

Arctic Discipline

Modern techniques and old-fashioned grit in the coldest pocket of Canada

by JACK ROBERTS

I was bored. Bored with all the sport climbing I had been doing and bored with most of the ice. Sure, the routes themselves were technical and challenging, but I was ready for an adventure. Something big and remote. Something no one had ever done before. I needed to get away and go up north.

The impetus to try to climb a route on Mount Kennedy's northwest face was a simple one: the imagined and implied threat of competition. An article appeared recently in the *Canadian Alpine Journal* detailing all the existing routes in the St. Elias Range and displaying pictures of many unclimbed peaks and faces. Kennedy was among them. I knew I wasn't the only person to read the article. The pressure to establish a route up its icy northwest face licked at my feet like the flames from a campfire. I had to react.

I approached Jack Tackle about the project and he seemed interested. In 1978 he failed in an attempt on an alpine-style ascent of its north ridge. He was keen to give the mountain another try. If it was to be by a new route, so much the better.

That was 1995, and we failed. The face proved to be much steeper than our pictures indicated; we lacked a portledge and a haulbag for the project. We would need both for success. We decided that a reconnaissance via the north ridge would better prepare us for an attempt the following year.

Our decision about what route to climb and by what means was simple. Both of us felt that we wanted to piece together a line that offered exclusive mixed rock and ice climbing. The less rock climbing on that cold face, the better. We spent weekends on technical test-pieces in Vail and Rocky Mountain National Park. Two week-long trips to Canada increased our endurance, confidence and ability on steep mixed routes. We wanted to apply the lessons learned on these trips to our proposed route on Mount Kennedy, because that was the type of climbing we did the best and enjoyed the most.



Roberts on Mixed Feelings, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. A Pair of Jacks applied modern mixed techniques to an alpine big wall. Jonathan Wright

MAY 1, 1996

We arrive in Yakutat in the afternoon and immediately walk into the Gulf Air hanger to meet Kurt, our pilot. The weather is almost too good. "I'll be ready in 30 minutes," he says, but we aren't, and we beg off until tomorrow, spending the time getting organized in the hangar and mentally psyching for the flight in.

The next morning we have a beautiful, uneventful flight. Kurt is excited to make his first-ever landing on the Kennedy Glacier. All too quickly the plane is unloaded.

"Have fun, boys," Kurt calls out. "See ya in three weeks. . . ." The Cessna turns around and takes off into the cloudy skies, leaving only ski tracks as a reminder of its passing. Funny: after 20 years of flying into glaciers, I still find myself straining to hear the last sounds of the plane's engine echoing off the granite mountain walls. I'm unable to do anything until the noise completely disappears.

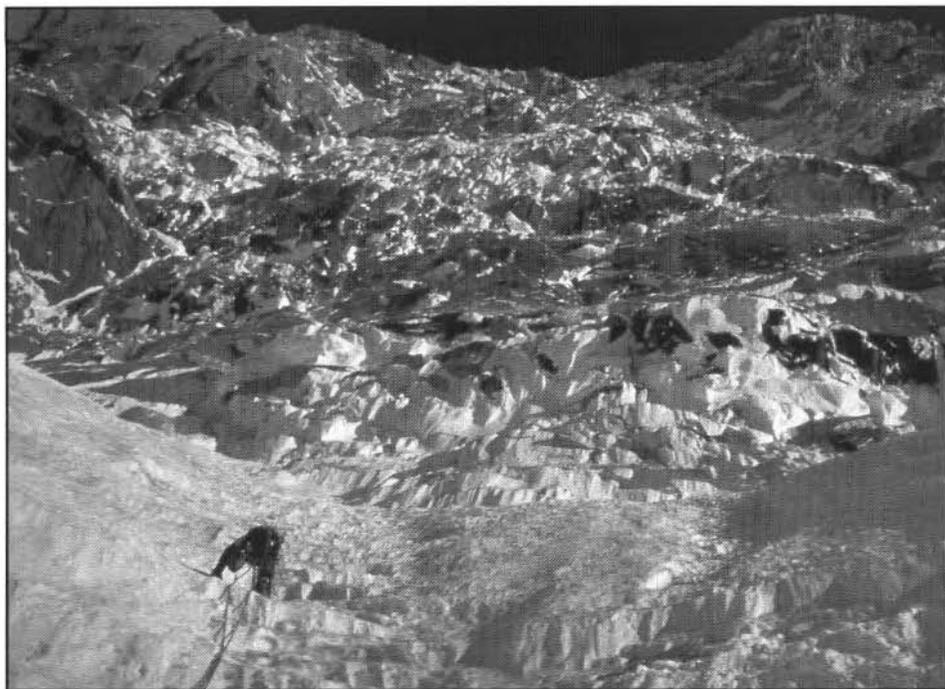
On our second day, we drift outside when the heat in the tent becomes oppressive. Kennedy greets us with glistening ice. Last year's route is still apparent but with much less climbable ice. Sitting in our chairs, glassing the face with binoculars, we seek out flaws in the mountain's defenses. We spot likely bivouac spots that are sheltered and map out a hypothetical plan. Due to the steepness of the rock, progress will come slowly, but climbing the face is definitely possible. Later in the afternoon we carry a load to the base of the route and begin the process of psyching up, the ritual of getting ready.

