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REPORT OF THE
BRISTOL DEVIL'S THUMB
EXPEDITION

S. E. ALASKA , APRIL - MAY 1982

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Bristol Devils Thumb Expedition
April-May 1982

SUMMARY

The objective of the expedition was the unclimbed north-west face of Devil's Thumb, in the Stikine area of south-east Alaska, which Steve Monks and Damian Carroll intended to climb alpine-style.

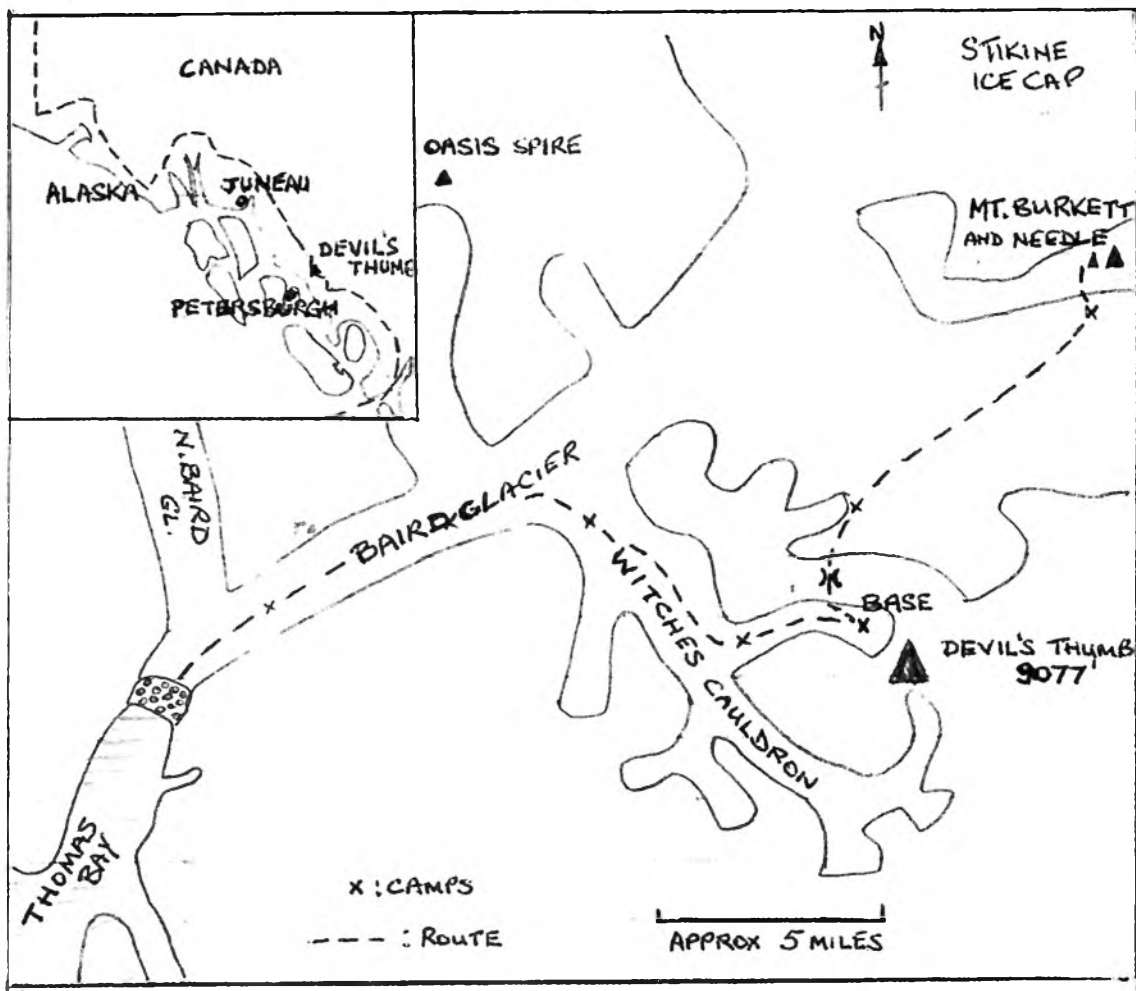
Access was by plane from Heathrow to Anchorage, Alaska; an internal flight to Petersburg, S.E. Alaska; float plane to Thomas Bay at the mouth of the Baird Glacier; then by foot about 23 miles to a base camp in the Witches Cauldron below the face.

The face is a very serious proposition, being nearly 6000' high, and presents mainly ice climbing during the spring.

Due to continuously bad weather Devil's Thumb was not climbed and an attempt on a new route on Burkett Needle failed for the same reason.

