

7-14 Nov 76

One of the joys of living in Alaska are the scenic views visible in almost every direction you look. Pollution is virtually nonexistent in Alaska and from Anchorage, on any of the many perfectly clear days, you can and observe Mt. McKinley to the north, Cook Inlet to the east and several heavily glaciated mountains on the west side of Cook Inlet.

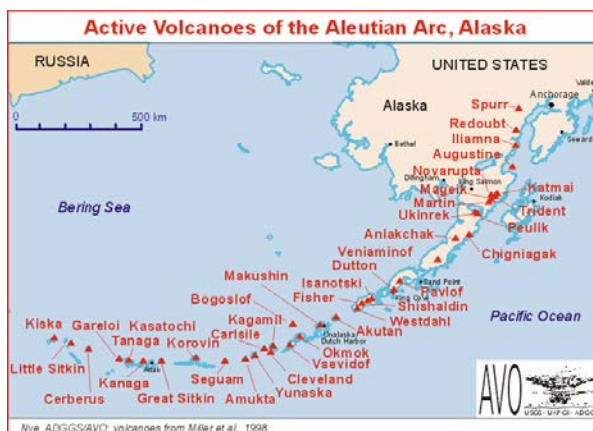
Occasionally atmospheric conditions create an illusion that makes the mountains look much closer than they actually are. These telescopic mirages are caused by temperature inversions creating sharp, stable, magnified views of distant mountains. On days when this weather phenomenon occurs, the mountains seemed to be beckoning me personally, telling me that I had to climb them.

From Anchorage we had spectacular views of Mt. Spurr, Mt. Redoubt, and Mt. Iliamna. All of these are active volcanoes that erupt occasionally.

Mount Spurr is a snow covered volcano in the north-eastern end of the Aleutian Arc of Alaska. It is heavily glaciated and is located 65 miles west of Anchorage, Alaska. Mount Spurr, the highest volcano of the Aleutian arc with an elevation of 11,070 feet. Mt. Spurr is an active volcano with eruptions in 1953, 1992, and 2005.



Mt. Spurr viewed from just south of Anchorage



Constantly seeing these magnificent peaks is inspiring to those who want to climb them. I had come to Alaska with a dream to climb North America's highest peak, Mt. McKinley. I accomplished this dream earlier this year when on 25 June 1976 I reached the summit of McKinley as a member of a civilian team climbing the mountain. I still wanted to make an all USAF ascent of McKinley with teammates from the Alaska pararescue team. But I realized that this would be a hard sell to the conservative leadership of the USAF and Air Rescue Service. They would want to know why they should support what they would consider to be a risky training event and what experience the Alaska PJs had that qualified them to make an expeditionary mountain climb.

I decided to get my PJ teammates needed experience on the smaller peaks in Alaska. I selected Mt. Spurr because it was relatively close to Anchorage, was heavily glaciated, provided a moderately difficult climbing route, and it had a very large plateau at 3000 feet on the south south-east flank of the mountain where my squadrons helicopter pilots could get remote landing

zone experience. I spotted this plateau during a training flight and my pilot told me that it would be a good place for the 71<sup>st</sup> ARRS pilots to train. From this plateau there is a series of connecting ridges that led to the glaciers on the upper slopes of the mountain. That was a potential climbing route to the summit of Mt. Spurr that offered many of the climbing challenges I would later face on actual missions in Alaska.

Even at the unit commander level, I expected a difficult time getting approval for a mountain climbing trip with a goal to summit Mt. Spurr. So the approach I used was to request training on Mt Spurr for the purposes of:

- Arctic survival training
- Arctic medical training
- Testing unit survival gear in actual conditions
- Practicing mountaineering skills needed for mountain rescue missions
- Provide unit helicopter pilots practice landing on mountains
- Provide unit helicopter pilots practice landing on snow

All of these objectives were valid training events for Alaska air rescue men tasked to conduct rescues in the arctic winters of Alaska. I had spoken to my flight surgeon Doctor Brant about a trip to Mt. Spurr and he expressed an interest in going along with us. Having him along was a good idea because my commander would be more likely to approve this request if his units' flight surgeon thought it was an environment his PJs should train in.



