

**North Eastern Tokositna (South Face of Kahiltna Queen)  
Expedition.  
April&May 2003  
MEF Reference 03/04**



**Personnel**

Malcolm Bass, British Clinical Psychologist. (Leader).  
Simon Yearsley, British Human Resource Director.

**Heights and nomenclature**

Heights in this report are given in feet as the maps of the area follow the US convention and use the Imperial system.

We must start with a humiliating confession. We chose the wrong name for the expedition. Our objectives are found on the North **West** Fork of the Tokositna, not the North East . We suggest that the expedition is retrospectively re named **The South Face of Kahiltna Queen Expedition.**

**Objectives**

The objectives of the expedition were to:

- Attempt the two couloirs on the unclimbed South Face of Kahiltna Queen (12,380').
- And/or the first ascent of Pt 11,520 by its North Face.

Kahiltna Queen and Pt 11,520 lie in the heart of the Central Alaska Range. Kahiltna Queen (which is not named on maps) has a North Face overlooking the West Fork of the Ruth Glacier, a West Face above the South East Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier, and a South Face rising from the Tokositna Glacier. Pt 11,520's North Face also rises from the Tokositna and looks onto the South Face of Kahiltna Queen. Pt 11,520 is a peak on Hunter's long East Ridge, but to the East of the section of that ridge which has been climbed.

Kahiltna Queen had been climbed by its North (Ruth) and West (Kahiltna) Faces, but its South (Tokositna) Face remained untouched. Malcolm Bass had taken an interest in this 3600' face when he saw it from the East Ridge of Hunter in 2001 (after having climbed The Prey with Paul Figg). Malcolm and Paul had examined the face more closely in mid May 2002, and spotted two compelling

couloirs slicing through steep granite buttresses. However warm conditions that Spring had rendered them unsafe.

In 2002 the North Face of 11,520 saw strong attempts on two lines by Pat Deavoll, Karen McNeill, Anna Keeling (NZ) and Scott Simper (USA). Neither attempt succeeded, although McNeill and Keeling reached the summit ridge. The face is a classic North face consisting largely of steep blue/grey ice, and is reminiscent of the North Face of Les Droites.

## **Itinerary**

**22<sup>nd</sup> April.** We flew from Heathrow to Seattle with British Airways, then on to Anchorage with Alaska Airlines. The huge weight allowance permitted when flying into the USA is very useful for mountaineering purposes. On arrival in Anchorage we stayed at a budget hotel near the airport. By starting our trip in April we hoped to avoid too much sun damage in the South facing couloirs, but an unplanned benefit was that accommodation could be found at winter prices.

**23<sup>rd</sup> April.** Spent the day shopping for food, gas, and extra bits of climbing gear, before catching our pre booked shuttle bus to Talkeetna. (Talkeetna Shuttle Service). In Talkeetna we stayed at the Roadhouse, a bunkhouse type establishment offering famous breakfasts. (But sadly not in "winter" months)

**24<sup>th</sup> April.** After hastily re-packing our food and gear into plane friendly loads and checking in with the Rangers we were airborne, Paul Roderick of Talkeetna Air Taxis at the controls. We were hoping to be able to land on the North West Fork of the Tokositna, right under Kahiltna Queen. But this isn't a common landing site, and it can be subject to wind sculpted bumps which can make landings dangerous. Our fall back position was to land at the well used site under the West Face of Mount Huntington, and then ski back West to the Queen. We were in luck however, and Paul put us down expertly beneath the Queen. Unloading took 5 minutes, and the Cessna roared off. In the afternoon we unpacked and set up camp, and in the evening took a ski trip up and down the glacier to spy out the lines. Both couloirs looked good, but some sections remained hidden in the folds of granite. Furthermore neither couloir seemed to meet the summit ridge, both looked to peter out amongst steep granite towers. We decided to attempt the right hand couloir first, as it looked easier angled and there was less hidden ground. We packed two 60m 7.5mm ropes, 20 carbo. gels and 2 liters of water each, a lightweight burner, gas canister, and kettle, a duvet each, and a bothy bag. We took a lightweight rack with some nuts, friends and ice screws.

