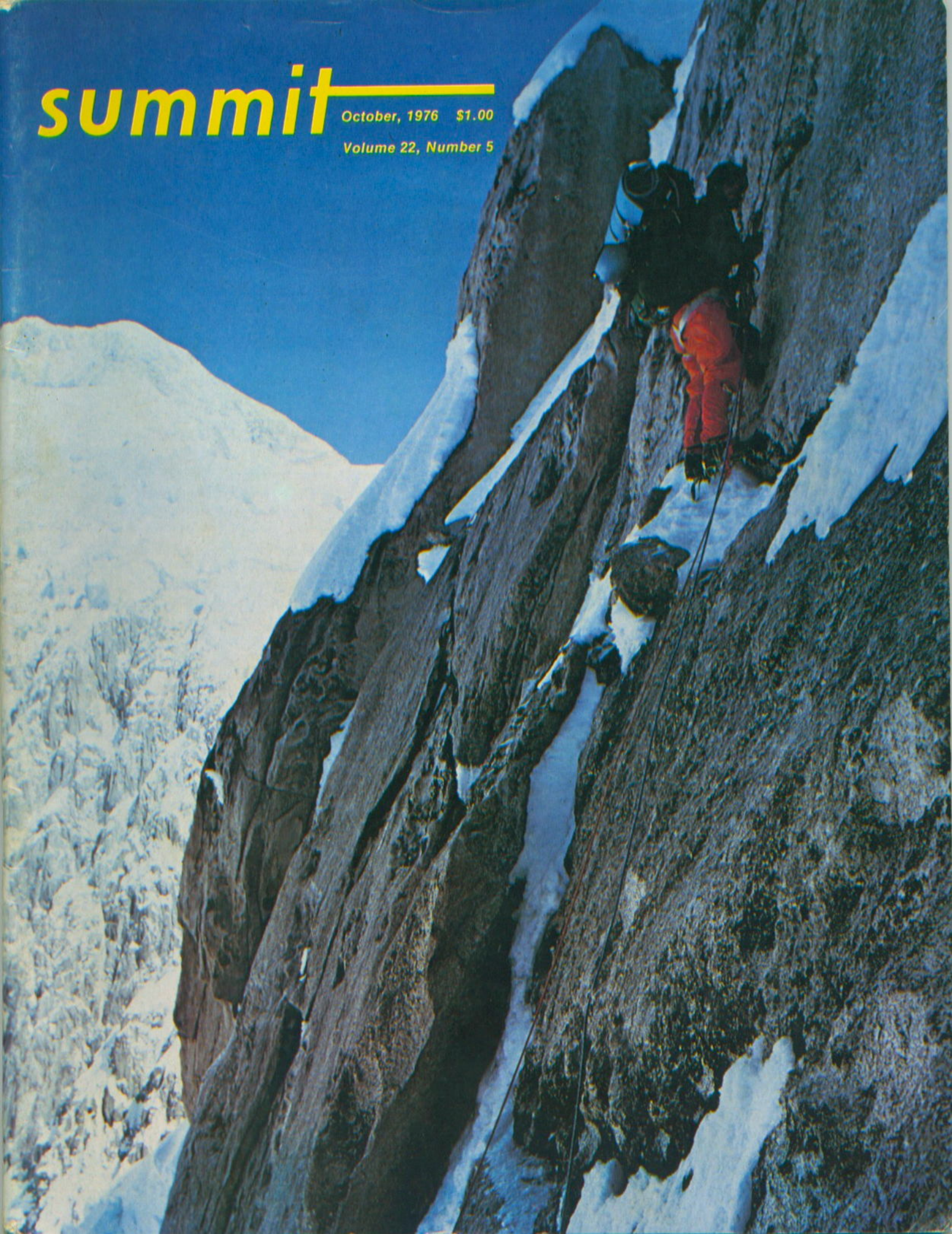


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*Climbing on the ridge
between camps I and II. The
climbing here was traversing on
hard ice overlain by two
inches of snow.
Thuermer Photo*

MT. MCKINLEY TRIPLE INDIRECT - - -

42 days and a new route on Denali

By Peter Metcalf

As I stood solemnly on the west fork of the Ruth Glacier and watched our pilot, Cliff Hudson, disappear into the misty clouds, a very empty and queasy feeling settled into the pit of my stomach. Before me steep walls and fluted ridges rose up at unbelievable angles in numerous one thousand-foot sweeps. All were plastered by huge hanging glaciers, menacing cornices and weird snow formations. My initial reaction was one of fear, and instinct told me to escape, for I was mentally and physically overwhelmed by what I saw. It is always hard to find courage and strength when confronting such an awesome adversary for the first time. Flying in, unlike slower overland approaches, allows one no time to adjust to the massive scale of the new environment. But last winter, while recovering from a knee operation that prevented me from doing any serious climbing, I had imagined just this sort of wild alpine terrain with true excitement. Unfortunately, my homespun fantasies were abruptly dispelled by the stark reality of the frozen landscape. But man is adaptable and emotion soon changed from fear to one of awe and respect.

