CLIMBS IN ALASKA, 1954

BY FRED BECKEY

PRIOR to this season, 1954, Alaska's highest peak, 20,269 ft. Mt. McKinley had been climbed by only two routes, roughly, the east and west faces. While a group was completing the first ascent of the mountain from the south our party of five was forging a route up the long north-west buttress, adjacent to Wickersham Wall, said to be the world's second highest sheer precipice.

Any route from the north leads to the north summit of the mountain, slightly lower and several miles distant from the south summit. Bradford Washburn, in an article surveying possible new routes on McKinley, suggested the buttress from the Peters Glacier west of Wickersham Wall would provide a long, difficult, but feasible route to the north summit. This, essentially, is the plan that controversial explorer, Frederick Cook, had in 1903 when he attempted the mountain from the north. Cook and his party reached an elevation of approximately 10,000 ft. to be stopped by what they termed 'insurmountable' difficulties. But the portion of the route he climbed has been termed 'Cook's Shoulder,' and it was to prove the key approach of our ascent.

Mt. McKinley and the Alaska Range, situated between the damp, cold maritime climate of the Gulf of Alaska and the dry atmosphere of the tundra country of the Arctic Circle, form a climatic barrier which moulds much of the central Alaskan weather and themselves are the focal point of violent tempests of a purely local nature. Like so much of the weather of the North American continent, winds from the south and west generally bring clouds and precipitation ; through the ages this range has been the harbinger of some of the world's greatest alpine glaciers.

Though Mt. McKinley is now within a National Park, it is itself still difficult of access because of the distance from roads and civilisation, and in early summer the one road within the Park, to Wonder Lake, is generally impassable because of snow drifts and flooded rivers. The aircraft has revolutionised the logistics and approach methods of climbing expeditions in Alaska ; however, their use within the Park is restricted to expeditions conducting scientific research. Fortunately, the medical and physical investigations we undertook qualified us to stock our supplies and equipment at base camp by air drops and landing.

Fairbanks, the hub city of central Alaska, as the meeting ground of our diversified group, fitted well into our scheme of aerial approach : we would fly to the airstrip at Lake Minchumina, transfer to a lighter plane flying from the still-frozen winter ice on the lake, and land at a small frozen lake on this ski-equipped plane, but seventeen miles from

the site of the proposed base camp. In four days we would snowshoe to the base of the mountain, tramp a landing strip on the glacier, and await our supplies to be landed. Weeks of heavy packing would be spared.

Our party was diversified in profession as well as origin, but quickly welded into a bond of brotherhood to accomplish our mission with safety and resolution. Donald McLean, a physician, and Charles 'Bucky' Wilson, geophysicist, are to be credited with doing the bulk of the preparation of food and equipment for the assault on the mountain, as well as conducting the scientific research. Henry Meybohm, recently from Germany, and Captain William Hackett, with the U.S. Army's Mountain Training Command, joined the expedition, and I came to both climb and record the ascent on colour film.

One of the world's most massive bulks, the splendid northern walls of McKinley, rising 16,000 ft. from the basal glaciers, presented a magnificent and unforgettable sight as our aircraft approached its landing lake. Such neighbouring giants as 17,000 ft. Mt. Foraker and Mt. Hunter seemed dwarfed by its gigantic presence. Not a delicately proportioned mountain with finely carved features, McKinley is powerful, gaunt and dominating. It is splendid in its magnificence, but from no angle is it a summit of visionary beauty. Reminiscent of the primitive northland it transcends, it speaks of savage and primitive aloofness. A cloud plume blew icily west of the summit : the weather looked well. But we were yet to see many changes, though it remained clear on our snowshoe journey to the base camp site.

On May 5 we had set out to make a preliminary reconnaissance of Cook's Shoulder. Hackett and I climbed from 7,700 to 10,000 ft. on a rock wall composed of dirty black schist ; it was not to our liking. Better news was the progress report of the other rope, who explored the ice-falls just above camp. There was a great deal of blue ice exposed this season, covered by a veneer of light powder snow which creaked with each step of the crampons. It was to be a huge task preparing the route to the top of the shoulder at 11,000 ft., and to enable us to carry loads we eventually had to chop steps the entire distance.