**25<sup>th</sup> April.** We left at 9.00 am and skied for five minutes to the bergshund. We crossed this, and soloed up the 900' snow apron on good snow. We turned the lower rock barrier on the right, then traversed left to enter the couloir proper. Once in the couloir we were disconcerted by a constant stream of ice fragments

and loose snow pouring down. As we debated the wisdom of continuing an avalanche arising to our right swept over our tracks on the snow apron, and made our minds up for us. The debris stream slowed us down, for although we could move against it, fear of being knocked off our feet led us to place more gear than we normally would need to on such moderate snow. We moved together, placing intermediate gear in the left wall (looking up) of the couloir. The rock architecture was magnificent, huge buttresses of perfect granite reared up on both sides of the couloir. The snow was a bit sugary in the heat of the day. After a couple of worrying pitches during which we could find no intermediate gear, we crossed to the right side in search of protection. This we found, but the snow deteriorated to knee deep sugar. We led in blocks of about 5 pitches. As Simon begun the second block we found a rivulet of melt water draining from the buttress on the right. We gratefully refilled our water bottles. As the day wore on the climbing grew steeper and icier and we began to use ice screws for intermediate protection. As we neared the top of the couloir it forked around a steep tower. We took the left branch, despite a worrying looking rock step. This rock step provided a superb pitch of Scottish technical 4 mixed climbing up a slot on the step's right hand side. Just above the step the gully (it was only quite narrow by this point: see photo) forked again, and we took the narrower right hand branch. It was getting dark by now, and we put on head torches and duvets and began to pitch the climbing, still using the block system.

**26<sup>th</sup> April.** One pitch after the fork the gully merged into a mixed face. Three further pitches, one with bullet hard black ice of Scottish 4 which strained the calves at this stage of the day, took us onto the broad summit ridge. We followed the ridge Westwards through the dead of night, and after about a quarter of a mile, 400' of gentle ascent, and a big ridge crest crevasse, we reached the summit, 18 hours after leaving the tent. Massive cornices overhung the North Face from the summit area. We could see electric lights in the distance that we thought were Talkeetna, and weak Northern Lights. It was a memorable moment, the darkness adding considerably to the ambience.

Our climb plan had included the idea of using the bothy bag to sit in whilst brewing, resting and eating. We tried this on the summit ridge, but soon grew too cold, and found the bag too flappy to brew safely. Dawn failed to warm us, so we began abseiling our route of ascent, knowing that we'd have to stop at some point to rehydrate. Just above the mixed step near the top of the gully we spotted a commodious ledge on the left side (looking down). This superb eyrie had a scooped shape for comfortable lying down, was big enough for two to stretch out, had a protective overhanging wall above, and was well supplied with nut cracks. We decided to wait out the heat of the day brewing and snoozing.

We left the ledge at 5.00pm when the couloir had been in shade for about an hour. A mixture of abseiling and down climbing got us down to the apron fairly speedily. At the bergshund we found that our skis had escaped the avalanche by about a couple of feet.

We called this right hand couloir **South Face Couloir**. It's about 1100m height gain to the summit, Alaskan 3+, Scottish 4.

**27<sup>th</sup> April.** Rest day. Cloud and light snow fall

**28<sup>th</sup> April.** More rest. For active rest we skied up and down the landing strip to pack down the previous day's snowfall

**29<sup>th</sup> April.** A strong Northerly wind blew up overnight ripping a tent guy. We built up the snow walls around the tent.

**30<sup>th</sup> April.** Strong winds continued through the morning, dying down in the afternoon. We made radio contact with a passing plane that relayed news of our wellbeing to Talkeetna Air Taxis. We decided to attempt the left hand couloir the next day, and packed as before, but left out the bothy bag replacing it with a lightweight Ph.D. bivvy bag each for emergency shelter.

