

# Fifty Years After— Aiguille Verte

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DURING THE SUMMERS OF 1926 and 1927 my family stayed at Chamonix and in 1927 my brother and I made a number of excellent climbs, including the first complete traverse of the Arête des Rochassiers, the first traverse of the Arête du Pain de Sucre de l'Aiguille du Plan, and the second ascent of the couloir leading to the col between the Plan and the Aiguille des Deux Aigles. All these climbs were made with Alfred Adolphe Couttet and Georges Charlet. That year my brother was 15 and I was 17.

We did not go to Europe in 1928 but planned to return in 1929. My brother particularly liked steep rock. He and Georges and Antoine Ravanel had made the first ascent of the Chamonix face of the Fou in 1927 (I had *mal à l'estomac* that day!) and he was eager to try a really challenging new rock ascent. I was more interested in mixed rock and ice. He and Armand Charlet made the first ascent of the north ridge of the Géant in 1929 and, together with David Murray and Antoine, we did a new route on the Chamonix face of the Col Supérieur du Plan.

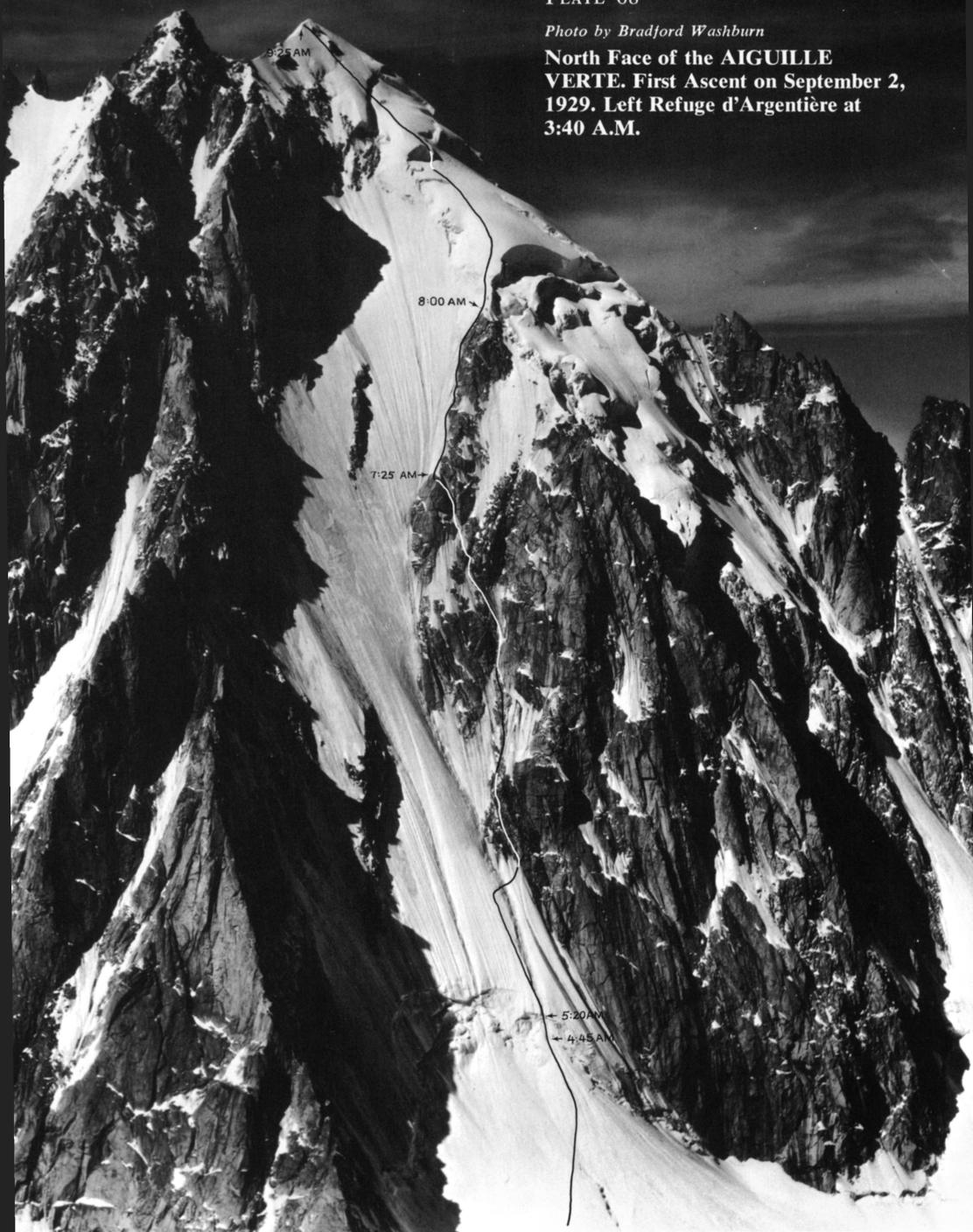
I had been very interested in trying the north face of the Grandes Jorasses and got Alfred Couttet to go over to the Refuge de Leschaux where he spent two or three days carefully studying it, as we were both concerned about rockfall when the sun hit the upper snow-and-rock cliffs in the afternoon. In those days very few of us wanted to take the great objective risks that climbers run so frequently today. In all our climbing, we never drove a single piton! We also did not have plastic helmets! Alfred reported lots of small rocks falling all across the face, and he recommended against trying it. So we decided to attempt the north face of the Verte, which he said presented a great challenge.

