

Mount King George Expedition 1996

Supported by

**Mount Everest Foundation
The British Mountaineering Council & Sports Council
Foundation for Sport and the Arts
Terra Nova Ltd**



NE Ridge of Mt. King George from Mt. Queen Mary

Summary

Area visited: St. Elias Mountains, Yukon, Canada.

Objective: First ascent of the NE Ridge of Mt. King George.

From a base camp on a 'virgin' glacier between Mount King George (3741m) and Mount Queen Mary (3928m), we took advantage of generally good weather to attempt the NE Ridge of Mt. King George, make the first British ascent of Mt. Queen Mary by a new route via the S Ridge and unclimbed Peak 3118m, and make the first ascent of Peak 3089m. In the absence of an effective radio link we signaled our wish to leave by stamping a message in the snow.

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Background and history

Mount King George (3741m) is an isolated, impressive peak in the Saint Elias Mountains, 35km east of Mount Logan. It rises 2000m from the Hubbard Glacier.

In 1961, when this area first caught the attention of climbers, Donald Monk and George Wallerstein observed from McArthur Peak that King George was outstanding amongst the remaining unclimbed peaks, and that when most of the first ascents are gone, climbers may turn their attention to the 5000-ft North Face of Mount King George. The mountain repelled its early attempts but succumbed in 1966³ by the South-West Ridge. An unsuccessful Japanese expedition in 1979⁴ was followed by an ascent of the East Ridge by Joe Filippone and party in 1990⁵. There had been no further attempts before we arrived at the mountain in May 1996. We approached from the North side of the mountain which also allowed us easy access to the South side of Queen Mary.

Queen Mary (3928m) has, by comparison seen more activity. Although large the mountain has several easy angles aspects, especially from the North. The 1st ascent took place in 1961⁶ when a seven strong team from Seattle climbed the North-East ridge from a col West of Pk. 3213m. The West ridge was climbed in 1978⁸ by a Canadian team including a dog. Several other ascents of the peak have been made, but all from the North and West sides of the mountain^{7,9,10,11,12}. Although not our original objective an ascent from the South side was an obvious choice once the NE ridge of King George proved too difficult.

