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Aconcagua at First Glance

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WHERE mountaineering is concerned, one effect of the present war has been to turn the attention of the climbing fraternity of both North and South America to the peaks, passes and glaciers of our own Hemisphere and to produce an increased acquaintance with the mountain resources which are to be found in the Americas. With an altitude of 22,829 ft., Aconcagua is the highest mountain of the Hemisphere and of the world outside of Asia, and has proved a centre of interest ever since its first ascent in 1897 by Zurbriggen and Vines of FitzGerald's expedition. What is not so generally realized, perhaps, is that the surrounding region contains a number of lesser peaks which are worthy of some attention in their own right.

It had been running through my mind, ever since arriving in Montevideo, that it was entirely improper for anyone interested in mountains to remain in South America for very long without at least one genuine attempt to see the High Andes in a manner more acceptable to a mountaineer than from an airplane flying at 20,000 ft. and 180 miles an hour. Accordingly, when the opportunity presented itself in the form of a two-weeks' wartime leave, I set about making plans for a quick visit to the region of Aconcagua, hoping to obtain at least an introduction to this part of the Andes. Those who have attempted to fit their climbing ambitions into a fortnight's holiday know how heartbreaking the procedure can be, and I realized regretfully that much high climbing would probably be out of the question, not only because the last eight years had been spent largely behind an office desk, but also because of the limitations imposed by lack of adequate high-altitude equipment and the inevitable delays caused by an unfamiliarity with conditions of travel in the Cordillera.

I found an enthusiastic collaborator in Theodore Crombie, a

Secretary of the British Embassy at Montevideo, and also established contact by correspondence with Sergeant Miguel Cafaro of the Argentine Air Force stationed at Mendoza, a member of the Club Andinista Mendoza, who proved anxious to join us in an attempt on one of the smaller peaks of the region.

On February 14, 1944, the Panagra plane brought the Montevideo contingent from Buenos Aires to Mendoza at the eastern foot of the Andean slope and terminus of the Transandine Highway. We immediately set about securing the necessary food supplies and, with the assistance of Sergeant Cafaro, managed to borrow further equipment such as ice-axes, tents and a primus stove with which to supplement our own meagre assortment. Two days of our precious time were thus spent in making final preparations, although our impatience at the delay was softened by the pleasant hospitality extended us by the American Vice Consul stationed at Mendoza, Richard Post, and his wife.

Late on the afternoon of February 17th, the three members of the party, plus baggage, were loaded into a Ford and started up the Transandine Highway for Puente del Inca, where a hotel and military "refugio" are situated near the top of the Paso de las Cuevas at an elevation of 8860 ft. This was to be our base of operations.

Although now repaired, the narrow-gauge railway over the pass between Argentina and Chile at that time had been interrupted for several years on the Argentine side by extensive landslides, the highway then being the only land connection between the two countries. The highway, itself, is a remarkable piece of engineering, especially in its lower part where it climbs abruptly from the plains in a series of incredible serpentine sweeps from one mountain shoulder to the next, until it crosses a 10,000-ft. pass over the "Pre-Cordillera" and descends to the upland plateau at the base of the main Cordillera. After passing the delightful irrigated oasis of Uspallata, which is now being made into somewhat of a winter ski centre, the road enters the final awe-inspiring gorges of the Vacas Valley through which it ascends in a series of tunnels and ragged curves for many miles to the more open reaches of the upper part of the pass at the foot of the snowcapped peaks. All this was very impressive to the dusty traveller after the flat Argentine pampas.

Through the courtesy of the Commandant of the local Argentine mountain regiment, we were given the use of quarters at the mili-

tary "refugio" at Puente del Inca, where we spent our last night in a real bed before starting the trek. Arrangements were made at the hotel to obtain mules to transport the party to a point known as "Plaza de Mulas" and thence to a higher camp, which we hoped to establish as a base for a proposed attempt on El Cuerno (18,216 ft.) and, possibly, El Catedral (19,700 ft.). We were confidently told that the "Plaza" was an easy day's trip from Puente del Inca, that we need not start early and, a crowning touch, that, as a concession to our untrained condition, we might find it pleasant, although not strictly necessary, to having a riding mule to share between the three of us. All these were bits of information the inaccuracy of which was to be overwhelmingly brought home to us on the following day.

