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West Buttress of Mount Hunter Expedition 2002
Central Alaska Range (including observations of the
South Face of Kahiltna Queen)



Personnel

Malcolm Bass (Leader) D.O.B. 6/2/65
Paul Figg D.O.B. 3/4/69

Introduction

The aim of the expedition was to climb the fine buttress that lies between Mt Hunters West and South West Ridges. We had seen this feature in profile as we descended Mt Hunters West Ridge in 2001 following our ascent of The Prey, a new route on Hunters East Face. Dave Wills and partner attempted the West Buttress in 1999 but bad weather had halted the attempt after some sustained climbing.

Altitudes

Are given here in feet as all the local US maps use feet.

Itinerary

18th May, arrived Anchorage, shopped for supplies, caught shuttle (Talkeetna Shuttle Services – See Contacts Section) to Talkeetna.

19th May, despite clear weather we were unable to fly out due to Talkeetna Air Taxis (See Contacts Section) having problems with one of their aircraft.

20th May, piloted by Paul Roderick of Talkeetna Air Taxis we carried out a close aerial examination of the West Buttress and its approach. An active serac overhung the Western aspect of the buttress. The Southern aspect of the buttress appeared safe from serac fall from the summit plateau, and seemed to be formed of excellent rock at an amenable angle for free rock climbing. The Buttress was largely clear of snow and ice, however it must be noted that May had been, and continued to be unusually warm. Furthermore the 2001-2002 winter and spring had seen very little snowfall in the range.

We then over flew the icefall approach to the Buttress, (see map) this was in a chaotic state, and was far more broken up than it appears in the photograph in High Alaska (Waterman). Most worryingly the approach was overhung by a number of large seracs dropping from the north flank of the South West Ridge. Although we knew that the seracs would be present, we found them to be much larger than expected. If one of the large seracs had fallen they would have covered the whole of the approach icefall. If the approach could have been made rapidly the objective hazard would have been justifiable, but the broken up icefall would not have permitted quick access. To approach the Buttress would therefore require slow weaving up the icefall whilst menaced by seracs from the South West Ridge. We reluctantly concluded that we were not prepared to accept this level of objective danger despite the excellence of the Buttress, especially in the prevailing warm conditions. We therefore aborted this part of the expedition and asked Paul Roderick to take us over to scout our subsidiary objective, the South Face of Kahiltna Queen, (12,380'). Kahiltna Queen lies on the North side of the Tokositna Glacier. It is the highest peak in the ridge that forms the French Ridge of Mount Huntington, then runs

+443

West over the Queen to the 9550' on the North East Ridge of Mount Hunter. It has been climbed by its North (Ruth Glacier) faces and West (Kahiltna Glacier) face.

The flight over Kahiltna Queen revealed two excellent looking colour systems running up the South Face between buttresses of excellent looking steep granite. We decided to alter our focus and attempt a route on the Queens South Face.

It is possible to land at the top of the Western branch of the Tokositna under the East Ridge of Hunter (indeed we had landed here in 2001 whilst inspecting Hunters East Ridge). However Paul Roderick preferred to land us under the West Face of Huntington as a runway had been packed and the landing site is relatively crevasse free. We therefore put down under the West Face of Huntington with a light base camp and two weeks supplies of food and gas.

After putting up a base camp tent we packed three days food and a bivouac tent and began to ski West towards Kahiltna Queen.

The initial part of the journey is downhill bottoming out above the icefall draining the Upper Tokositna, and gradually re-ascending towards Hunter and the Queen.

As we progressed we were rapidly bathed in sweat. Constant wet snow avalanches poured from the Southern flanks of the boundary ridge. Afternoon temperatures soared. It soon became apparent that a South-facing objective at this altitude would not be feasible, so we returned to the camp under Huntington resolved to wait for the cooler weather, and to filling our time usefully by attempting the Harvard route on Huntington.

21st May, we spent the day preparing and enduring baking afternoon temperatures. Loose cotton clothing and sun hats were essential for this sub arctic camping.

22nd May, we left camp at 3.00 a.m. Carrying belay jackets, a stove and two days food. Our plan was to climb at night and sit out the warm days. We used the modern start to the Harvard, joining the original route just below The Alley. The ice in this starting colour was excellent, and we moved rapidly together (with intermediate ice screw protection) up to The Lower Park, through The Alley, up The Upper Park and to The Spiral. The snow at the top of The Upper Park was pitted with large rocks which had fallen from the face above. We reached The Spiral (just beyond the first ascensionists Camp 2) at 8.30 am: we were pleased to be moving so well. The first pitch of The Spiral (one of the crux pitches of the route) is usually an icy chimney. There was no snow or ice in the chimney, and the blocks by which it is climbed were loose and creaking. The ledge above the pitch was covered in loose rocks. As we began the second pitch of The Spiral it began to snow. The second pitch proved equally loose and the second survived a near miss when the leader dislodged a fridge-sized block. To compound our problems it began to snow and thick cloud moved in. We waited on the weather until 2.00 p.m., but with no improvement our confidence in the 'night naked' tactics fell sharply. We decided to retreat, getting down onto The Upper Park just as a volley of stonefall rattled down the Spiral's chimney. Otherwise retreat was uneventful and assisted by old abseil stations.