View from Anchorage Hillside district in November 1976. The city of Anchorage is in the foreground. Cook Inlet and several of it's natural gas platforms is in the center of the photo. In the background is the Tordrillo Mountain Range with Mt Spurr being the highest peak seen in the center of the photo.

I was very fortunate that my NCOIC at the time was Udo Fischer. He was an avid supporter of hard training and mountaineering. He proposed the idea to our squadrons Director of Operations, LtCol Hoover without even mentioning climbing to the summit. Colonel Hoover agreed that Mt Spurr was a good training location for both PJs and pilots and he recommended approval to our squadron commander, LtCol Frank Cardile. Colonel Cardile was a Vietnam War

veteran, who flew with the 37<sup>th</sup> ARRS, DaNang Air Base from October 1966 to May 1967. He flew 97 combat rescue missions including several over North Vietnam. There he learned to trust his PJs and he respected their judgment. Much to my surprise he unhesitatingly approved my seven day training request with a departure scheduled for the 7<sup>th</sup> of November.



Udo Fischer my NCOIC at Elmendorf and who became a lifelong friend

I had picked early November because that period had a history of cold weather and avoided training during Thanksgiving or Christmas holidays. We planned on a seven day trip but we brought with us fourteen days of supplies. That way if we got caught in storms we would not be short on fuel or food.

Our insertion on November 7<sup>th</sup> by HH-3 helicopter was without problem. We arrived at the mountain around 10 a.m. The weather was 10,000 foot overcast, with some clouds but calm. We had a good view of the entire mountain and did an aerial recon of our climbing route. Then we landed and off loaded our gear. We were above the treeline and the only living things on the mountain appeared to be us and an occasional raven. The helicopter crew practiced a couple of landings before returning to base.



Unloading HH-3 for mountain training in Alaska

The pilot radioed us that they were finished with their training and were heading back to Elmendorf AFB. We had a handheld survival radio that allowed us to communicate with aircraft. But it would not reach Anchorage so it could not be used for communications with Elmendorf AFB. All of us watched the helicopter fly east until it disappeared. Except for noises made by us, Mt Spurr was now absolutely quiet. Little did we know that we were literally in the calm before a storm. We cached our extra food and supplies at the helicopter landing zone, marking the area with 6-foot tall bamboo sticks with orange surveyors tape tied to the top. These flags would allow us to find the cache if it became covered with snow. The weather forecast was for a low pressure area to arrive in 24-48 hours. Then a "small" storm would cover the mountain for a few days.

From the landing zone our route was easy to climb until we reached the first steep ridgeline which we used to ascend to another plateau at about 4500-feet. It was about 4 p.m. and sunset was an hour away. So, we set up camp 1. We melted snow for drinking water and rehydrating our freeze dried meals. Our spirits were high but I was a little concerned about the forecasted weather. One of our tests was to see how well our tents held up to arctic conditions. We were using an REI McKinley tent. This was a four person, pyramid shaped tent with a single aluminum center pole. A large door with zipper allowed easy entry even when wearing bulky arctic clothing. The tent fabric was a breathable strong ripstop nylon. Once the tent was setup, a separate piece of material, shaped like the tent, went over the top of the outside of the tent. This waterproof "tent fly" put an air pocket between the tent fabric and the outside elements. Our tents were a high visibility red to make air searches for us easy. Our primary concern for the tent test was how it would stand up to high winds. We would find out soon enough. If the tent were destroyed, we were prepared to dig snow caves and live in them. Snow caves are in many ways a safer shelter in the arctic. The inside of the cave is actually warmer than the inside of a tent, a cave will not collapse in a storm, and it is much quieter inside a snow cave. I also knew how to build an igloo; but it took longer to construct than a cave and it was more complicated to build.



4-person McKinley tent set up at Elmendorf AFB for practice. The tent fly is not installed yet.



McKinley tent with fly. In most conditions it was easy to set up. It had 12-tiedown points to anchor it to the snow. It folded up easily and was pushed into a stuff sack.

Sunrise the next morning was at 8:45 a.m. We were up at 6 a.m. and got out of our warm sleeping bags to cook our breakfast. Temperature was a balmy 15° F. Cooking was done outside the tent. Cooking inside a tent is to be avoided because the condensation created by boiling water will cover the inside walls of the tent. There it freezes and accumulates until gravity

pulls it down where it lands on you. Then it melts and gets your clothing wet. Wet clothing can become a death sentence in the arctic. By sunrise, we had eaten, packed up camp, roped up in climbing teams and were ready to resume climbing.

