

Rescue on Denali

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THE EARLY-JUNE clouds finally part after two weeks of drizzly, miserable weather in the Ruth Gorge. Like clockwork Doug Geeting flies in with another hopeful group, allowing Mike Helms and me to depart. Maybe we can get above these depressing clouds by climbing the Cassin Ridge on McKinley. On the way to the Kahiltna Glacier we fly by the south face of Dan Beard to check on two overdue climbers. Their tent stands in eerie isolation while fresh avalanche tracks tell the story of their fate.

When the sun sets, we leave the circus environment at the landing strip. Skis slide quietly on the Kahiltna as we enjoy the peaceful solitude of the arctic night. Slumping igloos and exposed food caches stand out as man's contributions to an otherwise pristine environment. We settle in for another two-day storm at the junction of the northeast fork, wondering if the weather will ever improve.

Clear skies signal our departure from the Denali "highway." Over fifty climbers from Japan, Switzerland, and Austria have slogged by on their way up the West Buttress. Our carefree attitude is packed away as a trail is forged across ominous snow bridges on the northeast fork of the Kahiltna. Porridge snow and stifling heat slow our progress, and we camp at only 9000 feet. Soon Californian Jack Roberts and Englishman Simon McCartney join us on their approach to the unclimbed southwest face. Dinner conversation centers on the immensity of this valley and the incredible north face of Kahiltna Peaks.

We are savoring a second cup of coffee as the sun rises over the Cassin. Suddenly the whole valley vibrates with an ear-shattering crack! Two huge séracs lean forward from their fragile position on Kahiltna Peaks. I bound through the knee-deep snow in the opposite direction. Mike laughs until he sees an enormous avalanche racing towards our campsite. Then he leaps after me step for step. The snow cloud obliterates the tents and hurls Mike and me onto our faces. Slowly the snow dust settles. As the tents reappear, I hear Jack and Simon laughing about our frantic exit across the glacier. Then they look around. The four-foot

wall of ice and snow is barely eight feet from the tents. The wave of boxcar-sized blocks traveled a quarter mile only to stop within spitting distance. Trembling hands hold another cup of coffee as our cameras record the near disaster. We solemnly pack our gear and continue up the "Valley of Death."

We wait out another two-day storm in cozy igloos at 11,200 feet before starting up the Japanese Couloir. We watch Jack and Simon ascending the ice apron below the awesome rock band on the southwest face. Six hours of calf-aching front-pointing take us to the Cassin ledge. The next day we continue up the elegant ice arête to a spacious campsite on the hanging glacier at 14,200 feet. Good weather prevails, allowing us to ascend the first rock band, above which we chop out a tent platform at 15,800 feet. A combination of bad weather and headaches results in two days of rest before Mike leads through the second rock band. We stay at 17,000 feet for another two days as I wrestle with nausea and the high-altitude "blahs." We move onto the south face and kick steps up steep snow until good fortune brings us to a much-needed fuel cache of two gallons of blazo. We pitch our tent on the crest at 18,000 feet and make preparations for a summit bid. The climb seems almost over as we crawl into our warm bags.

The tent shakes violently as another 100mph gust races over the ridge. I watch the seams stretch, revealing the grey light outside. Twenty hours of gale-force winds subside at midnight, the clouds disperse, and the cold descends. Fear of frostbite delays our departure until ten A.M. Our pace is purposely slow as we take two breaths for each step on our way to the summit. We feel strong and visualize a quick descent to our food cache via the West Buttress.

As I kick steps at 19,200 feet, my wandering thoughts are interrupted by a human voice. I glance back at Mike, but he has said nothing. Looking up I see a puppet-like form dancing on a rock outcropping. It takes a few minutes before I recognize the figure as Jack Roberts. Slowly we bridge the distance between us and the drama is revealed.

Jack and Simon have successfully climbed the difficult southwest face in impeccable alpine style, but their rapid ascent has resulted in frostbitten feet for Jack and high-altitude sickness for Simon. Simon is semi-conscious inside their tent and is unable to walk. They have been without food and water for two days. As I heat up one of our two remaining meals, I measure Simon's temperature as 96°F. We hold a hurried council.

