



A "No sci-fi special effects could possibly compare with the violence of McKinley," says Kocour (working out near her Reno home).

Ruth Anne Kocour returned from an ascent of Mount McKinley—but 11 didn't

A COLD STAY IN HELL

THE BODY OF SWISS CLIMBER ALEX VON Bergen, lying in a sleeping bag in a tent at 14,000 feet, served as a dire reminder of the perils of Mount McKinley. Von Bergen had died one night of an altitude-related illness. Not that any of the 50 or more climbers hunkered down on McKinley's western flank needed reminding. Storms tore across the ridge at

120 m.p.h. Visibility was about five feet. The temperature had plummeted to -30°F . "The bag just stayed there for 11 days," recalls Ruth Anne Kocour, one of the 1,000 or so mountaineers on McKinley during the spring climbing season. "Until the weather lifted, they couldn't even transport the body back."

Death and the rumor of death spread among encampments for more than two weeks this May, as North America's highest mountain was whipped by some of the most violent storms in memory. In a typical year about half of the 1,000 climbers make it to the 20,320-foot summit of the central Alaska peak. So far this year 39 percent have succeeded—and a record 11 people have already died in the attempt. In the face of such daunting conditions, Kocour's party of eight amateurs—their occupations range from attorney to computer consultant to assistant city

manager of Glendale, Ariz.—and two guides could have been forgiven for abandoning the mountain at the first break in the weather. Instead they pressed on to the summit. And the wind-blasted, freezing hell they endured made their triumph all the sweeter.

When the team, led by Robert Link, 34, and his assistant, Win Whittaker, both seasoned mountaineers, was flown to McKinley's Kahiltna Glacier on May 3, there was no sign of the trouble ahead. Instead, there was just the drudgery of carrying 60-pound loads and dragging 50-pound sleds to the site of their base camp at 7,000 feet. That turned out to be the easy part.

The team had established a camp at 9,500 feet when the first storm arrived. "You expect to sit three days when a storm hits," says Kocour, 45, an artist from Reno, and the team's most experienced ama-

teur, "but you hope it doesn't happen so soon."

Once the weather broke, the group put up a camp at 11,000 feet and then, two days later, reached 14,000 feet. It was there that tensions began to show in the group, which had been assembled, based on climbing experience, by an expedition organization in Ashford, Wash. (Each group member had paid about \$6,000 for guides and equipment.) When the pitching of tents, a job that should have taken two hours, stretched to five, tempers

began to unravel. Then, with sudden fury, the second storm lashed the mountain. "It started in midafternoon, out of nowhere, and everyone just rushed to get their heavy gear on," says Kocour. "If you don't get protection, you get hypothermia very quickly, within seconds."

The team hurriedly built walls with blocks of compacted snow to buffer their tents from the winds. They dug a snow cave to house the kitchen—and they waited for the storm to blow itself out. "We had one

deck of cards, and sometimes we played gin, though at times it was so cold you couldn't hold the cards," says Kocour. "We had a bunch of paperback books—*The Firm*, *The Icarus Agenda*, stuff like that—which we tore into thirds and passed around. We didn't even care if we were reading the middle third of a book before the first third."

Some of the men amused themselves with a greasy-hair contest. Team members bartered with other pinned-down mountaineers for toilet paper and cigarettes—and coped with the problem of performing bodily functions in temperatures that threatened frostbite to any body part exposed for even a few seconds. At times the climbers had to use water bottles inside their tents.

"It was *Twilight Zone* stuff," says Kocour. "Someone on another team went outside for a few minutes, came back and had a hot drink. His teeth cracked."

