

EXTRATERRESTRIAL BROTHER

*Forty-six hours of magical mystery touring
on McKinley's Father and Son Wall.*

KENTON COOL



Kenton Cool kitting up and thinking about what's to come on the Fathers and Sons Wall as it emerges from clouds just before their big push. *Ian Parnell*

“So there’s no moraine at all?”

“Not a single stone,” replied Ian. “You just fly straight to base camp, no porters, cooks, or even L.O.s. Basically no hassle. You just rock up, fly in, and then you have it in large style.”

My eyes glazed over. We were sitting next to the world’s biggest haulbags on what seemed to be the worst moraine in the Himalaya. Admittedly, India’s Arwa Tower was impressive, but the amount of hassle and effort was telling. Physically fighting with agents--plus a nine-day approach from base camp--was not ideal.

A week later, still in India, Ian and I were sitting in a very similar spot in a very similar state. “So, when are we going?”

“Going where?”

“Alaska, you fool; this sucks!”

Seven months later Ian (a.k.a. Buba Smith) and I are sitting next to one another again. This time it’s outside the Fairview Inn in Talkeetna, drinking beer and awaiting our burgers. “Beats Delhi, huh, Kenton?”

I couldn’t really disagree. We had arrived only 24 hours previously and would be at base camp in less than 24 more. It was looking like a designer trip. I have a reputation for being excitable, and right now, with a few beers inside me, I was fully excited.

The following evening saw us step out of our plane and onto the soft snow. A gaggle of people with skis and gear were shouting and screaming. “Okay, New York Bushwhackers Expedition” boomed a rather short, attractive lady wearing what looked like carpet slippers. Four climbers almost jumped to attention before throwing their gear into the plane. “Hi, Ian,” the woman said quickly before jumping into another chaotic scene of bodies and gear.

“That’s Lisa, the base camp manager,” explained Ian as we pulled our gear up to two empty campsites. After almost ten years of Himalayan climbing I had never seen a base camp such as this.

The next few days saw us sorting gear and eating (apparently we set a record for the amount of food brought in by a two-person team). Ian seemed to know most of the people at base camp and spent much time yarning. The big news was that one team was currently on the Stumps Route on the Moonflower and another was on the Wall of Shadows. Now, neither Ian nor I are superstars; we’re not like the late Alex Lowe or the current Steve House. We’re normal human beings, and all this talk of overhanging ice, killer mushrooms, five-day storms, and lightning-quick ascents was beginning to psych me out. It was time to go climbing.

The Mini Moonflower, as it became known during this trip, is a triangular buttress about a quarter of a mile past the Moonflower on Mt. Hunter. Ian had spotted it the year before and neither of us could believe that it hadn’t been climbed. Such a buttress in the Alps would have six routes on it.

After sorting a standard rack and two 7.5mm ropes, we turned to our supplies: 30 GU energy gel packets and seven liters of water. We looked at each GU suspiciously. “You sure about these, Bubs? Doesn’t look like very much to me!” Ian simply eyed them in silence.

Ian kicked up the initial slopes, went over the bergschrund, and put in a belay below a steep groove. Reaching the stance, I leaned over and muttered, “Here we go, Bubs, let’s have at it!”

Ian led off over some interesting mixed ground, and the pitches quickly merged into one. The climbing was hard enough to be interesting but never desperate; it was very similar to French goulottes in Chamonix: squeaky ice, good rock, great climbing.



Kenton Cool enjoying pitch 8 of Kiss Me Where the Sun Don't Shine on the Mini Moonflower, Mt. Hunter. *Ian Parnell*

The plan was to climb during the night (remembering that it doesn't really get dark at this latitude) and rest in the daytime, using the sun to fight the cold. However, as night became day, the clouds rolled in and wet snow began to fall. The leads (we were climbing in blocks of three pitches) switched again, and Ian started up what was to be the crux—a steep ice runnel with a tricky mixed step at the top. I pulled up to Ian at the belay with a roar of delight: “Fantastic, man, fantastic.”

But concern began to creep in as we got higher. Despite his list of outrageous ascents, Ian is relatively new to mountaineering. “What do ya reckon about the snow, Kenton?” We were worried about the upper slopes shedding on us. I'd heard nasty things about the Moonflower doing the same thing.

“Don't know, Bubs. Tell you what. We'll continue up and if it gets any heavier we'll reconsider.”

Although we had scoped the route from below, a combination of the clouds and actually being on the route meant that routefinding was tricky. We were using a large roof as a reference point, but as the clouds were coming in and out, a rather ominous sight came into view. A huge ice mushroom could be seen to one side of the roof. I caught Ian's eyes and they said it all. The whole upper half of the route was threatened.

We said nothing as I racked up and continued, trying to move out of the fall line, which seemed impossible. Tiredness was setting in; it was 29-plus hours since we'd left base camp. Watching the rope inch out the belay plate was depressing, and all I could think of was my sleeping bag and killer mushrooms. (Ian had suffered broken ribs at the hands of a collapsing mushroom the year before.)

