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**South Face of Mount Dickie expedition
Alaska**

Expedition Report

MEF REF: 96/26

Team members: Noel Craine (UK) Roger Hughes (UK) Steve Quinlan (USA) & Jim Surette (USA)

Dates: May 24 - June 26 1996

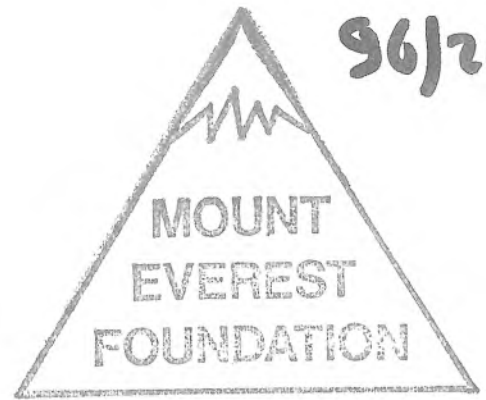


photo over leaf: the Ruth gorge showing Mt Dickie in foreground and Mt Barrille behind

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Introduction

The south face of mount Dickie had first been seriously drawn to our attention by Steve Quinlan whilst climbing in Baffin Island. As we hauled huge loads the length of the seemingly endless Weasel valley Steve started to reveal a little about the wonders of climbing in Alaska, where it was possible to take a plane to the base of the route. The prospect was at the time extremely appealing, for a start it would mean a well stocked base camp and a lot less wear and tear on the knees!

The face under consideration must rate as one of the larger continuously steep pieces of rock yet to be attempted, dwarfing El Capitan in Yosemite the face is formed by a huge sweep of granite topped by a large headwall of easier angle snow and mixed ground. Previous routes on the mountain had concentrated on facets of the mountain on the face abutting the main Ruth Glacier, the (as we took it) true south face abutted a side glacier, unnamed on our maps, squeezed between the North face of Mt Bradley and a steep glacial headwall, the col of which was known by the local bush pilots as '747' pass a reference to the unlikelyhood of getting a Jumbo between the walls!

Steve had attempted the most obvious line on the South face with the late Mugs Stump. That attempt had been turned back by bad weather. Sadly Steve was not able to return to the route with Mugs, who was killed in a crevasse fall close by on Denali. Initially Myself Steve and Paul Pritchard discussed an attempt, our numbers were increased to four by the addition of Dave Towse. Four months before departure Paul had to withdraw from the team after an accident whilst ice climbing in Scotland (which thankfully he is now making a good recovery from and refunding his previous fitness), Dave Towse also had to withdraw for personal reasons. We were thus left at rather a late stage with the necessity of finding two new partners for an attempt. Rodger 'Strappo' Hughes, a climber with an extensive range of big wall climbing skills and Jim Surette an extremely talented climber both on rock and ice agreed to join us.

The team met up in Anchorage on May the 25. A period of unsettled weather allowed the usual preparations, the endless amounts of shopping for food, fuel, climbing gear etc, to be carried out at a reasonably leisurely pace. Although logistically straight forward, as we were to be landed at base camp, (or more precisely base camp was to be where we landed) we had to be careful with the weight of supplies. The small Cessna planes that were to fly us to the glacier had limited pay loads that, with the heavy and unavoidable big wall gear, meant a degree of restraint had to be shown in the choice of food.

The flight was truly spectacular, taking us down the Ruth gorge between awesome big walls, The Mooses tooth, Broken tooth, Molar tooth and evocatively named Wearwolf lined the right hand side of the gorge whilst the left hand side was delineated by the beautiful combination of Hudson (named after Cliff Hudson, one of the pioneering glacial pilots), Wake, Bradley, Johnson, Dickie and Barrille. Landing gave a rush of adrenaline as the glacial surface approached with alarming speed, a soft landing into snow and a rush to unload.

The pilots were keen to get off quick, definitely feeling much more at home in the air than on down on the glacier. The contrast between the green forested lowlands, the Talkeetna cafe which we had shortly left and the glacier was striking. The sound of the disappearing plane was soon lost in the regular sound of stonefall and avalanche that was to accompany most of our stay in the gorge.

