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The Great White Mountains of the St Elias

The St Elias range is a vast icy wilderness straddling the Alaska-Yukon border and extending more than 200km in each direction. Its best-known mountains are St Elias and Logan, whose scale is among the largest anywhere in terms of height and bulk above the surrounding glacier. Other than the two standard routes on Mount Logan, the range is still travelled very little in spite of ready access by ski plane. This may be because the scale, combined with challenging snow conditions and prolonged storms, make it a serious place to visit. Typically, the summits are buttressed by soaring ridges and guarded by complex broken glaciers and sérac-torn faces. Climbing here is a distinctive adventure that has attracted a dedicated few to make repeated exploratory trips. I hope to provide some insight into this adventure by reflecting on the four visits I have enjoyed so far to the range.

In 1993 Ade Miller and I were inspired by pictures of Mount Augusta (4288m), which not only looked stunning but also had obvious unclimbed ridges. Arriving in Yakutat (permanent population 600) we were struck by the enthusiasm and friendliness of our glacier pilot, Kurt Gloyer. There were few other climbers and we prepared our equipment amongst bits of plane in the hangar. Landing on the huge Seward glacier, we stepped out of the plane into knee-deep snow. It took some digging to find a firm base for the tents.

Our first attempt to move anywhere was thwarted when Ade fell into an unseen crevasse 150m from the tents. The deep unconsolidated snow and flat light made it impossible to see the faint lines that can conceal even huge caverns. Ade's fall caused the rope to cut in several metres, pulled out my hastily placed stake and pulled me some distance towards the crevasse. It was hard to get a firm stance in snowshoes. The other pair who were with us approached to help, but unfortunately one of them fell down the same slot. We pulled out both victims using the dropped loop and pulley system, since it would have been almost impossible to prusik beyond where the rope had knifed in.

The crevasse problem was exacerbated by the low mist that often blanketed the glacier, causing near whiteout despite the sun burning just above. To avoid getting lost on the 15km-wide icefield we took frequent back bearings and placed plenty of glacier wands (these were pre-GPS days). When it cleared we could see across to the vast south side of Mount Logan. Best known for the 10km Hummingbird Ridge, this has a number of other existing routes, all very long and committing, and continues to attract exploratory interest.

18. Mount Augusta from the north. The 1953 north ridge route slants up from the right to the shoulder below the summit. The 1987 north rib route divides sunlight and shadow towards the right. The area from which Jack Tackle was rescued in 2002 lies in the hidden area between these two routes. (*Paul Knott*)

19. Ade Miller at 10,000ft camp on the north ridge of Mount Augusta. Behind is the south side of Mount Logan, with the Hummingbird ridge dividing light and shadow. (*Paul Knott*)

During our reconnoitre we met four German climbers – the only people I have met on any of the four trips to the range. They intended to climb a direct and rather avalanche-threatened route up Augusta's north face. The same area was the scene for Jack Tackle's dramatic helicopter rescue in 2002. The foursome later switched to the Early Bird Buttress on Logan, where one unfortunately was killed in an avalanche.

We first attempted Augusta's east ridge, which we approached via a northern spur. After wading through wet, unconsolidated snow to a small 3050m summit we found ourselves faced with 2km of steeply corniced ridge on the spur and over 4km of east ridge, including rock steps and a sizeable fluted peak. In such conditions, it was too serious for us and we descended. To date, the ridge remains unclimbed.

After this we made the fourth ascent of the 1953 North Ridge route, approaching it from the east. Although mostly straightforward, this involved strenuous trail-breaking through deep snow and was punctuated by major crevasses all the way from base camp to summit. On the final slopes we collapsed a huge snow bridge and were lucky to avoid injury. The summit view was of a great white wilderness, with Mount St Elias nearby, Mount Vancouver across the glacier and the Fairweather massif 200km down the coast. At the same time, we later discovered, Bill Pilling was crawling and being lowered down Mount Vancouver, having been injured in a crevasse fall after making the first ascent of the south rib.

On the descent we nervously sat out poor weather. Our seventh day heralded the end of our supplies, and it was a relief when the morning was perfect with well frozen snow. We hurried down, passing over new debris in the avalanche-prone approach valley. At base camp the radio worked, and by 3pm we were back in Yakutat surrounded by the sights, sounds and smells of spring.