This face has a large rock rib which divides it into two equal parts. The couloir to the right (west) had been climbed on July 31, 1876 by two ropes of very fine climbers: Cordier, Maund and Middlemore with the famous guides Jakob Anderegg, Johann Jaun and Andreas Maurer. (I believe that it had subsequently been attempted and that a second

PLATE 68

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**North Face of the AIGUILLE  
VERTE. First Ascent on September 2,  
1929. Left Refuge d'Argentière at  
3:40 A.M.**



ascent had been made by Henri de Ségogne in 1925.) This route is not only steep and difficult but has extreme objective dangers in that it is dominated by a magnificent *barrière de séracs*—and we were not interested in it for this reason.

The rock rib descending to the Glacier d'Argentière from the Grande Rocheuse had been attempted twice, unsuccessfully, by Farrar in 1898 and Odell, Frazar and Stobart in 1920—but did not appeal to us as it did not lead to the top of the Verte. So we decided to try the big eastern couloir which, although dominated by the rotten rock of the Grande Rocheuse and a small sérac wall, appeared to involve very little objective danger.

We made two attempts. The first, in August, ended in failure only a rope length above the bergschrund, where bad weather turned us back. This attempt was made from the Hôtel de Lognan, which resulted in a very long approach march, so we decided to make the next try from the Refuge d'Argentière which was not only nearer to the bottom of the face, but a good deal higher. The route was so long that Alfred Couffet and Georges Charlet, my guides, wanted to bring along a porter to help them in step-chopping and carrying food, etc. As it turned out, this was really unnecessary. André Devoussand was our porter.

We had perfect weather on this attempt. No wind, cloudless, warm sun throughout the climb. We left the hut at 3:40 A.M. on September 2, 1929. We were all in perfect shape and moved very fast. We reached the bergschrund at 4:45 and had chopped our way up over it by 5:20. There was no snow at this time of year. The bergschrund and the entire slope were bare ice. Alfred and Georges took turns with step-chopping, which was very slow, as the ice was so hard that it took 20 to 30 hacks with the ice-axe to make each step. We made large steps because, of course, in those days there were no ice-screws and the other modern safeguards. Unless one made large steps and careful belays, a slip would have pulled off the whole party. After about 30 minutes of chopping, we decided to traverse off the ice to the right and climb the side of the couloir on the rocks which looked pretty good.

They were better than we could have dreamed—not too steep and with lots of excellent, solid cracks and handholds. We climbed without stopping at all for an hour (see route on picture), following an open subsidiary couloir to the right of the main ice slope. We could not believe it possible, but by seven o'clock we were already fully halfway up the rib! There wasn't a breath of wind, not a cloud—but we were in the shadow of the Aiguille Verte, and it was chilly. We stopped for a bite to eat on a small but comfortable platform and then started again at 7:20, following along the rock ledges at the very edge of the main couloir, with the cliffs of the Grande Rocheuse towering dramatically right above us.

