

The First Ascent of Mount Russell

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MOUNT RUSSELL lies on the southwestern corner of Mount McKinley National Park. From one of our two American companions, Bob Goodwin, who in 1961 had made an unsuccessful attempt on the 11,670-foot peak, we knew that our best chance for success was from the northwest. This northwest face of Mount Russell soars to its lonesome height some 7000 feet above an almost flat glacial basin, with monstrous hanging glaciers on its upper part and abrupt rock walls below. The glacial basin, fed by Mount Russell and its nameless 9803-foot satellite, is a tributary of the Chedotlothna Glacier, some 16 miles long all in all from the tongue.

Since this basin lies outside the National Park, where plane-landings are forbidden, pilot Don Sheldon could set us down almost in the middle of our field of operations. Sheldon is one of those real men whom we often met in Alaska, tough, skilled, dependable and cheerful. We were immediately drawn to him; when we took leave of him five weeks later, we had become fast friends. From Talkeetna, which lies 60 miles south of the Mount McKinley Range, we had to fly over the main chain, which runs generally in a northeast-southwesterly direction. Though we did not yet know what this fact would mean to us, we were often to find out during our stay in the mountains how important this is to undertakings in the range. Every difference in atmospheric pressure between the southeastern and the northwestern side of the mountains makes itself apparent by the appearance of clouds. With unimaginable violence, the air masses swirl across the range to equalize the pressure, clothing the summits in banks of thick clouds while only a few kilometers away there is hardly a breath of wind and blue skies.

As it began to clear in the cool of the evening of May 13, Don Sheldon and I made the first attempt to reach our goal. On this flight I was introduced to Mount McKinley. As we climbed out of the banks of cumulus clouds above the foothills, McKinley suddenly appeared in front of us. It rose so gigantic that I was appalled by its sight. Only its neighbors, Hunter and Foraker, and on the horizon our Mount Russell towered above the blanket of clouds. Unfortunately we could not see the lower parts of the main range and so had to return to Talkeetna. The next morning we

left again at six. An hour later Don Sheldon landed me skillfully at the foot of Mount Russell and took off again moments later to pick up my comrades. I stood alone on the broad glacier in awe of our peak. There was not even a breeze. The morning sun shone warm. Only around Russell's summit did snow plumes play and obviously strong gusts of wind chased clouds of drifting snow down the hanging glaciers. I gazed long at the scene, seated on a boulder in the broad medial moraine.

Some two hours later I heard the roar of a motor and saw Don sweep into our glacial basin, this time in his bigger Cessna. He had brought me in with his smaller, handier Piper Supercub. He flew tight circles above me and flew off. I knew I was to remain alone. The wind had picked up meanwhile considerably where I was too. When I got to work setting up my tent, the gusts snatched at the cloth, a forewarning of a windstorm, the like of which I had never yet experienced. I must digress here a moment. After our unsuccessful evening attempt, Don had removed, unnoticed by us, my eight days' rations, in order to lighten the overloaded plane. There I lay in my storm-shaken tent without a bite to eat, not knowing whether my hunger treatment would last for three or perhaps five or six days. But it turned out that I did not yet know our friend Sheldon. My comrades had soon noticed my provisions box lying on his truck. Don had no peace of mind. When the storm abated a little the next evening, he took off with Toni Reiter, made a 250-mile detour around the mountains and flew (I hardly trusted my ears) up the Chedothlothna Glacier and, despite the storm, landed Reiter and the food in the lee of a peak several kilometers below my camp.

Only two days later did the weather allow him to cross the main range with Siegfried Gebel, Peter Hennig, Dr. Klaus Ekkerlein and our American friends, Bob Goodwin and John Dillman. Scarcely had Don taken off for the last time about eight in the evening when the wind again began to tug at our tent. We spent the whole next day protecting the 4600-foot Base Camp to stand the wind better.

We had grown impatient during the long wait for favorable weather. On May 19 we ignored the fact that a wall of clouds continued to hang on Mount Russell and reconnoitered toward the spot where the year before at 7000 feet Bob Goodwin and the others had also put their Camp I. The place is so spacious that dozens of tents could be pitched there, an ideal spot. It is engraved in our memories as "Witches Dancing", because almost always swirls of snow dust danced around our tents.

For four days Peter Hennig, Klaus Ekkerlein and Bob Goodwin, the team in Camp I, hardly left the tents while the sky stayed blue in the north and hardly a breeze stirred Base Camp. Tired of waiting, Toni Reiter, Sigi Gebel and I set out for the 7500-foot summit northeast of Base Camp.