Two days later, with the weather still beautiful and the equipment for the route stashed four pitches up, we leave the comfort of our glacier home and begin our vertical adventure. Our goal for the day is to reach the bottom of a slab, a sort of Glacier Point Apron, only steeper and smaller. It appears featureless from below, but we know it holds enough ice to climb on.

Straight-forward steep ice leads through iced-up chimneys for a few pitches, where we find a place to erect the portaledge. From here we begin climbing the slab. Our initial hesitation at the start of the slab is replaced by a stronger realization: we cannot begin this pitch directly. The ice is too thin, and unprotectable. Jack chooses a steep ice-choked offwidth; 50 feet above me, he traverses onto very thin ice. The minutes crawl by until he reaches a belay. I'm impressed. The sole protection for the last half of his pitch is a tied-off Spectre and Stubby ice screw equalized together. If this is an indication of what we can expect we'll have our hearts in our throats most of the time. I follow the pitch with difficulty. At the belay I compliment Jack on the size of his *cojones* and we rappel down for the night.

Later, when the ledge is erected and tomorrow's gear sorted, we fall into what will become our roles on this wall. I melt snow and deal with the evening meal while Jack entertains me with his eccentricities. In the morning it will be his turn to melt water, brew tea, make the meal. We're both comfortable and relaxed. We're more confident than last year. Our faith in each other shows in how we set up belays, laugh, and find the rhythm that comes naturally when doubt is absent (or at least held at bay).

The morning dawns blue and clear, encouraging a late start. Two hours after breaking down the ledge, we carefully pack the haulbag. I begin the second slab pitch. I ascend a dozen moves, then enter a section of ice the consistency of mist. The picks of my axes slip into the ice-gravel mixture; I have to restrain myself from hitting the rock beneath the icy surface. Torquing and pulling, hooking and edging, I come to small stances and get protection, just at the right time. The climbing continues like this all day, pitch after mixed pitch, creating occasional magical



Roberts getting into the business. Jack Tackle

moments when improvisation is the name of the game. The momentum of the previous sequence of moves catapults me into the next unforeseen sequence of hooking and scratching. The pressure never really goes away until I clip the belay anchors and yell with relief. Finally the ledge goes up, the brew is on. Reflection sets in.

Climbing without a pack is such a joy that I don't even mind hauling up our 100-pound haulbag. Or at least, not too much. Despite the wall's steepness, the bag gets caught occasionally on horns and stuck in chimneys—the most frustrating part of the day. We succumb to the camaraderie and grumpiness that helps our partnership work and discuss the mood swings of the mountain while held captive by the blueness of our tent.

I'm wasted, exhausted, both mentally and physically. I want only to lie down in a warm, sheltered space where the endless spindrift can't reach me and I don't have to worry about anything for a long time. Unwinding in the covered ledge, the steam rises from my mug of coffee and freezes against the blue nylon walls of the fly. I go over the events of the day. There was the dubious pitch I led, a fragile smear of ice that went on uninterrupted toward a narrow, ice-filled crack. Then Jack climbed an overhanging corner through a torrent of non-stop spindrift, scratching and clawing with his crampons for anything on which to stand. On the next lead, every step I took was irreversible; thought and action became one. Sections we couldn't read from a distance became no clearer upon closer inspection, but our ability to improvise spontaneously improved as we ascended. Our concentration became sharper, never wavering, through areas of unblemished, crackless granite and patches of diaphanous, brittle ice. Tied-off screws



Tackle entering the crux. Jack Roberts

or pitons provided protection, and each pick placement became a probe into the unknown. Eventually the moment arrived when calm overcame nervous exhaustion and fear. I became secure in the knowledge that anything was possible, that my momentum was over-riding weariness, and I became absorbed in the moment. Jack followed the traverse quickly on jumars and only just missed the last few rays of the sun's warmth. They were all we would receive today. His pitch went quickly and easily to another headwall. Beneath it we erected the ledge on a low-angled ramp.

