

Pumasillo - 1956

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THE Cordillera Vilcabamba is situated north-northwest of Cusco, bounded on the north by the Urubamba and Vilcabamba rivers, and on the south by the Rio Apurimac. It extends east-west for 20 miles, the major terminal mountains being Salcantay (21,500 feet) on the east and Panta (19,000 feet) on the west. Place names in this region are confused to non-existent, but one of the more prominent is Pumasillo—claws of the puma. This name applies to the crescent-shaped group of ten jagged peaks at the head of the Rio Andihuela, which flows eastwardly, and empties into the Rio Urubamba at the Village of Huadquiña. The average altitude of these claws is high, about 18,000 feet, and one of the most prominent, about 20,000 feet, is called Lasuna. This pyramid of ice was to be our primary objective.

Our expedition was a large one, consisting of nine Americans: George Arnis, Fred Ayres, Ginny and George Bell, Andrew Kauffman, Corky and Graham Matthews, Arnold Wexler, and myself; plus two Peruvian friends who had accompanied us on our 1952 Salcantay expedition, and were again of immeasurable aid: Abel-Pacheco Cano, and Señora Mayalay Flury. Although we had planned our expedition carefully, unexpected difficulties brought the usual delays. Almost a month elapsed—customs, red tape, lack of horses, plus confusion in objectives resulting from the possessiveness of various aggressive European expeditions—before we took the train from Cusco to Huadquiña.

Our scouts confirmed the existence of a trail, vaguely indicated on Hiram Bingham's route-map of his 1915 expedition. With four porters, 28 horses and mules, and various wranglers from the Hacienda, we left Huadquiña (5000 feet) on July 5, following a tortuous trail through the steep, jungle-covered walls of the Rio Andihuela canyon. Two days later we had risen to 13,000 feet, established a base camp at the bottom of the Northeast ridge of Lasuna. A mule had fallen from the treacherous trail and had been killed; it is a tribute to these *bestias de cargo* that accidents were not more numerous.

Weather during the entire trip was bad. There was never a day that was not overcast in the afternoon, but we did enjoy three "excellent" days (we were in the Pumasillo group for 38 days), meaning that it did not

actually snow on the peaks; if the peaks were engulfed in clouds and storm, but Base Camp did not record precipitation, the day was defined as "good"; the remainder of the time was "miserable." Four of our members were on restricted time requiring efficient scheduling if they were to climb anything before leaving. After five days of continuous rain and snow the clouds began to rise. Two groups scurried forth: Ayres, the Bells, and the Matthews to the north of Lasuna to climb a peak crowned with four fantastic ice spires, called with droll humor "Pretty Little Peak"; Arnis, Kauffman, Wexler, and I to the west ridge of Lasuna, to explore the route as far as possible, and later to be joined by the others.

Both ventures collapsed under trying conditions. Pretty Little Peak bogged down in exhaustingly deep powder-snow from the recent storms, but with valiant perseverance the icefall guarding the entrance to the summit basin was reached; here, Señores Ayres and Bell were avalanched but unharmed; with wisdom gained by this experience other slopes could be better evaluated and a return to camp seemed reasonable. Lasuna was just as grim. Climbing for 14 hours, we crossed under the north face, chopped our way up 400 feet of very steep ice (descent by rappel), and reached a dead-end on the corniced west ridge; an 80-foot overhanging ice-barrier mushroomed over the thin ridge, and we required either more equipment or a new route; return was accomplished by flashlight, and next day we re-grouped in Base Camp. Kauffman was recalled to the states, and we lost a strong climber.