It is the end point of the ridge that descends from Mount Russell to hem in on the right the glacier that descends northwards to the main Chedotlothna. We joyfully unfurled our pennants on top at eight o'clock. The ridge we had chosen to ascend had been more difficult than we had expected because of the enormous cornices.

As we stood on the summit we saw our companions leave Camp I. Obviously contrary to expectations, the wind had let up there too, although heavy clouds still hung to the shoulders of Mount Russell. During our descent, we watched our three friends cross the part of the ascent route particularly threatened by avalanches and slowly but steadily advance up the western spur of Russell. They reached the col between the south ridge of Mount Russell and its western 9803-foot neighbor; we would like to call it "Bavarian Col". There they pitched Camp II before high winds again prevented any further movement. Snow nearly drifted the tent in during the next two days and the zippers iced so badly that they could scarcely leave their cramped quarters.

Only on the night of May 25 did the weather seem to try to improve. Very early next morning we set out from Base Camp to carry supplies upwards, although the summit of Mount Russell still lay cloud-capped. Toni Reiter and I stayed in Camp I, intending to continue on to Camp II even with moderately favorable conditions during the night. Although hoped for and expected, the end of the storm surprised us by the speed with which it came. For the first time in days the summit of Mount Russell stood completely clear before us in streaming sunshine. We prepared ourselves hastily and ascended to Camp II with the most necessary food and equipment. We arrived at eleven P.M. to find our companions fast asleep. They had not noticed the improvement in the weather. While they got ready, Toni and I reconnoitered the route above. From the col a steep ice ramp appeared to give access to the ridge.

We wondered about the bergschrund right below the ridge but succeeded in finding a place to cross it before our comrades arrived from Camp II. I doubted that the weather would hold but lengthy inactivity in the tents had made the others impatient. Despite my misgivings they passed Toni and me, who were not equipped for a summit try and had to return. We later saw the team on the ridge making good progress until a blanket of clouds hid them from view. Seriously worried, Toni and I descended that evening to Base Camp to get Sigi Gebel and John Dillman in case we were needed for help. Thick clouds and falling snow hindered our progress back to Camp I.

Let me quote from Dr. Klaus Ekkerlein's diary. "Above the bergschrund Peter mastered the two rope lengths to the left around a small ice mushroom, cutting steps and using ice pitons. The first difficulties are

very time consuming. By five o'clock when we reach the beginning of the broad ridge the cloud blanket is already close down on our heads. After two hours we can not see the way higher. One ice mushroom is heaped on the next and steplike snow knife-edges swing upward, separated by icy, corniced terraces. One fifteen-foot ice step forces us to the right directly onto the cornice. With mixed feelings we do our gymnastics on this treacherous spot. The red of dawn has given way to a snow storm which halts us by ten o'clock in the morning on a small plateau at nearly 11,000 feet. We can not advance further among the ice mushrooms. Bob and Peter creep into their bivouac sacks while I get into mine. We are sentenced to wait the whole day. Bob complains about losing feeling in his left foot and in order to restore the circulation walks around our spot in the snow storm. During a lull in the evening we advance somewhat closer to the scene of action and take shelter behind a drift under a little break.

"May 27. I stick my head out at three A.M. to find clear weather and a view onto the ridge below us. Deeply drifted snow makes the first rope lengths wearisome after the sleepless night. Peter struggles over giant snow bridges and to the left past séracs. The last shreds of clouds have disappeared; far below lies our tent at Camp II, a black dot. We gaze at the bizarre ice peaks and feel that the summit of Mount Russel can not be far away. To cure this thought, we find a new obstacle as we climb around a graceful, split sérac; a full rope length of glare 75° ice. I stay below the sérac to belay because Bob, as middle man, has no dependable stance and the ice pinnacle can take over the function of emergency brake. Several unsuccessful attempts let our mood sink to zero. Is this the end? Until now the weather gods have defended the peak, but now climbing difficulties are taking over. Perpendicular ice prevents our going around it, and so Peter works his way slowly upwards, meter by meter. Our efforts are rewarded by the first warm rays of the sun. The way above leads through a much easier, unparalleled fairyland of ice. All the tempest-carved séracs wear snow caps. The view from our airy pulpit is overpowering. Kilometer-wide glaciers stream off imposing ice walls, divided from each other by black, ominous rock bastions, everything an untrodden mountain world. We advance over short steep pitches in the loose snow. A few transverse crevasses force us to zigzag. The ridge has given way to a broad glacier. However, again 300 feet below the summit an ice wall stops our progress. Peter traverses left into the 60° summit ice field above the 6000-foot northwest wall. Three rope lengths call for the greatest technical skill, courage and care. To our surprise, after breaking through a small cornice we stand on the plateaulike summit at twelve noon after seven and a half hours from the bivouac and a total of fifteen hours of difficult ice climbing from Camp II."