**1<sup>st</sup> May.** We had planned to wait till late afternoon (when the couloir went into shade), but grew impatient and started off around midday. We crossed the bergshund well to the left of the foot of the couloir and moved up and right around a rock buttress. We soloed up to the foot of the couloir, then roped up and moved together up the superb neve of the lower couloir. We soon found steeper ice, and pitched our way up brilliantly enjoyable plastic ice. One pitch reminded us strongly of Mad Hatters Gully on Bheinn Bhan. The ice took screws easily and the sidewalls provided additional gear. Soon we crossed a big triangle of snow about half way up the gully. A gully system led straight up from here, but we took the left-hand line, which led up to the crux pitch of the route. This was a step of well-featured vertical ice (Scottish 5) which was a joy to climb with our light sacs. Simon had a tool pull on this pitch, smashing into his forehead and creating an impressive amount of blood, and a few minutes of anxiety. Above the crux the couloir narrowed to a gully and steepened. The ice became thinner, but luckily the rock was extremely helpful and we were treated to a couple of pitches of great mixed climbing at about Scottish 4, with a memorable torquing crack up a chimney. Above the chimney half a rope length of steep, unconsolidated snow led to a shattered col on a ridge. (Crockery Col). Thankfully this loose ground only lasted for half a pitch, and a second col higher up the ridge found us back on solid granite as it grew dark.

**2nd May** Route finding in the dark up the upper section of the face wasn't easy, and we followed our noses up ribs, ramps, hanging gullies, and snowfields as the ridge merged into the face. We lost our rhythm during this section, and moved slowly, pitching when we should have been moving together, but eventually dawn found us on the summit ridge admiring views of the Moonflower, and the Cassin. We gave the summit a miss and followed our tracks back down to the top of South Face Couloir, and abseiled down to the "Resting Ledge" as before. Again

we sat out the day on the ledge, and abseiled South Face Couloir through the evening and night. The snow in South Face Couloir had deteriorated markedly since our last descent, so we abseiled many pitches that we'd previously down climbed. This made us slower and we used up a lot of gear for anchors. We reached the tent on the 3<sup>rd</sup> May just shy of 40 hours after we'd left. We named this route **Distant Lights** and feel it deserves Alaskan 3+, Scottish 5. It too is about 1100m height gain

**3<sup>rd</sup> May.** After a few hours sleep we decided that we had achieved our objectives for this expedition. Our rack was severely depleted, and after two highly enjoyable and successful routes our motivation was spent. We would have needed a few days rest before we were fit to climb again so, although the expedition still had a week to run we decided to try to take advantage of the clear weather to fly out. We again made radio contact with a passing plane, and quarter of an hour later came the glad news "Paul will be with you in 20 minutes". We frantically packed up camp, and true to his word, Paul Roderick arrived and flew us back to Talkeetna and a superb 40<sup>th</sup> birthday party amongst the budding birch trees. .

**4<sup>th</sup> May.** We checked out with the Rangers and gave them our Clean Mountain Canister. (see **Waste** below). Much of the day was spent on the phone changing flights, then catching up with the incoming Deavoll and McNeill who had just arrived in Talkeetna.

**5<sup>th</sup> May.** Shuttle bus back to Anchorage.

**6<sup>th</sup> May.** Flew back to UK.

## **Waste**

All our rubbish was flown out. Solid human waste had been deposited in a Clean Mountain Canister throughout the trip. These are available from the Ranger station in Talkeetna, and are an excellent, convenient, and comfortable way to keep the Range clean. We burnt our toilet paper before putting the ashes in the CMC, and reckon using this system one CMC will last two climbers for just over two weeks. At the end of your trip you hand them in at the Ranger station! There is no longer any real excuse for putting solid human waste into crevasses in this range (as we have done on previous trips).

## **Weather and equipment**

High pressure predominated throughout the trip, and is said by locals to be a common feature of the last couple of weeks of April. Skies were clear except for one day when it snowed slightly. The wind was chill from the North. On one night

the wind grew to gale force, and we needed substantial snow walls (higher than the tent) to stop the tent ripping to pieces. A shovel is an essential piece of kit.

We climbed during the day in thermals and shells, needing down duvets on top when climbing at night. At night temperatures dropped to about  $-16$  C. One of us (who didn't wear a duvet during night climbing) sustained mild frost nip to the toes in standard (i.e. not expedition rated) double plastic boots. Sensation returned two weeks after returning to the UK. There were no other medical issues.

