The First Ascent of Mount Erasmus

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BACK home after vacation in the summer of 1949, I had not been too sure that I would care to pack in to Mount Erasmus.[1] The 2500 feet of steep bushwhacking with heavy packs which Bob Bishop and I had put in to reach our high camp were still fresh in memory.[2] As the winter progressed, that memory faded, while the problem posed by the mountain continued to be teasing. Dr. Thorington had raised a question in 1941: "Why, Canadians and others, was Mt. Erasmus (10,700), standing just across the road not tackled before the North Fork bridge burned in 1940?"[3] Bishop and I had found only one possible flaw in the final cliffs, and that had seemed most unattractive as a route of ascent. Still, it might go.

Bob had other plans for the summer of 1950; but my climbing companion of several past seasons, Fred Ayres, of Portland, Oregon, who had previously expressed interest in the peak, agreed to meet me with his station wagon at Lake Louise Station on July 16th. In due course, we were driving up the highway to Saskatchewan Crossing. After checking out with Warden Black, we made up our packs and at about 5.00 P.M. hoisted them onto our backs with appropriate groans and started off along the Howse River trail. This trail is now in excellent condition, and we had nearly reached the deserted cabins on the sand hill when a heavy shower descended. It was then 7.00 P.M., so this seemed a good spot to camp for the night.

Next morning was only partly cloudy, and as we hiked along the trail we could see the lower portion of the big rock tower to the north of Glacier River. It did not appear any too climbable, and Fred looked skeptical when I told him I thought we could probably get up it from our high camp. Fording the Howse River required considerable zigzagging, but so much of the afternoon remained when we reached Glacier Lake that we both felt we should push on to high camp in the little hanging valley below the tower. Fred was the more

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[1] The mountain is named for Peter Erasmus, Dr. Hector's Indian guide, and last survivor of the Palliser Expedition.—*(Data supplied by Dr. J. M. Thorington).*

[2] R. H. Bishop, III, "Reconnaissance of Mt. Erasmus," *A.A.J.*, VII (1950), 529-30.

[3] *C.A.J.*, XXVIII (1941), 56.

enthusiastic of the two since he had not made the trip the year before.

After proceeding a considerable distance along the flats beyond the end of the lake, one turns uphill and proceeds to bushwhack through tangles of fallen timber, up a small but wet cliff, and then up a series of ridges between ravines while working to the right (east) in an attempt to emerge on the shoulder of the little valley. The vertical ascent is 2500 feet, and the slope from above the little cliff is very steep all the way. When we finally dragged ourselves out of the last of the timber and looked over the shoulder into the hanging valley, it was nearly 8.00 P.M., but at least we had come out at the right spot. This was just as well: we were dead-beat and agreed that no early start for anything would be made next morning.

The valley itself is a beauty spot—meadow and heather, with here and there patches of dwarf spruce, and a fair-sized stream splashing along between banks of snow toward its steep-walled exit gorge. The rock tower, here seen to be a ridge, rises on the far side and discloses the only chink in its armor. The encircling cliff, for the most part unclimbable and frequently overhanging, is broken down into a narrow scree funnel at one point on its south side. After a leisurely breakfast we headed up toward this.

Despite our comfortably slow pace, we soon found ourselves clambering up the summit ridge and were prematurely congratulating ourselves when the last few feet disclosed that the true summit was still a long way off—at the extreme eastern end of the ridge, in fact, and separated from us by several apparent gaps. The north side of the ridge is a spectacular cliff, but the crest proved an easy walk and the gaps non-existent. Shortly we were relieved to find ourselves on the undoubted summit. The sun shone on our efforts and the surrounding countryside.

No sign of any previous ascent being discernible, we resolved to build a cairn large enough to be seen from the Howse River trail and amused ourselves for some time at this strenuous and rather ridiculous task when we might just as well have been dozing in the sunshine. All the same, we were quite proud of the edifice.

The next day was showery, and Fred was forced to spend it nursing a heavy cold he had acquired from me. He was still convalescent on the following day, which was again perfect, and dragged his air-mattress out into the sun in order that he might soak up a few

extra vitamins. This also exposed him to unexpected hazards. Upon my return from a photographic scramble I found he had suffered a serious attack of marmotry. The air-mattress had sustained three punctures where the marauding rock-chuck had indulged a newly-acquired taste for rubber, and little piles of rock ammunition heaped about in all directions gave evidence of counter-measures taken. Adhesive tape was only partially successful as patching material.

