

UK-NZ
MT FORAKER EXPEDITION
1988

Expedition Members

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Contents

1. Expedition Report	1
Maps	
Appendix I - Expedition Accounts	5
Appendix II - Equipment	6
Appendix III - Food & Provisions	7
Appendix IV - Medical	7
Appendix V - Miscellaneous	8

EXPEDITION REPORT

As we flew over Greenland we reflected that it was taking us less time to get from London to Anchorage than it often took to get from London to Fort William. Having left at 1pm on Wednesday 18 May we arrived in Anchorage at 1.30 pm the same day! (the 9hr time difference having been lost somewhere between time zones). While this made us feel very efficient, it also made us feel extremely tired. It was almost literally a case of stepping off the plane and into the supermarkets (open 24hrs a day) to buy provisions, and a round of the climbing shops for miscellaneous equipment. By the time we stopped to eat dinner (10pm Alaska-time) we had been up for 24 hours. We collapsed that night at the home of a local woman Jean, who had been working on the information counter at the airport when we arrived. Having explained that we needed some help to find a motel, supermarkets, equipment shops and transport to Talkeetna, she had proceeded to arrange our transport to Talkeetna the next day, and then offered herself as chauffeur, and her home as our temporary place of residence: Alaskans are hospitable and friendly people.

The following morning we were on the road to Talkeetna, the jumping-off point for flights into the Denali National Park. A 2½hr journey saw us arriving midday in showery weather. We called in to K2 Aviation to meet Jim and Julie Okonek; organised loan of sleds, bought wands and fuel, and arranged to fly onto the glacier as soon as the weather cleared sufficiently. Then it was over to the Ranger Station to register and undergo a briefing. After another repacking of all our gear and an excellent dinner at the Latitude 62 our second hectic day finished at the K2 Bunkhouse. The following morning dawned (a relative term with 24hrs of daylight), beautifully clear and sunny and Jim started to fly parties onto the glacier at 6am. We were scheduled for 10am. Nothing can quite prepare you for the disorientation of standing one minute in the balmy spring air at Talkeetna airport and an hour later being dumped alone in the wilderness of the Denali National Park.

We had elected to land in the W Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier immediately beneath our objective Mt Foraker. This is a little climbed mountain having had only 29 ascents as compared to more than 5,000 individuals who have climbed nearby McKinley. Two possible reasons for this statistic soon became apparent. First, the least technical routes on Foraker are extremely long, and second, all the routes we examined had high objective danger from serac fall and avalanche. Of the six days we spent beneath the mountain we examined it from a number of angles. We had hoped to attempt a new route by climbing the S Buttress of the SE Ridge. On the 21st May we skinned up to a pass SW of our camp to get a better look at the proposed route. What had not been clear in our photographs of the route was a large ice cliff separating the rock butress from the summit snow slopes above. Somehow the route lost its immediate appeal and we began looking for alternatives. From our vantage point we could see down into the Lacuna Glacier and towards the SW Ridge and Infinite Spur routes. We already knew from reports from earlier parties that season that the approach and lower reaches of the Infinite spur were in dangerous condition and the SW Ridge is extremely long. One afternoon we saw four simultaneous serac avalanches on this side of the peak; for us this sounded the death-knell for any attempt from the W Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. On the 22nd May we moved camp to a bay between Mt Foraker's east face and Mt Crosson, and on the 25th climbed a small peak behind our camp to examine the E Face and NE Ridge routes. The Pink Panther and Czech routes on the East Face looked difficult, and as we witnessed, were both threatened by huge active seracs. The NE Ridge route which initially climbs over Mt Crosson began to look more the most likely option - but again very long. We decided as a warm up to climb the S Ridge on Mt Crosson to assess snow conditions and the feasibility of continueing on to Mt Foraker. The weather during this time had been mixed with some days of clear blue skies, but others

of snow fall. We set off to climb Mt Crosson at 3am on the 26th May. It seemed a long walk to the foot of the route, and the initial couloir we had picked to gain access to the upper ridge turned out to be most unpleasant. What had looked like one pitch of straightforward climbing turned into an hour long struggle through bottomless sugar beneath tumbled seracs. By the time we reached the top of the couloir we were thoroughly demoralised. Cold, tired and not impressed with snow conditions and the weather prospects we turned around and headed back for camp.