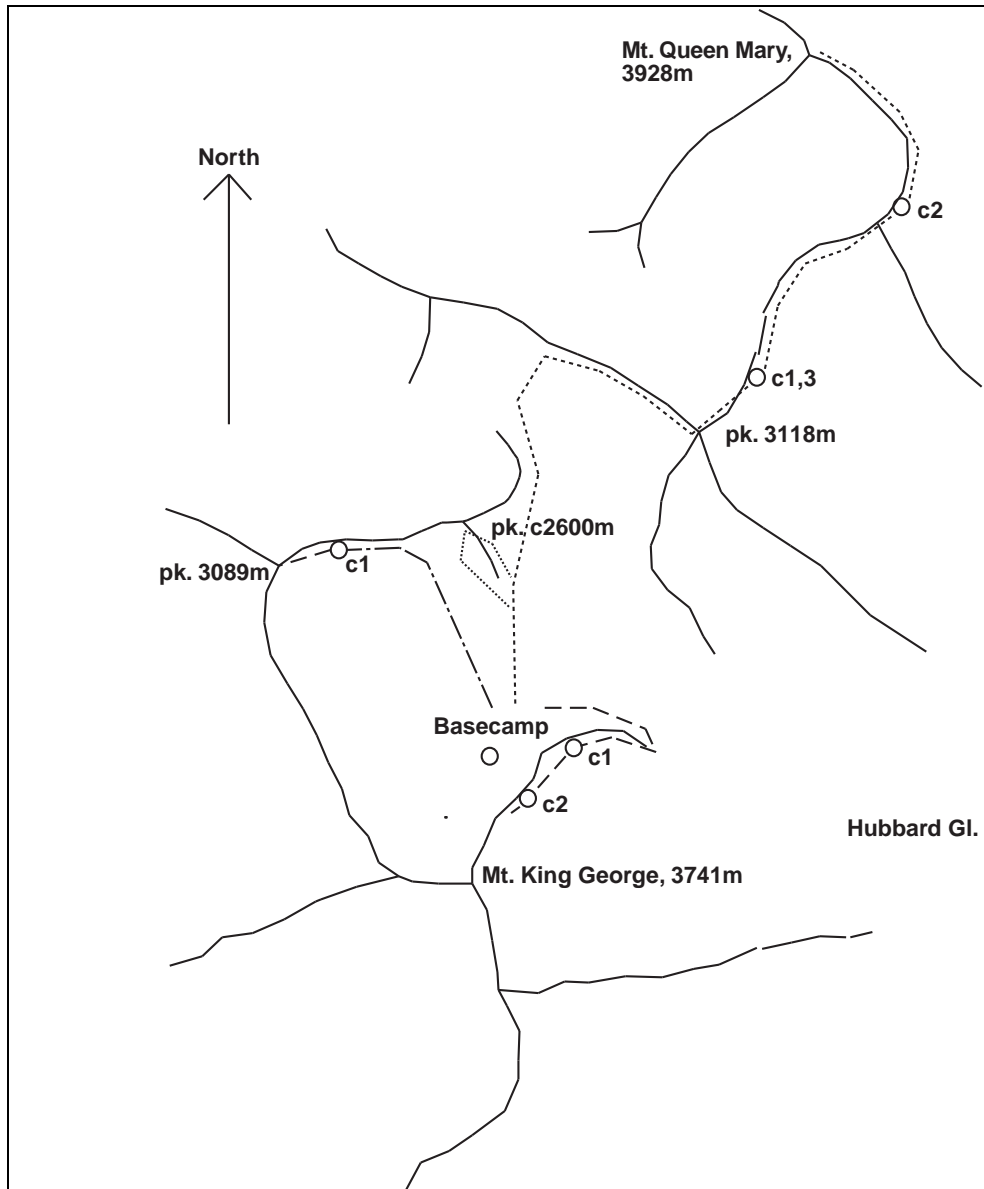


Figure 1: Based on Dept of Energy, Mines and Resources, Canada. 1:50,000 sheet 115B/12, "Mount Queen Mary"

Logistics

We based on the Canadian side of the border which required gaining permission from the Kluane National Park. Although the restriction on the minimum party size has been lifted and medical certificates are no longer required parties are still required to register and a park fee is payable¹. In 1996 a fee of \$5 CAN per person per day, up to a maximum of ten days, and \$30 CAN for each plane landing.

We flew from London to Seattle and then on to Yakutat the following morning. The overnight stopover in Seattle allowed us to buy the majority of the expedition food and some additional

¹ Details are available from: Mountaineering Warden, Kluane National Park Reserve, Box 5495, Haines Junction, Yukon, Canada, Y0B 1L0. Tel: 1-403-634-2251, Fax: 1-403-634-2686.

equipment. In Yakutat we used Gulf Air Taxi², the only glacier landing equipped service on the Alaskan side of the range, to fly into our basecamp.

Flying from Yakutat rather than from the Canadian side involved a shorter flight. This was not only cheaper but from previous experiences also less susceptible to bad weather. Our flight back to Yakutat proved somewhat costly as the Kurt Gloyer, the Gulf Air pilot, spent some time searching for us which cost additional flying hours.

Gulf Air rented us an FM radio phone. We were not charged for this because it didn't work due to a faulty antenna. The radio turned out to be largely useless as our basecamp beneath King George was so sheltered that we were unable to even receive the marine weather reports. 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 hangar itself for sorting gear. Showers are available for \$7 US at Yakutat Jack's bar (near the airport terminal).

Dates

4 May	Fly to Seattle.
5 May	Fly to Yakutat and on by ski plane to base camp (2025m) North of Mt. King George.
6 May	Wanded out a route to the foot of the NE ridge.
7 May	Sorted out equipment for attempt on route.
8-11 May	Attempt on NE Ridge of Mt. King George (see below).
12 May	Festered.
14-15 May	First ascent of Peak 3089m (see below).
16 May	Festered.
17 May	Wanded out route to foot of pk c.2600m.
18 May	Rock climb on c.2600m peak N of base camp.
19 May	Sorted out equipment for attempt on route.
21-24 May	Ascent of Mt. Queen Mary by a new route, via S Ridge and Peak 3118m (see below).
25-26 May	Sat out storm at BC. Dug out tents several times.
27 May	Festered.
28 May	Walked towards Queen Mary to attempt to radio Yakutat.
29-30 May	Walk 50km to and down Hubbard Glacier to attempt radio contact.
30 May	Picked up by ski plane after message stamped in snow had been spotted.
31 May	Morning in Yakutat. Flew out on afternoon flight to Seattle.
1 June	Rock climbing at "Exit 32" near Seattle.
2 June	Sight seeing in Seattle, Ade Miller returns to Syracuse.
3 June	Paul Knott returns to London.

Climbing

Mount King George attempt

Photos obtained prior to departure suggested that the main problem would be glacial breakup on the approach to the route. In the event our glacier pilot, Kurt Gloyer, solved this problem by confidently landing in a small flat area (1990m) on the 'virgin' upper glacier bowl N of the

² Gulf Air Taxi can be reached at: PO Box 367, Yakutat, Alaska 99689, Tel: 1-907-784-3240, Fax: 1-907-784-3380.

mountain. From the plane we saw alarming looking seracs barring the way on the upper part of our route.

