

British Mount Augusta Expedition 1993

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The British Mountaineering Council
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Mount Augusta

Summary

The expedition consisted of Paul Knott and Ade Miller (lead pair), Paul Mead and Rob Wilson.

We made the first British ascent of Mount Augusta (4289m, 14070ft), by the 1952 North Ridge route. We turned back at 10000 ft on our proposed new route via the East Ridge due to a long and dangerous corniced section. Ours was the fourth ascent, after Pete Schoening et al. 1952 (North Ridge), Don Serl et al. 1987 (North Rib) and Mark Bebie/Bill Pilling 1990 (South Ridge).

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Background

Mount Augusta is in the St Elias range, on the border between Southeast Alaska and Yukon territory, Canada. The range receives a relatively small number of visits each year, but is easily accessible. Being significantly further South than the Alaska Range, and nearer the coast, problems with crevasses and variable snow conditions are perhaps greater. Some of the glaciers are impassable on foot, and it is not uncommon for the planes to end up half buried in soft snow.

Information about the area was relatively easy to come by, using the American and Canadian Alpine Journals, the BMC fact sheet, the National Park authorities, and the log book kept at Gulf Air in Yakutat (which also provided entertainment whilst waiting in the hanger).

Some confusion was caused by Don Serl's photos of the NNW face of Augusta being labelled the North face and by the fact that the North Ridge actually comes down to the North West from the shoulder at 11500-12000ft. Thus, it is the North Ridge which appears in the left skyline of the photos in the 1988 American and Canadian Alpine Journals, both labelled "North Face of Augusta".

Logistics

Since we were to be based on the Canadian side of the border, it was necessary to gain permission from the Kluane National Park authorities. This required a minimum of four in the party, medical certificates, and forms to be submitted 3 months in advance. The park warden, Andrew Lawrence, was very co-operative and can be contacted quickly via phone 0101-403-634-2251 or fax 0101-403-634-2686.

We flew from London to Seattle on 1st May, then took the Alaska Airlines flight Seattle-Juneau-Yakutat. The same plane returns later in the day, Anchorage-Cordova-Yakutat. From Yakutat we flew onto the glacier with Gulf Air Taxi, the only suitable operator from this side. We made arrangements with them well in advance but this probably wasn't necessary. They are at: PO Box 367, Yakutat, Alaska 99689; tel. 0101 907 784 3240, fax -3380.

Flying from Yakutat rather than from the Canadian side involved a shorter flight (1 hour round trip). This was not only cheaper but also less susceptible to bad weather. We met another expedition which had flown from Kluane a few days after us - after waiting 8 days for clear weather. We had an abortive attempt on 2nd May, for which we paid ½ price (133\$), but flew in during a brief clear spell the next day and found the glacier in reasonable condition for the landing.

Gulf Air rented us an FM radio phone, which was effective from the Seward Glacier and could also pick up marine weather forecasts (but the repeater cost \$4/minute). They sold Coleman Fuel (in US gal cans - unused cans could be returned), and lent us sleds and marker wands. We camped opposite the hangar, and used the hanger itself for sorting gear. They seemed a pretty decent bunch.

Climbing

Our pilot, Kurt Gloyer, landed us on the Seward Glacier as close as possible to the mountain, at the edge of the crevasses resulting from the snows from Augusta joining the main Seward glacier. We were at about 5750ft, and about five miles North and one mile East of the summit.

Reconnaissance

After a day of poor visibility our first attempt to walk towards the mountain was thwarted when Ade fell into an unseen crevasse 150yds from the tents. At the time we had little idea of the topography of the crevasses, there was deep unconsolidated snow and the flat light made it impossible to see the faint lines of even quite large holes. The rope cut in 10-15ft; Paul Knott's hastily placed stake failed and he was pulled 10ft towards the crevasse. Snow shoes in soft snow made it hard to get a firm stance. Altogether Ade was 40ft down. The other pair approached to help with the rescue, but unfortunately as they did so Paul Mead fell down the same crevasse! Both victims were pulled out, because snowshoes are impractical for climbing or prussiking, and it would have been very hard to prusik beyond where the rope had knifed in.

On a clearer day, we tried but failed to find a satisfactory way through the crevasse pattern. We concluded that walking 3 miles East to avoid the crevassed area was the

only solution. However, it appeared that the way down East from the North Ridge would be entirely blocked by crevasses.

The next day we walked West to see whether there would be a descent on the North West side. We concluded that it was unwise to rely on descent of the North Ridge at all, due to possibly impassable crevasses low on the route. It was in much worse condition than the 1987 photos suggested.

During this reconnaissance we met three Germans also intending to climb Augusta, but by a direct route up the North Face. They hadn't done anything by the time we left; we felt that their route was not only difficult but also extremely dangerous in the lower part.

We also had good views of Mount Baird, which had been one of our secondary objectives. It looked straightforward from the col between it and Augusta. However, the route up to the col was dangerously avalanche prone.

