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# **THE BRITISH CENTRAL ALASKA RANGE EXPEDITION 1996**

**MEF Reference 96/25**

## **EXPEDITION REPORT**

**A mountaineering expedition to the Central Alaska Range of Alaska**

**22nd April to 20th May 1996**

**Supported by : The Mount Everest Foundation  
The British Mountaineering Council**

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# Introduction

The Central Alaska range is situated in a National Park in Alaska. It is the home of Denali, the highest peak in North America and two other giant peaks - Mounts Foraker and Hunter. In addition to these three peaks, the range consists of another 60 recognised summits, many of which provide challenges similar to the biggest routes in the Western Alps. With its location being at such a northerly latitude (63 degrees) compared to Everest's (27 degrees), this mountain range experiences a much lower barometric pressure than the Himalayas resulting in the summit of Denali having a pressure similar to that of a Himalayan 24,000 foot peak. Similarly, the weather can be extremely severe. In the summer season it is quite common for the summit temperatures on Denali and Foraker to be as low as minus 40°C. The summer ascents of the smaller peaks in the range are very similar in undertaking to climbing in the Western Alps in winter.

This expedition was planned as a series of ascents of routes of increasing height and length. This is intended to maximise the potential for both acclimatisation and the opportunities presented by the weather patterns. The expedition would operate as a four person team during phase one and then as a three person team during phase two. Each phase will take about 20 days and the expedition will begin in mid April and end in early June.

## Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks go to all the individuals, companies and organisations that helped us.

Our thanks to the following Companies and Organisations that supported us :

The Mount Everest Foundation  
The British Mountaineering Council  
K2 Air Taxi  
First Ascent

# Objectives and summary achievements

## Objectives

### PHASE ONE

The team flew into the Ruth Glacier system with K2 Aviation and were dropped off below Mt Bradley.

(i) **Mt Bradley** lies on the Western side of the Ruth Gorge and has a very attractive unclimbed South ridge. The route from the glacier gains 4500 feet in height to reach a summit of close to 9000 feet. The route would be climbed in two stages, the first is to climb a broad snow couloir leading to the col between Mts Bradley and Wake. From there the route follows the South ridge over a couple of subsidiary summits to the main summit. It was expected that a camp would be made on the col even if it was not used on the way up.

(ii) Having returned to the camp on the glacier, the team will then snow shoe five miles up the Ruth Glacier to the base of the West ridge of the **Mooses Tooth**. This ridge is commonly climbed to the easily accessible Western summit but has only been repeated 3 times to the main summit. The intention was to make the first British ascent of the full West ridge. This would require climbing up to the Western summit (possibly one long day) and then the following day make a long traverse to gain the main summit. Perhaps a four + day round trip.

### PHASE TWO

This phase would begin with a relocation by K2 aviation from the Ruth Glacier system to the Kahiltna Glacier. At this point, Susie Sammut would leave the expedition and return to the UK.

The primary objective of the second phase was to climb a new route on 17,000 foot Mount Foraker. From the Kahiltna glacier there are three distinct options for making a new route. The best looking line is the obvious spur on the South East face between the Viper ridge and the False Dawn route. Whilst this route is obviously attractive, it would require a rapid ascent after a period of minimal snow fall to make it safe. A second possibility is to make the first ascent of the South East ridge of Mt Crosson to gain the Sultana ridge. This variation start to the ridge would in fact be over 6000 feet high and constitute a major addition. This route has the advantage of being both possible and relatively safe after or during heavy snowfall and is a route that could be ground 'alpine style' into submission.

## **Summary achievements in order :**

Moose's Tooth - After a week of intermittent snow fall, Paul Ramsden and Andrew Brash made a long one day ascent of the West ridge to the West summit (9780 feet). This was found to be very arduous after the fresh snow that had fallen.

Mount Foraker - Paul Ramsden and Andrew Brash made the 1st ascent of the South ridge (12,800 feet) of Mount Crosson, they then continued up the Sultana ridge on Mount Foraker thereby completing the 1st British ascent of that route as well.

