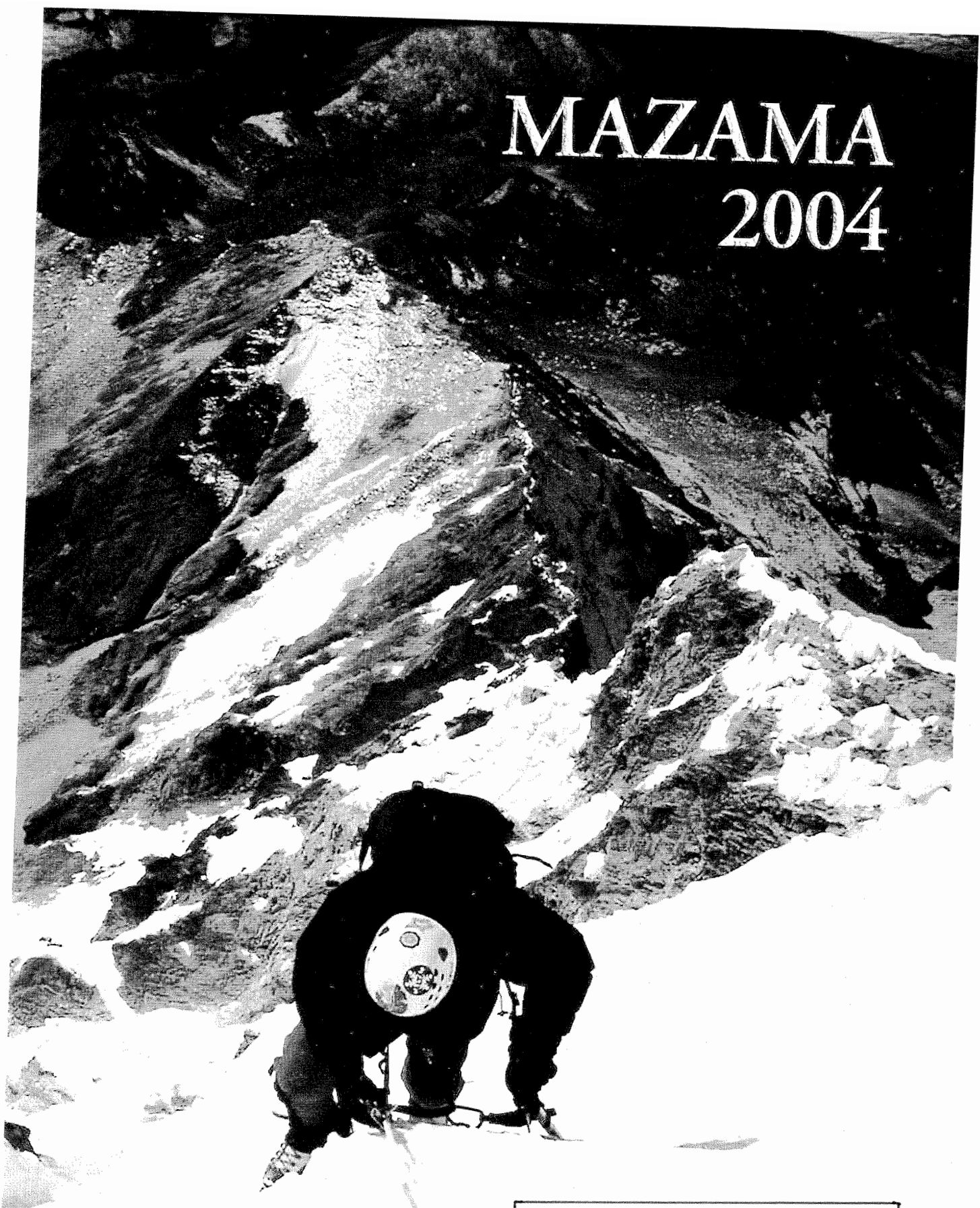


# MAZAMA 2004



2004 Mazama Annual Journal  
Volume LXXXVI, No. 13

# First Ascent: Mt. Blachnitzky and Peak 6500' on Juneau Icefield

by Keith Daellenbach

This expedition had its genesis in a tragedy that occurred in 1988 when I participated in a summer glaciological research program on the Juneau Icefield of southeast Alaska. Klaus Blachnitzky was head surveyor that season and, at 67, had a grandfather-like bearing with enthusiasm and a gift of sharing. He taught me surveying fundamentals and helped me apply engineering mechanics to the study of glacial movement.