We easily reached the start of the route (1960m), which at first was a mixed rock and ice ridge. We then weaved around small seracs on steep windslab, using 75cm snow-stakes to gain purchase. A traverse L under a larger serac at 2500m turned out to be on concrete-hard ice. We abandoned the traverse and camped under a stable section of serac, only to be blasted all night by wind and spindrift.

The next day we traversed lower down, and climbed between the seracs via more steep windslab to a shoulder. From here we climbed round another set of seracs, also to the L on the ubiquitous 'vertical windslab', to a second shoulder from which we could view the rest of the route. Ahead a section of steeply corniced ridge led to a large serac climbable only by an abutting snow pinnacle. Above this an 'impregnable' serac wall could be bypassed only by traversing well to the L onto the E Face, under the seracs on icy-looking and avalanche-scoured slopes.

As we ascended to the corniced ridge the snow changed to a thin layer of 'sugar' over concrete-hard ice. We retreated and camped back on the shoulder at c.3080m. In the morning, keeping an eye on the storm clouds scudding across the sky, we traversed well below the ridge and up a short rock step onto a slope leading back to the crest. The slope led on more steep windslab to a small lip marking the transition to another 'sugar-coated' ice slope, this time topped with yet more windslab (c.3120m). Commenting "this is asking for it", and having exhausted all reasonable alternatives, we reluctantly retreated. Our disappointment was tempered by a sense of relief once we had safely descended.

Peak 3089m ascent

On crusted slopes we reached a col on the E Ridge in 2 hours from base camp. After traversing intricate but straightforward corniced ridge and ascending a slope between seracs, we reached the N summit in a further 3 hours. Another summit, possibly a few metres higher, lay 1km to the S but the intervening corniced ridge was uninviting in the high winds and rapidly approaching storm. The S summit has no spot-height and would be more easily reached by a separate ascent.

On the descent we camped at c.2500m as the blizzard and poor visibility made further progress risky. After 16 hours of 'torrential' snowfall we trenched our way down the slopes to base camp when the weather cleared early next morning.

Peak c.2600m attempt

We attempted this mountain because of its attractive appearance from base camp and the solid-looking rock at the base of the S Ridge. We climbed the slabby buttress in two 50m pitches at around Severe via a crack line. The main difficulty apart from dubious protection was the volume of rock falling towards the second. We continued up the pleasant mixed alpine ridge above to the foresummit, then along a corniced ridge, on horrific avalanche-prone snow and 'vertical sugar', towards the true summit. We were turned back only 150m distant from this by a large cornice running directly down the side of the ridge.

Mount Queen Mary ascent

Mount Queen Mary had previously been climbed only from the N and via the W Ridge. From our base camp to the S there was no direct route, but we decided to attempt the mountain via the NW Ridge of Peak 3118m and the winding ridge leading from Peak 3118m to the summit of Mt. Queen Mary, a total of 11km of route. Anticipating poor snow conditions we set off with 7 days' food and fuel.

On the first day we reached the col N of Peak 3118m, having enjoyed mainly superb snow conditions apart from the 'cheesy' N slopes of 3118. The following day we made the steep ascent to a forepeak at 3440m, along some level ridge and up a further rise to a superbly open

campsite on a serac at c.3560m. On the third day we reached the rounded summit in 1½ hours.

The morning inversion turned into a storm as we descended to the col by Peak 3118m. After moderate overnight snowfall and in poor visibility we continued over Peak 3118 and reversed our route of ascent. Several times we were forced to sit out whiteout conditions, and on two occasions we lost the route. Our rapid ascent had been fortuitous since the weather took a further two days to clear.

Weather and conditions

The weather was good apart from the storms mentioned above, both of which arose with little warning. On other days ominous storm clouds came to nothing. The Yakutat marine weather service apparently “don't have a ****ing clue”, except after the event. As it turned out we were not able to receive the marine weather channel at our basecamp. When we took the radio up Mount Queen Mary the forecast was good for the next 5 days, but a day later a storm came in. Only then did the reports start to warn of an approaching storm! The barometer/altimeter we had gave consistently below average pressure reading throughout the trip and proved to be a fairly poor weather predictor.

Snow conditions were highly variable, with windslab predominating. North facing slopes seemed to remain in poor condition, while south facing slopes became well crusted. The NE Ridge of Mt. King George seemed prone to wind and to blowing spindrift. On the glacier virtually all of the crevasses were snow-choked; the glacier surface showed large dune-like wind sculptures rather than crevasse lines.