Next morning we arose to a cloudless sky and, after again registering surprise at this unusual clemency on the part of the local weather, set forth up heather slopes and snow tongues toward the scree col separating our peak of several days ago from the main ridge which culminates in Mount Erasmus.[4] Last year's exploration now paid off, and we turned promptly up the short ridge extending to the west from the col. When this reared up into a jagged tower, we followed the well-designed goat highway around to the left and into a long gully, filled with snow. Again arriving on the ridge, now above the tower, we continued upward to a snow patch which we traversed to the left, arriving thus at the end of a series of commodious ledges. The goats had worked out a most complex but not at all capricious route from one ledge to the next. We followed this with delight and admiration. When the trail finally ran across the nearly sheer face of the cliff to a notch in the main ridge, we preferred to continue directly upward to the crest, noting with satisfaction that at least one goat had also balked at that exposed traverse.

The view of the Lyells from the crest was most handsome, the whole sweeping ice field being visible. The ridge running toward Erasmus has a cap of curious bulbous projections resembling some fossilized giant seaweed, and a layer of similar knobs extends at the same level across the southwest face of Erasmus just below the final cliff.

Dropping down on the west side, we traversed easily to the notch and there rejoined our goat trail, which led across snow and scree to a scree ridge banked with snow, up which we kicked steps. A tedious traverse below the upper Erasmus cliff, involving the crossing of a number of steep snow gullies, finally led us to the cleft we were seeking, just as I was beginning to share Fred's doubts that I had ever really seen it.

[4] In the note in *A.A.J.*, VII (1950), 529-30, this col is erroneously stated to be immediately W. of Sullivan Peak. Actually, Sullivan Peak is considerably farther W.

This cleft is formed by two steep, sometimes overhanging waterfall gullies or chimneys separated by a rock rib. The right-hand gully seemed the less obnoxious and was fairly well filled with snow at its back although water gushed forth at several places. At first we could kick our way upward, but as soon as we entered between the gully's smooth enclosing walls I had to begin cutting steps in hard ice. Every now and then small rocks came sailing down. Dodging them was out of the question, but I managed to deflect one with the head of my axe. Another struck my thigh. They were not large enough or travelling fast enough to do damage. Our chief discomfort was the thought that at any moment a larger one might be released by the melting summit snows at the top of the cliff far above.

Finally, after ascending about 300 feet, we came even with a narrow sloping ledge running out onto the rib at our left, until now sheer and overhanging. The ice in the gully was here very thin over the rock, and I nicked the pick of my axe trying to make usable steps. A rivulet also emerged at this point, making things rather sloppy for several yards. Fred now took over the step-cutting while I eyed the dubious ledge. The steep ice up which Fred was slowly moving seemed to end in an impasse—20 feet of vertical and overhanging ice beneath a chockstone with only smooth rock walls on each side. The cliff itself had a projecting cornice running across its face at the level of the chockstone. I therefore sidled cautiously out on the ledge to the middle of the rib, where it terminated. It appeared, however, that one could ascend here; and, since the frozen waterfall toward which Fred was hacking his way looked worse than ever from this vantage point, I called to him to join me.

When he stood beside me, he agreed that the gully did not offer much prospect of success. I therefore stowed my pack on the ledge and gingerly hoisted myself the first few feet (no belay was available) until the rib began to round back somewhat. Fred then tossed me the coil of rope, and I proceeded to a large comfortable platform 30 feet above the ledge. From here I could belay him as he ascended encumbered with two packs and two axes.

From the platform it was impossible to get into either gully, except by a rappel; and in any case neither appeared at all climbable in this section. For that matter, our rib was obviously going to cause trouble, so I kindly offered to let Fred lead the next pitch. This consisted of a nearly vertical column, shattered, very exposed and not

MOUNT ERASMUS FROM COL ON ROUTE OF ASCENT
Photo, J. C. Oberlin

necessarily leading any place—at least not to any definite stance that we could see from below. As he slowly climbed up and around the corner to the left, he tossed numerous spurious handholds into space behind him, and soon I heard the clinking sound and muttered complaints which indicated that a piton was being put in. In due course the rope ran out again, and I was pleased to hear a happy shout signifying (I supposed) that he had arrived safely on a large shelf or setback. (When I later reached this same point I found only a small but flat stance, nearly large enough for both feet.) Again the sound of a piton being placed, more rope going out, and finally Fred announced that he was on a fine platform 60 feet above me where there was an excellent belay. He seemed skeptical that I could bring both packs and axes with me, but I assured him there would be nothing to it.