Our equipment for the routes was very light. We used mountain marathon rucksacs, which were ideal for the small loads. Carbohydrate gel sachets (GU) entrenched their position as the fuel of choice for continual movement. We never felt hungry or short of muscle power. We ate about 20 of these each on each route. The exhaustion we felt at times seemed to be more psychological and related to long periods of focussed attention, lack of sleep, and the ever-present anxiety of Alpine climbing

We also ate nuts and cheese at our breaks. The theory here was that the fats in them would keep us warm as we snoozed (they did), and then be converted slowly into energy over the next 8 hours. Fluid intake was good on South face Couloir (because of the melt water we each drank over 3 liters between bergshund and summit, then more at the brew stop), but inadequate on Distant Lights (2 liters each from 'shrund to summit ridge).

Days on the glacier were hot, and we needed sun hats. Light cotton trousers over thermals are much the most comfortable glacier wear. Wellington boots were a surprise success, easy to slip on and off, and they ensure you keep your plastic boots dry for climbing.

The sun was damaging this South Face even at this early stage of the season. Early season has a lot to recommend it on the lower Alaskan peaks, but you do sacrifice the endless daylight of mid May and June. We needed head torches to climb at night. At night on the glacier we slept comfortably in 900 grams of good down.

Glacier travel and runway maintenance is much easier with skis. You don't have to be a great skier to make progress on the easy angled Alaskan glaciers. Good skis with bindings that fit plastic climbing boots can be hired from Talkeetna Air taxis

## **Future possibilities in the area**

Back in the UK we heard from Pat Deavoll. With an Australian alpinist she had climbed the North Face of 11,520. We don't know yet which line they took. There will be other possibilities on this icy face, some of them being very hard, steep, mixed lines.

Kahiltna Queen's South Face has rock climbing possibilities on the ridges and buttresses. The rock is very solid on most of the face, but more dubious to the left of Distant Lights.

In winter, or early spring, there will be some hard mixed lines following the smaller gullies and seams on the face. We saw one such line to the right of South Face couloir, but watched it collapse as we climbed the couloir (indeed it provided the melt water!).

Taking a line straight up from the central snow triangle on Distant Lights would provide a worthwhile, harder variation with about 300-400m of new climbing. This section faces due South and gets no shade from side walls, so an April ascent would be the latest.

## **Expedition Finances**

<b>Costs</b>	<b>£</b>
Air tickets	1436
Air taxi	680
Shuttle	67
Accommodation	191
Food	300
Insurance	142
Equipment (incl. Gas)	686
Admin (phone calls, copying)	30
Medical eqpt.	70
<b>Total:</b>	<b>£3602</b>

<b>Income</b>	<b>£</b>
MEF	675
BMC	1500
Personal contributions	1427
<b>Total:</b>	<b>£3602</b>

## **Conclusion**

This was a very successful and extremely enjoyable expedition. It benefited from information obtained about Kahiltna Queen and Pt 11,520 during the less successful West Buttress of Mount Hunter Expedition in 2002 (which also received grant aid from the MEF and BMC). It is very satisfying that both faces have now been climbed by MEF supported expeditions.

If the landing site on the North West Fork of the Tokositna becomes more familiar to local pilots, and proves safe, this area may become popular. With rock, ice and mixed climbing on both North and South aspects within easy reach it makes a fine base. Distant Lights in particular has the potential to become a classic route by virtue of the quality of climbing, relative objective safety, the beautiful rock through which it cuts, its direct line to the summit, and its accessibility. Potential has been identified for further exploration on both Kahiltna Queen and Pt 11,520

International links with the New Zealanders have been enhanced, and new links made with US alpinists.

Malcolm Bass and Simon Yearsley would like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee of Management of the MEF for the grant. We would also like to particularly thank Bill Ruthven for his tireless work in administration with a human face. Our further thanks go to the officers of the BMC for their administration of the Sports Council grant. Your work gives British alpinists access to a superb grant support system. Alpinists of all nations who we've met on our expeditions are always jealous of our accessible, equitable and generous system.