Inside, the shelter and security allow us to unwind and relax. The weather is still almost perfect. Even though the wind, spindrift and Arctic cold are wearing us down, there is no reason to consider retreat. We are so well-equipped we feel we could withstand even the most severe storms. The climbing has been continuously interesting, challenging, and free. One of our goals is to push the limits of modern mixed climbing. So far we're succeeding. Happy and secure in the knowledge that we have adequate fuel and food to last awhile, I spend a calm night drifting in and out of sleep, waking only when spindrift blows through the air vent and collects on my face.

In the morning we decide we'll keep the ledge where it is and spend the day leading and fixing our three available ropes. I begin the day by stepping off the ledge onto 75-degree ice with over 2,500 feet of exposure beneath me. Fifty feet of moderate mixed ground leads to tricky movements: bottoming picks pressed into cracks provide just enough torque to allow me to press on, and I balance off nickel-width edges and stem with faith off of who-knows-what. Each pitch is a vignette. Jack leads a difficult and complicated section to the right, piecing together rock here, ice patches there, all the while climbing in a torrent of spindrift. While I'm waiting for him to secure the belay I begin to drift off and snooze. Once the ropes are anchored we squander the remaining time attempting to dry out the frozen clumps of down in our sleeping bags and enjoying our surroundings.

Everything about what we are doing seems wild, bizarre, lifeless. For the entire climb I maintain only four points of contact with the mountain: two monopoints and the picks of both axes. Somehow it seems so impersonal. No handholds. No footholds. Nowhere can I touch without having gloves, boots and sharp points make contact before I do. The intimacy I feel with this climb is different, somehow, than what I might develop on the *Nose* of El Cap or on the Diamond, where I can caress the warm rock with bare hands and smear with the rubber of my rock shoes. It seems alien to feel an affection for what I'm doing without being able to share it with the mountain. The sun never reaches us, never engulfs us in the grip of its warmth. The ice we are climbing, old, brittle, gray and colorless, has never been touched by the heat of the sun. Our red suits bring color to an otherwise black-and-white world. Lichen cannot live on this face—does not want to live. It is strange that in this exotic environment I find the energy to recharge my batteries and infuse my existence back home in Boulder with more meaning and substance.

As the morning light permeates the blue canopy of our shelter, an Arctic sheen makes the interior feel cold and oppressive. The veneer of spindrift that blankets everything inside is especially cheerless this morning. Breakfast is silent. The available warmth from the sleeping bags is scant and fleeting. For the first time on our climb I notice the mountain sucking away at my strength and resolve. This is no way to start the day, I think, as Jack melts more ice for tea.