Try to imagine the scene: Four climbers, one who is semi-conscious, try to sort out what is left of their brains in an attempt to save each other's lives. Jack, who has assisted in big-wall rescues in Yosemite, believes a winch and cable can be dropped on the crest above. Simon can be hauled up the south face and then an air evacuation can transport him off the mountain. Mike, who is trained in mountain rescue, believes a party from the West Buttress can trudge over the summit and carry



PLATE 1

Photo by Bradford Washburn

**New Route of Roberts and McCartney
on MOUNT MCKINLEY's
Southwest Face. Cassin Ridge
diagonals up from the right.**

Simon back over and down the tourist route. Simon mutters something about a helicopter plucking us directly off the ridge. I sit totally befuddled while dishing out the soup. So much for rational thought at 19,500 feet.

A decision is made: Mike, who is familiar with the West Buttress from previous trips, will take frostbitten Jack over while I stay to nurse Simon. Once they reach a group with a radio (we had no radio because it saved weight), a rescue can be coordinated. Surely this will take just a couple days. After all, this is Mount McKinley where rescues are commonplace!

From this point (called Day 1) Mike's and my stories are distinctly separate but ultimately integrated as we struggle to get off the mountain. Without radios we have no knowledge of the decisions being made on the opposite side of McKinley. The ensuing account reveals the astonishing sequence of events that bring us down Mount McKinley.

Day 1: Simon spends a fitful day passing in and out of consciousness. I give him a cup of soup or tea every hour. As night approaches I curl up next to him to transfer body heat.

Mike and Jack summit in four hours and trudge down to Denali Pass where they find a Mountain Trip expedition camped. Due to harsh atmospheric conditions radio contact is impossible from Denali Pass.

Day 2: Simon's temperature returns to normal as the soup is finished and the remaining tea is kicked over; we have no food left. An irritating groin rash causes Simon severe pain until a skin ointment is salvaged from the first-aid kit.

Mike and Jack are tent-bound due to high winds and poor visibility. Still no radio contact about Simon's condition has reached the Park Service.

Day 3: Simon and I decide to try for the summit crest to save ourselves. As we begin to pack, two starved and frostbitten Scottish climbers appear on their way to the summit. They are too exhausted and ill to lend assistance but their footsteps should aid in our attempt. An hour later Simon and I rope up and begin our ascent. In two hours we travel barely a quarter mile as Simon cannot maintain his balance and is too weak to stand. We retrace our steps and erect the tent. Hot water is served for dinner.

Mike and Jack descend to 17,200 feet and locate a radio. The message detailing Simon's condition is received by Frances Randall at Kahiltna airstrip at three P.M. The Mountain Trip expedition from Denali Pass leaves for the summit.

Day 4: Simon and I have been awake most of the night using the stove to heat ourselves. It is crucial that we descend. We repack the gear, swallow Dexedrines for breakfast, and begin the arduous descent

of the Cassin Ridge. Simon glissades on his seat while I belay, then I walk down. The clouds move in as a plane engine is heard. In poor visibility the plane signals it has seen us as we struggle onto a snow arête at 18,300 feet. We believe a rescue by helicopter now has been initiated. I stamp out the word "rescue" in the snow and we set up the tent and begin another wait.

The Mountain Trip expedition has encountered problems. A member of the party, Wolfgang Meyer, has suffered severely frostbitten feet and is in considerable pain. Mike and Jack volunteer to assist in his descent from 17,200 feet.

Day 5: No rescue has arrived. This is my fourth day without food while Simon has had one meal in the last six days. Our feeling of isolation and subsequent depression are acute. Tomorrow we will continue down. We resort to "toothpaste soup" in hopes of retarding our dehydration. This *soup de jour* causes intense indigestion but serves as an excellent decongestant.

