

The 1967 Yukon Alpine Centennial Expedition

BY DONALD MORTON

With Canada celebrating its 150th birthday this year, it is appropriate to retell the story of the Yukon Alpine Centennial Expedition (YACE) of 1967. Much of the story is covered by the excellent book *Expedition Yukon* edited by Marnie Fisher and published by Thomas Nelson.

To recognize the 100th anniversary of Confederation, the Federal Government encouraged communities and organizations to propose projects for grants up to \$25,000 each. In thinking about what the Yukon Territory might do, Craig Hughes, legal advisor to the Territory Commissioner, suggested choosing a range of peaks in the Saint Elias Mountains to be climbed and named by parties from each of the provinces and territories, as well as a peak on the border with Alaska in recognition of the United States having purchased that territory from Russia in 1867. Monty Alford of the Federal Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, who was in Whitehorse at the time, identified an east-west group of unclimbed peaks between the Chitina and Walsh Glaciers with altitudes above 10,000 feet that would be suitable.

The project needed climbers, so Hughes and Alford contacted The Alpine Club of Canada, which had already



Mount British Columbia team members (from left) Karl Winter, Andy Gruft, Ralph Hutchinson and Byron Olson relax at T-Bone Base Camp. | Repos au camp de base T-Bone des membres du mont British Columbia. De la gauche : Karl Winter, Andy Gruft, Ralph Hutchinson et Byron Olson. PHOTO: DON MORTON

suggested to the American Alpine Club a joint climb of a border peak. The ACC happily joined the project and decided to locate their regular 1967 summer mountaineering camp in the same area.

Soon the major work organizing the project became the responsibility of

David Fisher who was then the ACC's Eastern Vice President, particularly raising the necessary funds that much exceeded the \$25,000 grant. In the end, the expedition received \$77,000 from government sources with most of the rest of the \$132,000 total coming from camp fees—\$250 each for International and Centennial team members, and \$200 for the General Mountaineering Camp participants.

The first phase of the 1967 YACE was Good Neighbour Peak, the virgin 15,720-foot south summit of Mount Vancouver to be climbed by a joint team of four Canadians led by Monty Alford and four Americans led by Vin Hoeman. The south summit lies on the international boundary while the north peak, at 15,860 feet, first climbed in 1949, and the 15,800-foot central peak are entirely in Canada. On June 19 and 21, ski planes landed the team members on Valerie Glacier at about 7,000 feet on the U.S. side below the south ridge. During a week of good and bad weather they carried loads up to the ridge in deep snow, then along an icy ridge with sections of friable rock to pitch camps at 10,300 feet, 11,800 feet and 14,000 feet. On June 25 they all reached the summit, and five climbers continued

From left, Pat Baird, Jim Caldwell and Jim Ferguson climb the summit ridge of Mount Northwest.
De la gauche : Pat Baird, Jim Caldwell et Jim Ferguson grimpent la crête du sommet du mont Northwest.
PHOTO: DON MORTON



to the central peak. Four climbers carried on to make the second ascent of Mount Vancouver, by a new route. Then the weather deteriorated keeping everyone in the highest camp four nights, another night in Camp 1 and four more at the base before everyone could fly out.

The Centennial Range had 10 peaks named for the provinces, and two for the territories at that time, Yukon and Northwest, with the highest at 12,321 feet called Centennial Peak. Each had a representative team of four climbers to be split among three base camps. These were established by helicopter flights on July 8 and 9 from a snow transfer station at 8,470 feet serviced by planes with both wheels and skis from near Kluane Lake. I was fortunate to be able to join the group assigned to Mount Northwest, possibly because there were not many applicants from the Territory. Our leader most appropriately was Pat Baird, whom I knew from the ACC 1963 and 1965 expeditions to Baffin Island. On the Mount Yukon team camped beside us was Mike McCallum, who also had been with Baird in 1965.

Mount Northwest rose directly above the west side of the T-Bone

Mount Northwest climbing team leader Pat Baird is well-prepared for the 1967 ascent. Pat Baird, chef de l'équipe du mont Northwest, fin prêt pour l'ascension de 1967.

PHOTO: DON MORTON



Glacier where we were camped so first we explored a direct route, but retreated from steep loose rock. Instead, during a 27-hour exploration we found an easier route from the south up rock and snow passing near the summit of Mount Yukon which descended rather steeply to the col with Northwest. We returned on July 15 for another 27-hour day following the Yukon climbers. While they went to claim their snow summit we descended again to the col and up a ridge of mixed snow and rock on Northwest. As I was about to lead along a much-corniced snow ridge to a slightly higher point, Baird very wisely declared we had reached the summit and unfurled the territory and expedition flags. By July 24, with the exception of particularly challenging Mount Saskatchewan, all teams reached their objectives or, like us, as close as safety would permit.

The final phase of the YACE was the two general camps, each being two weeks long between July 15 and August 13 with about 100 climbers in each session. The base camp at 5,700 feet was adjacent to the Steele Glacier, which that year was in a surge mode with huge quantities of jumbled ice flowing at 50 feet per day towards its terminus. Helicopters carried people and gear from the end of a mine road off the Alaska Highway to the vicinity of the main camp and later to drop-off points and out camps below more distant objectives. The rope leaders were ACMG Mountain Guides Peter Furhmann, Hans Gmoser and Hans Schwarz, Club members Bob Hind, Michael Matthews, Scipio Merler, Don Morrison, Roger Neave, Gerrit Schlee and John Tewnion and visitor from Britain Lord John Hunt. During the four weeks of the general camp climbing teams made a remarkable 14 first ascents of peaks between 9,000 and 12,000 feet as well as four ascents of 14,780-foot Mount Walsh, one of 15,885-foot Mount Wood and two of 16,644-foot Mount Steele. The nine highest of the first ascents, plus three others previously climbed, now officially have the names of 12 early presidents of the ACC.

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