That a concerted effort was needed was obvious, and Lasuna received top priority. G. Matthews had reconnoitered the approaches to the east face and had located a rock buttress that split the ice flow of the mammoth east glaciers and offered access to the lower glacial plateau. On July 13, Camp I was placed high (16,000 feet) on the buttress, and as Bell led forerunners into the icefall above the lower plateau, others brought up more gear. Camp II (17,700 feet) was banished to a sérac in the icefall, and reconnaissance continued. It snowed steadily; fog cut visibility to a few hundred feet. We probed for three days—crevasses and dead ends, sunup to sundown, storm and cold feet—before the maze opened onto the upper plateau. The icefall had forced us to the most distant point from the summit cliffs. The plateau was smothered in drifted powder-snow, actually meeting the often-exaggerated phrase "waist-deep snow." Leads were rotated often, distributing the fatigue, but the 800 yards to the bottom of the summit mass required three and a half hours of step-kicking. There are two dramatic features of the leviathan ice mass that culminates at the summit of Lasuna: most obvious is the breath-taking

sweep of sheer ice rising 1500 feet directly to the top; the other is a mammoth bergschrund, a gash almost decapitating the summit. Weaving through the avalanche debris, climbing sharp snow slopes, and squeaking over wind slabs, we reached the left, or south, end of the bergschrund. Snowfall and dark imparted sinister gestures to the grotesque cliffs and séracs. Ayres finessed his way over the narrow end of the bergschrund and inched up to the corner of the summit cornice. The honeycombed, shingle-edged ice ridge offered no security in chopped steps, nor safety in pitons; below, a series of cliffs cascaded 2000 feet to the "Boltoro ships" of the valley glacier. The top was so near, yet so far. With supplies exhausted, we descended to Base Camp. Time ran out for the Bells and Wexler, again cutting our climbing force.

Armed with determination, more food, rope, pitons, pickets, wands, etc., we repeated the well memorized route to Camp I and Camp II, and placed a higher Camp III (18,200 feet) at the upper plateau. At six o'clock, July 23, we left for the summit, but exhilaration from "excellent" weather became dissipated with the exhausting work on the plateau—our old steps were drifted over. Four hours later, just below the bergschrund, the Faucett Airlines, carrying our friends, circled overhead and swiftly disappeared. Reaching the lower lip of the 90-foot overhang, we began working our way to the right, towards a point that appeared to be the only relenting break in the schrund. Steps hacked into the fracture-line of a sérac hanging 40 feet into space did not release its energy in avalanche, but allowed us to cross to the undercut cornices beyond, while space gleamed through holes underfoot. A thin bridge led into a rotten wall, loose snow, and pockmarked ice; we sneaked by with more "tip-toe" chopping. Snow had drifted into the schrund, and five rope-lengths of deep avalanche powder ate up time. Arnis burrowed into the seedy snow to try and hold a fall, I inched to the end of the schrund, completely ignorant of what was holding us up. The clean face of ice, with long shadows, accenting the unbroken angle, plummeted to the plateau. The ice was good, fortunately, and not much of it overhead. Ayres took over and smoothly chipped 200 feet of steps, and the summit ridge leveled off. We enjoyed the last easy 60 feet to the summit, where we arrived at 2:30 P.M. The top was comma-shaped: beginning as a comfortable dome, narrowing abruptly to a roof ridge, both sides dropping off sharply to shoot over rock cliffs. Maintaining balance while walking one-at-a-time to the end was a laughable and dizzy game. Fog denied the comparison of our elevation with other peaks, and we did not tarry. Rappeling over the bergschrund, we returned to Camp III, and next day carried loads off the mountain.

Of the remaining "claws" in this group, we singled out two as attractive objectives and within reach of our present Base Camp. East of Lasuna was a beautifully proportioned peak, whose fluted slabs of ice and cliffs of granite offered few opportunities for a route; we sardonically called it "Lady's Day," meaning "an easy day for a Lady." While worrying, however, we turned again to Pretty Little Peak, and reestablished camp at 15,500 feet, below the long east ridge. Up at 3 A.M. and off at 4:30, we reached the crest of the ridge at sunrise and followed the route of the first attempt. Turning into the icefall and under the 70-foot sérac whose fractures had separated it from the main ice mass above, we labored in deep snow for two hours, eventually crossing into the summit basin.