Base camp was set up where we were dropped, extensive digging and flattening soon saw our communal cook tent and sleeping tents firmly anchored to anything and everything available for burying. Already we were starting to adjust to the strange effects of twenty four hour daylight. In our circumstances the continuous light was both good and bad. The obvious benefits of not becoming benighted were countered against the fact that only rarely did the temperatures dip below freezing and even during storms freezing conditions remained elusive. The result of this light pattern meant that on certain days, and by no means all, the snow would have a thinly frozen crust for only a few short hours in the early hours of the morning. The rest of the time the continuous melting conditions rendered the snow extremely unstable. Movement without skis became extremely difficult, even a visit to the 'bathroom' necessitated the use of skis. On a more serious note it added a very worrying dimension to moving around and getting to the base of the rock face. The glaciers in Alaska are renowned for their size, and they certainly demanded a high level of respect, breaking through snowbridges on skis brought back for myself some rather unpleasant memories of crevasse fall the previous summer.

Initially we decided to scout out a couple of route options thus maximizing our chances of success. The initial plan of four people on one wall was adjusted to two independent parties on separate routes. The quality of the rock on closer experience proved to be very rotten, and at no time would one wish to have a pair of climbers above another pair directly in the fall line. It was decided that Steve and Strappo would attempt the line previously attempted with Mugs Stump and Myself and Jim would look at another objective. To both of us the alternative option of the East face of Mount Barrille was extremely appealing, a slender overhanging pillar of reasonable looking rock split its way through areas of obviously rotten granite. We were beginning to see that good rock is rare in Alaska!

We decided to however first assist each other in reaching the base of the routes, and all carried big loads up to the base of the South face of Mount Dickie. The approach to Dickie was straightforward, some simple but nonetheless worrying snow bridges were negotiated in the process. The route from below looked wonderful, the quality of the rock however did look slightly doubtful, but as is often the way optimism finds a reasonable looking line!

Five days later we sat somewhat dejected in base camp. We had tried repeatedly to find a way through the maze of huge crevasses and broken seracs that guarded the base of the route myself and Jim wished to attempt on Mount Barrille. Each time we were turned back by collapsing snow, gaping holes and a fairly high level of fear. Getting that

frightened on flat ground was surprising but probably sensible. On one occasion we reached to within 75 meters of the wall only to realise that our task was hopeless, and we were not going to be able to reach the base of the wall unladen, let alone with big wall gear. We were by now beginning to realise that the extremely dry winter (the driest in living memory according to some locals) had rendered the terrain extremely inhospitable, the crevasses and snow bridges were in extremely conditions. The winter snows failed to fill the slots and left thin and thus weak crevasse bridges.

A period of bad weather put the issue on hold for a while, rain instead of snow further collapsed the little integrity left in the snow, as ever I had omitted to seal the seams on our small two man tent. As the weather cleared we decided to look for other, possibly easier to approach, options. We took advantage of the clearing conditions to negotiate another very unpleasant half a mile of collapsing snow bridges guarding the base of the Broken Tooth once over them we were able to get in a position to scout out potential routes a couple of possible lines were apparent. We returned to base camp to collect more supplies. Meanwhile Steve and Strappo had made progress up the initial broken ground at the base of their route.

On our return up the glacier to below the broken Tooth we were confronted with a dramatically worse set of crevasses, new holes had appeared where previously had been flat glacier, undulations and sinister dips to all sides, in places snow bridges with our old ski tracks were visibly collapsing, in all, not the territory to be on as a pair, heavily loaded with climbing hardware. We were beginning to realise that things were not in our favour, the risk of a serious accident was getting higher every day, the snow bridges that had been worrying but reasonable two days previously were now in a dreadful condition. The chances of one person holding a crevasse fall, let alone rescuing someone were, we realised not very good.

By now we were both beginning to question the wisdom of what we were attempting, I knew that the conditions were abnormal and that some expeditions had decided not to even bother this year. The decision to call it a day however was still an extremely difficult one to make with all the conflicting aspects of pride and fear. Both myself and Jim felt the same and we once again returned to base camp.

Steve and Strappo were in turn having their set of difficulties, we could see them on our return to base camp through binoculars slowly jumaring the lines they had previously fixed to their high point. Once ensconced the comfort of their portaledge the real scale of the wall became apparent to us, the Ruth gorge was undoubtedly a huge place. The next 'day' was a storm moved in, bringing deep snow to both the wall and base camp.

