

99/12



Report

of the

British Alaska Alpine Fest 1999

by Dave Wills

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Introduction

From late April to Late May of 1999, Dan Donovan and Dave Wills (leader) based themselves on Thunder Glacier on the south side of Mt Hunter in the McKinley National Park.

Primary objectives were to make first ascents of both the North Face of Thunder Mountain (10,880) and the West Buttress of Mt Hunter (14,573 ft). Unfortunately attempts on both these routes were unsuccessful. It is our belief that they are achievable objectives under more favourable conditions.

As a consolation, however, the team did make the first ascent of a significant new variation to the West ridge of Mt Hunter, though failed to summit due to dangerous snow conditions. They also completed a traverse of Mt Hunter via the South West ridge to the South summit and down the the West ridge via the new variation in 48 hours.

Acknowledgements

The expedition wishes to thank the following who gave invaluable assistance to the expedition:

- Mount Everest Foundation
- British Mountaineering Council & UK Sports Council
- Geoff Hornby, for the loan of base camp equipment
- MacPac, for trade price equipment

Travelling

Left Manchester by Plane on 25th April arriving early on the 26th at Anchorage, then onward to Talkeetna (see details of the shuttle service below). The 26th was spent organising and we flew into Thunder Glacier with TAT (see details below) on the morning of the 27th. We established our camp a few yards from where we landed at approximately 6,750 ft.

Whilst we had a pre-arranged default date for pickup from the glacier, the actual pickup by TAT was arranged during a check-up visit (prompted by report of an accident on the South Face of Thunder Mountain). We flew back to Talkeetna late on the 23rd May and out of Anchorage on the 28th.

Copying

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The Climbing

Mt Hunter, West Ridge variation first ascent (named the "Ramen Route")

We arrived on the glacier in reasonable weather but being travel weary, needed a bit of a warm-up climb to gain some fitness and shake off the cobwebs. Last year I had spotted a potential new variation to Mt Hunter's west ridge so as soon as the camp was established we made the 5 mile trek to camp below the south side of the west ridge and at the foot of an ice-fall protecting a glacier basin.

28th April

Climbed a straight forward 1500 ft couloir then traversed around a little and dropped 500 ft into the basin. We walked about one mile up the basin to below the first of a series of rock and snow ribs leading up to the west ridge (see picture below). We spent the remainder of the day camped at just below 8,000 ft observing the options and resting.

29th April

We decided that conditions were good enough that rather than climb one of the ribs, a prominent couloir⁽¹⁾ would make speedier climbing and although we experienced soft snow, we gained the ridge at 11,250 ft after 4 ½ hours. We then continued on to the plateau at 13,000 ft arriving at approx 2pm. Lacking the fitness to summit that day, we made our camp only to have a storm arrive during the afternoon.

30th April

Spent the day in the tent. Storm abated late in the afternoon, though visibility was not sufficient for a summit attempt.

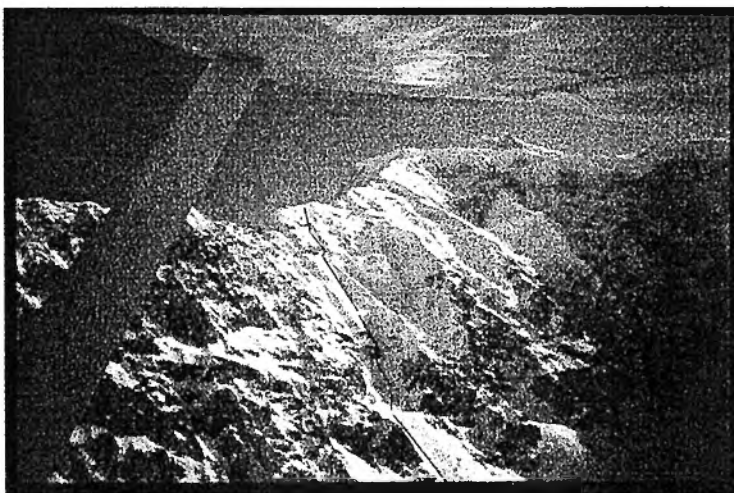
1st May

An early start in a cool wind (-30 °C). We headed off for the summit but turned about at approximately 13,800 due to unstable wind-slab. We returned to our tent then descended the ridge, continuing into the basin with the lower part of the couloir being in less than ideal condition. We waited in the basin for the remainder of the day as a British party camping on the ridge at 11,300 had decided to follow us out.

2nd May

Climbed out of the basin and returned to camp.

(1) The central section of the ridge has a long flattish corniced section which is very rocky on it's south side. After this it climbs steeply to an icy shoulder after which easier snow slopes lead to the plateau. The couloir gains the ridge at the top of this shoulder, thus avoiding all of the difficulties of the ridge making a 2 day ascent to the north summit very reasonable with full retreat on the third day. Several parties climbed to the summit from a camp at 11,300.