Three years earlier I had climbed Mt. Robson's Kain Face under the expert tutelage of John Waterman who was just back from the successful first ascent of Mt. Huntington's East Ridge and his glowing stories filled my mind with desire. John had caught my envy with his account of how

the members had climbed in Yosemite as a pre-expedition warmup. With this in mind, our expedition got underway. In late April, Henry Florschutz and I packed up his old '66 Dodge with gear and headed hopefully westward to the mecca of big wall climbing. In Yosemite Valley we were met by the expedition's third member, Angus Thuermer. Springtime in the valley was beautiful and successful ascents of Half Dome and El Capitan were enjoyable.

In early June, the three of us reloaded the sagging Dodge for the long drive to Alaska. Amazingly, we were able to find space for ourselves after forty days' supply of food, gear and hardware had been packed. With boxes piled high on the roof and spare tires lashed over the trunk and hood, the car looked like something out of the *Grapes of Wrath*.

By the time the last dusty section of the Alaska Highway rolled by, we were competent at changing blowouts. At the Anchorage Airport we picked up the expedition's fourth member, Lincoln Stoller. We had two days of nervous waiting in the legendary Alaskan frontier town of Talkeetna. This gave us just enough time to make final preparations on our gear and pack the food into forty separate bags.

Our objective had not been definitely set when pilot Hudson dumped us directly below Huntington's East Ridge. Though not totally committed to



Henry Florschutz on the steep snow and ice just below Camp II at 11,000 feet. Thuermer Photo



Camp II at 11,100 feet on the Reality Ridge. Cornice-glacier, where Camp III at 12,100 feet, was placed, can be seen in top center. Photo by Author



Map courtesy of Bradford Washburn

a route, the south side of McKinley, with its incredible array of jagged peaks and massive relief, seemed like the perfect area for the type of climbing we were looking for. The criteria was a technically challenging and unclimbed route, and we would be restricted by our own ability and a desire to climb in a semi-alpine style, i.e., fixing and cleaning the climb in sections so that we could use our limited supply of rope and hardware several times over. After a rather spirited debate we finally came up with a unanimous vote and chose McKinley's unclimbed western leg of the Southeast Spur as our objective. The leg rose almost directly up from our landing site at 7,500 feet and joined the Southeast Spur at 13,100 feet.

The gear was relayed a short distance through some crevasses and Camp I was established at 7,900 feet at the foot of the leg. On June 21 we were ready to start the actual climbing and hopefully fix ropes all the way to the ridge crest at 10,100 feet, where we planned to place Camp II. Those were the plans, but we were soon to learn the true reality of this ridge.

The first day was not encouraging. Temperatures were above freezing with snow conditions on the initial slopes so rotten that it took hours to climb just one pitch, with Henry breaking through to his neck. The snow was substanceless, consisting of what seemed like millions of tiny ball bearings stacked tenuously upon one another, due possibly to the lack of a spring thaw. We decided that by climbing at night, with its colder temperatures, and using our small Sherpa snowshoes discernible progress might be made. (Snowshoes were not worn the first day due to the steepness of the face and the rock and ice that interspersed it.) Discouragement gave way to despair during the following three evenings. Each night we would awaken at 7:30 only to glance out at a dreary whiteness and the monotony of constantly falling wet snow. Several small slides came down at this time, with one wiping out our latrine as it passed within a few feet of the tents.

On the evening of June 24 the storm broke, and the sight of clear skies acted like a shot of adrenalin on our sedated bodies. Our tactic from here to the top of the spur was to have one pair lead and fix ropes while the other two followed with heavy loads. The climbing and stocking of Camp II on the ridge crest took several days and con-

sisted of varying amounts of moderately easy rock and a few little gullies of ice. I was amazed at the beauty of several small flowers that managed to grow in some of the ice and snow-filled cracks of the rock. Moving night turned out to be the finest evening thus far. The air was crisp, cold, calm and clear, making the climbing in the twilight of the Alaskan night almost magical. At 9,500 feet, I turned around to see a full moon rising directly above Mt. Huntington while the first orange rays of morning began striking its upper half. At the same time, I could watch the last subdued pastel colors of sunset disappear off the west side of Mt. Hunter. This was the type of beauty that had lured me to Alaska, and if I saw no more this scene alone would have made all the effort worthwhile.