## **Team**

The membership of this expedition consists of three very experienced cold climate alpinists and one new comer to the colder ends of the world.

### **Geoff Hornby**

The expedition leader and planner. Geoff will be making his 7th expedition to either Alaska or the Yukon. His last 3 expeditions have received the generous support of the MEF and the BMC. During this time his teams have achieved the following successes :

- a. The 1st ascent of Point 9070 on the Kahiltna Glacier
- b. The 1st ascent of Thunder Mountain (the last major unclimbed peak in the Central Alaska range) on the Kahiltna Glacier.
- c. The 1st ascent of the East face of Benign Peak in the Chugach range (& in winter).
- d. The 1st British ascents of the SW ridge of Mt Hunter.
- e. The SE ridge of Mt Crosson.
- f. The 1st ascent of the Central Spur on the West face of Wood Peak in the Yukon.
- g. The 1st British ascent of the Lowe route - Keystone Greensteps in Valdez.

In addition to this, Geoff has led four Himalayan expeditions, the highlights of which have been the 1st ascents of Laspa Dhura, Nandakhani & Nandabhanar and repeat ascents of Tharkot and Tharpu Chuli.

His alpine record includes the first free ascent and in winter of the Direct start to the Supercouloir, the 1st British ascent of the Lalidererspitze North face direct, the Walker Spur and the Matterhorn North face.

Elsewhere in the world, Geoff has succeeded on the 2nd winter ascent of the Diamond couloir direct, the 1st winter solo of the Ice Window route and the 2nd ascent of Behemoth on the East face of Kishtwa Tembo, he has made over 20 first ascents in the Wadi Rum and climbed extensively in Norway, the Tatra in winter & Ecuador .

His big wall experience includes ascents of the Nose, Zodiac, Watkins South face and the NW face of Half Dome (in a day).

Contact :      The Coach House, Wingfield Hall, Manor Road, South Wingfield,  
Derbyshire, DE55 7NH.                      Tel 01773 831915

## **Paul Ramsden**

A 26 year old Yorkshire man who has spent much of his climbing time ticking off the harder routes in the Western Alps before joining the British Antarctic Survey and making many first ascents on that continent. He is currently working for BAS in Cambridge.

His major alpine ascents include :

The Eiger North face  
The Walker Spur  
The Bonatti Pillar on the Dru  
The American Direct on the West face of the Dru  
The North face of the Dru  
The NE spur direct on the Droites  
The Bonatti Gobi on the Eckpfeiller buttress  
The Frendo Spur in winter.

His Himalayan experience includes a failed attempt on Nilkantha and an ascent of Tharpu Chuli. He has also climbed the Nose on El Capitan and the NW face of Half Dome in Yosemite.

## **Andy Brash**

A 29 year old traveller currently planting trees on Vancouver Island. Andy is a British born and British passport holder who resides predominantly in Canada. He works as a wilderness tree planter in the early spring and an alpine porter in the summer. His ability to make double carries in a day of 50 kg loads into mountain huts in the Rockies has resulted in his being one of the real characters in the Canmore Banff climbing scene.

An experienced Alpinist and winter climber with two major Himalayan expeditions in the last two years.

His major ascents include :

Route Major on Mt Blanc  
The Brown Whillans on the Blaitiere West face  
Assiniboine's North face  
The North face of Mt Bryce  
The Polar Circus  
Takkakaw Falls  
Slipstream  
The Kahl Wall on Yamnuska

He led most of the route during an alpine ascent of Cholatse in Nepal and in 1995 failed on an attempt on Chogolisa in the Karakoram.

He has also climbed the South West face of the Liberty Cap and the Prow in Yosemite.

## **Susie Sammut**

Susie is the 35 year old wife of the expedition leader. This is her first expedition to Alaska although she has extensive alpine and sub alpine experience and has previously climbed two 18,000 foot peaks. Most of her ascents have been made in the company of her husband.