“Below!” screamed Ian. I looked up expecting to see crashing mushrooms but instead got a chestful of ice. “Arrgghh!” My hand felt like it had been squeezed in a vice. “Bastard, Ian, you bastard!”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, man.” My hand was on fire and I couldn’t move it. Shit, I thought, it’s broken. My immediate thought was for the rest of the trip and all the money we had spent getting here. “Safe” finally filtered down. I gingerly dismantled the belay and began to climb.

Ian was concerned about my hand since it was rapidly swelling. Light was fading and it was snowing again—and it was my lead. “Any chance of you continuing, Bubs?”

“No sweat, man.” He led another pitch toward the ridge, and we now seemed to be directly under the mushroom. The pitch finished on easy ground, and the ridge seemed to be only about 200 feet away. The condition of the snow prompted another discussion, and the ice prod-der came out of my pocket. We forced a couple of mocha GU’s down us, flushing them with the last water and started to descend. Fifteen rapid abs saw us back to the bergschrund and one last, long rappel to the skis.

Brits are famous for not being able to ski, and Ian and I are no exception. This, combined with Ian’s low-quality bindings, meant that skiing with rucksacks was at best interesting. I’d turn around to see Ian sitting on his sack smashing his skis with his pole while screaming obscenities. We finally reached base camp in the early hours. A wave of utter exhaustion enveloped us both, but the ascent was in the bag and it was time for tea and medals.

After a few days rest we decided to go up the west buttress to look at a new route on Denali’s Washburn Wall. Unfortunately, a three-day storm rolled in and we got no further than the 11,000-foot camp. On our return to base camp Ian bumped into “BenAndKevin” from New Hampshire along with Bruce Miller. “Don’t worry, Kenton, I told them not to do the route on the Washburn Wall.” Well, they did and called it Common Knowledge. Yanks for you!

The next week was spent sunbathing and eating at base camp, with a brief spell on the Moonflower, which we climbed with three points of aid. After this we geared up to go to the 14,000-foot camp on Denali.

Ian was quite right about no moraine, but he didn’t mention anything about sledge pulling. Anyone on Heartbreak Hill when the Brits were around were in for a laugh. Ian seemed to take it quite personally in the way his sledge would overtake him and pull him off his skis. He lay there in a crumpled heap, close to tears through frustration. It was hard to imagine him cranking it out on steep ice, and I could only laugh. Three days later, after many such falls and even more four-letter expletives, we reached the 14,000-foot camp.

This high camp on the west buttress is beautifully located and overlooks Mt. Foraker and the very top of Hunter. We were positioned here to make an attempt



Ian Parnell on pitch 19 of “The Shaft” during an ascent of the Moonflower, Mt. Hunter. *Kenton Cool*

on the Father and Sons Wall, a wall which to date had only one route on it. The plan was to climb a line to the left of First Born (Steve House's line), join up with the north buttress route, and then traverse both the north and south summits. All this in a single push with no tent, no sleeping bag, no idea.

Leaving camp at 10 p.m., we descended to the top of Motorcycle Hill, and it was here that we got our first look at the wall (it had been cloudy on the way up). "It's a bit big, Ian!"

"Na, it just looks big; no bigger than Stanager" came the reply. We had stashed a bag with ropes and hardware at the top of the descent, but unfortunately a freeze-thaw cycle had occurred. Ian pulled a cam out of the bag and attached to it was most of the rack and a huge lump of ice. Meanwhile I was struggling with a rope that thought it could do the Indian rope trick. "Bollocks" was slightly understating it, I thought as Ian started chipping ice away. Not the ideal start.

Things went from bad to worse, and the descent rapidly became one of the most mind-numbingly frightening things I've ever done. The slope felt good to start with but quickly deteriorated to what felt like imminent death, all above a line of gnarly seracs. Finally I broke the tension. "Ian, I'm scared, I'm scared stupid; I don't like this at all."

"No, it's shit," he agreed. We decided to go to a slight depression and make yet another ab; this would be our third one, each one leaving us more and more committed. Finally, after using all but three feet of our ab tat, we reached the glacier. "Better not retreat off the route," Ian pointed out, looking forlornly at the tat.

As we moved quickly over the glacier, the wall loomed above us and a sudden realization

of how remote this route really was sunk in. Although perhaps less than a mile from the west buttress, we could have been on the moon. The only feasible escape would be to exit via the Peter's Glacier. With no bivy gear, minimal food and fuel, it wasn't really an option. Cramming GU's and water down, I geared up.

