

Cassin Ridge in Winter

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OUR INTENT had been to climb Mount Logan in winter. Seldom visited in summer, we knew of no winter attempts on North America's second highest peak. Only weeks before we were to leave for the Yukon, our fourth climber opted for warmer activities. The Canadian Park Service refused to let groups of less than four enter Kluane National Park. Even farther north, Mount McKinley was a logical alternative.

McKinley's first winter ascent was in 1967. In his book *Minus 148*, Art Davidson details the grim adventure of that ascent where one climber died falling unroped into a crevasse and the rest of the party nearly perished while trapped in a blizzard near the summit for several days. Horror stories like this did not seem to inhibit other winter attempts over subsequent years, but few made it further than the glacier below the mountain. Stories circulated of arctic conditions with sustained 100-mph winds and temperatures of -70° .

Why climb Mount McKinley in the winter with its arctic storms and minimal daylight? After most of the great mountain summits around the world had been climbed, the focus changed to climbing mountains by their most difficult routes. In the 1970s the emphasis changed to "classic" routes in parties of one to four without porters and with lightning speed. A winter ascent of a difficult route in a subarctic region would perhaps further extend the boundaries of mountaineering.

As climbers gain confidence and experience, they often wish to simplify their gear. Ironically, as they improve, they attempt more difficult climbs requiring more sophisticated equipment. During the planning stages for our arctic winter climb we knew that our gear could easily be a limiting factor. Much of it required extensive modifications. Wool and natural fibers were used minimally. We wore polypropylene underwear next to our skin and then a one piece Dumart suit. Covering that we had pile suits. Our outer layer was of double thickness Thinsulate covered with Gore-Tex. Our faces were hidden by goggles, silk and wool balaclavas. In the coldest conditions we used neoprene face masks and a large hood attached to the oversuit. Footwear was our greatest concern. Vapor-barrier boots are warm but too floppy for the difficult climbing we anticipated. We used plastic double boots with vapor-barrier liners and neoprene over-boots. For hand protection we brought thick wool mittens with fiber-filled outer shells.

After the typical last-minute crises of gear sorting, food purchasing and equipment modifications, in the middle of February Roger Mear, Jon Waterman and I made our way to Talkeetna. With only a minimal delay we were flown to the "airstrip" on the southeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. As we arrived, a party of four were vacating the airstrip after an unsuccessful attempt on the West Buttress of McKinley. They had struggled with the winds for two weeks only to make it six miles up the glacier. We stashed our things and ourselves in their old snow hole. Eager to test our gear, we attempted to assemble our new large-dome tent. In the severe cold the shock cords lost their elasticity and were unusable. A pole snapped. The tent was retired. Our alternative was Roger's two-man tent made for people five feet seven. Roger is five feet seven. Jon and I are six feet two.

In surprisingly mild weather (temperatures of -12° to -30° F) we moved up-glacier carrying loads to the base of the Cassin Ridge. We hauled plastic sleds and wore skis with skins. To avoid the cramped quarters of our mini-tent and the winter winds, we routinely dug snow holes. Each day we learned more of the tricks of keeping warm and dry. Our days were broken down into cycles of eight hours of sleep time, ten hours of maintenance tasks and six hours of walking or climbing. Daylight was less of a problem than we anticipated. We had nearly ten hours of traveling light and our small lantern illuminated our snow homes.

Leading up to the Cassin Ridge is the Japanese Couloir, a 2000-foot, 40° -to- 50° gully of rock and smooth water ice. We determined to climb the mountain in alpine style. Shouldering enormous packs, we ascended the gully, ignoring the dozens of partly buried and chopped fixed ropes left behind by previous parties. The advent of front-pointing and drooped picks has eliminated the need for fixed lines on nearly all ice routes. The thought of 2000 feet of step-chopping on ten-point crampons seemed awesome to us. At twilight we reached the ridge crest, a knife-edged cornice, dropping away to the glacier 2000 feet below us. We traversed to a rock buttress providing a two-foot ledge over 30 feet in length. Fatigue tempered our concerns about our exposed bivouac site. Too soon it was time to melt chunks of snow and ice for breakfast cocoa.

The technical crux of the climb presented itself to us early the next morning. For years climbers have argued about the difficulty of the rock on the Cassin. It is frequently described as 5.7 or 5.8. As we grunted and scraped our way with crampons over the granite slabs wearing 70-pound packs, I was sure the climb was easily 5.10. In Yosemite wearing EBs on a summer day it might be graded as 5.1.