Having spent a week looking at options on Mt Foraker we felt we had to make a decision. Neither of us could really raise enthusiasm for any of the routes we had seen, being deterred primarily by the high objective danger. We finally decided to turn our backs on Foraker and move towards McKinley.

Armed with photocopied extracts from various journals and magazines, we searched through and settled with interest on an account of the ascent of the NW Ridge of McKinley. It has only been climbed twice and not had a British or NZ ascent- it seemed ideal. Our approach lay over Kahiltna Pass (10,320ft) at the head of the Kahiltna Glacier and then dropped down into the Peters Basin to reach the foot of the route at about 8,000ft. On the 27th May we moved camp to a new base at around 7,200 ft near the entrance to the E Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. The following day we packed up 8 days food and began to move towards Kahiltna Pass following the usual Mt McKinley west buttress trail. After 6½km and 6 hrs on the glacier we had to stop beneath the Pass overcome by the intense heat. We were dismayed to discover when we stepped off the trail that the snow was over our knees. It was a struggle to set up camp for the night and just as we crawled inside the tent it began to snow again. The following morning (29th) hardly a word needed to be spoken to agree to abandon crossing the Pass (now with heavily loaded slopes), and instead to opt for the only other route close to hand - the W Buttress of Mt McKinley.

We discovered that many of the guided parties on this, the standard route, take around 3 weeks to make a summit attempt. They adopt a seige approach to maximise success, but land themselves with days of load carrying between camps. We now had 7 days food and trusting our luck as to weather and our acclimitisation set off from 9,800ft towards the camp at 14,000ft. The weather was cloudy but cool- ideal travelling conditions. We skinned up to the 11,000 ft camp and there dumped sleds and skis and continued on foot. We stopped 2 or 3 times for longish breaks and a brew and reached 14,000ft about 8pm. The weather was deteriorating as we put up our tent. Despite our tiredness we spent a restless night listening to the rising wind. The 30th brought a calm day but whiteout conditions. We both had mild headaches and settled in for a much earned rest day. Lots of parties were dropping down from higher camps reporting very strong winds of 50-80mph. The 31st brought improving weather, but we were both still feeling the altitude and opted for another rest day. The 14,000ft camp is unique in having a manned medical station from which Dr Peter Hackett and colleagues collect data on high altitude sickness from the great pool of afflicted mountaineers passing their door. They even offer a 'haemoglobin-oxygen-saturation reading' service which gives some indication of whether one is wise to continue gaining altitude - we could not resist, and were delighted to found ourselves above the recommended level. We woke at 4am on the 1 June and found the day was clear and cold. We set off at 6.30am up the steeper slopes towards the 16,000ft camp on the ridge above. Although only about 50° at its steepest a fixed rope was in place (presumably to make load carrying safer and easier and to protect guided parties). We arrived at 16,000ft at 9am and stopped to have a drink and warm cold hands and feet. The wind was gusting more strongly and parties were still dropping down from higher camps. Within 30mins

