the ice field. Again squeezing half in, half out we settled down to snooze as the afternoon sun hit the face. Unfortunately around this time the clouds made their first surprise appearance. We were further perturbed when snow began to fall later in the afternoon. This definitely hadn't been part of the game plan. Sunless we found it impossible to sleep in the frigid temperatures instead opting to huddle together through the coldest part of the night and make a slightly later than scheduled start the next morning.

That next day the icy runnels gradually steepened and thinned as they led up into the heart of the wall. It was like an alpine Petra with only one improbable one through very impressive terrain. Eventually the ice ran out completely and we found ourselves below the crux roofs. This area had been vividly described by Brian Becker in his American Alpine Journal first ascent account with an A3 25 foot roof and "the most difficult—sustained- mixed-aid-ice pitch" he had ever led. By now the snow, which had been falling since midday, was causing spindrift avalanches to pour down at regular intervals. Around this time I managed to leave my ice axe unguarded at a belay and with the inevitable nudge it took a 2000ft tumble to the glacier below. An attempt on a steep wall outflanking the roofs had to be curtailed, as Kenton tied to the belay was getting hypothermic under a spindrift onslaught. After a fruitless search for a place to pitch the tent we were forced to "pitch" it vertically hanging it by one corner. The night spent dangling inside in our harnesses unsurprisingly led to little sleep and was capped off when the cross pole broke in the middle of the night.

The following morning despite such a terrible night I felt very psyched about the challenge of the crux pitches. Borrowing one of Kenton's axes I managed to climb the steep wall using only 1 tension point and 1 rest point. Very reminiscent of the "Northern Corries" back home this pitch was the toughest I've climbed in the mountains. Kenton put in a massive effort to follow with 1 axe and a little hauling but was too exhausted to lead through. I continued for 2 more tough pitches (in the region of Scottish VII) in increasingly heavy snowfall eventually breaking through to the top of the main rock wall. To finish the day we plodded for another 4 or 5 hours before collapsing in our rather battered tent.

We were relieved to be past the technical difficulties of the route and anticipated that the easy upper slopes next to the Cassin we pass by quickly, hopefully with us summiting that evening. This fourth day however proved to be perhaps the toughest of the climb with unrelenting knee deep trail breaking through the freshly fallen snow. Kenton put in a sterling effort as I struggled to keep moving following my efforts the previous day. Eventually we joined the Cassin Ridge and after another 15 hours on the go stopped for the night. That night (another sleepless affair) we heard voices and were relieved to find we weren't hallucinating but that we had been joined by an American pair who were climbing the classic Cassin route. Our relief also stemmed from the fact that we would now have some help with the trail breaking.

All so we thought! The next morning after an early start it became obvious that the Americans were even more tired than we were and so we soon left them behind. We reached the top of the face late in the afternoon and continued in white out conditions along the thin ridge to the summit. With little view to enjoy we turned round and set about the tricky task of navigating back to the 14,000ft camp. This was a boot and braces approximate bearing type affair eventually recognising the top of the West Rib and descending down a combination of that route on the 14,000ft basin gullies such as the Orient Express. (Note the American team after rejoining us at the top of the Cassin had abandoned our lead and opted to camp out until further better weather arrived). With our tent broken and our sleeping bags now frozen crisp packets we were hoping for a doss in the Rangers tents but worried about the late hour. We needn't have worried as we entered camp at midnight we were met by a sizeable international welcoming party and cups of tea prepared by the rangers who took us into their hospitality for the next 24 hours.