Mt Hunter's west ridge and Nth Summit with the Ramen Route marked

Thunder Mountain, North Face attempted first ascent

After our return from Hunter's west ridge, there was a period of unstable weather (with some new snow). We also spent some time observing the avalanche and serac activity on Thunder Mtn and prepared a track as far as the bergschrund.

13th May

Presented with a gorgeous morning we headed off to Thunder Mtn. The lower slopes were climbed relatively quickly with mainly good conditions including some good ice. As the ground steepened ($65^{\circ}+$) ice was replaced by crusted sugar snow and with very poor or no protection – the first of these pitches found a belay with 2 metres of rope remaining and no protection for 100 ft of $70^{\circ} - 85^{\circ}$ climbing. During this time we experienced a lot of minor spindrift activity; this was unexpected and due no doubt to the day being much warmer than previously experienced. We continued on for another 100 ft but with no viable runners and the ground becoming very steep, we felt the risks to be unjustifiable and opted to fashion a retreat. We had reached a high-point of approximately 8100 ft, barely 950 ft above the bergschrund.

It took considerable time to arrange a usable anchor but eventually the descent began. During the second rappel, a serac peeled off from the top of the mountain (as observed by climbers on Hunter's SW ridge) and funnelled down an adjacent chute; unfortunately the avalanche was rather large and overflowed onto the part of our route which we were currently descending. Fortunately nobody was hurt and we were able to continue the return to our camp, somewhat shaken.



North Face of Thunder Mountain



Lower half showing line to high point

Mt Hunter, West Buttress attempted first ascent

14th May

The following day was spent resting and drying kit. With the weather still excellent, we decided to turn our attentions to the rock buttress.

15th May

We made an early start and with reasonable snow conditions, travelled around to the adjacent glacier and gained the foot of the rock buttress proper by 10 am. We initially climbed a short distance up the right side to gain a snowy traverse back left (not visible in the pictures) to the foot of a corner system on the front of the buttress (chosen for looking less icy). From this point we climbed 6 hard pitches (using 60 metre ropes), firstly on very mixed icy ground (one solid Scottish 6 pitch), with the pitches becoming progressively less icy. The last two pitches were serious climbing on steep exfoliating slabs. One fall was



taken, because of the fragile rock. Some easy snow/ice then lead to a snow band at half height with the time now mid-night. It took a further hour to find and fashion a suitable bivouac.

Light snow fell on and off during the climb, continuing into the night.

16th May

We made a late start, with snow falling more heavily. The way ahead looked to be difficult and our first attempt at a way forward. The only feasible way ahead looked to be hard rock-climbing and with snow now falling heavily, we were hesitant. We were also very weary of being caught on the route in bad weather as finishing over the summit, as intended, would only be possible in good weather and the descent would quickly become too dangerous due to considerable avalanche risk – the approach is serious even in good conditions. We decided to retreat and spent anxious hours descending from the buttress and getting down the narrow glacier to safe territory.



Buttress viewed from SW ridge, with line marked



Dan Donovan climbing the slabs

Mt Hunter traverse

Having failed on our two objectives and considering conditions to be unsuitable for another attempt, we now had to consider alternatives. We decided to climb the South West ridge of Mt Hunter which several teams had failed on during our stay on the glacier. In addition, we decided to carry snow-shoes with the aim of completing a traverse of the mountain if weather permitted.

20th May

We left camp at 3:20 am and made steady progress, arriving at the top of the ridge around noon having only needed to belay the leader on two short sections high on the ridge. We traversed onto the plateau for a quick brew then summited the south Peak at 2pm. By this time the weather had deteriorated considerably and we debated whether or not to continue.

We decided to continue on the basis that we could retrace our steps if unable to find the way across in the clouds and also because we had prior and recent knowledge of the west ridge. Fortunately, whenever it mattered, there was adequate visibility or the cloud cleared after only a short wait and by 5 pm we were underneath the North summit but feeling extremely tired.

We were too tired to continue to the summit and so another debate ensued; this time whether to wait and hope the weather held for a summit bid in the morning or to begin the descent. With the weather looking very threatening, we opted for the later and began a slow descent in white-out conditions with steady snow falling. We eventually camped at 11,300 near the top of our new variation, the Ramen Route.

21st May

We left quite late but cloudy conditions, initially with light snow falling, meant that the slopes of the Ramen Route were in surprisingly firm condition, only getting soft in the lowest section. Upon reaching the basin, we rested the afternoon in sunshine (sadly not breaking through the thick clouds above) and enjoyed a leisurely dinner while waiting for the sun to leave the lower couloir. We started off at 7:30 but deep soft snow still made progress into the main descent couloir extremely slow, though once gained the snow was considerably firmer and the descent rapid. We returned to camp in steady snow fall, arriving at 1:30 am.