That evening we sat among the hunting and fishing trophies accumulating a large bar bill. We were satisfied with our ascent and had enjoyed the sense of adventure provided by the sheer scale of the landscape. I still have vivid memories of the pastel colours of the night and the sharp contrasts of the low morning sun. Even the glacier life was a distinctive experience. The tents were bright and warm as we sat reading in sunglasses, drank Red Zinger and listened alternately to the silence of the glacier and the roar of the X-GK stove.

Ade and I returned three years later, this time with our eyes on Mount King George (3741m), an impressive peak 35km east of Mount Logan. Its 1500m north face in particular was remarked upon in 1961 as an objective for future climbers. The mountain was not climbed until 1966, and had only seen two successful ascents before we arrived to attempt the unclimbed north-east ridge.

Prior to the trip our main concern was glacial break-up on the approach. In the event, Kurt solved this problem by confidently landing on a small flat area in the glacier bowl north of the mountain. Our new concerns

were the alarming-looking séracs on the upper part of our route and the absence of radio reception. We simply had to trust that Kurt would pick us up in five weeks. As a team of two, we took extra precautions in case of crevasse incidents. On the glacier we always carried separate rescue ropes so that we could travel far apart (in case of large crevasses) and still perform a dropped-loop rescue. We also carried two 75cm snow stakes each and enough equipment for a full 6:1 haul system.

The start of the route was but a short walk away. The climb was in the lee of the usual storm winds and involved weaving around séracs on steep windslab. The snow collapsed so badly that sometimes the only way to progress was to plunge a snow stake and pull up on it. Several times the séracs forced us down and left onto the face. After two camps on the ridge we reached just over 3100m on one of these diversions before turning back at a steep section of hard ice covered with a layer of crystalline snow under yet more windslab. Our disappointment was tempered by a sense of relief once we had safely descended the avalanche slopes below.

This side of King George remains unclimbed, with some reason. Beyond our high point several more séracs interrupted the ridge and would force lengthy traverses onto the scoured-looking face. As consolation, we made the first ascent of Peak 3089m between King George and Queen Mary. On the descent an oncoming blizzard forced us to camp on the ridge. Fortunately the 16-hour snow-blast cleared early next morning and we literally trenched our way down.

For a larger objective we looked to Mount Queen Mary (3928m), a peak that has straightforward routes from the north and west, one of which has even been climbed by a dog. Our new route from the south involved 11km of winding ridge starting with the north-west ridge of Peak 3118m. Anticipating poor snow conditions we set off with seven days' food and fuel. In the event the going was good (we were on the south side with better freeze-thaw and more wind exposure) and we reached the summit early on the third day. It was a beautiful morning, the extensive view producing the cover photograph for *AJ102*. We had a forecast for five more settled days, but less than five hours later were enveloped in blizzard. The radio that had given us the forecast also failed to make contact from the summit.

By morning we had partial visibility to continue, but our footprints had been obscured and we repeatedly lost the route or were grounded by whiteout. Our few marker wands were useless; even if they hadn't melted out, we couldn't see them in the mist. I joked about trying to procure radio-wands. On one stretch we persisted through whiteout by throwing snowballs to create texture and get some idea of the terrain ahead. We reached the glacier exasperated, but rapidly became grateful for our escape as heavy snow fell for another two days.

