

Antisana as seen from Cotopaxi in the early morning.

From left to right Peaks 11,530, 11,520, and Mount Hunter sit above the NW Fork of the Tokositna. All photos by Coley Gentzel

Mount Huntington is remarkable not for it's past, but for it's present. For the sixty years men have known about it (not many men either), it has possessed a quality common to only a few mountains in the world. A sense of arrested grace, perhaps; a sculptured frailty too savage for any sculptor's hand; a kinship with the air around it that makes it seem always in motion-but these are only metaphors, unable to capture the essence of the mountain.

-David Roberts, *Mountain of my Fear*

The almost electric sound of snowflakes crackling against the outside of my tent signals the end of another Alaskan day here on the Tokositna Glacier. As has been the pattern the last few days, the mountains outside the door of my tent are once again donning their evening veils of cloud and mist, not to show their snow and ice-clad faces again until morning. Our adventure here began seven days ago on the tarmac of the airstrip in Talkeetna, Alaska. Actually, that's not true. This particular adventure started several years ago, in our minds, probably over a beer, undoubtedly while leafing through a guidebook or magazine of some sort, the exact details of the moment I can't recall just now. Despite their existence for a few seasons now, reality made acquaintance with our plans merely a week ago.



Our Talkeetna Air Taxi Beaver loaded and ready for take-off.

"You're late" our pilot barked at me as I wheeled a cartload of supplies towards his five passenger plane equipped with skis for the glacier landing that would be forthcoming. I apologized feebly and made an attempt at explanation as he walked briskly past me and opened the door of the plane. "Where is Seth? We were supposed to be in the air by eight!" Again my lack of reasonable explanation brought a less than enthusiastic look to the pilot's furrowed face. As soon as I opened my mouth to say I'd search for my missing partner, Seth burst onto the scene,

jogging down the runway, disheveled as usual. He had a precarious armload of last minute this and that and was mumbling something about a fruitless battle with a fax machine while he offered a host of apologies, none of which shook the stern look from our pilot's face. Unquestionably, this look was a product of many things; the recent bad weather, the 54 climbers waiting on his property to get into the mountains on this first clear day in a week, and most recently, our tardiness.

Once we were in the air, the mood eased slightly as the land that is Alaska stretched out before us. Our seventy mile flight took us from the banks of the still-frozen Talkeetna and Susitna Rivers, over tundra and moraines, eventually into the immense gorges left by retreating glaciers of ages past, beyond the blue tongues of the glaciers themselves, and into the granite and ice heart of the Alaska Range.

The Alaska Range is a land of extremes. Extreme temperatures, extreme weather, extreme triumph, and extreme tragedy. Some of mountaineering's most courageous battles have been won and lost here, and every year since the first explorations in the range, standards have been set, limits pushed, and possibilities redefined. I am not just talking about the recent "light and fast," single push efforts that have shunned traditional expeditionary tactics in favor of speed and reduced exposure.



A foreshortened view of the Harvard route from camp.

Ever since the Sourdoughs of 1910 set out into the unknown to make what would become the first ascent of Denali's North Peak, this range has attracted some of the world's most notable photographers, explorers, mountaineers, and now modern-day alpinists. Perhaps the most notable of these early efforts was the 1965 expedition by the Harvard Climbing Club to the West Face of Mount Huntington, a peak situated about seven miles south of Denali. Armed with a little bit of previous Alaskan experience, information and photos collected with the help of photographer Bradford Washburn, 7000 feet of fixed line, and plenty of ambition, four members of Harvard's climbing club bid school farewell for the summer from their VW mini-bus and headed for Alaska. Their goal was to climb the then once summited Mount Huntington by a new route on its steep and complex West Face. They accomplished this goal after forty-one days of effort and the loss of one of their team members.



The West Face of Huntington with our route marked as seen from Peak 11,520.

Our plane landed in the glacial basin below Mount Huntington's West Face before I could even get a bearing on where we were let alone take a quick picture or two. A photo of the route and the mountain would have to wait for the flight out. Our pilot whipped the doors of the plane open and encouraged us to keep the unloading pace lively as he started throwing gear and food into the snow. As the last bag hit the ground, he leapt back into the driver's seat yelling at us mid-leap to "watch out for the wing." Before the door could fully close, his De Havilland Beaver roared to life and back down the packed snow landing strip

towards Mount Hunter and on to Talkeetna to pick up his next load of human cargo, likely bound for one of the many other flat spots on the miles of glacier that now surround us.

