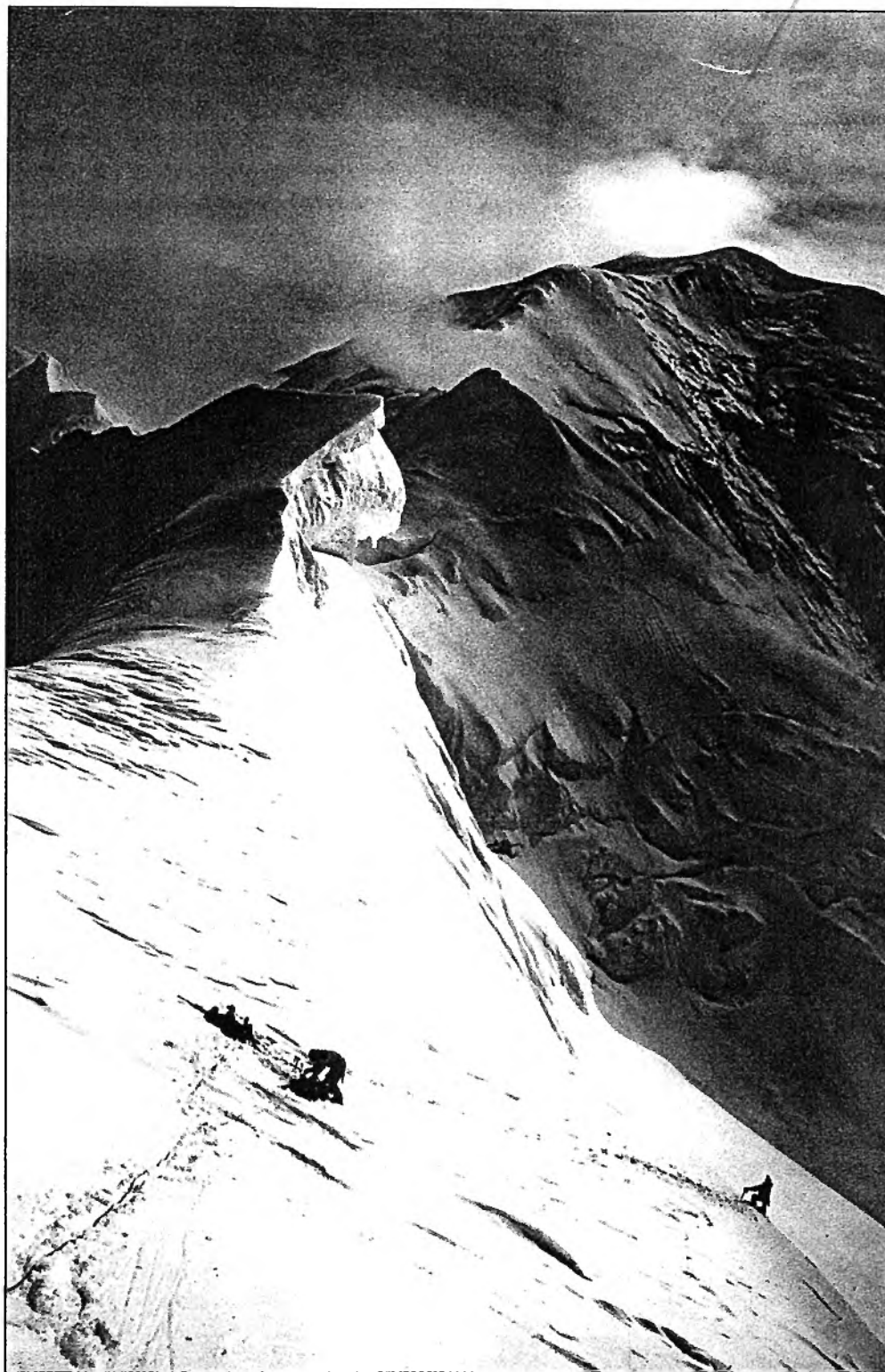


AC
001 27311

Expedition Report

British-Canadian St Elias 1998

Mt Wood - Mt Steele High-Level Traverse (*Millar's High Life*)