Using a climbing altimeter, we navigated north while staying at the 4500-foot level. This led to the base of a ridgeline that went steeply up 2000-feet. We left our heavy packs at the base of the ridge and climbed up until the 6,500-foot level, where this ridgeline gradually ascended to the upper slopes of Mt. Spurr. I thought that this ridgeline would be an easy route to the top of the mountain. About a mile along the ridge, I suddenly came to a large break in the ridge. From the air we had seen it but it looked small enough to easily bypass. We named this landmark “gunsight” because it reminded us of the sight on a rifle.



Sketch of ridgeline “gunsight”

Up close the “gunsight” was much more challenging than from the air. The drop from the ridge to the bottom of the break was about 100-feet. It’s width was more than 50-feet and then you had to climb up to the top of the ridge again. The ridgeline was deep in snow but the “gunsight” was solid rock with some snow in its bottom. It had taken us more than half a day to climb to this point. We were going to need fixed line, pitons and snow anchors to make this obstacle passable while carrying packs. Because we needed additional gear and sunset was a few hours away, I decided that we should descend and set up our camp back at the 4500-foot plateau. Then the next day we would ascend again with the specialized gear needed to navigate the “gunsight.”

Camp 2 was set up without problem. We had almost two hours before sunset. The temperature was rising, the clouds thickening and lowering, winds were blowing 15 knots, and the barometer was dropping fast. All these indicated a storm was soon to arrive. We cut snow blocks and constructed snow walls around three sides of our tent. I expected that this added safety measure would make the tent as storm proof and could possibly be. In the 5-foot rectangular hole left from cutting the snow blocks, we set up our kitchen. This kept the stoves and us out of the wind as we melted snow for hot drinks and water for our meals.

One of our most important pieces of equipment was our stove. We were using Optimus 111 stoves using Coleman fuel (white gas). It is an extremely rugged stove whose base is a steel storage case. It has a side pump used to prime and pressurize the stove. It is easy to start and the rate of burn can be adjusted by a knob that attaches to the side of the burner. When burning at it’s highest setting, two quarts of water came rapidly to a boil. It’s only downside was it was heavier than most other climbing stoves. But that was a byproduct of the steel case construction that made it virtually indestructible and highly reliable. An Optimus 111 stove that I bought in 1973 was running as good as new thirty-five years later and had never required replacement parts or failed to start in spite of heavy use and several expeditions up Mt. McKinley.



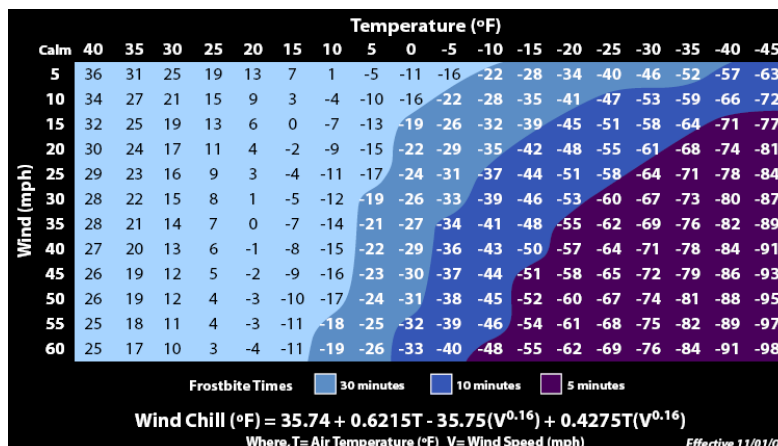
Optimus 111 closed



Darkness arrived as we were eating. Everyone was in good spirits and we talked mostly about the weather and where we would build a snow cave in the event the tent was damaged or destroyed. We stayed awake until about 8 p.m. and then climbed into our sleeping bags.

