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ALASKAN SUN 96

EXPEDITION

FINAL REPORT



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Final report on the Alaskan Sun 96 Expedition to the Alaskan Range, Alaska, USA,
between May and June 1996.

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Cover photo: The East face of the Moose's Tooth

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SUMMARY

Alaskan Sun 96 was an Alpine climbing expedition to the Alaskan Range, USA, between May and June 1996. The primary objectives being to attempt new routes and first British ascents on some of the smaller but more technical and demanding peaks. However, conditions in the Alaskan range this season can be summarised as very little snowfall during the winter and unseasonably warm in the spring. This resulted in very little snow or ice and very frequent large avalanches. Glacier travel was particularly arduous due to the lack of winter snowfall and conditions were much more akin to those found in July, when the season is traditionally at an end. The end result was that no climbing was done and only some glacial exploration was achieved.

Mt Huntington
from the Cessna's
cockpit.
The Nettle/Quirk
route takes the
rightward slanting
fault in the centre.



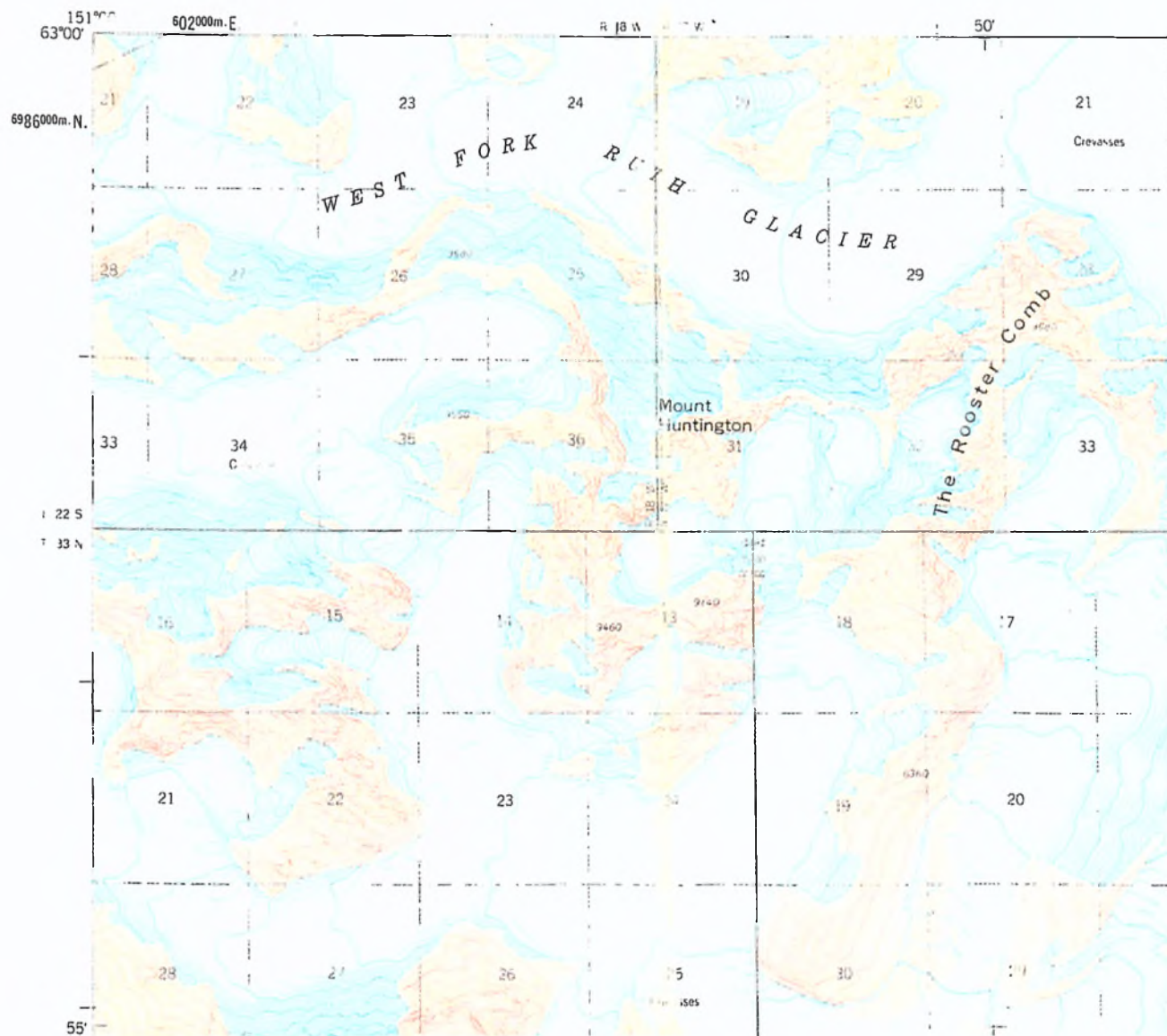
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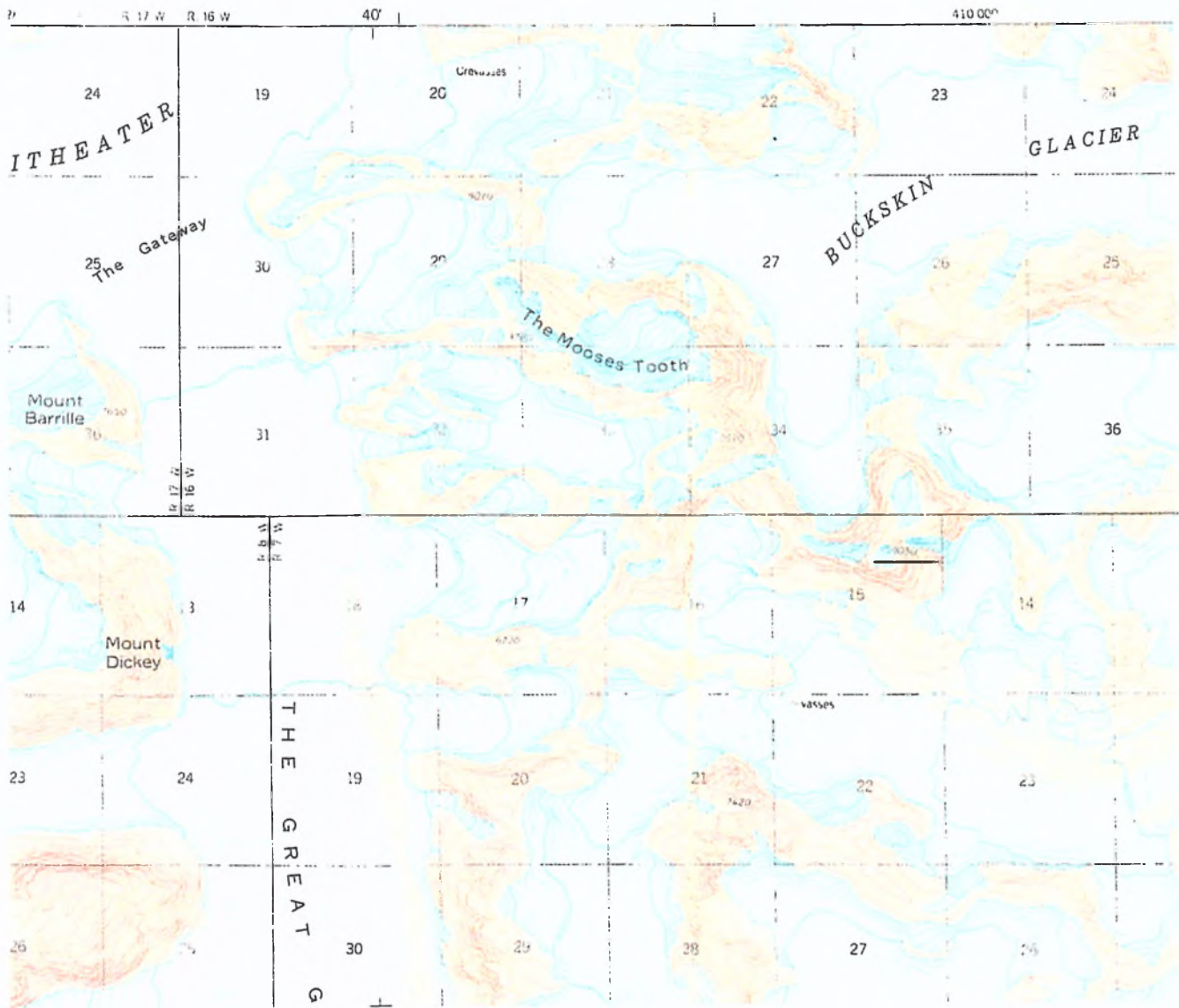
AREA MAPS

Mt Huntington



Buckskin Glacier

Note: The Broken Tooth is shown as spot height 9,050ft.



