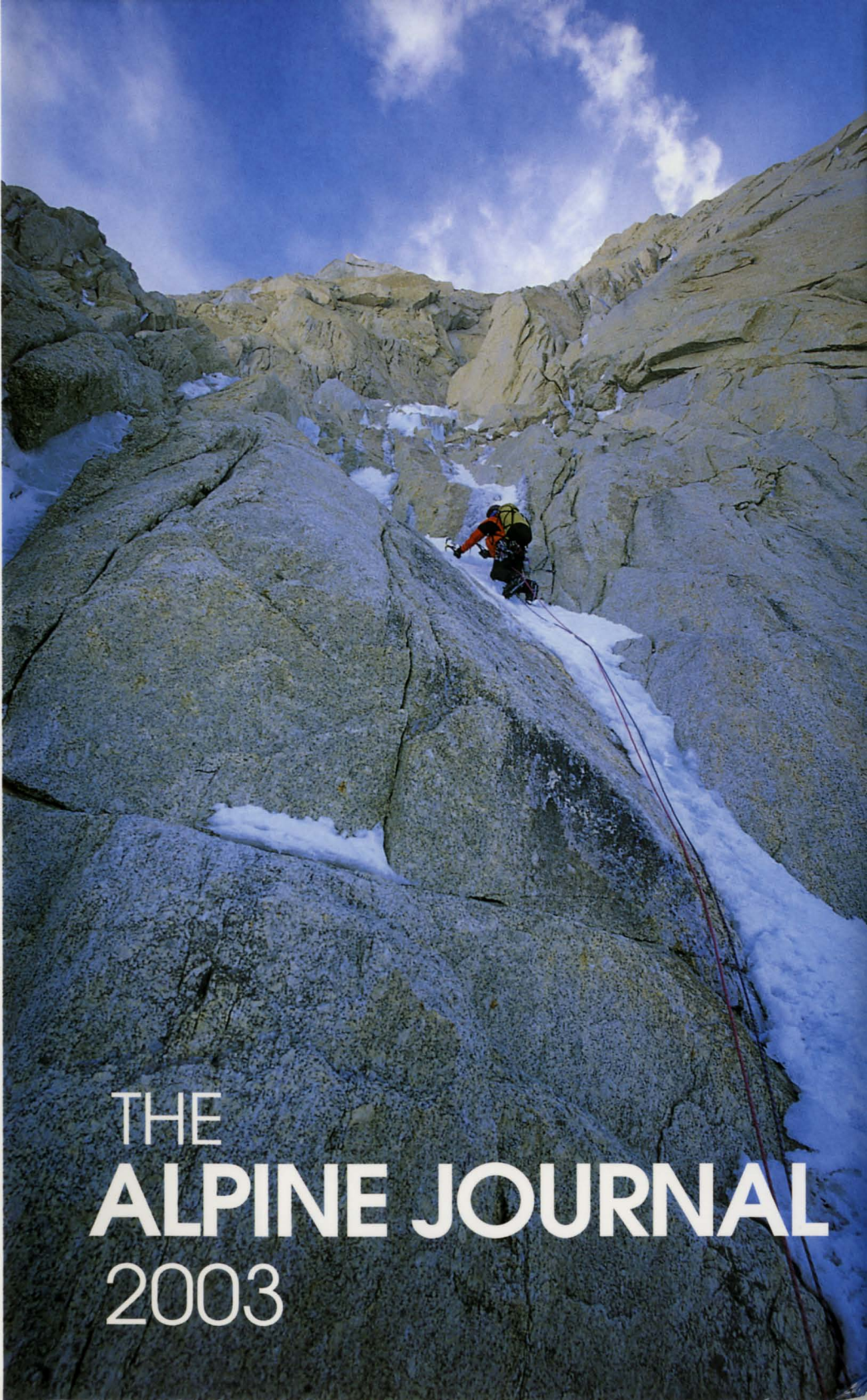


2. Do not adjust your set. Kenton Cool peers out of a vertically pitched tent at the end of day two during the five-day second ascent of the Denali Diamond. (*Ian Parnell*) (p23)

Expeditions



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IAN PARNELL

Hell to Pay: On Denali's Diamond

(Front cover and Plate 2)