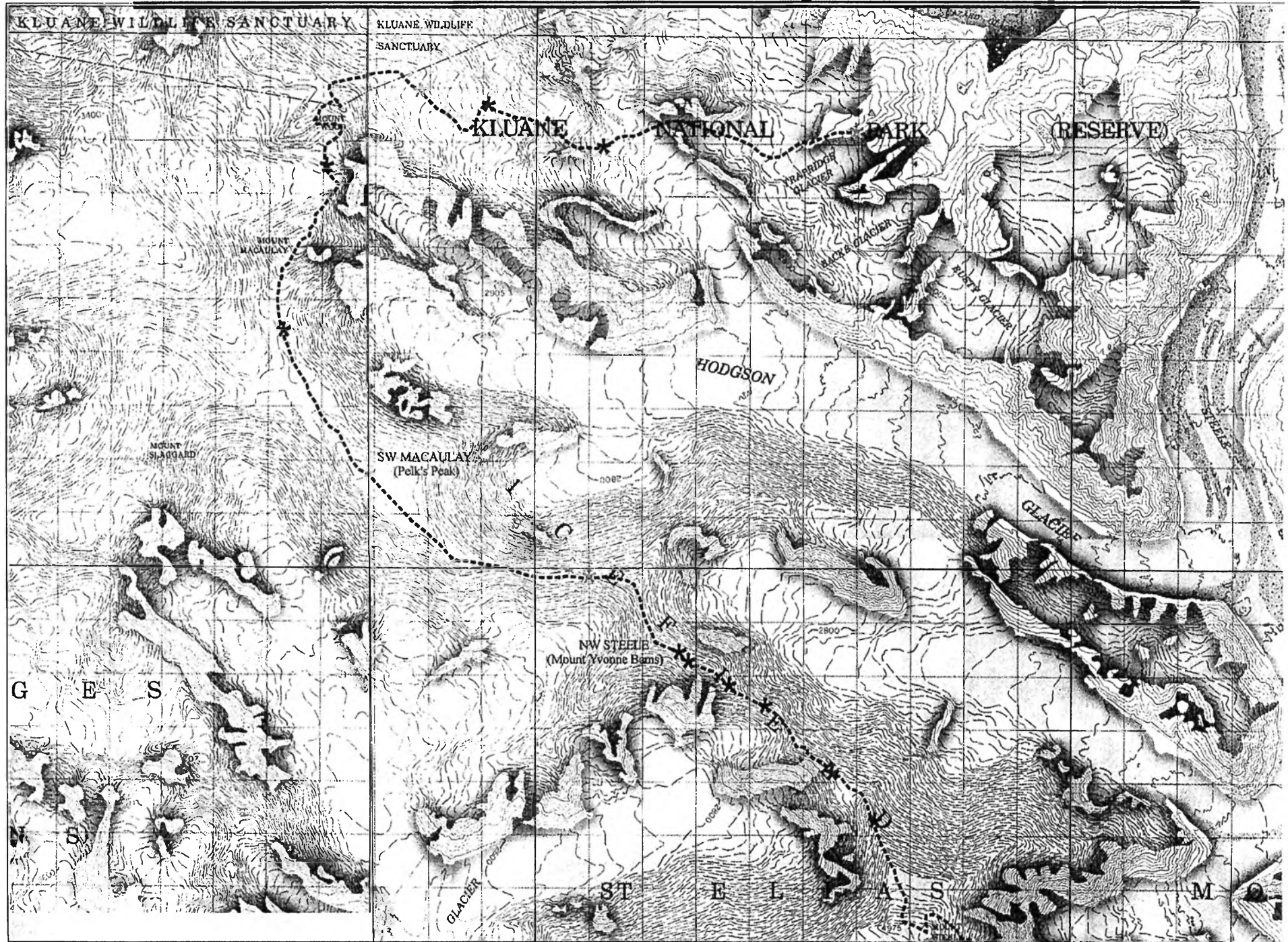
compiled & lead by Alun Hubbard (UK)
Jeremy Frimer (Canada) Dave Hildes (Canada) John Millar (UK) David Persson (Sweden)

98/48

alvafestival.ed.ac.uk
01970 871541

+445

Mt Wood - Mt Steele Traverse (Millar's High Life)



Adapted from: 1:50 000 first edition series 115 F/1 & 115 F/2

Summary & Route Description

Between 28 July and 15 August, 1998 we successfully climbed Mt Wood (4798 m), Mt Macaulay (4690 m), SE Macaulay (4420 m), NW Steele (4220 m) and Mt Steele (5073 m) via its unclimbed North Ridge. Of these peaks NW Steele and SE Macaulay were previously unclimbed, the latter representing the highest unclimbed peak in Canada for some time. Furthermore, the 20 km route from Mt Macaulay to Mt Steele via its North Ridge was also previously unclimbed and has been described by Don Serl and Roger Wallis (two leading west coast mountaineers) as the 'ultimate high-level project' in the St Elias (CAJ, 1993). During the 18 day traverse we spent six days ascending Mt Wood from Trapridge Glacier where JF, DP and JM were flown in to meet AH and DH who had spend the previous month at this glacier carrying out fieldwork. The ascent of Wood was relatively straightforward (carried out mostly on skis) and involved no considerable technical difficulties, just surmounting two sections (each about 300 m vertical) of icefall. During this time we were beset by bad visibility and high winds which forced two rest days and made route finding challenging.

The next 10 km section from Mt Wood through to SE Macaulay was also straight-forward and carried out during three days of exceptionally good weather (for the St Elias). Except for the moderately steep N face of Macaulay (45° with small sections up to 65°) we traveled mostly on skis and throughout the first 10 days of the expedition we each trailed a 'Krazy Karpet' roll-up sled (a novel and most splendid west coast innovation) which saved us from a fairly crippling load of food and fuel.

From SE Macaulay onwards difficulties increased considerably and progress slumped. The ridge honed down to a steep knife-edge with about a 1000 m of exposure either side and being draped by large, often, double cornices up to 20 m overhanging. Although not technical, the going proved quite tough, the cornices being unstable, of highly variable snow quality which was difficult to protect with no obvious 'safe' route. Furthermore, the weather deteriorated badly and we were buffeted by extreme winds. Difficulties increased as we approached the 'notch' demarking the beginning of the North Ridge of Steele. This section involved dropping 100 m on the SW side of the ridge in order to traverse some huge and highly unstable 'mushroom formations'. Regaining the ridge involved a 120 m pitch of 70° - 80° rotten snow/ice. More tight-rope walking followed with another section of about 300 m of highly corniced ridge (dubbed 'the cobra' due to the likeness to the fanned head) which involved traversing in very rotten snow, and steep sections (up to c. 75°) of fairly good snow/ice. Fixed belays were set up where appropriate but often our limit of two ropes (c. 100 m) required that we climbed together as often a good stance was not in the offing. Much of this section was protected by snow pickets setup in the 'bomber' T notch and ice screws which were somewhat more dubious. The five days on this section were slow going, fairly stressful but enjoyable and eventually lead us to the base of the unclimbed North Ridge of Steele, which compared with the problems getting to it, turned out to be a doddle. Only one section proved to be technical involving turning a large set of unstable cornices low down on the mountain via the NE side. This involved traversing a 75° snow/ice slope for some 200 m and a short vertical pitch to regain the ridge. Conditions underfoot were near perfect for the entire ridge which involved mostly 45° slopes with steeper sections up to 70° and enabled us to make rapid progress. A clear day with high winds (leading to DH and JM suffering with superficial facial frost-bite) forced us to take refuge in a crevasse/wind scope but the following day proved perfect for a quick ascent of the remaining 800 m and descend via a tricky and wind-slabbed SE face/ridge. Our last day, again under ideal conditions, involved dropping down the remainder of the SE ridge to the upper Walsh glacier and the blissful, gentle ski of some 25 km, accompanied by a beautiful St Elias sunset, to our rendezvous point with Andy Williams who flew us out the following morning.