Equipment

Terra Nova Ltd. loaned us a Voyager two man tent specially modified for mountaineering. This proved to be much lighter than our Mountain Quasar for use on the mountain. It was pretty cramped, but better than a bivi-bag or small single walled tent. The Voyager was stable in high winds and the flattish roof was still able to shed snow and not sag even in heavy snowfall. The only real problems we had with it was snow blowing under then flysheet and inside the inner. The fly could be made a bit lower to the ground and the net panel in the back of the inner removed for mountain use. The net panel also made the tent very cold.

The other tents were excellent. A Mountain Hyperspace and Mountain Quasar at basecamp were ideal for waiting out bad weather and cooking in. We suffered a broken pole on the Quasar. This is a persistent problem with these tents and seems to be caused by the flysheet shrinking in warm weather and the tight curvature of the porch poles. At basecamp we both used Eagle Creek camp chairs, these were excellent and made sitting in the tent much more comfortable.

We used a toy snow shovel bought at Toys-R-Us as a lightweight snow shovel when climbing. This was cheap and quite easy to carry, and adequate for the soft snow. At basecamp we had a proper shovel and snow saw for constructing platforms for the tents. The sleds we used were too small for our rucksacks and tended to roll over on uneven ground. To be stable a sled must be considerably larger than the rucksack on it. Gulf Air Taxi have such sleds. The sleds did prove very useful for melting snow during the day. On warm days most of our water was obtained this way.

The Radio Gulf Air hired us did not work throughout our trip. This was partly due to the location of our basecamp, which shielded use from even the marine weather report station. The long aerial we were given had a faulty BNC connector rendering it useless. This left us with the short range aerial which was not long enough to transmit to Yakutat effectively. The moral of this is don't rely on your radio and check it and the aerials both in Yakutat and at basecamp before the plane leaves if possible.

Ade Miller also used a Buffalo suit. This proved very effective in bad weather and avoided the need to carry Gore Tex but could be very hot on warm afternoons. Paul Knott used a fleece and Gore Tex shell combination which was more flexible but heavier.

It is also worth noting that US airlines give large baggage allowances.

Food and Fuel

After our experiences of living off some rather dull food in 1993¹ we decided to ensure that the same thing didn't happen in 1996. We used a very comprehensive food list which took into account the quality and availability of different foods in the UK and USA. Many of the specialty items were purchased in the UK. The bulk of the food was bought in Seattle on the way to Yakutat. In the event we tended to purchase 10% more of bulk foods than we had allowed for on our lists and 1-200% more of "nice" food like nuts and dried fruit.

The only mistake we made was not purchasing semolina in the UK. This is very hard to obtain in the USA. We were able to buy Couscous, a coarse grained savory semolina, which made a welcome change from rice and pasta. Good packet soups are also hard to come by in the US. It is worth bringing at least some of them from the UK to ensure a good selection.

We took six US gallons of Coleman fuel to base camp but used a total of only two.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the financial support, in the form of grants, The British Mountaineering Council, Mount Everest Foundation & Sports Council and the Foundation for Sport and the Arts. We would also like to thank Terra Nova Ltd. for providing tents at low cost and also the loan of a lightweight mountain adapted Voyager tent.

Budget

Expenses	£	Income	£
Scheduled air flights to Seattle, inc. change fees	791	Mount Everest Foundation	800
Scheduled air flights to Yakutat, inc. change fees	547	British Mountaineering Council & Sports Council	700
Glacier flights (Gulf Air Taxi)	650	Foundation for Sport and the Arts	385
Kluane Park fees	85	Individual Contributions	950
Food	300		
Fuel	12		
Other traveling expenses	250		
Miscellaneous, inc. updating medical kits with new drugs.	200		
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	2835		2835

Expenditure shown excludes insurance (for which existing policies were able to be used), equipment, and radio hire (for which we were not charged). Ade Miller only required a ticket from New York State to Seattle which reduced the air flight costs. These factors reduce the apparent cost of the expedition by approximately £400.

Bibliography

- 1 "British Mount Augusta Expedition Report", 1993, available from Paul Knott or Ade Miller, also filed in the RGS and AC libraries.
- 2 AAJ 1966 p148-9.

- 3 CAJ 1962 p69-74.
- 4 AAJ 1979 p204 & CAJ 1979, p76.
- 5 CAJ 1991 p34-5.
- 6 CAJ 1962 p69-74
- 7 AAJ 1967.
- 8 CAJ 1979 p76.
- 9 AAJ 1979 p204 & CAJ 1979 p76.
- 10 AAJ 1990.
- 11 AAJ 1992.
- 12 AAJ 1993 p158.