



## AAC Publications

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### **Denali, Kahiltna Peaks to Cassin Ridge**

Alaska, Alaska Range, Denali National Park

**The Cassin Ridge, the famed south buttress of Denali (Mt. McKinley), rises from Kahiltna Notch to the 20,310' summit.** But the geographic feature that forms the complete south ridge of Denali extends from Kahiltna Notch over four miles to the southwest and then west. In between, the ridge crosses two notable summits—East and West Kahiltna peaks—before dropping into the Kahiltna Glacier like a multipronged tentacle.

Denali's full south ridge was tried for the first time by a pair of Japanese climbers, Yuto Inoue and Tatsuro Yamada, two of the Giri-Giri Boys, in 2008. They disappeared near the top of the Cassin. The line was tried again in 2011 by Japanese alpinists Yasuhiro Hanatani and Kei Taniguchi, who had awful conditions and bailed. To this day, the full line connecting the Kahiltna Peaks into the Cassin and up to Denali's summit is believed to be unclimbed. Given the history, it has acquired reverence for Japanese alpinists. With that in mind, Toranosuke Nagayama, Genya Takenaka, and I decided to meet the challenge.

Easier said than done—the start of our expedition was a nightmare. After Genya and I arrived in Anchorage, we went to the apartment we had arranged, dropped our climbing gear near the entrance, and took off for a few hours. When we came back, nearly all the gear was gone—stolen! All that was left were our skis and a ski bag with very little equipment. We were in a daze; our expedition seemed to be over before it had even started.

The next day, I reported the theft to the police. At REI in Anchorage, I posted a flyer on the bulletin board, seeking any information about our stolen kit. I woke to a flood of emails—all messages of sympathy and encouragement. One was from Alaska hardman Clint Helander, who drove right over to lend us his gear. Dana Drummond, owner of the Hoarding Marmot shop, became a middleman between us and other Alaskan climbers who made similar offers. Dana even let us stay at his place. The kindness and generosity from the Alaska climbing community was overwhelming.

Re-equipped, the three of us flew onto the Kahiltna Glacier, ready for action. We climbed Denali's West Buttress to acclimatize. Then, on May 25, we left Camp 1 on the Kahiltna Glacier with everything we needed for ten days.

We started up the West Ridge (Alaska Grade 4, 5.8 75° ice) of West Kahiltna Peak (12,835'), which had been climbed by Italians Diego Giovannini and Fabio Meraldi in 2011 (and possibly by Inoue and Yamada in 2008). It took us about 13 hours to get to the top of West Kahiltna. The next day, we dipped into a col before summiting East Kahiltna Peak (13,440').

From the top, we could see that both sides of the ridge toward Kahiltna Notch were extremely steep, and the cornices were enormous. Aside from a lone rocky section after West Kahiltna Peak, all of the climbing on the traverse was on ice and snow.

On the fourth night, we finally arrived at Kahiltna Notch (11,960'). We had already summited two peaks and covered over 4.2 miles, yet more than 8,000' of climbing rose above us. After climbing straight up the ridge from Kahiltna Notch, then traversing left for four pitches, we reached the entrance to the Japanese Couloir, the standard start of the Cassin Ridge route. By now, we were

exhausted. Nevertheless, we started up the Cassin, trying to move carefully, always conscious of the fate of Inoue and Yamada.

On the ninth day after we left the Kahiltna Glacier, the weather took a turn for the worse, and we rested at the 17,700' camp. A bad storm was forecast for the next afternoon. We started to climb before dawn, hoping to reach the summit and get down to high camp on the West Buttress by noon. As we gained altitude, the air became frighteningly cold. Genya was quickly becoming hypothermic. We set up the tent to get Genya warm, rested for about five hours, and then resumed the climb.

Soon we were at Kahiltna Horn, at the top of the Cassin Ridge, only 200 vertical feet below the summit. But we were in the middle of a snowstorm and Genya was in bad shape. We debated whether to set up the tent again and wait out the storm. But Genya chimed in to say he could go no further. I glanced once more toward the top, and we all began descending the West Buttress.

As painful as it was to come so far and not quite achieve our goal, all of us making it back down safely was infinitely more important. I'm proud of our team for making the tough decision.

**—Subaru Takeda, Japan**

**Images**

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