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# **ALASKA WALLS 1997 EXPEDITION REPORT**

**MEF REF: 97/17**



**TEAM MEMBERS: JERRY GORE AND SILVO KARO**

**DATES: MAY 21ST - JUNE 21ST 1997**

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The South Face of Mount Dickie was first drawn to my attention after talking to Noel Craine about his attempt last year (1996). He was unsuccessful but left me with the impression that the Ruth Gorge area had a lot of Big Wall potential, and that the South Face was a worthy objective. Having climbed in many of the Big Wall venues in the World, I was keen to add Alaska to the list because of all the great things I had heard about the place. My choice of partner was easy. I had thoroughly enjoyed climbing with Silvo in Greenland in '96, and had been very impressed by his wide range of mountaineering skills. He is a great guy and definitely World Class on the hill.

I have included a detailed account of our expedition in the form of a diary of events. I would just like to mention a few points now that might help future expeditions. Firstly, the weather we had on the trip was extremely unstable and generally mild. It was a bad season etc. etc. A number of people were killed because of falling ice and rock, including very experienced Alaskan veterans. As it was Silvo missed death by 5 to 10 minute due to a rock and ice avalanche caused by very warm conditions. Basically you have two choices if you are going for a Big Wall. Either you go in May or late April, get cold but avoid very mild conditions, or you go in June /July and climb in warm wet conditions and be very aware of what is above you when it heats up. Because it is 24 hour daylight it is easy to forget the old alpine rule of climbing early so that you are off the face or out of danger by midday when the temperatures are highest. Also, access to routes may become difficult this late in the season as the snow melts and the glaciers become increasingly unstable. From the middle of June most pilots will not land in the Ruth but will drop you at the Mountain House instead. This is around the corner from the top of the Gorge. It takes 2 hours to ski down to a Base opposite Mount Dickie from the Mountain House. Contact the air companies in spring to determine the snow conditions.

The rock is very bad in the Ruth. Even on Barrille on what appeared to be the best granite around, we were hammering pitons directly into the rock. Do take a couple of nut tools, and a bolt kit and be prepared mentally for loose rubbish! The best pieces we used included A5 Bird Beaks, all sorts of hooks, No. 3 heads and an assorted collection of blades.

Do practice with ski and sledge combinations before you get out there. Brits are not used to using sledges for hauling gear. They work marvelously out there, but only if your set up is worked out in advance. Don't just pick up a hire sledge from the Air taxi firm before flying into the range. Prepare in advance. The same with your skis and skins. Do take or buy out there a big snow shovel. You can get really lightweight ones at the REI shop or the AMH store in Anchorage. Do

take one or two snow stakes for crevasse safety or simply anchoring your tent down. Do practice crevasse rescue before going, so that you are entirely conversant with the various techniques. Two on a rope is fine, but three or four is much safer.

In June temperatures ranged from -10C. ambient up to +25C. so have a clothing system that is that flexible. I was wearing the Lowe Alpine system which was very comfortable, but we saw a lot of very sweaty climbers! Also do take a spare tent for storing food. Don't leave edibles outside your tent because the ravens will have anything, even food well buried!! Beware. Also use stoves at Base that run on Coleman (White Gas) fuel. This is readily available and you can buy it from your pilot. Everyone uses it. You can get small supplies of propane/butane out there but phone in advance. The air service we used was Talkeetna Air Taxi (TAT). Paul Roderick runs it - address details at the end of the report. He is the best pilot and is a climber. He can advise you on anything, is very reliable and a really nice guy. He offers free accommodation to his clients and if you are around during one of TAT's legendary barbecues just join in the fun. By pure good fortune we got back just as one was starting. It was a GOOD night!

Do aim to do most of your shopping in Anchorage. There are big supermarkets with a huge array of goodies. The Youth Hostel in town is fine for a few days whilst kitting up.

