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Reader's Digest



**The Alaska
Range promised
adventure and
menace. Colby
Coombs found both.**

Ordeal on Mount Foraker

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Book Section

ORDEAL ON MOUNT FORAKER

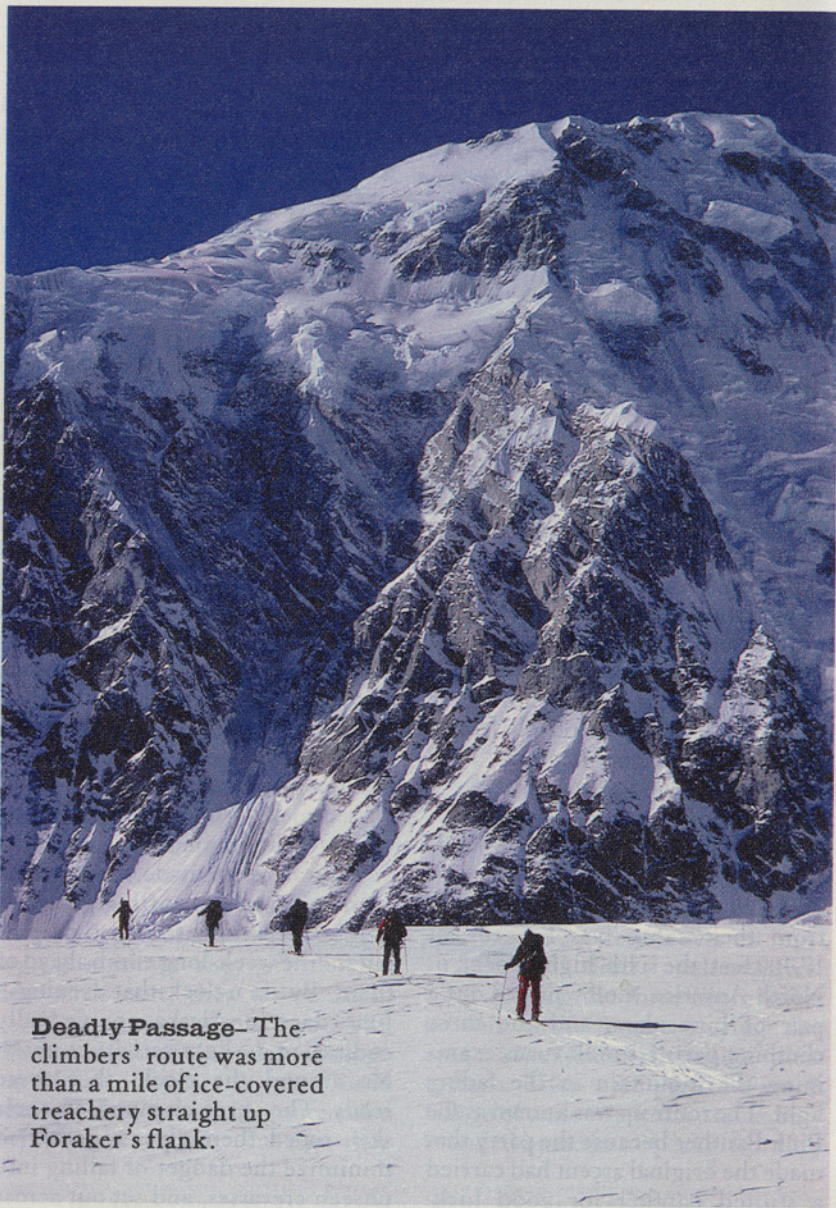
By Peter Potterfield

Adapted from "IN THE ZONE"

IN A MICROSECOND, the ice-covered rock wall disappeared as tons of rushing snow ripped Colby from the mountain slope. Avalanche! Swept away in the tumult, he was hurtling helplessly into the abyss.



To the Summit-
For Colby Coombs,
the unforgiving
Alaska Range held
special allure.



Deadly Passage—The climbers' route was more than a mile of ice-covered treachery straight up Foraker's flank.

© COLBY COOMES

the five-mile-wide stretch of glacier. Colby was pulling a child's red plastic sled loaded with a week's worth of food and stove fuel.

As the men were leaving, Annie Duquette happened to be standing in front of her shelter. A combination air-traffic controller and base-camp manager, she spent the entire climbing season—from April to July—on the glacier. She had seen her share of old hands and first-timers come and go. In the softening light of dusk, Duquette watched the group move quickly across the glacier.

She couldn't help but recall the other times she had observed people setting out toward Foraker. Sometimes, if the group was not particularly well-prepared, she got a bad feeling. Foraker is a dangerous mountain.

These guys struck her as strong and confident and very capable. Yet for some reason she felt compelled to watch them for a long, long time.

In the Clouds

THE SMALL PARTY feached the base of Foraker at eleven o'clock that first night. Colby gazed at their route, which rose upward another 6000 feet. "Awesome," he said to his two companions.

As the trio began to divide gear and supplies among themselves, clouds gathered around Foraker's peak. Soon snow was falling in discouraging abundance. The group decided to wait it out.

