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**The First Ascent of Mount Salcantay**

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THE shadow of our plane flickered across the brown hills beneath us as the pilot brought us down toward a valley spotted with green fields and darker clumps of eucalyptus trees. Suddenly plane and shadow met in a swirl of dust, and we rolled smoothly to a stop at the edge of the city of Cuzco, one-time capital of the ancient and mighty Inca Empire of Peru.

It was a rendezvous. Four Americans climbed out of the Faucett plane to watch the growing mountain of food and equipment being discharged from its belly, Dr. Fred D. Ayres of Reed College, Portland, Oregon, Assistant Professor of Physical Chemistry; W. V. Graham Matthews, master at The Fessenden School, West Newton, Massachusetts; David Michael, Jr., banker and artist from Athens, Georgia; and John Oberlin, patent lawyer from Cleveland, Ohio. The cast was far from complete. Nearly a week later a much smaller plane floated in to Cuzco, a Piper Super-Cub flown from Pennsylvania by Dr. Austen F. Riggs of Cambridge, Massachusetts, with Dr. George I. Bell, physicist from New Mexico, as supercargo and official photographer. This was something of a feat as both men are considerably over six feet, three inches tall, probably an extreme test for this small plane and for them! For the next three days they flew to the greatest snow and ice peaks of the region and circled them at 20,000 feet. Bell took photographs furiously, if a bit haphazardly, as the plane's oxygen supply was limited and was reserved for the pilot while Bell went without. Anyhow, he hoped soon to be standing on the summit of one of the peaks, Mount Salcantay, well above 20,000 feet itself.

Soon another Faucett plane arrived bearing Mme. Claude Kogan

URUMBA GORGE NEAR SALCANTAY

*Photo, G. I. Bell*

of Nice, France, who had come via New York and Miami, and M. Bernard Pierre of Paris, France, who had come via North Africa (Dakar). Claude Kogan had been on the 1951 French expedition to Peru which made the first ascent of the great ice peak, Alpamayo, and she had distinguished herself by breaking the world's altitude record for an all-feminine party, in company with Mme. Leininger. Mount Alpamayo, incidentally, had distinguished *itself*, some time previously, by dropping an entire party of three Swiss climbers through one of its huge snow cornices and some hundreds of feet down its icy flanks. Oddly enough, all three survived.

We believe ours was the first Franco-American mountaineering expedition in history. We all hoped it would be successful. In 1950 three of the Americans, after Mount Yerupaja (A.A.J., 1951) had been climbed, rode and hiked in to Mount Salcantay, which is in the Cordillera Vilcabamba of southern Peru and the most spectacular peak of the region, rising 20,574 feet into the sky, its snow-white slopes fluted by avalanches and its ridges broken by cliffs and pinnacles of ice. They did not find a route up it, but they did form some ideas about one. Hiram Bingham, Yale Professor, later U.S. Senator, and the discoverer of Macchu Picchu, "Last City of the Incas," who had passed by Salcantay many years before, had made no attempt to climb it, although no mean alpinist himself. But he did suggest that it would prove a challenge, and such it had remained until 1952.

While the early comers awaited the arrival of the French members of the expedition, two great festivals took place at Cuzco. The first, the fiesta of Corpus Christi, consisted of a magnificent procession of tremendous images carried from the Cathedral by the Indians and moved slowly around the plaza. A number were fully twenty feet high and so heavy that the groups of twenty or thirty Indians shouldering the beams on which each rested could barely stagger with their burdens. A little band with flutes, drums, and conches followed each great figure in its lurching, swaying course.

The other fiesta was a pageant before the colossal walls of the Incaic fortress of Sacsahuaman, celebrating the mid-winter solstice. (As we were south of the equator, it was winter in Peru.) Fifty thousand Indians swarmed like ants upon the ramparts and on the granite hill known as the Inca's throne on the opposite side of the parade ground. A long line of Indian mayors in red ponchos, black

knee breeches, and cartwheel hats filed in to open the ceremonies. The old ceremony of sun worship was re-enacted by the "Inca for a day," and then a series of wild dances was performed. Beer and "chicha" flowed in quantity and little wisps of smoke floated up here and there where spectators cooked a light snack. When the formalities were over, the audience poured down upon the parade ground to surround the groups of dancers who continued as wildly as ever and indeed were still gyrating through the streets of Cuzco next day.

