

# Cordillera Blanca Adventure

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**I**T IS perhaps surprising that mountaineers, who in the past fifty years have sought conquests in the most remote parts of the world, have devoted so little attention to one of the greatest, yet one of the most easily accessible, mountain ranges. It cannot be said that the Andes is a climbers' paradise in every one of its 4,500 miles of length, but in subranges like the Cordillera Blanca there are concentrations of great peaks that would keep even the most indefatigable mountaineer occupied for a life time. Moreover, the Cordillera Blanca, with more than 27 peaks of over 20,000 feet, is one of the easiest of the great ranges to reach—at most a two or three-day flight from anywhere in the United States and a one-day drive from Lima, the capital of Peru, to Huaras, the 10,000-foot high capital of the province of Ancash. Once in Huaras, mountaineers are enthusiastically welcomed by Dr. Augusto Soriano Infante and Sr. Cesar Morales Arnao of the recently formed Grupo Andinista Cordillera Blanca.

Our interest in the Cordillera Blanca began three years ago when Siri spent several months in Peru as part of a research team from the University of California that was studying problems in high altitude physiology. Little serious mountaineering was attempted on this trip, but it did stimulate an intense determination to return fully equipped for a serious mountaineering effort.

The opportunity came toward the end of 1951. Dr. John H. Lawrence, leader of the first expedition, planned a second series of studies in the same laboratories of Dr. Alberto Hurtado in Lima and at Morococha (14,800 feet), and at the Hospital of the Cerro de Pasco Corporation in La Oroya for the summer of 1952.

The United States Air Force, which had provided transportation for the first expedition, was again to transport men and equipment for the second series of studies. Hearing of the second expedition, a group of us interested in climbing some of the higher peaks in the Andes thought that we might obtain transportation by adding to the program special physiological studies on ourselves during our

mountain climbing venture. It was thus possible to arrange for transportation in the Air Force plane, which had adequate space for the additional men and equipment.

The six-man mountaineering team that boarded the plane at Oakland, California, on July 5, 1952, included Oscar Cook, Allen Steck, Fletcher Hoyt, Leigh Ortenburger, Peter Hoessly, and William Siri. In addition to serving as a subject, Hoessly would assist Siri with the studies and also serve as expedition physician once the climbing party was in the mountains. Dr. Lawrence and Dr. Nathaniel Berlin, with whom we traveled, were to carry out their program with Peruvian subjects in Lima and at 16,400-foot high Ticlio.

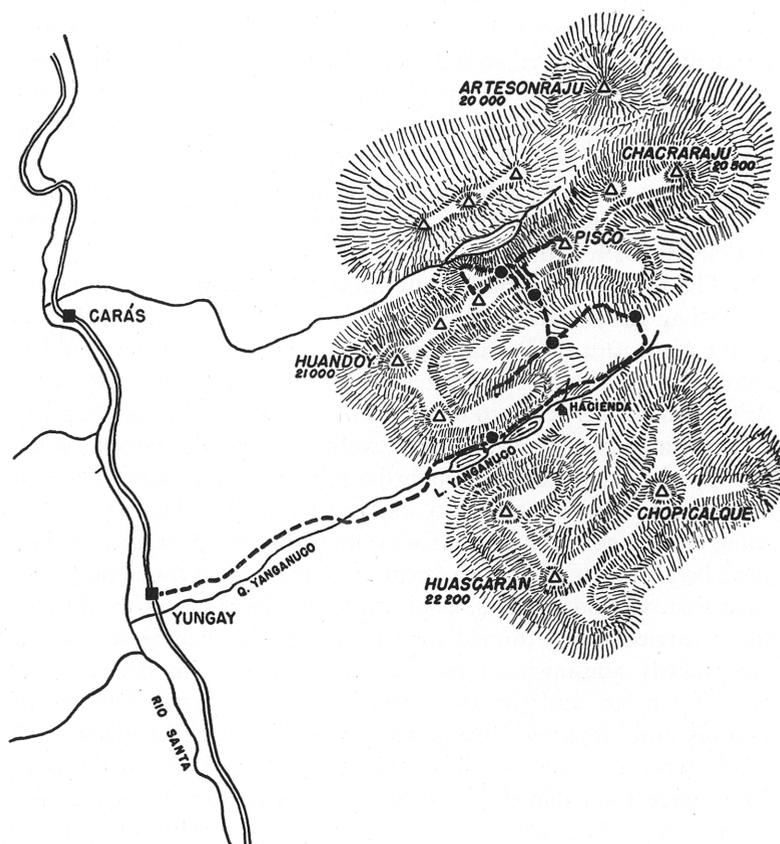
Our first day in Lima was spent on last-minute preparations and the next, on a photo-reconnaissance flight around the Cordillera Blanca, a spectacular flight generously provided by the U. S. Air Mission at Lima. The next day we left for Huaras by truck and car. Among our 1,500 pounds of equipment, all in duffel bags, were the scientific paraphernalia, 6,000 feet of 16 mm Kodachrome movie film, and food for 30 days.