Wolfgang is assisted down from 17,200 to 14,000 feet where thrombophlebitis is also diagnosed. An evacuation by helicopter will take place from 14,000 feet when the weather clears. On a fly-by Doug Geeting and Park Ranger Dave Buchanan spotted Simon and me descending the Cassin Ridge. We appeared tired but capable of moving so no rescue has been organized. Our crucial food shortage was obviously not emphasized through radio contact.

Day 6: Simon and I get motivated by Dexedrines and stumble down to an old campsite at 17,000 feet. The last gallon of fuel is retrieved from the cache and used tea bags are extricated from the snow. Above the campsite two coils of climbing rope are miraculously discovered. These will be used in rappelling the upper rock band. The diluted tea creates optimism on my fifth day without food.

Heavy snow and high winds prevent a rescue attempt from the West Buttress.

Day 7: Barely able to stand, Simon and I begin the rappels. Frustration results in tears as we struggle to find anchors in the rock. Halfway through the rockband we spot four climbers erecting a tent on the slope below. As luck would have it, the ropes get caught on the next rappel. We are too weak to jummar up to unhook the snag and so we continue down with only one rope. Six hours after leaving 17,000 feet we collapse into the climbers' arms. As we rehydrate on soup and cocoa we learn that these four climbers, who have no high-altitude experience, are ready for a summit bid from 15,800 feet with three days of meager food, one faulty stove, and only two sleeping bags! Our desperate situation fortunately alters their ambitions and the decision to descend tomorrow is made. They also have no radio.

Again bad weather thwarts any evacuation of Wolfgang Meyer.

PLATE 2

Photos by Robert Kandiko

Simon McCartney being evacuated after a 50-foot fall into a crevasse during his rescue from McKinley.

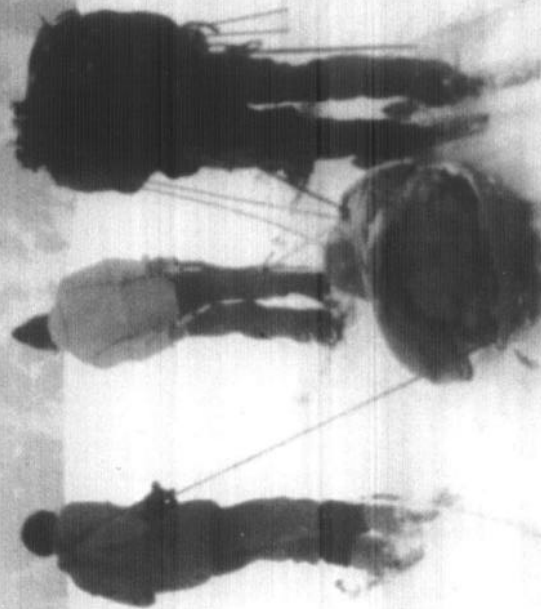
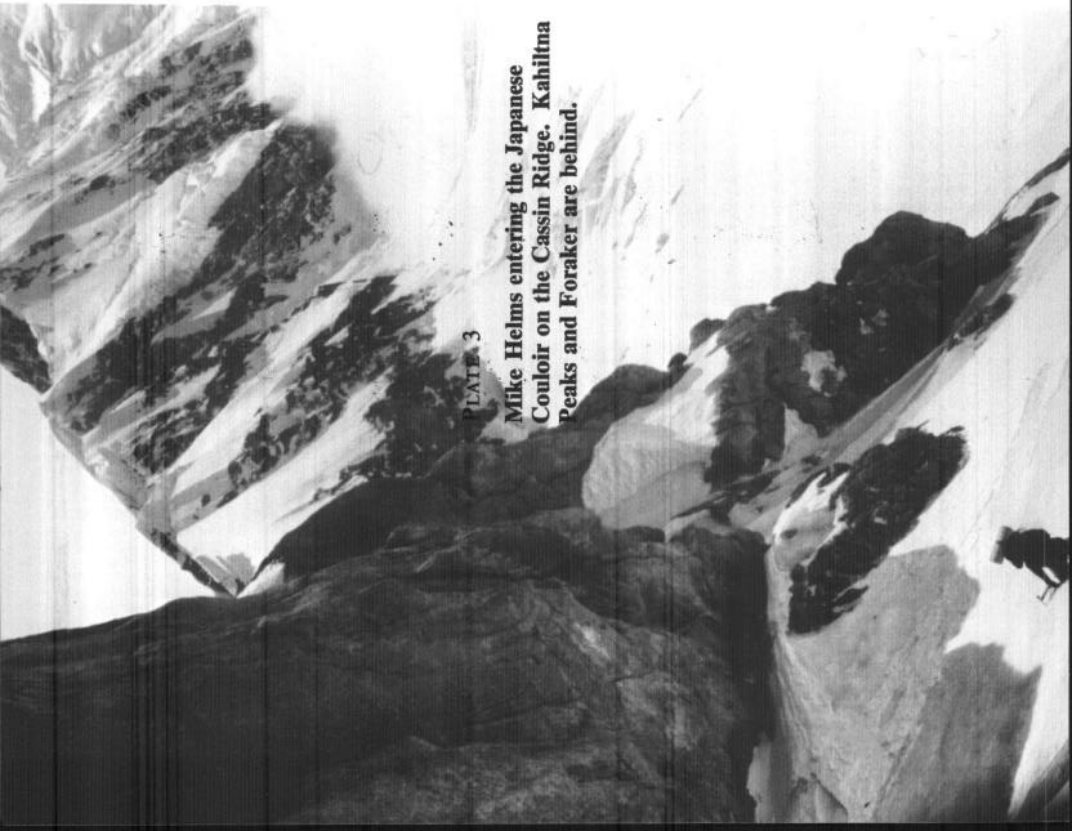