After an hour's rest our companions began their descent, but they did not reach Camp II that day either, because they could not find the way down the ramp in the blanket of clouds which had lain below them as they were on the summit. Finally on May 29 at ten o'clock they reached Camp II after 58 hours on the mountain. They propose the name of "Willo Welzenbach Memorial Route" in memory of the great Bavarian developer of modern ice technique.

It cleared in Base Camp on the night of May 29 and we prepared to leave. It was a glorious, windless day as we caught sight of our companions from Camp I. Our concern for them had made us oblivious to the resplendent beauty of the mountains around us when suddenly three figures appeared in Bavarian Col. Joyfully Toni and I climbed towards them to help them with their heavy packs, while John Dillman began to prepare a banquet to greet them.

Unfortunately the month of May and Bob Goodwin's vacation were drawing to an end. Not until the evening of June 1 could Don Sheldon land his good Cessna to take Bob to Talkeetna. "A big storm is coming," he explained but he hoped he could still fly us the next day across to the Kahiltna Glacier. We should meanwhile carry our camp down onto the main Chedotlothna Glacier where he could land better, less hindered by cross winds. The whole night—it never gets dark so close to the Arctic Circle—we toted tents and equipment down to the Glacier; then as we climbed into our tents in the morning, we saw the bank of clouds already on the shoulder of Mount Russell. Three days, Don had said, would the storm last, but it was five. Not until June 6 did Sheldon's Cessna stand in front of our tents. By evening we had our new Base Camp erected at the foot of the southwest spur of Harrer's ridge on Mount Hunter.

Since Don had predicted three good days, we set out at eight P.M. for Camp I on 17,395-foot Mount Foraker. We crossed the nearly-flat, 4-mile wide Kahiltna glacier and reached the foot of the icefall through which we hoped to reach the northeast ridge of Foraker. When we had flown over it weeks before we had thought that it could not offer too many difficulties. The icefall, which was the real problem, seemed to be in good condition because its steepness caused the falling ice to block the crevasses which the snow then plugged shut. After a three and a half hour climb from the Kahiltna Glacier we reached the ridge, where we wanted to pitch camp. Peter Hennig and Toni Reiter stayed in the camp while the others descended to bring the rest of the gear up the next night. Here, however, we had proved to us again how quickly the weather can change in the Alaska Range. By the time we reached Base Camp, the clouds hid Camp I from view and soon it began to snow. It didn't stop for thirty hours.

On the afternoon of June 8 we saw how Toni and Peter were getting ready to go on from Camp I. At seven we ourselves left Base Camp after seeing our comrades return to the tent from above. We supposed that they were waiting for us to help them break trail in the deep snow and laboriously toled a tent along on the assumption that on the route to the ridge another camp would be needed. We were astonished, however, as we moved upwards, to see Toni and Peter keep on descending from Camp I. We met in the icefall. They announced that gigantic crevasses which could not be seen from below completely barred the route and that you could not turn them on the left without entering an area threatened by avalanches that fell off the 8500-foot eastern wall of Foraker. Two feet of snow had fallen at the camp in these two days and even in the tents which were pitched under an ice overhang they had felt the wind from the avalanches which continually rolled off Mount Foraker. Under these circumstances I could but agree with the decision to turn back since we knew that it was impossible to climb Foraker and be back to meet Don on the 15th or the 16th.

We wanted to use the remaining time to cross Kahiltna Pass and climb Kahiltna Dome which provides the best view of the usual route up Mount McKinley by way of the West Buttress. Unfortunately we had unavoidably let a beautiful day go by when we were giving up our attempt on Foraker. The next day the clouds shrouded us again and for three days and two nights it snowed or else the wind-driven rain whipped the tents.

Only on the eve of Don Sheldon's expected arrival did it begin to clear. The sky was cloudless as never before when Don came flying up the Kahiltna. He had good reason in the still, calm air to fly out of his way past countless, nameless peaks that looked like the Chamonix Aiguilles to show us the heavenly mountains of this broad land.

On the horizon in lonesome beauty stood our Mount Russell.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENTS: First ascent of Mount Russell, 11,670 feet, May 28, 1962 (Ekkerlein, Goodwin, Hennig).

First ascent of Point c. 7500 feet, May 23, 1962 (Gebel, Raithel, Reiter).

ATTEMPTED ASCENT: Mount Foraker, 17,395 feet by Northeast ridge to about 9350 feet.

PERSONNEL: Hellmut Raithel, leader; Dr. Klaus Ekkerlein, Siegfried Gebel, Peter Hennig, Germans of the Section Bayerland of the Deutscher Alpenverein; John Dillman, Robert Goodwin, Americans.