The party got underway on the 18th at a leisurely 11.15 a.m. with a muleteer (*baquiano*), his mount, three pack-mules and our single riding-mule. The Horcones Valley, along which the route lay, joins the Cuevas Valley from the N. a mile or so above Puente del Inca. At this junction the full prospect of Aconcagua's tremendous southern wall is suddenly and impressively presented, rising from the head of the S.E. branch of the Horcones about 15 miles away.

With this inspiring sight as a beacon, we turned northwards, passing a small deep-blue alpine lake, the Lago de Horcones, and descending gradually across meadows to the main Horcones stream, over which the party was ferried individually on the back of our mule. The four nondescript dogs which had attached themselves to the party leaped into the millrace and somehow managed to reach the farther bank. They had undoubtedly done it before.

The track continued for some miles along the true right bank of the stream, climbing steadily over the long slopes of scree that originate from towering cliffs of "boiler-plate" which flank the valley to the E. About 2.00 p.m. we reached the point where the Lower Horcones (S.E.) valley, descending from Aconcagua to the S., joins the main, or Upper, Horcones. Here a second torrent had to be crossed, and here too, one of the dogs gave up and went home. The other three, for some unaccountable reason best known to themselves, stayed with us for the entire trip.

¹ According to local usage the article "El" is always employed with mountain names even though the name itself is feminine in gender, the word "Cerro" being omitted although understood.

Beyond this junction the Upper Horcones Valley broadens, in some places, to nearly half a mile. To the left rose Tolosa (18,040 ft.), a sharp volcanic peak that has been ascended several times by its northern flank. The S. face presents fine sweeping cliffs, topped by a hanging glacier, and supported by sharp ridges. On our right good views were had of the smooth varicolored rock facets of Almacenes (16,204 ft.), and ahead of us appeared the snow-covered bulk of Los Dedos (18,285 ft.), framed by the valley cliffs and appearing to block the way.

The Upper Horcones Valley above this point is a wild composite of savage cliffs, scree and floodplain, almost devoid of any visible plant and animal life. We were now close under the massive western precipices of Aconcagua, whose heights by this time were hidden in the mists of a gathering storm.

The long grind up over the interminable broken rock of the valley floor was beginning to have its effect on our flagging energy. Upon reaching a landslide which had all but obstructed the valley, the track climbed for several hundred feet to avoid the stream. Too late was it discovered that a recent mud avalanche, descending from the base of the cliffs above, had cut a transverse trench some 30 ft. in depth for the entire length of the slope, thus blocking all advance in that direction and making an onerous detour necessary. These mud avalanches are a peculiar feature of this region and seem to form as the result of the action of rainfall or melting snow on the higher slopes which starts a flow of a type of red volcanic mud of singular viscosity. This flow appears to gather with it at first small stones and then larger boulders sometimes weighing up to a ton or more, the whole mass ploughing a deep scar as it moves. The mud then dries, forming an amazingly strong binding material that cements the walls of the trough firmly and leaving virtually a concrete-lined trench until the next inundation.

The last few miles of the route that day led up a steepening gradient at the head of the Upper Horcones. The haze of physical weariness which by now surrounded the travellers was broken momentarily, at least for me, when, with some detachment and more amusement, I watched my two companions mount our lone riding-mule together, fore and aft, to make full use of the available transport, and together bite the dust, fortunately with no permanent ill effects.

At long last we emerged on the lateral moraine to the E. of the

Upper Horcones glacier, where a small level area has become known to the various Aconcagua expeditions as the Plaza de Mulas (13,875 ft.). It was 9.15 P.M. before we reached this point, 20 miles from Puente del Inca and an ascent of 5000 ft., not such an "easy day" as we had been led to believe, particularly as, for the last hour, we had been moving into the teeth of a driving snowstorm with the temperature at about 25°F.

At Plaza de Mulas there was established the elaborate base camp of the Link Expedition, then engaged not only in making an ascent of Aconcagua by the standard route on the N., but also in attempting the lower unclimbed S. summit, and in taking weather observations. The expedition consisted of the leader, Juan Link, and his wife, Tibor Sekelj, Juan Zechner, Mario Bertrone, Eric Grimm and his wife, Alberto Kneidl and Walter Schiller. The group, by this time, had been on Aconcagua for three weeks, Sekelj, Bertone and Zechner having reached the N. summit on February 13th from a camp at 19,300 ft. without incident, constituting the 19th successful ascent to date according to their calculations. The summit had also been previously reached on January 13, 1944, by a strong Chilean party consisting of Alejandro Fergadiott, Walter Bochmann and Juan Harsem in a total of four days from Puente del Inca.