May 5 ended ominously. Wisps of cloud appeared early in the day. When we began the descent it was impossible to stay warm, due to the biting wind. The tents were flapping terribly by supper-time and cooking inside became most difficult. A blizzard of most serious proportions was upon us by midnight ; gusts kept us up all night to steady the tent poles against the tremendous onslaught of wind. In the morning the entire Peters Glacier basin was a mass of blowing snow drifting unmercifully eastward. Tightening the guy ropes of the tents was an ordeal and the jokes about the tents ripping in the wind took on a serious possibility. Though the 6th was the day tentatively set for the air landing we never expected to see the plane suddenly appear in mid-morning. With great concern we watched it skim overhead, certain there would be trouble if the pilot did not recognise the dangers of landing in the tempest. But the plane disappeared behind a ridge

Photo, Bradford Washburn.]

NORTH-WEST BUTTRESS OF MT. MCKINLEY. SHOWS ROUTE TO TOP OF NORTH PEAK.

[*To face p.* 32.

of the glacier, flying low. To our dismay, we could not be certain if he had landed, crashed, or circled around and escaped the tempest. On the chance there was trouble we set out in two ropes, each in a different direction, to investigate. In an hour we had had enough of the blizzard, and could neither see any evidence of the plane or had any reason to believe there was trouble. Yet an hour later the pilot and his wife stumbled into camp ! Imagine our surprise !

'We were forced to the surface by a down-draught,' Jim Collins spoke softly. 'It was impossible to power up again.' It was apparent why we had not seen the plane land, when he explained the wind drove the craft into a hollow a mile up the glacier, at a point we never believed he could have reached. Though we were happy to see them both unhurt it was apparent the aircraft was in serious danger unless the wind abated. But slightly damaged in landing, the wind had forced it on to one wing, and though it was anchored to the ice by ropes, the gusts could cause much havoc with it. We all roped and tramped to the plane to find added damage since the landing. There was reason for pessimism : gusts belted us completely over while walking, and during the night catapulted the plane on to its back. Though we later righted it again, it seemed unlikely that it could be repaired sufficiently to be flown out. Before the radio went dead it was possible to radio out for assistance, but the storm apparently kept other craft away. Accordingly, McLean and Wilson snowshoed out to the landing lake with the pilot and his wife, a trek that consumed two days and resulted in their being seen by searching aircraft. A rescue helicopter then picked up the flyers.

In the meantime the remainder of our food was dropped or parachuted to us by the Air Force, who by now had taken a friendly interest in our predicament, for we were quite over-extended without our supplies. Luckily everything reached us in fair shape but for minor mishaps and some damage to film magazines. The three of us at base camp began the arduous step-cutting and relaying of loads up the steep shoulder. There were steep icy stretches requiring fixed ropes ; there were great crevasses to cross on delicate snow bridges ; there were great séracs to climb around. The 'shoulder' was a fascinating problem in route finding. It was also the key to success, and on May 13 the herculean task of packing three weeks' food and equipment to the site of Camp II was completed.

The conventional route up McKinley via the Muldrow Glacier is principally a long snow ascent, much of it through great crevasse fields. This route was its antithesis. There was a constant variation of difficulty and terrain. Conditions changed continually : there was clear blue ice ; then a stretch of cold powder snow in which one would sink to the hips. There were flat stretches of treacherous crevasse fields, and there were steep walls of high technical difficulty. Then there were two long ridges of rock, one between 11,000 and 12,500 ft. and the other at 15,000 ft. One was composed of loose schist and the other of firm pink granite. Both had to be strung with a long line of fixed ropes to safeguard progress, as we were constantly burdened with

our packs. Even several pitons had to be used to protect the leader on a dangerous rock traverse.

