The North American Andean Expedition 1958

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Upon return from an expedition which had no other purpose than to attempt mountain ascents, from an expedition on which a very good friend died of pneumonia almost at the very beginning, from an expedition which later had considerable success in reaching difficult summits, what should one's thoughts be? The well-known phenomenon of forgetting the painful and unpleasant and remembering only the pleasant very likely places the successes uppermost in mind. And yet the thoughts of death are never completely subdued, and indeed forever return to bring up again the philosophical problem of whether such endeavor, devoid as it is of any utility, is really worthwhile when the consequences can be and have been so great and irreversible. If the answer is no, then the tragedy is doubly compounded. Hence, one must either have or search for an argument leading to the positive answer to this, one of the basic problems of mountaineering philosophy. Those of us who are not gifted with the ability to express inner thoughts and emotions clearly can only say softly that we hope and believe that for the individual mountaineering does represent an endeavor as worthwhile as any other in which one may engage during the short life allotted us.

The North American Andean Expedition of 1958 cannot be given any specific date of birth; it just grew in the minds of several of us. After some airmail discussion, eight of us decided that we wanted to climb among the high peaks of the Cordillera Blanca of Peru. Our group consisted of Dr. Fred Ayres of Portland, Oregon, well-known for his numerous ascents in the Canadian Rockies and Peru; Walt Bailey of Casper, Wyoming, who had climbed extensively in this country, Canada, and the Alps; Dr. Henry Kendall of Stanford, California, a relatively newcomer to mountaineering, who had already displayed his skill in Yosemite and the Battle Range; W. V. Graham Matthews of Pebble Beach, California, who had participated in more Peruvian expeditions than any of the rest of us; David "Georgia" Michael of Aspen, Colorado, veteran of many expeditions to Alaska, the Selkirks and Peru; George Whitmore of Fresno, California, rock-climbing expert, participant in the recent success on El Capitan in Yosemite; my wife Irene, whose experience included the California Sierra, Canada, and the Tetons; and myself.

Our plans included the establishment of base camps in three different
areas in the Cordillera Blanca during the months of June, July, and August. First we would enter the Quebrada Alpamayo, at the north end of the range, and attempt the ascents of nevados Alpamayo, Quitaraju, and Santa Cruz. Alpamayo (ca. 19,700 ft.) and Santa Cruz (20,535 ft.) each having been climbed but once previously, presented a formidable challenge. The second base camp would be in the central Quebrada Ulta, from which Nevado Contrahierbas, the unclimbed Nevado Ulta, and a new route on the south summit of Huascarán would be attempted. Nevado Ulta (19,275 ft.) was one of the highest unclimbed peaks in the range and one of the most interesting. All previous ascents of the famous Huascarán had been made by way of the saddle between its two summits. From a study of photographs I had concluded that the long and unknown south ridge might provide a route to the summit. For a finale we would try to repeat the difficult ascent of Nevado Huantsán (20,981 ft.) in the southern portion of the Cordillera Blanca, the first ascent of which had been made in 1952, after a prolonged siege, by Terray, Egeler, and De Booy.

The chronicle of our expedition begins on June 22 when Bailey, Kendall, Michael, Irene, and I deplaned at Caraz, a small town near the northwestern end of the Cordillera Blanca. There we found a truck to take us to the Hacienda Colcas, the starting point for the long journey into Quebrada Alpamayo, where we met Ayres, Matthews, and Whitmore. We now also met the four porters who had been engaged to assist us through the summer. I had known two of them from our expeditions in 1952 and 1954—Eliséo Vargas and Macario Angeles. Eliséo’s strength and determination when faced with difficulties had always been valuable, but this summer they were to prove crucial to the success of our expedition. Today he probably ranks as the finest of Peruvian mountaineers. Macario is one of the very few men I have seen who can spend all day carrying a 70-pound load to 19,000 feet and arrive smiling and laughing. Emilio Angeles, Macario’s older brother, is one of the most capable and responsible of all Peruvian porters; his dependability and knowledge of the whereabouts of every burro within a hundred miles make him an asset to any expedition. Zacarias Corsino, a slight boy of only eighteen, was an apprentice to the other three. This was his first expedition (the others averaged four), but he did very well carrying loads almost as heavy as the others’.

