

Northern Cordillera Blanca

WILLIAM KATRA, *Unaffiliated*

THE three of us were in agreement. We had one of the most unorganized—but not disorganized—expeditions ever to attempt big things in the Andes. Frankly, we liked it that way, with a minimum of hierarchy, planning and equipment, and a maximum of climbing. It all began in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Jim Milne and I, two “intentional cultivators of schizophrenia,” focused on Peru for a summer fling at the mountains, a means of physical and spiritual survival after eight months of essential but debilitating academia. Mike Andrews, who was enticed to join us through last-minute correspondence, either fortunately or unfortunately does not have that fractured vitality: at every check-point in Peru he unabashedly signed as his profession, “andinista,” or mountain climber.

After a few days spent acclimatizing near Huaraz, we acted on advice from Ad Carter and headed for the little climbed Pucahirca group in the northern Cordillera Blanca (see the map, p. 263, *A.A.J.*, 1971). An 18-hour trip into the Safuna Basin in a small Toyota pick-up with all our gear and three weeks' food proved so uncomfortable that we determined to walk out at the end. We had only one definite goal, an unnamed 5550-meter (18,209-foot) peak located on the ridge between Pucarashta and Pucahirca Oeste. John Ricker had given it the distinction of being one of the last unclimbed peaks in the whole range, which meant that previous parties had considered it either too hard, or too unimpressive, to climb. The latter seemed to be the case, and its appearance from our camp 1000 feet above Laguna Pucacocha earned it the nick-name “Pucabumpa.” So confident were we, that when we left next morning, we were carrying gear more suitable for an easy day in the Alps. We reached the col between the peak and Pucarashta, and headed up the west ridge. To our dismay this turned out to be the typical Andean ridge—a very sharp rock formation covered by meters and meters of unstable snow. We bulldozed our way up to the first of two mushrooms on the ridge. On this we were forced to remove huge quantities of snow in forging a diagonal path up its 15-foot vertical wall. The second appeared to be even less inviting until Mike found a tunnel through between it and a huge leaning pillar of ice on its north side. The final part of the ridge maintained the excitement by slab-avalanching on the south and being heavily corniced on the north. All in all, a slow, dangerous and spectacular climb.

Darkness caught us about 150 feet below the summit. On a rela-

tively flat place we kicked out a small shelf, popped down two sleeping pills apiece, and drowsed into a twelve-hour shiver. The monotony of the long cold night was broken only by Jim sleep-walking into a crevasse a few meters below our platform. He fell only 12 feet and since he had cleverly managed to take his ice axe with him, was able to exit unharmed with the help of Mike and the rope. In the morning we were still so drowsy that we lounged until noon in the life-restoring Andean sun. Then we descended a 45° slope on the north face onto a shelf, and traversed easily back west to the col. Because of the unexpected thrills offered by this peak, we decided to name it Mushoc Shipash, the youngest virgin.

The next day we were off to attempt the unclimbed north face of Tayapampa, a 5674-meter (18,618-foot) peak some three miles to the west. Approaching from the southeast, we crossed over its east ridge and rappelled down onto a glacier on its northern side, where we made camp at about 16,500 feet. In the morning, as we gazed up at it, the face appeared pleausurably steep for most of its height, but was nearly vertical near the top. Mike led a shaky pitch on ice across the bergschrund and up under some rocks. We passed left and then front-pointed steadily up on good snow, each of us using an ice axe in one hand and an ice hammer in the other. We moved together much of the time, always careful to have at least two ice screws or pickets protecting our progress. Looking upward, the increasing steepness made the snow flutings near the top appear as suspended white blobs against the deep blue of the sky. Tension mounted with our doubts of being able to follow our direct path up through them. But the ideal consistency of the hard snow was in our favor, and we emerged on the ridge only about 50 feet west of the summit. The 900-foot face had given us six-and-a-half hours of sustained hard climbing on an enjoyable mixture of snow, ice and a little rock.