In Huaras, the following day, we were warmly welcomed by the Grupo Andinista, presided over by Dr. Soriano and Cesar Morales, who offered us every assistance possible. Equally important to our efforts to get under way was Victor Benavides from Arequipa, a graduate student at Columbia University, who at the time was collecting paleontological specimens in the Cordillera Negra. After several days acclimatization above 10,000 feet, the six climbers, together with Dr. Berlin and Sr. Benavides who were to accompany us for the first week, assembled in Yungay on the morning of July 16th. Awaiting our arrival were our seven porters and a dozen burros. Among the porters were Eliseo Vargas, the foreman, Macario Angeles, and Felipe, who were to be our constant and devoted companions throughout the trip.

Our first objective was the high plateau between the three principal peaks of Nevado Huandoy. From here, assaults on the three peaks, as well as neighboring summits, would be attempted. The route, following the Yanganuco Valley to its head and then ascending to the east flank of Huandoy, was essentially that followed by Schneider in 1932 and by the French expedition in 1951.

Burros carried the loads eighteen miles to the head of the Valley

where the equipment was then relayed to successively higher camps by the porters. By July 18th we were camped by the lateral moraine of the glacier that drops precipitously from the upper plateau into the great East Cirque of Huandoy. A brief reconnaissance revealed only one feasible route to the plateau. It was in every sense a climbing route, ascending the steep broken glacier, up high angle ice chutes, and over a huge ice wall. It was not a route we could expect our ill-equipped porters, or even ourselves, to negotiate with equipment and food for twenty days. Our only alternative for a permanent



SKETCH MAP OF ROUTE AND CAMPS ON NEVADO HUANDOY

18,000-foot camp lay on a snow saddle across the glacier and high on the northeast ridge of Huandoy.

Both Dr. Berlin and Benavides, their time exhausted, now returned to Huaras, Dr. Berlin to carry out his scientific work in Lima and Morococcha, and Sr. Benavides to continue his paleontological studies.

The next camp, at 16,000 feet, was quickly established on the far (north) side of the glacier below the saddle that was now our immediate objective. The next day when Cook and Siri arrived at the camp with the porters, the rest, according to plan, had already proceeded up a rib of rock and a small lateral glacier to the saddle. In the afternoon, Hoyt and Siri followed, heavily loaded with equipment, for we intended to have at least two men begin permanent occupancy of the high camp (Camp 5) that night. The scientific studies could then begin in the morning and with this work, our 20 days of high life. Late in the afternoon we returned to the lower camp (Camp 4), leaving Steck and Ortenburger to man the high camp for the first night. At Camp 4 we found Cook cheerful but clearly distressed with *soroche*.

The following morning, July 22nd, everyone but Cook was out of his bag early to assemble loads in anticipation of the final move to the high camp. Far above us Steck and Ortenburger could be seen, two tiny black spots moving about on the snow slopes. At 9:30, with porters ready to be off, Cook was still in his sleeping bag, and sensing that he was ill, Siri walked over to the rocks where Cook was encamped to see how he felt. Siri was stunned to find Cook semi-conscious, and at a shout of alarm, Dr. Hoessly quickly came over to examine him. It was impossible to make a clear diagnosis because of the absence of symptoms other than coma, but it was clear that, without oxygen, Cook could not survive and would have to be carried down immediately to Yungay and lower elevations. As Hoessly administered to Cook, a litter was improvised from climbing ropes, and the two men above were signaled to return. Hoessly and Hoyt with five porters started down to the glacier with Cook, who was now bundled into two sleeping bags on the litter. They were soon joined by Steck and Ortenburger from the high camp and by Siri, who secured the lower camp while waiting for them.

The next 24 hours of anxiety and brutal struggle down the

mountain will not quickly be forgotten by Cook's companions. The route passed down steep scree slopes, over moraines, and across hills of loose debris covering the glacier. Long after nightfall, the party was forced to stop because of exhaustion and treacherous terrain. At the first light of dawn the struggle continued, and Cook grew steadily worse. By mid-morning, the litter party reached the first high alpine meadow and there, while the tired crew stopped for a brief rest, Oscar Cook quietly succumbed to pneumonia\* without regaining consciousness on July 23, 1952.

