

PHIL DRUKER ... Cathedral of Ice



The weather cooperated just long enough to allow our climbing team to scale the Yukon's Mt. Kennedy and narrowly avoid disaster on the way back down ...

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Patience and persistence. Climbing Mt. Kennedy in the Yukon this May and June demanded both.

Usually these months offer the best weather for climbing in the St. Elias Mountains, but this year they proved to be the wettest and coldest on record in that region.



Bad weather forced us to wait in Yakutat, Alaska, five days before we could make the 45-minute flight to 8,500 feet on the Cathedral Glacier. Then, we waited four days at base camp hunkered in tents as storm after storm blasted us with a foot of new snow each day.

One evening as the sun set, an earthquake shook the valley and sent avalanches thundering down the mountain walls that flanked our camp.

Moving in short breaks between the storms, our eight man team from the University of Idaho hauled sleds and packs loaded with food and gear for our 16 day expedition to the 11,500 foot basin that lies between Mt. Kennedy (13,905) and Mt. Hubbard (15,015), our two goals.

On the tenth day, during the evening of Memorial Day, the storms cleared, the barometer began to rise, the wind calmed, and the temperature plummeted to minus-10 degrees. We knew June 1 would be a summit day.

Not trusting the weather to hold, advance team members, John Carnes, Chris Geidt, Drew Grimes, and Clint Herridge, got a 3 a.m. start in the clear, cold sub-Arctic dawn. Traveling on skis, they broke trail through knee-deep snow, as they moved up the icefall, switch-backed between crevasses, and headed up the ridge towards Mt. Kennedy.

Mike Beiser, Ben Rush, Brian Keller, and I followed an hour later. As we broke over the first main ridge, we got our first view of Mt. Kennedy, still over a mile away. The route then ascended a steep pitch of ice. So we cached our skis, put on crampons, and continued climbing. A storm began to build in the west. To summit, we had to beat the storm.

We moved quickly up the exposed glacier on a 50-degree slope kicking our crampons into the ice.

As we crossed a broad plateau at 13,000 feet, our compatriots reached the summit. A cloud ceiling formed and began to lower.



While we approached Mt. Kennedy's knife-edged ridge, the other team worked its way down carefully kicking steps in the snow. A misstep here, especially on the daunting 30-foot ice step with its 60-degree pitch, would mean serious trouble, and possibly death. The icy ridge fell steeply 2,000 feet to crevasses below.

At 10:30 a.m., we summited Mt. Kennedy. The wind was picking up and the clouds were lowering. The summit just barely gave the four of us room to stand, take pictures and admire the view of the seemingly infinite number of snow-covered peaks that rose and fell around us.

Glaciers formed white, broad, flat, frozen rivers of ice. Forty miles to the east, the Hubbard Glacier broke up and met the gray Gulf of Alaska. At our feet, the summit dropped off steeply to the Kennedy Glacier, 6,000 feet below.



Bad weather was closing in. Clouds threatened to enshroud us in a whiteout. The wind kicked up in earnest, blowing fresh snow. Beiser used a GPS system to record the altitude and position of the peak. Then, racing to beat the storm, we retraced our steps down the knife-edged ridge.

For the next two days, weather pummeled us with wind and more snow. We were beginning to come to the end of our food and time on the mountain. Still, we wanted to try Mt. Hubbard.

So when the weather cleared on the evening of June 3, some team members prepared for a night climb. But before they could leave, the weather changed again. Winds gusted to 50 or 60 miles per hour and snow fell continuously for 36 hours.

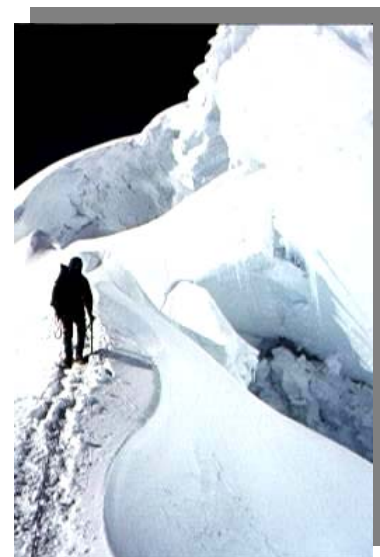


We spent our time reading the last of our books, digging out tents to keep them from being buried in snow, and taking consolation that the weather had at least permitted us to summit Mt. Kennedy.

The trip down was no simple matter. The icefall between our high camp and the base camp where Kurt Glower from Gulf Air Taxi agreed to pick us up on June 6 was steep and scarred with crevasses. Herridge, the only team member on snowshoes, had already fallen through snow bridges across those crevasses four times.

So when the weather broke on the evening of June 5, we made our way down carefully, surprised by how the strong winds had exposed crevasses that earlier were covered with snow.

Skiing roped to three team members is like playing crack-the-whip, which is no great joy when carrying a 60-pound pack and pulling a sled loaded with 50 pounds of gear.



But we made our way down safely until Herridge took a 30-foot fall into a crevasse.

Amazingly, he didn't get hurt. The advance team was able to pull his pack and sled out of the crevasse and he climbed out. He lost one of his snowshoes during the fall. So Carnes volunteered to retrieve it.

He lowered himself through the hole in the snow bridge across the crevasse, rappelled 70 feet down through the blue ice, found the snowshoe, and started to ascend.

Then disaster struck. The icefall began to move. A block of the glacier began to moan and rumble. Then it cracked off, fell, and crumbled down the icefall --all this just 30 feet from the crevasse where Carnes worked his way up the rope.

Snow and ice blew out of the crevasse. The other crewmembers feared the worst. They shouted down the hole, hoping Carnes could hear and would return their call. Nothing.

They waited. Shouted again. Nothing.

Then while they were preparing to extract Carnes from the crevasse, they heard his muffled voice from below. Miraculously, he was unharmed. And he was able to climb out of the crevasse with Herridge's snowshoe.

The next day -- the last day of the trip -- was beautifully clear, and we finished the difficult trip down the icefall to base camp. The good weather allowed our pilot to fly in just as planned, and by 10 a.m. he was running shuttles carrying two passengers plus gear from the glacier back to Yakutat.

Beiser and I, the last to be flown off the Cathedral Glacier, contemplated the scene as we sat in the sun on the flat glacier. The air temperature was 60 degrees. The wind was still. Ironically, the first and only truly clear weather of the trip occurred on this last day.

Above us rose a glacier covered peaks. Rock pinnacles and faces rubbed smooth by ice and snow formed shear cliffs. The Cathedral Glacier was aptly named.

We were the only people in a 50-mile radius. There wasn't a sound. The only colors were the

white of the snow, the gray of the rock, and the blues of the ice and sky.



An icefall above calved, breaking the silence as the snow and ice thundered down a 1,000-foot precipice. Silence returned till the faint drone of our brush pilot's plane began to grow in the distance. We gathered our gear to load it on the ski-equipped Cessna, a dot against the mountains that grew to a small, single-engine plane.

Mountain climbing is life simplified: You are going up, not moving, or going down. Like life, it is a routine punctuated with moments of excitement. Patience and persistence make it happen.