Most of the team was using fiberfill synthetic insulation with water resistant fabric. The bag was contour shaped with the widest part at the shoulders and the narrowest part at the feet. There was no zipper along the length of the bag. Instead, you climbed into the bag at the top and used a drawstring to close the bag around your face. Your face was the only part of your body that remained outside of the bag while sleeping. This style sleeping bag was called a “Mummy” bag. A foam pad was placed under the bag to get between you and the cold floor of the tent. I also had a lightweight down sleeping bag that I used inside of the fiberfill bag. Two of the PJs had waterproof sleeping bag covers. These were supposed to keep water from penetrating the sleeping bag from the outside. All of our bags were supposedly rated for temperatures as low as -15°F. Both the tent and sleeping bags were state of the art for the late 1970's. We purchased them from Recreational Equipment Inc. in Seattle, Washington.

During the night, I was awakened several times by noise created by the tent flapping in the wind. The forecasted storm had arrived and it continued for the next four days. I had wanted a good test of the ability of our tent to stand up to heavy winds; and, we really had a hard test to the extremes. Those who have not lived in the arctic usually believe that cold temperatures are the most limiting environmental condition. But that is not true. Cold by itself is easy to contend with by wearing the proper type of clothing and wearing it in layers. Snow also rarely stops people who live in Alaska. What does bring most activity to a halt is wind. Cold combined with wind results in “wind chill.” Wind chill is the decrease in air temperature felt by the body due to the flow of cold air.



Wind also moves snow around and under the right conditions results in whiteout conditions. A “whiteout” is a meteorological condition in which uniform illumination from snow on the ground and from low clouds makes features of the landscape indistinguishable. Whiteouts can also occur because of heavily falling or blowing snow which makes visibility extremely poor. Visibility is so poor, that the climbers on a rope team frequently cannot see each other 50-feet away. Wind speeds during this storm easily exceeded hurricane force (75+ mph). Combined with heavy snow we were mostly confined to our tents for the duration of the storm. We left the tents on occasion to:

- check out our anchors that held the tent to the snow
- repair snow walls around the tents
- shovel snow from around tent walls
- melt snow for water for drinks and food
- to just get outside and see what was going on around us
- dig a snow cave for emergency use

Because we were well equipped and trained for these conditions we were in little physical danger during the storm. Our chief concern was more psychological in nature due to the unrelenting noises of the storm assaulting our tent. Flapping tent fabric is very noisy to those inside. Combined with the howling winds from the storm, we constantly worried if the tent was going to be ripped by the wind. Any rip would quickly become a catastrophe resulting in the complete destruction of the tent. The combined noises from wind and tent flapping made sleeping difficult. Because we had flown on to Mt Spurr in a helicopter, we had foam earplugs with us. Using these, we were able to occasionally catch a few hours of sleep. Needless to say, we had to keep one of us awake at all times to be alert for any damage to our tent.

We had a lot of time on our hands during this storm. Each of us had a paperback book with us and it provided some relief from the boredom of being stuck in our tents most of the time. I had brought some paper with me so that I could make notes on how the trip was progressing. These notes would become part of a future trip report that would be written upon our return. At one point in the storm I was becoming philosophical and wrote the below two sheets of paper.

12 November 1976 Time: 8 p.m. Location: In a tent on a ridgeline of Mt Spurr

There is no question which force of nature rules in the mountains. The wind rules supreme and without any real challengers. We have been caught in a succession of storms since our second day on this mountain (9 November). On 9 - 10 November, four feet of new snow fell at camp 1. This stopped us from doing any climbing. November 11 was another stormy day but we must try and force the route down as our food is running low and all our reserve food is at the landing zone. Despite high wind and blowing snow, we started down. It is a miserable hike with heavy packs and low to zero visibility. Finding the route is extremely difficult and patience is the order of the day. The wind picks up and a couple of the guys were blown off their feet. My climbing rope normally snakes its way on top of the snow in front of me. Now it is being blown off the snow so that it does not even touch the snow between me and my rope mates. But we cannot stop because on this ridge the wind would literally be our death warrant. We pushed on for what seemed a long time; until we found an exit off the lee side of the ridge that ended in a small bowl. We then stopped and set up camp with the tents.

