

Yerupajá—1966

LEIF-NORMAN PATTERSON *and* DAVID ISLES

Patterson describes the ascent of the west face.

MOUNTAINEERING becomes difficult from the very start if you have a passion for the straightest lines from bottom to top of the steepest faces and yet are neither an Eiger Nordwand “steel-nerve” nor a Yosemite “best-in-the-world.”

That is how it happened that we were sitting indecisively on the 17,000-foot Yerupajá glacier, biting nails and juicy oranges. We were contemplating the arrow-straight centerline through the slightly cone-shaped west face of Yerupajá, weighing the danger of the top cornices against the protection offered by the convex face, the rocks under the 21,759-foot summit against the angle of the slope. A definite break in the summit cornices encouraged us, but we could not see how to run a whole expedition up that 50° face. Some of us were hot for doing a new, exciting route, others would be just as happy with a first repeat of Harrah’s and Maxwell’s famous 1950 climb. (*A.A.J.*, 1951, 8:1, pp. 22-32.)

It took Argentine Club Andino Bariloche’s 35-year jubilee expedition to start us off. Spearheaded by Paul Dudzinski and Jorge Peterek plus pretty wives, this group arrived at emerald green lake Jahua one windy day. And *they* had not just come to catch trout with their hands; no, they were headed for the monstrously steep and fluted southwest side of Jirishanca. But first they were going to do a warm-up climb, the west face of Yerupajá!

Our egos were deflated to nothing when we learned of these plans. At the same time, we were inspired to lay aside hesitations and doubts and do something.

Les Wilson and I scouted the bottom approach to the west face, even spent a day cutting slightly over a rope-length into the ice and leaving a fixed line. We concluded the whole climb would be a Herculean job of ice-carving, comparable to the sculpting of Mount Rushmore. Sure, the angle was not much more than that of a very steep ski slope, and whatever little pieces whizzed by now and then only scared *me*—but how would it ever be finished?

One afternoon Peterek arrived in our tri-tent city on the glacier, inquiring modestly if perhaps we might have a little extra space for the night? —

Yes, that could be. What might this gentleman be up to? — Oh, just look a little at the face. — Solo? — Perhaps, yes, if there was no one to climb with. — Hm. Over 4000 feet. Ice. And where was the rest of the CAB expedition? — Not arrived yet, transportation troubles most likely. And Paul's time was very limited. — How about joining one of us for an inspection trip in the face tomorrow? — Fine. Very good. Pleased.

That is how Pete and I came to be companions. I was worried I would not measure up when paired with such a first-rate climber of well known Polish courage and endurance, but we hit it off perfectly on the little test trip and so the die was cast.

Pete and I would try the direct face route alpine-style; John Crowley, Barry Hagen, David Isles and Les Wilson would follow the southwest ridge over the south peak expedition-style, and hopefully we would all meet somewhere up there. A Swiss party had just retreated off this south summit for a second time, reporting poor prospects for reaching the main peak from it. We wondered why, since the route did not appear difficult. In fairness it must be said, however, that the Swiss hit an unfortunate period of high winds and clouds.

Pete laughed heartily at the wild suggestion of food for two weeks in the face. "Three days — and it'll be done!" he smiled. But having an extraordinarily big stomach even at high altitude and a foreboding of less than programmed progress, I insisted till we had piled up enough Spanish rice, tomato and pea soup, home dried slivers of meat and Peruvian candy to last us for eight full days.

We would only be two, with no support from below, and as always the problem was to select a safe minimum of gear from a collection of too much. In the end we sorted out about two dozen ice screws, half of them Marwa "cork-screws", the other half home-improved Salewa spirals. We took ten assorted chromolly rock pitons for the forbidding rockband, five aluminum pickets, David's best 150-foot perlon rope, about 1500 feet of quarter-inch nylon ropes, twenty carabiners, slings, ice hammers and a shovel. A good old Phoebus stove with one gallon of kerosene and one pot completed our kitchen gear. While I, not believing in down-jackets, brought both a sleeping bag and a fair ensolite pad, Pete trusted his luck to down jacket, pants and halfbag exclusively. For the next fortnight, every evening brought a major show when he prepared his bed on ropes, rucksacks, overboots and helmet. Pete's only surplus item, a pair of brand new Simond long-spiked crampons, whirled crazily down the face a week later. They were useless on the hard ice.

By Alpine standards we took a lot, but then we had over 4000 feet of unknown climbing ahead, on top of our 17,000-foot starting position.

* * *

"Pete, what's it like?"

"Looks better, perhaps snow."

"How far?"

"Three-four meters."

"You've ten to go."

— — —

"How's that snow? You've still got seven meters."

"Sorry, Leif. Ice here too."

"Nothing better?"

"No. Will try further right."

"OK."

— — —

"Pete, what's it like?"

