



AAC Publications

Mt. Eaton, east ridge and epic

Canada, St. Elias Range

On May 7, pilot Paul Swanstrom flew Derek Buckle and me from Haines to ca 3,700' on the lower Seward Glacier close to the Yukon border. The week prior, storms had broken precipitation records for much of neighboring southeast Alaska. Our objective was the complete east ridge of Mt. Augusta (14,070'). I had tried accessing this ridge in 1993 via a spur from the north, reaching ca 10,500' on the spur (AAJ 1994). Our plan was to make a long traverse over the east ridge of unclimbed Mt. Eaton continuing along the unclimbed ridge to Mt. Augusta.

Several sources misrepresent the location of Mt. Eaton and incorrectly state that it was previously climbed. Canadian and USGS maps correctly show the summit directly overlooking the lower Seward Glacier, the main corridor between the icefields and the coast. The only known previous attempt was by our team in 1993. After starting the climb, we realized we could not complete the traverse to Mt. Augusta in a short weather window, so we stashed surplus supplies and shifted our aims to the summit of Mt. Eaton only.

On May 10, from our high camp on an exposed foresummit at ca 8,700', we took a little over five hours to cover the 3km to the main summit of Eaton, as we climbed over false summits, huge mushroom-domes, and undulating corniced ridge. On top, the GPS read 10,946' (3,336m), which corresponds well with the 3,320m contour on the Canadian map. Ahead, the 5km or so to Mt. Augusta looked similarly straightforward, although undoubtedly foreshortened. Conditions were clear but windy. As we started our descent, clouds descended with us. By the time we reached our foresummit highcamp, Derek was too tired to go further. I consoled myself with the forecasted day of additional good weather. However, during the night, wind-blown snow half-buried our tent. We packed and began to descend, but found ourselves groping in almost total whiteout—untenable in the crevassed and corniced terrain. We climbed back up to the foresummit and re-pitched the tent.

We had one day of spare food, but in the ensuing nightmare we became trapped for the next eight days. During that time, 20' or more of snow fell at our camp. We had to keep the tent mostly sealed from weather, so could not safely use the stove and relied on melting water in our sleeping bags. We tried a snow cave, but found the speed of burial even more alarming. We made a second attempt to descend on May 15, which served only to demonstrate the thigh-deep snow and our weakened ability to cope. We concluded our only prudent option was to raise an emergency with Kluane National Park. An impressive effort was launched on our behalf, but to little avail.

Late on May 16 I listened intently as Craig McKinnon in the park office set out the grim forecast. We mentally prepared ourselves for a hungrier and more wearing round of blizzards and burials—a definitive clearance was potentially another five days away. After our eighth stormy night, on May 19, the morning dawned clear and calm. At around 6:45 a.m., rescuers Dion Parker and Scott Stewart landed a helicopter next to us, and some edgy navigation around rapidly building clouds brought us to Haines Junction and the greeting, "Are you the back-from-the-dead climbers?". It was several more days before the weather settled and our base camp could be retrieved.

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Images



Mt. Augusta (A) and Mt. Eaton (B) from the lower Seward Glacier. On Mt. Augusta, the east ridge faces the camera and sweeps to the right behind Mt. Eaton. On Mt. Eaton, the south/southwest ridge is visible on the left; the east ridge on the right lies out of frame.



Looking down the east ridge of Mt. Augusta toward Mt. Eaton, as seen from the north ridge of Mt. Augusta. (A) Mt. Foresta. (B) Mt. Seattle. (C) Mt. Cook. (S) the ca 8,700' foresummit leading to the summit of (D) Mt. Eaton [the summit above the clouds between Mt. Augusta and Mt. Cook]. (E) Mt. Owen. (F) Point 3,440m [unnamed subsidiary summit on Augusta's east ridge]. (G) North spur of Mt. Augusta [Knott's ca 10,500 highpoint on this ridge lies just out of view, left].



The point where the team joined the east ridge of Mt Eaton. Behind is the main icefield of the Seward glacier. On the left are Mts Queen Mary and King George. On the right is Mt Vancouver.



The summit of Mt Augusta from Mt Eaton. The east ridge of Mt Augusta faces the camera, while its north ridge forms the upper right skyline.



The north side of Mt Eaton from the c.10,500ft summit on the north spur that lies between Mt Eaton and Mt Augusta.

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