East Ridge Attempt

On 10th May Paul Knott and Ade Miller left with 10 days' food and fuel for the East ridge, intending to descend by the same route. Paul Mead and Rob Wilson left for Mount Eaton, sharing the start of the Augusta route. We left at 3:30 on our only really cold morning, and after 3½ hours sledding, reached a campsite in the middle of the large cwm North East of the mountain. Later this journey time was much reduced as the snow consolidated.

Early next morning we took a snowy spur (40° - 50°) between two icefalls. The snow was soft, even early in the morning, and this combined with heavy sacs and the strong sunshine to make progress slow. Breaking trail was exhausting. After 14 hours' slogging, up the spur and the slopes above, we camped at a 9500ft col on the branch of ridge leading to the East ridge.

Next day at 11am we reached a small summit at 10000+ ft in snow which was wet as well as unconsolidated. From here the continuation was 2Km of badly corniced ridge with no apparent campsites, leading to over 4Km of the East ridge including a sizeable fluted peak to go over. The East Ridge itself appeared not devoid of difficulties, including rock steps. Bearing in mind the poor conditions, the much greater seriousness than we had expected, and the necessity to return by the same route, we descended.

From the camp in the cwm we had a better view of the approaches and lower half of the North Ridge. It appeared feasible from the crevasse point of view to walk up the confines of a small valley almost as far as the col between the ridge and the forepeak to its North. From here, there was a slope leading onto the ridge, then 3 - 4 large crevasses on the ridge itself. It seemed not unlikely that these would be passable. The approach route was full of avalanche debris and was threatened by seracs on Augusta and rockfall from the subsidiary peak, so would need to be negotiated early on both ascent and descent.

Climb via North Ridge

After a few days of poor weather, on 19th May the whole team set off for the North Ridge via the Northeast cwm.

Early next morning we passed through the avalanche-prone valley leading to the bottom of the ridge on thinly crusted snow, crossing full-width crevasses by walking over the debris at either side. We continued up the ridge, finding all the crevasses reasonably bridged, to a beautiful campsite on a level section at 10000ft.

We sat out the 21st in bad weather - poor visibility, prolonged but light snow, warm temperatures around 0°C. On the 22nd we continued, over a further crevasse and up steeper (45°) slopes. The 1953 team had considered these slopes too dangerous and had taken to rock, presumably well to the left. Some new snow was sliding down as we climbed, but we never felt the danger excessive, and certainly were not tempted by the loose rock. We reached the shoulder, and traversed a level knife-edged section before the ridge broadened again to a bivvi site at 12000ft.

On 23rd the weather was still fine, with an inversion. The snow was good but there were crevasses all the way up the ridge; a huge snowbridge collapsed under Ade just above the bivvi site. There was a steep névé section just below the summit, which we reached in four hours. It was a long level ridge, corniced on the NE side. The views were superb, although exposure to the cold wind meant we only spent a few minutes there. We descended to our 10000ft campsite, on snow that was more consolidated than on our ascent.

We nervously sat out the next day in bad weather, running low on food and fuel. The following day, 25th, we intended to descend regardless. In the event it was a perfect morning with well frozen snow; we hurried down to the sleds, passing over new avalanche debris in the approach valley. By 10am we were at base camp and by 4pm we were amongst the mosquitoes in Yakutat.

We had a few days in Seattle before our return to the UK on 31st, during which time we sampled the delights of climbing on the Granite of Leavenworth and ate enormous numbers of American pancakes.

Weather & Conditions

Conditions were much warmer than is usual for May. On some days we had rain on the glacier; only on a few occasions was there ice inside the tents in the morning. There were many avalanches, sometimes a virtually continuous roar which only partially subsided during the night; some nights it hardly froze.

When we arrived the snow was powdery and unconsolidated. This greatly hampered progress on our first attempt on the mountain, particularly later in the day when it also became wet and sticky. A very warm spell (0°C at 5am, 10°C at 8am - outside, in shade - on 14th May; some *rain* on the glacier on 16th) melted and consolidated much of the surface powder. During the next 2 weeks several feet of snow melted off the Seward Glacier, with consequent effects on base camp tents. On our second attempt on the mountain, the snow was crusted early in the morning, although not always thickly enough. By midday it was too wet to do anything. On our descent and return to base camp, conditions were good enough to walk the whole way back to base camp without snowshoes.

Several other expeditions in the area retreated due to dangerous conditions, including a British team on Fairweather which found the Carpe Ridge in bad condition and had their food eaten by crows! A USA East Coast expedition later succeeded on the route on 11th June. On Mount Vancouver, Bill Pilling and his partner Carl waited 2 weeks

for conditions to attempt the mountain. On the descent Bill was injured falling into a crevasse near the summit and had a 5-day epic retreat to base camp.

We experienced no major storms and no high winds. However, frequently there was a layer of cloud over the Seward, causing poor visibility or at best very flat light making it difficult to walk on snow. During our summit day and the day before, there was an inversion as far as the eye could see (150 miles+). The marine forecasts on the radio were useful for giving a general idea of the weather pattern, although they were not very precise.

