Acc 25850

94/17

1994 SCOTTISH ALASKAN EXPEDITION

Expedition Report - Summary

1.1 Expedition members - Chris Schiller
Mark Sinclair

1.2 Objectives - 1st Ascent of South Ridge Mt Crosson
- New route on South face of Mt Foraker and traverse of Sultana Ridge.

1.3 Achievements/Highpoints -

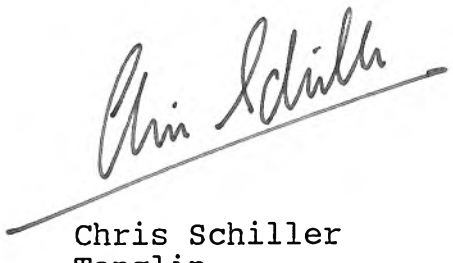
Mountain	Route	Remarks
Crosson	South Ridge	Retreat from 9300ft due to unstable condition of ridge. Three attempts made.
Hunter	West Ridge	Retreat from 9000ft due to extremely high avalanche risk. Three attempts made.

1.4 Finance -

	Expense		Income
Travel	1814	MEF Grant	600
Food & Stores	400	BMC Grant	600
Equipment	800	Personal contributions	2090
Insurance	276		
	3290		3290

1.5 Dates -

Depart UK 26th April
Return UK 21st May



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2.Introduction.

Mark and I decided to return to the Kahiltna on our flight back from Alaska last year. That trip had been quite a success, we had climbed the South East Ridge of Mt Crosson (a wonderful pyramid when viewed from the Kahiltna), acclimatised on McKinley, and made the first British ascent of the SW Ridge of Mt Hunter. Considering that it was our first trip to the central Alaska range, we were well pleased with our efforts.

The conditions had been quite good in 1993 and we only experienced a short period of bad weather.The rest of the time we roasted in the day and watched the hoar frost form on everything at night. So, having gained some experience in this area, we decided to return in 1994 with a grander objective.

We definitely wanted to do a route on Mt Foraker and had considered the Infinite Spur. However, this had already received a British ascent. Our attention was then drawn to a fairly obvious line, that looked relatively safe, to the right of a route called "False Dawn" on the South face. This became our main objective. When we came to look at how to get off the mountain it was decided that if we reached the summit and still felt strong, then we would traverse the Sultana ridge and come down Mt Crosson. This was a mountain which we were already familiar with from the 1993 trip.

In order to acclimatise and get an idea of conditions on South facing slopes we planned on making the first ascent of the S ridge of Mt Crosson.The route looked relatively straight forward and it was hoped (as ever) that we might be able to get something else in as well !

We arrived in Talkeetna on the 27th April. Apparently it had been the mildest winter in living memory. However, all the climbers who had been in so far had suffered with some form of frost bite,so conditions in the range seemed to be no different than usual (bloody cold).The question was would conditions allow us to achieve at least one of our objectives over the next few weeks ?

3.South Ridge Mt Crosson (12,800ft)

On the morning of the 29th April, we started to pack for the South Ridge. We had learned from last year that it is easier and safer to climb at night and rest during the day (due to the fact that it never really goes dark).

By adopting this approach you don't need to worry about your boots and other gear freezing up while you're sleeping. As a result of this, everything is warm and dry when starting the climb,thus reducing the chance of frost bite. Other advantages are that fuel lasts longer, cooking is easier and you're resting during the hottest time of the day when the mountain is most likely to be out of condition.

This was the way we planned to climb the South ridge, however by the time we were ready to set off the weather had started to turn and it wasn't to long before we were tent bound for the next couple of days. On the 1st May the weather seemed to improve and by the afternoon we were snow shoeing across the 76 kilometre long Kahiltna glacier. It was very very hot. After a few hours we reached a safe hummock of snow near the foot of the ridge, set up the two man tent and made numerous brews.

As soon as the sun disappeared behind Foraker the temperature dropped considerably. We set off at 7:30 PM. Initially conditions seemed quite good, 50° snow slopes with a faint gully over on our right led to a traverse below a shoulder. None of this ground is visible from base camp and it receives little sun. It was here that we first encountered very poor snow conditions. Unconsolidated snow that would slide off the mountain if not stamped down. After forcing up through this ground we arrived on a small col. The way ahead was not clear. Over to our left steep snow over shattered rock buttresses led unpleasantly up and around to a section that we expected would give us much technical difficulty. To the right snow slopes ran up to another rock buttress. Mark decided to have a look over to the right but the snow was again unconsolidated and steep. There was no question of our continuing any higher that evening as it was far too dangerous and snow had started to fall.

We decided to dig a snow cave which we would also be able to use at a later date. It was now 12:30 AM and snowing much harder. We crawled in and got some rest while making more drinks. Four and a half hours later snow was still falling so we decided to make a run for it back to the tent. It didn't take long for us to get down to the warmth of our sleeping bags. The sky was a dark grey, Annie at base camp informed us by CB radio that the weather was going to be bad for the next 24 hours so, defeated, we returned to Kahiltna base, determined to try again soon.