The long nights gave us time to discuss many things, including the difference between winter and summer climbing in subarctic regions. Despite the weakness of the sun, icefalls still released blocks the size of trucks with about the same frequency as in summer. The snow on the glaciers was predictably less packed in winter but above 11,000 feet there were no consistent differ-

ences. The ridge itself was mainly blown clear of new snow and the clutter and waste of previous parties was grossly apparent. During our month the most profound contrast with summer was that the temperatures never warmed to above -12° F. There was seldom a time when we could sit outside comfortably for more than a few minutes. Our sleeping bags became crusty and meticulous attention to clothing was needed to stay dry. Discipline is needed to avoid frostbite to the extremities and it was only moments of inattention that brought me superficial frostbite later on the trip.

Above the rock ridge, the route narrowed to an arête of rock and snow. We moved steadily across the arête kicking steps under the brilliant sun until mid-afternoon when we uncovered a crevasse for our evening headquarters. In another two days we reached 16,000 feet and were able to make contact with a CB operator named Kansas Sunflower who lives just north of Anchorage. He relayed our progress and departure plans on to our pilot. Roger and I spent that night in the tent and Jon slept outside in his bivouac sack ecstatically describing the brilliant northern lights sweeping across the mountain. Satisfied with his description, I burrowed further into my sleeping bag.

Most of the climbing above 16,000 feet on the Cassin is on moderate snow-and-ice slopes. Up to that point we had moved together through the technical terrain placing occasional runners and infrequent belays, perhaps more out of habit than logic or need. Weaving in and out of the rocks in the ice gullies over short rock ramps reminded me of Scottish winter climbing. On the final 4000 feet to the summit we abandoned extra gear and, unroped, we walked up the final steep slope.

Gaining several thousand feet of altitude a day, we were far from fully acclimatized. Except when confronting freeze-dried dinners, my appetite was good and I was able to sleep at night. Sleeping fully clothed has its advantages. Morning departures, however, were slowed by our cramped tenting quarters and inertia. We had one tent for the three of us. One by one, we put on our boots while those waiting savored another few moments of warmth in their sleeping bags.

On our fifth evening on the ridge we chopped out a small platform among rocks covered with rime ice. Jon was not feeling well and woke up with a nightmare about suffocation. The next morning was clearly our coldest but the thermometer was lost or broken. Roger and I both complained of numb toes and started up the slope. In about 30 minutes we reached the summit ridge. Dropping our packs the two of us walked up the 400 feet to North America's highest point. Approaching the summit cornice I briefly reminisced about broken relationships, family and the green world below. I noted the bamboo and aluminum rods staking out the highest snow block. Instead of exultation I felt irritation at earlier climbers for marring a sculpture finer than any art work.

Back at our packs we saw Jon struggling up the last few hundred feet to the summit ridge. I walked down to him and relieved him of his pack. He was

too fatigued and we were too cold for him to climb the final section to the summit. We started down the West Buttress route. Jon resembled a man living a nightmare with sunken eyes staring at the ground. He took prolonged rest stops while Roger and I danced up and down to stay warm. At 17,200 feet we camped in brilliant sunshine. During the night the weather deteriorated. In near white-out conditions we broke camp. Jon was still suffering from fatigue. I helped him dress and pack while Roger organized the group gear. Roger walked with Jon encouraging him on while I fumbled ahead looking for wands and the best footing down the windy descent route. Jon stated that he would descend no further than the crevasse at 15,000 feet. Since we had only one day of food and fuel, Roger and I independently concluded that we would have to leave him if he refused to move further down-glacier. We were spared that choice when we spotted a party moving up the glacier. Five British mountaineers shared an enormous snow cave with us that night, as well as the English cooking that horrifies the world. Jon recovered his strength during the night. He felt that he had been suffering from pulmonary edema, but it may have been other forms of acute mountain sickness with nausea, lassitude and fatigue. His respiratory rate and pulse were normal, he had normal airway sounds and was able to sleep at night with his head lower than his feet.

Our longest day was after leaving the British party and walking the 12 miles back to the airstrip. The final mile was sadly uphill. I wore snowshoes picked up from a previous camp to protect my toes which were beginning to blister with frostbite. Ahead of me Roger and Jon post-holed but moved steadily ahead with the patience of Job.

The airstrip in summer is often a tent-city with as many as several hundred temporary residents. Except for a forlorn wooden pole guarding the entrance of our snowcave, the glacier was deserted. We dug our way down to our subterranean home where bagels and a canned ham formed our victory dinner. Exhaustion dulled our sense of accomplishment. Decreased mutual dependency diminished our tolerance for each other's oddities. Irritably we tolerated each other's presence over the next few days waiting for the plane. Incredibly, our pilot flew in late one afternoon, dropping off three Spaniards who hoped to climb the north face of Hunter. Later we found that he had shouted down our snow hole but the snores of two sleeping climbers and the sounds of a walkman radio drowned out his call. He flew away believing us still on the mountain.