The sun was extremely strong, inducing lethargy, dehydration and sunburn. Frequent application of sun block was essential. Our Hawaiian Tropic After Sun lotion was a great luxury.

Equipment

We were equipped for much lower temperatures than we encountered. Our down duvet jackets were never used, and were not taken on our second attempt on the mountain.

We took the French TSL Bibollet plastic snowshoes, and no skis. We were extremely pleased with them as they could be used on reasonably steep slopes, worked well in the soft snow, could be used with care on crusted snow, and were light enough to be carried high up the mountain. For our use, they were much more appropriate than skis.

We used plastic sleds provided by Gulf Air, for the walk from base camp to the bottom of the mountain. These were adequate for the job.

Our wands were provided by Gulf Air. The longer ones were better as they needed pushing well down into the snow to increase the time taken for them to melt out and fall over. They were well worth taking up on the mountain to mark snowbridges over crevasses.

We took one 75cm Mountain Technology snowstake each, which seemed the most appropriate form of protection, but hammering them battered the top edges. The one ice screw placement took a Lowe-Camp drive-in better than a Russian Titanium, due to the hardness of the ice.

We used 2 Wild Country Mountain Quasars and a Mountain SuperNova. Thus we had a luxury base camp. Their ability to withstand high winds was not needed, in the event, but being free-standing meant they withstood the effects of a melting site without actually collapsing. We used Field & Trek snow pegs which we found useful in conjunction with snowstakes, ice tools etc. We were disappointed to find that *both* porch poles broke on one of the (brand new) Quasars. It appears that the new, gold anodised, poles are better.

Mosquito repellent would have been useful for camping in Yakutat at the end of May.

Food & Fuel

We chose our food on the assumption that temperatures would be much lower, and consequently avoided anything unusable when frozen. This precaution was not necessary.

We ordered freeze-dried main meals from REI in Seattle (Matt Hyde/Trent Amonette, tel 0101-206-891-2507, fax -2523). All were found to be tasty, but the AlpineAire and Backpackers Pantry varieties contained significantly more per serving than the Mountain House meals. For base camp use, all the meals needed bulking out with rice/pasta/noodles.

The remaining food was bought in a supermarket in Seattle on the day of our arrival. We made a few mistakes due to jetlag - with hindsight we should have had an exact list of what to buy, with quantities. In particular we were short of luxuries to make up for the lack of cake shops on the Seward Glacier - condensed milk, pancake and cookie mix, chocolate puddings etc.

On the mountain we always thought our food was too heavy but never felt we had enough to eat. We had about 380g/person/day, providing around 1600 KCal of which a high proportion came from chocolate and cereal bars.

In the event we used only 4 US gallons (15 litres) of Coleman fuel in the 22 days spent on the glacier (0.34 litres/pair/day). On the hill, we used about 0.25 litres/pair/day but always allowed for 0.3. We would have used more had conditions been colder; most of the water was melted during the afternoons when the snow was very warm.

Acknowledgements

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- Funding from the Mount Everest Foundation, BMC/Sports Council and Foundation for Sport & The Arts.
- Sun protection products from Nivea and Labello (Smith & Nephew) and Hawaiian Tropic (Tanning Research Bureau, Warner Lambert Health Care).
- Information on the area from Dean James, Don Serl and Bill Pilling.
- Hospitality in Seattle from Bill Fischelis and Rob James.

Budget

Flights to Seattle & tax	1752	MEF	600
Flights to Yakutat inc. change fee	1120	BMC/Sports Council	500
Glacier flights	785	Foundation for Sport & The Arts	600
Radio hire	115	Individual contributions	3198
Food	487		
Insurance	614		
Other	<u>25</u>		
	£4898		<u>£4898</u>

In addition the expedition members purchased equipment and medical supplies individually.

Bibliography

Peter K. Schoening King Peak-Yukon Expedition, AAJ 1953

	1952	
Allen Steck	(plate 13: Mount Augusta from Logan)	AAJ 1966
Don Serl	Augusta and Logan Twin Pack	AAJ <u>30</u> , 1988
Don Serl	A Kluane Twin-Pack	CAJ <u>71</u> , 1988
William Pilling	Mount Augusta's South Ridge	AAJ 1991

Update 1994

When someone asked me for a copy of the Expedition report in December 1994 I reread it and decided to add an update in the light of subsequent expedition reports. The main text of the report remains the same, apart from a few minor corrections.

The German Party mentioned on page 4 failed to climb Augusta but completed a first ascent on Mt. Baird and a route on Logan (AAJ 36, 1994, p151-2), other activity during the 1993 season is also recorded there.

There is a short article recording the ascent of Good Neighbour Peak by Bill Pilling and his partner and their subsequent accident and retreat (AAJ 36, 1994, p87-9 & plate 31)

The American team whom we met attempting the Carpe Ridge also wrote up their successful ascent (AAJ 36, 1994, p126-7).

Ade Miller

15th December 1994