The next day (November 12) when we get up there is a lull and Doc Brant and I take off to wand the trail. By the time we climb back to camp, the storm is going again. We break camp and head down in the slight chance the H-3 crew will be able to get us out today. After we get off the steep stuff, we run into a whiteout

Of course the storm is still howling all around us. I am leading the route and depth perception is nill. After walking off the edge of two crevasses, and then climbing out of them, I decided that we were not going on any further. So we stop and set up camp.

Setting up the tents in the storm is lots of fun. But with a lot of effort we get them up. After we get the tents up, the winds again begin to pick up. Which brings us up to now (8 p.m.)

The wind is now blowing steady at 35 miles per hour with gusts (a lot of gusting) to at least 50 mph and occasional winds of 75 mph. Needless to say, the noise caused by the flapping tent is not letting anyone get any sleep. Everyone wonders how long the tent will hold up. If it rips, we will have to abandon the tent and quickly dig a snow cave.

I am laying in my sleeping bag while wearing my down gear. If there is an emergency I can get out in a hurry. All our sleeping bags are wet from perspiration and they are not working well. The inside of the tent fabric is covered with frost that was created by our breathing. Every time someone bumps into the tent fabric, a lot of the frost falls free and lands on our sleeping bags.

The chopper was unable to get in and pick us up today (November 13). We are all not looking forward to spending another evening in the clutches of the storms of Mt. Spurr.

Postscript: We were finally picked up by our helicopter on November 14<sup>th</sup>. We learned a lot about arctic mountaineering on this trip that will allow us to function better as rescuers if we have to do a jump mission in the winter. Mt Spurr is an excellent training area. It is only an hour and one-half away from Anchorage by air and it provides a training environment similar to Mt. McKinley, our ultimate objective. The most important lesson about our equipment learned on this trip was the need for Gortex sleeping bag covers. These would prevent water from contacting our sleeping bag and at the same time allow perspiration to escape from the sleeping bag. Gortex is essentially a one way fabric concerning water. Water can leave from the inside;

but, water cannot enter from the outside. This new equipment became standard issue and ended our wet sleeping bag problems during my many future mountain climbing adventures.

This was not my only trip to Mt. Spurr. Because it was an excellent area to do both mountain and arctic training, I returned in 1977, 1978 and 1979.

12 November 1976

Location: Mt. Spurr, AK (on a ridge)

Time: 2000 hrs

There is no question which force of nature rules in the mountains. The wind rules supreme and without any real challengers. We have been caught in a succession of storms since our second day on this mountain (9 Nov). On 9–10 Nov, 4 ft. of new snow fell at Camp 1. This prohibited us from doing any climbing. 11 November was another stormy day but we must try and force the route down as our food is running low, and all our extra food is at the LZ. Despite high winds and blowing snow we start down. It is a miserable hike with heavy packs and low to zero visibility. Finding the route is extremely difficult and patience is the order of the day. The wind picks up and a couple of the guys were blown off their feet. My climbing rope, which usually snakes its way thru the snow in front of me, is being blown off the snow so that it doesn't even touch the snow between me and my ropemate, but we cannot stop because on this ridge the wind would literally be our death warrant. We pushed on for what seemed a long time till we could find an exit off to the lee side of the ridge in a small bowl. We then stopped and set up camp with the tents.

Today despite the storm we must continue to descend. When we get our three [unclear] is a lull and Doc Bradt and I take off to wand the trail. By the time we climb back up to camp the storm is again raging. We break camp and head down in the slight chance the H-3 will be able to get us out today. After we get off the steep stuff we run into a whiteout. Of course the storm is still howling all around us. My leading and depth perception is nil. After walking off the edge of two snow cliffs and climbing out of them, I decided that I was not going on any further so we stop and make camp. Setting up the tents in the storm is lots of fun. After we get the tents up the wind starts to pick up, which brings us to 2000 hrs. The wind is now blowing at least steady at 35 mph, with gusts (a lot of gusts) to at least 50 mph. Needless to say no one can sleep. Everyone wonders how long the tent will hold out. If it rips we will have to go out and dig in. I am laying in my down gear so that if we have an emergency I can get out in a hurry. All our sleeping bags are wet from perspiration and they are not working well. The chopper was unable to get in to pick us up today. We are all looking forward to spending another evening in the clutches of the storms of Spurr.

# Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service

"That Others May Live"

12 NOVEMBER 1976

LOCATION - MT. SPURR, AK. (ON A RIDGE)

TIME - 2000 HRS

THERE IS NO QUESTION WHICH FORCE OF NATURE RULE'S IN THE MOUNTAINS. THE WIND RULE'S SUPREME AND WITHOUT ANY REAL CHALLENGERS. WE HAVE BEEN CAUGHT IN A SUCCESSION OF STORMS SINCE OUR SECOND DAY ON THIS MOUNTAIN (9 NOV.). ON 9-10 NOV. 4 FT. OF NEW SNOW FELL AT CAMP 2. THIS PROHIBITED US FROM DOING ANY CLIMBING. 11 NOVEMBER WAS ANOTHER STORMY DAY BUT WE MUST TRY AND FORCE THE ROUTE DOWN AS OUR FOOD IS RUNNING LOW AND ALL OUR EMER. FOOD IS AT THE LZ. DISPIE HIGH WIND AND BLOWING SNOW WE START DOWN. IT IS A MISERABLE HIKE WITH HEAVY PACKS AND LOW TO ZERO VISABILITY. FINDING THE ROUTE IS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT AND PATIENCE IS THE ORDER OF THE DAY. THE WIND PICKS UP AND A COUPLE OF THE GUYS WERE BLOWN OFF THEIR FEET. MY CLIMBING ROPE WHICH USUALLY SNAKES IT'S WAY THRU THE SNOW IN FRONT OF ME IS BEING BLOWN OFF THE SNOW SO THAT IT DOESN'T EVEN TOUCH THE SNOW BETWEEN ME AND MY ROPEMATE, BUT WE CANNOT STOP BECAUSE ON THIS RIDGE THE WIND WOULD LITTERALLY BE OUR DEATH WARRANT. WE PUSHED ON FOR WHAT SEEMED A LONG TIME TILL WE COULD FIND AN EXIT OFF TO THE LEE SIDE OF THE RIDGE IN A SMALL BOWL. WE THEN STOPPED AND SET UP CAMP WITH THE TENTS.

TODAY DESPITE THE STORM WE MUST CONTINUE TO DESCEND  
WHEN WE GET UP THERE IS A LULL AND DOC BRANT AND  
I TAKE OFF TO WAND THE TRAIL. BY THE TIME WE  
CLIMB BACK UP TO CAMP THE STORM IS GAINING.  
WE BREAK CAMP AND HEAD DOWN IN THE SLIGHT CHANCE THE  
H-3 WILL BE ABLE TO GET US OUT TODAY. AFTER WE GET  
OFF THE STEEP STUFF WE RUN INTO A WHITEOUT. OF  
COURSE THE STORM IS STILL HOWLING AROUND US. I AM  
LEADING AND DEPTH PERCEPTION IS NIL. AFTER WALKING  
OFF THE EDGE OF TWO SNOW CLIFFS AND CLIMBING OUT  
OF THEM, I DECIDED THAT I WAS NOT GOING ON ANY  
FURTHER SO WE STOP AND MAKE CAMP. SETTING UP THE TENTS  
IN THE STORM IS LOTS OF FUN. AFTER WE GET THE TENTS  
UP THE WIND STARTS TO PICK UP, WHICH BRINGS US TO  
2000 HRS. THE WIND IS NOW BLOWING AT LEAST STEADY AT  
35 MPH WITH GUSTS (A LOT OF GUSTS) TO AT LEAST 50 MPH.  
NEEDLESS TO SAY NO ONE CAN SLEEP. EVERYONE WONDERES HOW  
LONG THE TENT WILL HOLD OUT. IF IT RIPS WE WILL HAVE TO  
GO OUT AND DIG IN. I AM LAYING IN MY DOWN GEAR SO  
THAT IF WE HAVE AN EMERGENCY I CAN GET OUT IN A  
HURRY. ALL OUR SLEEPING BAGS ARE WET FROM PERSPIRATION  
AND THEY ARE NOT WORKING WELL. THE CHOPPER WAS UNABLE TO  
GET IN TO PICK US UP TODAY. WE ARE ALL LOOKING FORWARD  
TO SPENDING ANOTHER EVENING IN THE CLOTHES OF THE STORMS OF  
SOLRA