

Parachutes in the St. Elias Range

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“THE *McKinley* is four days behind schedule. No, the *Louise* is full up. You haven't a chance there.” Such was the news which greeted one unbearded and five bearded members of the fourth expedition of the A.G.S. to the Yukon peaks of the St. Elias Range on their arrival in Whitehorse in September. Nevertheless, accommodation on the *Louise* turned up at the last moment and we sailed from Skagway with confirmation that an almost unbelievable succession of “fortunate coincidences” was still unbroken.

It all began late in June and early in July when Fortune permitted us to drop, with and without the benefit of parachutes, 2.5 tons of equipment and supplies at seven widely separated points with a loss of not more than 6% of the total. She smiled again and allowed us to circle the summit of Mt. Logan three times when every other peak from Fairweather to Bona was swathed in cloud; her smile became a little embarrassed while we climbed Mt. Wood in a stiff breeze and cloud but, as though to atone for this breach of hospitality, she provided 14 consecutive perfect days in August during which we travelled 50 miles and climbed Mt. Walsh; and permitted a storm to break only an hour or so after we had re-entered the comfort and security of Base Camp. Possibly remembering her rude rejection of our 1939 efforts, we were permitted a cloudless evacuation of our base, a pleasantly low crossing of the Donjek River and a two-hour photographic flight on which the nearest clouds were 100 miles away. With a final wave of her wand she stopped the Whitehorse-Skagway train to return to us the expedition finances which, in the turmoil of final goodbyes, had been left sitting in the station waiting room, and crowned her efforts by providing “unavailable” space on the *Princess Louise*.

Such, in brief, is the chronicle of our 1941 summer, which for weather will go down in meteorologists' records as unequaled in the St. Elias Range in 25 years.

We were a party of seven: my wife and I back again for our fourth season of field research for the A.G.S., Robert Sharp to fathom the intricacies of geological structure and glacier history, Anderson Bakewell to continue meteorological records and botanical

collections, Bob Bates and Jack Jackman to conduct innumerable "tests" ranging from the counting of pulse beats to the permeability of clothing when inadvertently immersed in glacier surface rivers; and Frank Bee, cook, comedian and raconteur of two previous expeditions.

The area in which our objectives lay was the same as that visited in 1935 and 1939. It has already been described in the pages of this Journal¹ and to do so again would be repetition. Suffice it to say that our activities were devoted to the Wolf Creek Glacier basin from which they overflowed only when we approached Mt. Walsh. The ascent of Walsh is described by Bates in the succeeding article of this issue; I shall confine myself therefore to detailing the trip to Mt. Wood, a climb which followed the trail of a stormy 1939 season and was novel only because the summit was reached and because of the means which were used to make success possible.

Base Camp was established on June 28th by Sharp and Bakewell near the left bank of Wolf Creek Glacier and in a valley giving access to the S. E. slopes of Mt. Wood. It was inaccessible to a packtrain since horses could be coerced only with difficulty up the true right bank of the glacier to a point opposite and 3 miles distant from it. Over those intervening 3 miles we had failed in 1939 to establish ourselves on the far bank, a task which had involved nine relays and which none of us had particularly enjoyed. This time the job was done in a few hours, for beside Base Camp was "the front lawn," a gently sloping few acres of soft tundra, a survivor of the ravages of erosion which has left the surrounding topography more nearly in a vertical than in a horizontal plane. On this lawn we endeavored to deposit from the air all our Base Camp supplies and equipment. This was accomplished by 17 parachutes and by dropping between 25 and 30 free bundles. Of the 17 parachute loads one misguided bundle landed in a raging torrent beside the lawn and was lost forever; three failed to open, depositing their cargo unceremoniously and firmly, and the remaining 13 did what was expected of them. It might be expected that a free fall of 500 ft. would seriously jeopardize the utility of any of the contents of the boxes. Actually such was not always the case, for while the chocolate and cheese were not the same in appearance as when they were packed, the flavor was unaltered, and instead of having to divide

¹ *A. A. J.*, ii, 439; IV, i.

portions at a later date, this was already accomplished. It is true, butterscotch pudding and devils-food powders became intermingled, but we found the result to be worthy of consideration by those who favor a sweet tooth. Metal objects didn't fare so well, but of three distorted Primus stoves and a Coleman lantern, all but the latter were repaired and found serviceable. Actually the loss through breakage worked out at less than 6% of the total dropped both free and by parachute, including the load which disappeared in the torrent and from which nothing but a few labels was ever recovered. Fortunately, there was not a single item broken or lost which was vital to our program or more important than would fall in the "nice to have along" category. Of the loads attached to the 17 properly functioning parachutes, two cracked eggs out of 360 were the only semblance of damage.