Hoessly and Siri proceeded quickly to Yungay to make whatever arrangements would be necessary, and in the small hours of the next morning the rest of the party arrived, bearing Cook's body. Four of the porters had carried Cook 20 miles down a treacherous trail in total darkness and with only one brief stop—a tour de force of heroic proportions. Dr. Lawrence came down to Lima from Morococcha and, with Dr. Berlin, now bore the brunt of the complicated arrangements to fly Cook's body back to San Francisco. But without the personal intervention of Sr. Pease, Prefecto of the Province of Ancash, and the sympathetic and efficient assistance of officials in Huaras, the task would have been literally impossible.

A week after Cook's death found the party hiking sadly over now familiar terrain, past the cairn erected at the spot where Cook died and back to the abandoned camps. With us again were Eliseo, Macario, and Felipe to carry loads. So little time now remained before the scheduled return to the United States that the scientific program, which was never begun, was perforce abandoned, but it was decided to attempt a few ascents while retrieving our equipment.

On July 30th, the first day back in our former high camp, a reconnaissance of the unclimbed east peak of Huandoy revealed two possible routes to its summit (about 20,500 feet). The route favored by Hoessly and Hoyt lay along the crest of its steep and heavily corniced north ridge. The other, considered the most likely by Steck and Siri, followed a rib straight up the north face until it met the north ridge several hundred feet below the summit.

Before attempting the east peak, we elected first to make an ascent of Pisco, a 19,000-foot peak rising above our saddle camp to the northeast. The peak, first climbed by the French Expedition in

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\* Post mortem later revealed that the illness was a fulminating, diffuse bilateral pneumonia, an affliction which is particularly serious at high altitude.

1951, was facetiously named by them after the Peruvian National Beverage. Despite a late start, little difficulty was anticipated; a broad, easy slope, beginning at the saddle, continued almost unbroken to the summit. Only a few pitches through a patch of broken ice blocks required step-cutting and careful belaying. Immediately below the summit, deep unconsolidated snow on a short but steep slope proved exasperating but was no serious obstacle.

We returned in a light snow squall, well before darkness, to be greeted with admiring grins and congratulations from our porters. We felt it unkind to disillusion them about the difficulty of the climb.

The attempt on the east peak was set for the next day, August 1st. Early in the morning, in total darkness, Hoessly and Hoyt set off across the high glacier toward the north ridge. Steck and Siri soon followed for a try at the north face. If both ropes should succeed, we would meet on the ridge just below the summit. Ortenburger, in bitter disappointment, was constrained to camp by a severe attack of intestinal disorder.

The ascent of the face, while demanding great caution with rotten and loose rock, proved no more difficult than fourth class, although pitons were used occasionally for belay anchors. By one o'clock, Steck and Siri had clawed their way up the last steep pitch of hard snow to the top of the ridge and, after assuring themselves of the other rope's progress below on the ridge, continued on to the summit.

Hoyt and Hoessly were a half hour behind but had made a remarkably rapid ascent of a very difficult ridge. At times it rose at high angles above them, heavily corniced on the west side and too steep to cling to on the east. It was later clear from their insistence on returning by the face route, that they had enjoyed an exhilarating climb – but too exhilarating to repeat.

By three o'clock everyone had been to the summit, consumed his ration of canned tuna, chocolate, and raisins and was assembled on the ridge below for the descent. By six-thirty the party was overtaken by darkness, still only half way down the face. Fortunately the night was clear and still, with a three-quarter moon dimly lighting the way. Under the circumstances, a bivouac was not seriously considered and the descent continued. But there now was no way to avoid dislodging rocks, and in the semi-darkness progress became painfully slow and

NEVADO PISCO (ca. 19,700 FT.) FROM SADDLE BETWEEN PISCO AND EAST PEAK OF HUANDOY

Trail leading to summit barely visible in snow

*Photo, L. Ortenburger*

cautious, more by feel than by sight. During the hours that followed, we were cheered by a tiny point of light far below—the Coleman lamp that Ortenburger had set out as a beacon.

Once on the glacier below, progress was rapid, and at midnight we marched tired yet happily into camp to hot tea and soup that Ortenburger had thoughtfully prepared.

Since our time was rapidly running out, we faced with considerable regret the anticlimactic trip back to civilization before the goals we had planned had been realized. In Huaras, however, our spirits were raised by an extraordinary reception by the Grupo Andinista at the home of Sr. Morales where we also met Dr. Egeler and deBoy who, with Lionel Terray, had just returned from their remarkable ascent, the first, of 21,000-foot Huantsan.

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Top: HIGH CAMP ON NORTHEAST RIDGE OF NEVADA HUANDOY

Looking north toward Artesonraju. Pisco at extreme right

*Photo, F. Hoyt*

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Bottom: AERIAL PHOTO OF HUANDOY GROUP

Left to right: Chacararaju (ca. 20,500 ft.), East Peak of Huandoy, Main Peak, West Peak, and South Peak. The main, west, and south peaks are all about 21,000 feet. The East peak is about 20,300 feet

*Photo, L. Ortenburger*