"Looks better. . . ."

* * *

I leaned back into space, hanging out slightly in the two belay pitons, trying to take the weight off the leg that had lost all feeling. I scanned the immense ice surfaces. If they had not been tilted, nobody would have bothered even walking on them. Although it was not too hot, the intense sun burnt viciously. It soaked that little white surface layer with water, too. Ice pitons melted out. Tomorrow, after a chill night, our puny traces would be erased and there would be a little more glassy stuff to fight. The shadow of that longish, brown rotten heap called Rasac began creeping over the glacier. When it had swallowed up the big crevasses, it would be time to quit for the day.

Some ice loosened under the broken séracs a few hundred feet across the face. It sounded like rushing water and looked that way too. Big sections of ice tumbled and twisted sideways, around, all the while moving faster and faster till they disappeared over a drop. A little white cloud rose silently below.

Tiny black spots approached a point near the big crevasses and the shadow of Rasac, following thin dotted lines that converged in a spiral pattern. Our friends were returning to Base after a day's carry and were safely across the path of those massive ice-avalanches which flashed down over 3000 feet from the south summit. Every day half a dozen of these would shoot all the way down and clear across the glacier in less than twenty seconds.

Bits and pieces of ice flew by as Pete kept on cutting above. Now and then something bigger or faster zoomed past, causing my heart to jump. Pete would only straighten the down glove inside his happy-red cap and continue undaunted. I knew he wanted to get moving, nothing but front points preferably. But he, too, saw the impossibility. Sure, we were trying to climb alpine-style, but this really was expeditioneering. Each day we cut a few rope-lengths (once only two!), strung the hand line and retreated to a cave-platform for the night, until, 1500 feet higher, we were able to erect our next camp. It was certainly slower, but the only sensible way unless we wished to carve unprotected shelves in the ice every night and bivouac sleeplessly. And at least we always brought up ropes and hardware with us, leaving nothing to mar the mountain (save the very first 200 feet).

Blood-red light from the dying sun splashed around us when we landed at our semi-cave again, the second one, in the "crevasse that never was." This platform, partly covered by a dripping ice cliff, sheltered us beautifully. Night had already crept into the valley of lakes Jahua and Soltera and was eating away at the base of the mountains. The desert-dry Negras had lost their brownish color. Not a breath of wind nor a sound other than our own hearts disturbed the dying day. Not even a condor was in sight. The west spur of Rondoy, below us, still strutted sharply out of darkness — another challenge biding its time.

In the light of a flickering candle we melted snow, ate glop and drank hot sugar-milk. No jokes about surplus food cut the stillness. This was the end of the fourth day and progress was decreasing exponentially. After the dizzying success of the first two days when the ice unexpectedly had degenerated to an easy layer the axe could penetrate in a blow or two, we had hit really hard ice again. Today I had even given up getting in the ice screws a couple of times. The face was steepening. Yesterday we had made a traverse as airy as they come under some protective ice-overhangs, hoping to hit snow. A cloud had sailed in and made everything look white. But today all was green ice again.

As day after day faded away, the weather became even better. Not a cloud broke the metal blue sky. The scorched hills looked drier than ever, and the air above them seemed saturated with dirty brown smog. The landscape looked sterile and monotonous. Nothing, except the sun, changed perceptibly, not even our position. We were two souls entombed in nothingness, isolated from everything living; two insects scratching tiny marks on a great white wall.

It was not an heroic fight of hard moves, instant challenges—just a long, long haul against increasing odds. We pitted persistence against brute size, hope against suffering. Every day took something out of us that was not replaced. Thin air, headaches, burnt lips, swollen gums, tooth-aches, reduced food rations—all worked against us.

We continued, perhaps because up did not seem much worse than down. At the end of the sixth day we made our home over the airy void in a little cave dug in a big crevasse at the 3000-foot mark. On the seventh, except for a brief exploration above, we had to rest. The eighth we brought up the lines we had used on the section below. The ninth we set out to conquer the last, upper part of the face, to cross those rockbands about which we were desperately anxious. Our optimism rose, as the ice below those rocks changed to fluted granular snow. Moving perceptibly and relatively easily for several hundred feet was such a delightful change that our spirits went soaring, dragging our bodies at a lesser rate.

And then we failed miserably. Even before we got close enough to lay hand on them, I saw the cliffs above were steeper, smoother and more compact than we had anticipated. Pete tried to cross the very wide and open couloir acting as a chute for all the summit cornices. To make time, he front-pointed across that dangerous trap, but the rope was not long enough and he ended up spending ever so long right in the middle of it, belayed through one insecure ice piton. Studying the steep rock-projection leading into a little spur on the other side, he decided against going further and returned. But had it not been for my stubborn refusal, I think he might still have taken the chance and tried the *verglas*-filled chute which offered a possibility.