This catchment was not the continuous plateau we had assumed, but was split open and traversed by four huge crevasses, each one bridged at the far end from the previous one, forcing a zigzag path through the exhausting snow. Because of incessant overcast and daily precipitation the snow never consolidated. At 3:30 P.M. we reached the col between the highest two pinnacles and had to guess which was higher. Choosing the south sliver, we hacked 200 feet of steps on the corniced ridge and arrived at 4:30 on the summit, which overhangs the wonderously fluted south face. Through the fog Ayres sighted his level on the other summit and discovered it to be perhaps ten feet higher! Reaching camp by flashlight, it was agreed to repeat the route and climb the other summit. After a rest-day, Arnis, Ayres, and Matthews left at 2:30 A.M., climbing by moonlight, and reached the bottom of the north pinnacle at eight o'clock. One rope length and two hours of waist-deep snow later, they crossed the bergschrund. Matthews made a spectacular lead chopping 350 feet in flaky, porous ice, plus using chimney technique between the flutes. The summit cornice rocked as they placed a picket for a rappel, and they gingerly roped off. The weather was "excellent" all day, and by late afternoon they had returned to Base Camp. Meanwhile, C. Matthews had found a steep route through grass alongside a waterfall to the glaciers north of Lady's Day. Inasmuch as we had not seen the north side of the mountain, we assumed we might find a route there. Accordingly, while the others were finishing Pretty Little Peak, Corky and I climbed to the Col (16,400 feet) north of Lady's Day. After a few days of "miserable" weather in Base Camp, we established our high camp (14,800 feet) below the north glacier, beside a beautiful lake. On August 3, we retraced old steps across the glacier to the increasingly steep slopes that rise above the rock cliffs. It began to snow, as usual. Although we had little hope of reaching the top, we decided to go ahead as far as we could. We crossed the schrund, and Arnis chopped

upwards and across the first cliffs. Ayres took over and indefatigably chopped for three hours in the thickening snowstorm. At my complaints of being hit on the head too often by ice, Ayres suggested that I take the lead. Gratefully, I struggled through mixed rocks, snow, and icicles, and a short steep pitch to the top of the ridge cornice. But this weak flake was the top; the far side plumeted, seemingly without break, to the grass in the valley. Arnis came up and heard the sizzle of static electricity on the axes. In attempting to drive in a rappel picket we felt the summit shake at every blow, and it seemed better to descend. Retreating to an exposed rock in the slope, Ayres drove in an ice piton, and fixing a line, we backed off into the milky fog and groped for the covered steps. Four hundred and fifty feet of fixed rope brought us safely across the cliffs, and we descended the glacier. The moraine was covered with thin snow, and in our haste to reach the tent before dark, we crashed more than once. Wet and happy, we slid into camp.

In addition to the three major objectives, various other climbs resulted in much reconnaissance of this area. Two lower peaks were climbed by Matthews and Ayres: Old Flattop (16,800 feet), whose summit block of granite imposed some tricky problems; and Terror Tower (16,200 feet), so named because it is the only mountain in the region that looks easy. On August 2, the *bestias de cargo* returned, and we packed out. The peaks of the Pumasillo group because of their proximity to the Amazon jungle offer excessive difficulties in snow conditions, and the supporting core of granite presents awesome relief. They are small as Peruvian peaks go—small, but Oh My!

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Cordillera Vilcabamba, Peru.

ASCENTS: Several peaks in the Pumasillo group, by Ayres, Arnis, Michael, G. Matthews, July, 1956.

PERSONNEL: Fred D. Ayres, George Arnis, David Michael, W. V. Graham Matthews, Corky Matthews, George I. Bell, Ginny Bell, Andrew D. Kauffman, Arnold Wexler, Abel-Pacheco Cano, Señora Mayalay Flury.