Klaus was a strong skier and could leave most young whippersnappers behind when skiing back to camp after a long day of surveying. He told me stories of how, on the Russian Front during World War II, he kept warm by stuffing newspaper under his clothing. He escaped his regiment near the war's end and was captured by an African-American G.I., "the first Negro I had ever seen." He spent the remaining days of the war as a German-English translator for Allied troops.

In mid-August, while making a straightforward descent down a cleaver into the Gilkey Trench, tragedy struck. Scott McGee and I were two students nearby when he lost his footing and tumbled over a precipice. Klaus plummeted into a deep moat at the cliff's base and died. We extracted his broken body, and he was flown off the ice field by helicopter for a long journey home to Bavaria.

A stunning peak visible from this cleaver was named in his honor. Scott, of Anchorage, Alaska, and I dreamed of making a memorial first ascent of Mt. Blachnitzky. I assembled a climbing "dream team" of well-tested friends, including Scott; my father, Chuck, of Albany, Ore.; and long-time climbing associate Fred Skemp III, of La Crosse, Wis.

After months of plotting gear, food and routes, the four of us arrived in Juneau on June 28. The next morning, after packing gear in the helicopter hangar and drawing up final flight plans, we were off. We flew over the Herbert, Eagle and Thiel glaciers, past towering spires, and over the Trench, which looks like a fjord filled with a river of glacial ice striped by medial moraines instead of water. We stopped briefly, helicopter blades still churning, at the rim of Avalanche Canyon to stow our skis and ski boots — they were not needed for our mountaineering objectives.

Back onto the helicopter, we were deposited at about 2,000 feet in the Trench on the bare ice of the Gilkey Glacier. As the sounds of the helicopter dissipated, we found ourselves deep in the Alaskan wilderness. We could hear running water of supraglacial streams and felt the cold katabatic wind. Taking advantage of clearing weather, we quickly cached gear and food, and we began our ascent of Mt. Blachnitzky.



The author on the summit of Peak 6500'

The Gilkey has receded a few hundred feet since the maximum advance of the 18th century Little Ice Age glaciation, so we first had to climb a steep and loose flank directly off the glacier to the vegetation trimline. Above the trimline was a morass of scrub alder, willow and hemlock krummholz through which we laboriously bushwhacked. At about 3,500 feet, we escaped the thicket and entered a beautiful alpine tundra of heather, wildflowers and small snowmelt rivulets. Here, in this Shangri-la, we made camp, certain no one had ever visited this location before.

It was raining in the morning, but we decided to head up anyway, hoping conditions would improve. We climbed a 600-foot snow gully that steepened to 45 degrees and topped out on a broad bench. The rain stopped, and we continued to climb easy snow tongues into the high southwest cirque on the mountain's upper flank. Here, we roped up and simul-climbed, using pickets to protect a steep, exposed section as we gained the upper south ridge.

On this beautiful stroll, the four of us approached the summit with quiet reverence. The sky was now free of clouds, and the scenery was jaw-dropping. The view down 4,000 feet into the Trench was dramatic, with its massive river of ice and heavily crevassed mountain flanks; clearly we had found the easiest way up. Granite nunataks jutted above the high glacial

plateau. Scott and I shared pleasant and humorous anecdotes of Klaus and unfurled Bavarian and United States flags.

We also spread the ashes of our friend and fellow ice field compatriot Allen H. Throop, of Corvallis, Ore. Allen was on the Mazamas-supported 2001 Juneau Icefield traverse expedition and had died in April after a courageous struggle with ALS. On that high summit, in a remote quadrant of the Alaskan Coast Range, there was something transcendent in reaching out to the eternal by memorializing departed comrades with the esteemed company gathered. We left several surveying mementos from Klaus' widow, Hannelore, a poem I had written for Allen, a Colby College pennant (Allen's alma mater), two small pewter crosses and a summit register in a metal container underneath a cairn we built.

Fog was creeping into the valleys below, and by the time we left the summit, it had risen to envelope all but the mountain's upper pinnacle. We made our way quietly off the summit and retraced our route to our tarn camp for another night at Shangri-la. The following day, we continued our descent to our cache at the "confluence camp," where the Gilkey intersects Avalanche Canyon and the Bucher Glacier.