Sekelj, Bertone and Zechner were in residence at the base camp upon our arrival. Perceiving that our own tents were uncomfortably small, they kindly offered us the use of their larger supply tent which was gratefully accepted because of the violence of the storm. The three men were awaiting the return of the rest of the Link party, then at one of their higher camps making an attempt on the S. summit. They told us that, in addition to having climbed Aconcagua, they had also made a ski ascent of El Catedral, one of the first such ascents accomplished in this region.

The Link Expedition by then had established three advance camps on Aconcagua above Plaza de Mulas, the highest being at 21,000 ft. The one next below, at 19,350 ft., consisted of a prefabricated plastic hut large enough to accommodate from six to eight men and weighing over 400 lbs. which had been set up at great labor and was to be left standing for a year or more to test it out. The test was unexpectedly completed about two weeks later, however, when the hut was found thoroughly wrecked by

storm, although it was intended to be of a semi-permanent nature and had been well anchored.

At the base camp the storm raged intermittently throughout the next 48 hours, with high winds, snow and a minimum recorded temperature of 10° F. In our comparatively sheltered position, it was realized that conditions higher on the peaks must be very much worse. We remained in our sleeping bags during most of this period, venturing outside only long enough to tighten the tentropes and to catch an occasional glimpse of the summit cliffs of Aconcagua and of El Cuerno through the spindrift.

Finally, late in the afternoon of the 20th, it was decided to beat a retreat, as the storm still showed little signs of abating, while the higher mountain slopes were now covered by several feet of fresh snow and would not be in condition for two or three days, allowing us insufficient time to accomplish much, if any, climbing. Regretfully we abandoned all hope of being able to ascend El Cuerno, now looming vaguely through the clouds, and took leave of Plaza de Mulas.

As we descended the Upper Horcones Valley, the weather began to relent slightly and, on reaching the junction with the Lower Horcones at about 12,000 ft., it was decided to set up a camp from where it would be possible to make an approach to the southern wall of Aconcagua.

On the following morning, which fortunately was fine, the three of us commenced the ascent of the Lower Horcones Valley. One interesting feature noted close to our camp was the existence of a considerable body of stagnant glacial ice, buried beneath moraine at the junction of the two valleys. It was apparently unconnected with its former source of supply, the Lower Horcones glacier, which has now retreated several miles to an altitude of about 13,000 ft. The permanent snowline in this region now generally lies between 16,000 and 17,000 ft., and there has been a marked recession of many of the glaciers throughout this area.

By utilizing a series of abandoned central moraines, an easy route was found to the higher reaches of the valley. To the left rose the imposing cliffs of Aconcagua's supporting buttresses, while on the right the valley was enclosed by the great stratified wall of Almacenes, connected, further along, to the eastern arête of Aconcagua by a line of steeply inclined strata, forming a serrated crest of gendarmes not unlike a picket fence.

After several hours of climbing, the curving valley opened out into a sweeping cirque, exposing to full view the magnificent S. face of Aconcagua itself. From where we stood at about 14,000 ft. to the E. of the Lower Horcones glacier, this tremendous wall fell away from the sharp summit ridges in a series of great precipices and hanging glaciers for some 9000 ft., ranking, possibly, even with such great mountain declivities as the S. face of Monte Rosa or the S. wall of Mt. McKinley.

The lower portion of the valley glacier at this point is characterized by an area of ice penitentes formed, apparently, more by differential melting than by the fracturing of the ice into seracs. Other fine examples of these penitentes are found at the terminus of the Upper Horcones glacier to the W. of Aconcagua.

The rock walls to the S. of the Lower Horcones Valley demonstrated an interesting combination of undisturbed sedimentary beds of considerable thickness, coupled with the occurrence of marked unconformities and the much-distorted strata resulting from a great degree of anticlinal folding, all in conjunction with evidence of marked volcanic action. In fact it might be said that the entire region surrounding Aconcagua presents a beautiful geologic potpourri, constituting either a geologist's nightmare or paradise, depending upon the individual point of view. The mass of Aconcagua, itself, appears at least from a short distance away, to be composed of horizontally bedded sedimentary rocks, showing little evidence of deformation, although authorities disagree on this point, some claiming that the mountain is essentially of volcanic origin.²

After feasting our eyes on these magnificent surroundings for several hours, the peaks became obscured in gathering clouds, and we returned to camp late in the afternoon. The 22nd was again clear and, to take advantage of this fact, we ascended the W. ridge of Almacenes to about 13,500 ft., from where fine views were obtained of the peaks to the N., W. and S. of the main Horcones watershed. As always, we were thrilled at the sight of the silver pinpoint of the Panagra plane and the echoes set up by the beat of its motors as, on its appointed rounds, it swept high above the peaks and snows which hemmed us in.