PLATE 3

Mike Helms entering the Japanese Couloir on the Cassin Ridge. Kahiltna Peaks and Foraker are behind.



Day 8: In the company of the four Pennsylvania climbers, Simon and I rappel the lower rockband just in time to catch a Japanese party which is also retreating after an unsuccessful attempt on the Cassin. They have a radio and call Frances Randall indicating that we are alive but in desperate need of food. She contacts the park rangers who are about to leave Talkeetna to evacuate Wolfgang. Within an hour a food-drop is made on the hanging glacier at 14,200 feet and Wolfgang is on his way to Anchorage. Jack is flown out from the glacier by Geeting and is taken to Anchorage hospital for frostbite treatment.

Day 9: Simon and I descend the ice arête with the inexperienced and frightened Pennsylvanians who use pitons for brake bars and want to rappel the arête instead of moving along the new fixed line. We finally reach the glacier at the base of the Japanese Couloir. Simon has contracted severe trench foot and can barely walk.

Day 10: In white-out conditions Simon and I follow faint footsteps down the northeast fork. In the upper icefall we encounter a steep icy slope. I start down on belay only to slip and begin somersaulting. Simon is pulled off his stance. Incredibly I post-hole a leg which stops my fall. The rope jerks tight as Simon freefalls 50 feet into a crevasse. Now he is completely incapacitated with a broken wrist and a severe concussion. Fortunately the trailing Japanese party and a Minneapolis group camped below extricate Simon from the lower lip of the crevasse. Simon is carried to their camp where another radio message is made.

Day 11: The Minneapolis group generously shares its food with us as the clouds move in to prevent the authorized helicopter rescue.

Day 12: After two days of waiting at the junction of the northeast fork, Ranger Dave Buchanan convinces two Swiss mountain guides to accompany him up the glacier to haul Simon down in a toboggan. At 8:30 P.M. Simon is enclosed in a bivy sac, tied onto the rescue sled, and the long trip to the airstrip is started. With the help of twenty climbers from Kahiltna airstrip, Simon reaches the southeast fork at four A.M. When the clouds finally part at eleven A.M., Geeting zips in and flies Simon and two frostbite victims directly to Anchorage.

* * *

Our story ends on July 1 at this point, but the tragic summer on Denali was to continue. While waiting for my flight out, I talked with four Toronto climbers who were starting for the Cassin. Late in August, I learned these climbers were never seen again, undoubtedly victims of an avalanche. Ten climbers were killed in the park in 1980; Simon and I were lucky to have survived.