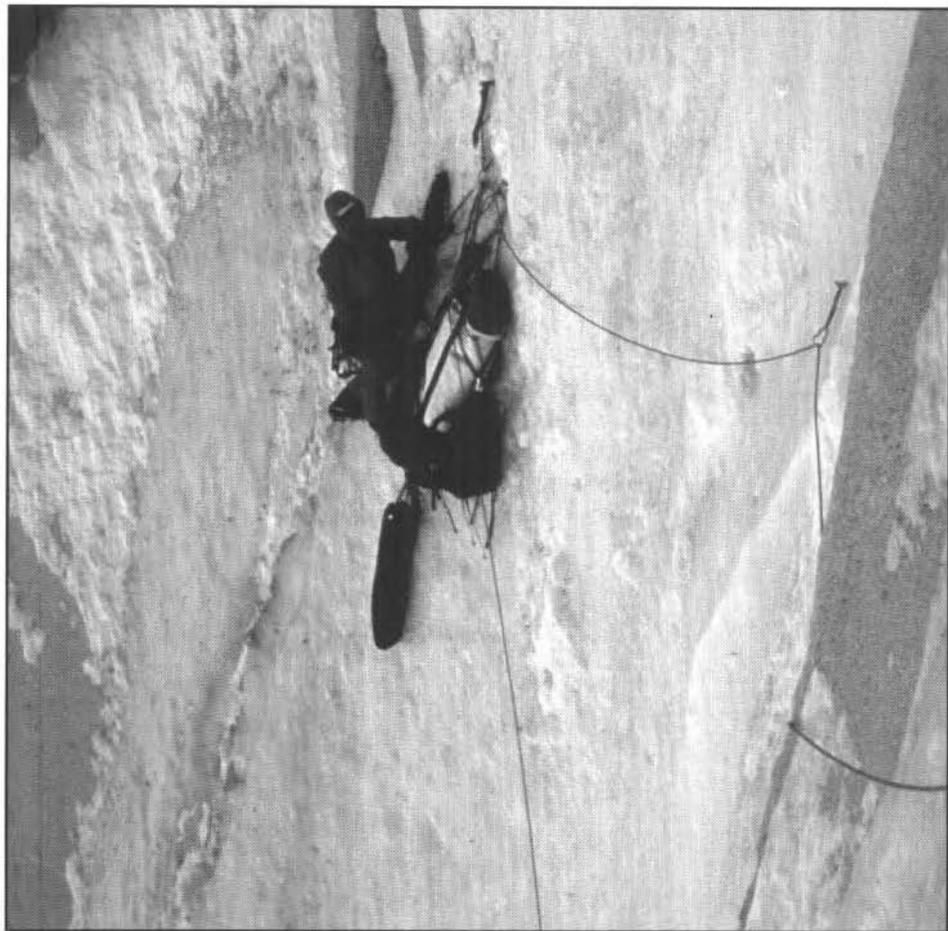
Our agenda today is all work, little play. We have to break camp and haul for 200 meters before the climbing begins. At times it seems as if the rock is reaching out and grabbing the pack and haulbag. I hate every minute it takes to hoist our gear up this hill. If we could have done the climb with less equipment I would have gladly dumped what was unnecessary and climbed unladen to the top. We use and need everything we brought, though. Today it is too much. The

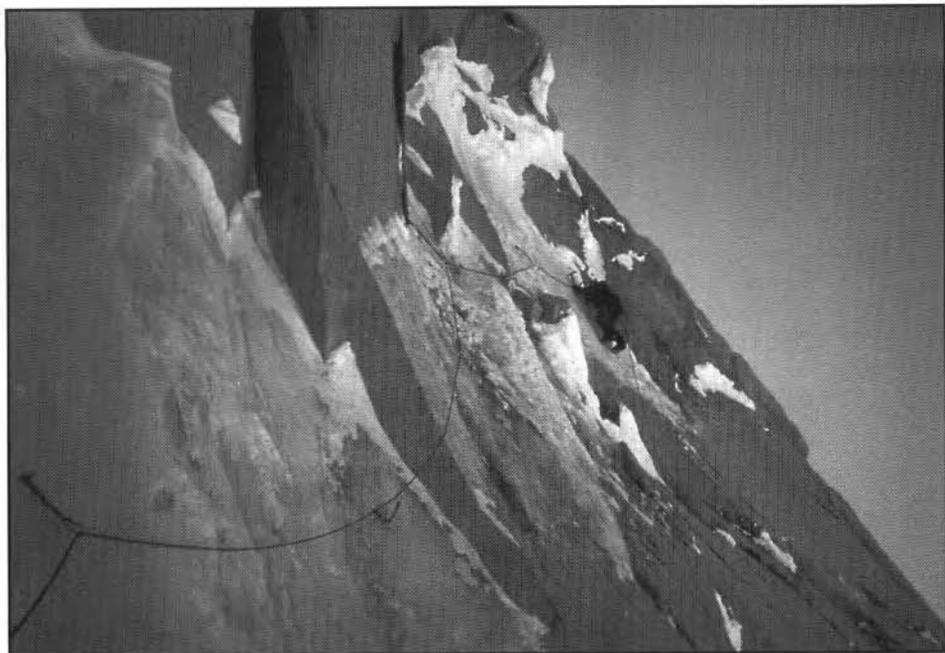
racks are too big and never organized enough. The five layers of clothing I wear are too bulky. The snow blowing off the summit icefields is unending. Too much.