Ever so slowly, the nine branches of the Tokositna Glacier crawl beneath the flanks of Mount Hunter, Denali, Thunder Mountain, the Kahiltna Queen, and many more of the most rugged peaks in Alaska. In the native tongue of the land, it's name means "the river that comes from the land where there are no trees." After a rapid exodus from our winged transportation, we were standing on the Northeast Fork of the Tokositna, searching through our big pile of gear for warm clothes. The Tokositna (Tok), nicknamed the "Toko-sit-there" by climbers who have endured the bad weather that haunts the glacial basin, can be a pretty lonely place. Tales of twelve-day storms, near starvation epics, and snowfall of unreal proportions abound in reports from climbers who have visited the area. Loneliness didn't seem like it would be a concern for us though. Some friends from close to home were waiting for us as we collected our things on the landing strip and wallowed towards a camp site.

With a few trips to and from the landing strip, our gear and overly stuffed food sacks made it to the spot where we would dig in for the next three weeks. I was fairly confident that we had brought enough food to weather the aforementioned storms, but just in case, I couldn't help but glance at our neighbors and size them up as a potential meal should things go awry. The fellow from Colorado looked to have some meat on his bones. The rest seemed pretty lean though. Typical climbers, I guess.

Establishing camp went pretty quickly despite frequent breaks to share tales with our friends and hear reports of their recent attempts and rapidly developing plans. Apparently nine feet of snow had fallen in the last few days, and everyone had spent far too much time in their tents. With us bearing the news of high pressure and a few days of favorable forecast, everyone currently on the glacier was eager to shed their storm-induced lethargy and get on with the climbing. As of our arrival, Huntington had not yet been climbed this year despite several attempts, one of



Taking advantage of a gear drying opportunity at camp.

In the early days, Huntington carried with it a shadow of fear in the minds of many climbers. This was due in part to the daunting nature of the climbing found on its flanks, but more significantly because the mountain seemed to have a history of ill will towards the climbers that had tread upon it.



Paul Roderick banks a turn in his plane as he heads out of the Northeast fork of the Tok.

Lionel Terray and another member of the French party that climbed Huntington for the first time, just a year before the Harvard ascent, died shortly after their climb of the French Ridge. One of the four members of the Harvard team fell to his death on the descent from their route in 1965. In fact, seven of the first seventeen people to climb the mountain met with untimely ends not long after their safe return from Huntington. The mountain's reputation has since faded, but at least for me, it's hard to overlook any death in the mountains, particularly when the most recent victim of tragedy lies buried in avalanche debris only a few hundred paces from our tent.

The Harvard Route on Huntington's West Face gains about 4000 feet from the standard camp at 8200' on the NE Fork of the Tok. After an initial approach through an icefall and across a moderate snow slope, the route gains a gradually steeping ridge, which eventually becomes vertical and blends into the true West Face of the mountain.

As we finished digging our camp and tried to relax the torrential pace of the last few days, our neighbors broke trail to the start of the route to have a look at the upper mountain, which was slightly out of view from our camp. Their arrival back to camp woke me from a balmy afternoon nap inside our spacious and already somewhat odiferous tent. The guys reported lean-looking snow and ice conditions on the route, but they still intended to cast off early the next morning.

In past trips to Alaska, it has worked out for Seth and me to have a few days at the outset of the trip to wait for good weather and conditions before considering our first objective. I have always appreciated this little bit of time at the get-go to rest, wrap my mind around the enormity of the place, and mentally prepare for the climbs ahead. Now we were in a climbing pickle - not an animated vegetable, but a dilemma rather. Do we sit and wait a day or two, and risk losing precious time off a weather window that was forecasted to be quite small? Or do we keep the frantic pace rolling, and prepare to leave early the next morning?

We came to climb...the weather is good...and we might not get another chance. One of the countless lessons I've learned in Alaska is not to sit when the sun is shining. Last April, we had four days of climbing weather in a three-week trip. Somehow in that time we found our way up and down Mount Hunter just as the clouds closed back in and the snow started... again. So this time, after a quick discussion, some pro vs. con lobbing and volleying, a dash of speculation, and a pinch of head scratching, we had what we thought was a recipe for a chance at success. We packed, slept, and left camp at a leisurely 9 a.m., third in line for the Harvard Route.

