

Denali Diamond

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FROM MAY 24 TO JUNE 10 Rolf Graage and I put up a new route on the south face of Mount McKinley. It lies to the right of the Roberts-McCartney route (*A.A.J.*, 1981, page 3). When we set out, the rangers thought we had no chance and indicated that if completed, the line would be one of the most difficult routes ever done on McKinley. The start of our route is well to the left of the Cassin route and just to the right of the Roberts.

Our route consisted of 37½ pitches, mostly of steep and some overhanging mixed climbing, a variety of ice as well as pure rock pitches, including an A3 rope-length out over a 25-foot roof. We were able to manage these difficulties using an old 9mm rope, originally intended as a haul line (Rolf had forgotten the other rope), two ice screws I had bought in Talkeetna (I forgot those), and luckily, a healthy supply of pegs and nuts.

Of the 17 days we spent on the route, we were able to climb only on nine. On the other eight we were pinned down in our fourth and fifth bivouacs near the top of the rock wall by raging winds and spin-drift avalanches. It was during these storms that Rolf's feet were severely frostbitten. Having only one rope and a limited rack, we found retreat impractical at that point and so we pushed on, hoping that we would soon reach easier ground. We encountered instead the most difficult climbing on the route, the last two-and-a-half pitches to the top of the lower rock wall taking us two days to complete.

Low-angled icefields led us from there to the upper Cassin Ridge and then in three days to the summit. Though the climbing on this section was much easier, the winds we encountered were brutal. In fact, we were forced to spend our last bivouac entrenched near the summit, being unable to walk or crawl into the wind down the West Buttress route. The next morning I went the last 15 minutes to the summit alone, Rolf being too exhausted and nearly despondent from his frostbitten feet to move out of his bivouac sack. I have never been colder and was in tears upon reaching North America's highest point.

Other events of note during the climb include Rolf's taking a 65-foot leader fall, Rolf's almost dying of hypothermia and his being blown off our sixth bivouac ledge in the bivouac tent after I had gone out to put on crampons and pack. In the last case, Rolf had untied himself from the rope to reorganize when the tent was blown off the platform. Though dangling over the edge inside the tent, he was spared a 3000-foot ride to the glacier below by a single, thin strand

PLATE 28

Photo by Bradford Washburn

McKINLEY's Southwest Face.



of cord attaching one corner of the tent to the rope. Both of us nearly drowned on two separate occasions in spin-drift. Having taken only ten days of food, we were short of food and fuel for the last week we were on the route.

We descended the West Buttress. Rolf was flown to Anchorage, where he lost one toe. Though the quality of the climbing was superb, Denali gave us a thrashing I shall never forget.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Mount McKinley, 6105 meters, 20,320 feet, via the Southwest Face to the right (east) of the Roberts-McCartney Route, May 24 to June 10, 1983 (Bryan Becker, Rolf Graage).

