

Above the Whirlwind

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AS our large plane roared up the Wolf Creek Valley, 1000 ft. above the pitted, débris-laden ice, I wondered again whether Walter Wood's ambitious plan would work. We had discussed it in New York months before, and now it was becoming an actuality. The plan was this: Carefully marked boxes of food and equipment were to be parachuted onto level spaces of the Wolf Creek and Whirlwind Glaciers, so that a land party, *weeks later*, could use these supplies on a quick trip to Mt. Walsh (14,780 ft.) from a camp near the base of Mt. Wood. The desirable positions for the loads had been carefully worked out on airplane pictures during the spring, and though no known land party had ever set foot on the Whirlwind Glacier, we felt sure from the pictures taken by Walter Wood that the glacier would "go."

Now, on a warm, somewhat cloudy day, we were dropping these loads: two, at an altitude of about 10,000 ft., near the base of the N. W. ridge of Mt. Walsh; two (food and skis) about four miles N. of Mt. Walsh, above the icefall of the Whirlwind Glacier; one on Wolf Creek Glacier about a mile from the base of Mt. Steele; and the last near the junction of the Wolf Creek and Valiant Glaciers. After each box went out, we would circle and make another run over the target to be sure that the load had landed safely. As far as we could determine from the air, on this sombre July day, all boxes landed safely, though the chutes had not all collapsed when we last saw them, and one load I dropped was some distance from the target and in a crevassed area. Clouds were shutting in over the glacial valley as the last loads were dumped, and so our identification of the precise position of the last boxes was not as accurate as it should have been; however, that all loads had apparently landed safely was enough for us at that moment.

We sped up the Whirlwind Glacier again and climbed straight toward Mt. Logan, the gigantic monarch of this beautiful and savage white wilderness. Taking oxygen in sporadic gulps (not calmly and evenly as we should), we bounced around the plane, taking pictures frantically and trying to see all of the breath-taking panorama spreading below us. Lucania and Steele were swathed in

cloud, but Augusta, Cook, splendid Vancouver, and mighty Logan were largely free. As we swept above the famous 10,000 ft., cliffs of Mt. Logan, and across the plateau where the gallant 1925 expedition had fought their way and bivouacked before returning, our hearts were full of the majesty of the scene and the human struggles these great peaks had already witnessed. Beyond the top of Logan, appearing only a stone's throw farther, projected the summit of St. Elias, from which the Duke of the Abruzzi had viewed the range some 40 years before. What climbs and adventure will the next 40 years bring to this range which is one of the most awe-inspiring in the world?

A physical let-down was inevitable after the vigorous exercise and sudden rise to over 20,000 ft., and it was an exhausted group that landed at the Whitehorse airport at 10 A.M., July 1st. At supper that night, after a refreshing sleep, we felt better, although Mrs. Wood confessed that her legs were black and blue with bruises, the result of vigorously operating two cameras in a limited space full of projecting edges.

Not till over a month later did we see again any of the boxes dropped July 1st on Wolf Creek and Whirlwind snows. During the intervening period the expedition, as mentioned in the previous article, had established itself at a base camp on Wolf Creek Glacier, climbed Mt. Wood, and packed down most of the equipment off the mountain. August 4th marked the continuation of the Mt. Walsh journey. On that day Jackman and I set out on a three-day trip to accomplish two things: to test thoroughly a kind of pemmican in which we were interested, and to find the box dropped on Wolf Creek Glacier at the junction of the Valiant. For three days while reconnoitering we planned to live on pemmican, chocolate, and dextrose tablets. The route also was experimental. Airplane pictures indicated a good passage from Camp I on Mt. Wood to the position of the box by going up unnamed glacier to a height of land at about 8500 ft., thence down onto the Valiant Glacier, and down it to its junction with Wolf Creek. By taking this route we hoped more easily to pack snowshoes, crampons, and other items used on Mt. Wood to our line of march toward Mt. Walsh. The distances involved were small, and accordingly we hoped to complete the reconnaissance itself in three days.

On August 4th Jackman and I went to Camp I on Mt. Wood, but as low clouds descended on us we were unable to proceed far-

ther. Next morning, with heavy loads, we started up the unnamed glacier, and progressed in turn across muddy moraines, firm ice, and soggy snow to a real belvedere at the height of land. Across the Valiant Glacier rose the glittering icy bulwark of Mt. Steele, from this angle not so much beautiful as massive and impressive; Mt. Wood, farther away, looked its very best. The sun was warm, fuzzy blue polemoniums hid in the rocks at our feet, and the sky held only fluffy summer clouds. For a delicious hour we took pictures and lazed in that delightful spot; then, leaving our loads except for sleeping bags, we pushed on in the direction of the Valiant-Wolf Creek junction some four miles away.