The snow finally let up the next day, June 15. Around noon they eagerly got under way with Tom in the lead. The men were tied together with two ropes. Using ice axes and the front points of their crampons—racks of metal spikes attached to their boots—they moved quickly up the lower reaches of the mountain.

"We're cruising!" Ritt exulted.

"Let's keep it up," came Tom's voice from above.

After more than 12 hours of continuous climbing, they reached the foot of a narrow ridge and decided to stop. With amazed delight they realized they had covered almost a third of the route in one day.

On the second day, June 16, the pace was equally quick. Excited and energized by their progress, the trio continued climbing right into the dusky light of the Alaskan evening.

Excited by their progress, the trio continued climbing in the dusky light of the long Alaskan evening.

Alaskan summer night. By early morning on the 17th, they were some 11,000 feet high. They would have liked to press on, but clouds began to cling to the mountain, obscuring the route ahead. The next thousand feet, they knew, would be the hardest, most treacherous part of the climb.

Reluctantly they prepared another bivouac: a snow cave they dug into the slope. Each of the three took



Trouble Brewing- Passing the 11,000-foot mark on June 17, Colby took this photo as menacing snow clouds formed. Disaster was less than 48 hours away.

turns digging out a space big enough for all of them. It took almost an hour, but when finished, it offered a snug haven.

Huddled inside, the men waited out the storm. As always, their meal that night was instant soup sprin-

kled with a little Parmesan cheese. And although they were 11,000 feet up, squeezed into a tiny cave, they were content. It is what they lived for: to be up in the clouds with fellow adventurers.

"This is great," Tom said, sipping

a mug of Earl Grey tea. "I just wish we'd see a little blue sky and mid-night sun."

Ritt looked around at the cramped, frigid quarters and its dirty, unshaven occupants and shook his head. Before opting for this

excursion, he'd been planning a South American vacation. "What a place for a holiday," he said in mock complaint. "And to think I could be sailing instead of being stuck in this icebox with you two."

Colby smiled. A few weeks be-

fore, he had run across Tom at the National Outdoor Leadership School headquarters in Lander, Wyo., where they were both instructors. Colby had done some climbing with Tom and knew him to be

somewhat quiet and introverted and Tom was more outgoing, both were easygoing men without the big egos common to many climbers.

Colby had always enjoyed Ritt's company. Their climb up Foraker was the most recent in a series of adventures the two had been sharing since they were students at Colorado College in 1986. Because of their love of the rugged outdoors, the two men had found they were kindred spirits, and soon became fast friends.

Now Colby added snow to the pot to make hot water. Every so often one of the threesome would stick his head



Snow-Cave Cuisine—Tom (right) cooks soup for dinner as Ritt prepares to add water to the pot.

an exceptionally skilled, laid-back companion. Tom's mountaineering résumé was impressive. He had pioneered several routes in the Alaska Range and had climbed mountains in Pakistan, India, Nepal and South America. When Colby asked Tom to join him and Ritt on their Alaskan adventure, Tom jumped at the invitation.

Colby was pleased to see how well Ritt and Tom got along. In the few days they had been together, they enjoyed each other's company and had clearly come to respect each other's abilities. Although Ritt was

out to check conditions, only to retreat under a blustering snowfall.

Finally, around noon the following day, June 18, the wind died down, and traces of blue sky appeared through the ragged, windblown clouds. This was their chance.

The men got ready carefully. Facing them was a thousand feet of a high and treacherous rock buttress. In places it was coated with thin, unstable layers of ice. Elsewhere the mountain jutted outward, creating precarious overhangs.

Tom and Colby swapped leads as
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they went. Ritt was happy to let the others set the pace—Tom, the old hand, Colby, the gung-ho natural-born climber. They moved slowly but steadily. The three men had to use their full mountaineering repertoire, at times going barehanded for more dexterity.

About 300 feet short of the top of the buttress, the weather turned mean. A strong wind kicked up, rolling in clouds and fog. They could see only a few feet above them. With no place to stop, the group had to feel its way along the rock face. By midnight they reached the top of the buttress. The men had been going nonstop for about 12 hours.

Relieved to have this part of the climb behind them, the three faced a new problem. They found themselves at the bottom of a 1200-foot ice slope that rose up at a 50-degree angle. Visibility was almost zero, and the wind was gusting at about 40 miles an hour. In that kind of weather, death from exposure was a real risk. They had to get sheltered quickly.



Book Section

ORDEAL ON MOUNT FORAKER

(Continued from page 136)

The group discussed their options. One was to stay where they were and dig in. But hacking a ledge out of the steep ice was not much of an option. It would take hours, and the ice slope was far too steep. That left another possibility: to climb to a more protected site.

They turned their hooded jackets against the building wind.

“What do you think?” Colby shouted to his companions. Tom glanced into the whiteout above them. “I’d forget trying to make camp here.”

“Agree,” Ritt added.

Colby nodded toward the ice slope and said, “I figure we’ll be at the top in an hour or so. It should be less windy on the other side.”

Though steep, the slope before them was far less demanding than the terrain they had just climbed. And once they were over the top, they could set up a bivouac. With plenty of food and fuel, they could wait out the worst of the storm.

As the blizzard raged around them, the three began carefully