This is my third year in the Central Alaskan Range. I come not just for the mountains, but also for the sense of hope, shared desire and belief that exudes from the climbers here. The mountains, with their 8,000 to 10,000ft faces, offer some of the world's best alpine challenges but it is the people here that are really special. Most climbers gather at the same base camp. A bit like Yosemite's Camp 4 on ice, with your neighbours ranging from wannabe Messners to some of America's leading alpinists, from *voie normale* weekend warriors through to single-push fanatics. For most of us, this is the promised land. We've worked hard to earn the pennies to get here amongst our long-dreamt-of summits. With so many fought-for ambitions it would be easy for brutal competition to breed. Instead there is a real sense of community. Every success seems shared, raising the collective experience, bolstering a belief in what might be possible. Each year I make lifelong friends, meet great people, who share that innocent joy of pure climbing.

2001 was an exceptional season in the Central Alaskan Range, with perfect weather and conditions. Party after party nipped up world-class test-pieces in the lightest of alpine style. It seemed anything was possible and as the mental barriers tumbled and myths evaporated you could sense the collective growth in confidence. May and June 2002 again saw the gathering of the top US alpinists, with a handful of crack Euros thrown in. Buoyant from last year's successes, most had their sights set high, hard and very, very fast. But things had changed; nothing is for certain in the mountains. Amongst the flux, this year's most popular target, the *Moonflower Buttress* on Mount Hunter, lay untouched as a huge rockfall guarded its base. The nearby *Deprivation*, another coveted line, led suitors on with a flirtation of ice that on closer acquaintance revealed vertical ribbons of slush. Everywhere, climbers' attentions were being spurned and despite some bold efforts even Hunter held out, unclimbed so far this year.

Some climbers feel a mystical contact with the hills. Top Slovenian mountaineer Tomaz Humar has even developed his own religion around them saying: 'Every rock face breathes life with its lungs and emanates an energy that is proper only to itself.'

The mountains are a place I love, where I feel most at home, but to me they are still piles of snow and stones. But as I broke through the sun-crust, up to my chest in ball-bearing snow, I couldn't help thinking they weren't

on my side. Kenton Cool and I were nearing the end of our second day on the 'six-hour' approach to Mount Foraker's *Infinite Spur* whose glistening back, bare of the usual soft coat of snow, loomed mockingly above us. Perhaps Humar was right and we had used up our alpine karma last year, managing two first ascents and one near-first free ascent. This season it was the mountain's turn for revenge; somewhere someone was laughing. It was an evil humour.

If I'm honest I'd have to admit it wasn't only the mountains with revenge in mind. I'd left the UK with stinging criticism from one particular climbing magazine's comments ringing in my ears. I knew it had little to do with my actual climbing and more to do with selling reputations and magazines, but their accusations still hurt. In the climbing world talk is cheap, meaningless without action, so my determination grew to expose their posturing with an ascent that they couldn't ignore.

Things weren't quite going to plan though. Kenton and I hoped to pioneer a 9000ft new route on Mount Foraker before nipping over to Denali for the coveted second ascent of the *Denali Diamond*. It didn't take us too long to realise that the new route wasn't going to happen this year, or any year, riddled as it was with tottering séracs. The attempt on the *Infinite Spur* was supposed to be our consolation but that wasn't going too well either.

'I hate this place. I want the first flight out of here!' screamed Kenton as he fell through the snow for a final time. Kenton wears his emotions on his sleeve. It's one of the reasons I climb with him. I'm fed up with macho bullshit in the mountaineering world, the inability to be honest about fear and risk. It's carefully calculated reticence, followed closely by jealousy of those who share their stories, and the attitude that promotes someone who travels around the world festival circuit but slags off those who get out into the mountains and try.

I shared Kenton's feelings. We were boiling in frustration and needed some vertical action soon. I put it bluntly: 'Kenny you've got until the end of today to get your whinging out of your system and then let's quit messing about down here and head up onto the Diamond.'