On July 11th the whole party was reunited at Base Camp and, after three days of organization, which included filling the larder with sheep meat, we set out towards Mt. Wood which rose white and glistening 11,000 ft. above us and perhaps 8 miles away. At this point we had no way of knowing that luck was on our side and that the weather was going to play fair with us. In anticipation of the usual one good day to every five bad ones, we had attempted to fortify our positions on the mountain by dropping supplies and equipment at 7800 ft. and at 10,000 ft. The former site was stocked for six men for one week while the higher loads contained provisions for a two weeks' siege.

Late in the afternoon of July 15th, after encountering annoyances in the form of two swift glacier streams which had to be forded, and after seemingly endless wandering over débris cones and boulder slopes which reminded us that our legs were still very rubbery, we were rewarded by the sight of our parachute load. It rested on a broad rock apron from which the ice had retreated to form an ideal campsite. Immediately all the aches and fatigue vanished as we plunged into the box to find its contents dry and intact. Camp I was established and the weather was fine.

The following morning four of us set out for the point at which two loads, totaling about 300 lbs., had been dropped on the head snows of a gently inclined catchment basin and at the foot of the real climbing. It had required a considerable feat of flying to drop these loads as the plane had to pass through a narrow gap separating the 10,300-ft. fore peak from the main mass of Mt. Wood.

and drop the loads before a maze of huge crevasses was reached. Furthermore, we were somewhat anxious about one of the loads, as we had not been able to positively spot it on circling the location. Progress was rapid as we moved upwards on snowshoes, and lunch time found us at the site where, in 1939, we had established Camp II. Here we made an amazing discovery: among other items which we had been forced to leave behind in that year, we found a Primus stove solidly frozen into the ice which had accumulated on our tent platforms. Carefully the ice was chipped away and pressure pumped into the chamber. A match was applied and a sputter resulted. Another match and, after a choke or two as if clearing its throat after a long nap, the little stove broke into a deep satisfying roar which has made many a tired mountaineer happy at the end of a long day. We used that stove continuously for the rest of the summer.

Following this happy find we continued upwards, and towards 3 o'clock approached the spot we were anxiously anticipating. It was a low crest forming the eastern margin of the aforementioned catchment basin and from it we knew we could see the surface on which the loads had been dropped. As we topped the rise a yell went up, "There's one of them." Then, after a searching pause, "And there's the other." Twenty minutes later we crowded round the first box, 90% covered with snow, but with its contents as dry and unharmed as when they were packed in New Jersey. By this time a biting wind had arisen and was blowing sharp crystals of snow against our as yet uninitiated faces.

While Jack and Andy set about preparing a campsite, Bob and I went off to retrieve the second load. It had apparently fallen on the verge of a considerable icefall and we detoured around so as to approach it from the safest angle. Twenty minutes of threading crevasses and attempting to walk like a cat on a basket of eggs, across bridges spanning some of the nastiest cracks I have ever encountered, brought us to our goal. The load lay on a wedge-shaped sloping plane, the extent of which was bounded by two seemingly bottomless, intersecting crevasses. Its resting place was only a matter of 6 or 8 ft. from the intersection. Very gingerly we went about unpacking the 130-lb. box and transferring its contents to more secure quarters. Working hard in the face of the now really gusty wind, we finally thought we had completed the job. But Bob was carrying a pack-board without a sack, and since it is im-

possible to tie tin cans and food bags onto a bare pack-board without a container of some kind, we had to resort to the parachutes. This was singularly unsuccessful. When a load which Bob considered to be worthy of his mettle had been bundled up and tied with cold fingers, it was always found that a means of egress had been left undetected and a shower of supplies would result. Finally we tried hauling the whole load in the parachute up the steep slope and past the crevasses. So hard did we strive, and so unsuccessfully, that we forgot where we were. When we came to, after finally giving up and caching a fair load against a return on the morrow, we realized that our course had been about as safe as if we had been blindfolded. We had stamped and hauled on and crossed three crevasses whose bridges we had earlier scorned as being rotten and unjustifiably dangerous!

That night in Camp I we celebrated, for our supplies were safe and it seemed that, with Fortune obviously on our side, we couldn't miss. We even took a day off and watched a few lazy clouds amble across an otherwise spotless sky. Had we done that in 1939 we would have been repaid with a week of storm.

The following day Camp II was occupied, to be followed by three cloudy days during which various routes were reconnoitered by Bob, Jack and Andy, while Foresta ministered to my unhappy self, finally fallen victim to a chest cold inherited from our pilot in the parachuting program. Fortunately, the patient's condition and the weather improved at the same time and on June 22nd we packed a four-day camp up to 11,300 ft. and established Bates and Jackman in it. The route from Camp II to Camp III is by far the most interesting and spectacular part of the mountain. For 1000 ft. it follows the sharp crest of an increasingly steep snow and ice ridge and gives access by way of a number of large snowed-in séracs to the spacious top of the first snow buttress. In 1939 this stretch had exacted three hours of hard work on the two occasions we climbed it. This time the snow was far better and progress was somewhat faster. By noon we turned to descend as Bates and Jackman were setting off for a reconnaissance towards the summit.