Our technique was to keep an advance party ahead of the relaying group at each camp, to reconnoitre the route and set up any needed fixed ropes and to cut steps. We alternated at this work, and through it all I tried to film all phases of the ascent. The beginnings of final success dawned on May 19 when Hackett, Meybohm and I pushed the route up the final stretches of the frowning granite buttress to 15,600 ft. and left a cache. This point, according to the photographs of the mountain, ended the serious technical difficulties. Above, the chief problems would be distance, altitude, and wind coupled with terrible cold. Temperature lows at night reached minus 22° F. at Camp II ; at Camp VII at 18,400 ft. they were to dip to minus 40.

A two-day snowstorm delayed completing the relaying to 15,600 ft., but a wonderfully benign day on the 23rd enabled us to complete this leg of the climb. Fresh snow on the rocks delayed us, and it was fortunate that the fixed ropes were already placed. Two days later we were packing loads to what would be our high point above 18,000 ft. A sudden storm developed, fiercely frosting our clothing and faces, and making it imperative to dig a platform at 17,400 ft. for an emergency camp site. This we did, working hard to level out an area on a 25° slope. Possibly as a result of the work, I became quite ill with the symptoms of altitude sickness, and the next day could barely make it to the highest camp. I recovered, but two others had mild symptoms of distress in the following days at our highest camp.

With five men in a standard-sized Logan tent there was little room for movement or comfort at our last camp. The summit of the north peak was but a few hours above ; to all intentions our route had been accomplished, and now there was only the formality of climbing to the summit, a task we easily accomplished on May 27. There was no view, due to the near clouds ; the rewards of the climb had to be enjoyed at the lower levels.

Until June 1 we were butted by fierce winds, sufficiently strong to keep us immobilised, though we made two short attempts at crossing the wind-duned plateau to Denali Pass and the south peak. Food and time ran out, so on June 1 we began the tedious descent. Below Camp IV the storm had deposited great drifts of new snow, and on our many rappels the first man would start avalanches. At times we had to dig our way across slopes with the snow shovel. Not until the evening of June 4 did we reach our cache by the airplane, quite tired from the exhausting struggle down the mountain. Fortunately we were able to descend the steeper slopes by rappelling, a technique we must have employed two dozen times.

All that remained was to carry heavy loads to the road at Wonder Lake. There was a distance of 65 miles involved, composed of upland tundra, difficult river crossings, forests, and the gravel beds of various rivers. In three-and-a-half days of hard walking we reached Bar Cabin, the first vestige of civilisation. A few miles of trail pleasantly

Photo, Bradford Washburn.]

MT. DEBORAH (LEFT). MT. HUNTER AND MT. MCKINLEY VISIBLE ON FAR RIGHT.

took us to the road at Wonder Lake. We looked back at the icy, shimmering bulk of McKinley and saw the cloud banner still blowing west.

Henry Meybohm and I decided to spend another three weeks climbing, so joined Heinrich Harrer in Fairbanks for a proposed ' quick ' expedition to 12,450 ft. Mt. Deborah in the Hayes Range and 14,580 ft. Mt. Hunter in the McKinley region. These were the principal unclimbed peaks of the Alaska Range, each worthy of a major expedition in itself.

We planned to fly in and out of McKinley Park Station on the Alaska Railroad to reach the Yanert Glacier at 5,500 ft. just west of Mt. Deborah. According to plan we were picked up by a ski-wheel aircraft at 5.30 A.M. on June 17, and in two flights rapidly borne over 75 miles of rough terrain to the threshold of a new alpine world. Even with an air-drop of supplies, this leg of the journey could have taken a full week of hard travel.

Fortunately the glacier surface was smooth, though a bit soft. It was good for landing the plane, but not so good for the take-off or the subsequent tramp to the first ice-fall of Deborah. A previous attempt on the peak had failed when the party was unable to surmount this initial obstacle ; we found it not to our liking, so chose a steep ice couloir to its left, in the hope there would be an escape route on to the glacier above the ice-fall. To be safe from the downrush of daytime avalanches we slept during the afternoon, cooked a short meal, and began the steep climb in the evening. Due to the northerly latitude (63° N.) there is quite adequate light all night, and due to the crusting of snow, night generally offered the best time for glacier travel on Deborah.