It required three long days to reach our Base Camp at 14,500 feet, at the head of Quebrada Alpamayo, from Hacienda Colcas. The first day after arrival we were up early to commence the task of sorting the baggage. That evening, as we were eating our supper of soup and “hoosh,” Walt Bailey mentioned that he was not feeling well. We did not take much notice of this
at the time, as the same was largely true of all of us. The next morning, however, when he was feeling no better, it was suggested that he stay at Base Camp for a couple of days and rest before coming up to Camp I. But in his usual unselfish manner, Walt said that he would go with the rest of us to Camp I, but would come down to Base Camp for a rest if he did not feel better.

We got a late start that morning, and, since different members and porters started at different times, the party became very much separated. The route proved more difficult than we had expected, and in order to cross the last rock-ridge a steep cliff had to be negotiated. From the crest of this ridge we had a brilliant view of Alpamayo for the first time. Previous expeditions had called it one of the most beautiful peaks in South America, but only now did we appreciate the truth of the statement. The almost mathematical pyramidal symmetry, the vertical ice-flutings in the west face, and the heavily corniced ridges were all very impressive.

The site which the advance party had selected for Camp I was located on a moraine slope, with no flat tent-space, at an altitude of about 16,000 feet. Four of us spent two hours excavating enough level space for our two four-man tents. That evening, as we were standing around eating supper, for the first time we noticed that Walt, who had been the last to arrive, did not look at all well. Still, we did not see any reason to be alarmed. It appeared that he was just more tired than the rest of us. However, very soon after we retired to our tents Walt began coughing seriously, and the thermometer from the first-aid kit indicated that he had a temperature of 100.5°. Although there was no physician among us, we felt sure that Walt had pneumonia, an extremely serious disease at that altitude. Immediately, Henry and George administered an injection of fast-acting penicillin. We were all very much concerned by now. As the hours passed, our concern mounted, since Walt's coughing was getting worse. After the second injection of penicillin, when it was apparent that he was no better, a consultation was held, and it was decided to send two members down to Base Camp immediately even though it was the middle of the night. They were to send one of the porters back to Colcas, where there was a radio transmitter with which Lima could be reached with a message requesting the U. S. Air Force Mission to drop oxygen and a mask. It was clear to us that this was our only hope of saving Walt. With our manpower it would have been almost impossible to carry him down to Base Camp. Graham and Georgia volunteered to undertake the dangerous mission of climbing down the rock-cliff at night. We wished them luck and they were off at 1 A.M. No one got any sleep that night. As the hours and minutes passed, Walt's breathing became progres-
sively worse. He died at 4 a.m. We just couldn't believe it. Only a few hours earlier we had all been talking together at suppertime. It seemed inconceivable that such a tragedy had claimed our friend. Walt had been more than a friend, however—he was one of the finest mountain companions I have ever known. He was completely at ease in the mountains, which seemed to be his second home. Requiescat in pace.

George volunteered to climb down to Base Camp and stop the proposed airdrop of oxygen, making the climb in the dark. At daybreak we held a council and concluded that it would be just barely possible to evacuate the body, although an undesirable risk of life would be involved in descending the cliff between Camp I and Base Camp. Consequently, most of the rest of the day was consumed in providing a proper burial. That evening we reached Base Camp physically and mentally exhausted. The next morning Fred and Graham volunteered to go back to Lima to notify the family and make whatever arrangements were needed through the U. S. Embassy in Lima.

The five who remained at Base Camp were now faced with a serious decision. Should we continue to climb? There are those who might say that to do so would show lack of sympathy and feeling. Yet Walt had been our friend and we knew that his wish would have been that we continue the expedition. In reaching our decision there was no callous disregard for the tragedy.

