

Snow Blind

Brian Irwin



Mt Foraker as seen from 14,000 feet on Denali. Photo: Brian Irwin

It would have been irresponsible to go on. Eric Seifer and I had climbed fewer than a dozen pitches of Denali's Thunder Ridge and we were moving slowly. Our pace was limited by heavy packs laden with bivouac gear for a night on the 3,000 face and the seemingly-endless cloak of sixty-degree ice and snow stretched to the milky horizon. Lenticular clouds were stacking on the adjacent peaks and the pressure was dropping. We rappelled back to our skis and skinned back to the safety of the 14,000-foot camp where warm bags and warmer Ramen awaited. On nearby Mt. Foraker, our friends Sue Nott and Karen McNeill were attempting the first all-female ascent of The Infinite Spur. Its summit was obscured with a creamy glow, its glaciers humming with a palate of pastels as the sun succumbed to gravity. In the morning we would follow suit.

We awoke to a foot of fresh Alaska powder on our shoulders. The tent bowed under the weight. We shoveled out and packed away a crispy tent fly. The stove brewed up a final round of hot water for the 7,000-foot descent to the West Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier landing strip, a compressed stripe of snow at the toe of Mount Hunter where bush planes touchdown to drop off climbers, skiers and tourists for forays or photo opportunities in the Alaska Range.

Seifer and I were in the Range for three weeks attempting Thunder Ridge, a direct line up the huge West Buttress of Denali, the peak's namesake trade route and our planned route of descent. It took us two weeks to climb and acclimate to the 14,000-foot basin that holds the upper mountain's slough and dozens of antsy climbers awaiting a favorable climbing forecast. More than summiting, our objective was to come down alive. The storm was building as we lashed down our sleds and clipped in for the convoluted slide to base camp.



As we glided out of the basin the pitch steepened. The ceiling had fallen on us, annihilating any trace of tracks that could help guide us through the miles of winding glacier, strewn with hundred-foot deep slots and pourovers that end in hanging cliffbands, striped with runnels of thin ice and seeping grey water. Goggles made optics worse. Ski tips disappeared into the slabby snow, erupting to the surface with each turn, yet still remaining elusive within the thick air to our cinched pupils and tired retinas. It was like skiing inside of a whiffle-ball. White up and down, side to side, no landmarks and slots the size of school busses lurked under our skis, waiting to swallow us if we made one errant turn.

We rounded Windy Corner, a precarious double-fall line bend in the upper Kahiltna that sits at the finish line of a shooting gallery where rockfall sheds from the upper mountain. Sleds swung to our sides, pulling taut either our tow lines, our belay rope, or both. The terrain eased onto the flats and then fell away to the notorious Motorcycle Hill, a fifty-degree slope that ended at the 11,000-foot camp and a final cache we had there.

Visibility at the 11,000-foot camp was negligible. Sugar blew sideways as our planks plowed through the lower angled terrain below camp. Deep turns in heavy snow stressed our tired bodies; the occasional knock on our tails from our sleds interrupted fluidity and begged for a straight descent as we navigated the maze of deep crevasses on the lower glacier.

We eased our way down miles of winding ice until we coasted onto the flats seven thousand feet below where we had started. For the first time that day, the precip melded from a shelling into a light flurry. The clouds hung low in the valley, casting their fury on the upper mountain while spilling orange light onto the toes of Foraker and the great peaks of the range. I'd just skied through the floor of my first whiteout.

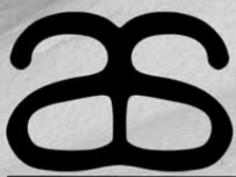
At base camp, the sun shone brightly. A ceiling of clouds obscured the upper half of the larger peaks. We rested and excavated a sixer of tall boys and half a leftover pizza from a deep cache in the glacier. Skins and sleds steamed as they warmed in the alpine sun. As we rested, waiting for our bushplane to arrive, the thunderous crash of distant avalanches echoed in the valley from which we had just descended. Nott and McNeill were on Foraker, in the soup and trying to make history. As we watched, I felt a certain guilt. We were relaxing on the lower glacier while our friends challenged the storm. The surrounding summits remained elusive, their caps torn apart by hurricane-force winds while here in the valley, we drank and ate without shirts.

We loaded our kit into the blood-red twin Otter, its turbo props screaming at the storm that enveloped the range. Mount Foraker's tip poked through the clouds for an instant, revealing The Infinite Spur. From the air it was clear that this route could not be descended from high. As committing as the Polar Star Couloir to a big-mountain skier, once on spur there was no easy way out.

When a person's tracks are left in the snow, the substrate work-hardens under the pressure of their feet. If winds climb to a critical velocity, all soft snow is swept away, leaving an elevated series of ski tracks or boot prints in the snow, like small pillars or stripes in the white. NSP planes, searching for sign or arrest of Nott and McNeill's passage, scoured Foraker when the storm cleared. In the wake of nature's fury, a lone set of tracks was spotted high on the mountain, above the technical portion of the route, but Nott and McNeill were never found. Nine months after my return I received a call from Sue Nott's mother. She came to tears quickly, recollecting her daughter's accomplishments in the Greater Ranges and wishing she could have said goodbye to her daughter. While we talked there was a knock on her door. She lay down the phone and answered the door. It was UPS. They placed a long cardboard box on her doorstep, took her signature, and left her to her mourning.

She lifted the phone, pressed it to her ear and peeled it open. She narrated her findings. Inside the box rested Nott's skis, skins still attached. The National Park Service had closed the investigation regarding her daughter's accident. Nott's skis were discovered at the base of The Infinite Spur by an NSP helicopter. The bodies of her strong offspring and her partner have never been found.

One slip, one wrong turn, one miscalculation of my sled or myself and I could have been at the bottom of an icy tomb. I'm lucky. Nott and McNeill were not. But I believe, as do many others, that these two women were the first to ascend one of the hardest climbs in Alaska. *The Infinite Spur.*



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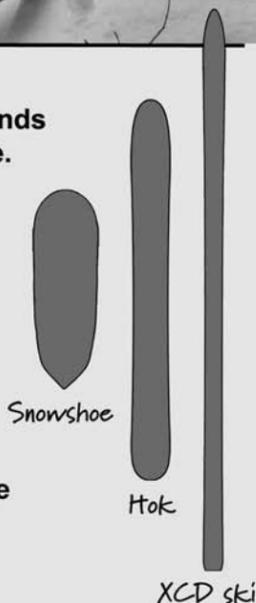
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