After five days of waiting, Roger went with one of the Spaniards to rescue gear abandoned up-glacier. Less than a mile from Base Camp, he fell 30 feet into a crevasse, tearing knee ligaments. The Spanish climbers hauled him back to camp. Jon, like me, was nursing frostbitten toes. And so we three cripples sat in our snow cave with its blackened ceiling from the lantern smoke, eating macaroni and cheese. The following day another pilot, flying up glacier to rescue gear from an airplane that had crashed earlier that winter, spotted our huge S.O.S. and initiated our evacuation to civilization.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range.

FIRST WINTER ASCENT: Mount McKinley, 6193 meters, 20,320 feet, via Cassin Ridge; on the glacier and mountain from February 17 to March 13, 1982, on the Cassin Ridge from February 27 to March 4, 1982.

PERSONNEL: Roger Mear, Jonathan Waterman, Michael Young.

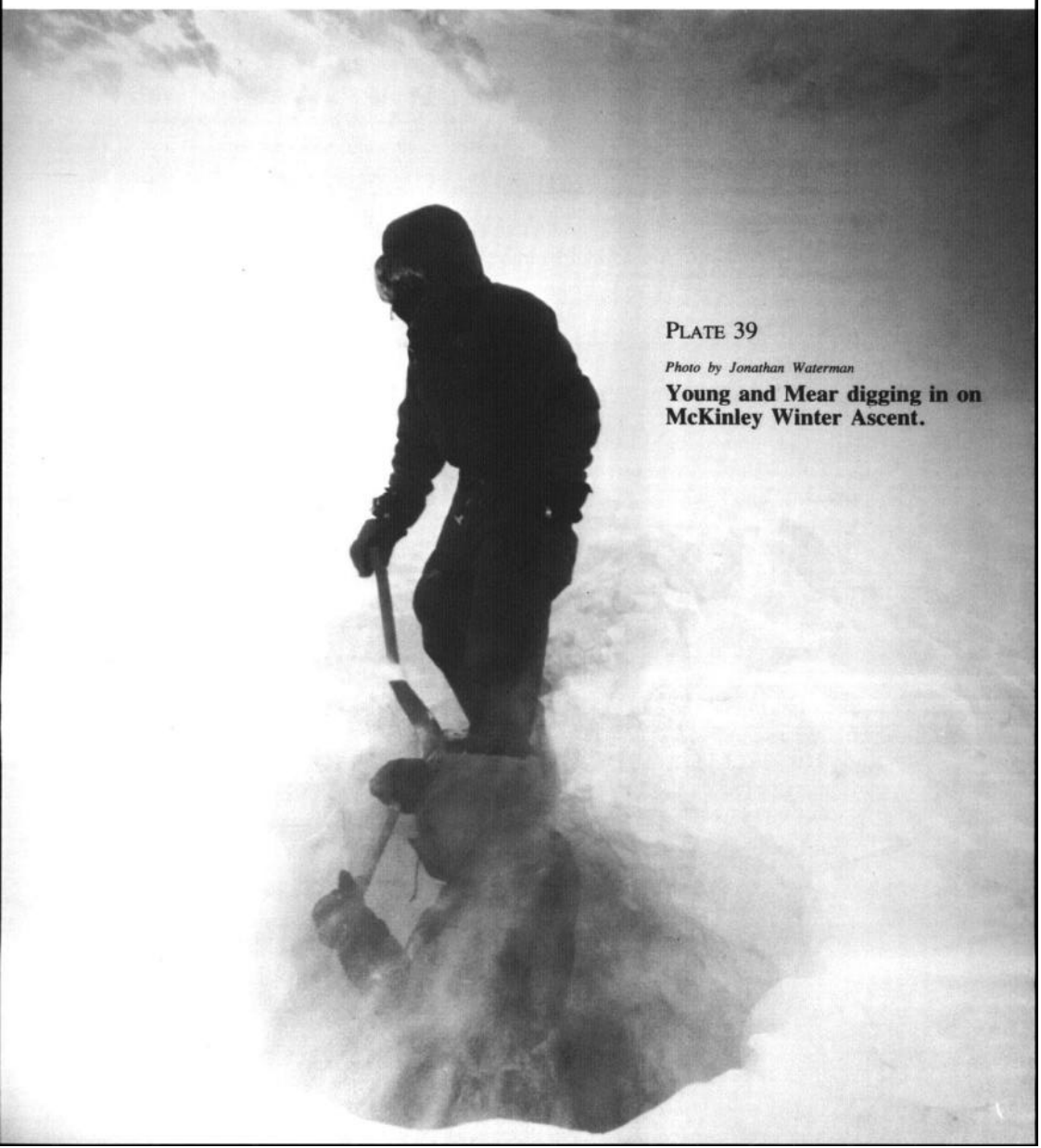


PLATE 39

Photo by Jonathan Waterman

**Young and Mear digging in on
McKinley Winter Ascent.**