## The south face of Mount Dan Beard (3127m), Alaska

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In the beginning we had a number of objectives but after a few days reconnaissance had discarded most of them. One really can die by following a black line on a photograph. On 9 May we repeated Washburn and Fisher's route on Mount Dickey (2909 m) and despite a little panic among collapsing séracs near the Pittock Pass we were beginning to enjoy Alaska. We felt ready for Dan Beard.

22 Mount McKinley with Mount Dan Beard lower right. Photo: Bradford Washburn



## THE SOUTH FACE OF MOUNT DAN BEARD

Yanking and yawing like a couple of puppets on elastic we skied roped together out through the hummocks and crevasses and on to the flat; we left base on the S side of the Ruth Amphitheatre at 8pm on 17 May. Three miles of straight going and a pause to fit ski skins, squash a blister, then we worked out a convoluted route up into the little glacier below the face. To avoid the tumult of an ice-fall in the centre we flirted a little hesitantly with avalanche skirts from the SE ridge and worked our way round so that in the gloom we could cross to the foot of a couloir (the one obvious entry on to the face) without being caught by a gaping schrund. At about midnight we abandoned the skis by another avalanche heap and crawled and stumbled our way into the sombre arms of the couloir—hoping the evening crust would bear our weight.

Between the S face and the SW ridge we had noticed this couloir;  $1000 \, \mathrm{ft}$  long and committing, it steepened from  $30^{\circ}$  to  $50^{\circ}$ . We took it in turns to flog a trail—and though it felt unsafe no avalanching occurred. The couloir abutted in the darkness against a black wall with an arrangement of overhangs here and there. For us a slightly hollow and delicate snow traverse led right in 4 pitches to a col, the corner of the face proper.

Out of the S shade, night and seriousness, we stepped into a staggering flourish of sunlight on McKinley's twin summits to the W. Despite the minus twenties, our new style butane stove flared and roared into action and we enjoyed the luxury of a proper brew for breakfast, a little early at 4am maybe but a time for smiles and biscuits. Sipping in silence to that feeling of feelings 'We've got it. We'll do it. By tonight we'll have done it . . . only 3000 ft to go'.

Pete led out 100 ft up a steep snow wall. A sudden crack. No woomph! Only another crevasse. Mumbling into his black helmet he leaned over and peered into the crack where he discovered a 90 ft deep bottleneck cutting right across the wall, too wide to jump and cunningly covered. I moved up and belayed as he tip-toed and probed. We crossed on a lid whose thickness was academic; the lid held to whispered incantations. On up to a cornice in the roof of the world and suddenly we were sky walking through the dawn with Mount Huntingdon's vast N face stealing the sun from McKinley, and the unclimbed Rooster's Comb, hunched still in shadow, sending down a grumpy avalanche every 10 minutes or so. There followed 3 pitches of aerial scarp walking, like something from the Forbes Arête. As he posed for a photo a cornice some feet away collapsed by Pete and dropped down the W face. He pointed at the gap as though to complain.

Matching our memory of the face from below with a horizon reduced to 50 ft we worked our way across to a central depression. Never technically fierce, the next 8 pitches were on steep (almost suspended at times) snow ramps and galleries with reassuring rock belays. A solid mind-grinding routine of axe, foot, kick, breathe, move. We decided not to race, not to move together, mainly so that we could rest at belays. Whether to hang the sack up or belay wearing it? A super alpine bore in an increasingly sensational setting! Traverse slightly, then up a little, back a bit, then over. Odd little things for the camera. Even some

perennial Irish jokes over the lunch snack, taken in a bomb proof eyrie in the now baking and bewildering sun of noon. An almost desert heat as the whole face shimmered and shook in violent haze and thermal twists. A near total silence emphasised by the odd stone rumbling and burring through the air. A monster avalanche more or less close.