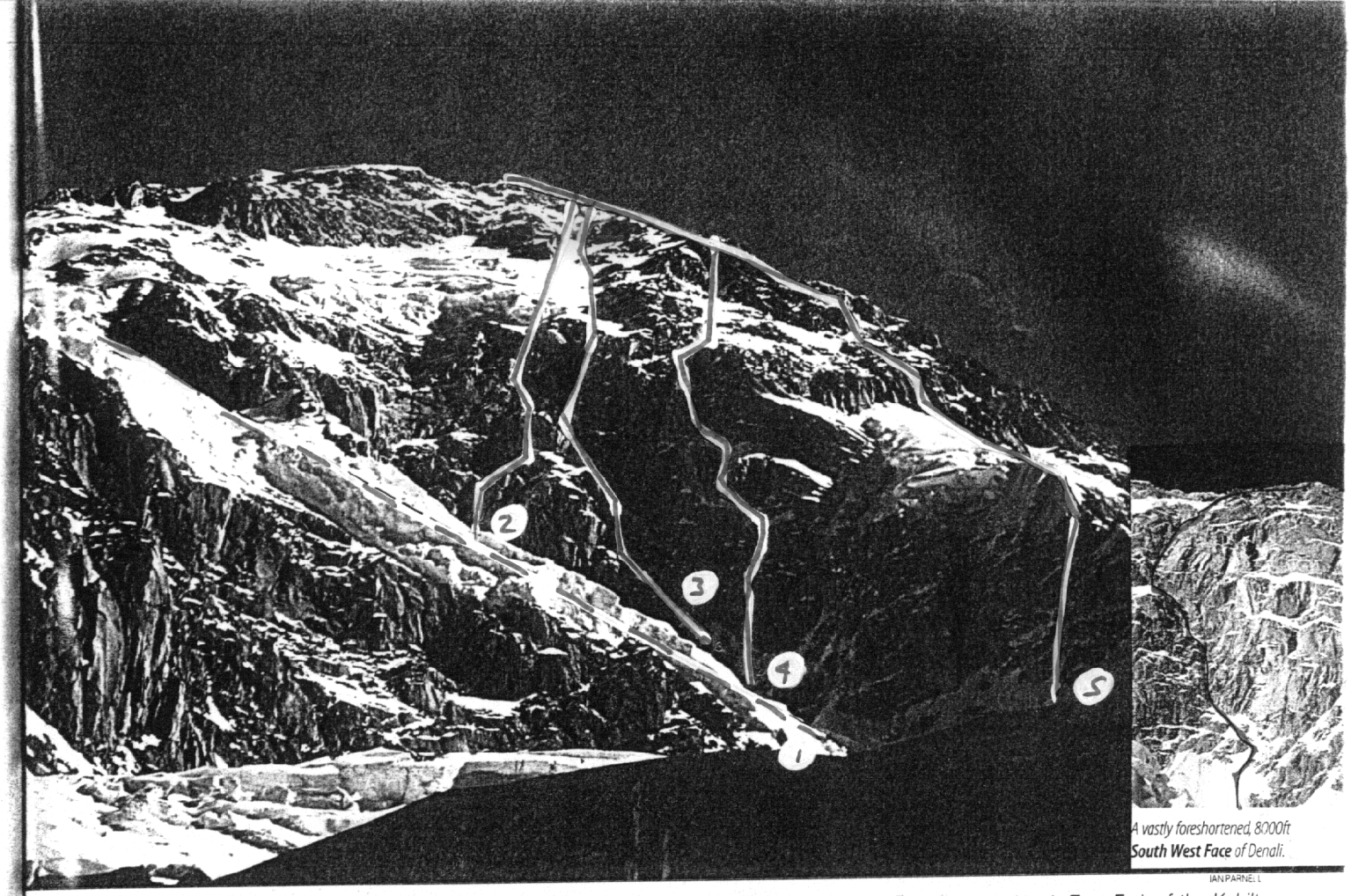
This was a fantastic conclusion to the trip. Despite not managing our major objective of a new route on Foraker we were almost the only team to achieve a major route in what turned out to be a very tricky season.

Thanks

Our thanks for generous grant support from the Mount Everest Foundation, UK Sport and the British Mountaineering Council. We also received valuable equipment support; many thanks to Rob at Mountain Hardwear, Gaz and Keith at the North Face, Sandy at Urban Rock and at Crux.