Her major ascents are as follows :

Bugaboo Spire's North East ridge  
Snowpatch Spire's South East Corner  
Chinaman's Peak North East face  
Mt Rundle's East face  
Yamnuska's Kahl Wall  
The North face of the Petit Bargy  
The North ridge on the Peigne  
The traverse of Mt Blanc  
Tharpu Chuli in the Annapurna Sanctuary  
Pico de Orizaba in Mexico  
Norway's Lofjell South East face - 1st ascent  
Norway's Pic Sans Nom's Voie des Anglais - 1st ascent  
Wadi Rum's Barrah North - East Pillar - 1st ascent  
Wadi Rum's Burdah South face - 1st ascent

## Diary

- 22.4.96 Flew to Anchorage, slept at Airport.  
23rd Bought food and gear and travelled to Talkeetna.  
24/5th Registered with Park Service and K2 aviation. Collected snowshoes and fuel.  
26th Flew into the Ruth Gorge.  
27th onwards Bad weather - drizzling snow and poor visibility. GH develops respiratory problems.  
4.5.96 PR and AB climb the West ridge to West summit of the Mooses Tooth.  
5th GH and SS fly out to get medical treatment.  
6th PR and AB ski across and camp below 11,300.  
7th Attempt on new route on 11,300 abandoned after the return of drizzling snow and poor visibility.  
10th PR and AB fly round to the Kahiltna Glacier to attempt Foraker.  
11th PR and AB climb the initial buttress on the 1st ascent of the South ridge of Mount Crosson. Tent bivi.  
12th PR and AB summit Crosson and traverse half a mile onto the Sultana ridge. Tent bivi. GH and SS fly back to the UK.  
13th PR and AB traverse the Sultana ridge to the start of the summit ridge. Snow hole bivi.  
14th PR and AB summit Foraker and descend to snow hole.  
15th Return traverse of Sultana ridge to camp near Crosson summit.  
16th Descend the SE ridge of Crosson to Kahiltna base and flew out to Talkeetna.  
20th AB returns to Tree planting in Vancouver and PR returns to the UK.



## Accidents and injuries

The members of the team were involved in no accidents during this expedition. Unfortunately though, the leader suffered from a throat problem that has since being operated on.

Geoff Hornby -

Developed a serious and obstructive swelling in the throat - principally around the Uvula. This made breathing very sore and difficult and he was forced to leave the mountains accompanied by Susie Sammut.

In Talkeetna, the local Doctor attempted to amputate the swelling under a local anaesthetic but repeated vomiting on him soon turned him away. Dr Greer later attempted to inject the swelling with cortisone, but repeated vomiting on him again stopped him in his tracks.

Treatment with antibiotics and anti histamines proved ineffective and GH returned to the UK with SS to see a specialist.

The ENT specialist was horrified at the idea that Dr Greer was willing to conduct an Uvulectomy under a local anaesthetic, claiming that the risk of death through choking or inhaling ones own vomit is very high. There but for the grace of God go I !!!

GH has since had the operation under a general anaesthetic and had some sculpturing of the throat such that he can no longer snore and can breath like a wind tunnel. Watch out Linford Christie. The operation was fairly minor but very painful resulting in GH having about 15 stitches in the back of his throat. He is now making a good recovery.

## **ACCESS AND TRAVEL**

Access is very easy to this mountain range.

Fly to Anchorage, easiest via Seattle - 20 hours.

Get a taxi service from Talkeetna to collect you from the airport.

Register with a Glacier Pilot Operator - we used K2 aviation.

Whilst the quality of service is constantly changing, it is not realistic to make recommendations in a report that may be read in 10 years time. For further detailed advice please contact the expedition leader by telephone.