When finally we were all in Cuzco except Dr. Jean Guillemin, the expedition doctor and a veteran of the 1951 Alpamayo expedition, we loaded our gear in a big truck with the assistance of Senora Mayaly Flury and Senor Abel Pacheco Cano and were soon sailing down the highway with Abel at the wheel, bound for Limatambo where we would hit the trail for Salcantay. En route we stopped at the well-known hacienda of La Joya, belonging to Abel's family and there met his brother Leonidas. Both Abel and Leo are ardent and versatile sportsmen, riding, hunting, cock-fighting and auto racing in dashing but expert fashion. Abel was shortly to add mountain-climbing to his repertoire. After an elegant meal of many courses we re-embarked and were soon descending a series of zig-zags into the depths of the valley where Limatambo is situated. Nearby, in a small hacienda set about with banana and lime trees we sorted and packed our food and equipment for loading on horses and mules.

It was drizzling when we left on June 29th, and our long caravan was soon strung out along the trail. Most of the climbing party walked the greater part of the day in the possibly mistaken notion that it would assist acclimatization. By late afternoon we were high up the flank of a treeless side valley, following an ancient watercourse contouring the slope, and it was nearly dark when we arrived at Ccollpa, a group of four or five one-room farm houses with dirt floors, loose rock walls, and thatched roofs. We were invited to enter one of the houses, which was placed at our disposal; so we waded through the barnyard mud to the low doorway with its door of skin on a frame of sticks. Inside, an old woman was cooking over a little fire in a corner and the smoke seeped out through the thatch. While this made the house appear to be afire, it did creosote the roof very effectively, making it vermin-free and

water-proof. After a night packed together on the floor, we awoke to the dismal sight of falling snow. The next pass was blocked as far as horses were concerned, and the expedition dropped everything and returned to the flesh-pots of Limatambo and Cuzco, leaving Fred Ayres, George Bell, John Oberlin, and one Indian to keep track of things and explore the passes.

When the main body returned more than a week later, this time with Dr. Jean Guillemin, the three had seen enough of Ccollpa. The Indian, however, didn't seem to mind. We now had 29 horses, 10 mules and 14 Indians, so a more impressive cavalcade had probably never passed that way since the day of the last Inca. Fred Ayres chased butterflies with net and cyanide jar as we trudged along the trail, but butterfly-hunting is a strenuous sport above 12,000 feet. Most of the butterflies flew too fast.

One afternoon, while we were bogged down by snow at Ccollpa, a bearded Peruvian-Swiss mountaineer by the name of Marx strode in with a harrowing tale. He and Marcus Brönnimann, with the latter's wife and a couple of porters, had gone in to Salcantay some weeks before. Marx reported that the two of them had climbed Salcantay under arduous conditions—including four bivouacs—and that Brönnimann had had an accident on the way down. Marx was now going out for more food for the frost-bitten Brönnimann and the rest of the party who were snowbound at Palcaycasa Pass. Needless to say, this was disquieting news, but our plans remained unchanged; much later we learned of the incompleteness of Marx's report. Courageous as their attempt was, they retreated considerably short of the true summit.

Getting over the first pass, Cruzcasa, was no particular problem as most of the snow and ice had melted, and an occasional swish of the ice-axe was all that was needed. The descent of the dry northern side was even easier. We then wound our way up along the banks of the meandering Pampacahuana River to the foot of the Paso de Palcaycasa. The upper part looked thoroughly snowed in, but we had hopes that the lower portion of the barrier which rose 1800 feet above us would be easy. George Bell and Abel set out bravely on horses, while the rest of us lolled in the sunshine. We soon noted that they left the horses behind. By the time George and Abel returned late in the afternoon we knew that plenty of work lay ahead.

