

Pukajirka Central

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HE Cordillera Blanca continues to attract climbers from all nations of the world. On this, my seventh trip to this splendid range, I was impressed by the progressive changes in the region, while the peaks are beautifully constant. A quarter of a century ago when postwar mountaineering began in the range, transportation was on foot when you were once away from the single road along the Río Santa. Inexperienced but strong porters were available at very reasonable rates. Today climbers travel by truck well up into the mountain canyons on roads recently blasted from steep walls, shortening the approach by one hard day. And there is a substantial corps of strong and experienced porters, readily available, but at wages several times those of the early years.

We were five: three Californian climbers, Mike Warburton, also known for his climbs in the USSR, Roger Gocking and Brian Cox, both with several successful Yosemite seasons, as well as Jock Glidden of Ogden, Utah and I. Our chief objectives were in the Pukajirka* group in the northeastern section of the Cordillera Blanca. It was my first visit to these peaks, one of the major features of the range.

Rather than make the lengthy approach via Pomabamba, we took the road from Caraz to Hacienda Santa Cruz and traveled for two days to the upper end of the Quebrada Santa Cruz. From there we could cross an easy saddle (17,550 feet) onto the glacial plateau separating the southeastern base of Pukajirka Central (19,734 feet) and Pukajirka Sur from the slightly lower peaks of Rinrijirka (19,062 feet) and remarkable Taulliraju. Base Camp was set up near the lake Taulliqocha on July 1.

By July 5 we had reached the saddle and set up Camp I in the flat bottom of a huge crevasse. We decided to climb Rinrijirka for acclimatization. On July 7 the weather was typical of what we would experience during much of the next month: nothing really severe but clouds and light snow with visibility near zero. In spite of this, we managed to put in the route to a small saddle on the north ridge of the peak. The next day, except for Mike Warburton, who was not acclimatizing well, we all

* The spellings used are the more phonetically correct ones used by John Ricker in his excellent new guidebook, *Yuraq Janka*.

set off from Camp I at 6:20 A.M. and were on the very small summit by mid-afternoon. Rinrijirka had been climbed a number of times, and the standard north ridge, while narrow and fragile in places, was not exceptionally difficult. There was a problem in finding the summit. Convinced that the left of the two summit points was the higher, we aimed in that direction. From its top we could see that the other was in fact higher. Jock Glidden and Roger Gocking made the two final delicate leads to the utmost top of the peak, a mushroom of questionable integrity.

The next morning there were two casualties. Mike Warburton was still not feeling any better and we agreed with his decision to return to Base Camp to recuperate. Brian Cox had developed a severe toothache and decided to descend to Base Camp; eventually he went back to the United States for dental surgery. Mike returned to Camp I a day or two later. The rest of us made an unsuccessful attempt on P 5790.

On the morning of July 12 Roger and I set out across the *pampa*, as we called the almost flat glacier, to try to put in Camp II for our attempt on Pukajirka Central. After our previous tracks ended, we hit soft powder snow which, when the slope steepened, became knee- or even waist-deep. Progress was slow and exhausting. After we had reached a flat spot for a camp about halfway up the glacier leading to the south-east face of Pukajirka Central, Jock, Mike and the two porters, Mauricio Eban and Fortunato Rosales Vidal, arrived. Jock and Mike spent the afternoon making steps up two more headwalls, again in poor snow. On the morning of the 13th Roger and I found a location for a higher camp at nearly 19,000 feet, about 1000 feet from the summit. Returning to Camp I $\frac{1}{2}$, we passed Mike, Jock and the two porters on their way up to Camp II. By the time we were back, Jock and Mike were working away, putting in the route up the final headwall above camp to the bergschrund.

There were several possibilities on the face. One possible line, unattractive to me, led directly upward toward the top in a broad flute containing ominous bands of ice-covered rock. I recommended a narrow snow-and-ice flute leading to the right or east ridge, which we could follow to the top. Either route would be new since the one previous ascent of the peak by the Italians had been up the left or south ridge. Incorrectly, we felt that the right ridge would be of the same difficulty as the left ridge. Since the other three opted for the direct flute, they set out the next morning to put in a portion of the route, while I gathered strength.