the cold drove us to make the decision to set up camp there in order to see what the day would bring. It took a long time to dig out a platform and erect the tent; and even longer to get warm again. However, the day improved and by 3pm it was sunny calm and warm. We decided to ascend to the camp at 17,000ft. It was perhaps the most memorable days climbing for sheer enjoyment; winding our way on hard neve between beautiful granite blocks, enjoying the views of peaks and tundra dropping away on both sides. We arrived at 17,000ft at 8pm and feeling extremely tired put up our tent and collapsed into our sleeping bags. Again the weather deteriorated and the night brought very strong winds and more snow. The 2nd June was cold, windy and miserable, but the weather outlook was for improvement so we sat and rested and hoped. The morning of 3rd June we woke late at 9am to find calm weather and sunny skies. We had a leisurely breakfast and there suddenly seemed nothing else for it but to set off for the summit. It was very cold traversing the shaded slopes up to Denali Pass at 18,000ft and we feared the end of the summit attempt when Julie-Ann had to stop to rewarm cold feet. However, some brisk rubbing and a change of socks later we were able to continue. Progress was steady over moderate slopes until about 19,000ft. From then the altitude began to feel like a physical barrier. Our footsteps were weighted and slow, and the greatest effort was in willing our bodies to keep moving upward. The last few hundred feet up a suddenly steeper slope and along the summit ridge was like being on a treadmill - the summit was in view, but never seeming to get any closer. Finally about 7pm we reach the top. Except for one other person we were alone and the conditions were exceptional. The evening was calm and clear, and incredibly we felt properly warm for the first time all day. It seemed that having stopped to rest, our bodies finally had time to attend to the luxury of releasing blood to the extremities. We stayed on the summit ridge for over an hour taking photographs from different viewpoints, and it was with the greatest reluctance we turned to make the descent. We arrived back at 17,000ft at 9.30pm to warm congratulations from other occupants of the camp, and a much needed brew. The following day we descended back to 14,000ft in the morning and continued on to our dump at 11,000ft in the afternoon. We had heard stories from parties passing us on their way up, that there had been a big avalanche at the 11,000ft camp and lots of people had lost equipment. Nothing had quite prepared us for the sight of a deep fracture line which extended along over 1km of ridge above the camp. Had it not been for the large bergschrund at the bottom of the slope, the whole camp and all of its occupants would have been destroyed. Freshly fallen snow had buried our skis to within a foot of their tips and so a long session of digging was required before we could reload our sleds and ski off down to a safer haven. Tiredness and frustration from falling over under our heavy loads finally led us to stop at 9,000ft for the night. A final mornings effort saw us reach our depot at 7,400ft again on the 5 June. We were both starving and spent the next 4 days luxuriating in good food and lots of sleep and rest.

It was not long though before we felt we were squandering our time and began to cast about for another peak to climb. A small 'peaklet' (Peak 9,300) across the glacier from our camp seemed to offer just what we were looking for; 1300ft of nice looking technical climbing on a 50° ice and mixed face. We called it Kahiltna Gnome. We set off about midnight on the 8th June and skinned across to the foot of the route on crisp snow. We made good progress, moving together on the face until two pitches beneath the summit. Here the snow was deep 55° windslab deposited beneath the cornice. We tiptoed across to a firmer rib of snow which led through the cornice. We could not relax even as we moved onto the rounded summit as the snow settled and creaked beneath our feet. We decided it an unhealthy place to linger and made for the mixed SE Ridge for our descent. This was straight forward and gave wonderful views of the peaks further down

the glacier turning pink and blue in the morning sun. We were back in our sleeping bags at 6am, happy with a good nights work.

After a further nights rest we decided on another attempt on McKinley by the NW Ridge. We left camp at 10.30pm on the 10th June and skinned up to beneath Kahiltna Pass. We left our skis at 10,000ft and continued on foot. The snow was much improved and consolidated; only now we had to contend with breakable crust. It was a struggle to get to the top of the Pass with sacks containing 8 days food and every other step collapsing beneath us. The view into the Peters Basin and onto the snow laden NW Ridge was extremely disappointing. The weather was deteriorating again, and we could only see the upper 500ft of the slopes descending to the glacier below. What we could see was littered with serac debris and loaded with wind slab. Again a tactical retreat was decided and we slogged back to camp in a whiteout, arriving again at 8.30am. (We later learnt that a party of Italians were avalanched, luckily without serious injury, descending near this point).

By this stage we were getting fairly tired of carrying heavy loads up and down the glacier to little effect, but with time running short decided to make one last attempt on McKinley. Two days later on the 13th June we set off at 10.30pm, this time up the NE Fork of the Kahiltna towards the Cassin Ridge. The NE Fork has something of a fearsome reputation as a dangerous place to go, and although there was no debris on the trail, the size of the seracs which line this narrow passage are such that if something big was to come down, one would not want to be there to see it! We skinned, and later walked, on up to the head of the glacier without incident hoping the worst to be over, but in fact the most appalling line of seracs was sitting above the final part of the trail which we needed to follow to reach a safe campsite. It was already 6.30am and the sun was beginning to touch the upper slopes, so it was heart-in-mouth that we practically ran to beneath the safety of a rock wall near Kahiltna Notch. By 8am the show had started with enormous avalanches rolling across the glacier from the serac band above. We spent the day resting in our tent trying to find relief from the oppressive heat. The next day (15th June) the pressure had dropped and the weather was deteriorating with light snow falling. Suddenly it seemed like a good time to be going home, and both happy to be leaving that oppressive place we raced back down to our base to pack up our equipment, and in a heavy snow storm continued on to the landing strip to wait for a flight back to Talkeetna.