Budget

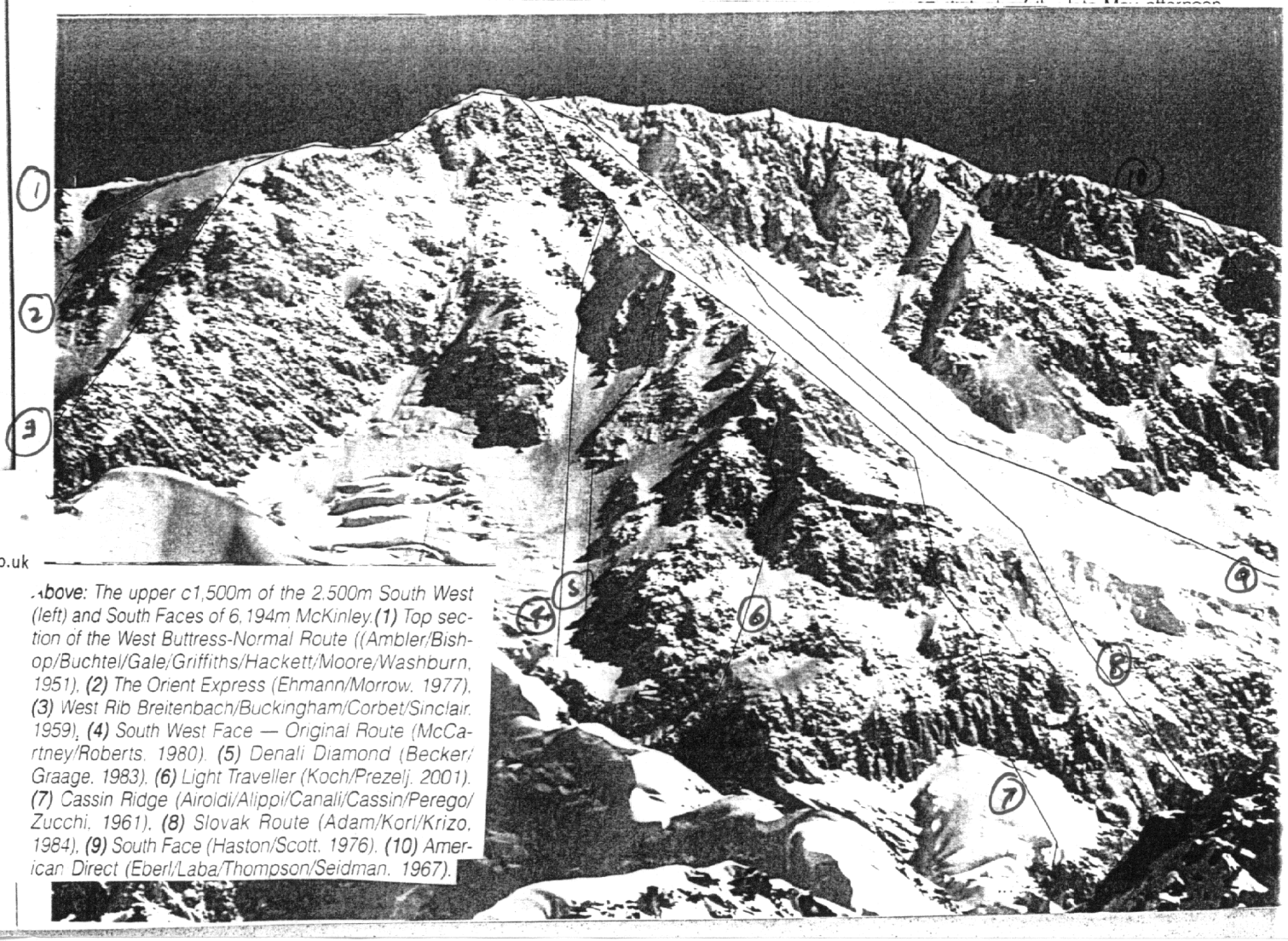
In		Out	
Flights	£1400	MEF	£750
Air taxi	£450	BMC	£1800
Food	£450	Personal contributions	£457.50(x2)
Peak Fees	£200		
Taxis and Buses	£210		
Equipment	£185		
Insurance	£400		
Accommodation	£120		
Fuel	£50		
Total	£3465		£3465



A vastly foreshortened, 8000ft **South West Face** of Denali.