## **Contact details**

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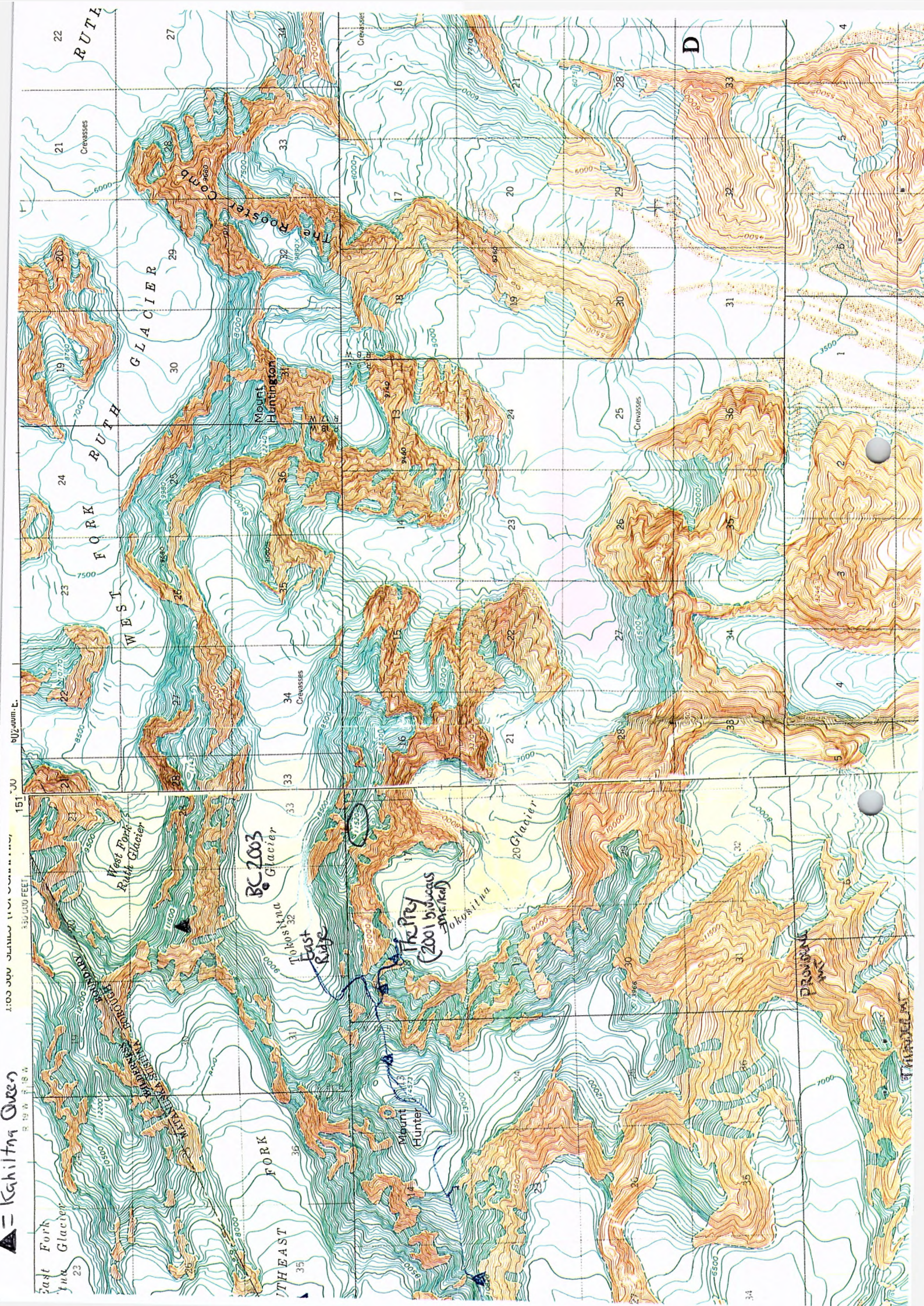
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▲ = Kahilt'na Queen