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SALCANTAY FROM WEST

*Photo, G. I. Bell*

The next two days all the troops fell out with ice-axes and shovels to hack away at the snow and ice. It was tiring work, but the Indians who worked eight and more hours barefoot in the snow without complaint excited our wonder and admiration. Finally, with the continuing sunshine, we decided on July 12th to risk some animals; by early afternoon nearly half of the expedition gear was dumped near a small lake on the dry side of the pass. George and Claude went ahead to reconnoiter for a base camp and returned with the encouraging news that a suitable place at about 15,200 feet had been found on the north-eastern flank of the mountain.

By evening of the next day we were all in base camp, and the equipment was pouring in. On the day following, Bastille Day, the Americans were up early. David Michael ("Georgia") had fortunately brought some firecrackers which were used to good effect to arouse the French. After they had recovered from the powder burns, they were quite cheerful, and Bernard Pierre made a hilarious speech in honor of the occasion. We spent most of the day in organizing base camp. Late that afternoon we were startled by the appearance of a lone Indian: he brought a message in spasmodic Spanish saying that John Oberlin's mother was seriously ill. John left the next morning for Cuzco, and our brief spell of good weather left too. Sleet, then snow, covered the ground, while the peaks became shrouded in clouds. During three days of dubious weather the French educated the porters in the use of crampons and ice-axes, and George Bell and David Michael put up a route to Camp 1, at 17,000 feet.

From base camp the route led across grassy slopes to a narrow pass in a rocky ridge, then along a tedious and steep grass slope to a level glacier. We crossed the glacier diagonally and gained a large tongue of rock at the upper end of which we established a tent and equipment cache. Immediately above this the ice work proper began. Getting onto the glacier was not easy; about 70 feet of steep ice necessitated many steps and a fixed rope. Then steep slopes of nev  led eventually to a broad snow shelf at the base of a high rocky overhang—an ideal and well-protected spot for Camp 1.

July 19th saw the return of both John Oberlin and good weather, while loads were being moved to Camp 1. By July 21st all the climbers were in Camp 1, the route to Camp 2 had been scouted, and porters had taken some loads as far as was deemed safe

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SUMMIT PORTION OF SALCANTAY FROM SOUTHWEST

*Photo, G. I. Bell*

above Camp 1. The route above Camp 1 was devious. It wound around crevasses without much difficulty, but it was then necessary to cross the lower part of the chute, a broad gully which was obviously constantly being avalanched by ice, rocks, and snow from the higher cliffs. The farther side of the chute offered steep slopes with protecting crevasses where loads could be safely cached. It was then necessary to crouch under a somewhat protecting snow buttress and make a dash across the worst part of the chute which was under almost continuous bombardment. At about 17,700 feet this was a breathless affair. We were fortunate indeed that all our crossings were made without mishap, although there were several close calls. Every day we found our previous steps obliterated. Once across the chute, the route led upward and then traversed below beetling rock cliffs, with an occasional threatening serac. Two steep pitches, on one of which a fixed rope was decidedly pleasant, then followed, and a short traverse brought one to Camp 2 on a gently sloping shelf on the brink of an enormous gully topped by hanging glaciers. Here our last camp at 18,200 feet was pitched, at the base of the great cone, a monstrous structure of ice shaped very much like an inverted ice cream cone.

All seven climbers packed loads from Camp 1 on July 22nd and established Camp 2 with two tents, leaving Fred Ayres, George Bell, Claude Kogan, and Bernard Pierre there with enough food for three days and with the hopes that they could make a try for the summit on the next day, or surely the day following. Subsequent experience was to show how far away the summit really was. Graham Matthews, David ("Georgia") Michael, and John Oberlin returned to Camp 1 in a little over an hour where Dr. Jean Guillemin had just arrived with four heavily laden porters and the news that the porters would bring more loads to the cache the next day. That evening we completed a fine snowhouse which Georgia had begun and ate supper in great style and comfort. Outside it began to snow.