Within 24 hours we were refuelled and leaving base camp with a perfect, stable forecast. Our friends Jimmy and Russ, Kelly and Scott were poised for their prospective return matches with Hunter. That sense of collective energy was growing again. I even began to feel nostalgia for our initial single-push plans. Instead we had opted to go traditional alpine style although in a rather lightweight manner with only one-season sleeping bags plus the novel 'Babu' tent.

Designed for the Sherpa Babu Chhiri during his record camp on the summit of Everest, the tent was certainly strong but not very long – Babu was five-foot-two. With two six-footers lying on top of each other, our shelter took on all the comforts of a primary school play tent but at least it was light. The theory was to climb during the night and slumber in the warmth of the afternoon sun. And after making the approach during the cold of

early morning, we spent the day sunbathing at the base of the SW Face, congratulating ourselves on our cunning plan.

Twenty-four hours later and we had begun to test the hypothesis. Of course the mountains are no respecters of mere theories. As the snow began on the first night, it soon became obvious that our forecast was a hollow tease. The test was changing and we'd have to adapt quickly to survive this one.

The tales from the first ascent of the *Denali Diamond* are legendary. Having forgotten half their gear, Brian Becker and Rolf Graage took their single 9mm rope and two ice screws to the 8000ft SW Face of Denali anyway. Seventeen days later they emerged frostbitten and hungry with their Diamond and the first Alaskan grade 6+. I relived their epic story again and again but the line that I couldn't get from my mind was what they'd found on the penultimate technical pitch, 3500 feet up – a great A3 roof, 25 feet wide. My mind leapt at the challenge, could it go free? In the months prior to landing on the glacier here I'd found myself startled awake, head full of images of me struggling across the overhang before the aching void caught my fall. Each time I dreamt I got further toward that virtual lip, gradually convincing myself it might be possible. Last season our friends, Slovenian Marko Prezelj and American Stephen Koch, had pioneered a new line close to the *Denali Diamond* in an astonishing 48-hour push. As striking as their speed was the difficulty. While Marko declined to offer a grade, Stephen, who followed the crux, reckoned it might be M8, as hard as anything yet freed in the mountains. I wanted such a challenge.

The climbing was fantastic, a natural line weaving up ribbons of beautiful ice between towering granite. Gradually the gully narrowed and the walls steepened. An alpine Petra, the Diamond eased its way into ever more improbable terrain until a sudden opening revealed the test. Above us, out of the snow-flurries, loomed a series of huge roofs dripping with spindrift avalanches. There were only three vague weaknesses from the overhung bay – the least likely a hideous flared chimney, blocked by a huge chockstone that implausibly had hoared up to create a 20-foot horizontal ice roof. To our right lay the infamous '25-foot roof crack', in reality a steeply-leaning wall rather than a roof. In places, however, the fissure widened to off-width and as our biggest gear was a Friend 3, that left only one real option. The cracked wall seemed to offer plenty of protection and the possibility of hooks for my ice axes but in places it bulged alarmingly. It would be the steepest mixed climbing I had ever tried.

Again things started badly. An initial attempt, late in the day, ground to a halt in continuous spindrift avalanches. Kenton, lashed to the belay and unable to move, fared the worst, shivering and drowning in the icy torrents. Calling a premature halt to proceedings, we vainly searched for a campsite but had to make do with Kenton's original belay. A couple of hours spent chopping blunted our picks and yielded just two shallow bum-scoops. Eventually we 'pitched' the tent vertically, hanging it from the belay anchors over us as we slumped into the bite of our harnesses. Not only did it look

like we might have to climb Scottish 8 to get up this thing but we would have to do it without sleep and without the use of our blood-starved legs. Finally, as if the challenge hadn't been racked up enough notches, I chose this moment to drop my axe.

Strangely, the following morning, despite a little grogginess, I feel ready for whatever this climb might throw at me. I have Kenton's axes, leaving him a puzzle of improvisation to follow. Unlike the imagined screaming struggle a calmness comes over me as I pull the torqued axes home and my picks find improbable hooks at full stretch. After a heroic struggle to follow the pitch with only one axe, an exhausted Kenton declines the next lead, so on the rush of momentum I jump at the challenge. Strength and confidence seem to flood through my veins. Caught within feet of the top of the final steep wall by a freight train of avalanching spindrift, I relax and intuitively release the axe in the centre of its tracks. The snow thunders past, knocking me aside to swing on my remaining axe. Just for these moments I feel like I could climb anything. This was my day and I was relishing every minute. I had passed my test.