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INTRODUCTION

The concept of the expedition was for two independent pairs of climbers to attempt the following routes in the Alaskan range:

First British Ascent of Nettle/Quirk route on Mt Huntington

New route on the East face of the Moose's Tooth

New route on the North face of the Broken Tooth

The teams would climb Alpine style and would not utilise any fixed rope or camps in their attempts.

The team would deploy to Alaska in late May and would initially base itself in Talkeetna, the traditional staging post for climbers going to the Alaskan Range, then a forty minute flight was to place us on the East fork of the upper Tokisitna glacier for our attempt on Mt Huntington. One week had been allocated for this phase of the expedition after which it was planned to take another short flight, transferring us to the Buckskin glacier under the East face of the Moose's Tooth, where a Base camp would be established for our remaining objectives. All being well it was anticipated that we would be flown out mid June, as we were on a tight schedule owing to various work commitments.

DIARY

23 MAY Three of us flew from Edinburgh while the fourth flew from Aberdeen to Amsterdam. Then we all boarded our flight to Miniapolis. When we arrived in Miniapolis we had to brave the US Immigration Service only then to find that one of our bags was missing, this coupled with a thorough questioning from Customs led to a lengthy delay (US Customs take a particular interest in people who roll their own cigarettes especially when they route through Amsterdam). Once we had filed the necessary forms for our lost bag we were once more on our way to Anchorage. Arriving in Anchorage the Airline still had no trace of our bag, so they put us up for the night in a motel. We had been travelling for 24 hours and it was still the same day as when we left the UK!

24 MAY Several phonecalls to the Airline established that our bag had been found and that it would not be in Anchorage until late that pm so another night in the motel was gratefully accepted. The remainder of the day was spent buying vast quantities of groceries and items of superfluous but "essential" climbing gear.

25 MAY With all of our gear now accounted for we boarded the very plush minibus for Talkeetna and once there set up camp in the yard of our air taxi company. It was to prove a frustrating wait.

26&27 MAY Our first objective was the Nettle/Quirk route on Mt Huntington the base camp for which lies at 8,200 ft in the very small amphitheatre of the East fork of the upper Tokisitna glacier. It is a notoriously difficult landing site to access and so it was to prove for us. We spent two days doing “the hang,” as locals refer to the act of waiting to do something, and then decided that the next day we would have to do something, anything as long as it involved getting out of Talkeetna. Also I think Paul our pilot was fed up of our continual haranguing of him with respect to conditions so he at least would be glad to fly us somewhere.

28 MAY Bryan and Colin went in the first lift, the intention being to try and land on the upper Tokisitna. If this proved impossible then we would consider going to our second venue, the Buckskin glacier. There was a real danger that if we got onto the Tokisitna after too a long wait we may not be able to get off in time to meet our return flights. The flight was apparently eventful but sadly unproductive as hanging cloud precluded a landing so Bryan and Colin found themselves deposited on the Ruth Glacier while Paul came back for Stewart and myself. We elected to go to the Buckskin closely followed by Bryan and Colin. A new vista is always pleasant especially in the mountains and this was no exception, the East face of the Moose’s Tooth, nearly 5,000 ft tall, dwarfed us and our camp. Almost immediately we were struck by the warmth, the poor quality snow and the almost constant sound of avalanches.

29&30 MAY The first couple of days spent on the glacier were an opportunity to settle in to our new camp and get ourselves well established. The warmth also meant that we had to have an almost constant building programme to maintain the snow-walls around our tent to protect us from the anticipated storms which were sadly (!) non existent.