True to a pattern which was to prove inescapable, we arrived on top just in time to enjoy a magnificent sunset. But by now we had learned our lesson. Our epicurean inability to move before being warmed by the rays of the morning sun, the shortness of the days, and the size of the mountains, meant that we never again climbed without taking light sleeping bags and bivouac tents with us. The Andes were kind to us, and we never lacked for a good camp-site. This time we found a large shelf 150 feet below the summit on the south ridge. In the fading light we were able to enjoy a magnificent view of the pyramid-shaped Alpmayo two miles to our south, and we cursed our luck that its fine north face had already been climbed. In the morning we descended in thick fog down the south ridge and back to the comforts of our Base Camp at the Laguna Safuna encampment of Electro-Perú (previously called *Corporación Peruana del Santa*).

After waiting out two days of bad weather, we set off for the spectacular north face of Pucahirca Norte III. It was another day of poetry,

moving together up hard-packed snow and ice, bathed in the tropical winter sunshine. The 2000-foot face, averaging about 57°, took us nine hours. It was not until a few minutes after dark that we were able to pull ourselves into a small bergschrund only 65 feet from the top. We hacked away the icicles with our axes, settled down into our sleeping bags, contentedly fatigued, and began the long rite of water melting, cooking and eating.

Every good climb deserves a bivouac such as this. After the intense physical challenge and mental absorption of the climb, we were able to relax, suspended in the darkness near the top of our face, and meditate. It was a marvellous night, too special to pass away in sleep, as I intentionally woke myself at times in order to gaze out over the vertical landscape, reminding myself that I was really and fully alive.

Next morning, our luck with the weather held, and the remaining icicles glittered as the sun's rays crept into our little cave. After a leisurely breakfast we slid down an *étrier* from the cave onto the steep face. We front-pointed 50 feet across to the edge, then hacked away the underside of the cornice, and plowed through deep snow on the ridge to the summit. Ten minutes was hardly a day's climbing, so we set off south towards Pucahirca Norte II (5970 meters, 19,587 feet). This proved to be a straight-forward climb except for a 65-foot traverse across vertical unstable snow and ice under the summit cornice. Jim came across muttering that hand traverses might be all right in Yosemite, but were a bit rough at high altitudes in Peru. We had hoped to continue the traverse to Norte I but were prevented by the lack of 100-meter rope which would be needed to descend, and reascend, the steep slope of unconsolidated powder leading down to the col between Norte II and I. So we returned for another memorable night in our cave, the enjoyment being tempered only by the fact that it was our third night out, and we had brought food and fuel for only two. The next day we descended east from Norte III, traversed back to a col between it and a beautiful satellite peak, and then continued on down to the foot of the north face.

Time was running out, but we felt we could not leave without trying to force a route up out of the Safuna basin itself. After some very difficult climbing on steep ice-cliffs we set up camp at 18,500 feet, hoping that on the next day we would be able to reach the summit of Pucahirca Sur via the northwest face. However, a high wind flattened our camp in the night, and this, together with our lassitude after climbing four peaks in ten days, forced a retreat. Two days later we crossed over the ridge of Alpamayo, trudged down the boggy trails of the Quebrada Santa Cruz, and on out to the road.

But our climbing was not yet over. After a few days sunbathing near Huaraz, we set off up the Quebrada Ulta, toward the mighty east face of Huascarán Sur. A two-day approach and another two-and-a-half suspended on the face, and we were, true to form, to be found enjoying