The morning brought cloudy weather. While the three of us at Camp 1 went down to pick up the loads at the cache, the others were becoming acquainted with the cone. The route led along the delicate lower lip of a crevasse to a point where an hour's hard work by Bell made a crossing possible. Fifty feet up a steep snow slope brought one to another crevasse which could be crossed without too much

difficulty. Then Claude Kogan took the lead and chopped out 150 feet of steps in ice to the next crevasse. Here, too, a fixed rope was more than comforting. A short diagonal traverse beneath the crevasse led to a place that could be crossed. But from this point on, the cone proper began, and the route was only too clear: UP! Deteriorating weather, however, drove the high party back to Camp 2, and by 4:30 P.M. it was snowing heavily. Fred, George, Claude, and Bernard returned in the snow the next morning to Camp 1, and we reluctantly decided that a general evacuation to base camp was dictated by the weather.

Two days of snow brought operations to a standstill, and his vacation's end forced John Oberlin to leave for the U. S. The summit seemed farther away than ever.

July 27th, however, brought such a welcome clearing in the weather that we made haste to reoccupy Camp 1. Most of the tents had collapsed and almost everything was soaking wet. With clear skies the next morning we brought another tent up to Camp 2 so that eventually all six could stay there. Good weather the following morning induced George, Georgia, and Graham to work on the route, while Fred, Claude, and Bernard, who had all returned to Camp 1, relayed loads. The first three excavated the fixed rope, then began attacking the cone itself. It proved to be unending and dazzling ice at a severe angle. The work went slowly. By late afternoon we were near the top of the cone; we had set some 350 feet of fixed rope. The top of the cone ended in a cornice, but a small break allowed a man to descend a fixed rope to a shelf over which the cornice hung. Although the light came through the cornice, and it was by all laws an extremely unsafe place, it seemed like a haven, for it was the only spot in hundreds of feet that was level and protected from the wind. To the south of the cornice cone a gully stretched upward for about 400 feet at about the same high angle as the cone itself. Entrance to the gully via the shelf was reasonably easy; the gully itself, however, in many places seemed to be held together mostly by mirrors. Nonetheless, it looked feasible, and in any event there was no choice. Tired, we returned to Camp 2 at 4:30 P.M., determined to take another day in preparing the route and try for the summit the next day.

The following morning Fred and Georgia left Camp 2 at 8:30, quickly ascended the long line of fixed ropes, and then put up some

200 feet of fixed rope in the gully, returning at 3:00 P.M. with the report that the top of the gully was still a long way off. In the meantime, Claude and Bernard had taken a spare climbing rope and were using it to replace one of the lengths of lighter fixed ropes above Camp 2; we were rapidly exhausting our supply of reepschnur, and everything, including tent ropes and shoe laces, was being pressed into service. Shortly after noon some first flakes of snow began falling; by mid-afternoon it was snowing steadily. After supper that night, as we lay in our sleeping bags hoping for good weather for our summit try, we heard the dull roar of an avalanche beginning far above us. This was mildly interesting, as we had heard many pour down the great gulf north of our campsite. The roar, however, continued and grew until it was overpowering. Something big was definitely happening. Claude climbed out of her tent and cried, "Look! Look!" (in French). This would have been rather difficult for me, as my head was trying to catch up to my heart which had fled to the bottom of the sleeping bag. Sure enough, the air was filled with snow dust, obscuring the pale moon. Fortunately, the avalanche was confined to the gully, and the tons of hurtling ice roared past us. When we looked at the hanging glaciers the next morning, we could detect no change.

July 31st, the projected great day, was not good. Again we decided to evacuate, rather than stay on, consuming our supplies. Fred and George remained at Camp 1, while the rest of us descended to base camp. Two days later the weather again improved, and we saw Fred and George go up to Camp 2. On August 3rd the weather was really good, and we saw Fred and George working on the route high above Camp 2. We loaded up the porters, left at 10:00 and with porters made it over the now familiar route to Camp 2 by 4:15 P.M. Jean took the porters all the way down. Fred and George reported that they had cleared out all the fixed ropes and steps and had put up fixed rope to the top of the gully. In addition, they had climbed a couple of hundred feet over easier going and had put up another fixed rope where the ridge once again assumed its alarmingly steep angle. Best of all, they announced that the summit, with this much of the route in readiness, could be climbed in one day. There was, however, no tent site within view, and we would probably have to bivouac. So August 4th was to be the great day.