As Mike was preparing to cross the bergschrund, rocks came whooshing down the flute, barely missing him. They reconsidered and turned to my route, climbing three-and-a-half pitches and leaving fixed rope to facilitate the next ascent. At 6:30 the next morning Jock, Roger and I were off to push the route onto the ridge crest. From above the fixed

ropes there appeared to be a very narrow passageway alongside a mushroom which sat on the ridge, but this ended with nearly vertical ice. Roger took the only alternative, an 80-foot lead up through a difficult natural tunnel in the ice formations. Two more steep pitches on poor snow-ice, with some chimneying in the narrow, deep fluting ended on the crest. Instead of the more or less friendly ridge we had expected, it was terrifyingly narrow and unstable. Using both deadmen and pickets, we put in an anchor and rappelled down toward camp.

The following day was set aside for rest. It was just as well since it snowed all night and in the morning there was no visibility. During the next two days food supplies dwindled while we listened to avalanches on the nearby faces. As the others brought more food from Camp I, I had the easier task of digging out the tent.

Finally, on July 19, after a week in this high camp, we set off with headlights at five A.M. for the summit, taking bivouac gear and food for a second day. The climb to the ridge crest in good weather and darkness was rapid, thanks to the fixed ropes. From our previous high point Jock made a shaky lead across a gap and continued diagonally up across the ice wall on the far side of the gap, one of the more difficult leads. Jock used a northwall hammer in the left hand for balance and support, while applying the axe in the right hand to cut minimal steps for the ascending traverse. Under increasing cloudiness Roger and I led the next two-and-a-half pitches on easier ground to the base of the crux, a particularly steep and narrow section of the ridge. The angle exceeded 60° and the width was perhaps two feet. Jock Glidden led this ridge section with great skill and determination. The crest was so narrow and the steep adjacent walls had such rotten snow and ice that one could hardly have regained the ridge if he had slipped, even with a rope from above. After surmounting the steep section, Jock was then faced with a delicate knife-edge of snow which had inadequate structural strength on one side and none at all on the other. Anchors were not to be trusted.

The afternoon was by now mostly gone. Jock led a final rope-length to a most remarkable ice cave, just off the crest at 19,500 feet, the only possible bivouac spot on the entire ridge. It was a comfortable night with no wind inside the cave, though a disturbing scimitar-shaped block of ice was suspended above us. At dawn Roger led out of the cave and up to the top of the steep mushroom above. It was now my turn to climb yet another knife-edge to just short of the summit. Roger then led to the top, chopping off the top three feet of the crest in order to obtain a surface two feet wide.

From the summit we could look down the Italian or south ridge, which was very broad, perhaps 100 yards across, vastly easier than our east ridge. The entire summit area was a confused aggregation of mushrooms, cornices and crevasses.

The descent was tricky. Fixed ropes were left in critical places, but even so it was dark when we regained Camp II. In the course of the descent something can easily go wrong when one is tired and rushed. There will doubtless be some who, in the name of purity and ethics and without seeing the ground, will criticize our use of fixed ropes. The fact of the matter is that we are all alive and well, perhaps impure, but ready to climb again. How many have, or how many will, in the name of purity be unable to survive? There have been several generations of survival with conservative climbing where such practices as fixed ropes provide a margin. The first generation of climbing without such protection has yet to be completed, and until it is, the proof of its validity is not at hand. The deliberate maximizing of risk is not the essence of mountaineering. Let others dazzle the world with their purity. Some of us are content to accumulate our experiences, of lesser quality perhaps, but of greater volume. We at least should have an old age in which to contemplate the exploits of our youth.

Our expedition was completed in what is now regarded as a mundane fashion, by climbing both peaks of Huascarán. Some twenty-three years ago I was part of a group that made the fourth ascent of that grand peak, with considerable route-finding difficulties. Today the easy day for a lady is at hand. All the way from the edge of the ice to the summit, there is by mid-season a veritable trail whose width is measured in feet, not inches. Roger and Mike also made the ascent of Ranrapallka, thus adding a fifth summit to our bag.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Cordillera Blanca, Peru

ASCENTS: Rinrijirka, 19,062 feet, via north ridge, July 8, 1977 (Cox, Glidden, Gocking, Ortenburger).

Pukajirka Central, 19,734 feet, second ascent via a new route, the east ridge, July 19 and 20 (Glidden, Gocking, Ortenburger, Warburton).

Huascarán Norte, 21,830 feet, from the Garganta, August 2 (Glidden, Gocking, Ortenburger, Warburton).

Huascarán Sur, 22,205 feet, from the Garganta, August 4 (Glidden, Gocking, Ortenburger, Warburton).

Ranrapallka (20,216 feet, via northeast slopes near northeast ridge, August 16 (Gocking, Warburton).

PERSONNEL: Brian Cox, Jocelyn C. Glidden, Roger Gocking, Leigh N. Ortenburger, Michael Warburton.