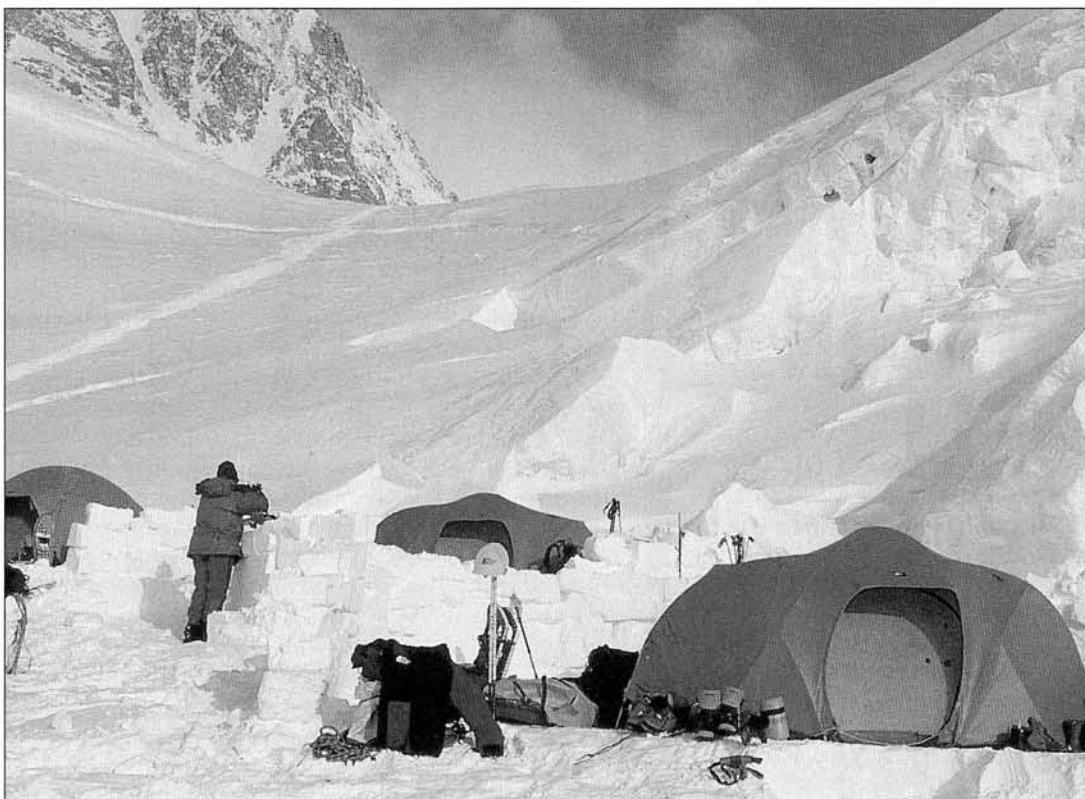
During the day there was always something to do: melting snow for water, digging out snowdrifts that otherwise would have buried the tents. But at night Kocour would lie awake and take stock. "When this roaring wind hit your tent," she says, "you weren't sure if your tent was go-



RUTH ANNE KOCOURE (2)

▲ "We were on the edge in more ways than one. Visibility was zero, so we never knew where the edge was," says Kocour, who took this picture of the camp's medical tent at 14,000 feet as the big storm was abating.

► At each of its five forward camps the team built walls of compacted snow blocks to protect against winds that roared up to 120 m.p.h.





▲ Kocour says her not so adventurous husband, sporting-goods executive Bob Hall, “thinks a good climb is something that ends in a hot tub.”

ing to explode. It was hard to believe this little membrane of nylon was going to save you. I felt as if we were absolutely less than ants.”

Kocour teammate Pete Callas, 35, a Navy pilot from Arlington, Va., called the experience “the closest thing to paying for the privilege of being in a war.” All the while, dispiriting reports swept through the camp of the terrible toll McKinley was exacting this year: Two Italian climbers had fallen to their deaths, three Koreans slipped into a large crevasse; Terrance “Mugs” Stump, a legendary Utah climber, plunged to his death when an ice bridge collapsed under him. And the storm continued to rage outside. As several feet of snow fell, the wind-chill factor reached -150°F . “We’d calculate the temperature in California in late May,” recalls Kocour, “and figured that there was about a 240° difference.” Above the roar of the wind

was an even more ominous sound—tons of ice falling continually from a 20-story shelf about a half mile from the camp. “They sounded like bombs going off,” says Kocour. “It got to the point where I wore earplugs to muffle the noise.”

Finally, on May 22, day 11 in the camp, the storm lifted. The team was able to ferry food and supplies to 16,000 feet, then spent another storm day at 14,000. Provisions were running low—and some members wanted to head down in surrender, not up toward the summit. “Just about everyone was bitching at one point, which was understandable given all the pressure we were under,” says climber Callas. “A Dutch team came down with some horrible stories of three ice walls blowing down on them and their tents being blown away.”

Finally, the group established its topmost camp at 17,000 feet and

launched a final assault on McKinley, covering the remaining 3,000 feet in a single day. They reached the summit at 7 P.M. and spent a half hour taking pictures of the Alaskan wild below. With their food reduced to four cans of tuna, some noodles and two bags of Cheerios, and another storm on the way, they would have to push to make it down the mountain to safety, but in the meantime there was the euphoria of having made it all the way to the summit. “This was the most emotional moment of my life,” says Callas. “The tears just flowed. Of course, as soon as they flowed, they stuck to my face.”

Ruth Anne Kocour, who has climbed her share of mountains, agrees. “McKinley,” she exults, “was the most exquisite summit I’ve ever seen.”

■ MICHAEL J. NEILL
 ■ IRVIN MUCHNICK *in Reno*