

Alaska – USA June 1990

Mt. McKinley (Denali) 20,320ft

Via the West Buttress Route

Summit:- Wednesday 20th June @ 17:30

Friday 8th June: Had a drink with Vaughn and Gail my neighbours before departing for the railway station.

Train departed at 21:03, changed at Manningtree and met David Beet on the train.

Arrived at Liverpool St. station then took the underground train to Heathrow, arrived at the airport just before midnight.

Saturday 9th June: Airport very quiet. Found some seats and had a few hours sleep. Awake at 05:00. Met up with the other two climbers, Dick from Mt. Blanc is one of them and Andy Black who arrives in the nick of time with the expedition equipment. Flight leaves on time at 08:30 for Alaska with a change in Amsterdam. Excellent flight; which arrives 30 minutes early at Anchorage 11:30 local time.

It took over one hour to check in at immigration. Henry, the last member of the team is waiting for us with transport. Denali overland takes us all by bus to Talkeetna. The bus is very battered like most of the transport on the road.

Three and a half hours drive to the frontier town of Talkeetna. There is a backlog of climbers waiting to fly out to the mountain. Bit of confusion as to arrangements.

Spent the afternoon eating and drinking, and then dosed down at the bunkhouse for the night. From talking to a few people, the climb is going to be hard.

Sunday 10th June: Not a very good night's sleep. Awake at 04:30. I went for a walk through town and breakfasted American style at the Roadhouse. Great way to start the day, hash-browns, scrambled eggs, and toast, followed by waffles with blue-berries and washed down with endless cups of coffee.

We sorted out food for the expedition. What a lot! Brings home what an adventure this will be.

We then visit Ranger station to sign-in and see video. Reports were coming in of a Japanese team in trouble on McKinley. (Last year Dick * had to help bury three British climbers who died here).

** This was Dick's second attempt at climbing Mt. McKinley. The previous year the climb was abandoned when three of the party were killed when camping under a bergschrund (a type of ice formation), which collapsed and buried them.*

I enjoyed a wonderful shower then spent the afternoon/evening dosing in bunkhouse. Base camp was unreachable due to poor weather conditions. No flying expected for two days at least. Reports of a storm coming in. One Jap dead!

20:00 big rush, opening in weather, get your gear together quickly, hope I don't forget anything.

Henry, Andy and Alex are away in first plane. Both planes return to Talkeetna, fog at base-camp.

Try again after half-an-hour. Perfect this time. One injured climber being transferred to an ambulance from a K2 plane as we depart Talkeetna.

Busy at base camp. Still full daylight at midnight. Tent up, feeling good, many brews, no wind, very clear, temp about minus 5.

Still not able to sleep properly due to jet-lag, excitement and constant daylight. Team all working well together. I'm optimistic.
Planes flying at night while the weather holds good.

Monday 11th June: Weather very hot. Too warm to move during the day. Spent all day at base-camp dossing, eating and drinking lots.

Eventually moved out at 20:30. 2 ropes of 3. * I lead the first rope.

** It is important to be roped together when moving on a glacier. The crevasses in Alaska are some of the biggest in the world. If one person falls through the surface it is hoped that the others will be able to pull him out. This is not easy however as a climber with a fully laden rucksack and sledge weighs a considerable amount. The crevasses are not always apparent or avoidable. Sometimes they stretch for miles and other times they are covered with a snow-bridge. The task wasn't made any easier due to the fact that a volcano had recently erupted and deposited a large amount of ash over the snow. Brown snow melts much quicker than white snow. 2 ropes of 3 climbers is more manageable than a single one of six. When you stop it is important that everyone maintains a full ropes distance away from the others on that rope.*

Made it to camp 1 in 3 hours with all our gear. All teams going very well. No problems except using a lot of fuel as stoves not working properly. Had a good nights sleep at last. Camp 1 @ 7,600ft.

Tuesday 12th June: Awoke at 07:00. Weather really hot again. Got up first and done most of the chores, which included construction of the camp toilet as I am unable to hold out any longer. *

** When choosing a camp-site it is important that it is not situated on top of a crevasse. A good reconnaissance is needed and then the area is probed with a long metal pole to try to detect hollows below the snow. Once satisfied the area is safe (never 100%) markers are placed around the area and we can all unrope, but must stay within the confines of the 'safe area'.*

Spent most of the day in the tent out of the sun playing cards. Tried to teach David to play 'Chase the Lady'. Henry, David and I had a good game.

Chopper looking for some climbers who are missing on the Cassin Ridge.

Set off for Camp 2 at 20:10 after the heat of the day has waned.

I'm leading the first rope, excellent team-work by Andy and David who were behind me, hardly knew they were there. Hard slog up the glacier with the visibility getting worse.

By midnight unable to see more than 100ft. Altimeter gave a reading of 9,600ft so decide to camp just past a small plateau. When visibility improved we are short of our objective and below some ice-cliffs, but as camp is almost up we decide to stay. Dick and Alex had a disagreement over cooking in the tent as it was snowing outside.