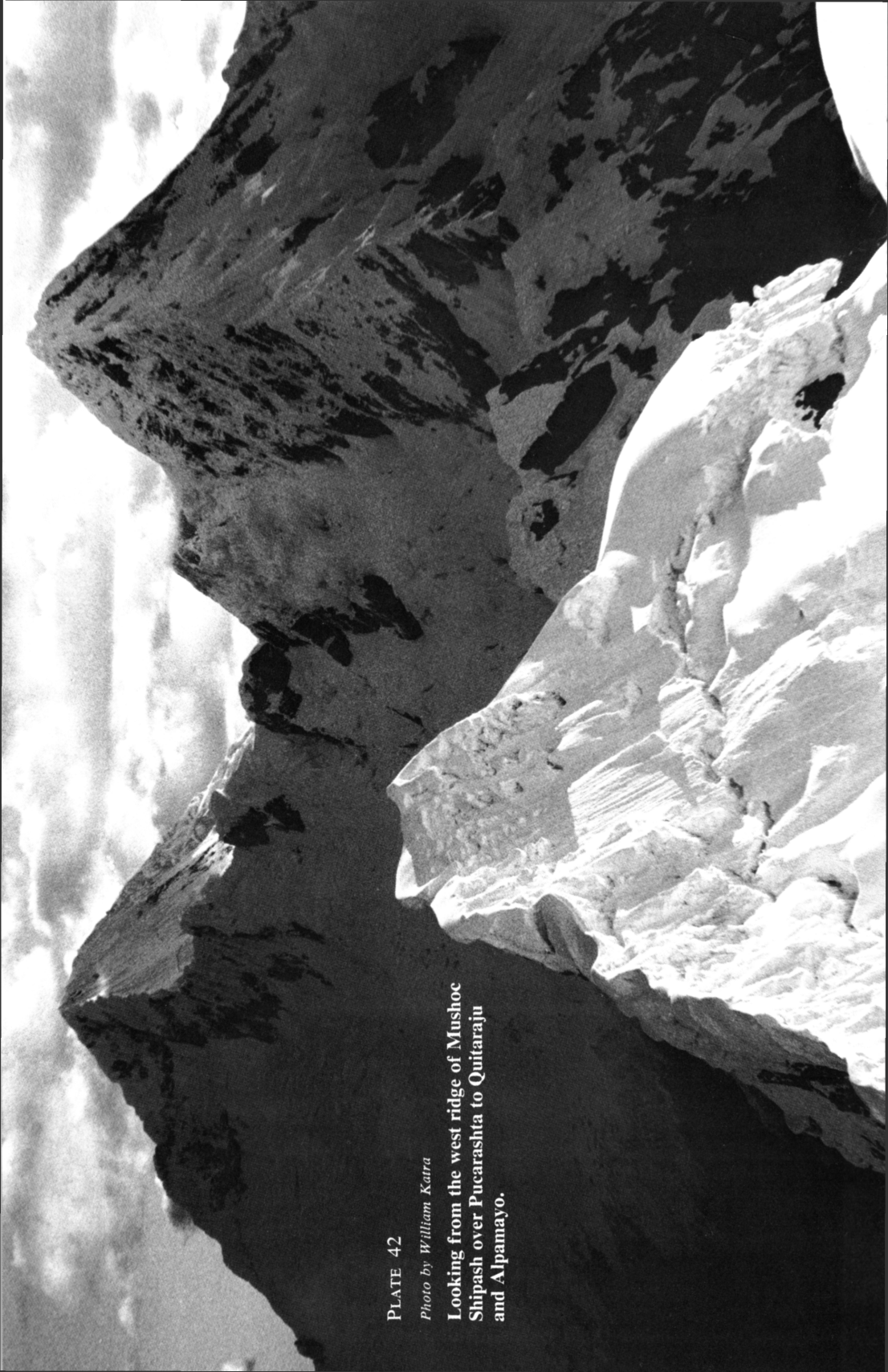


PLATE 42

Photo by William Katra

Looking from the west ridge of Mushoc
Shipash over Pucarashia to Quitaraju
and Alpamayo.