Camp II was placed in a little col which was meringued by large cornices and snow sculptures. Above camp rose the steep and beautifully corniced next section of ridge which contained several sections of extreme knife-edge along with a tiny notch whose backside consisted of a high angle rock wall, capped by steep ice before leveling off to a col at 11,000 feet.

The next several days were spent at our comfortable camp while we climbed, placed ropes and ferried loads. The climbing consisted mainly of traversing on moderate to steep ice, sometimes below rather menacing cornices. Occasionally, we were forced to cut through a cornice in order to switch sides when ours slid off into a void. One section was so narrow that we had to straddle our way across, while on both sides we could look down several thousand feet. The climbing had become truly exciting, though placing anchors in the often rotten ice was tedious.

For the first time during the climb we were higher than any of the ridges across from us on the south side of the Ruth Glacier. We were in line of sight with the woodlands and settlements of southern Alaska, allowing us to make use of our five-watt walkie-talkie. The reception was perfect and, besides making several contacts for evening weather forecasts, we were able to talk on numerous occasions with our pilot, Cliff Hudson, in Talkeetna. By the time our 42 days on the mountain were over, there were few radio operators in southern Alaska who didn't know the radio call name of Camp-7, which was the catchy name we gave ourselves in honor of the fine sleeping bags

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we used. The psychological comfort we received from talking to these Alaskans was indeed great.

The weather continued to be quite good, but what a problem it began to pose! The very warm, sunny, clear days we had often been having reeked havoc with the snow and ice, making the climbing strenuous and often dangerous. Our climbing nights were short due to the late departure and early arrival of the sun. It seemed like such a contradiction having to sleep during the warmth (physically and mentally) and brightness of the day and then awakening in the often dark murk and cold of the evening.

On the cold and clear evening of July 3, camp was broken and Lincoln and I ascended the fixed ropes to the tight little notch at 10,750 feet. The notch was so tight and narrow that we had to bang in a couple of pins from which to hang our biwi-bag. We dumped our personal gear in the bag, cinched our remarkable Hine Snowbridge Packs down to rucksack size and loaded them with rope and hardware. The ridge that rose directly above was an overhanging rock wall, so we anchored a rope and Linc rappelled down an ice gully onto the northeast side of the ridge. While I had visions of freezing to death in this exposed notch, Lincoln tensioned around to a rock face and competently worked his way up the steep rock, chopping ice from holds as he went. Finally, I heard the warmth of an "off belay" and rappelled down out of the wind. With jumars on the rope, I realized immediately that the pitch in its present form of several dog legs, would be impossible to follow with a heavy pack. I clipped my jumars on to the now anchored haul line and cleaned the pitch by means of a crampon-sparking pendulum, making for some exhilarating rock climbing on Mt. McKinley.

From the top of the rock I took over the lead and headed up an ever-steepening three-hundred foot snow runnel that turned out to be hard ice overlaid with two inches of snow. It ended with some seventy-five degree ice before terminating at the ridge crest. A short descent brought us to a beautiful but exposed col which groaningly sank six inches when we reached it. In no time flat we were jumaring up with our personal gear after a speedy bunch of rappels. With the approach of ominous looking weather we decided to dig a snow-

cave. It took us most of the day. Since we were sleeping days, we found the cave much colder and wetter than our tents and, therefore, moved back to the comfort of them the next day. During the whole time we were on McKinley, we never had weather severe enough to collapse our Bomb-shelter Tents. That evening we decided to celebrate the 4th of July by easing our hunger with an instant cheesecake, which then seemed like the ultimate creation of American technology.

The next section of ridge up to Camp IV was even more spectacular and airy than the preceding section, but from a climbing aspect it was not too difficult, consisting mainly of diagonaling just below the cornices of the ridge crest. Our next camp was placed atop a huge cornice-turned-glacier that completely overhung the east side of the ridge at 12,100 feet, but we rationalized that its sheer size made it safe. We spent much time fantasizing what it would be like to climb the long jam crack that ran up the center of our cornice-glacier.