THERE'S A MATE OF MINE, involved with some big, bad multinational or other, who's always banging on about "optimizing opportunity". I've never been totally sure of the merits behind this jargon, but it was something along these lines that I had in mind last July as I found myself involved for the second year running in a glaciology research project in the midst of the great St. Elias Range. Trapridge Glacier sits at the foot of the eastern face of Mount Wood; for two months I had trampled that glacier, hand-drilling three-metre-deep holes into its surface and inserting survey markers. It's a thankless task, not exactly thrilling, but it does give ample excuse to gaze longingly at that colossal face of Wood and its desolate summit, often shrouded by eerie lenticular clouds. The adjoining ridge, which sweeps southward across the horizon to a seriously foreshortened Mount Steele twenty kilometres away, felt almost near enough to touch. It looked hostile up there: stark; deep cold-blue against the crystal white lines of the mountain flanks; swept by long, snaking ribbons of spindrift weaving in slow motion under the harsh light of a late-summer Alaskan sun. It was also a highly seductive scene, especially so to a mind that had slowly unwound to a most basic level of activity with the uncluttered, simple life that accompanies routine fieldwork. The idea was there, I was there; it was a matter of... optimizing opportunity.

Dave Hildes, also working at Trapridge, was keen but maybe a tad lacking in experience — maybe very lacking even, never having put on a pair of crampons. But don't get me wrong: Hildes does not shy at a challenge. He has an audacious mind and a fine sense of the absurd, a much-underrated quality in this day and age. I'd take him anywhere, even to meet my mum. Besides all this, he's a bit of a powerhouse (a.k.a. "Thick Fucking Thighs") as a result of years of speed skating with the Psycho Buffaloes, and a penchant for loppets and other such strenuous (and daft) winter activities out there in Winnipeg. On a couple of mornings, we rose early to play around the steep, 100-metre ice cliff at the front of Trapridge, just to see how he would take to yet another (equally daft?) winter activity. Within an hour he was bombing up overhanging pitches of cruddy glacier ice with distinctly more verve than I had mustered; ignorance is bliss, the bastard.

The Mount Wood to Mount Steele High-level Ski

— Story by Alun Hubbard —



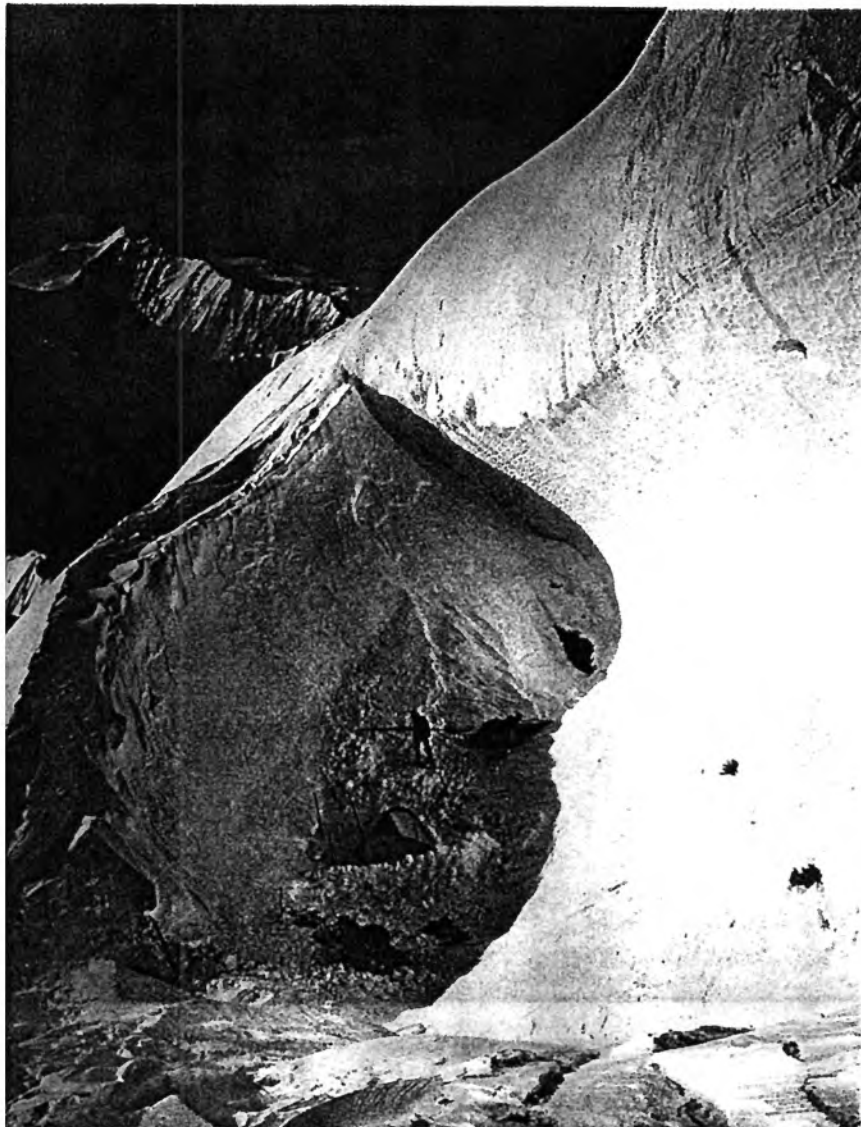
The unclimbed north ridge of Mount Steele. Photo: Alun Hubbard