Retrospective:

The 1988 season in the Denali Park seemed to be a relatively good one. In the months of May and June we found the weather was good 50% of the time; temperatures were up as high as 30°C during the day and only reached -20° to -25°C on a few nights. The periods of bad weather generally tended towards large snowfalls, often with warm temperatures and little wind. The stronger winds became more noticeable higher on the mountain, but did bestow the advantage of clearing off fresh snow which plagued the lower slopes. (On our descent of the W Butress route after 3-4 days of bad weather, below 14,000ft stepping off the trail landed us in snow that was from thigh-deep to head-high!) Although a team of two was ideal from an organisational and decision making point of view, it was a definite disadvantage when trying to break a trail. For exploration other than on the most established trails, a team of 4 to 6 would be better. The climbing potential in the Denali National Park is vast. The well known Ruth Gorge with its big wall type routes and smaller areas like Little Switzerland still have scope for new routes, while on a bigger scale climbing Foraker from the north or traversing McKinley by its NW ridge would be very worthwhile undertakings.

MT MCKINLEY NATIONAL PARK



camps occupied

landing strip

APPENDIX I
EXPEDITION ACCOUNTS

Income

MEF Grant	£ 200,00
BMC Grant	150,00
personal contributions	1820,00
 Total Income	 £2170,00

Expenditure

flights	£ 894,00
insurance	180,00
equipment	220,00
food	68,00
US account	808,00
 Total Expenditure	 £2170,00

Balance £0000,00

US Account

Income

Personal contribution	£ 808,00
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Expenditure

transport (flights/other)	£ 350,00
equipment	185,00
food	117,00
accomodation & misc,	155,00
 Total	 £ 808,00

Balance £0000,00

FINAL BALANCE £0000,00

APPENDIX II

EQUIPMENT

Clothing: The temperatures during May and June were such that it was more often difficult to keep cool than it was to keep warm. If it was necessary to be moving on the glacier or lower slopes after 10am only a layer of thermal underwear was worn. At higher altitudes (above 14,000ft) and when travelling through the 'night' a layer of thermal underwear, a pile jacket and a lined North Face Mountain Suit were adequate. We did take duvet jackets but never had recourse to wear them. We both used Asolo AFS 101 boots and experimented with neoprene socks for extra insulation and to keep boots dry. Although they did keep the boots dry, they did not seem appreciably better at keeping feet warm. We did not have neoprene overboots - using only Berghaus Super Yeti gaitors- but overboots would have been a definite advantage. For those without, the Park Rangers recommend using boot shaped karrimat cut-outs to insert between boot soles and crampons for extra insulation. Another item which would be useful in very bad weather is a face mask to protect the face from frost-bite.

Sleeping Bags: These were one-year-old, down, North Face IbeX bags. Used with a Vapour Barrier Liner (VBL) and bivi bag, and sleeping in thermal underwear these were almost too warm until at and above 14,000ft. From this altitude the system worked very well - only on one or two nights did we put on an extra layer of clothing. Although sleeping inside a VBL feels rather sweaty, we never found it necessary to change out of the thermal layer we had slept in; any sweat evaporated away during the process of dressing.

Tents: A North Face VE24 was used on the glacier and a Bullfrog for higher camps. Both tents were excellent in their different roles. The Bullfrog did suffer from some condensation and icing up, but this was significantly less than on the single-skin goretex tents we have used on previous expeditions.

Stoves: We took two stoves, a 'whisperlite' MSR and an EPIgas 'Loke', both of which burned white spirits (Blazo). The 'Loke' stove was only used on the glacier; the 'whisperlite' was used at all camps. Both were extremely efficient and reliable despite the effects of cold and altitude.

Skis and sleds: We both used 195 touring skis with adjustable bindings. These were vital in alleviating the hard work of hauling sleds and travelling over long distances on soft snow (not to mention a joy on the downhill slopes!). Sleds were essential for hauling gear between camps on the glacier and lower slopes. It is possible to buy/rent/loan these from the air companies in Talkeetna.