Pete did not give up. He next climbed on the rocks directly above our shabby picket belay, somehow got in a rock piton, gingerly removed overboots and in the warm sunshine started that careful feeling over the rocks prior to a difficult move. He made one, but that was all. No cracks, just smooth slabs—and what was not smooth dribbled off at a touch of the hand. Surely a place for a few bolts.

Dejected, we climbed down to the cave again, trying to choose between two alternatives: the steep, beautiful 1000-foot ice-flutings some distance to the left, or an exit up on the summit ridge, far to the right, where we would retrace Harrah's and Maxwell's steps. This time I had to acquiesce. The flutings were not corniced but had ominous tipsy-turvy ice figures along the sides and were hard to reach. Pete wisely pointed out that not only did the exit to the right look easier, but it would bring us closer to friends and safety as well.

This "easy" escape, starting with a simple walk along the crevasse we were camped in, consumed the next *two* days. We really climbed, too — no line stringing — exposed to all the finest cornices on the mountain. We crossed a chute by rappelling into it, fought schrunds and plowed through very steep sugar snow as stable as a heap of marbles. Then we barely escaped under a heavy, sagging cornice.

The relief of setting foot on the ridge felt like pardon to a "lifer." From the confinement of the wall the eye now roamed in complete liberty into breathtaking drop-offs, over soaring ridges and stupendous rock faces, across endless rows of rusty hills and green and black lakes. The south summit appeared below us and for the first time we felt real satisfaction.

Right in front towered the dark rock triangle of the Yerupajá summit, gently capped by westward cornices. We knew Harrah and Maxwell had beaten it once; yet things had changed: more rock, less snow. And we were weakening. Our food was finished. We still had more kerosene, but everyone knows the taste. . . .

A little down from the ridge and closer to the rocks we dug our first really good cave and blocked the entrance. The night fell bitterly cold here at 21,000 feet.

* * *

"Looks like a fine day outside, Pete. Anything doing?"

"Just that summit walk."

"Oh, yes. I'd nearly forgotten. It's so nice and warm in the bag. Hand me the stove."

"Here. What's on the menu?"

"Hot dishwater à la Spanish rice flavor."

"Fine. Doesn't matter. Tomorrow we'll have steaks with your friends. What've you been up to all this time anyway?"

"Imitating burros. You say it's going to be easy over that south summit? Those cornices. . . ."

"Sure, Leif. Just a walk."

* * *

Pete stuffed our remaining paper into the remnants of his overboots, and we set off on the last lap in warm sunshine — a very pleasant contrast to the chill mornings in the face. Neither of us was too peppy on this, our twelfth day. A couple of rope-lengths across crumbly snow-ice brought us into the shade of the summit rocks. Rotten and down-sloping, they were at least broken and the left skyline not overly steep. Pete led gracefully, plugged a few so-so pitons, cleaned off snow and head-sized pebbles and made the most of some tricky "crampon-on-rock" moves.

We rested in an amusing natural ice cave under a cornice, which led to a balcony affording a super-view of the whole west face. Then we plowed the last few rope-lengths across the steep backs of the usual sugarlike cornices, symbolically belayed on our three remaining pickets.

Eventually we, the snails, stood on the partly corniced little summit ridge; at each end was a small tower, and in the middle a man-sized block leaned precariously over the wild flutings, the rock band and our route far below. Atop the bridge of the mighty ship Huayhuash, we plowed through an ocean of rolling, brown hills. Myriads of tiny snow-crystals glittered in the hazy air; even at this height there was a tang of smoke. To starboard the southeast ridge thrust out and down. It would give the Scots a handful. Too tired to traverse the whole summit ridge, we never did get a glimpse into the fantastic northeast face.

Late in the afternoon we descended, ever more slowly. Darkness caught us as we entered the ice cave. But we decided against a bivouac in this drafty place and fixed the 600-foot quarter-inch line we had brought up here, returning safely in semi-rappel by flashlight to a warm, if foodless cave.

The thirteenth of July, our thirteenth day, was so beautiful and pleasant we lingered long before starting toward the south summit. At the saddle between the two peaks a huge, evil looking cornice and a short, but awesome ridge suddenly faced us. Pete declared that he could not climb up any more and that his feet were freezing. Clouds ominously created themselves out of nothing. My own limbs felt strangely jelly-like. The sneaking fear that paralyzes a trapped animal raised its blind head. I thought of the English on Haramosh. What should we do? Starve, and wait for the black rider?

We did the simplest and most naïve thing possible: traversed out into the face below the saddle (where Harrah and Maxwell once had found difficult cornices) so we could see more of the lower parts of the mountain, and shouted for help!

Eventually, after many tries, John and Barry answered the frightened yells, from far below the south peak. They were fighting the agonies of stomach troubles in their highest camp. Yet they promised to climb toward the peak immediately if we would try from our side.