The next morning starts routinely enough, but I know something bad has happened when Jack begins to swear and yell. He dropped a crampon. Somehow he neglected to attach the safety strap around his left ankle and the crampon jumped off while he was attaching the right one. I feel numb. Nausea hits me as the reality of our situation reaches my small, frightened brain. We're 4,000 feet up a major wall in Alaska with more than 2,000 feet to go before we meet the descent line. No one has ever descended that route before without using fixed lines. We have two 60-meter ropes and some hardware. Because of the steepness and the traversing nature of the climb, descending the way we came up is not an option.

I feel sick. I want to scream and yell at Jack but I can't. It's not his fault. Well, OK, it is; but he didn't do it intentionally.

Jack feels worse than I do. "We're not going down," he says, as much to himself as to me. "We're not going down."





Roberts two-thirds of the way up the wall. Jack Tackle

The weather is still stable and we probably have two more good days ahead. We should be able to cover the remaining ground in that time and begin the rappels.

We keep moving up. Nothing to do but go on and deal. Could be worse. . . . We could be in Scotland. . . .

From here on the feeling of being committed hits me especially hard. We step out onto the upper icefield with a sense of urgency that was lacking before. Now we become even more obsessed about handing off gear and tying everything in. Jack is careful about his every move.

The climbing becomes more moderate. We hand off crampons at the end of each pitch so we can still swing leads. Sometimes I lead a few in a row, other times Jack does the same. No problems, no ego involved, just get the job done as efficiently as possible and carry on. A few more inconvenient sections of hard, unprotected spindrift-covered climbing, and we find ourselves in the sun on the summit icefields ready to move with more speed toward the top.

But we're bone tired. Nine days on the wall and over 4,000 feet of climbing have worn us down more than expected. Jack is exhausted from all the leaping on one leg, and since we each are carrying 30 pounds of gear in packs instead of in the haulbag, we go much slower than we'd like. Our progress is disheartening. I lead for 700 feet to the shelter of a rock outcrop where we think we'll bivouac. Jack follows on one crampon, hopping sideways like a crab missing a few legs. We move up on hard ice; the snow we had hoped would speed our progress is missing. Hard, slow work. It's late and we've bonked. There really is no good place to camp. Our fatigue dictates our decision more than our experience, and we dig in and make a tent platform where

Tackle at a hanging belay, alpine-style. Jack Roberts



Tackle hop-jugging. Note missing crampon. Jack Roberts

we are. A red light in my head goes off, warning us, but I ignore it. At least the chopping keeps us warm. Three hours pass. We create a seven-by-three-foot ledge for the tent. Not a pretty sight, but it will have to do until tomorrow.

We've reached the point where our route intersects the North Ridge route. The plan is to leave the tent and all unnecessary equipment behind, rise early, rush toward the summit, and return by tomorrow. The wind is picking up, buffeting the sides of the tent, knocking the hoarfrost from the ceiling into my soup. Doubts begin to creep in. The familiar thumping of snow blown against the tent invades our privacy. All too soon the thumping becomes more insistent. Louder. Small avalanches from above begin hitting us with increasing frequency. They are slowly burying us. During the night I doze uneasily. Cold, damp, frozen clumps of down suck at my last remaining bits of body heat. We are buried in a small tent on a big face and feel impotent to do anything about it. In the few moments when I am able to doze off, I dream of tropical beaches and hot sand. The shudder caused by more snow sliding over the tent wakes me and I feel the first stages of panic rising in my throat. I manage to swallow the urge to scream. Instead I whimper to myself, trying hard not to let Jack notice.

When I open my eyes, I'm still in a frozen cocoon filled with frost and frozen air. Jack and I are cramped tightly together, and we look at each other from our respective corners. Our entire tent with the exception of the air vents is completely buried by snow and more continues to build on top. We struggle to keep the air vents open by punching out the tent fabric. Our situation is wild and potentially serious, but not out of control. Not yet.

The storm continues for almost two days. I feel we are continuously and slowly being pressed

into the bowels of the mountain. The feeling has become almost normal when suddenly the storm ends. I slowly and carefully unzip the tent door, inadvertently allowing a small amount of snow to cascade in.