The mules arrived by appointment about noon on February

² *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th Edition, vol. i, p. 128.

23rd, and with regret we turned our backs on the jagged peaks and gleaming snows of this magnificent range, with many a back-over-the-shoulder look. We were beginning to feel really in trim, and the untimely return to civilized life at the end of so short an acquaintance with the high Andes came hard indeed. Before reaching Puente del Inca, we officially ended our expedition, as all good expeditions should end, by a dip in the icy waters of a mountain lake, in this case, the Lago de Horcones.

The general region roundabout Aconcagua is a rewarding one for the mountaineer, even aside from the main peak itself. The open valleys give ready access to most of the peaks which often present an agreeable combination of rock and snow, the principal difficulty being the frequent fords across swift-flowing streams which sometimes can constitute a serious obstacle to an unmounted party. The standard routes on most of the peaks do not present a high order of technical difficulty, although new routes can be found on almost any of these mountains which will satisfy the yearnings of even the most ardent "expert." The best season for climbing is considered to be during the months of January and February, although, as in our case, sudden severe storms at any time may sweep in from the Pacific against which one must be constantly on guard, particularly at high altitudes.

Among the many fine peaks which are to be found in this area both on the Argentine and Chilean sides of the Andes may be listed Tupungato (22,300 ft.), Mercedario (22,210 ft.) and Juncal (*ca.* 20,000 ft.), in addition to those mentioned previously in this article. Winter skiing in this part of the Andes is also excellent, the Chileans, particularly, having developed some fine ski facilities. The high-altitude skiing possibilities have not been fully explored, however, and should be well worth more attention.

A short description of the fate of the Link Expedition may here prove of interest. On his return to our Lower Horcones camp, our baquiano informed us that tragedy had apparently overtaken the Link party. On February 20th, the day on which we left their base camp and the fourth day of the storm, Sekelj, accompanied by Pasten, a baquiano who had climbed Aconcagua the previous year, started for the higher camps to try to establish contact with Link and to find out how his summit party had weathered the storm. The two men reached the plastic hut at the second advance camp

where they met Grimm and his wife descending (the latter was suffering slightly from frost bite) and accompanied them to Plaza de Mulas. The Grimms had left the summit party at 5.00 p.m. on the afternoon of the 17th in a gathering storm at an elevation of about 22,000 ft., still heading for the southern summit, and had returned to the highest camp at 21,000 ft., where they remained for two days of storm.

Knowing that the higher camps by now were stocked with food for only two or three days more, Sekelj and Bertone (Zechner had a frostbitten foot) made a second strong bid to find the summit party on the 21st. Although snow conditions were very adverse, they managed to push on through all the camps without finding a trace until, at the site of the highest one (21,000 ft.), they now discovered that the tent and equipment had either been removed or had blown away. No sign of Link or his companions apparently could be discerned anywhere above and the search party returned to base camp after having ascended some 6000 ft. in heavy snow in about twelve hours.

Further rescue efforts were temporarily abandoned and the base camp was evacuated. Upon our return to Puente del Inca, on the 23rd, we learned that details of the tragedy from the surviving members of the expedition, who by now had given up hope for Link and his wife and their two companions, Kneidl and Schiller. A later attempt to find the summit party was made by Grimm accompanied by several baquianos but without success as they again were hampered by bad weather.

Following our return to Montevideo, we learned, some ten days later, that Sergeant Cafaro, with two other Argentine climbers, had organized a search party from Mendoza. On February 29th they discovered the frozen body of Schiller, the 65-year-old geologist, lying partially clad outside his sleeping-bag in the wreckage of a tent at an altitude of 22,300 ft. which apparently he had pitched. No trace of the other three members of the party could be discovered, and further search had to be abandoned because of the onset of more stormy weather. Many of the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Schiller and of his companions still appear to lack adequate explanation.