

By Ian Rea

First appeared in the Irish Mountain Log, No. 41, Winter 1996

The following is a brief report of the activities of the above expedition which visited the Alaska Range during June of this year.

The four members were; Ian Rea, from Annalong, Co. Down; Eddie Cooper, from Belfast; Calvin Torrans from Bray, Co. Wicklow; and Paul Harrington from Dublin. Our intention was to attempt the north spur (Lowe-Kennedy route) of Mt. Hunter (14,570ft) and then attempt a new route on the south side of Mt. Foraker (17,400ft). We were aware that this was an ambitious plan, and were also aware of the vagaries of Alaskan weather, so we arrived with open minds.

Before we flew in to the glacier, the Park Service rangers warned us of poor snow conditions at low altitudes, due to a combination of a very dry spring and continuing unseasonably hot temperatures. We landed on the South East Fork of the Kahiltna glacier in late May and were faced with the immediate prospect of fine weather. But the snow conditions were as bad as we had been told. No one had succeeded on any route on Mt. Hunter, and by the end of the season it remained unclimbed. Worse, two parties of two were killed in their efforts. We were also told that two parties had retreated from the south side of Foraker due to atrocious snow and that two parties had succeeded on the north side of Foraker due to better conditions.

Faced with the good weather and the above information we decided to attempt the long but technically straightforward north east or Sultan ridge of Mt. Foraker. This we achieved in six and a half days return from our base camp on the South East Fork.

We left base camp on the afternoon of the 28th May. We had fine weather during the first day and a half. During the afternoon and early evening of our third day we had to negotiate the ridge in worsening wind and whiteout. Map, compass and instinct saw us through some airy crest and some dangerous windslab. The fourth day was lost completely to the worsening weather. At about 5 a.m. on the fifth day we looked out to see clear skies. We left camp around 6 a.m. and returned that night around 8.30p.m. all four of us having reached the summit. This was 1st June. We had very strong north winds on the summit ridge so we made a freezing cold duvet-clad ascent. Thankfully though, the wind blew away any fresh snow and we had little windslab. Luckily the summit plateau has some secluded bowls and in these we were able to sun bathe, fully clothed of course.

Quickly deteriorating weather on the 2nd of June gave us a hard time. We retreated back along our undulating route of ascent and covered in one long day terrain that had taken two days to climb on the way up. We were glad of the wands we had placed, but were reduced to following compass bearing and barely visible tracks and remembered features to regain a safe campsite at 10,000ft on Mt. Crosson, out of the worst of the storm, which had reached gale force on exposed sections of the ridge. We slept in on the morning of 3rd June, safe in the knowledge that we would reach base camp that afternoon. This was the first Irish ascent of Mt. Foraker.

We had three voluntary rest days and four involuntary ones due to poor weather.

We then set out to climb the West Rib of Mt. McKinley (20,320ft) which lies between the standard West Buttress route and the Cassin Ridge. We achieved this in a six and a half day round trip from the South East Fork. Although we had two afternoons of cloud and snowfall, the weather was virtually perfect. We were hampered by bad snow conditions on the North East Fork of the Kahiltna glacier during our approach and on our summit day. We all reached the top on 16th June, a fine day with limitless views. As we ski-ed back to base on the 17th the weather started to deteriorate and we realised we had been lucky in the timing of our ascent. A day or maybe two later and we could have been stuck in high camp for a week. This was the first Irish ascent of the West Rib route.

After our successes and the unlikely prospect of continued good weather, we were in no mood to linger on the Kahiltna glacier, so we flew out on the 19th and back to Ireland, happy.

For further information about the above peaks and routes, which it would be pointless to duplicate here, see: -

High Alaska by Jonathan Waterman, published by The American Alpine Club, New York 1988.

We are most grateful for the grants which we received from The MCI, the Irish Himalayan Trust, the Ulster Sports and Recreation Trust, and Rock Climber Magazine. We are also most grateful for rucksacks and clothing supplied by Lowe Alpine in Tullamore and for gifts of money from Se Nolan, Des Murnane and Joe Lyons.

ACCOUNT OF INCOME & EXPENDITURE

400

3000

270

150

214

380

600

60

100

500

100

200

-----

5974

EXPENDITURE

- Flights to London
- Flights to Anchorage
- Insurance
- Car Hire in Anchorage
- Shuttle from Anchorage to Talkeetna
- National Park fees
- Flights from Talkeetna to glacier
- C. B. Radio Hire
- Accommodation in Anchorage
- Food & Fuel
- Maps/Equipment/Sundries
- Eating expenses in Talkeetna and Anchorage

800

500

541

100

40

600

83

25

150

3200

-----

6039

INCOME

- M.C.I.
- Irish Himalayan Trust
- Profit from ballot

- Se Nolan
- Rock Climber Magazine
- Ulster Sports & Recreation Trust
- Profit from Slide Shows
- Joe Lyons
- Des Murnane
- Personal Contributions

Apart from the help given by the organisations listed above and in particular by those individuals, we would also like to thank the Everest Foundation for the loan of various items of equipment and to Harry O'Brien for the loan of a high altitude tent.