## **EQUIPMENT**

The following set of equipment was the basic set used by each of the four climbers :

### **CLOTHING**

Polartec thermals

Polartec fleece jacket

Helly Hansen fleece salopettes

A lightweight down duvet

Heavyweight full weather protected down jacket

A single or two piece Gore Tex shell

Vapour barrier socks

Wild Country toaster socks

Scarpa Vega boots with normal inner and alveolite inner

Supergaitors

Fleece balaclava

Down booties

Inner gloves

Wool gloves for technical climbing

Pile lined overmitts

### **SLEEPING**

Serious Goretex covered 5 season sleeping bag.

3 sleeping mats, either Foam or Thermorests.

North Face VE25 tents.

### **COOKING**

White gas MSR's with kettle and stainless steel pan sets.

I have a home made kitchen platform that is excellent in the snow.

A thermos is essential for keeping liquid overnight and simplifies brews on the glacier or on routes.

Lots of kitchen role to remove melt water inside tent.

### CLIMBING

Clip on crampons. Normal technical ice tools.

Troll Expedition Whillans harnesses.

3 ice screws, 3 snargs, 3 snow stakes per person.

100 metre 8.5 millimetre ropes, one per pair.

Slings and tape.

Scottish mixed rack for harder climbing.

Snow saws and snow shovels, one shovel should be lightweight.

### FOOD

Standard food, nothing fancy or clever, all bought or buyable at a Safeways in Anchorage.

## EXPENSES

TRAVEL	to Anchorage : £575 x 4	= £ 2300
	Anchorage to Talkeetna return : £80 x 4	= £ 320
	Glacier flights : £240 x 3	= £ 720
	Glacier flights : £160 x 1	= £ 160
	Glacier radio hire : £300	= £ 300
	Glacier snowshoe hire : £600	= £ 600
	<b>SUB TOTAL</b>	<b>= £ 4400</b>

FOOD AND FUEL	250 litres of Blazo	= £ 100
	Base camp and hill food	= £ 900

EQUIPMENT	1 new tent, 1 new set of Gore tex, abseil tape, snow stakes, 2 new MSR stoves, 1 new 5 season sleeping bag, 1 new thermorest, extra warm weather clothing.	= £ 2000
	<b>SUB TOTAL</b>	<b>= £ 3000</b>

PEAK FEES      The Denali National Park and Preserve now require a pre registration for ascents of Foraker and Denali. This is currently priced at \$150 per person. The total \$450

= £ 300

INSURANCE	4 x £150	= £ 600
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MISCELLANEOUS AND CONTINGENCY To cover bunkhouse  
accommodation in Talkeetna, food in Talkeetna, lighters, film, maps,  
photocopies, research costs. = £ 800

**SUB TOTAL = £ 1700**

This trip was financially supported by significant contributions from :

The Mount Everest Foundation  
The British Mountaineering Council

to whom we are eternally grateful.

## **CONCLUSION**

Yet again we went to the frozen North and returned with the team having climbed a significant new route. The drive to climb this new route lay with Andy and Paul who demonstrated to the crowds sitting at Kahiltna base that a big heart and lungs driving strong legs can fulfil the objectives of a good plan.

Anyone requiring further information on this expedition, or on how to mount an expedition such as this, or would like to discuss some objectives in this range are very welcome to contact Geoff Hornby as follows :

THE COACH HOUSE, WINGFIELD HALL, MANOR ROAD, SOUTH  
WINGFIELD, DERBYSHIRE DE55 7NH.  
PHONE 01773 831915, FAX 01773 833151.

MOOSES TOOTH  
WEST SUMMIT





MT FORAKER

MT CROSSON

**MOUNT FORAKER  
THE EASTERN ROUTES**

USGS MAPS: Talkeetna D-3,  
Mt. McKinley A-3

- 1 Southeast Ridge
- 2 Southeast Ridge  
Southwest Toe
- 3 Northeast Ridge
- 4 Northeast Ridge  
Sultana Variation
- 5 Pink Panther
- 6 Czech Route
- 7 Kahiltna Glacier
- 8 Kahiltna Glacier  
Southwest Toe
- 9 SOUTH RIDGE