Santa Cruz Chico

We now turned our eyes westward and started the attempt on Nevado Santa Cruz and Santa Cruz Chico. We had already learned that instead of one, there actually are two peaks north of Santa Cruz, of approximately the same altitude, 19,100 feet. The more northerly of the two did not seem to offer any attractive route, so we established a high camp on the other, at about 17,000 feet, on July 1. Irene, Georgia, and I were the only climbers at this camp. Henry did not feel well, so George stayed with him at Base Camp to administer medicines if necessary. We started at 6 a.m. The first portion of the ascent up the northeast face did not involve difficulties, other than winding in and out of the various crevasses in the glacier. Just before noon we came to a very steep ice-cliff that seemed to be a mere mass of icicles. It required two precarious leads to pass it. We were relieved to be able to eat lunch on the broad snow-shelf above this bad spot. Turning our attention to the mountain, we saw a very steep face of ice and rock above us. Rather than climb directly up it we concluded that it would be easier to cut steps across the face to an ice gully from which we
could reach the north ridge a short distance from the summit. And cut steps we did! It seemed hours before we reached the gully, and then Georgia had to cut many, many more steps in ascending it. About halfway up we traded the lead and I continued to the ridge crest. Then, at a gentler angle, Georgia kicked steps in the snow until at 5:45 p.m. we stepped upon the summit. The true summit was a cornice, perhaps ten feet above us, veering out over the west face; we did not choose to test its stability.

The view of Nevado Santa Cruz was impressive, even terrifying, as it rose over 1500 feet above us. However, we could not linger since it was very late and we knew that we should not have light much longer. With a scant five minutes on the summit we began retracing our steps down the face.

Upon return to Base Camp, we learned that much had occurred. The local authorities in Caraz, after learning of the death, insisted that the body be brought down for autopsy, a legal requirement whenever a physician is not present at the time of death. The day after the three of us had started for Santa Cruz Chico two policemen and two peons from the hacienda had arrived in Base Camp to see that this was carried out. By the time we returned everything had been accomplished, and Henry accompanied the body out to Caraz.

Nevado Santa Cruz

The four remaining rested for a day in Base Camp and then commenced to work on Santa Cruz. We knew that the north ridge had been ascended once, but a bivouac had been required near the summit. A steep ice-slope on the east flank of the ridge had been used to gain access to the easier upper portions of the ridge which were otherwise guarded by a very steep rock-face. We placed our camp as high as was deemed safe, under the northeast face, at about 17,500 feet. After a closer look at the ice slope, we decided that the rock face was the lesser of two evils. George and Georgia made the first reconnaissance on July 6 and succeeded in putting up four hundred feet of fixed rope on the rock face. In the tent that night we decided to try to make a light camp on the snow shelf at the top of the rock face. With heavy packs we set out on the 7th to do this. However, this attempt did not get past the high point of the previous day—no one was feeling particularly strong and the necessary enthusiasm was not there. After an early return to camp we decided that two of us should make the last effort by starting very early with light packs. The next morning Georgia and I were off at 2:30 a.m., and by 6:30 we were at the top of the fixed rope. The weather which had been clear now began to turn. By the time we had reached the last rock, about 400 feet above the fixed
rope, conditions were very poor—a very strong wind and occasional snow. The climbing had been rather difficult—water ice over very steep rock. The prospect of having to negotiate this section late in the afternoon covered with fresh snow was not appealing, but our decision to retreat stemmed from an unwillingness to climb all day on an unknown ridge in virtual blizzard conditions. We had to rappel the entire distance, but camp was reached at 2 P.M. We knew that this was our last attempt for Santa Cruz since we had arranged for the burros to arrive and evacuate Base Camp the next day, July 9. Only two days were required to reach the valley. We were lucky in finding a truck to take us to Huáras where we met Fred and Graham who had returned from their duties in Lima.

*Nevado Ulta*

It was a matter of only a couple of days before we were able to start for Quebrada Ulta, the second portion of our expedition. We left the town of Carhuás on July 14 and that evening reached the beautiful little village of Huaypan at the foot of Huascarán. The next day we continued up the canyon and established Base Camp at 14,000 feet. On the 16th three separate reconnaissance parties set out to explore the three possible objectives. Henry and George reported that night at supper that they saw no feasible route on Nevado Ulta, the name we had given to the spectacular unclimbed 19,275-foot peak directly above camp. Emilio and I reported finding a possible campsite from which the southeast buttress of Huascarán could be attacked. At best it looked like a difficult proposition requiring several days to surmount this lower section of Huascarán’s south ridge. Fred on the other hand had had better luck. He had found the route for at least part of the ascent of Contrahierbas, 19,803 feet. As a result the next day most of us packed loads for the climb while Fred, Henry, and George made another reconnaissance of Nevado Ulta. They had a difficult climb to reach the saddle just north of the peak from which the prospects were no better than those reported previously.

