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Purported 1948 Ascent of Denali's West Buttress

Alaska, Alaska Range, Denali

In the summer of 2015, I learned that a man claimed to have completed the West Buttress Route on Denali three years before the well-known 1951 first ascent by Bradford Washburn and team. Bob Jones, a maverick cement truck driver—apparently 95 years old and a World War II infantry hero—said that he had secretly parachuted from a military plane onto the Southeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier and climbed the route in 1948.

Jones seemed to embody the inverse of Washburn, who paved the way for thousands of climbers by generously sharing hundreds of his breathtaking aerial photographs, a laser-precise map of Denali, and specific information on what has become the most popular path to the top. Skeptical that Washburn would have knowingly ignored such an important predecessor in the mountain's history, I repeatedly interviewed Jones over the telephone, and, like others, was taken in by his story. Mention of his climb, along with his many escapades in WWII, had already appeared online and in newspapers. There were niggling holes in his tale, but it seemed ungracious to doubt him until sitting face to face.

When I visited Jones at his Bellevue, Washington, home, I discovered that he was a neophyte climber and that he claimed to summit Denali in five days, with two other men, without using crampons, ropes, or sleeping pads. He said one of the men had died during the descent, from altitude illness, and was buried in a crevasse. They did not carry a camera. When I expressed my doubts, he clung to his story. After further research, I discovered that Jones was five years younger than his stated age and had missed most of World War II, despite his claims to medals and behind-the-lines combat bravado. For the full story of what I believe to be Bob Jones's false claim on Denali, see [Adventure Journal](#) issue number 3. Jones died from cancer in January 2016.

– Jonathan Waterman

Images

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