23rd / 24th May, the unseasonably hot weather continued. Rockfall repelled a joint US/New Zealand party from an attempt on the Colton / Leach couloir, and the snow slopes leading to the Nettle / Quirk were subject to wet snow slides, and stonefall. A party retreating from the Nettle / Quirk reported a near miss when a wet snow and rockslide swept past them.

25th May, accompanied by Dave Sheldon (USA) we skied to the South Face of the Kahiltna Queen in case things looked better close up. They didn't, the couloirs were dirty brown and had rock debris at their feet. The South Face of Kahiltna Queen does however look very interesting, both for rock routes and snow/ice climbing routes in colder conditions. The couloirs would certainly repay future attention (see photos). Attempts on these would need to take place earlier in the year before the sun damages this South Face and rock fall begins. In contrast the superb looking rock routes on the face would need to be attempted later in the year when all the snow patches had melted.

We also investigated the North Face of Point 11,520 across the glacier from Kahiltna Queen. This mountain hasn't been climbed. We saw two New Zealand/US teams attempting routes on ribs on the East and West ends of the north face. We later learned that neither attempt had been successful, leaving the peak inviolate. Our attention was drawn more to the steep Moonflower like buttress in the centre of the face. (See photos) Again this would make an admirable objective.

Ski touring conditions were hazardous. Many crevasse bridges were melting out, but the crevasses remained hidden. We moved with full 60m ropes between us.

As we returned to camp under Huntington clouds began to boil up from the valleys.

26th – 30th May, thick cloudy, but warm weather, snowfall and hail confined us to basecamp.

31st May, during the evening a clearing allowed Paul Roderick to land and check on our party, and the three other parties camped under Huntington. Our F.M. radio indicated that the clearance was a window in a spell of poor weather that would extend for several more days. With conditions and weather poor we decided to take the opportunity to fly out, donating our last 3 day's food to other teams waiting for the flight out.

1st June, on consulting the weather forecast in Talkeetna we found that poor weather with precipitation was forecast until the 5th of June. We consulted climbers and Rangers who told us that poor conditions existed across the range. With prospects for improvement looking slim we decided to save further unprofitable expense by returning to the U.K. We have subsequently learnt from the US and New Zealand climbers camped alongside us under Huntington that the weather did indeed remain poor and they accomplished no further climbing. The next flight out from the Tokositna was not possible until week after we had left, and even with the food we'd donated at least one party had run out of food.

Contacts

Talkeetna Shuttle Services are highly reliable and can be pre booked by email.

Tel: USA 907 733 1725

Email: tshuttle@alaska.net

Talkeetna Air Taxis cannot be recommended too highly. Paul Roderick is an expert pilot and keen climber who can take you just where you want to go. Spotter flights with Paul are invaluable for scoping objectives. They also have friendly staff who respond cheerfully to emails and phone calls from friends and family at home asking for updates. Ski hire is also provided, and skis are of excellent quality with bindings that work with climbing boots.

Tel: USA 907 733 2218

Email: flytat@alaska.net

Equipment

An F.M. radio can pick up several Alaskan radio stations on the Tokositna Glacier and allows weather forecasts to be heard. The differences in temperature between our 2001 East Buttress of Hunter trip and the 2002 trip were marked despite the 2001 trip only being one week earlier in May. We would recommend kit that can deal with both Alpine winter cold and Himalayan glacier heat!

Finances

Income		Expenditure	
M.E.F. Grant	750.00	AirFares, U.K – Anchorage – U.K.	1350.4
B.M.C Grant	1,100.00	Shuttle, Anchorage – Talkeetna	122.8
Personal	1,150.99	Air Taxis, Talkeetna – Glacier, ski hire	689.1
		Accommodation, Anchorage	65.5
		Route / Base Camp food	193.1
		Gas	67.3
		Specialist food, (GU, Energy drinks)	111.3
		Ropes	196.5
		Miscellaneous	68.2
		Food and beverages en route	136.4
TOTAL	3000.99	TOTAL	3000.9

Summary

In some ways this was a disappointing expedition - the protracted warm weather was totally unsuitable for our objectives. The West Buttress is a compelling feature, but we echo Dave Wills' comments about future suitors needing to be prepared to run the gamut of significant objective danger merely to get on the route.

On the other hand we feel that we learned a lot about an unknown part of the Tokositna, with the South Face of the Kahiltna Queen and the North face of 11,520. This trip can be therefore seen as a springboard to future exploration of the area, and we certainly aim to be a part of this exploration! We also made several useful contacts with US and New Zealand climbers, contacts that may well bear fruit for future expeditions.



West Butress Hunter



West Buttes Hunter



North Face 11/2/20

South Face of Kahiltna-Queen (12380)



North Face of 11,520



North Face 11,520

8700
1500
3000
3300
33 | 3000
330 | 30000
2700
900 m 270

TALKEETNA (D-3) QUADRANGLE
ALASKA
1:63 360 SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)