The first 600 feet disappeared quickly as we moved together. The plan was to gain the center of the face via a series of icy runnels. I found myself eyeing a rather scary-looking icefall, the key to the line. "It's shit, utterly shit" Ian shouted down as he watched his tools track down in the mush. The ice had been fried by the sun, leaving a soggy excuse for falling blocks. "Don't fancy it, do ya, Kenny?" I didn't and I told him so. Back at the belay we had a



Kenton Cool belayed in deteriorating weather beneath pitch 13 of Kiss Me Where the Sun Don't Shine, Mini Moonflower. *Ian Parnell*



Kenton Cool looking for a way out 28 hours into Extra Terrestrial Brother, Denali. Ian Parnell



The Mini Moonflower (left) and the real thing, the Moonflower Buttress, on Mt. Hunter. *Ian Parnell*

discussion on what to do, and out came topos and descriptions. Arms were waving here and there, and necks were craning. In retrospect 600 feet up a 6,500-foot wall and being lost already wasn't very good. Try left was the final decision, and thus began the magical mystery tour.

We moved quickly over moderate but interesting ground and soon gained a mixed spur that seemed to kick back into the middle of the face. The climbing was a mixture of icy runnels and easy mixed ground interspersed with gnarly steep snow. After a number of hours I ended up belaying underneath a short, steep corner, with the yellow plate of Ian's crampons inches above my head. "Watch me, Kenny!" His feet skated and so I placed his front points onto a micro edge for him. "There's nothing for my tools" he spurted as his left foot shot off the edge again. "I'm off, na I'm on, no I'm off." He wasn't; he was in fact grinning nervously at me. Sweat glistened on his face. It turned out that Ian had just sent the crux.

Thirty hours into our little jaunt we stopped for mashed potatoes and soup. It's surprising how comfortable it is sitting on two ropes halfway up a mountain. Sleep quickly overcame me. The only shelter we had was a bothy bag, and it was this, flapping in the wind, that woke me almost four hours later. "Four hours, you sure? It felt like ten minutes to me," Ian moaned. My mind was groggy from not enough rest. My senses slowly returned with depressing clarity, as my hostile surroundings closed in once again. Moving away from our little lunch spot was the psychological crux, but once moving again we passed the hours with little recognition.

The final hard climbing found us moving together over tricky ground. This was more out of laziness than forethought. Looking back on it, we were stupid, but normal reasoning had long since left us. It was turning to an ordeal, no longer fun. The final slopes up to the north ridge were never-ending and the thigh-deep powder was soul destroying. "Go, Ian, you're the man. Yeah, have at it, show it who's boss!" Upon hearing this, Ian would pull himself back to his feet and break trail for another eternity before collapsing again. It was only afterward that I confessed I was encouraging him only because I didn't want to break trail myself. It truly was an impressive sight. The final 300-foot slope up to the north ridge was horrendously loaded, and the wind was blowing spindrift over the top. The last 60 feet I had to climb totally blind. Pulling onto the ridge was like stepping into the heart of Hades. The wind was screaming all around us. We had intended to sleep in the sun on the ridge and then traverse the north and south summits, but the wind meant that stopping was impossible and sleeping would result in black digits or worse.

The ground was easy but I was unable to move across it; my body was hurting and my mind had gone numb. Figures kept dancing in my peripheral vision and I kept looking every which way. I knew there was nothing else up there, but I kept staring and saw nothing. "Ian...Ian" I found myself muttering. "This is fucking stupid," I screamed. I slumped down utterly spent, feeling frustrated and angry that Ian had brought me here. This was quickly superseded by a feeling of guilt; it was Ian's dream and I was in the process of shattering it. For me, continuing up was not an issue; it was time to drop onto the upper Peter's Glacier. I think with this realization my self-conscious gave up and my body stuck its finger up at me.

As we moved off the ridge and down onto the glacier, the situation seemed to improve. Out of the wind and with food in me, I started to recover. Ian had for the last hour or so been operating for the both of us. We plowed straight across the glacier, under a snub of rock above an ice-fall. The final push to the 16,000-foot camp on the west buttress was fine, previous stories of waist-deep powder proving unfounded. Reaching the ridge, we quickly located the fixed ropes on the headwall. I turned to Ian, who was grinning. We embraced and shouted into the wind, congratulating each other. Cramming the rope and gear into the sack, we clipped onto the fixed ropes and started to bum-slide almost down to the tent. We staggered into camp approximately 46 hours after leaving it. We got a number of strange looks from people looking as spent and as disheveled as we were. They had no idea, no idea at all.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Alaska Range

ASCENTS: Extraterrestrial Brothers (VI, Alaska Grade 5/6, Scottish VII) on Mt. McKinley's Father and Sons Wall, in 46 hours round-trip from the 14,200-foot camp on the West Buttress, early June. Kenton Cool and Ian Parnell.

Kiss Me Where the Sun Don't Shine (Scottish VII) on Mt. Hunter's Mini-Moonflower in May. Also a repeat of Mt. Hunter's Moonflower Buttress. Kenton Cool and Ian Parnell.