*Contrahierbas*

The establishment of Camps I and II on Contrahierbas was accomplished without difficulty. Camp II was located at 17,500 feet high on a ridge overlooking the main north glacier. On July 20 we were up at 4 A.M. and started climbing at 6:15. The first problem was to descend a rock cliff by a very tricky route in order to get down onto the main glacier. The rest of the route was fairly straightforward and consisted mostly of kicking steps in snow of moderate angle. But none of us will ever forget the perfect day we had for the ascent. I have never seen a finer day in the mountains.
—a very light breeze and absolutely no clouds. Since Contrahierbas lies somewhat to the east of the rest of the Cordillera Blanca we were able to see almost the entire range from its summit.

**Huascarán**

Three days later we were rested sufficiently to commence the attack on Huascarán. Henry mentioned that on the reconnaissance of Nevado Ulta he had seen an alternative to the southeast buttress as a means of reaching the south summit ridge. A southwest glacier also led to the ridge and appeared much easier than the difficult buttress. On the morning of July 23 Henry and I with two porters set off to find a route to Camp I, and late that afternoon we located a site for a camp. We quickly dumped our loads and returned to Base Camp. The next day Graham, George, and Georgia, with three porters, carried more loads up to the camp. On the 24th they reconnoitered the route to Camp II, putting in two fixed ropes, while Fred, Henry, Irene, and I, with three porters, carried more loads to Camp I.

On July 26 the seven of us, plus two porters, carried enough loads to Camp II to establish Fred, Henry, and me there for the night. Late that afternoon Henry and I were able to spend two hours chopping steps in the ice above camp. The next morning we three set forth at 7:45, a rather late start, to see if a route could be found up to the summit ridge. Camp II, at 19,000 feet, was fully 2000 feet below the ridge and since not one person had ever been on any part of the mountain south of the summit, we had no way of knowing whether or not the projected route would go. After a final traverse across a steep slope of snow of dubious stability we reached the summit ridge at about 21,000 feet at 3 o’clock. Our mission had been accomplished! Judging from what we could see we had no reason to believe that the 1200 feet of ridge above would offer any great difficulties. Thinking that we had solved the problem of finding a new route on Huascarán, we returned to Camp II with light hearts. In the late afternoon of the next day Irene, Georgia, George, and Graham joined us at Camp II for the summit climb on the 29th.

My wrist alarm started rattling at midnight and Henry started cooking the oatmeal and cocoa. Unfortunately George had developed a slight cold, with cough and nausea, the previous evening and he thought it better not to try to make the ascent with the rest of us. At 2 A.M. the temperature measured 12 degrees. The night air was quiet and the icy slopes of Huascarán were brilliant in the light of the almost full moon—a myriad of ice crystals reflecting as so many small mirrors. We advanced rhythmically in the steps made two days before. The summit ridge was reached, a little
ahead of schedule, about fifteen minutes before dawn. We waited for the light and then started with Irene in the lead, stamping our steps along the now new upper portions of the summit ridge. The sunrise over the even cloud-mass extending from our feet several hundred miles out over the Amazon Basin had been a wild and lonely experience. To our right the immense east face dropped off for over 3500 feet. Progress was good until we met the "Cauliflower," a peculiar ice bump directly on the ridge. Choosing to climb over this we soon became enmeshed in difficulties. From extremely unstable steep snow we disappeared one by one through a tunnel in the ridgcrest; on the other side we found ourselves following Georgia's lead along the very edge of the east face rocks. Fortunately we were completely engulfed in clouds so that we could not see the exposure below. Once past this bad place we emerged onto the upper slopes at 22,000 feet. Fred and Graham made the final steps and we were on the summit at 1:15 p.m. The summit of Huascarán leaves something to be desired. More than one football field could be placed there.

During our half-hour on the summit Irene received many congratulations. Not only was she the first woman to climb the mountain, the highest peak in Peru, but she had even led a significant portion of the ascent. The only American woman who has made a higher ascent was Fanny Bullock-Workman in the Karakoram in 1906.