1-3 JUNE On these days we made some tentative forays into the upper reaches of the Buckskin glacier and confirmed our worst fears over conditions, they were awful. The upper glacier is however an extremely impressive place bounded on three sides by some phenomenally high walls; @2,000ft to the East, @4,000ft to the South and @4-5,000ft to the West add to this the fact that this glacial branch is only ½ a mile wide by one mile long and it does tend to make one feel insignificant. We also, over this period, began to discuss other options. What we knew was that conditions low down were very poor, indeed unworkable. Huntington may well have been in condition however, we were now time critical as it has been known for teams to have to wait two weeks to get flown in/out of the upper Tokisitna and we couldn’t afford to do that. Our final consideration was given to Denali/Foraker or Mt Hunter. We already knew from conversation with people in Talkeetna that conditions on Mt Hunter were very poor and Denali/Foraker were out of the equation as under the new regulations one has to pre-register to climb on these mountains sixty days in advance. So we regrettably came to the decision that we would call it a day and head for home.

4-5 JUNE It took two days to raise anyone on the radio to arrange a pick up and this time was spent organising our gear for more efficient carriage on the aircraft for the flight out.

6-8 JUNE Our departure was fairly straightforward once we had “stomped” down the soft snow to make a better landing strip and it was a fairly dejected bunch that reassembled at Talkeetna airstrip. All that remained was to persuade the Airline to change our return tickets (at no cost-not an easy task) and we found ourselves back in the UK. It was a fairly ignominious end to what we felt was a well planned and thought out expedition.

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PERSONNEL

- AUSTIN HARLEY- (Leader) Previous experience; 3 Alpine seasons plus one winter trip icefall climbing. Summited Denali by the West Buttress route in June 95.
- BRYAN SHEDDEN- Previous experience; 5 summer, 1 winter Alpine seasons and minor peaks in the Kahiltna region of Alaska in June 94.
- COLIN LYON- Previous experience; 5 summer, 1 winter Alpine seasons and minor peaks in the Kahiltna region of Alaska in June 94.
- STEWART ANDERSON- Previous experience; no previous Alpine or greater ranges experience but a very strong Scottish winter climber.

All the team members had climbed together before and selection, as such, was based more on compatibility than necessarily experience. We did however feel that we were a match for the objectives.

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ADMIN AND LOGISTICS

The beauty of planning a trip to Alaska is the relative ease with which it can be organised. In particular the fact that communications are excellent (and in English,) credit cards are readily accepted as a form of payment, particularly useful for pre payment of services and there are no peak fees per se.

What follows are a few thoughts on general topics to aid those who might be planning a similar trip (useful names and addresses can be found in appendix B-1-2);

RESEARCH- There is a great fund of information available and indeed we at one point were in danger of having too much choice with the ensuing difficulty of not being able to define our objectives. In particular the American Alpine Journal (AAJ) is an excellent source of information, and is not surprisingly better than the Alpine Journal (AJ) which tends to carry less detail on important Alaskan ascents. Both publications are readily available at the Alpine Club (AC) in London or the Scottish Mountaineering Club (SMC) in Glasgow, both organisations allow access to there libraries to non-members with prior approval.

Maps proved to be a stumbling block and indeed it was only when we arrived in Talkeetna that we managed to obtain a map of the Buckskin glacier from the National Park Service (NPS) ranger station. We had an order for the maps we required with Stamfords in London for 6 months prior to our trip and they were unable to deliver due to the map being out of print.

Undoubtedly the finest source of photographs is from The Museum of Science in Boston. These black and white photos all the work of Bradford Washburn, geologist and first ascensionist of the now standard West Buttress route on Denali (Mt McKinley), are of an unsurpassed quality and cover almost the entire range.

TRAINING- Due to constraints of time no specific training other than Scottish winter hill days were carried out. We felt that given that the height of our highest objective (Mt Huntington) was 12,240 ft we could train/acclimatise "in country". The Alaskan range should not however be under estimated. The weather can be incredibly fierce and the effects of altitude are usually worse than those you would expect for a given altitude. Due to its proximity to the North Pole it is estimated that on the summit of Denali (20,320 ft) the effective altitude is closer to 23-24,000 ft.