I found it odd that this climb, which has been done only a handful of times, suddenly had what the French call a queue, British call bloody traffic, and we called a stinkin' line-up. In having spun a few times on the edge of the circle that is the climbing world, I am constantly reminded that the circle of people and places is not as large as the globe makes it seem. The team of two that was first in line consisted of my former roommate, Erik Johnson, and a former co-worker, Clint Cook, both still good friends. Second in line was a John Fitzgerald, a fellow that I had spoken with a couple of times over the last few years, and his partner. Last and most certainly least, were Seth and I. Strange that we were all sharing space on this remote and seldom climbed peak, all having arrived at this bump in the glacier of our own accord and with separate plans.

Seth and I watched from camp as contestants on team number two made their way through the icefall and up the technical pitch of ice required to gain the start of the ridge. We eventually got our particulars together and headed off to follow in the footsteps of the others. Erik and Clint were way ahead, having left several hours before the rest of us, planning a lighter and faster climb. Our approach and ascent of a fixed line left by our friends went quickly, and soon enough we were on the crest of the ridge and officially on the route.



Seth and John sort out the newly formed team of three.

To our left the gradually steepening ridge overlooked our camp and the landing strip in the narrow basin. To our right the ridge dropped sharply 3000' into another significantly more chaotic basin much farther below. Seth and I decided to climb together simultaneously (instead of making pitches) along the ridge as the climbing was mostly on easy, though exposed, snow. All the while we were glancing nervously at the route ahead, wondering how badly the seemingly excessive weight on our backs would hinder our pace on the technical ground above.



John's partner descending the lower ridge.

Just below a feature that the first ascent party named "the Alley," we caught up with the team in front of us. John's partner had developed an acute case of motivation-loss, which surfaced in the form of an aggravated back injury from years past. The weight of the face above sitting heavily upon his shoulders had no doubt aided the aggravation, and as a result he had decided to descend and

abandon the route and possibly his desire to climb ever again. I can't deny having to fight similar thoughts and feelings as I considered the difficulties yet to come. John, sans partner, was eager to continue and asked if he could join us. This marked a first for me in the mountains. I have encountered cached gear on routes before, but never a cached partner. I am not allergic to many things, but I am certain that alpine climbing in a party of three is one of them.

In past experiences with groups of three, I have found that the normally rapid pace that I (we) prefer slows significantly, and the decision making process takes on a whole new (3rd) dimension that can be complicated and often problematic. If given the opportunity to choose between pulling teeth minus the luxury of Novocain, and climbing a technical mountain in a party of three, I would have a tough time choosing.

It was time for an impromptu board meeting on our corner of the ledge. After a minute or two, we decided that because of the nature of the route, the difficulty of the climbing, and our planned approach to its challenges, adding another competent climber could actually be a benefit on this particular ascent, and we thus decided to give it a go. The ensuing days would prove this to be an excellent choice, not only for the additional hand to help with the work, but for John's newly added motivation and our soon-to-come friendship.

After a quick repack at the belay anchor, John's partner rappelled solo back to camp and the three of us roped up and got back into action. We headed for the base of "The Spiral," the first major difficulty on the route and where the "real" climbing is supposed to begin. There was supposed to be a good spot to dig a platform for sleeping at the base of the Spiral, but in this low snow year we found the safe options pretty limited. The fixed anchor here stood about six feet out of our reach and was useless for protection. Instead we had to sling a large flake of rock with cord and tether ourselves to it while moving about the ledge.

We were able to dig into the little snow there to provide sleeping room for two, and John opted for a spot on a smaller ledge around the corner. Talk about room with a view! His 6'x3' ledge looked out to Mount Hunter, Foraker, and over the vast sea of peaks beyond, with a drop at his toes that led almost vertically to our tracks on the glacier below. We had hoped to climb another pitch or two this day and leave our ropes fixed for the next, but almost constant rock fall funneling down the route above kept us from attempting this. As the heat of the day increased so did the rock fall, and we spent the majority of the afternoon listening for the loud hum of rocks

careening from thousands of feet above so that we could cower against the wall, hug the anchor, and hope for yet another miss. It was nightmarish to say the least. Now, several days removed from the experience, I still occasionally hear the nauseating hum and subsequent explosion of rock in my sleep and awake with a start.