## 2. DIARY OF EVENTS:

22 - 29 May Yosemite (ascent of Zenyatta Mondata A5)

1 June Flew to Anchorage, stayed in the Anchorage Youth Hostel, bought food supplies from supermarket

2 June Bus to Talkeetna, flew out to Ruth Gorge.

3 June Set up BC

4 - 6 June Attempt on South Face of Mount Bradley failed due to extreme heat, rock and ice fall

7 - 9 June Attempt on South Face of Mount Dickie failed due to lack of safe line and mild conditions

11 - 12 June Bad weather

13 - 19 June Attempt on South East face of Mount Barrille ended at  $\frac{3}{4}$  height after Gore got hit in rock and ice avalanche, rope cut and Karo had near death experience. Full 60 meter rope stretchers climbed, up to New Wave A4 (Gore led one pitch that took 13 hours)

20<sup>th</sup> June Flew out of Mountain House

21<sup>st</sup> June Flew back home

## 3. BUDGET

- a) Flights to Anchorage return £1500
- b) Flights to Ruth Gorge return £400
- c) Food/fuel £250
- d) Equipment (hire of skis, skins and sledges) £500
- e) Insurance £300
- f) Miscellaneous £50
- g) TOTAL £3000

## 4. USEFUL CONTACTS AND INFORMATION

a) Talkeetna Air Taxi - Paul Roderick PO Box 73, Talkeetna, Alaska 99676 USA  
Tel: Toll Free 800 533 2219 Fax: 907 733 1434 Email: flytat@alaska.net

b) .Big Walls in Alaska . - Andi Orgler. A very useful article in the 1996 April edition of the German magazine Kletterern, by the king of Big Wall routes in the Ruth.

- c) American Alpine Journals - these are a great source of information, a collection of which can be found at The Alpine Club, 55 Charlotte Road, London. EC2A 3QT Tel: 0171 613 0755  
Look for articles by Jim Donini as he has done many FA's in Alaska
- d) Denali Overland - Reliable bus transport from Anchorage to Talkeetna. Tel: 001 907 733 2381  
or Talkeetna Shuttle Service Tel: 001 907 733 1725 . It is around \$40 per person one way
- e) REI (mountain shop co-op) 1200 West Northern Lights Boulevard, 99508 Anchorage, Alaska.  
Tel: 001 907 272 4565. Open Sundays 10 - 6pm. The other gear store in Anchorage is AMH  
(Alaska Mountaineering and Hiking). The owner is Paul Denkewalter - nice guy.
- f) The Anchorage Youth Hostel Tel: 001 907 276 3635 It's \$20 per person per night. The  
Snowshoe Inn is \$55 - 60 per night for a double room. Tel: 001 907 258 7669

## 5. NOTES

- a) Camp in the middle of the glaciers
- b) Get bamboo wands for glacier travel from your air taxi company
- c) Buy a big shovel in Anchorage
- d) Ski roped always and have your prussiks ready
- e) Stay on the aretes once on the face, the gullies are lethal
- f) Take high sun screen cream, light kit for glacier travel, and 25 ASA film
- g) Pay for an extra hour of flying time to scope out objectives
- h) Take snow stakes
- i) Bring alcohol!

## 6. CONCLUSION

We narrowly missed climbing a great line up one of the most spectacular faces in the Ruth Gorge, which is itself the widest glaciated valley in the USA. It was a good trip, but as ever, because we did not get a result we were very disappointed.

We both would go out again to Alaska, but we agreed it will not be our first priority. As Silvo said, even in Patagonia when it is good it is the best, whereas in Alaska because the weather is often simply wet and warm and the rock is rotten, for the discerning Big Wall alpinist there are better places. Having said that I am sure that if we had been successful we would have sung a different song.

Both Silvo and I would very much like to thank both the MEF and BMC for providing us with generous grants that made the expedition possible.

I would also like to thank the following people and companies for making the adventure a lot more enjoyable, and more importantly a great deal safer:

- a) Lowe Alpine (especially Clive Allen) for providing me with really functional clothing and rucksacks
- b) Andy Bowman at Mammut/Boreal UK for all our fixed and static rope
- c) Troll, especially Andy Perkins for very useful slings and etriers
- d) Terra Nova for the loan of a Super Nova tent which proved invaluable during long Alaskan storms

Jerry Gore  
November 1997