IAN PARNELL

Above: *A hugely foreshortened view of the 2,500m South West Face of McKinley (6,194m), seen from the North East Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier close to the foot of the face.* **(1)** *West Rib — Wickwire Route,* **(2)** *South West Face Original Route (McCartney/Roberts, 1980),* **(3)** *Denali Diamond (Becker/Graage, 1983),* **(4)** *Light Traveller (Koch/Prezelj, 2001) and* **(5)** *Cassin Ridge (Airoldi/Alippi/Canali/Cassin/Perego/Zucchi, 1961: marked is the Japanese Start).*



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Above: *The upper c1,500m of the 2,500m South West (left) and South Faces of 6,194m McKinley.* **(1)** *Top section of the West Buttress-Normal Route ((Ambler/Bishop/Buchtel/Gale/Griffiths/Hackett/Moore/Washburn, 1951),* **(2)** *The Orient Express (Ehmann/Morrow, 1977),* **(3)** *West Rib Breitenbach/Buckingham/Corbet/Sinclair, 1959),* **(4)** *South West Face — Original Route (McCartney/Roberts, 1980).* **(5)** *Denali Diamond (Becker/Graage, 1983).* **(6)** *Light Traveller (Koch/Prezelj, 2001).* **(7)** *Cassin Ridge (Airoldi/Alippi/Canali/Cassin/Perego/Zucchi, 1961).* **(8)** *Slovak Route (Adam/Korl/Krizo, 1984),* **(9)** *South Face (Haston/Scott, 1976).* **(10)** *American Direct (Eberl/Laba/Thompson/Seidman, 1967).*

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ALASKA 2002

MOUNT EVEREST FOUNDATION

May 1st - June 15th 2002

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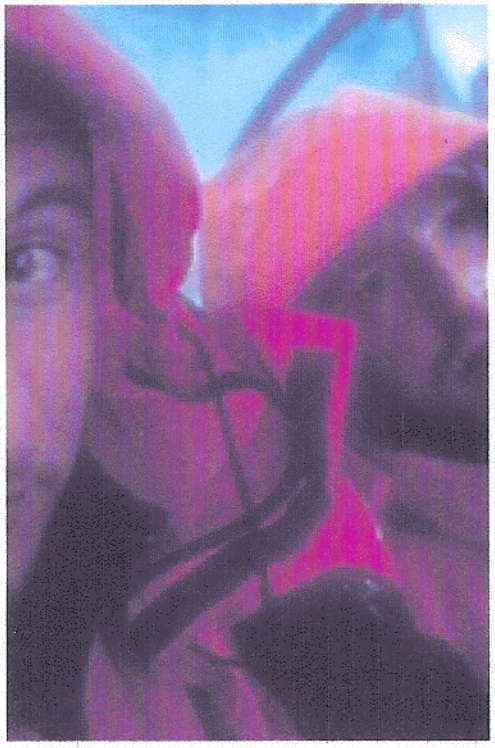
Right: Yes this is the right way up! The second night's bivi, tiny tent, no view, somewhat uncomfortable.



The strain begins to tell: Parnell left, Kenton Cool.