Somehow we managed to leave the spot unscathed the next morning. The first lead of the day was mine. The pitch was mostly rock climbing with a few icy moves in a wide crack that required ice tools and yarding on a couple pieces of gear. After a while of grunting, some delicate moves in a steep corner, and some more mixed climbing, I reached an uncomfortable belay stance, fixed the rope for Seth and John to ascend, and hauled a few packs. John lead a steep bit of rock above the anchor, and then we wandered up easier mixed ground for a pitch or two, stopping at the next crux, a vertical seam in a blank headwall that was supposed to go at A2.

It was Seth's turn in the rotation and he did well on the pitch. The stance at the top of this pitch was uncomfortable, yet again. This theme would repeat itself constantly over the course of the climb and the descent. In fact, I can't really recall being comfortable, comfortable being a relative term, for more than a second or two on the whole climb. Each time the climbing stopped and the belaying commenced, the two people tied to the anchor would play a game of standing, shifting, slouching, crouching, adjusting, basically trying anything to get comfortable, all the while praying that the fellow on lead would shake a dang leg and find something better to stand on above. Each adjustment in stance would bring welcomed relief that felt at first like Nirvana for our aching bones and joints, but would all-too-quickly morph back into familiar agony, as had the position before, and the one before that, and the one before that . . .



Seth on the A2 crack, day two.



John searching for the path of least resistance a few pitches below the nose.

A few more pitches of mixed ground, including a narrow snow gully and a few spicy rock moves, led us to our next bivy spot and the third major crux of the route - "The Nose" pitch. The feature called the "Nose" is a 70-foot high wall of steeply overhanging rock that one must aid climb via a "one to two-inch crack." The last good spot to sleep on the route is just below the nose so the climber is afforded many an opportunity ponder the moves and wonder what lies beyond.

Nearing the belay, we heard noises from above and soon found ourselves exchanging quick greetings, high fives, and well wishes with our friends Erik and Clint, who were on their way down. They reported good but strenuous conditions on the summit ice field. As I passed Erik, him on rappel and me on front points and ice tools mid-pitch, his eyes met mine with a wild although tired intensity, and as we gave each other a brotherly fist-pound he said "man this mountain is steep" reflecting my sentiments exactly. Since having left camp we hadn't seen anything remotely resembling a flat spot or any ease in the angle of the face.

As quickly as we had happened upon them, our friends were gone and we were once again alone with the several thousand feet of the steep, hard, and unknown looming above. Seeing my friends, if only for a brief minute in passing, had helped me to momentarily forget the gravity of our situation, the commitment of our position, and how far from both the top and the bottom of this mountain we happened to be. Just for a second we could have all been buddies, hanging out somewhere, anywhere but here. Their familiar voices and friendly, sunburned faces could just have easily been staring at me from across a table, or a few barstools down, instead of from the end of a rope with vertical granite as a backdrop in this setting of unforgiving stone and ice. A look back to the few remaining moves to the anchor and our bivy ledge snapped me back to reality more quickly than perhaps I would have liked.

The hour was somewhat late, and daylight was in short supply. We quickly divided the remaining duties for the day. John would lead the next pitch, Seth would work on digging a place to sleep and sort out gear, and I, getting off somewhat easy, would belay and take pictures. After watching a car sized block of granite tumble off the wall a short distance away and deciding the ensuing rumble was not actually the whole mountain falling down, the pitch was led, the rope fixed for an early morning jug session, and we all convened on the tiny ledge to hang the remainder of our gear from the rope serving as our anchor and drying rack. We slept, fitfully, tied to the rope, and dreamt of waking to a midnight bivi-bag express ride 6000' feet to the first floor.

The morning was a blur as we quickly woke, melted water, and out of haste chose to forego the luxury of a hot breakfast, opting to instead get into the GU and snack bar routine that would fuel the next 17 odd hours of movement. Ascending the fixed line on the nose was a rough, eye wide-opening way to start the day. It was intensified just slightly by the sharp edge that was doing it's best to make my free-hanging 70m rope into two shorter sections. A disturbing discovery at the top of the pitch granted me a second opportunity to ascend the now badly frayed line after rappelling back to our ledge to retrieve the rock rack that was overlooked in our hastily assembly of gear for the day. For the record, Seth and John sorted the gear and divided carrying duties the night before and in the process failed to inform me that I had been elected to carry the rock gear. To this day I maintain my ignorance, um arrogance, er uh, I mean innocence rather.



Seth ascending the fixed line on the nose in the morning of day three.



Coley and John approach the last obstacle in the summit ridge.