We went all out and somehow managed to get across the south peak, the final and sharpest culmination of rickety snow structures. The last traverse down toward John's bright flashlight was like a flight among the stars.

Then we hugged our friends. Safety, chocolates, soup . . . unbelievable!

John fashioned a little cave while Barry treated Pete's feet in the nick of time. The bivouac was cool, but outside the temperature dropped below a frosty 0° F.

Next day Pete hurried down alone along the ropes of the well-prepared route, while the rest of us descended only to the highest camp at 20,000 feet—an enormous supply dump sufficient to conquer Everest. Dave joined us again after having exchanged a broken crampon at Base. The following day he and John went for the main summit while Barry and I started down to Base. The packs were much too heavy, but otherwise we had the most enjoyable ridge walking imaginable. Still another day brought us down to Lake Jahua, and we saw Dave and John disappear in clouds at the summit. Then we walked the twenty-five miles to Chiquián in a day which the burros liked even less than we. Literally carrying their loads and pushing one of them, we entered the pitch dark, muddy streets of Chiquián by flashlight—very humble *conquistadores* indeed.

Isles recounts the support party's southwest ridge ascent.

When Leif and Peterek started cutting their way up the west face, the four of us got busy in an attempt to be on time for the rendezvous at the top. The first job was to porter supplies along the glacier, over an avalanche chute, and up to the first camp at the base of the southwest ridge (about 18,000 feet). Crossing the chute was the most nerve-wracking part of the whole climb; avalanches would come suddenly and unannounced as large sections of the hanging glacier broke off. To our surprise the tracks of the Swiss party passed close to the base of the wall; in several places they were obliterated by cascades of ice. We held further to the right near a glacier on Rasac's wall that appeared to be equally unstable but proved solid enough. Crossing became ritualized: we would pause on the downstream side, fill our lungs, ask for the mountain's indulgence, and then plunge across as rapidly as packs and altitude allowed. Once across, we would drop to the snow and recover our breath.

Our route followed that of the Swiss party pretty closely all the way to just below the south summit; in fact, we were able to make frequent use of their fixed ropes. Often when cutting steps we would come across still older fixed ropes which lay frozen in the ice from previous expeditions. After some false starts we found a reasonably convenient route from Camp I to a steep ice face which lay just below the ridge. Getting across a bergschrund below this slope and then cutting steps and fixing ropes on it took at least three days and forced us to establish an intermediate Camp I½. We were falling behind schedule. A route which from below looked relatively straightforward, marvelous weather, and altitude-induced lethargy

(plus a four-man tent that was much too comfortable) caused us to adopt bankers' hours. To make matters worse, we were carrying such a load of food, fuel, and climbing equipment that the enthusiasm which the surroundings and goal inspired was often ground out by the drudgery and fatigue of portering. Ours, Les assured us, was a prime example of the "Alaskan wave type" expedition: if you start with enough equipment at the bottom and keep on plugging, you are bound to eventually slosh over the summit.

We knew we were making progress once the ridge was reached. It was thin and steep with impressive drops and views on either side. Les and Barry went ahead and fixed ropes up most of it but John and I had the pleasure of being first to the site of the last Swiss camp (about 20,000 feet). We celebrated by eating some Choc-Ovo and jam they had cached there. The next day, July 8, Camp II was set up near the Swiss cave overlooking Siulá.

From here Les had to return to the U. S. and his job. I accompanied him back to Jahuacocha in order to fetch a new pair of crampons. As I was climbing back up to Camp II on July 14, I met an ebullient Jorge Peterek descending. He quickly described their success and the meeting of the two parties at the south summit; his burned and peeling face was as descriptive as his words. At Camp II, over soup and tea, Leif and Barry announced that they were ready to go down leaving John Crowley and me to make another visit to the summit. Using the ropes and caves left by the previous party, we did this in the next two days and reached the summit without great difficulty on July 17.

The weather now began to deteriorate; new snow fell, the wind increased, and ridges became very awkward to descend. With extremely heavy packs, John and I finally reached the glacier on July 20 where we were met by our porters (roped together with a 15-foot length of rawhide). A small slide came down as we were crossing the avalanche chute for the last time; a not too subtle reminder by the mountain that we should consider ourselves lucky rather than skilled.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Cordillera Huayhuash, Peru.

ASCENTS: Yerupajá, 21,759 feet, July 12, 1966 (Patterson, Peterek) — First ascent of West Face and second ascent of the mountain; July 17, 1966 (Crowley, Isles) — second ascent of Southwest Ridge.

PERSONNEL: Leif-Norman Patterson, John Crowley, David Isles, Leslie D. Wilson, *Americans*; Barry Hagen, *Canadian*; Jorge Peterek, Paul Dudzinski, *Argentines*.