The weather was bad for the next few days but cleared again on the 5th, so with a fairly reasonable forecast we decided to give it another go. If it was hot the last time we crossed the glacier, it was positively sweltering this time. Again climbing at night we made rapid progress to our snow cave. A helicopter was hovering

near the variation start to the West ridge of Mt Hunter. Listening on the radio it was clear that there had been an accident, possibly a fatality. Conditions were still very dangerous and massive avalanches could be heard thundering down Foraker. It was clear that we were not going to succeed this time either so once again we retreated back to base camp, this time in a white out.

Fortunately nobody had been killed on Hunter. However the climbers involved had been beaten up pretty badly in an avalanche when some seracs collapsed. A few climbers from base camp skied up to help with the evacuation. One of them ,Scott Backes, lost a ski pole when another serac collapsed next to him during the rescue. We all hoped that the mountains would settle down soon.

The evening of the 7th was clear and numbingly cold. We decided to give it another go the next day.... If we could find a way up through the rock we might be able to reach the easier upper section of the ridge. With this in mind Mark once again traversed across and up to the right. This time we were in luck. A gully led straight up to the crest of the ridge. Belays were very poor in the shattered rock so we moved together. Eventually we reached a point where the snow reared up and formed a cornice. The only way out was on the left up a steep snow arete. I thrashed my way up thigh deep powder to a cornice, aware of the insecure belay below, I swam up and over the edge landing on what can only be described as sugar. I placed a snow stake and brought up Mark. The ridge proper now lay before us. The snow here was the worst you could imagine, honey comb sugar at about 55° with nothing but the glacier 2000ft below your feet. Again we moved together staying as near to the crest as we dared. At times we could see clear through the fracture line of the cornices which we also used for ice axe placements.

Things got worse, ahead of us lay over 250 metres of cornices,snow powdered rock towers and snow mushrooms. Still, after 3 attempts we were gaining height. After a particularly nasty section of down climbing I came up against a very large snow mushroom. Inching my way up and over the edge I peered down to the next section of ridge. This was it, make your mind up time. If we descended here (probably by abseil) then we really would be committed with nothing but even more heinous snow and greater obstacles ahead. And we still had a very long way to go. I turned and declared to Mark that I loved my wife too much for this s*#t. Mark agreed with my sentiments entirely. He had much more experience on this stuff than me, having climbed in South America, Canada and the Himalaya. We had given it our very best shot and were satisfied with the decisions we had made. We sat down for five minutes at what we reckon was about 9300ft and took a couple of photos. We heard another massive avalanche pour off Foraker and felt it tremble through our ridge. It was midnight, all the mountains should have been asleep.

The descent to the top of the gully was as hairy as the ascent. Its so easy to rush these things and then catch a crampon, putting a permanent end to the fun. Carefully we side stepped down and eventually reached the site of my belly flop over the cornice. Once back in the gully we steadily front pointed down to the site of our snow cave. We picked up a dumped rucksac and continued to the tent at the foot of the route. Not wanting to linger any longer we trudged back to base camp with the knowledge that we had

done the right thing.

It wasn't until the next day that both of us realised that we had come to the same conclusion before we had to retreat.We had both secretly decided to traverse the mountain and go down the South East ridge, regardless of the fact that our tent and snow shoes were at the foot of the South ridge.The reasoning behind this was that yes, we were familiar with the route from the year before, but more importantly was that we definitely did not want to reverse the ground we had just ascended. We also realised when we were on the nasty section that the South ridge is of the same aspect as the famous French ridge on Mt Foraker. Reading the account of the first ascent which took place in 1976 I could see a number of similarities. I'm not saying the South ridge of Crosson is as desperate as the French ridge on Foraker but it does make you "think" !

4.West Ridge Mt Hunter

It was clear from the general lack of success that routes on south facing slopes were out. In fact all routes were out with the exception of the West Buttress on Denali. It was too warm and there was far too much snow. It would not consolidate. On top of this Mark went down with a flu type bug which wiped him out for a few days. With the new route on the South face of Foraker now looking unlikely we decided to turn our attention to the West ridge of Mt Hunter. We figured it would be nice to get the higher North peak to add to our South peak. Besides this we knew we could "Blast it" given good conditions. In fact we planned on making one camp (or rather pit stop) and then race it to the top.

On the morning of the 12th we went round to the relatively near West ridge of Hunter. We got there in a white out and then performed what we had become really good at, turning round and walking back. The next effort on the 13th got us about 400 metres up a soggy slope of porridge. Again this was at night, why wasn't it consolidating ? Annie at Kahiltna base confirmed what we really knew anyway, it was unseasonably warm. Back at base we slept till we were hungry and ate till we were tired. I was going to have to go on a diet when I got home.

On the 14th we gave it another go. This time we started really late, 11:45pm, again lightweight. No tent, no sleeping bag, little spare clothing, a bivvi bag and food. We would rest in the warmth of the day and climb at night. It was much colder than on the previous attempts and the initial couloir did seem to take our weight. After about 1000ft we surfaced on a small plateau. There was some avalanche debris, ahead lay the rest of the couloir guarded on either side by seracs. Not a place to linger. Moving together we swapped leads regularly. We were eager to reach the comparative safety of the shoulder which we estimated was at 9000ish ft.