Early the following morning we were routed out of our tents at Camp II by shouts from the ridge above, and, in time for a second breakfast, Bob and Jack stormed into camp. They had done a fine job the previous afternoon, reaching 14,000 ft. at about the point where we had been obliged to turn back in 1939.

In order to take advantage of the excellent snow conditions, they suggested an immediate attempt on the mountain. However, by this time the western sky was taking on an ominous milky appearance and we decided against an attempt and in favor of consolidation of Camp III. It turned out to be the better move for, as we struggled up the ice ridge, the wind began to rise and as we arrived at Camp II clouds of snow were being whipped off the upper slopes and our campsite exposed as it was on the broad snow buttress, was being increasingly raked by flying particles of snow. An hour sufficed to dig ourselves in and for the next 36 hours we lay in our sleeping bags while the storm blew itself out.

By the evening of the 24th the weather moderated and we found ourselves perched above a vast sea of heaving clouds through which only Mts. Walsh, Steele and Wood emerged, and we went to bed confident that the morrow would be fine.

At 4 o'clock the Primus roared into action while outside the tents the sun was tinting the summit a golden glow. Below us the clouds of yesterday still hung in a fluffy blanket, but above 10,000 ft. it was crystal clear and cold. After a wait for the sun to warm us on our way, we set out at 7.30 on two ropes: Bob, Jack and Foresta on one, Andy and I on the other.

By this time a frost cloud had accumulated on the summit and after an hour of climbing we encountered a cold, crisp breeze. Moreover we were climbing in the shade of a small fleecy cloud which hung tenaciously over us for most of the climb. All went well, however, and at 10 o'clock we reached and passed our high-water mark of two years past. As we progressed upward the wind and cold increased, and after a long, monotonous trudge up and across one of the vast glacier benches which adorn the upper slopes of the mountain, we took refuge behind a large ice block, remnant of a fall from the slopes below the summit. At this point my wife unwillingly admitted that her feet were cold, and examination proved an understatement. Having severely frosted her toes in 1939, they were doubly susceptible. There was nothing for her to do but to descend immediately to Camp III. To make a long story short, Bates went down with her, refusing to listen to any alternative suggestion, while Bakewell, Jackman and I turned towards the upper slopes.

When seen from below and within 10 miles of the mountain, the summit cone appears short and of modest slope. We guessed that two hours would see us on the summit. But foreshortening and

wishful thinking soon told the story in its true proportions. Two hours passed and the top still seemed as far away as ever. Besides the slope proved to be steep and the snow fathomless. Breaking trail in long zig-zags on "bear-paws" became the order of the day and fortunately the slope never steepened to a point where snowshoes could not be used. We had been climbing for two hours in the frost cloud when the summit suddenly emerged ahead of us and at 3.15 we scrambled over the last wall of snow and stood on top. The summit cone had required nearly four hours.

There was no view on which to feast our eyes and from a summit where this should have been magnificent it was a disappointment. We had little occasion to consider the view, however, for a N. W. wind was blasting across the ridge. With numb fingers Jack somehow manipulated a camera, while Andy and I extracted a thermometer from the sack. It registered 20° above zero. But as we watched, the red line began to shrink. Downward it went: 10°, 5°, 0°. When we returned it to its case the alcohol was creeping still lower and a fair estimate would be -2°.

Cold and inhospitable as was the summit, my thoughts went down to Camp III where two grand mountaineers were awaiting our return. One deprived, through no fault of her own, of the goal she had striven on two occasions to reach; always doing the dirty work while others took care of the heavy going, never tiring in her resolve to provide us with photographs to be enjoyed in years to come. The other, the most unselfish mountaineer a party ever had and, of all of us, the most deserving of reaching the summit. But sub-arctic mountaineering is like that. The big peaks allow of no personal triumphs nor would the true mountaineer have it so.

Our sport is still a sport (despite foreign attempts to make it a symbol of national or racial superiority) and as such depends as much as any other on team play. Five of us wanted to get up, and through the combined efforts of all five, three succeeded. In years to come the summit slopes of Mt. Wood will become hazy in our mind's eye, but the recollection of perfect companionship, through the days before and after, will remain indelibly impressed in memory. And, after all, that's what counts most.

The foregoing article, as well as that by Mr. Bates, was submitted to the editor shortly after return from the Yukon. At that time the War Department had not permitted publication of its participation in the activities described. Such permission has since been given and the reader's attention is called to the fact that the aerial delivery of supplies was effected with Army Air Corps planes and that Capt. Albert H. Jackman represented the War Department in the field.