PLATE 69

*Photo by André Dévouassand*

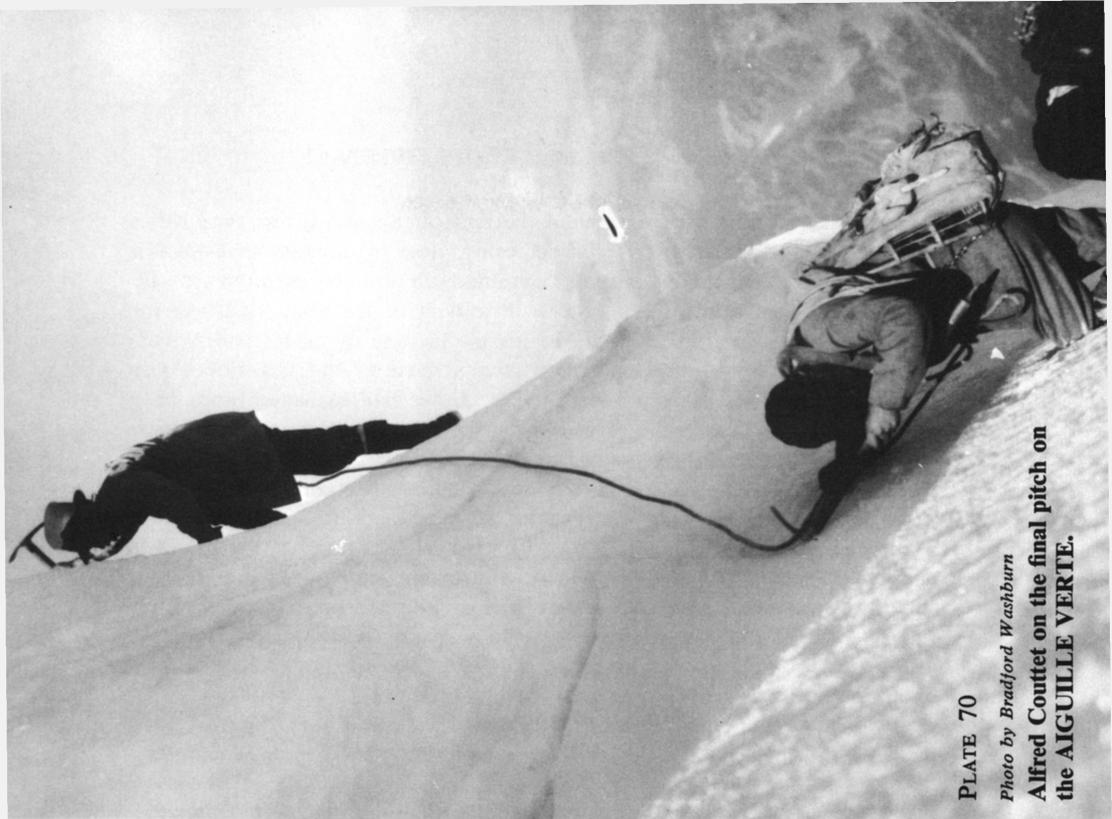
**On the summit of the AIGUILLE VERTE. Bradford Washburn, Alfred Couttet, and Georges Charlet.**



PLATE 70

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**Alfred Couttet on the final pitch on the AIGUILLE VERTE.**



In only 40 minutes we reached the end of the rocks, less than three hours from the schrund! We felt so well and so triumphant that we did not stop here at all, but simply continued up the ice cap toward the summit. We encountered one steep little wall of ice about halfway up this slope, but the gradient (except this pitch) was much less steep than in the couloir or on the rocks until we arrived at the last slope, just below the summit. Here we were lucky, as we had expected more bare ice, but it turned out to be of blue ice with a firm veneer of snow on it, so we could move upward very fast with no belays at all.

At 9:20 we reached the summit cornice through which Alfred speedily cut a hole. This was exactly 50 years ago last summer, yet I remember that moment as if it were yesterday! He gave a yell, "Nous y sommes!" and his head emerged into the bright sunlight. I stood on a tiny platform that he had cut and took his picture as he climbed through the cornice. At 9:25 A.M. we gathered on the summit of the Verte, only four hours from the bergschrund—less than six hours all the way from the hut!

It was an incredibly beautiful day, and we stayed on top for fully half an hour, then descended the Arête du Moine leisurely, searching for crystals all the way.

This was a wonderful experience with two of the finest guides in the Alps—and a very competent and congenial porter as well. If I had been somewhat older (I was just past my 19th birthday) I guess Alfred and Georges might have made the climb alone with me—as in retrospect it seems as if we had been a luxuriously large group. But if the conditions had been less perfect, and we had encountered *verglas* on the rocks, we would have been glad to all be there together. As it turned out, it was a rare opportunity to do a fine new climb with three of Chamonix's most respected people—and, after all, the climb itself never seems as important as the companions with whom one makes it. Alfred Couette and Georges have both died, and I have not heard from André for many years, but September 2, 1929 still stands out as one of the happiest moments of my life. It was a privilege to have learned the trade from such competent and delightful experts.