



THE BRITISH FORAKER TRAVERSE EXPEDITION 1997

MEF Reference 97/44

EXPEDITION REPORT

A mountaineering expedition to the Central Alaska Range of Alaska

5th MAY to 27th May 1997

**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 planned to make the first ascent of a new route on Mt Foraker. This new route was the central spur on the North face. Access to the North face is very problematical as in the past it has required access via a float plane to a remote lake on the Western boundary of the National Park. From this float lake, a three day walk would give access to the base of the face. The original plan was to climb an acclimatisation peak in the Chugach range, and then to fly directly into the float plane lake and to go like stink up the new line on the North face and then down the South East ridge, thereby making a traverse of the mountain.

Further research showed the potential to add a new dimension to the main ascent. To climb Mt Crosson on the North East side of Mt Foraker, to then descend the previously unclimbed West ridge of Crosson and thence to arrive at the base of the unclimbed Central spur on the North face of Foraker, acclimatised and ready to roll. If the Sultana ridge on Foraker was then used as a descent route (Crosson lies on the Sultana Ridge) then a food cache could be left on Crosson for the descent.

This is intended to maximise the potential for both acclimatisation and the opportunities presented by the weather patterns. The expedition would operate as a two person team and the expedition will begin in early May 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
Talkeetna Air Taxi
First Ascent

Objectives and summary achievements

Objectives

On arrival in Talkeetna, we met with two Alaskan climbers who had just completed the first ascent of 'Full Circle' our proposed new route on Mt Foraker. They had followed our plan of traversing Crosson to get to the North side of Foraker exactly.

Their ascent was made in Alpine style and over ten days in near perfect weather. Excellent stuff, but I could have cried when they told me. All those plans and then someone steals the march on us.

Tom Nonis was not interested in making the second ascent of a route on Foraker and wanted to look at either climbing the rarely repeated Infinite Spur or some new routes elsewhere in the range.

We decided to fly into the Ruth Gorge to look at a new route on Mt Bradley which would help with acclimatisation and to discuss options further from then.

After two days of bad weather we flew into the Ruth Glacier system with TAT Aviation and were dropped off in the Amphitheatre.

(i) **Mt Barrille** lies at the junction of the Western side of the Ruth Gorge and the West Fork of the Ruth Glacier. It has a very attractive North face of moderate difficulty and is regularly climbed. Given the bad weather report that we received on our flight in, we decided to climb this route immediately as it may be our only chance to climb for the next few days.

The route from the glacier gains 3500 feet in height to reach a summit of 7000 feet. The climb follows a short glaciated approach and consists of a long broad snow couloir between seracs, leading up the West ridge which is followed to the summit.

Summary achievements in order :

Mt Barrille - North face central couloir. Geoff Hornby and Tom Nonis made an ascent of this classic line in a one day round trip.

Team

The membership of this expedition consists of two very experienced cold climate alpinists.

Geoff Hornby

The expedition leader and planner. Geoff will be making his 8th expedition to either Alaska or the Yukon. His last 4 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.
- h. The ascent of the West ridge to the West summit of the Mooses Tooth.
- i. The 1st ascent of the South ridge of Mt Crosson.
- j. The 1st British ascent of the Sultana ridge on Mt Foraker.

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 30 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) as well as the Troll Wall.

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

TOM NONIS - 38 years old, Builder,

Important ascents to date :

- (i) South spur on the Ogre to summit pyramid,
- (ii) Shivling West ridge solo,
- (iii) Six routes on El Capitan including Nose, Zodiac, Salathe, Tangerine Trip and Triple Direct,
- (iv) Half Dome NW face in a day,
- (v) Supercouloir Direct in winter,
- (vi) Shea Jackson on the Droites,
- (vii) Alpamayo SW face.
- (viii) The 1st ascent of the Central Spur on the West face of Wood Peak in the Yukon.

Contact : 500 Summer Street, Arlington, Mass 02174 USA

Diary

5.5.97	Flew to Anchorage, slept at Airport.
6th	Bought food and gear and travelled to Talkeetna.
7th	Registered with Park Service and TAT aviation. Collected snowshoes and fuel.
8th	Bad weather.
9th	Flew into the Ruth Gorge.
10th	Climbed Mt Barrille.
11th onwards	Bad weather - drizzling snow and poor visibility.
15th	Skied down into Ruth Gorge with gear but turned back by the onset of more bad weather.
16th	Bad weather - drizzling snow and poor visibility.
20th	Nice morning, skied across to Mt Dan Beard and found up to 2 metres of fresh snow, avalanches everywhere. Turned back.
21st	Bad weather - drizzling snow and poor visibility..
25th	Flew out of the glacier system, the conditions were too poor to consider climbing. Probably the worst May for 10 years.
27th	Flew home.

Accidents and injuries

The members of the team were involved in no accidents during this expedition.

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 TAT 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.
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 2	= £ 1150
	Anchorage to Talkeetna return : £80 x 2	= £ 160
	Glacier flights : £240 x 2	= £ 480
	Glacier radio hire : £300	= £ 300
	Glacier snowshoe hire : £300	= £ 300

SUB TOTAL = £ 2390

FOOD AND FUEL	120 litres of Blazo	= £ 45
	Base camp and hill food	= £ 500

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
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SUB TOTAL = £ 2545

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 \$300	= £ 160
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MISCELLANEOUS AND CONTINGENCY	To cover bunkhouse accommodation in Talkeetna, food in Talkeetna, lighters, film, maps, photocopies, research costs.	= £ 400
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