

# summit

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# The Damsels and Denali

By Arlene Blum

On June 18, 1970, we all got together at the Institute of Arctic Biology in Fairbanks. The next couple of days we participated in interesting physiological and psychological tests to determine the effects of living at high altitudes. "Before" pictures were taken of our hands, feet and ears in case of frostbite. Also, photos were taken of the retina of our eyes. Retinal hemorrhages frequently accompany exposure to high altitude, particularly in smokers. The changes in our breathing patterns were monitored as we breathed various mixtures of oxygen and carbon dioxide. Exposure to high altitude increases sensitivity to  $\text{CO}_2$ . Since  $\text{CO}_2$  buildup is the primary mechanism for initiating breathing, it was thought that we would not be able to hold our breath as long after an exposure to high altitude.

A free trip to 19,000 feet in an altitude chamber was a highlight of the tests. Euphoria! Our per-

formance in a series of tests of physical and mental dexterity did not deteriorate markedly. The amount of laughter accompanying the test did seem to increase with elevation.

On June 21, Don Sheldon flew us and an incredible amount of equipment to our basecamp on the Kahiltna Glacier just outside the McKinley park boundary. Approaching basecamp, we saw a giant peace symbol someone had stamped in the snow. A good omen!

In six days we moved our 900 pounds of food and equipment to Camp II below Kahiltna Pass — three day-long carries of about 50 pounds each between camps. As we moved slowly upward, one minute everything would be completely whited out by the swirling snow: the next minute, the sun would be beating down fiercely on us. I would usually be soaked, half from perspiration and half from melting snow. There were so few crevasses





*Prior to take-off for a landing on the Kahiltna Glacier. From left to right: Faye Kerr, Dana Isherwood, Grace Hoeman, Margaret Young, Don Sheldon and Arlene Blum in Sheldon's backyard.*

that sometimes my ropemate and I would walk next to each other, swapping a bit of safety for sociability.

One sunny afternoon we took pictures of the products we had been given. Our favorite showed us marching up the glacier with snowshoes and ice axes, wearing *only* our Duofold underwear. It was so warm on the glacier that afterward we took off our Duofold for some pleasant sunbathing.

From Camp II at 9,800 feet to Camp III at 14,300 feet was a long day. Progress was slow as we had to break trail through heavy new snow. It began snowing heavily as we worked our way through the crevassed area above Windy Corner. Visibility was non-existent and we were confused by the forest of wands from earlier expeditions

that seemed almost randomly distributed over the crevassed area.

Camp at last. We enjoyed steaming hot tea, courtesy of a Japanese ski team already there. When the storm stopped it was glorious outside — cold, clear and clean after the recent snowfall. The nearby peaks shone in the setting sun.

On July 2, we carried loads up the West Buttress to our high camp — a snow cave at 17,300 feet. In Bradford Washburn's description of the first ascent of this route in 1951, he described the slope leading to the West Buttress as a "60° hard ice slope." Times and mountains have changed. We found a 45° soft snow slope festooned with fixed lines. You could choose a red, blue or yellow fixed line to suit your mood!





*Making a shelter for camp at 9,800 feet.*

The ridge itself was heavenly. A world of golden light floating above the clouds. Awesome views of Mt. Foraker, Hunter and Huntington dominated the scene.

A day of storm was spent chatting with the neighbors, then another carry day, a rest day, and the time had come for our summit attempt. Everyone was feeling fit except Grace who felt the effects of altitude quite strongly. We left at 4:00 a.m. traversing the steep slopes below Denali Pass. A bitter wind froze the vapour in my breath to my parka hood. All our food was frozen and unpalatable. The summit area was covered by a large lenticular cloud indicating high winds and we considered turning back, but decided to continue

on the chance that the wind would decrease. It did.

Margaret Clark was still carrying her ice hammer with the hope that there would be some challenging climbing somewhere on this so-far most untechnical route.

Slowly upward past outcrops of pink granite and black basalt. The rock crystals stood out vividly in the clean air. Everything was sharp and more clearly defined than lower down. The snow crystals sparkling white, the sky a deep dark blue, the neighboring peaks now benignly magnificent.

Grace was feeling poorly but was very determined to reach the summit. At last we were there, at the top of the Alaska range, posing for hurried summit photos with the "Denali Damsel" flag that



*Descending the ridge.*



*Above: On the slope of  
Buttress you had your  
red, or yellow fixed line*



*The  
Denali Damsels  
model their  
Duofold underwear  
on the glacier  
one sunny after-  
noon.*





below the West  
choice of a blue,  
me.



*Arlene Blum climbing up the fixed line at 16,000 feet.*



*Rocks  
near the  
summit.*



*Grace Hoeman carrying loads on the Kahiltna Glacier.  
Margaret Young and Arlene Blum at their cooking chores.*







Margaret Clark, a geology student from Christchurch, New Zealand, at 15,000 feet.





*Descending ridge at 17,000 feet.*

Dana had sewn for us.

At the ridge of the Archdeacons Tower, Grace collapsed, exhausted. We improvised a stretcher from a climbing rope and a Kelty packframe to carry Grace down the mountain. Grace felt better with a decrease in altitude and was able to walk below 18,000 feet. She was as strong as ever below 14,000 feet. The confusion attendant upon bringing Grace down in the stretcher resulted in Faye spending a night outside without a sleeping bag at 18,000 feet when it was  $-20^{\circ}\text{F}$ ! Faye, who did not seem to feel the cold at all, said she thought it was a beautiful evening — which it certainly was.

On our way down we met a guided party of 17, much to the disgust of Margaret Clark, who had come from New Zealand expecting the “splendid

isolation of an Arctic wilderness.” Margaret could not resist shouting out, “Baa! Baa!” as the party moved slowly by in ropes of five. Jeb Schenck’s timely article (SUMMIT Dec., 1970) discusses in detail the problems of overcrowding on the West Buttress.

After a four-day storm at 10,000 feet, during which our main concern was keeping our tents from being buried or blown away, with discussing climbing in warm, sunny places while eating popcorn and cheesecake, we were flown back to Talkeetna.

The train to Fairbanks was full of tourists taking photos of what they thought was Mt. McKinley. Denali was actually well-hidden by clouds, but I knew what it looked like, so I just sat there and smiled.