Three pitons for safety were needed to scale a 200 ft. rock wall beside the great ice couloir ; then, since the steep rock was impossible to climb with packs, we rigged a hauling line to pull up our supplies. After climbing all night we were quite ready to pitch camp at seven in the morning. That evening we broke camp and moved on another three hours, perhaps to 9,000 ft., where we established our final camp. Too tired to leave early, we set out for the summit in perfect weather in mid-morning, June 19. The climb up the third ice-fall was intriguing, varied, and in places difficult. Due to the soft snow crust, we had to take many turns at leading, since we broke through to the knees at almost every step. At 12,000 ft. we reached the south ridge of the summit pyramid, still one-half mile from the top.

Without doubt the summit of Deborah is one of the most impressive and spectacular sights in the Americas, and to us the final south ridge seemed a nightmare of steep and exposed corniced knife-edged ridge. In general angle it was not steep, though a few pitches were of a sharp profile ; but both sides of the ridge had tremendous fluted ice walls, far too steep to be of use. The only route lay along the top of the ridge over the cornices, constantly exposed to the danger of a break.

Photo, Bradford Washburn.]

West ridge of Mt. Hunter runs diagonally up photo. Route runs up ridge to summit. In background is south face of Mt. McKinley.

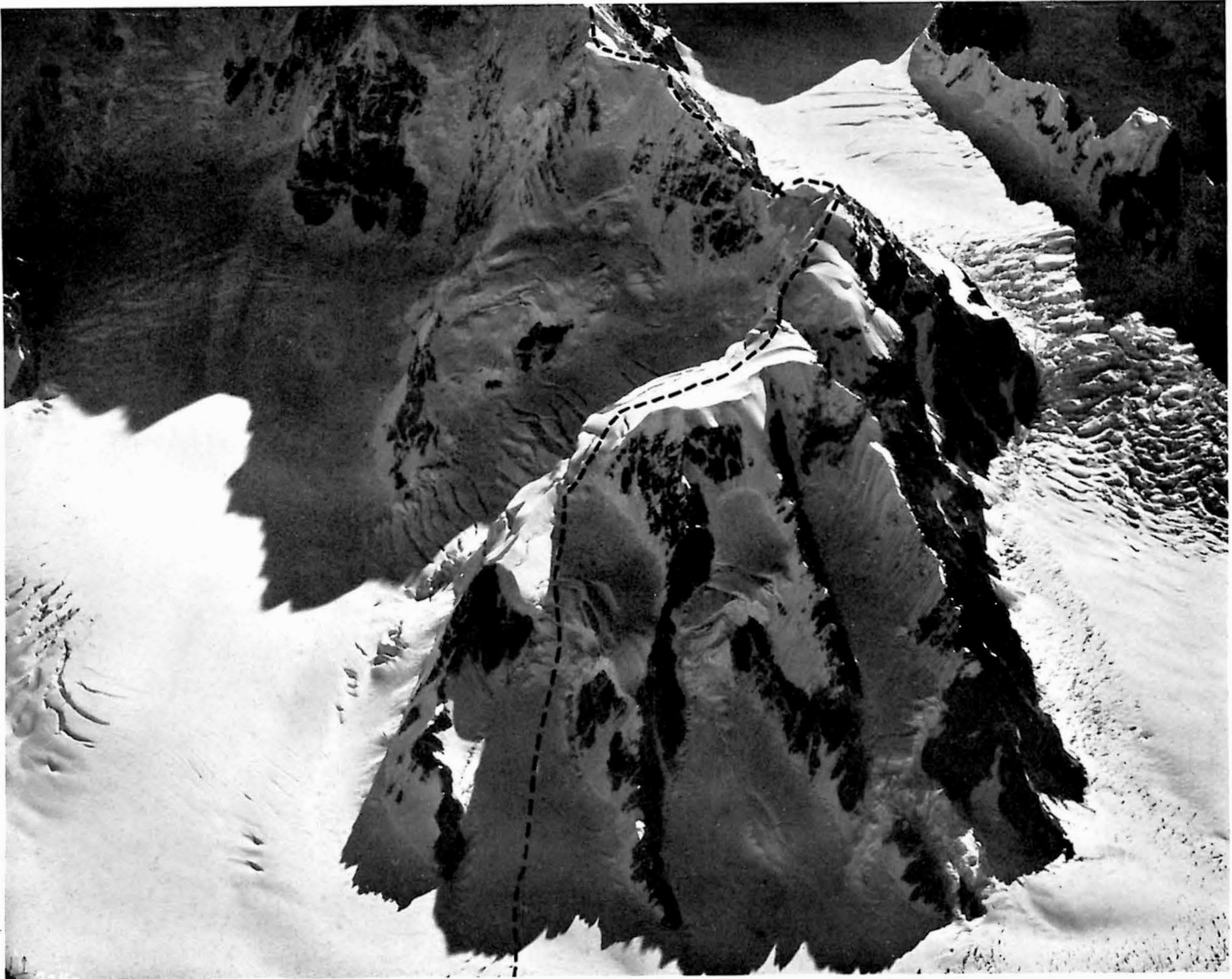
In six hours, every step of the way belayed, we reached the summit. The sun was just setting, to be down but four hours, and before we were off the ridge, it had risen again. It was one of the most memorable climbs in our experience, and the most dangerous and difficult ice summit any of us had ever attained.