Twelve hours later and I feel I can't get any lower. Now I'm having my worst day in the mountains. Perhaps I'm exhausted from the previous day's efforts or perhaps it's due to our third sleepless night. Whatever, I'm really paying for it now. The irony is that after a day spent climbing technically harder ground than I've ever done before, I'm about to fail on 45-degree snow. Twice I've come close to blacking out, fighting nausea as I drop to my knees every other step. The snow has continued to fall, blanketing the black ice beneath, offering a promise of progress as I step up, then letting me down several steps as I break through the crust to skitter on the ice.

Kenton waits patiently for the umpteenth time today. As I reach him I lose it completely, openly sobbing, collapsed in the snow. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I've let you down,' I babble. Kenton's been breaking trail all day. He's not enjoying this much either but he has no doubt about summiting. 'Don't worry mate, it's only a climb,' he reassures me. I feel that I'm losing not only my dreams but breaking Kenton's too. But his calm words break through my despondency. His strength feels like it could pull us both through. If only I can keep moving, no matter how slow or how much snow, we will make it. I remember Kenton last year trying to explain to a non-climber the unique bond of two people climbing. Once again I feel the power of our partnership. As long as one of us keeps working we'll be okay.

This should be our last day on the climb. Last night we had a pleasant surprise as Americans Hank and Jeff emerged out of the swirling snow after climbing the lower two-thirds of the *Cassin*. We made an agreement to wake early and share trail-breaking. Throughout this climb, however, great ideas had been exposed, in the light of the real world, for what they really were. When Hank managed less than a hundred yards on the first stint, I thought he might just need a little warming up and took over. But when the Americans stopped for lunch at 9.30am it became clear we would be doing

all the snow-ploughing today. Luckily the exhaustion I felt earlier had lifted somewhat and Kenton was on form yet again. Working together, we waded through knee-deep crust, squinting through the whiteout until suddenly the angle eased. Euphoria and sheer relief welled up and we hugged each other at the top of the *Cassin Ridge*.

We took the hour-long horizontal plod to the summit, the top ticked for the critics, but with no view the highest point seemed superfluous to our climb. Back atop the *Cassin* we joined up once again with Hank and Jeff, combining for the descent across the featureless football field. Zero visibility and a few sloughs of windslab had the Americans nervously enquiring if we knew where we were. We could only answer 'not exactly' but that we were on a bearing and would deal with whatever came in our way. This did little for Hank and Jeff's confidence and so they opted to put up camp and await better weather. With the tent poles broken after our vertical bivvy and our one-season bags useless clumps of mushy down, we had little option. We began to rehearse our lines to the Rangers at the high camp. Would they mind being woken up? Would they have any shelter for us?

Emerging through the cloud at midnight, 5000ft below the summit, we were surprised to see a crowd of climbers ringing the edge of camp. Perhaps 50 climbers and Rangers watched our chaotic descent. We hurriedly stumbled downwards in case they disappeared to bed.

Little did we know but the alert was out. With the poor weather most climbers had been tent-bound, with time to worry about the epic-prone 'bad-ass Brits'. With rescue services poised, friends at base camp had even delayed their flights out in case their help was needed. As we staggered the last few steps to camp the crowd was still there waiting for us. A stranger walked out and shook my hand. Another pressed a mug of steaming tea towards me. I recognised a face. One of the rangers, John Evans, smiled: 'Welcome home boys, we've got a tent ready.' It was all I could do to keep the tears back.

As we were pampered by the Rangers, with a tent that actually worked, huge five-season down bags and a cooked breakfast, I realised I hadn't thought of revenge or reputations once over the last five days. The purity of action had cut away the crap and shown what really mattered. Belief, partnership and the support of our friends on the hill had pulled us through. We'd paid our dues to the real boss.

Summary: A personal account of the second ascent of the *Denali Diamond* (8,000ft , VIII, 8, A3) on the SW Face of Denali (Mt McKinley, 6194m), Alaska, by Kenton Cool and Ian Parnell over 5 days in late May 2002.

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