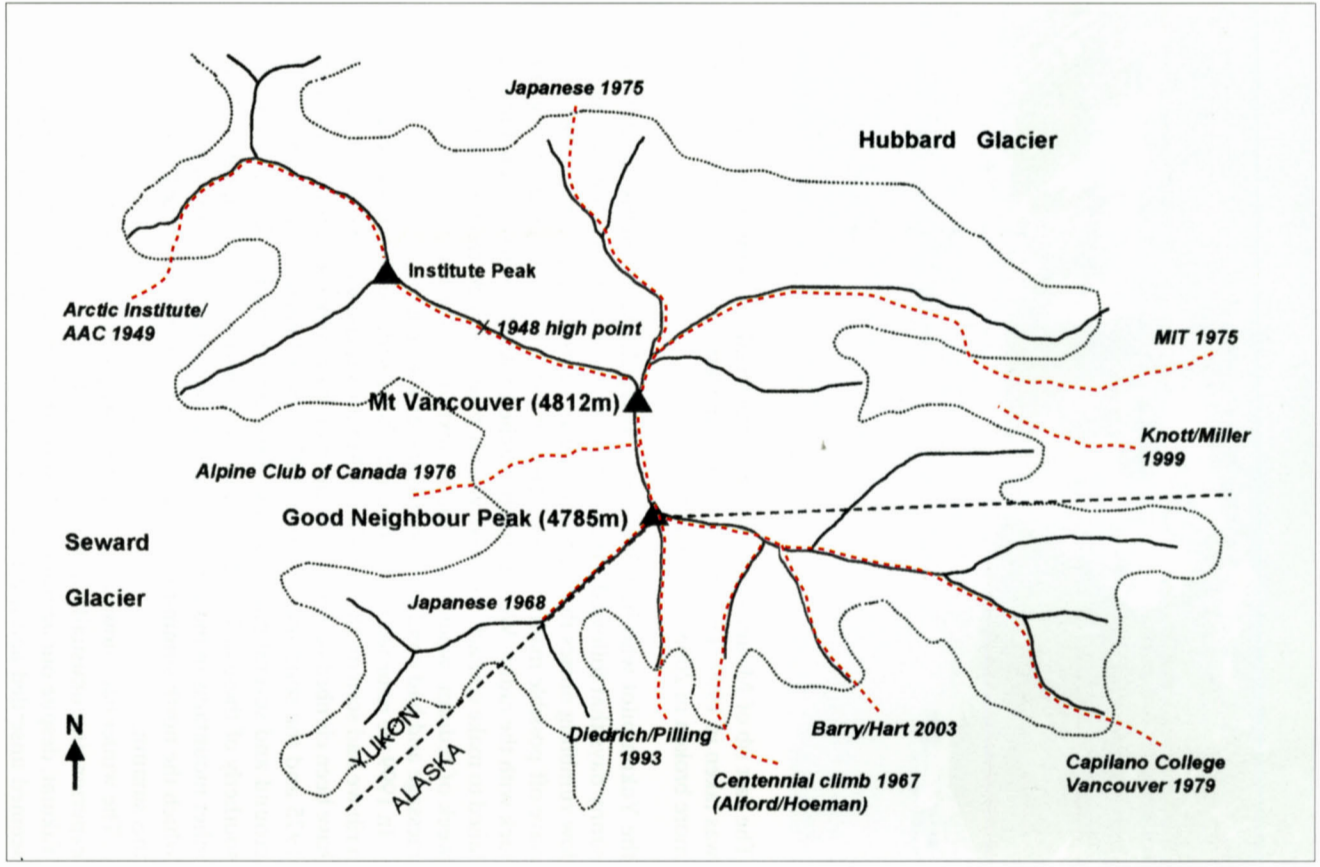
Having had our fill of climbing, we tried to leave by stamping GET US OUT in the snow. We knew that this would be spotted by Andy Williams,

20. The east rib of Mount Vancouver with the icefall blocking access. The photo was taken in 1999. The smooth area on the left side of the icefall was much more broken in 2003. (*Paul Knott*)

the Yukon pilot who had flown over us regularly. However, during the sunny days that followed, Andy did not fly over; instead our ears created low rumbling noises that sounded like an approaching aircraft. Partly to stave off possible madness we walked out to the Hubbard glacier to try our luck with the radio. We eventually reached 50km from base camp, but still failed to make contact. We were wearily plodding back, resigned to another week of tedium, when Kurt landed next to us. He had been told of our message and had conducted something of a search.

In 1999 we returned to the Hubbard glacier with the objective of climbing a rib we had seen on the east side of Mount Vancouver. The only routes to have been climbed on this side of the mountain were the north-east ridge in 1975 and the south-east ridge in 1979. In between is a vast amount of ground and several major ridges. Fred Beckey had looked at the most southerly of these in 1979 but found the approach 'nearly hopeless'. Like other mountains in the area, Mount Vancouver has two main summits, of which the north summit is the higher at 4812m. Our route led directly to this summit.

The winter had shown a La Niña weather pattern with south-east Alaska experiencing unusually heavy snowfall. Patches of snow remained in Yakutat, despite our arrival in late May. In the mountains the weather still seemed unsettled and it was five days before we left base camp, prepared for 10 days on the mountain. We spent some hours finding a line through the icefall, climbing around and over blocks using the generous snow cover.



21. Routes on Mount Vancouver 1948-2004. Only the Diedrich/Pilling route has been repeated.

Above, we had to traverse north-facing avalanche slopes to avoid crevasses. As the day warmed up the hazard seemed too great, so we walked out between two crevasses and pitched the tent. That night the weather changed and we were trapped: near-whiteout and unfrozen snow prevented all movement. Our third morning at this rather dismal camp dawned clear enough for us to move — downwards. On the lower section the mist came down again, and the GPS waypoints proved crucial to our escape. My desire for a 'radio-wand' had been fulfilled.