We expected to find our box and have a tent up within three hours, but not so. Jackman slipped on a treacherous piece of ice while crossing a swift glacial stream, and sped down it nearly 100 yards before getting out. He was completely soaked and the air was chill, for the sun had by now declined behind the high wall of Mt. Steele. Luckily, however, he had dry underwear in his pack. Standing on a small piece of sponge rubber in the middle of ice hummocks on the center of that glacier, he then stripped and changed his clothes, presenting one of the most incongruous sights imaginable. The piece of rubber looked like a miniature bathmat, and he like one of Dante's lost souls or a masculine September Morn.

Suffice it to say that we went on rapidly after this; as a matter of fact we kept on moving rapidly nearly all night. We had a picture showing a 100-ft. mound near which the parachute and load had been dropped, but we failed to realize that the picture had been taken in 1935—not 1939—and that the mound had moved with the ice in that time about two miles from the point shown in the picture. The sky by now had clouded over and the light on the glacier at night was less than usual. We searched vigorously in the indistinct light, but not until 3 A.M. did we find the mound, and not until 4 A.M., after an hour's bivouac and an awakening in the rain, did we find the box. It was intact, and ten minutes after locating it we had the cover off, the tent set up, and were preparing to sleep some more.

We slept till noon, then returned without incident to our tent at the height of land. Here we had our last meal of chocolate and pemmican, and spent a happy evening. We had proved that the pemmican and chocolate could be used effectively as an emergency

ration, and we found it to taste as good (and as bad) on the third day as on the first.

Next morning we found that a wolf had carefully skirted our tents but harmed nothing. Caching our supplies, we started back to base camp, and shortly after Jack's watch said eight we were at the glacial bench where we had spent the night of August 4th. As nearly the whole day was ahead of us, we decided to climb up 600 ft. to Camp I on Mt. Wood, and bring down a tent previously left there. By the time we got to the camp, clouds had descended thickly, but we found the tent and were soon rummaging in the food box previously dropped by parachute. (Our 600-ft. climb had not been wholly altruistic!) The first thing we saw was a bottle of ketchup. I have never cared much for ketchup, nor has Jackman, but the pemmican diet must have done something to us. We seized the bottle, mixed the stuff with a little water, and drained it to the dregs. Then we cooked an eight-man portion of corn soup and a little bacon, which immediately made us terribly drowsy. Before Jack had finished cleaning the corn soup pot we were both asleep.

The next we knew, the watch said 12.20 and the clouds were still thick outside. Quickly we packed our loads, returned to the cache below, and started to Base Camp (three hours away); but to our great surprise the light began to fail. Our only watch said 1.30, yet it was getting dark. I have never felt so outraged. "You can't do this," I felt like shouting. There was of course no help for it. We had been in the clouds for two days and had not realized that Jackman's watch had slowed down since its immersion in the glacial stream. This shocking phenomenon of the sun going down at lunch time staggered us. We headed on, however, and despite getting off our route in the rain and mist that followed, managed to ford Willow Creek (more than waist deep), and get to Base Camp by midnight. We celebrated our arrival by eating a can of grapefruit apiece—probably like the ketchup incident a hangover from the pemmican diet—and then consumed a splendid meal that the others got up to cook for us.

Now that the expedition was sure the first of the supply boxes was all right, we were eager to start for Mt. Walsh. Accordingly on August 9th Wood and Bakewell crossed Wolf Creek to the camp on the other side. The following day Jackman and I retraced our steps to the height of land, and on the 11th packed loads down the Valiant to the box. Wood and Bakewell arrived the same after-

noon, having carried heavy packs up Wolf Creek Glacier. They had found bad going.

From now on things progressed swiftly. On the 12th we went on to where the next box was supposed to be. This was the box I had had trouble seeing after it had landed. After three hours' search, Wood and I went over to the base of Mt. Steele to see if we could find any food left at the Base Camp of the 1935 expedition. Washburn and I in 1937 had been unable to find this camp, but Wood and I located it this time in short order. The camp itself was on the verge of being covered by débris, so I believe no one will benefit from it in the future. Here we joyfully assembled a good tent, pots, jam, and some sardines, then hastily returned to the others.

Jackman, during our absence, had found the box, half a mile from its supposed position, so next day we were able to continue without relaying loads. This day we reconnoitered in two teams: Wood and Bakewell set out to climb high on one of the valley peaks in order to spy out a route through the Whirlwind icefall, for we had now reached the junction of the Wolf Creek and Whirlwind Glaciers; meanwhile Jackman and I set out to wrestle with the icefall itself.