Enthusiasm and strength go a long way; for the endeavour I had in mind, however, a little more mountain experience in the party might be prudent. After an hour on a very handy satellite phone, this came in the shape of three Vancouver-based lads: Jeremy, whom I'd accompanied on a couple of aborted winter outings; John, with whom I'd once talked about an outing; and another David, Swedish this time, whom I hadn't even met but whose reputation for highjinks on high mountains was unsurpassed. The Dream Team was in, had secured a car and the appropriate maps and was headed up the Alaska Highway for a bit of late-summer fun in the St. Elias.

DEALING WITH HELICOPTERS isn't an especially relaxing task. When you're flying out four tonnes of field equipment and personnel from Trapridge at \$20 per minute of flight time with a small budget, organization is paramount. On the penultimate return flight into Trapridge, I was getting more than a little anxious since, with the exception of the bits that constitute an SBX radio, none of our kit (or team, for that matter) had yet materialized. Curses flew — as did, fortunately, the Dream Team, complete with three weeks

of food, fuel, skis and climbing kit attached to the helicopter by duct tape, on that last flight (well done, Doug Maconan). Enthusiastic welcomes and introductions were made; the Dream Team was now fully assembled and ready for action. Hildes and I, still in fieldwork mode, were perhaps just a little overwhelmed by the enthusiasm that emanated from our newly arrived dynamic triad, but then these guys had been stuck in a car for the previous three days. The banter and orgy of roll-up consumption upon recovering my stash of tobacco after forced abstinence did much to quell this initial enthusiasm for activity, but David, our new Swedish acquaintance, was not to be deterred and with devilish determination set off up the glacier in a fading evening light with a huge load. He was indeed living up to his reputation — strong, quiet and perhaps not quite dealing with a full deck (Doug Maconan's description, not mine) — as he headed off in what was not exactly the right direction. Equally sporadic and highly entertaining scatological acts of random nuttiness from this man became a bit of a theme as the expedition unfolded.

Attention soon focused on the dismembered SBX-11 single-sideband radio and an uncharacteristically verbose note from Andy Williams at Kluane: "This radio — last



Taking shelter at 4220 metres on Mount Steele. Photo: Jeremy Frimer

one on the shelf — spent three weeks under water. Reassembly is simple...” Needless to say, we failed to get even a croak out of the thing. Fortunately, we had had the (uncharacteristic) good sense to pre-arrange a rendezvous at Walsh Col, off the southeast ridge of Steele, some 16 days hence. Unfortunately, we had not had the foresight to inform anyone of our intended route for getting to Steele via Wood and its adjoining high-level north ridge. But never mind; bollocks to that, we were committed, the race was on, and David came stumbling out of the cloud with what can only be described as a half-witted, maniacal grin spread across his face.

The next two days (July 29 and 30) were ones of realization as to the scale of our problem. After breaking camp with an urgency that would have made watching paint dry seem like a speed sport, we struggled, in very non-alpine style, with big loads, crazy-carpet sleds and skis up the bare ice on the back of Trapridge towards the Hodgson Glacier. Despite having surveyed this part of the glacier only five days previously and having spent two months staring inanely at this section of our route, in the low cloud I was utterly clueless as to where we were or

where we were going. It was unnerving to be so easily disorientated in an area that should have been so familiar.

WORKING OFF COMPASS bearings and circumnavigating large, ominous crevasses, we made slow progress towards a corner that provided access to the upper glacier and the ridge that hemmed in the Hodgson Glacier. I was elated to be on new and unfamiliar ground — the dull routine of fieldwork now out of my mind, replaced by a growing sense of excitement at the reality that I had managed to pull together. The scene, one of Himalayan proportions, revealed itself in snatches as the cloud lifted; the surging Hodgson, huge, humbling and broken, lay below. The somewhat fickle weather that evening was a precursor of much that was to come: an incredible sunset deteriorated into hail, sleet, snow and an electrical storm, followed by a rapid clearing and a starry night to finish. We’d gained about 500 metres in elevation, and the summit of Wood looked no closer.