We assess the situation. Our food is low. The climbing above is still difficult. With the missing crampon, progress will be slow. The descent is unknown. The weather is unstable and turning worse. We have met our goal of ascending a new route up the northwest face and have connected with an established route. We decide to play it safe and descend. We are disappointed to not stand on the summit, but we both feel that the risks are too high for what we have to gain. Down we go.

SHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH.

Ah, man, here it comes again, as if it had ever gone away: that endless sound of spindrift coming down and covering the face for the 50th time today. I'm so tired of this stuff I could cry. We are forced to rappel diagonally, and for the next 800 feet we get knocked off our crampons by huge spindrift avalanches coming off the summit icefield—the icefield we might have been climbing on. I begin to feel sketchy and unstable on my feet. A big one hits me hard, knocking me off my crampons and sending me spinning sideways for 50 feet. I simultaneously lock off the rope and swim in place so the snow doesn't build up around me. I want to scream, but I try to keep my mouth closed so I don't inhale snow.

Jack's attempts with his single crampon are even more exhausting and time-consuming than mine. Our feeble attempts at rappeling quickly become a matter of survival. Hours pass before we are out of the path of the avalanches. We re-group on a ledge and begin the momentum that will take us closer to the ground. In our haste, we head down too soon and have to climb north diagonally across the face until we are completely beat.

Darkness comes. We swing our picks in a pathetic attempt to chop out a tent platform for the night. We're close to the bottom and sense that the weather is improving. Once inside the tent, conversation is brief. Sleep comes easily.

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The dawn brings clear blue skies and relief; we no longer have to rush, only hurry. Soon we get onto the North Ridge route. The rappels are easier, and quickly accomplished. Too much gear gets left behind, but we don't care. Our immediate safety is more important than equipment or money. Watching Jack below me I suddenly feel the heat of the sun on my shoulders. For the first time in two weeks, I discover I'm basking in the sun. As I wait for Jack to set up the next anchors, I notice the spindrift seems less frequent and not as thick as it was higher up. With the glacier getting closer after every rappel, I begin to unwind and relax. The route we've just accomplished comes into full view. It is no less steep or intimidating for our passing. As I scan over the pitches we have just climbed and mentally track the events of the past 12 days I begin to notice the warm glow of success building in my stomach. I am proud of what we've done.

I don't remember when I've actually enjoyed a climb as much as this one. We planned for it perfectly; everything seemed to click into place. The climbing was difficult and sustained—maybe more continuous than either of us have ever done on a single route. We worked well together and came away with our friendship intact. The weather was as good as we could ask for and I have lots