In the perennially unsettled weather we felt we would have a better chance on Mount Seattle (3069m), which had no icefall approach. The only previous ascent of this mountain was of the south summit by Fred Beckey's party in 1966. They had climbed it from the Russell fjord, despite sinking their boat on the approach, and found it to be the higher summit. We snow-shoed the 30km down the glacier at the first available clearance, dragging our packs behind us on plastic sleds. During this interminable plod we weighed up the possible routes to the unclimbed north summit, marked as higher on the map. The north ridge was an option, but we selected the east ridge as offering a more direct line. There was a sérac band guarding the summit ridge, but we convinced ourselves using the 500ft contours on our 1:250.000-map that we would be able to traverse left onto easier ground.

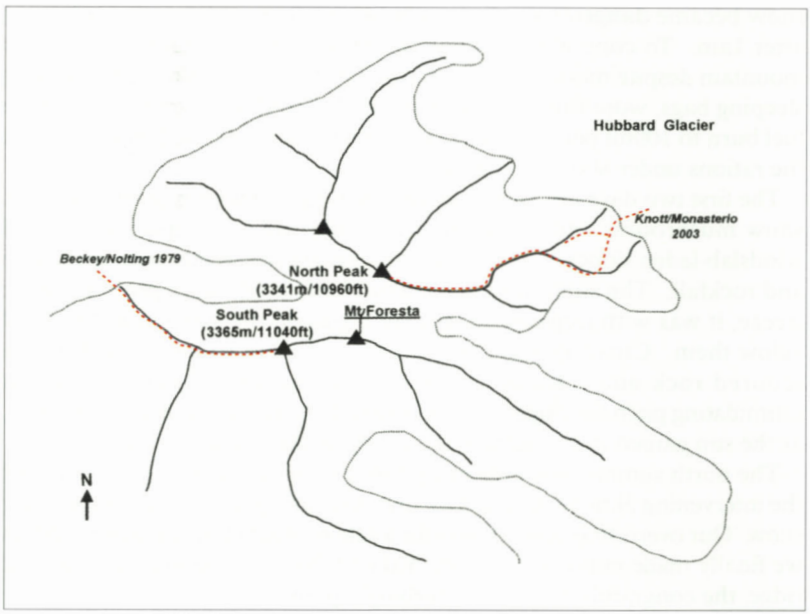
The scale of the mountain, 2000m above the glacier, was compounded by the early-June conditions. Because our route faced the rising sun, the snow became dangerously slushy after about 8am and only consolidated after 1am. To cope with this our tactics allowed for many days on the mountain despite modest loads. We used a small single-skin tent and light sleeping bags, wore Buffalo gear with no shell and no spare clothing, kept fuel burn to 100ml per person-day by melting snow in a dark bag, and kept the rations under 400g per person-day.

The first two days involved wading in soft snow, shovelling our way over snow mushrooms and using the snow-stake aid technique on exposed windslab-laden slopes. Parts of the face poured constantly with avalanche and rockfall. The summit séracs did not look stable, and, given the poor freeze, it was with trepidation that we traversed the steep mixed ground below them. Crossing a spur we were horrified to be confronted with a scoured rock and ice couloir barring our escape. Luckily, after an intimidating pitch the slopes we had hoped for materialised and we escaped, as the sun gained in strength, to the safety of the summit ridge.

The north summit was noticeably lower than the south, but we rejected the intervening 3km traverse as too time-consuming in the rapidly softening snow. Our overriding concern was for a safe retreat below the séracs. When we finally made radio contact with Yakutat from our camp on the summit ridge, the congratulations felt disturbingly premature.

We reversed the route without mishap, finding snow-bridges weakened and many features altered due to melting. Back at base camp, the tents

22. Mount Foresta from the Hubbard glacier side. The pointed summit on the righ is the North Peak. The left-most summit is the South Peak. The ridge facing th camera is unclimbed. (*Paul Knott*)



23. Routes and summit topography on Mount Foresta.
(*Sketch map by Paul Knott*)

stood on pedestals and cracks had opened up in the glacier. Luckily when Kurt arrived we convinced him these were inconsequential. In Yakutat we found there had been few successful ascents that season, the poor weather in May having prevented almost all activity.