One of the benefits of climbing in the USA was that it was possible to buy any last minute items of equipment in the shops in Anchorage. There are two major climbing shops AMH and REI (almost opposite each other on Spennard Road) which could supply almost anything. We bought stoves, skins, water bottles, cooking and eating utensils, neoprene socks, and Mountainhouse food to name just a few items.

APPENDIX III

FOOD AND PROVISIONS

The generous baggage allowance of 60kg each meant that we were able to take out some of our rations from Britian. A quick trip to the local Cash & Carry and Sainsburys provided us with old favourites of instant soups and noodles, chocolate and meusli bars and various pickles and spreads. The supermarkets in Anchorage are open 24 hours a day (a rather mixed blessing to the jetlagged) - we staggered straight into these from the plane and spent a bewildering number of hours trying to choose from the myriad varieties of food. However it was good to have a mixture of food some of which was familiar and some of which was new to the palate - particularly recommended is the dehydrated Guacamole and Humus.

We used relatively little fuel for the month on the glacier - 2 gallons - mostly because it was so hot during the day that we were able to provide all our drinking water by melting snow on black plastic bags on our sleds (regularly 8-10l a day). The Rangers can give a guide to the amount of fuel to take for a particular period, but if a party does run short it is possible to buy more fuel at the SE Fork Kahiltna landing strip, and fairly easy to obtain left-overs from other parties.

APPENDIX IV

MEDICAL

Yet another benefit of climbing in the USA was being able to forget the usual worries of vaccinations, stomach bugs and polluted drinking water. The major problems were the extremes of temperature and altitude sickness.

Our first aid kit was comprehensive, with dressings for small cuts, large wounds, fractures and burns; drugs including antibiotics, diuretic (frusemide), painkillers (aspirin and temgesic), vasodilator (ronicol), and diamox (to aid acclimatisation); and other assorted items like throat lozenges, bonjela, digestive tablets, moleskin and tape.

The only drug that was used was the ronicol which Julie-Ann took on our McKinley summit day, to increase peripheral circulation when her feet became extremely cold.

We also included the book 'Medicine for Mountaineering' 3rd ed. The Mountaineers. A very comprehensive and concise guide to the problems encountered in mountaineering situations and how to treat them. Recommended not only as a reference text, but a good read on a bad weather day!

APPENDIX V

MISCELLANEOUS

Below are a number of contacts we found particularly good during our stay:

Mahays River Boat Service, Talkeetna- a charter company for river boat tours and fishing expeditions, but they also run an occasional bus service between Talkeetna and Anchorage. Depending on numbers in the party about \$35.00 each one way.

K2 Aviation, PO Box 290, Talkeetna, Alaska 99676 (Tel. (907) 733-2291/2292)
- owners Jim and Julie Okonek. Operate flights to a number of areas in the McKinley Range at about \$220 each return. Also scenic flights on the glacier of about \$50 each. Apart from friendly service, they also offer 2 free nights in their bunkhouse, and can provide sleds, wands and fuel. Very highly recommended.

Talkeetna Roadhouse, PO Box 388, Talkeetna, Alaska 99676-0388 Tel. (907) 733-2341
-basic rooms, but excellent showers and fantastic food. Single room \$24.00, double \$32.00, triple \$39.00.

US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Denali National Park and Preserve, PO Box 9, Denali Park, Alaska 99755.

-a contact for information on climbing in the park, registration forms, etc. There is no rule that says you must register when climbing in the park, but it is strongly recommended. The office in Talkeetna has a wide range of resource material- maps, photos of routes, articles, etc. and the rangers give a briefing session to alert climbers to the problems they may encounter, and also to make requests regarding the disposal of rubbish, advise on methods for roping up with sleds, etc.

Alaska National History Association, Denali National Park Branch, PO Box 1109, Girdwood, Alaska 99511, Tel. (907) 345 5700

-one of many branches of the ANHA with a wide range of reference material; slide sets, videos, maps, posters and books. They operate a mail-order service. We were only able to buy the Bradford Washburn map in London but the ANHA can provide US Geological Survey maps 1:250,000 or 1":4miles, contour lines with vegetation shading, 41" x 42", (folded). This also comes as a double sided map with a beautiful satellite image of the park on the reverse side. Write for catalogue and further details.

MT MCKINLEY NATIONAL PARK



○ camps occupied
● landing strip