Day 3 saw some interesting sections but slow progress. A rappel down the steep side of a disgusting, ice-cored moraine that flanked the upper Hodgson and was constantly collapsing and releasing huge blocks and slides of debris left us a little jumpy and the morning gone. A clear view ahead revealed a whole ring of torturous icefalls barring the way from the Hodgson and fully isolating the upper section of the mountain. A route was picked, and on skis we wove through more cavernous slots, headed for the section of icefall which looked least prone to avalanches from above. Visibility disintegrated again; having made even less progress than the previous day, we made the decision to camp. David, with his usual gusto, was not willing to give up, and so in zero visibility he, John and I blindly stumbled upward through the three hundred metres of icefall ahead. Thanks more, I suspect, to fluke than to mountain acumen, the route went, giving us a much-needed morale boost as we returned to the assembled camp and the nosh waiting below. In thick cloud, on a 45-degree slope of cruddy crust and with slots big enough to shake a stick at surrounding us, David, in his “chef from ‘The Muppet Show’” accent, informed us in all seriousness that it was “ideal ski conditions”. John and I nodded knowingly to one another, refraining from comment.

The next morning, after another not exactly swift start and a lot of MSR cursing thrown in for good measure, we retraced our route up through the first icefall. In failing visibility we then led off on skis up a steep ridge that, according to the map, would allow us to outflank the next set of icefalls. I found myself skiing across a fairly crusty 35-degree slope with the sinking realization that



Mount Wood. Photo: Paul Malon

there were monstrous, overhanging seracs poised above and what appeared to be an ice cliff and a monstrous slot below. Time for a short, sharp exit. A roll-up (I was thoroughly addicted by now and couldn't make a decision without the ritual) and perhaps a little patience were in order until we could at least see what we were heading into. Soon Hildes, John and I were skiing off around the foot of another huge series of seracs in an attempt to recce a way through the barrier. The next few hours until evening were nothing short of bliss as we threaded our way through these behemoths draped in wisps of cloud and mist and illuminated by the late afternoon sun burning through. The route appeared fairly tortuous, but we were euphoric upon successfully navigating this maze of precarious ice through to the upper plateau. Morale was astro as we retraced our steps with our sleds, which required a few short sections of hauling with ropes to overcome the steeper blocks. At 4000 metres, it was colder that evening, but with the light fading and an inspiring view of the Steele valley down to the Donjek in the far distance, we did not care to notice. Aspirations were high, with a good day and the main obstacles on Wood behind us, the summit ahead.

Day 5 hardly dawned: high winds, soaked in, and Jeremy with a headache. We procrastinated a lot, and then some more. Then, during a brief clearing, we made

a token gesture towards our goal by moving up about 200 metres in deteriorating weather. We were skiing by compass bearing and heading straight into the mush, hoping to find relatively level ground far enough away from the top pyramidal face of Wood, which was clad with seracs and snow ready to release. At some point, we stopped.

DAY 6 DIDN'T DAWN. We read, chatted, made roll-ups, speculated, read, played cards, smoked roll-ups, slept, made mind-bogglingly precise observations on the paths of feathers floating around the tent and then speculated some more, using the time wisely to develop our bladders' maximum capacities. There is a quote I like that Bill Tilman used to start off the account of his ill-fated Antarctic voyage: "Let us cease to consider what may happen, and what, when it shall happen will laugh at human speculation." What we didn't expect next was four days of superbly clear weather with relatively low winds, which is what we got. Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, the Dream Team rolled into action; by Day 10 we had summited Wood (4798 m), descended to its northern col (4200 m), summited Macaulay (4690 m), skied up its southeast peak (4420 m, first ascent), which Jeremy named "Pelk's Peak", and found ourselves over halfway

along our ridge, with life looking very rosy indeed. Even our SBX-11 started to warble; the sweet, dulcet tones of Andy Williams' Welsh accent provided a welcome alternative to the continual drone of climbing banter. Unfortunately, Andy couldn't receive us, but what the hell — we (well, John, actually) weren't carrying the four kilos entirely for nothing. Advice for would-be "social climbers": avoid expeditions with keen mountaineers, they will drive you round the bend. Even such potentially boundless topics as "How's the woman situation, J?" would provoke the profound response of "Ummmm, argghhh," followed by "Hey, Al, have you been to the Bugaboos yet? Just awesome... way out there!"