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Above the Nose, John led a long traversing pitch that took us to the junction with the West Face Couloir and to an exposed view of our camp far below. Seth and I each led pitches that traversed up and right on ledges, through gullies, and soon enough we were at the base of the notorious, infamous, and much ballyhooed summit ice field. Now all that lay between us and the hopefully easy walk along the summit ridge was 900 feet of calf-roasting blue ice. Four and a half face-frying, foot-agonizing, toe-bashing, resolve-melting pitches later, we were on easier ground with the summit in view.

Nothing is ever easy or over when you want it to be in the Alaska Range. The feeling of elation that comes with discovering, after much uncertainty and uneasiness, that you have passed the last of the difficulties barring the path between you and your goal does not exist in Alaska, I am quite sure. There is always another difficulty, another problem to solve, another steep section ahead, another rappel to make, and so on. Nothing is ever trivial here. It seems as though every time you expect or hope to be able to switch your brain and body into autopilot mode and relax for a while, another obstacle somehow materializes in your path and forces you, once again, to summon courage, sustain effort, and dig deep for the desire and focus to push on and keep the party rolling.



Seth takes in the summit

This particular ridge crest was no exception. The walk to the summit was fairly casual, minus a thirty-five foot, vertical to overhanging ice bulge, flanked by mind-bending exposure, and capped by ice the consistency of a blended mountain margarita. The rotten and insecure ice made the final moves over this section a bit harder than we each would have liked at that point in the day, but soon enough our heart rates returned to normal and the fatigued looks that adorned our faces turned to smiles. We were on top.

The summit was small, spectacular, rewarding, and quite simply beyond explanation or description. The photo I have of Seth standing on this beautiful summit, hands clasped in a silent prayer, head slightly bowed in reverence with his eyes fixed on mountains in the distance, represented our collective feelings and hope for a safe descent almost perfectly. For just a minute, or was it an hour, we paused our almost continual movement of the last few days, and each privately considered

our position at center stage in this drama played out for our audience of Denali, Hunter, and the countless other peaks looking on silently, unmoved, and uncaring, from all angles.

Our prayers offered from the summit were answered, our wishes for a safe decent were granted, and a few days after our climb on Huntington, Seth and I found ourselves staring back at the peak from the top of a new route on Peak 11,520, a sub-peak of Mount Hunter. Huntington's elegance, beauty, and domination over the landscape haunted that day and will forever live in my mind.

There is a place just outside of Talkeetna where the road crests a small hill, just before it bends sharply and continues south. A pause here affords a traveler one of the most spectacular panoramas of the Alaska Range found anywhere. The view from this hill makes the 75 miles of space between you and the mountains seem almost nonexistent. At first glance, it's easy to think that you could stretch an arm out and ever so gently touch the icy summits glittering brightly on the horizon. Whether going or coming, I have never been able to resist a stop at this particular spot, and by now I must have at least a dozen almost identical photos taken from here.

I don't know what it is that continues to draw me to this spot and compels me to stop time after time. Perhaps it's the chance, in one last gaze, to remember fondly my adventures in the valleys and on the peaks that stretch out picture-perfect before me. Or, more likely, it's to dream of the adventures yet to come. One thing I am certain of, as this trip comes to an end and as I must turn my duffel bag-laden-wagons toward home, I will spare a minute for another stop, another thought, and probably another photo. I will turn my back slowly on the mountains, parting ways but not parting company, and look forward to the next time I round that bend, crest that hill, and start a new adventure in this familiar but constantly new place.

A man's best moments seem to go by before he notices them; and he spends a large part of his life reaching back for them, like a runner for a baton that will never come. In dissatisfaction, he grows nostalgic; and nostalgia inevitably blurs the memory of the immediate thrill, which, simply because it had to be instantaneous, could not have lasted. Now that our whole expedition has passed, now that I sit in a warm room with a pencil and blank paper before me, instead of rock and snow, I feel our vanished moments forever lost.

-David Roberts, *Mountain of my Fear*

Trip Summary and Ascents

1. Mount Huntington's Harvard Route (Grade 6, M5, A2, 70 degrees, 4000')
-April 27-29, 2005 (Coley Gentzel, Seth Hobby, John Fitzgerald)
2. Peak 11,520, New Route (Grade 4+, Alpine Ice 3+, 2850')
-May 8, 2005 (Coley Gentzel, Seth Hobby)



Sunset on Mount Foraker, Mount Hunter, Denali, and the Talkeetna River.

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