The climbers returned to Petersburg after four weeks when supplies had run out.

Sketch map of Devil's Thumb Area



MAPS: United States Geological Survey, SUMDUM (A2), Alaska, 1:63360. (This is the Devil's Thumb sheet)
Whole area covered by SUMDUM, Alaska, 1:250000

Introduction

Devil's Thumb, 9077', is a prominent tower of granite when seen from Petersburg about 30 miles away, and seemed an attractive proposition for a lightweight expedition. It was first climbed in 1946 by the inimitable Fred Beckey together with Bob Craig and Cliff Schmidtke by a route on the south-east side, and has seen few ascents since then.

The first time we had heard of the huge North Face was from an article by Jon Krakauer in Mountain 59 - "Alone on Devil's Thumb" He made a solo attempt on the smaller N.E. Face via a circuitous approach but failed due to poor conditions.

The face which rises from the Witches Cauldron (an impressive, deep, glacier-filled canyon complex) is almost 6000' high and has an average angle of 67°, with many sections up to 80° or more. The rib separating this face from the north-east was climbed by Dave Stutzmann and Bob Plumb in 1978 and is very impressive in its own right.

From the information in Krakauer's article and some guesswork on the little we knew of local weather we judged that the best time for an attempt would be April-May. Hopefully the conditions would be mild enough to allow ice to form but not yet too warm that snowfall was turning to rain. As it happened our assumptions were correct and we found the glaciers had good snow cover, while the face built up a good formation of ice during the first part of our stay.

The main unpredictable factor was the weather, which is notoriously bad in S.E. Alaska (Two Colorado climbers had spent six weeks below the face in 1981 without getting a chance to climb). The maritime aspect and relatively low altitude produce conditions more akin to Scottish winter climbing than the more continental patterns of the greater ranges further north and inland.

The face, as already mentioned, is very steep and exceptionally high considering the height of the mountain. The lower half is made up of steep bands and ice fields linked by ice runnels and shallow couloirs, all threatened by a hanging glacier on the right and the gully which issues from the Cat's ears Spires. Above half-height a discontinuous line of snowy aretes separated by short walls runs up to the vertical headwall which could possibly be turned on the left.

The shattered nature of the granite gneiss means ice cover must be good, and the constant ice fall and avalanches in anything other than perfect conditions would make an ascent ~~incredibly~~ extremely serious.

All in all this face is a major objective but seems to require an unusual amount of good luck to be climbed.

Account

Steve Monks and Damian Carroll flew Heathrow-Anchorage by British Airways on 15/4/82 and stayed a few days to buy some equipment and freeze-dried food and wait for a flight to Petersburg. They flew there on 20/4/82 and bought more supplies (very expensive in this part of the U.S.A.)

- 21/4 : A local float plane flew them to Thomas Bay where they were left with four weeks of food. On the beach they met Mike Bearzi and Dieter Klose from Colorado, much to the consternation of both parties when their objectives were discovered to be the same! Two loads were carried up the ice-fall that afternoon.
- 22/4 : The rest of the gear was carried about four miles to easier terrain further up the Baird Glacier.
- 23-25/4 : All the supplies and equipment was taken in one push to the base camp in the Cauldron, about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from the foot of the face. Each person had a sac of about 50 lbs and towed about 70 lbs.
- 26/4 to 2/5 : Almost continuous heavy snow - about four feet fell in this period. Several major avalanches from the face and ice falls on either side blasted the tents with powder.
- 3/5 : Relatively good weather, but an attempt was called off at Midnight as snow flurries started.
- 4-5/5 : Heavy snowfall, changing to rain.
- 6/5 : A clear afternoon was spent ice-bouldering on seracs lower down the glacier.
- 7/5 : Clear and sunny all day, but a thin layer of cloud settled in the evening. That night both parties left for the face but the Americans turned back at the foot of the avalanche cones, while the British started through the bergschrunds before judging the conditions too cloudy and mild.
- 8/5 : It was now thought that not enough time remained to climb the Thumb, descend to camp and reach the beach even if the weather improved very soon. (8-10 days would be required). A decision was made to attempt Burkett Needle (ca. 8500'), a satellite peak of Mount Burkett (ca. 10050'), about 7 miles ~~to the~~ N.E. of Devil's Thumb.
- The climbers left that day, crossing a col in appalling deep snow conditions to the Lower Baird Glacier, where the night was spent in a snow hole.
- 9/5 : Perversely good weather meant the snow had frozen in the night so good time was made crossing the wide glacier to Burkett Needle. The south side is a marvellous sight - a beautiful granite spire split by a series of corners above an icy approach. This peak has been climbed once before, by Layton Kor, via a route on the north side.
- 10/5 : In deteriorating weather, a 2 am. start ran out of steam about eight pitches from the summit. The glacier and couloir above were soloed to the ridge where a line of snow ramps led rightwards across the south-west face to a shoulder. A very difficult mixed pitch to the foot of the dihedrals, climbed in a violent blizzard, marked the end of the attempt. Descent was by on abseil and a lot of down-climbing.