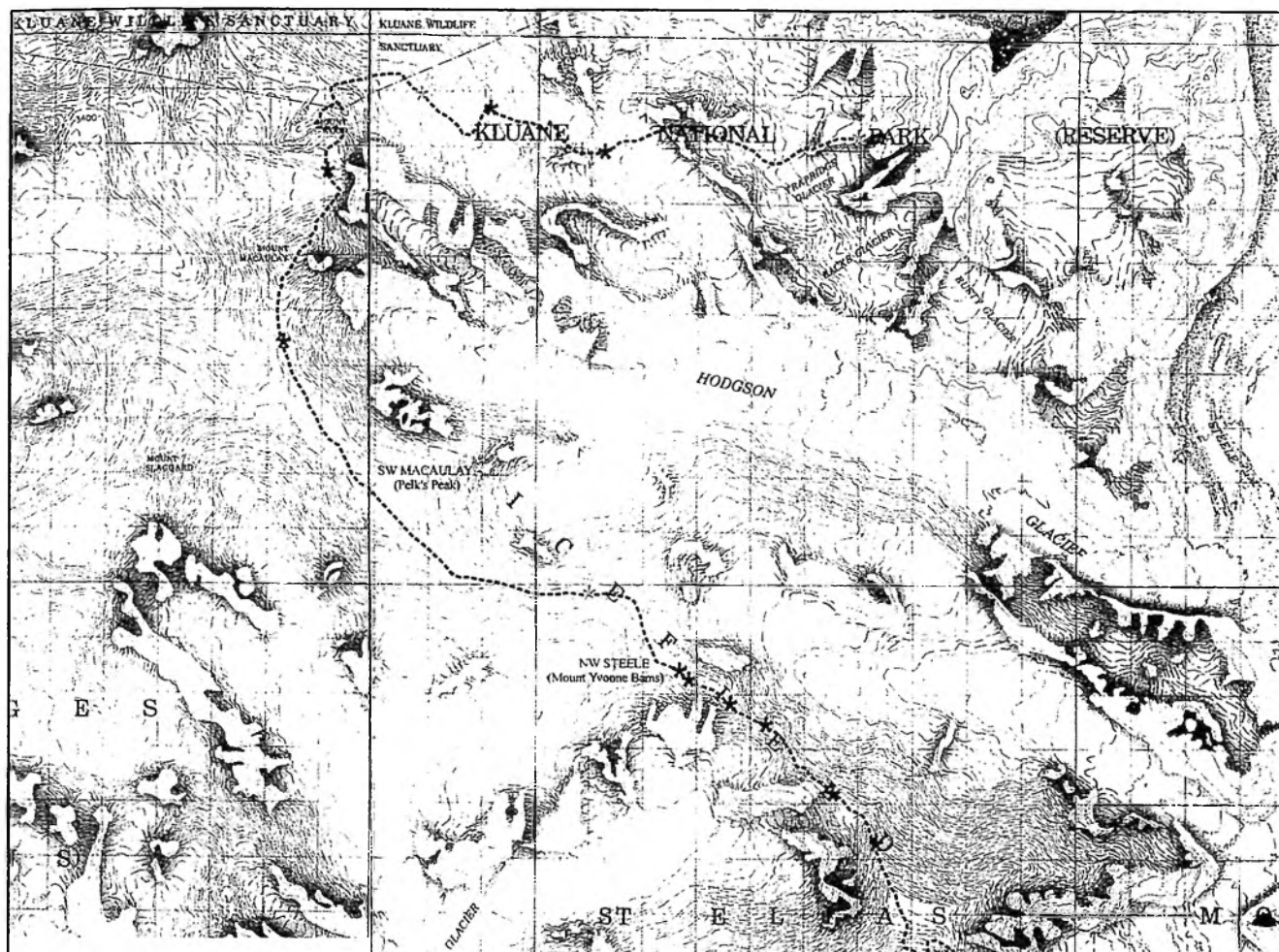
UN**TIL THEN**, there had been nothing particularly technical in the climbing; our ridge was broad, and the ascents had involved nothing more than sections of 45 degrees on snow conditions varying from firm to deep powder. A dicey moment was had jumping a wide slot whilst descending the south face of Wood. Hildes' sled (with a third of our food) was temporarily swallowed by the open slot, but Jonny-Boy, who was emerging as a bit of an all-round star-bar, jumped at the opportunity for en-glacial ice antics and was able to recover it from a small snow bridge some forty metres down. All said, we had been pretty lucky. However, the glimpses we'd had of the route ahead hinted that life might become a tad more interesting. The ridge seemed to drop away into an incredibly exposed and knife-edged gap draped with fantastic cornice formations before it began the stepped rise up to Steele. So far, we had been treated to a most gentle break-in — just to get acquainted.

Overall levels of anxiety were not eased the following day, when we found ourselves socked in by high winds and driving snow — another rest day. We still had an escape-route possibility if it all got too much, but in truth this looked equally hard and just as committing in terms of unknown territory. We had covered over 14 kilometres since the summit of Mount Wood, all of it above 4000 metres; given our pre-arranged rendezvous with Andy, turning back now didn't really seem like an option. In retrospect, I suspect that the bad-weather day forced us to shift up a gear. The next day, in decreased winds (but still with dreadful visibility) and in more deep snow, we waded a route up the unclimbed peak of "Northwest Steele" (4220 m), which I named Mount Yvonne Bams. Next, we hung a right and trudged for another kilometre along a tortuously corniced but not technically challenging edge. I called a halt when visibility deteriorated to the dangerous extent that I could no longer work out whether I was stepping onto firm ground or over the abyss. Despite our painful slowness, we had managed to salvage the day by making some progress. Day 12 was worse again: wind, shitty visibility and more driving

snow. Out of frustration and boredom, during a laughably brief lull in the day, JB and I emerged to do a bit of a recce ahead. I have never been quite so cold; whilst belaying JB down a step into the unknown, I sat, isolated in my own little world, and slowly descended into total numbness accompanied, quite surprisingly, by a sort of euphoria. JB eventually reappeared with the news that there was a good hollow below that was sheltered from the wind by an ice wall. A decision was made to move camp. So that day yielded a net movement of about 150 metres horizontal — not so good considering we had several kilometres of corniced ridge ahead and only six days of food left.

Day 13 was exhilarating! The wind dropped and visibility improved, giving us an inspiring, magical mystery tour as we threaded our way amongst a series of the most sublime and bizarre-looking snow and ice sculptures. The climbing was getting a little more technical, too, with sections of steep, spectacularly exposed ground to traverse and short, corniced steps to deal with. Our ridge eventually opened up into a broad, gently sloping bench that marked the end of the summit ridge of Mount Yvonne Bams and the beginning of the descent into "the Notch". Visibility deteriorated again; rather than push into unknown difficulties, we decided to camp whilst we could and to get an early night.