**Chekiacraju and Tulparaju**

After a day or two of rest, on August 3, Fred, George, Macario, and I made the first ascent of Chekiacraju, 17,342 feet, in the hope of obtaining photographs of our route on Huascarán. Luck was not with us, for clouds prevented our photography. George even managed to make the first climb of another peak the same day, Talparaju, 16,752 feet. That ended our efforts in Quebrada Ulta and we departed the next day for Huarás. At this time Graham and Henry had to return to the United States and Fred took off on an archeological jaunt to the east of the range in search of some Inca ruins.

**Huantsán**

The remaining four left Huarás at 5 a.m. on August 9 for Quebrada Shallap to attempt the ascent of Nevado Huantsán. Terray, De Booy, and Egeler, in 1952, made their base camp on the east side of the range, but had to cross back to the west through a gap in the ridge north of the north peak in order to make the ascent. Their route involved first climbing the north peak, 20,056 feet, and then descending to the saddle between it and the higher south peak, 20,981 feet. We planned a shorter approach to the base of the north peak from the west and to repeat their route on the upper mountain.
After one day of bad weather, George and Georgia left Base Camp on August 11 to establish Camp I. Irene and I moved up the following day while the other two looked for a route to Camp II, which we hoped to place at the base of the northwest ridge leading to the north peak. Upon their return they reported the route to be very complicated, involving many zigzags through a great series of crevasses. The ridge above Camp II appeared so terrible and forbidding that all of the porters except Eliséo declared they would not carry loads up it. I could not blame them—from below it was not obvious that we would be able to climb it ourselves. Fortunately, this proved to be a case in which the bark was worse than the bite. The next day Irene and I were able to make fairly rapid progress up the snow and at times on the rock. By three in the afternoon we reached a point 150 feet below the plateau northwest of the north peak. George and Georgia had carried loads up behind us. The descent required more time than we had expected, with the result that the sudden tropical night found us still a couple of hundred feet above camp. We rappelled into camp at 10 o’clock. The next day was voted for rest. On August 16 we all moved up, accompanied by Eliséo. He had mentioned to me back in June that he wanted to climb Huantsán and we were happy to have him with us. Georgia did an excellent job of cutting steps up the last 150 feet to the plateau. Our Camp III was the highest camp of the summer, located at the base of the summit ridge of the north peak at 19,700 feet. In the morning Eliséo and I were the first two ready to leave, so we roped together and started up the ridge. The first obstacle was a great crevasse cutting completely across the ridge and spanned only by one frail bridge. With Eliséo belaying I ventured onto the bridge. It held. As we continued, the ridge became narrower and narrower. The right or west face was much too steep to be climbable. The only route was along the very slight rounding at the top of the equally steep left or east face. At the summit of the north peak a terrible sight appeared. Immediately ahead of us this rounding of the east face disappeared. There was nothing left but a sharp crest of snow, no more than an inch wide, with both walls leading up to this crest at an angle of 80 degrees. The only possibility for crossing this barrier was simply to cut away the upper portion of the crest until the ridge was wide enough for footing. With a belay from Eliséo, this I proceeded to do; an hour and a half was required to cross this fifty-foot section. The exposure, over 3000 feet on either side, demanded caution. The remainder of the descent to the saddle was steep and required time to make the steps. We could now see that the main south peak was significantly more difficult than the one we had just traversed. By 3 p.m. we had reached the end of
easy going on the south peak. Ahead was an ice slope requiring more effort than we could muster at the end of such a day. Returning to the saddle we met Irene and Georgia coming up; Irene had enough energy left to cut one rope length’s steps out onto this ice slope before joining us for the descent.