Our route lay up the true right side, veering to the middle, then to the far left and finally towards the middle to avoid sérac falls. So many crevasses threaded the slope that not till we actually stood at the top of the icefall were we sure that the route would "go." I know it was the most intricate problem of the sort I have ever faced. A mile above the icefall we found the next box and the package of skis, then turned back to camp. Here we found that the other route did not "go," and, far worse, that Wood had been struck on the head by a falling stone.

Next day he still had a splitting headache, but we packed to an intermediate camp below the main part of the icefall. On the 15th we were up at 3 A.M., and soon had passed the spectacular icefall. Above the main crevasses we picked up a pair of skis left by Jackman and me on the 13th. With these we soon made a sledge, and pulled our loads to the next box. On the 16th the weather was still clear and we were able to sledge on some four miles farther to the base of the N. W. ridge of Mt. Walsh, at a height of about 10,300 ft.

Our two boxes dropped here were completely covered, and only the tip of the marker device in each instance was showing. After

considerable effort we unearthed these boxes and set up camp on the col. Here we could look straight down the Hubbard Glacier to the splendid snow and rock walls of Mt. Vancouver. This, now the highest unclimbed peak in North America, is one of the finest mountain prizes to be obtained anywhere.

We could hardly believe that our luck with the weather had held so long. Never before had we heard of such a spell of weather in the Yukon. Firmly entrenched within striking distance of Mt. Walsh, with two weeks' food and all necessary equipment, we were indeed happy.

However, we were determined to try Mt. Walsh next day if weather permitted. At 4 A.M. the weather looked bad, but by 5 it was clearing, and after a hearty breakfast we were off, Wood leading carefully through bad crevasses to where we could get onto the ridge. The weather was only fair this day, but fortunately it was not cold and there was no wind. Taking turns at leading and kicking steps, we mounted steadily, Wood leading the steep pitch that shows prominently in pictures of the ridge. Above this slope the angle of the ridge is less, but Mt. Walsh does not lower her defenses, for this part of the ridge is narrow and corniced with snow and ice towers blocking the way. We led very gingerly, first on one side then on the other, going over or around four of these delicate towers.

Above the last of these snow gendarmes we ate some panforte, then pushed on up the 40° slope that leads to the summit. Here a stiff crust made step kicking difficult. Snowily we advanced to the highest rock. As we sat here, tired by step kicking, we felt that the summit would probably be ours; but ten minutes later the summit appeared much farther from our reach. We had left our crampons 1000 ft. below, when it appeared they were an unnecessary burden. Now we met ice.

Fortunately, however, Jackman and I were able to cut up this slope, and soon came to crusted snow again. Once more we kicked upward along fragile rims of snow. Not until 100 yards from the top were we sure of the last part. Then Walter stopped leading, and the three insisted that I lead on to the summit. I had not stood with them on the summit of Mt. Wood, and this was their way of saying we missed you. Mountaineering is too big for individual triumphs—it is a team sport—but as I led on to the summit, I knew

how they had felt that windswept day on Mt. Wood, and it meant a lot to me.

Films of cloud brushed across the summit, now shutting us in, now revealing the glories of the St. Elias range. It was a scene vague, misty, dreamlike. Steele, Lucania and Logan—magnificent all—held the eye, while to the west the great glaciers swept off into oblivion in the clouds. Vancouver was hidden, but Hubbard and Fairweather were distinctly visible. How the toil of the ascent dropped away from us in that breath-taking half hour!

Then came the descent, without incident except when Bakewell and Jackman, straddling a flimsy knife edge of snow, and facing each other, put on an unexpected Alphonse-Gaston act. "I shall belay you." "Not at all. Let me belay you." This seemed so funny to Wood and me that in laughing we nearly fell off a far more substantial piece of ridge. The rest of the descent was less humorous but equally successful. We reached camp at 9.30, a little over 14 hours from the time we left it.

Next day Jackman was sure he heard an airplane, but the plane turned out to be a misguided bee resting on his hat brim. This was not the only wild life we were to see, for after a day's rest and some skiing we started back, progressing steadily through the area of birds and insects to the area of sheep on the hoof and from there on August 22nd to Base Camp and the area of sheep in the frying pan. What matter that we had had a bad day with 90-lb. loads on the 21st, what matter that it stormed as soon as we reached Base Camp; here was food, here was rest, here was mail from home. Thanks to an unprecedented streak of favorable weather and to the parachute system, we had reconnoitered the Whirlwind Glacier, climbed Mt. Walsh and returned in a dozen days.