The first few feet were easy, but soon it became decidedly strenuous. After knocking out the first piton with a rock and clipping it to my waist loop, from which an axe already dangled, I soon reached the second piton. Here I was confronted with a new problem. The rope a short distance above me ran beneath a very loose block which gave every sign that it would drop on me when I stepped up on the delicate holds above my present stance. I solved that one by jerking the rope free and thereby dislodging the block, which then bounced off one shoulder and into the depths behind me. Surprised but undamaged, I pounded at the piton but could not get it out, so left it to be retrieved with the aid of the hammer on our return. The last 15 feet or so below the platform where Fred was perched, like impatience on a monument, were quite steep and exposed. My arms began to feel the effect of the pack straps, which tended to cut off the circulation as I reached up for holds.

The left-hand gully was still impracticable, but the right-hand gully offered its icy bed as a further route since we were now above the frozen chockstone waterfall. Fred hurried up it, utilizing holds in the rock wall at first; but he was soon forced to cut steps and finally to straddle from side to side, emerging on a slope of broken rock very insecurely stacked. After joining him I poked around into the left-hand gully and found it was only a pleasant scramble of 75 feet to the top of the cliff.

The main summit was to the south and appeared to be a snow dome, but it was such an easy walk between the edge of the snow

UPPER CLIFF OF MOUNT ERASMUS FROM CREST OF RIDGE TO SOUTH
Photo, J. C. Oberlin

BUSHWHACKING NEAR GLACIER LAKE
Photo, F. D. Ayres

and the edge of the cliff that we first visited the two lesser summits to the north, erecting a cairn on each. The view across the upper portion of the north face disclosed an ice cap and cornice crowning the cliff on this side; and, when we reached the main summit, we found that it was not a dome but merely a huge cornice crowning the eastern face. After erecting a third cairn here at the edge of the snow and leaving a record, we returned to the upper exit of our gully and at 5.00 P.M. started the descent.

We agreed that a rope would not be required for the icy section above the chockstone, and I believe we both later regretted this decision. Fred forgot that he had straddled the last few feet of ascent and had an uncomfortable time lowering himself to the uppermost ice steps, the slope of loose rock above the ice being most unstable. After allowing Fred an opportunity to get out of the line of fire, I profited from his example and started down in proper fashion. Once on the ice, however, I found the steps too far apart for convenience and despite some helpful instruction from Fred below developed a rather cold sweat before reaching the section where the rock wall afforded a few holds.

Placing a long sling around a big block on the upper platform, we quickly rappelled to the first platform. Fred retrieved, *en route,* the piton I had been unable to dislodge. Because it was impossible to protect the last man, we did not want to climb down to the ledge below and traverse back into the gully, nor did we relish the prospect of then descending more melting ice steps while subject to intermittent bombardment. This time, we searched long and diligently before a support for a sling could be engineered. The cracks were unsatisfactory for pitons; but finally we drove a piton into a horizontal crack on one side of the platform and, after threading a sling through it, brought the sling up over a horizontal slab and let it hang down on the side toward the right-hand gully. There was thus no outward pull on the piton, only a considerably reduced upward and slightly inward pull.

Using our 120-foot climbing rope and 140-foot rappel rope tied together, we descended two overhangs and arrived on a ledge on the far side of the gully below all the real difficulties. The ropes were coiled and a drink obtained at a little dribble, at the risk of a wallop from some pebbles which came bounding down; and then we

stamped our way down the snow cone to the foot of the cliff. The real climb was over, but it was a long way back to camp.

With the aid of the goat trail and little cairns we had set up, we managed to reach the col before dark; but the scree and heather slopes below seemed many times longer than in the morning, and we stumbled into camp ready to retire after only a most elementary supper.

The next day took us down to Glacier Lake, where we camped near the outlet. The descent of the wooded slope was most tedious but brightened by discovery of a clump of the lovely orchid, calypso. In a gully below the little cliff near the foot of the slope there are also a number of spectacular mountain lilies, somewhat resembling large orange tulips.

When it came to fording the Howse, I mistakenly argued Fred into attempting it downstream of our previous crossing; but happily it proved passable, and eventually we arrived at the highway and Warden Black's, somewhat dirty and footsore but not displeased with our little expedition.