We were awake by 4 A.M. and left about 6. The weather was cold, 3°, and threatening. Our progress up the cone was rapid, thanks to the cleaned out steps and fixed ropes. Before 9, however, the weather had definitely soured, and once again we were forced to turn back. It was snowing by 3:00 P.M.

We had tentatively decided to wait and see on August 5th, but by 7 A.M. the weather looked definitely encouraging. After some discussion, Fred and George left about 8, completely equipped, to cut some more steps. The weather continued to show promise, and Claude and Bernard were off by 8:40; Georgia and I, by 8:55. With this late start, there was no doubt about a bivouac.

Progress was rapid up the prepared part of the route. Clouds boiled up from the Amazon basin as usual, but above 19,000 feet we were higher than most of them. Cutting steps in the ice was continuous. Several difficult crevasses required caution, and in one of them I managed to collapse a snow bridge which the other five had successfully negotiated. While I screamed "Rope!" comments floated down in English, French, and Spanish. Fortunately I managed to keep my position with crampons on one side and ice axe on the other and got out with nothing worse than "jitters."

Fred and George continued chopping upwards, finally gaining the easier slopes leading to the Swiss summit where step cutting was no longer required. Fred prudently marked the route with pieces of cardboard which he had carefully hoarded. By 3 P.M. they were on the Swiss summit and discovered the broken staff of the flag pole which the Swiss had planted. To the north the narrow corniced ridge swept away, then dropped abruptly to a large gap. Beyond, still a good quarter of a mile away, soared the true summit. Fred and George inched delicately along the ridge under extremely exposed conditions. Hacking away a small part of the cornice, they planted a stake to which they attached 125 feet of fixed rope. They clambered down the rope which ended just at the lip of the crevasse that cut off the alarmingly steep slope. Fortunately, the crevasse was bridged at just one point, and it was possible to gain the gently rolling plateau that separated the two summits. They quickly crossed the plateau and worked their way up on to the final Gothic Tower which was the true summit. It was fantastic that such a huge mountain should have for its summit such a tiny ice spire. Just as Georgia and I reached the last fixed rope, we saw Fred go à

cheval onto the narrow summit. It was 4:30 P.M., August 5th—five weeks after we had left Limatambo. Putting up over 1600 feet of fixed rope and cutting 1291 steps in ice alone had finally brought their reward. Within the hour, all had gained the summit, just as the sun was setting through boiling clouds.

The temperature was dropping rapidly. The long tropic night had begun. We were lucky to find in the crevasse at the foot of the ridge a perfect bivouac spot. Well down inside the crevasse and completely protected from the wind was a narrow platform. We hastened to pitch our light Gerry tent, guying it with pitons and ice axes. Inside, the six of us huddled on air mattresses and spent a delightfully warm but sleepless night in a hopeless confusion of arms, legs, and bodies while Bernard made welcome hot drinks on his Meta stove.

With the dawn we were eager to get out. An icy wind, however, quickly changed our minds, and we spent 3½ more hours huddled in the tent. By 9:30 A.M. we had had enough. The temperature inside the crevasse was still only 12°, but we left and dazedly crawled up the fixed rope in the numbing cold. The descent required care, but by 3:00 P.M. we were back at Camp 2, where Jean, Mayaly, Abel, and the porters gave us a warm welcome, including wonderful oranges to eat. Most of Camp 2 was taken down, Georgia and I remained for the night, Fred and George staying at Camp 1, while the others staggered into base camp long after dark. The next day everything was taken down off the ice, and we all were welcomed at base camp by a delicious dinner of doves prepared by Mayaly—doves which Abel had shot on his last trip in to base camp. By August 15th we were all back in Cuzco.

Two days later we took the Faucett DC-4 for Lima. The pilot flew around Salcantay twice, and then, the most thrilling moment of all, flew just over and between the two summits. Our campsites, even our tracks leading to the summit, were all clearly seen. We flew on to Lima, marveling at what we had accomplished. Although we regretted that neither John Oberlin nor Jean Guillemin, who had both worked so hard on the expedition, could make the final climb, all of us were truly thankful that the first Franco-American expedition had safely put six climbers on the summit of mighty Salcantay.