Accounts

<u>Expenditure</u>		<u>Income</u>	
Travel	1,740	MEF	1,000
Food & stores (incl fuel)	860	BMC & UK Sports Council	2,300
Insurance	534	Member contributions	502
Equipment including hire (see below)	418		
Miscellaneous, administration, etc	250		
	3802		3,802

Snow shoes, ski-poles, sleds and radio were all hired from TAT, from whom we also obtained wands and the coleman fuel.

Weather & Conditions

By Alaskan standards May weather was outstanding (though more unstable after 20th May). Due to the prevailing weather, however, Mt Hunter, whilst experiencing some excellent days, was almost constantly enshrouded by a band of cloud which hung around the mountain, most particularly around the steep walls in a 3000' band below the summit plateau. This cloud usually precipitated snow and it was particularly frustrating as Mt Foraker (and Denali) was usually clear. Much of the time, Thunder Mtn (a satellite of Hunter) was also affected by this cloud. This made it very difficult to judge exactly what the weather was doing, or how much snow to expect, especially when engulfed in cloud.

This phenomena aside, we experienced two mildly bad spells of weather, each bringing about 6 inches of snow.

Initial temperatures were bracing with 20 - 25° below overnight down on the glacier (7000') but they warmed up by a good 10 degrees, virtually overnight, at the beginning of May. At the end of the trip, overnight temperatures at basecamp barely reached -5°, while day-time temperatures in the sun were scorching (though much cooler in the shade).

During May, it there are 22 hrs of day-light, with dusk between 1 am and 3 am. A torch is almost unnecessary.

Waste disposal

Human waste was disposed of in a crevasse at the side of the glacier, while all other waste was sorted and returned to Talkeetna.

Useful Information & Contacts

Shopping

Food

The best place for food shopping is either in Anchorage or Wassilla (enroute to Talkeetna) where there are several all-night supermarkets (including Safeway), though these don't have quite the same range as UK shops; the most notable difference is the "low in fat" labelling of everything and the lack of decent instant soups (poor range and very low calorie). Personally I take instant soups and custard from the UK.

Talkeetna has two small shops for minor food items.

One recommended item to search out is Pilot Bread, a monster cracker packed with calories which helps fill that lunch-time gap at basecamp which is so often forgotten about.

Equipment and Gas

Again, Anchorage is probably the best place to buy equipment, with REI and Alaska Mountaineering shops within 100 yards of each other. Talkeetna has two shops with limited supplies, though these tend to run out early in the season. Gas can be bought at either location (with luck) though the best option is probably to book some in advance through TAT – make sure you specify 70/30 butane/propane mix as a lot of the gas about is only 85/15.

Some useful items to take

Most people think of Alaska as being cold, and while this can be true, the middle of the day on the glacier can be extremely hot so don't forget your sun protection, i.e. lots of suncream, glacier shirt and the thing I missed most, some long cotton trousers.

Transport

Shuttle

This is an easy means of travelling the 100+ miles between Anchorage airport and Talkeetna.

Currently the best operator is Talkeetna Shuttle Service who provide an excellent service, meeting planes by arrangement. It is run by Joel Rardin & Julia Stephens, who can be booked in advance by phone, fax or email and costs \$40 per person each way.

Contact: Talkeetna Shuttle Service

PO Box 468

Talkeetna, AK 99676

Phones: USA, (907) 733 1725, toll free on (1 888) 288 6008, fax (907) 733 2222

Email: tshuttle@alaska.net

Web site: <http://www.alaska.net/~tshuttle>

Ski-plane

Paul Roderick's TAT (Talkeetna Air Taxi) is recognised now as the leading climbers choice and this was emphasised during our stay on the glacier. Paul is one of the best glacier flyers around and will get you safely into places where many other pilots can't land. In addition to this Paul is a climber himself and takes an interest in your climbing and your safety; this was illustrated by several visits to check up on us and also a social visit with pizza and beer.

Contact: Talkeetna Air Taxi

PO Box 73

Talkeetna, AK 99676

Phones: USA, (907) 733 2218, toll free on (800) 533 2219, fax (907) 733 1434

Email: flytat@alaska.net

Permissions

No permits are required for mountains outside the wilderness area and within this permits are only required for Foraker and Denali. These permits, which cost \$125, need to be booked in advance (60 days before the trip, I believe) with a \$25 deposit, though I was told independently that it is possible to book up to 12 months in advance (i.e. to climb before the end of that period) without confirming the exact date or nature of the climb – this should be looked into further by interested parties.

New Route Potential

Numerous further viable opportunities exist for new routes in the area, including the North side of Mt Providence (east of Thunder Mountain), in the basin of the Ramen Route and also near the West Buttress attempted route. All, though, require some consideration of the risks from avalanche or serac fall.