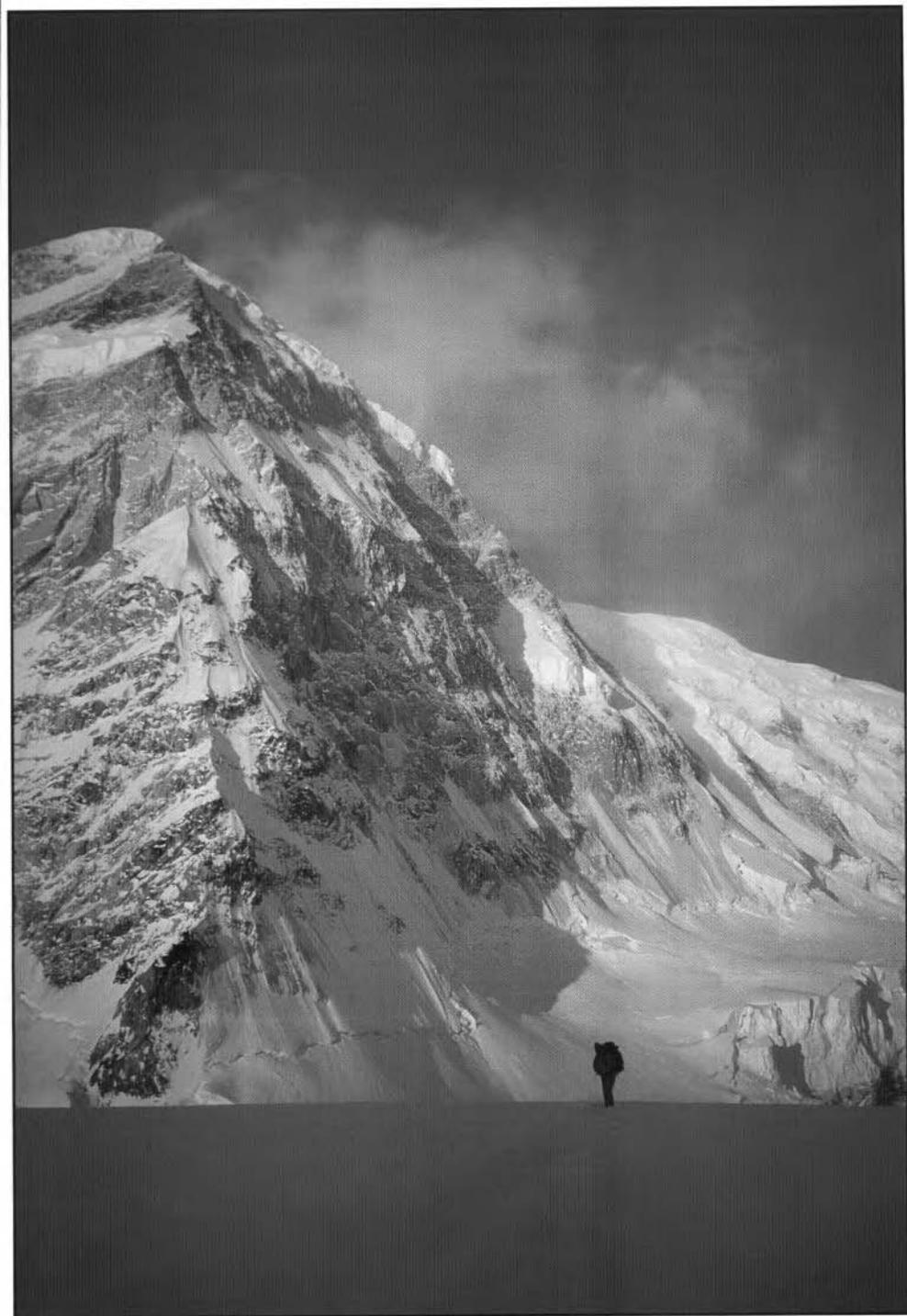
Tackle in the lower wall's exit couloir. Jack Roberts

of good memories and stories to tell. I decide I want to come back to Alaska next year. But right now all I want is to be warm, dry, and to sleep forever.

ADDENDUM

One week later I am sunning myself on the beach in Dana Point, southern California, watching beautiful waves and beautiful women, enjoying the contrast of snow and sand, glacier and sea. Today a singular feeling pulls at my brain for the first time. That feeling is of being disappointed about our success on Kennedy. After some deep introspection I realize it's because we missed the summit. We didn't really finish the route by continuing all the way to the top. Or did we? From some dark corners of the Alpine Club trophy room would come cheers and confirmation that missing the summit doesn't matter because we met and joined an already existing route. Therefore our line is complete and the rest is only icing on a cake already eaten. From other dusty recesses of the room would come yelling and screaming. "No, you punters, you failed!! Wankers!!" Because we failed to stand on the highest point of the mountain, ours was only an attempt that missed its mark.

While sport climbing, cragging, and big walls do not necessarily require an achieved summit, I feel climbs on mountains are different. They deserve better. Summits are sacred and demand the best from the alpinists who would climb them. The last few rope lengths to the summit are often the most difficult, because the temptation to begin the descent early is strong and the climbers may be at their weakest. But when a climber stands on top, with nothing else above, the



Mount Kennedy, with the Arctic Discipline Wall in shadow. Jack Roberts

feeling is immense—and so different than when one turns back with the top still, well, on top. It isn't so much that the summit offers success; it is that the feeling of success is so special nothing else comes close. And that truth needs to be kept special.

I know our decision to turn back just short of the summit due to mechanical failure and avalanche danger was prudent and justified. I know we succeeded in our stated goal of establishing a difficult standard of climbing via a new route on a beautiful mountain. I also know that by denying ourselves the summit, we denied ourselves the very special feeling that makes alpine climbing the exceptional sport it is. I know, deep down, that really, we failed.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Saint Elias Mountains, Canada

NEW ROUTE: *A Pair of Jacks* (6,000 feet, Alaska Grade VI M6 WI5+), May 4-13, 1996
(Jack Tackle, Jack Roberts*)

Recipients of the 1995 Malden Mills/Polartec Challenge Grant.