Strappo writes 'the following evening saw us bivied three pitches higher and one pitch fixed to the nine hundred mark. The pillar we were climbing was relatively safe, but avalanche/stonefall poured down from both sides making it a very spectacular place to be! A storm rolled in the next morning and heavy snow pinned us down for four days. We

rapped off in the evening and as the storm rolled back in we spent a tense time negotiating crevasses and traveling two miles by compass in full white out conditions back to the tent'

Having decided to call it a day Jim returned home, I had the great pleasure of a surprub flight out and back in with supplies for the three of us remaining. The sight of a few cans of weak American beer did much to cheer the teams spirits as we had an impromptu feast on my return to the glacier. Steve and Strappo felt like one more attempt on the wall, the four day storm having been a stressful time for them. I was unsure about joining them feeling burnt out from the miles of high stress skiing myself and Jim had encountered, the final moment had been breaking through on skis and hearing the falling Ice and snow dropping to huge black depths! After a night of contemplation I decided not to join them, having climbed 900 feet and hauled a lot of gear to hitch hike a ride at this late stage would have been a little cheeky, the main reason however was one of simple intuition, it did not feel right for me to go up on the wall. I have been privileged enough to know how convincing and all encompassing the drive can be when things feel right, and for whatever reason this was not to be such an occasion.

Strappo continues 'A week later the weather was clear as we jugged our lines to begin our second attempt. We made the top of the pillar in one and a half days from our high point with very enjoyable mainly A1 - A3 climbing on very good rock. At this point we were a little less than half way up the wall at approximately 1700feet. Above the pillar there was big disappointment however, as the rock turned rotten and we tried a variety of options, all to no avail. We rapped off next afternoon'

The trip as a whole did not enjoy the pleasure of climbing any new routes, we all however had a surprub and extremely memorable time in an outrageous mountain venue. Furthermore we all managed to avoid serious injury, learnt a lot about glaciers and glacial travel that frankly we had not found necessary in either the Alps, Himalayas or Patagonia. And most importantly parted as friends already eagerly planning our next trip.

Strappo will have the final word echoed by the rest of the team..

'Once again, many thanks for your help in allowing us a chance to attempt a serious climb in the Alaska range, an incomparable place. I (we) hope to return in a year or Two'

Travel Itinary

UK - Alaska
Anchorage - Talkeetna
Talkeetna - Ruth glacier

finances

Grants

Mount Everest foundation	1000
British Mountaineering Council	1100
Other contributions including personal	1800
TOTAL	3900

Expenditure

Expedition travel to Alaska	1800
flights from Talkeetna to glacier (4 people return)	800
Food/fuel supplies	300
Expedition equipment (hardware/stoves/gas etc)	1000

Contacts

Air flights into and around the Denali national park:

It is possible to be flown and landed at a number of different areas. It is important to contact the pilots and ensure that they are willing to attempt a landing at your chosen site. All the popular sites i.e. Denali base camp, Ruth gorge Amphitheater (not the lower Ruth gorge) are reliable and they will generally fly in weather permitting all through the climbing season. For lower areas and infrequently visited areas snow conditions can vary from year to year, hence the importance of checking. Conditions can also change whilst in the mountains making a pick landing impossible, as was the case below mount Dickie this year. This necessitated a large expenditure of effort to move all the gear about five miles up the glacier to the Ruth Amphitheater or Sheldon Amphitheater named in memory of Don Sheldon, one of the groundbreaking bush pilots who opened up the area.

Hudson Air Service
P.O. Box Talkeetna AK 99676
USA
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Fax USA (907) 733 2333
Email hasi@anc.ak.net

Notes

May, June and July are all considered climbable months. However, access to routes may be very difficult later in the season as the snow melts and glaciers become increasingly unstable. Very late in the season it may at the lower elevations, be possible to move on dry glaciers, this will vary from year to year. Earlier in the season the weather will be a little colder (very cold at the higher elevations) but possibly! more stable and access too routes will be easier. Contact the air companies in spring to determine the snow conditions.

Ski mountaineering cross-country or similar skis are essential, snow shoes would In our opinion not be so effective, good skins are important as is an ample supply of duct tape to keep them on.

Mountaineering equipment can be obtained in Anchorage at a couple of stores, check the availability of 'epigas' as it is not always available in the USA.

Food (for base camp) is available in Talkeetna but is very limited (apart from fresh Salmon, Moose etc!) and also very expensive.

Make sure you are fully proficient in the techniques of glacial travel: avoiding going down crevasses and how to hold a fall and how to get yourself or someone else out of one is valuable knowledge.

Snow stakes, pulleys, prussiks or jumars and a least one spade per rope is essential. The glacial conditions, in the absence of a regular freeze thaw cycle with twenty four hour daylight, and the sheer size of the crevasses and snow bridges make the crevasse risk very high. If possible avoid traveling as two on a rope, three or four is much safer.