- 11/5 : The climbers returned to the Witches Cauldron in bad weather to find that Bearzi and Klose had climbed to a bivouac on the face about 1500' up. They had encountered much 75° ice then very steep and serious terrain before worsening weather heralded a retreat. They had about another week before they too had to move out.
- 12/5: Rest day.
- 13-14/5 ; The equipment and remaining food was towed out of the Cauldron and most of the way down the Baird Glacier.
- 15/5 : A descent of the ice-fall led to the beach and an encounter with a black bear. Fortunately he ran away first. The prospect of waiting four days for a plane with two or three days food left was rather uninviting.
- 16/5 : A wandering Coast Guard helicopter landed in response to vigorous waving and took two dirty and hungry climbers back to Petersburg.

From here Monks took a boat south to climb in the "Lower 48" while Carroll, by boat and an 850 mile hitch-hike through the Yukon and Alaska, returned to Anchorage.

Some Thoughts

In retrospect it was a mistake that skis were not used and more supplies taken in for a longer stay although we both agreed that the experience was both valuable and enjoyable despite the lack of climbing success.

As an area for Alpine-style climbing this part of the Coast Ranges has tremendous potential. There are numerous unclimbed, unnamed summits up to 8000' high, and those that have been climbed have many faces and ridges left (and usually await second ascents).

For example, the south face of Mt Burkett looks very good, while Oasis Spire is probably technically one of the most difficult rock peaks in Alaska. It has had one ascent.

The element of exploration is also very appealing, with many glaciers and passes as yet untraveled, giving plenty of opportunity for straightforward yet adventurous ski touring in a wild and effectively very remote region.

Perhaps the best system for climbing in this range would be to use skis and lightweight fibreglass sleds, with several weeks supplies, or arrange airdrops (expensive).

June and July apparently provide the best weather for mixed or mainly rock climbing, but ice build-up seems to be best in April-May for the North faces and gullies.

One final thought:- bear tracks are plentiful even 20 miles and more from the coast, and Mountain Lion, wolverine and fox tracks were also seen. This might make gear dumps and air drops vulnerable to raids by hungry animals, never mind the climbers!

Equipment and Food

Clothing and climbing gear were as one would use for a winter Alpine ascent. Due to the potentially mild conditions on the climbs, gore-tex shells and bivouac bags would be recommended, and insulation should be synthetics.

Snow shoes are essential, although touring skis would be preferable.

Our "sleds" were made from thick plastic sheets for use as childrens toboggans because everywhere seemed to be sold out of the type we wanted. The Heath-Robinson constructions we made worked surprisingly well.

Most of the food was freeze-dried, as a weight consideration, and we found that the Raven Products "Regal" range we brought from the UK. to be both cheaper and superior to US brands. (A word of warning:- most Britons still do not realise that the import of beef products is forbidden in the USA. We had some minced beef confiscated, so either take soya protein or be resigned to spending a lot in Anchorage.)

Accounts

<u>Expenditure</u>		<u>Income</u>	
Air fares:		MEF. grant	£350
Heathrow-Anchorage-	£450	BMC/Sports Council	£200
Heathrow		grant	
Anchorage-Petersburgh	£205	Personal contrib.	£537
Petersburgh-Thomas Bay	£ 51		
Boat fares	£ 44		
Food, fuel, equipment	£135		
Misc.food, accomodation	£140		
etc.			
Insurance	£ 62		
	<u>£1087</u>		<u>£1087</u>
	<u>=====</u>		<u>=====</u>

Exchange rate calculated at \$1.72 to £1 as of April 1982

All personal clothing and climbing equipment, except for snow shovel and Thermarests, were already possessed and brought from the UK.

Acknowledgements

This expedition was greatly aided by grants from the Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Association.

The float plane service was provided by Alaska Island Air in Petersburg, who were also good enough to allow us to sleep in their hangar and look after the clothing and valuables we did not wish to take onto the mountain with us.

The friendliness and information given by several Alaskan climbers was greatly appreciated

Also our thanks go to Mike Bearzi and Dieter Klose for making our stay below the Devil's Thumb so enjoyable, and providing entertainment, food and tobacco when we were running short!