Linc and I fixed the last one thousand feet of ridge which was decorated by the most beautiful and awesome looking ice flutings, crystals, and cornices that I had ever seen. As we approached it the golden rays of morning had just burst over the horizon causing the infinite number of icicles that coated the flutings to reflect and refract the light like a million prisms twinkling with every color of the spectrum—a truly incredible exhibition of nature at her finest. Fortunately, the west side consisted of nothing more than moderate ice overlaid with varying amounts of snow. Linc got the honor of leading one short, but difficult, pitch that consisted of some eighty-five degrees climbing on rotten honeycombed ice constructed of large air pockets intermingled with blocks of hard ice. Though it was impossible to get an ice axe shaft in fully, and the pick failed to provide anything substantial, the wall was overcome with some good balance and chopping. A short distance later our route merged with the Southeast Spur, and it was no longer necessary to fix ropes.

Early in the morning of July 9, we packed camp up to the Southeast Spur and a few hours later we joyously stepped onto the 13,100-foot summit of the west leg and our Reality Ridge was completed. The weather was perfect and in the orange light of daybreak the views that stretched out below were like a fantasy come true. Starting from the north, we saw McKinley's East Buttress, then the steep

"Memories of a circular traverse of McKinley linger on."

south face of Mt. Dan Beard, the rock spires circling the Moose's Tooth, the granite faces of the Ruth Gorge, jagged Mt. Huntington, the mass of Mt. Hunter and then the impressive summit of McKinley itself. A 360-foot degree splendor! Surely this is one of the most impressive and beautiful mountain vistas to be seen anywhere in the world.

A day later we left the Reality Ridge for good and set up camp in the shelter of a crevasse at the juncture of the Southeast Spur and South Buttress at 13,400 feet. The weather had been incredibly warm and clear, and we became increasingly optimistic that we would be off this mountain in the foreseeable future. The evening radio contact gave us a forecast of three more days of good weather and a best wishes message from Dave Johnston (first winter ascent of McKinley) who just happened to hear us on his radio.

Overconfident from the good forecast, we made one ferry with our remaining food up to the South Buttress. The day was hot and perfectly calm as we trudged up to 15,000 feet, wearing nothing more than T-shirts. We were amazed to see huge waterfalls cascading down several thousand feet to the Ruth Glacier from Thayer Basin. An unheard of phenomenon! Unfortunately, forecasts are not to be trusted, and it was three frustrating, hungry days before we could climb back down to our now buried food, almost getting avalanched enroute. Most expeditions to McKinley's West Buttress bring close to three pounds of food per man per day. We had cut that figure down to one and one-half to one and three-fourths pounds and were hungry enough before having to cut that meager figure by a third. I really felt a tight bond with some of the central figures in the book I was reading—*Alive, The Story of the Andes Survivors*.

In high winds and deep fresh powder we snowshoed into the peaceful and sullen calmness of Thayer Basin whose high walls blocked the warmth and brightness of the sun's rays. The weather was now almost continually poor to bad, reducing our pace to that of a tortoise. But when we did have a good day it was extremely rewarding and satisfying. The desire to finish grew, and Denali Pass, the entrance to our exit route of the West Buttress, became our sought after golden arches.

On July 22 we traversed along the very pleasant Thayer Ridge to a 17,400-foot high camp overlooking the Harper Glacier and in viewing distance of the pass. The climb over the ridge crest opened up our first vistas of the contrasting north side of McKinley and the long Muldrow Glacier which snaked its way down to the treeless tundra below. At camp that night it was warm and calm enough to sit outside of the tents, lightly clad and gloveless, writing in our diaries some of the strong emotional thoughts we were sensing from the beauty and solitude of the evening. Once again I felt inner contentment and a closeness to God. There were many occasions throughout the expedition when I wouldn't have traded anything in the world to be in this incredible place, but there were other times when the reverse would have been true. But after it was all over there was no doubt in my mind that the former far outweighed the latter, and every moment had held true meaning for me.

Two days later we stood in the clouds at Denali Pass and discussed going to the top. The weather was poor and our food low, so we opted for the security of descending to the 17,200-foot high camp of the West Buttress Route. Here we met other people for the first time in thirty-eight days, and it felt like some great burden had been lifted from me. The next day, in cloudy and breezy weather, Thuermer reached the South Summit. In our one day descent of the West Buttress, we were almost put into culture shock by the totally unexpected teeming hordes of people we passed. This was quite a contrast to the peace, solitude and adventure we had experienced on the mountain's south side. For the third time we had switched onto a new side of McKinley and were impressed with the marked difference. When Cliff Hudson's plane touched down on the Kahiltna Glacier airstrip I felt a sense of excitement in flying out, but just as strong was the feeling of remorse that I sensed in leaving. I knew I would have to come back.

Forty-two days after being flown in, we found ourselves back again in Talkeetna with its flowing water, lush green grass, warm earth, delicious food and beautiful people. We set ourselves adrift in time as memories of a fine new route and a circular traverse of McKinley lingered on. □