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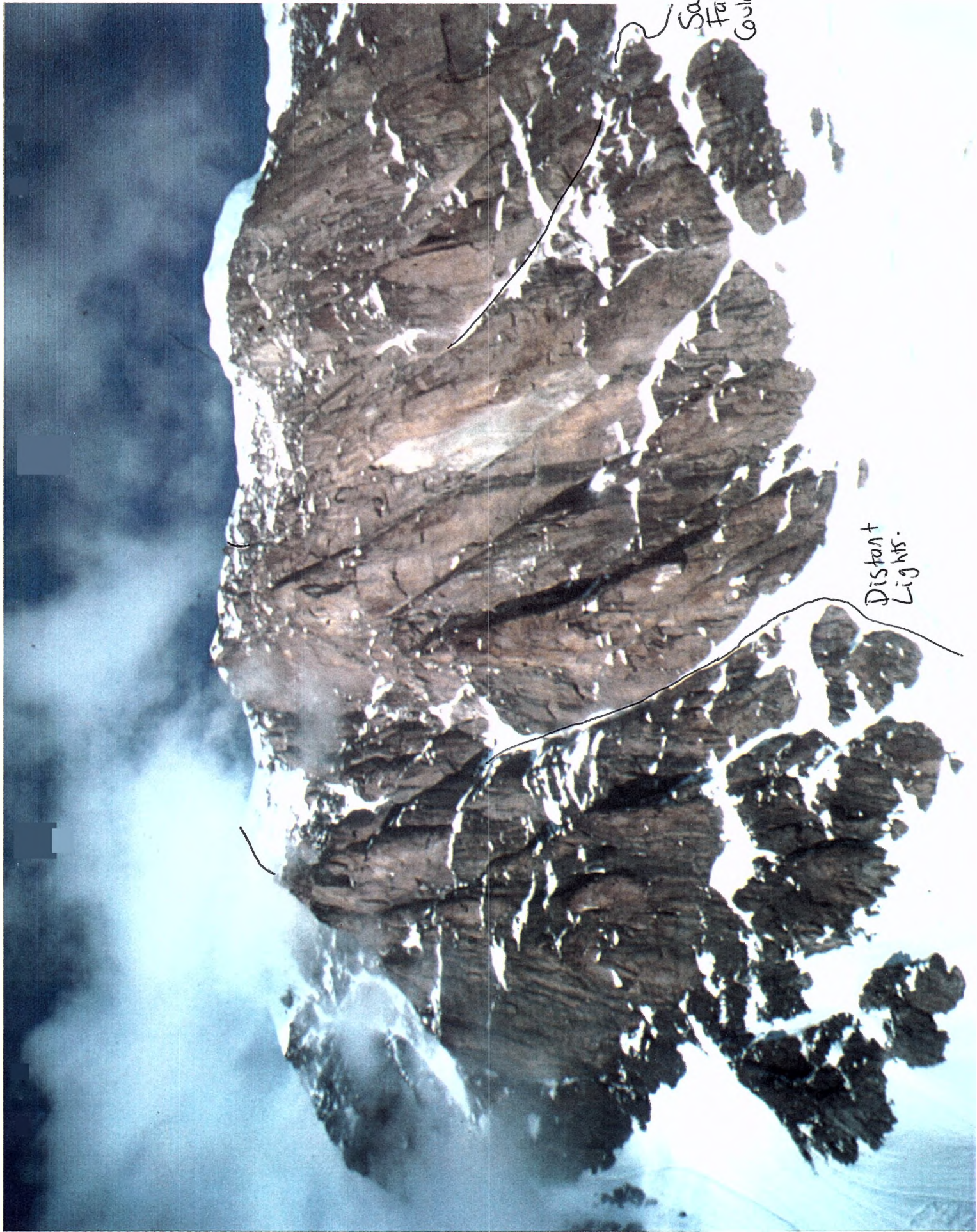
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South Face  
of Kachina  
Queen

South  
Face  
Coulis.

Distant  
Lights.





Simon Yearstey on South Face  
Coular by Malcolm Bass



Malcolm Bass on Distant Light  
by Simon Yearsley