HELL TO PAY

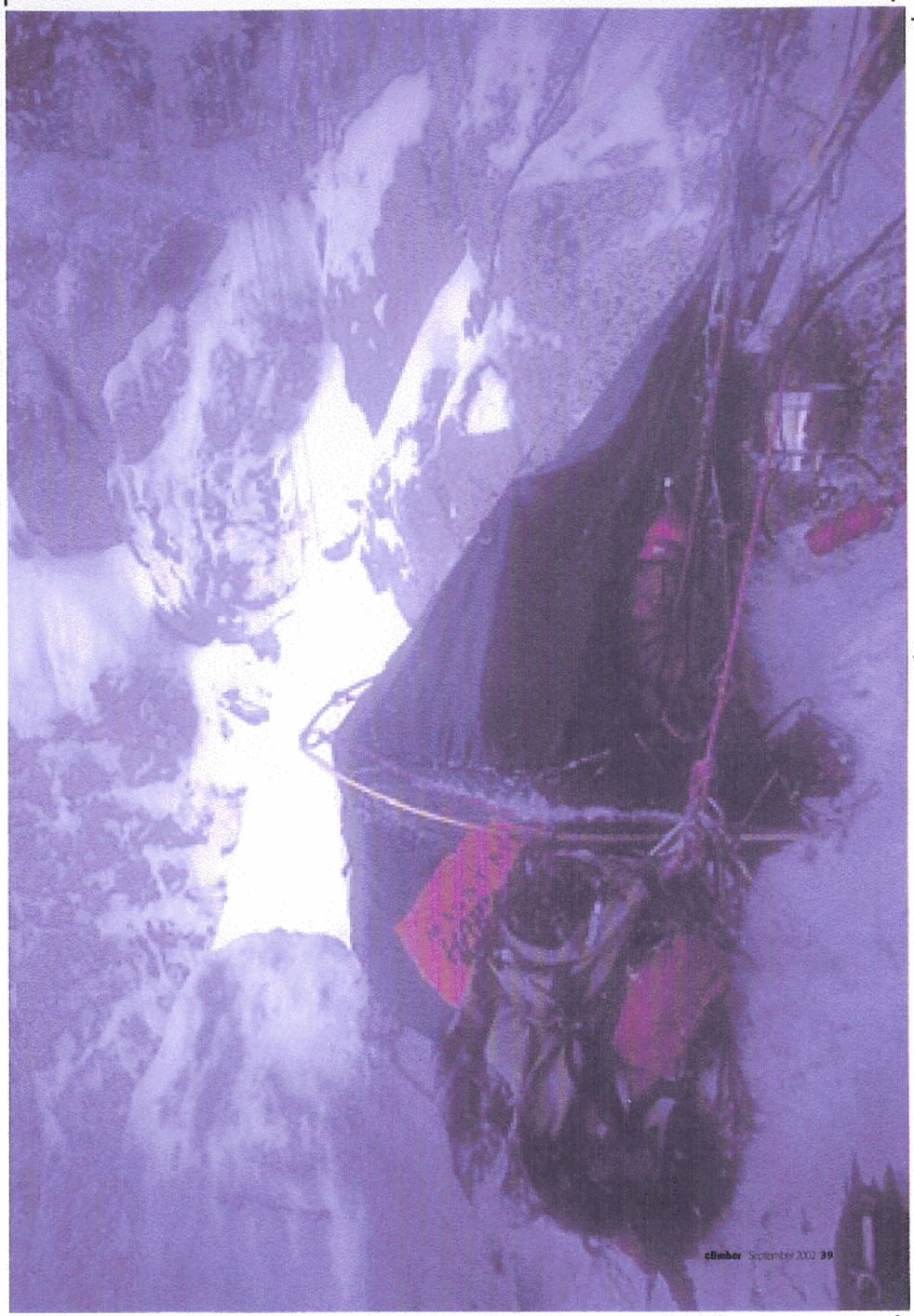
Ian Parnell tells a tale of revenge, partnership and vertically pitched tents on America's highest mountain

"I feel as if I must confide
There is a cost
When you say
Now we got hell to pay
Don't worry baby, that's okay
I know the boss."

– Afghan Whigs from their album *Black Love*

Photography: Ian Parnell

INNOCENCE

This is my third year in the Central Alaskan Range, I come not just for the mountains, but for the sense of hope, shared desire and belief that emanates from the climbers here. The mountains with their 8 to 10,000ft faces offer some of the world's best alpine challenges but it is the people here that are really special. Most climbers gather at the same base camp. A bit like Yosemite's Camp 4 on ice, with your neighbours ranging from wannabe Messners to some of America's leading alpinists, from *voie normale* weekend warriors through to single push fanatics. For most of us this is the promised land, we've worked hard to earn the pennies to get here amongst our long dreamt of summits. With so many fought-for ambitions it would be easy for brutal competition to breed. Instead there is a real sense of community. Every success seems shared, raising the collective experience, bolstering a belief of what might be possible. Each year I make lifelong friends, meet great climbers, great people, who share that innocent joy of pure climbing.

Last year was an exceptional season in the Central Alaskan Range, with perfect weather and conditions party after party nipped up world-class test pieces in the lightest of alpine style. It seemed anything was possible and as the mental barriers tumbled and myths evaporated you could sense the collective growth in confidence. May and June 2002 again saw the gathering of the top US alpinists with a handful of crack Euros thrown in. Buoyant from last year's successes, most had their sights set high, hard and very, very fast. But things had changed, nothing is a 'given' in the mountains. Amongst the flux, this year's most popular target the *Moonflower* on Mount Hunter lay untouched as a huge rockfall guarded it's base. The nearby *Deprivation*, another coveted line, led suitors on with a flirtation of ice that on closer acquaintance revealed vertical ribbons of slush. Everywhere, climbers' attentions were being spurned and despite some bold efforts even Hunter held out, unclimbed so far this year.