I awoke at 4 a.m. It was cold but windless. Hoarfrost coated everything in the tent; the atmosphere was alive with ice particles that stung the throat and nasal passages and sparkled magically in the light of my head torch. I was chilled even with two layers of fleece and a duvet jacket on inside my sleeping bag, and my body still ached from the previous day. I overcame the urge to retreat further into the depths and forced a look outside. My spirits soared; revealed was a crystal-clear, starry night and a fantastical sight: the first proper, close-up view of our objective, Mount Steele and its unclimbed north ridge. The vista unfolded towards the right, the expanse of the 4000-metre plateau extending across to Lucania, which looked just sublime as it stood bathed in moonlight with a few wisps of cloud clinging to her flanks. We were moving by 7 a.m., Jeremy leading off the descent, and soon were weaving about on the ridge, turning series of cornices on the left, then on the right and then wading in deep powder down sections of 45 degrees or more. The massive relief, along with the precariously unstable snow, made for a little worry, but all five of us were spread out along a hundred metres of rope, and snow pickets were placed appropriately. Again, we were making decent progress; by early afternoon we had arrived at what was obviously the beginning of the crux section of the traverse. "The Notch" consisted of about a kilometre of long sections of steeply exposed knife-edge draped massively with huge cornices — some extending out for tens of metres — and interspersed with small, "safe" platform



The route of the Wood-Steele Traverse with camps marked. Adapted from 1:50,000 first-edition series 115F/1 and 115 F/2.

areas. David led on and descended about a hundred metres down the right side before traversing moderately steep ground for some three hundred metres. Snow conditions were not ideal: deep snow prevailed, but the odd section of rotten firn was present. Protection was equally dicey. By mid-afternoon we'd traversed below the major difficulties of the Notch's main section and, sitting a hundred metres below and on the right-hand side, were in position to regain the crest of the ridge.

JOHNN LED AROUND a blind corner, and soon we were all out on a 65- to 70-degree slope of rotten snow underlain by rotten ice. The fact that we were all out on that slope together without a fixed belay made us feel a tad precarious, but JB was doing a grand job excavating half a metre of rotten crud in order to get a screw into solid ice below. It was a superb and arduous lead in classic "Scottish winter" (i.e. shit) ground conditions and with no good resting positions. All the while, scary-mad exposure down to the Chitina Glacier below kept us adequately entertained. JB was loving it; Hildes

was looking a little worried; and Jeremy, who had drawn the short straw and had only one axe for this section, was feeling positively kamikaze. It took about two hours to get us all back onto the ridge; by this time the wind had begun to pick up again, with the addition of a few snow flurries just to make things really uncomfortable. JB, who on gaining the top had promptly set up a much-desired fixed belay, was receiving a full-frontal onslaught and resembled an icicle. It was getting late and very cold, and we'd had a fine day. Despite being exposed, it didn't take much to convince us to get our tents up. The mammoth snow platforms and structures that we built for protection — "the Chitina viewing gallery" — soon had us warm and in rosy spirits. That night, realizing that Andy was actually hearing a click when we tried to transmit, we managed to devise a sophisticated code that James Bond would have died for: one click for "No," two for "Yes." Furthermore, by using this system to answer a random selection of questions asked by Andy, we managed to communicate that we were somewhere in the vicinity of Mount Steele. Morale was high.

DAVID AND I led the morning's proceedings as, bathed in warm sunlight, we finished off the last of the knife-edge difficulties of the Notch. A section of three corniced waves some ten metres high (dubbed "the Cobra") involved a forty-metre stretch of disgustingly rotten ridge edge. Postholing unexpectedly through a cornice with about a kilometre of nothing much below you is about the best aerobic workout around.

At last, the Dream Team was at the base of its objective — the north ridge. In comparison with the problems of the previous few days, it proved to be a doddle. David led the only surprise on it, taking to the left and traversing an exposed, sixty-degree slope for about a hundred metres to avoid a section of big, blocky cornices. John finished off the day with an inspired effort as he waded for two hours in deep snow and in failing visibility through a bizarre collection of ice blocks and sculptures to take us up to 3870 metres. We were now well established on the ridge and ready for the summit.

Day 16 was clear, but the winds were strong. Our campsite was out of the direct onslaught of the wind; after Jeremy led off, however, it soon became apparent that things were rough — and looking worse higher up. Streams of spindrift were streaking across the ridge, and we were getting blasted. At about 4150 metres, I took over the lead, totally absorbed by the absurdity of the situation. I could lean out at some stupidly big angle over the steep drop on the southwest side of our ridge and be completely supported by the force of the wind. It was a scream. Eager to press on and keep warm, I failed to notice Hildes pulling on the rope (the rope between us was whipping around frantically in the wind) and waving his axe. Eventually I realized there was more than just high wind resistance holding me back, and I retraced my steps (leaning to the left now) back to the group. Hildes and John were developing facial frostbite, and we were all suffering from numb feet to various degrees. I had noticed a large scoop formed below a cornice on the windward side of the ridge a few hundred metres back so I turned around and tentatively entered it, probing as I went.



On the summit of Mount Wood. The line of the traverse went from right to left.

The effect of the scoop was magic. Inside, we were almost completely sheltered from the wind roaring past over the crest, so we were at least able to hear ourselves and discuss the plan. Realizing how everyone was suffering, we decided without difficulty to stop and set up a tent.

The wind did not abate all day, and by evening we were organized and had even dug out a snow cave in order to tune into SBX "Radio Wales" in relative quiet. It was crucial to get through to Andy that night and postpone our pickup day (the next day) near Walsh. At 6 p.m., Andy came through fine and clear. As a postscript to our rather one-sided "conversation", I was determined to get our location across, so before closing off I started frantically tapping our grid reference: 3-6-3-7-5-5. Andy, a quick thinker, picked up immediately:

"You've got something else to tell me?"

Click, click! 3-6-3-7-5-5!