PERMISSION- Current regulations only require permits for routes on Denali (Mt McKinley) and Sultana (Mt Foraker). This has been discussed greatly in the climbing press and involves a 60 day minimum pre registration and a \$150.00 fee, \$25.00 payable in advance. In 1996 the pre registration period was flexible (ish) but no leniency will be allowed in future years.

FUNDING- From the outset we planned to go irrespective of the outcome of any attempts to raise funds. An initial budget of £1600.00 per person was envisaged but this was greatly reduced as our fundraising attempts were very successful. In particular the Mount Everest Foundation (MEF) were particularly supportive as were the British Mountaineering Council (BMC). The

MEF has two application dates (31 August and 31 December) which are strictly adhered to. After consideration you may be asked to attend a screening interview which it is well worth preparing a presentation for. The screening committee (approximately eight people in total) consists of representatives from the MEF, BMC, AC and others made up from leading members of the climbing community. Note that although you may not receive any funding from the MEF their approval is an achievement in itself and a prerequisite for BMC funding. Other sources of sponsorship which proved successful for us were employers and local business contacts.

Although not utilised by us there is also the Nick Estcourt Award (closing date 30 November annually) and Polartec Performance Challenge (closing date 1 September annually).

INSURANCE- Initially it had been intended to utilise the insurance scheme of the Dutch Alpine Club (KNAV) but the MEF screening committee advised us that they felt the medical insurance element of this policy (HFL 30,000 = £12,000) would be insufficient should an accident befall us in the States. We elected to take out insurance with the BMC, this policy undoubtedly had excellent benefits but was considered exceptionally expensive by all the team members.

TRAVEL- The travel element of a trip to Alaska is relatively easy to organise, there are numerous companies offering "cheap" fares to the States and a glance through any quality paper on a weekend should produce a host of telephone numbers to try. In general you should be able to connect from any regional UK airport-to a transatlantic flight-to one of the US "hub" airports with an onward connection to Anchorage for approximately £650.00. From Anchorage to Talkeetna is a straight forward 125 mile bus journey with three or four private companies offering various degrees of comfort for the journey. I would strongly recommend the Alaska Backpacker Shuttle who we travelled with this year, they were friendly, efficient, cheap and above all had the newest, most reliable vehicles with trailers for the plethora of kit which left plenty of room for us to stretch out in comfort. Talkeetna has a small airstrip with several companies offering glacier landings. Do not however expect that they will all be able to take you where you want to go, flying tourists over the range is easier than landing climbers and all there kit on a glacier at 8,200 ft. Make sure to book your flight well in advance and discuss exactly where you want to go with your pilot, they have vast experience of the range and will advise you on where it is feasible to go. Normally your Cessna will take 2 or 3 passengers with kit to the more normal landing sites but for some of the higher more difficult venues it is not uncommon for people to travel individually. Most aviation companies can provide fuel, marker wands, basic sleds, snow shovels and snow saws for a nominal fee.

IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS- There is currently no need for British Citizens to apply beforehand for a Visa for a visit the US, it may however speed your way through immigration. US Customs are strict, expect them to question you thoroughly and be in a position to prove financial solvency to them. It is an idea to have pre paid for as much of your trip as possible.

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CONCLUSION

Whilst we have to admit to not achieving our goals on Alaskan Sun 96, time spent on reconnaissance is, as they say, seldom wasted. We all felt that there is a possibility for new lines on our chosen objectives and an almost limitless potential for adventures in the Alaskan range. Whilst the standard routes on Denali, Sultana and Mt Hunter tend to be the main focus of attention in the range it should be remembered that there are still, as yet unexplored lines on Denali, numerous routes still awaiting repeats on Sultana, and Mt Hunter offers some of the finest modern alpine test pieces in the World. Then we have an almost untouched area with 12,000 ft plus peaks, readily accessible, just awaiting potential suitors. Given the crowds of the European Alps and the ease of access to this area I am more than surprised that this range of mountains does not attract more people seeking to climb in relative solitude. Areas which I am sure will come in for close inspection in the near future are the Buckskin basin, the Ruth Gorge and the Kahiltna peaks.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All the members of ALASKAN SUN 96 would like to thank the following people/organisations for their support and assistance;

Mount Everest Foundation-we would like to thank the Foundation for its very generous grant of £600.00. This is especially so as their support for a small group, of “unknowns,” was a great boost for us, not only financially but also in terms of our own confidence and morale.