Rising slowly up a hanging basin 300 ft across, the exit looked blocked. A big wall 400 ft or more and certainly overhanging. Pete . . . ? Wrenched from the confidence of the plod—plod of the snow into a horrible sinking feeling. The word 'boobed' had a sudden flair to it. We were weary and somewhat frayed from the dangerous snow.



23 The arête on the S face of Mount Dan Beard, Photo: R. O'Donovan

Suck a sweet or two. Look around there, here . . . Look down there . . . maybe across here . . . watch the rope. Out over a piece of rock. 'Dodge, do you think . . . ?' 'Must be. Do you remember that bit when . . . ?' The very sacrilege of 'How much further?' or 'Will it go?' It went all right. A sneaky sly and twisting gully. Flush of adrenalin and a smack of what it's all about. An untapped pocket of energy and two long run-outs up the steepest hardest pitches of the climb to a big split block. Evening suddenly cold again, a rising wind as we coiled up ropes stubborn and stiff with fresh frozen moisture. Feeling drunken and tired we lurched on to the summit dome. Don't slip. It is so silly to slip. On to the flat top and windslab; look at the watch. Twenty three and a half hours of continuous effort. All the usual non feeling of the occasion; still a job to do; we have to get down.

## THE SOUTH FACE OF MOUNT DAN BEARD

In Alaska you have got to get down. 63° north, an area so suddenly high from the flatlands, so turbulent because of Mount McKinley's 6000 odd metres, so snow-engulfed because it's only 100 miles to the Pacific and warmth; so remote. Routes normally seiged and camped, fixed roped and done by teams working in turns have a lot to fall back on. Two people atop a new 4500 ft route do not.

We had no details of Biven and Smythe's original route up Dan Beard and anyway our skis were at the foot of the S face. Any other descent would involve miles of fear and wallowing on glaciers. We had not really thought as much as we should maybe . . . It was all suddenly very serious, that doubtful justification of the whole thing. To descend our route in our present state was unthinkable. To bivouac right on the summit with . . . yes, all the clichés together . . . gathering storm clouds from the S!

An idea; think of an igloo right up there in the sky surrounded by wind and the peaks of the world. We had with us a saw. The blocks came like polystyrene. 'Could you cut one, '9, by 8, by 12'?' Dull looks, very dull looks from Pete. But we built a tiny little igloo. Too tired to cook he curled up in his pied d'éléphant and I in my misery. Ghosts of flakes drifted in at the door as the wind thudded dull on the walls about us.

We shivered awake, reluctant noses to the freezing air and stiffness. Outside a blaze of light and no wind or nastiness, another beautiful day. We breakfasted basking in sunshine and our 9 hours of sleep had us ready for anything. We followed our footprints back to the split boulder on the face. (Unthinkable thought; what if our footprints had been obliterated and we had had to negotiate the corniced plateau in cloud or snow fall? What if crossing the road . . . ?) A slight feeling of presumption as the first abseil was rigged over the massive drop, but once away down the ropes that feeling of routine, assemble, check it; routine, run it and home.

A 14 hour collage of descent. Twelve abseils and, I think, 24 roped pitches. Down the maniac couloir in late slidy afternoon. Buried to our heads and wincing as the snow squeaked to breaking point. Squeaking as we talked with parched throats. Then a humiliating and ugly crawl for our skis, on flat  $\frac{1}{2}$  in crust over volumes of engulfing rubbish and crevasses. But we made it; as usual. Then the skins on Pete's skis broke which added vocabulary and grotesqueness to our passage off the ice-fall. We fell over a lot and tripped on the rope. Fatigued, salvage one's safety by enforcing a routine. Save the pleasure and the ego tale epics till later (preserved in photographs and memories of a fine little mountain, Dan Beard).

## Summary

Mount Dan Beard (3127 m) Central Alaska Range. 2nd ascent of mountain, 1st via S Face. 17, 18 and 19 May 1974 by Peter Boardman and Roger O'Donovan.