"It's a number?"

Click, click! 363755!

"Hang on, I'll get a pen... Right, start again."

363755!

"Is it 363755?"

CLICK, CLICK! CLICK, CLICK! (I'm ecstatic by now.)

"Hmmm, so what could it be? Is it important?"

Click, click!

"Well, let's see... It's got to be a phone number... A girlfriend... You want me to tell her you're not going to be out on time."

Even now, I'm still unsure if he was taking the piss or not, but eventually I gave up, feeling quite bemused.



The dome on the near right is "Pelk's Peak", with Steele right of the climber, and Logan far right.

The next day was a dream. The wind dropped overnight, and an early start got us fairly motoring up the remainder of the ridge. Conditions underfoot were generally firm and the climbing straightforward, with nothing exceeding 45 degrees. By about 1 p.m. we were at the end of the ridge and approaching the summit. I wanted Hildes (who was getting a fine initiation into committed mountaineering and had taken everything in his stride) to lead this last section so that each of us in turn could be first up one of the five peaks we had climbed. In perfect conditions — windless and sunny — the mountain fell away below us and a fantastic vista of the St. Elias unfolded.

We spent an hour on the summit of Steele, basking in that very elusive and ephemeral euphoria that accompanies the end of sustained commitment and struggle into the unknown. I recall it clearly; it was all so good... very good. We took a glance at the route down the southeast face. It didn't look too taxing, and I finished the last of my tobacco.

THUS IN HIGH SPIRIT and shambolic disarray, the team set off down the southeast face with our minds on... well... I couldn't tell you, to be honest. However, as 2000 metres of air dropped sickeningly over a windslabbed, crevassed and steepening slope, it became evident that the descent was not quite the Sunday tea party I'd imagined. I decided that the matter needed to be taken in hand. With the detached authority of Winston Churchill addressing the nation in its final

hour, I told the Dream Team in less concise but somewhat more expressive words to sort itself out before we all ended up at the bottom of the face. Then, showing the kind of panache that would make Mr. Bean seem like a contender for the leading role in a spaghetti western, I promptly stumbled arse over tit into a hidden crevasse and my moment of leadership glory was lost forever. The point had been made, though, and our descent continued somewhat more prudently.

We pushed on till dark to get as low as we could; we were short on food and

were ready to just get out. Aside from a prolonged encounter with a crevasse (which reached comical proportions as David exclaimed "Watch me! I swing!"), we reached safe and stable ground at 4000 metres without a hitch. That evening's descent was accompanied by a gorgeous sunset illuminating the colossal Logan massif, fifty kilometres to the south — a lasting finale to an inspired, perfect day.

As we lifted off the Walsh Glacier in Andy's Helio-Courier on August 15, my mind was at last released from the great St. Elias; detachedly, I mused over the reality of the previous few weeks. I glowed inwardly with pride at having brought this apparently random group together. It had been so focused and motivated and just hadn't needed leading. Kilometre after kilometre of steep, untrodden, corniced ridge had challenged our technical ability as well as our wits... Ever-present had been the fear that an impassable section loomed ahead. Yet climbing past "Cobra Cornice" was pure triumph. "Living the High Life" was an exacting yet rewarding experience snatched in the nick of time from the onset of autumn. *Opportunity optimized!* ▲

Millar's High Life. *New high-elevation traverse connecting Mount Wood to Mount Steele (unclimbed north ridge) via Mount Macaulay, "Pelk's Peak" and "Mount Yvonne Bams" (two first ascents).* Alaskan Grade 6, WI3. Alun Hubbard, Jeremy Frimer, Dave Hildes, John Millar, David Persson. August, 1998.

Accounts:***Transport:***

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 2 x rtn car trips (Vancouver - Kluane Base): | \$900.00 |
| 1.1 hours helicopter (TransNorth) Kluane - Trapridge: | \$1350.00 |
| 2 x rtn flights (Icefield Ranges Expeditions) Kluane - Walsh Col: | \$1060.00 |

Equipment:

| | |
|-------------------------------|----------|
| Stretch Dome Expedition: | \$800.00 |
| 1 x MSR GXX2: | \$100.00 |
| 2 x snow pickets: | \$40.00 |
| 5 x Krazy Karpets & grommets: | \$25.00 |

Food & Fuel:

| | |
|--|----------|
| 100 x man days of expedition supplies: | \$495.00 |
| 15 li of coleman whitegas: | \$30.00 |

Permission:

| | |
|----------------------|----------|
| 5 x permits: | \$250.00 |
| 3 x landing permits: | \$90.00 |

Total: **\$5,240.00**

Funds:

| | |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| Mount Everest Foundation: | \$1,300.00 |
| British Mountaineering Council: | \$1,200.00 |
| Alun Hubbard: | \$740.00 |
| David Hildes: | \$500.00 |
| David Persson: | \$500.00 |
| Jeremy Frimer: | \$500.00 |
| John Millar: | \$500.00 |

Total: **\$5,240.00**

Acknowledgments:

We are extremely grateful to both the Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council for contributing their name and financial support to this last minute endeavour in the Canadian Arctic. A special thanks to Bill Ruthven at the MEF for his patience and tolerating the level of chaos at which I operate and finally to Andy Williams (Radio Wales) at Kluane for high level entertainments and keeping an eye out.

Postscript:

On 24 May, 1999 David Persson fell to his death whilst telemarking down Liberty ridge of Mt Rainier. The name of that ridge seems appropriate and his enthusiasm, drive and outlook will be tenderly missed by all of us.