I returned in early May 2003 to try again on the east rib of Vancouver, this time with Erik Monasterio. Tragically Kurt Gloyer, whose dedication and tolerance had been pivotal to my previous trips, had been killed while trying to rescue climbers high on Mount Kennedy. Selecting from several more distant airfields, we chose to fly with Paul Swanstrom from Haines. For communication we used a satellite phone. Lamenting this loss of commitment, I consoled myself with the thought that Bradford Washburn had full communication in the mountains even in 1934.

It had been a strong El Niño winter with half the average precipitation. Paul circled, eyeing suspiciously the crevasse lines extending into the flat Hubbard glacier. He was concerned it might not be safe to pick us up if the melt continued. When we stepped out of the plane it was onto firm melt-freeze crust.

From the landing site, Mount Foresta was such a striking sight we decided to tackle it first. This highly attractive massif has multiple pointed summits lying along two main ridges. We were looking at the North Peak, marked as the highest summit at 11,960ft (3645m) and completely unclimbed. The potential routes all involved 5km or more of ridge and 2100m of ascent. The only previous ascent of any point in the massif was of the distinctly separate South Peak (3365m), climbed by Fred Beckey's party in 1979. As on Mount Seattle, they had found this to be the highest summit.

We approached the mountain in low cloud, picking routes as best we could. After a false start that cost us a day, we took a steep north-facing snow rib that joined the east branch of the east ridge at 1950m. Under normal conditions it would probably be too dangerous to contemplate, but our confidence had been boosted by the firm snow. As we might have predicted, it turned out to consist of unconsolidated wind deposits with a sliding surface layer. On the ridge, easy slopes soon turned to a steep, corniced crest. The climbing felt insecure, as the cornice was large and partially detached from the sharp underlying ridge. We felt progressively more committed as we overcame one hidden obstacle after another - sometimes steep rock steps, sometimes poorly bridged gaps in the cornice.

After six hours the going finally eased, and we made good progress on hard névé to a camp at 2635m. The conditions were in stark contrast to those we had endured on Mount Seattle. Similarly firm snow above led us surprisingly quickly to the summit, where GPS and altimeter readings gave 10,960ft (3341m), exactly 1000ft below the map height. Visually, the South Peak was very much separate and a little higher, consistent with the 80ft difference between its map height and our measured height. The Geological Survey later acknowledged that the spot height of 11,960ft was likely a typo error for 10,960ft.

The following day, in warmer conditions, our descent of the corniced ridge was distinctly unnerving. Our old footprints were now over hollow ground and we were forced to choose between the awkward rock crest, the detached cornice, or the gap between the two. The only belays were snow-stakes or detached spikes. Concerned about conditions on the rib we camped, hoping for a freeze. We ignored the lenticular clouds that had so often come to nothing, but overnight the weather deteriorated, bringing mist and light snow. Finding the rib was a challenge, even with the GPS, and felt like stepping onto the cornice over an unseen void. Below, the snow was wet and poorly bonded. We descended without incident, but had to rely entirely on GPS waypoints to navigate back to base camp in what were rapidly becoming full storm conditions. A metre of snow fell on the glacier during the next 48 hours, practically burying the tents.

After four days the weather finally cleared and we skied to the 1999 base camp to attempt Mount Vancouver. Conditions had changed so radically that we found ourselves navigating around large crevasses where the ski plane had landed four years earlier. The icefall above was also dramatically transformed, leaving only the most tenuous of possible lines through an impenetrable jumble of blocks. The next morning we found ourselves entering a labyrinth before even reaching that tenuous line. The difficulties and danger ahead were too sustained – later reflection suggested 2km to the end of the icefall – and we aborted the attempt.

Thus ended what will surely not be my last visit. The range has great potential, and not only for climbs of the type I have described. A few harder face climbs have been done, including the route on Mount Kennedy by Jon Bracey and Rich Cross, and there is potential for more, where access is not blocked by séracs and icefalls. In recent years Mount St Elias has seen a winter ascent, a ski descent and a paraglider descent. There are also hundreds of smaller but pretty-looking unclimbed peaks, and there is huge scope for extended ski traverses. But most importantly, this great white wilderness remains just that, a wilderness.

Notes

A summary of peaks and routes appears in an article by Roger Wallis in 1992 *Canadian Alpine Journal* (although many of the suggested new climbs have been taken). The range is included in *Alaska: A Climbing Guide* by Michael Wood and Colby Coombs. Historical information is found in articles by Terris Moore and Kenneth Andrasko in *AJ81* and *AJ83*, and in *Fifty Classic Climbs in North America* by Steve Roper and Allen Steck.

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