Not long after we left the plateau we started to cross a few crevasses. It was here that Mark first experienced the creaking pack. Gazing round with our head torches we scanned around for tell tale cracks in the snow. The Northern lights were glowing a warm red above but we had our minds held by other forces. We decided to continue cautiously. The angle steepened as we approached the shoulder and soon after we felt much more secure. Our goal for the evening was to make the camp at 10,600, we were making great time,3 hours to this point. Next came a long traverse over a Wembley sized snow field. Once again we had to plough through powder. Peeping over the horizon was the South peak. Seeing it from over here it felt like it was mine. We could also see the rock pinnacle that we would have to abseil down to get to the 500ft rock tower.

A cone shaped snow slope led to the top but first we needed to drink. We found a relatively safe mound of snow and brewed up. The night chill persuaded us that it was time to move. Heading off up the slope I wondered what lay on the other side. Suddenly the snow started to creak and groan ahead of me. I even thought I could see it stretch.Totally spooked I turned to Mark and asked

him in the most gentlemanly of manners to move back down rather quickly. We gave it some thought and then Mark gave it a go. Things got worse. Not only did the pack creak and groan but when he got higher cracks would shoot across the snow whenever he placed his foot down. This was crazy country and with similar language Mark ushered me down the slope.

We sat down and wondered what to do. If we went down there was little chance of us coming back up. We decided to sit the night out and give it another days sun. It was a long cold night and thanks to the little rock pinnacle the sun did'nt reach us till late in the morning. There was more helicopter activity, this time over on Denali. We learned later that day that a man and woman had slipped at Denali pass and had been unable to arrest the fall. She was dead and the man was badly broken up and frostbitten. Mark made the connection immediately, it was the couple that had stayed in our bunk house and flown in with the same air taxi. With the exception of two others, the four of us had been the first in that season. We felt saddened by this.

After a long day the sun finally set and we gave it another go. No use, it was still far to dangerous. Without wasting any time we moved straight back down the whole route and once again dissappointed but relieved, we reached our snow shoes at the foot of the route.

The weather was set to turn really bad for the next four or five days so on the 17th we left the glacier. No summits this year but everything intact.

5.Conclusion

Weatherwise it was unusually warm which resulted in a lot of fresh snow which failed to consolidate. Few people acheived anything during the period we were on the glacier. Scott Backes and Mark Twight succeeded after two days on a new route on the North Buttress of Hunter and a couple of pairs made it up the West Buttress of Denali. That was about it. Not long after we left a couple of Korean climbers died near the summit of Denali and I'm sure many others had close calls. So be careful !

Its still a great place though and as usual the crack on the glacier with all the other climbers was as good as ever. One final point I would make is that if you do go to Alaska be sure to take your own malt because those Americans do insist on serving cooking whisky after dinner !!

6.Useful reading

Beckey, Fred. MOUNT McKINLEY. The Mountaineers.

Davidson,Art. MINUS 148°-The winter ascent of Mt Mckinley. Cloudcap Press.

Randall,Glenn. BREAKING POINT. Chockestone Press.

Roper,Steve and Allen Steck. FIFTY CLASSIC CLIMBS OF NORTH AMERICA. Sierra Club Books.

Waterman,Jonathon. HIGH ALASKA. The American Alpine Club.

Waterman,Jonathon. SURVIVING DENALI. The American Alpine Club.

7.Useful Addresses

National Park Services: Park Headquarters
Denali National Park and Preserve
PO Box 9
Denali National Park AK 99755
907-683-2294

Ranger Station
Denali National Park and Preserve
PO Box 588
Talkeetna AK 99676
907-733-2231

Reference Material: The American Alpine Club
113 East 90th Street
New York NY 10128-1589
212-722-1628

Transportation:
Anchorage to Talkeetna. Denali Overland Transportation
PO Box 330
Talkeetna AK 99676
907-733-2384

Alaska Railroad Corporation
PO Box 107500
Anchorage AK 99510
800-544-0552
907-265-2494,265-2623

Talkeetna to Glacier. K2 Aviation
PO Box 545
Talkeetna AK 99676
907-733-2291

Talkeetna Air Taxi
PO Box 73
Talkeetna AK 99676
907-733-2218

Doug Geeting Aviation
PO Box 42
Talkeetna AK 99676
907-733-2366

Please note that this list is not exhaustive. There are more air charter companies available for hire.

Rental Equipment:

Snow Shoes. Alaska Denali Guiding - If you can't ski you will need snow shoes.
PO Box 566
Talkeetna AK 99676
907-733-2649

Recreational Equipment, Inc
2710 Spenard Rord
Anchorage AK 99503
907-272-4565

Communications:
We strongly advise all climbers to hire a CB radio. These are available through the Talkeetna air services. By carrying a two and a half pound set expeditions can contact Kahiltna base, Talkeetna aircraft and relay messages to various other expeditions.

8. Acknowledgements:

Finally we must thank The Mount Everest Foundation and The British Mountaineering Council for their generous contributions which made the expedition possible.