Wednesday 13th June: Had to get up early to go to the loo as unable to use the bottle due to psychological pressure. * Snowing hard outside and had to have breakfast cooked in the entrance to the tent.

** It is too cold to get out of the sleeping-bag during the night. However, drinking up to 6 litres of water each day (a necessity to prevent altitude sickness) means that you need to wee a lot. The only way to overcome this problem is to take a bottle into your sleeping-bag and wee in the bottle. The bottle remains inside the sleeping-bag until*

you are ready to get up. If you leave it outside of the warm sleeping bag it will freeze and you will be unable to use it again.

On this subject nearly everything you needed to protect from the cold had to go into your sleeping bag, drinking water, cameras, etc.

Initially I found it very hard to wee in my sleeping-bag, as since a child we have all been trained not to wet the bed. This could be an unusual party game to try at home. Snowed all day long. Most of day spent in tent cooking and drinking.

Set out for Camp 3 with full loads at 19:30. Henry says it should only be a short hop of 2 to 3 hours.

Some short hop! Five and a half hours later we arrive at Camp 3 (11,000ft) all totally knackered.

The distance was much further than expected. The snow was ankle deep even in snow-shoes, (Andy had to do without) and the altitude was starting to take its toll. Inherited a deep hole to pitch our tent. Dick, David and I had a major disagreement with Alex over his use of contaminated water. *

** We all had two bottles (one clean one dirty) except Alex, who wanted to be the hardman with only one bottle to drink from and to wee in at night. Quite rightly we all objected to him using his 'contaminated' water to contribute to the communal cooking system.*

Thursday 14th June: A good nights rest and the morning turns out to be dry and bright with a few snow showers. Lots of cooking, drinking to replace fluids and food to eat to replace that expended before the altitude affects our appetites. *

** As you get higher one of the effects is a loss of appetite. As we are burning up to 9,000 calories each day due to the cold and physical exertion it is important to maintain your food intake.*

No altitude problems to date for me, except a little breathlessness at times. David had a slight headache last night.*

** At sea-level the oxygen content of the air is 21%. On top of McKinley it is only around 11%. It's like having only one lung. The body gradually adjusts by producing additional red blood cells. This takes time and is never a complete replacement for lost oxygen. If you gain height too quickly the body cannot adapt quickly enough and you run the risk of serious illness or even death. Many climbers die this way each year. For our climb we had no oxygen, so we had to be respectful of the conditions. Us four feel we have gained enough height over the last 3 days to justify a rest day, although the weather is suitable for moving on.*

One stove has given up the ghost; the other is still temperamental * after lighting. Weather very mild, (just above freezing).

** The cooking stoves were a continual headache for us. Never reliable and often prone to flaring up. Dangerous if you are cooking inside a tent, which we had to do on occasions. Without a stove you cannot melt snow for water this would mean the end of the expedition. No tent and you may well die!*

Set off on next leg of journey at 20:45, the first part of which is the ascent of 'Motorcycle Hill'. A 45 degree slope of powder-snow, up to thigh deep in places. Full packs and sledges and it is up to me to break trail. It took two and a half hours. The next part of the journey was really hard and dangerous in places. We arrived just short of Windy Corner at 04:00 and set up camp on an exposed plateau. All very tired.

Altitude 12,000ft. *

- *A big storm came in when we were exposed on a ridge. We had to make a snap decision to pitch our tents in a less than ideal location and hope for the best.*

Friday 15th June: Tent-bound at present(12:00). The wind has become quite strong and the air temperature is now -10C. All comfortable in the tent, which is holding up well to the weather. We hope the wind doesn't increase any further.

Cooking in the tent, water only, as main food supplies are still outside. Plenty of snacks inside though.

Dick has performed a major overhaul and repair of our second stove. Awaiting a suitable time to test it. Too dangerous to try in the tent.

Feeling warm and reasonably comfortable, just hope that I don't require any bodily functions while the weather is unsettled. *

** This was not the time to go outside to have a poo, unless you wanted to get frost-bite on your bum.*

21:30 Still windy and cold (-10C), but now bright as we are now above the clouds.

Looks like we will be staying here overnight.

23:00 On the move again. Decided to push towards the 14,300 camp even though the weather is now -15C and very windy.

Saturday 16th June: Moving towards Windy Corner through very deep powder snow, me in the lead until I am totally knackered. *We never reached the 14,300ft camp. All too exhausted to push through the powder snow. Now camped half a mile and 600ft below where we wanted to be.