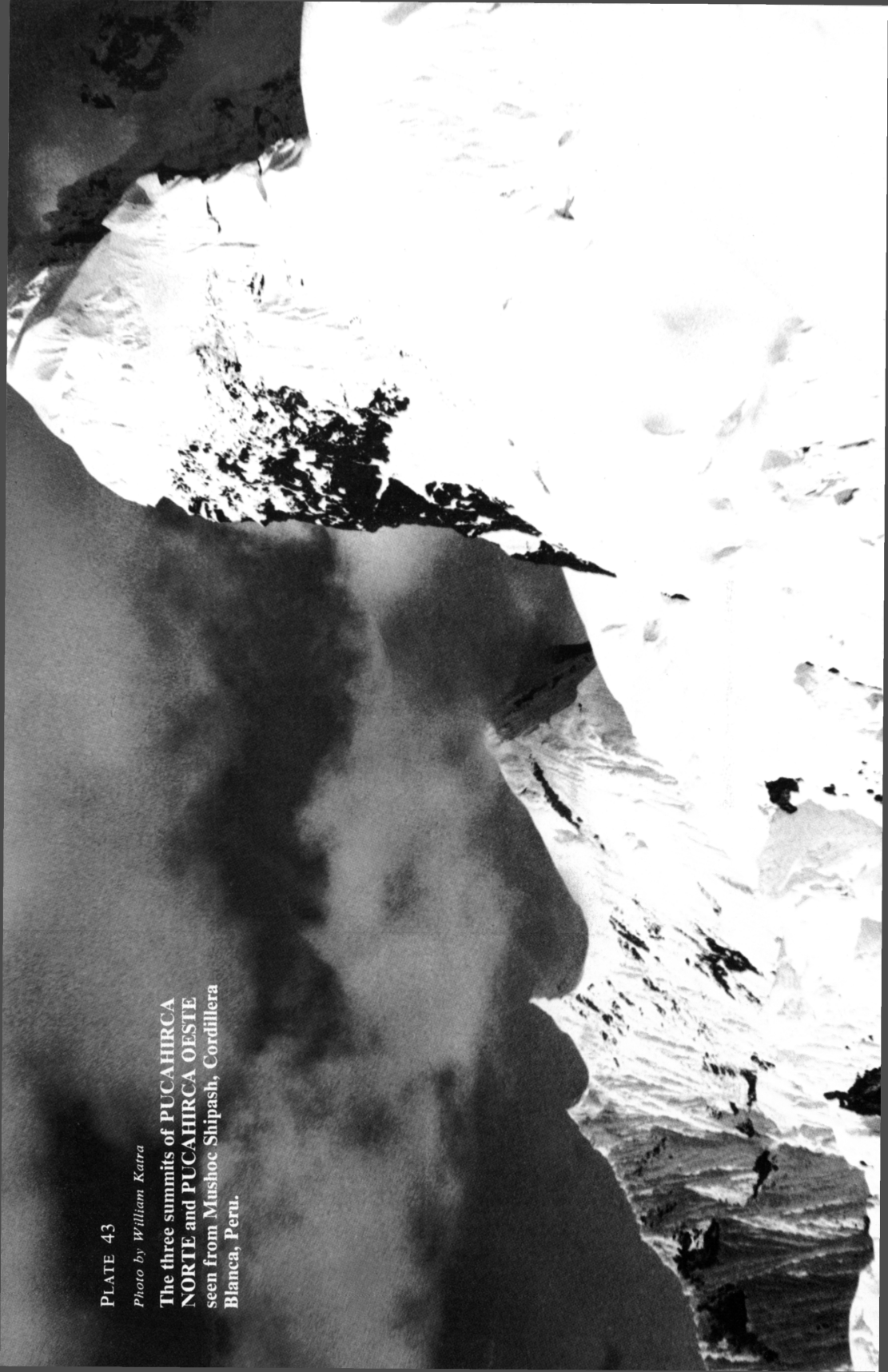


PLATE 43

Photo by William Katra

The three summits of PUCAHIRCA
NORTE and PUCAHIRCA OESTE
seen from Mushoc Shipash, Cordillera
Blanca, Peru.

the sunset from the summit of Peru's highest peak. We had made the second ascent of the ANZUS route.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Cordillera Blanca, Peru.

ASCENTS: Shacsha (Huantsán Chico), 5703 meters (18,711 feet), attempt on the West ridge, June 7, 1974 (Katra and Milne), failed at 18,000 feet.

Cashan Oeste, West peak, c. 18,500 feet, fourth ascent and first solo ascent by original route, June 9, 1974 (Andrews).

"Mushoc Shipash" (previously unnamed peak, c. 5550 meters (18,209 feet), on ridge between Pucarashta and Pucahirca Oeste), 1st ascent, June 15, 1974 (whole party).

Tayapampa, 5674 meters (18,618 feet), 1st ascent of north face, June 18, 1974 (whole party).

Pucahirca Norte III, 5919 meters (19,417 feet), 1st ascent of north face, June 24, 1974 (whole party).

Pucahirca Norte II, 5970 meters (19,582 feet), 2nd ascent, June 24, 1974 (whole party).

Pucahirca Sur, 6039 meters (19,808 feet), attempted the north-west face (whole party).

Huascarán Sur, 6729 meters (22,208 feet), 2nd ascent of the ANZUS route on the east face, July 9, 1974 (whole party).

PERSONNEL: Michael G. Andrews, and James Milne, New Zealand; and William Katra, U.S.A.