As a student researcher years ago, I spied a stunning peak west-southwest and more than 10 miles from the Vaughan Lewis Glacier cleaver, also unclimbed. It dominated an island of peaks bordered on three sides by the Antler, Bucher and Gilkey glaciers, with subsidiary peaks stretching west to the Lynn Canal. In preparation for the expedition, I pored over USGS maps and eyeballed the screen up close as I examined old slides of this distant peak.

From confluence base camp, we trekked six miles up the Bucher Glacier. When this peak finally came into view up a narrow cirque, I knew we had our work cut out for us. Early in the morning, Fred and I left camp for the north-northeast ridge of Peak 6500'. Dad and Scott opted for a peaceful day in camp watching our progress through a monocular. Upon gaining the toe of the ridge, I spotted an adult mountain goat with kid. We followed the hoof prints of these sure-footed beasts up steep snow slopes and onto the ridge proper.

Our first obstacle was a satellite pinnacle, which we bypassed by skirting west through a heavily crevassed flank. This took us to the upper 1,000 feet of the summit pinnacle. The "ridge" I had hoped to climb revealed itself to be rather a highly dissected buttress. We altered our plans and instead crossed the summit glacier poised precariously above an icefall. The gradient steepened to 55 degrees, and we belayed five pitches up and across this hanging glacier, finally gaining the security of a rock buttress leading to the south-east ridge.

Fred led a 5th-class rock pitch off the glacier, and I took the next lead, which required two-tooled work up a short ice pitch. More steep snow followed and finally some 4th-class climbing along the southeast ridge to the summit. We let out a shout of joy and relief, which Dad later reported hearing even though camp was two miles away. The exploratory nature of this wilderness climb and summit views never witnessed by another person, along with the challenging

mixed climbing, made this an extremely gratifying climb. All other peaks in the vicinity were below us, and even the steely skies and cold, hard expanse surrounding us warmed my heart.

The view down to the Gilkey Glacier terminus 6,000 feet below struck me as a northern latitude version of the Inferno from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with swirling coffee-brown water boiling out from underneath the glacier's terminus and gigantic seracs floating in a terminus lake. We left a metal summit container with summit register, United States flag and small pewter cross under a cairn. We carefully descended from the summit pinnacle with rappels and belayed down-climbing to a victor's welcome at the Bucher moraine camp.

Our egress from the icefield required several days of travel over about 50 miles. We scouted and made the first-ever traverse from the Trench over precarious ledges and seracs into Avalanche Canyon. We crawled and hacked our way through the thicket-choked canyon, making camp near the rushing torrent that drained glaciers far up the valley.

The next morning, Fred belayed me as I forded the 70-foot wide river. I unbuckled my pack's waist belt and carefully waded through the cold rushing water, balancing with my ski poles. The others followed. We climbed 2,000 feet out of Avalanche Canyon, and Scott, a GPS wizard, located our skis in the fog. Continuing, we skied across the "high ice" and camped on the southwest ridge of Taku D, a nunatak at the confluence of the Northwest Taku and Matthes glaciers.

We continued for several more days, skiing across broad glaciers. At Echo Pass, we paused and deposited the rest of Allen's ashes. This place was particularly memorable from our 2001 traverse, for it was here that Allen had the presentiment of "If I never skied again, this tour would be enough." After 13 days, we made our way to civilization in Alaska's capital of Juneau and feasted on salmon, halibut and Alaska King Crab, reveling in our successes and deepened friendships. ▲

*We are grateful for the financial support provided by a Mazamas Expedition Grant and for the Juneau liaison of Dr. and Mrs. Maynard M. Miller of the Foundation for Glacier and Environmental Research.*

## Climbs:

Mt. Blachnitzky: 6,552'; N58°47'48" W134°23'38"; First ascent on 30 June 2004 via southwest cirque/south ridge, 45-degree snow, class 3 rock; Charles B. Daellenbach, Keith K. Daellenbach, Scott McGee, Fred Skemp III.

Peak 6500': 6,500'; N58°48'17" W134°35'56", First ascent on 4 July 2004 via Independence Route: north-northeast ridge/northeast face/southeast ridge, 55-degree snow, 5.3 rock, WI2 ice; Keith K. Daellenbach, Fred Skemp III.

Taku D: 5,810'; N58°42'17" W134°17'30"; Ascent on 7 July 2004 via southwest ridge, class 3; Charles B. Daellenbach, Keith K. Daellenbach, Scott McGee, Fred Skemp III.