Although we did not reach camp that night until well after dark, we were forced to make the summit effort the next day due to lack of extra food. Off at 6 A.M., we made very quick work of the north peak. Eliséo and I reached the saddle in only 45 minutes. By 8 o’clock we had reached the last step chopped by Irene the day before. The next 300 feet proved to be the crux of the climb and the most difficult bit negotiated during the whole summer. From the summit of the north peak this section of clear blue ice had stood out vividly against the white of the snow of the rest of the ridge. Several ice pitons were used to protect the lead climber. It was noon before I reached the top of this section. By most mountain standards the next part of the ridge should have been easy. But the mountain showed absolutely no signs of giving up the battle. We advanced very slowly. Finally at 3:30, at about 20,700 feet, we had to admit defeat since the summit was not even in sight and it was already clear that we would be climbing back over the north peak in the dark. On the 19th we descended to Camp II. The next day George, Georgia, and Irene indicated that they were through with Huantsán and went all the way down to Base Camp.

With the weather still perfect, it seemed a shame not to have another try. After an hour or two of gentle persuasion Eliséo agreed to accompany me for one last summit try. Shortly after noon we almost raced up the steep ridge above Camp II, in an hour and a half, and were eating supper at Camp III at 5 o’clock. At 2 A.M. we were adjusting our headlights. Without a word we started up the now well-known stepladder over the north peak. But during our brief and restless sleep the weather had changed completely. Snow was falling, being blown by a moderate wind. The traverse of the north peak went easily, but “exciting” is the only correct word to describe the crossing of the knife-edge in the dark with only a dim light and a variable wind degrading one’s sense of balance. By 4 A.M. we had reached the beginning of the blue ice. With ever-present optimism I reckoned that the weather should improve with daybreak. Instead, the snowfall continued and the ferocity of the wind increased to the point where the word “blizzard” would be a more appropriate description. We managed to keep warm only when moving.

At 6 o’clock I was standing in the last steps cut during our former attempt. The route-finding was hindered, since the visibility was less than 100 feet through the swirling snow. I chopped for a rope length across to
what we had supposed to be the last rocks short of the summit. Leading back to the ridge-crest, I was concerned because the snow was very soft and I expected each step to break out. Fortunately they held, while I cut up and around a very steep corner to what I thought would be a flatter portion, allowing an easy walk to the summit. Instead there was nothing but another steep face interrupted by a rock outcropping whose existence we had not suspected.

During the entire climb Eliséo and I had alternated being half-frozen. I was cold belaying while he climbed, and he was cold belaying while I climbed. From the top of this last rock I again led up the unrelenting face. At the end of two rope-lengths we were on the summit! With some difficulty I managed to push aside all the clothes covering my wrist and read my watch—8:25 in the morning! Seldom have I been on a summit at an earlier hour. And seldom have I seen less from a summit. We could see approximately fifty feet down the ridge on the other side, and then, as all around us, nothing but the white blankness of snow and cloud. After a brief bit of portrait photography we started the descent and Huantsán was behind us.

Summary of Statistics

**Area:** Cordillera Blanca, Peru.

**Ascents:**

- Santa Cruz Chico, 19,100 feet, July 1, 1958 (Michael, Irene Ortenburger, Leigh Ortenburger).
- Contrahierbas, 19,803 feet, July 20, 1958 (Ayers, Kendall, Matthews, Michael, Irene Ortenburger, Leigh Ortenburger, Whitmore).
- Huascaran (South Peak), 22,205 feet, July 29, 1958 (Ayers, Kendall, Matthews, Michael, Irene Ortenburger, Leigh Ortenburger); by a new route. The highest ascent made by a woman in the Western Hemisphere.
- Chekiacraju, 17,342 feet, August 3, 1958 (Ayers, L. Ortenburger, Whitmore, Macario Angeles)—first ascent.
- Tulparaju, 16,752 feet, August 3, 1958 (Whitmore, *solo*)—first ascent.
- Huantsán (North Peak), 20,056 feet, August 17, 1958 (Michael, I. Ortenburger, L. Ortenburger, Whitmore, Vargas); August 18 and 20 (L. Ortenburger, Vargas).
- Huantsán (South Peak), 20,981 feet, August 20, 1958 (Leigh Ortenburger, Eliséo Vargas)—second ascent (the first was by Terray, De Booy, and Egeler, 1952).

**Personnel:** Fred D. Ayers, Henry Kendall, W. V. Graham Matthews, David Michael, Irene Ortenburger, Leigh Ortenburger, George Whitmore; and the Peruvian porters, Eliséo Vargas, Macario Angeles, Emilio Angeles, Zacarias Corsino.