British Mountaineering Council-were also generous in their grant of £400.00 for which we are grateful and for the support and advice of the National Officer.

Hope Scott Garage, Edinburgh-our sole commercial financial sponsor very generously supported us with a donation of £500.00 for which we were very grateful. We hope that their first foray into mountaineering sponsorship was not a disappointment to them.

Scottish Mountain Gear-SMG were very helpful at a particularly busy period for themselves and provided us with some excellent equipment, some to our own specification, at an extremely attractive rate.

Graham Tiso-finally we would like to say a very great thank you to Graham Tiso's the equipment retailer based in Scotland. We had initially planned on the purchase of a considerable amount of new equipment but Tiso's very generously agreed to underwrite the cost of any and all of the new equipment we required.

Organising even a small expedition is not an easy task and sometimes it is the little things which make just as much difference as the larger things. Undoubtedly without the help of all of the above our trip would not only have been more awkward but much more costly.

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FINANCIAL STATEMENT

<u>EXPENDITURE</u>	£
AIR FARES	2588.27
GLACIAL FLIGHTS	1088.44
ROAD TRANSPORT	178.08
FOOD	661.59
INSURANCE	596.00
SNOW SHOE HIRE	231.64
CB HIRE	67.46
BMC MEMBERSHIP	40.50
FUEL	16.44
EQUIPMENT	183.22
PHONE	18.90
TAXIS	6.50
TOTAL	5677.04

INCOME

MOUNT EVEREST FOUNDATION	600.00
BRITISH MOUNTAINEERING COUNCIL	400.00
HOPE SCOTT GARAGE, EDINBURGH	500.00
PERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS 4@1044.26	4177.04
TOTAL	5677.04

At the time of writing this report there was still no result on a grant application to the Foundation for Sport and the Arts.

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USEFUL NAMES AND ADDRESSES

BRITISH MOUNTAINEERING COUNCIL
177-179 BURTON ROAD
MANCHESTER M20 2BB
TEL:0161 445 4747
FAX:0161 445 4500

W H RUTHVEN
HONORARY SECRETARY
MOUNT EVEREST FOUNDATION
GOWRIE
CARDWELL CLOSE
WARTON
PRESTON PR4 1SH
TEL&FAX:01772 635346

ALPINE CLUB
55 CHARLOTTE ROAD
LONDON EC2A 3QT
TEL:0171 613 0755

EXPEDITION ADVISORY CENTRE
ROYAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY
1 KENSINGTON GORE
LONDON SW7 2AR
TEL:0171 581 2057

DENALI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE
TALKEETNA RANGER STATION
PO BOX 588
TALKEETNA
ALASKA 99676
TEL:001 907 733 2231
FAX:001 907 733 1465

ALASKA BACKPACKER SHUTTLE
PO BOX 232493
ANCHORAGE
ALASKA
99523-2493
TEL:001 907 344 8775
FAX:001 907 522 7382
FOR ROAD TRANSPORT TO TALKEETNA

PUFFIN PLACE
1058 W. 27TH AVENUE
ANCHORAGE
ALASKA 99503
TEL:001 907 279 1058
FAX:001 907 276 4922
FOR ACCOMMODATION

TALKEETNA AIR TAXI
PO BOX 73
TALKEETNA
ALASKA 99676
TEL:001 907 733 2218
FAX:001 907 733 1434

THE BEST EQUIPMENT SHOPS TO BUY OR TO HIRE FROM ARE;

ALASKA MOUNTAINEERING AND HIKING (AMH)
001 907 272 1811, JUST AROUND THE CORNER FROM PUFFIN PLACE

WINDY CORNER
WASILLA (MID WAY BETWEEN ANCHORAGE AND TALKEETNA)
001 907 373 6117
TALKEETNA
001 907 733 1600

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DISTRIBUTION

RECIPIENT

NUMBER OF COPIES

Mount Everest Foundation	1
British Mountaineering Council	1
Alpine Club	1
Royal Geographic Society	1
Scottish Mountain Gear	1
Graham Tiso's	1
Hope Scott Garage, Edinburgh	1
Team Members	4