Poor weather on the descent to base camp not only delayed us, but put the pick-up date of our rendezvous with the airplane back to June 24. A temporary lifting of clouds enabled us to fly out, but a prevailing storm over the McKinley Range kept us in the village of Talkeetna for almost a week. Fortunately, just as we were about to cast a coin for a decision on waiting longer for an attempt on Mt. Hunter, a north wind arose and our pilot was able to fly us 80 miles to the north-west over vast forests and up the great Kahiltna Glacier to a point between Mt. Foraker and Mt. Hunter. Here we were landed with three weeks' food and our climbing equipment.

Mt. Hunter is a massive peak, rising in quite sheer cliffs for 8,000 ft. from the level floor of the Kahiltna and Tokisitna Glaciers to a summit plateau. Several short pyramids rise from it, and the one on the north is the highest. The problem is to reach the summit plateau, and it was solved by Washburn on many flights around the peak on his surveying work. The western ridge, leading to the Kahiltna Glacier, is the only feasible route for expeditionary climbing, he predicted. But he added, 'it will not be easy.' Buffeted by constant quick-rising storms, guarded by great corniced ridges, and covered with snow and ice of treacherous and varying nature, Mt. Hunter was a mean and dangerous antagonist. But it is a beautiful peak, with the most artistic cornices we had ever seen.

The ascent took us up the west ridge. We relayed loads up in two stages, placing two advance camps on the ridge. Generally the climbing was up soft névé on the crest of a heavily corniced ridge, but twice we had to engage in rock climbing of a serious order. One section required a full day of reconnaissance and the setting of fixed ropes. But the granite was reminiscent of Chamonix—huge blocks of solid stone, difficult, yet safe. The cornices, on the other hand, were a constant source of treachery and twice, on our way to the highest camp, sections of overhanging material broke off due to our weight. Two stretches on the ridge above 10,000 ft. were at an imposing angle, some of it covered with a foot of powdered snow. On the evening of July 4, when we climbed through the night successfully to the summit, we had to overcome the most exposed section of the ascent: a 600 ft. ice wall, all blue ice with a slab of wet slush atop. It was only safe with the placing of pitons at every stance, and in the process we used thirteen ice pitons.

The way to Talkeetna was a long one, and it included the trek down the Kahiltna Glacier for thirty miles over terrain never traversed by man on foot. Then followed a tiring series of river crossings and bush forests; happily we reached a mining camp on July 10 and arranged for transportation to Talkeetna.



Photo, Bradford Washburn.]

LOWER WEST RIDGE OF MT. HUNTER.