** Really difficult night. It was a real struggle to make it around Windy Corner. There is no photographic record of this part of the journey as there was neither the time, nor the opportunity to take photos. The conditions were atrocious and the path very steep with a long drop-off into a gully always to our right. A fall into the abyss would be certain death. Negotiating the corner was made more difficult as the sledges would always want to slide away to the low ground. In this case it was into the gully. Trying to continually drag a sledge away from the edge whilst roped to two others in no mean feat when you are tired, the weather is savage and you are wearing multiply layers of clothing.*

Rested during the day and set off again at 21:00.

Weather OK, trail well established so we made camp by 24:00, tent up as well.

This is a real home from home with two loos, a Rangers tent and many ready-made camp sites.

Sunday 17th June: All of us had a good nights sleep from midnight until 10:30. We needed the rest.

Today we don't plan to ascend any more as we are giving ourselves time to acclimatise. Last nights the temperature was -25C, but all cosy in our tent.

Weather excellent, no wind, bright sunshine, cloud height at 11,000ft.

Spectacular views of Mt. Hunter and Mt. Foraker. Spent all day eating, drinking and dossing.

Monday 18th June: Laid in bed until the sun warms the tent as temperature outside was -28C during the night. From 10:30 to 16:30 eating, drinking and dismantling camp.

16:30 to 20:30 ascended to camp at 16,000ft. Front-pointed up fixed rope. Spectacular views and excellent campsite.

Feel like the summit is near now, thank God we haven't got to tow those stupid sledges any more. Feels like real mountaineering now. *

** At this point we have left the danger of crevasses behind and as the climbing is more technical now we cannot tow sledges any more. This means that surplus gear is left-behind at the last big campsite. However, this means that our rucksacks are now more fully laden.*

Tuesday 19th June: Made the push from 16,000ft to 17,200ft. Took us three hours. The most technical part of the journey so far with a nice ridge walk. Really feeling breathless at this altitude, but otherwise OK. Conditions for traverse not suitable, with a cold wind blowing and poor visibility. The evening at the high camp is ideal. Clear and dry with no wind. We hope to make our summit attempt tomorrow.

Wednesday 20th June: This morning there is a difference of opinion between Andy and Henry. Henry thinks a storm is imminent and doesn't wish to leave camp. Andy wants to give it a try. Each person must make their own choice. Alex, Dick and me elect to attempt the climb with Andy. David decides to stay at camp with Henry. From camp 17,200ft to Denali Pass is 1,000ft and once there we decide to make an attempt for the summit in spite of the storm warning. We left camp at 11:00 and finally made the summit at 17:30. A very hard day and still the journey back to camp to complete.

There were times on the ascent that I didn't think that we were going to make it and I wasn't the weakest of us four. * We only stayed on the summit for a few minutes as it was very cold with a fresh wind.

** At one stage Dick was so tired that Andy wanted to leave him behind. Dick refused to give up and Alex and myself backed up Dick to ensure he had a chance to reach the summit.*

The descent was made in a dream-like state, but had to be alert all the time as one slip would be fatal.

We arrived back at camp by 20:00 all totally exhausted. I could only stomach one cup of tea, then died in my sleeping bag.

Thursday 21st June: Woke up feeling pretty bad, but after a couple of brews started to come round.

We four will spend the day at 17,200ft while David and Henry make their bid for the summit. I don't envy them although the weather is perfect.

At camp talk is turning to going home. I can't wait. This afternoon the weather has turned really nasty with a very cold wind blowing.

As the evening passes we grow more and more concerned for the two who are out on McKinley.

At 20:10 David and Henry are sighted. They are tired and cold, but have made a successful summit bid.

Friday 22nd June: Started the long journey home. From 17,200ft we quickly drop height to the 14,300ft camp via the rescue gully. Here we uncover our cached gear and hitch up to our sledges again. Although the going is downhill these sledges have the temperaments of a mule and by evening we only make the 11,000ft camp. Even at this height the air is so much richer. Our appetites are returning, the temperature is not so cold and simple acts no longer make one breathless.

Saturday 23rd June: After a morning of eating and drinking we finally manage to break camp at 12:00. I have the easy position of lead on our rope. David is the man in the middle with Henry as the anchor-man holding back the sledges.

This part of the descent is not as bad as yesterdays as the sledges are lighter and the gradient more suited to what they are designed to cope with. As we loose height the temperature becomes very hot and after a couple of hours I swap places with David as he is suffering from pulling two sledges. I see what he means! Pulling two sledges plus Henry on a tight rope is a killer. *

** On the decent the sledges would run ahead of us. The rope system had to be adjusted to cope with this problem. This meant that we were forever fighting the downward pull of the sledges. The front person (normally me) didn't have a sledge in front of them as it was expected that if anyone was to fall into a crevasse it would be the first person). By this stage of the season the crevasses were very wide and prone to collapse at any minute.*

We need a taught rope because of the numerous crevasses. Henry falls into one up to his waist to prove a point. We are now a bit snappy with each other due to heat, tension and tiredness.

Heartbreak Hill really lived up to its name, but we managed to beat the other rope back to the base-camp to claim the first plane back to Talkeetna.