

Cayesh from the East

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IN THE SOUTHERN REGION of the Cordillera Blanca of Peru, a razor-edged sword of a mountain, Nevado Cayesh, slices boldly into the Andean sky.

Cayesh had been climbed only once before to its summit of 18,770 feet. Many had tried to climb it and failed; not for lack of attempts or for want of good weather. The Cordillera Blanca has the best weather of any major mountain range in the world. Simply, there is no easy way to climb it, or descend from it. Such is the challenge of its pinnacles.

I had just finished guiding Huascarán and other peaks. I had two weeks off before another guiding job and was anxious to try Cayesh. I was, however, left without a partner. That's when I hooked up with the "Rhody Loadies" as they called themselves. They were Chuck Boyd and Neil Pothier. Although both were solid rock climbers, they had little experience on big mountains. It was their first season in the Blanca. They had already completed the north face of Ranrapalka and hoped to finish up with the northeast face of Huascarán.

They seemed tough and ready for an adventure. I fed them stories of the wild, unclimbed walls and spectacular valleys around Cayesh on the eastern side of the range. Their appetites grew and they agreed to come. My friend, Teresa Sal y Rosas, joined us as Base Camp manager.

On August 12, the four of us boarded a bus to Chavín heading for Huántar, a tiny mudbrick village at the foot of Quebrada Carhuascancha, the approach valley. I had stayed in Huántar four years before and since they receive so few outside visitors, the villagers remembered me as if it had been only four weeks! The hospitality and warmth extended to us from these hardworking and humble people was, as usual, immense.

We had come at an inconvenient time for the people of Huántar. It was harvest time, and pack animals were difficult to find. They sympathized with our situation and after much searching by a gang of villagers, we rounded up three burros and a driver.

An eight-hour walk through one of the most beautiful valleys in Peru followed. Steep rock canyons, covered with red and dark green bromeliads, gave way to a magnificent cirque. The air was filled with the rushing sounds of waterfalls spilling hundreds of feet to tiny lakes and the frequent crash of glacier walls collapsing.



PLATE 18

Photo by H. Adams Carter

**East Face of CAYESH. Bivouacs
are marked.**

Nevado Huantsán, 20,980 feet, dominates the valley. Smaller but also impressive are the peaks of San Juan, Tumarinaraju, Maparaju and Milpoqraju. From our campsite in the valley floor, however, Nevado Cayesh could not be seen. I had chosen Carhuascancha rather than Quebrada Rurec, which is closer to Cayesh, because it allowed for greater options should the east face of Cayesh present no logical route. Also there is an east-west pass from Carhuascancha which might prove useful should we have to descend the opposite side of the mountain.

Early the next morning we hiked to the pass between Rurec and Carhuascancha to have a look. The 3000-foot rock-and-ice wall looked very steep, in fact overhanging in places. However, a broad ice-covered ramp diagonaled up the lower right-hand section. It looked as if a series of ice columns might connect with icefields above and finally onto the summit ridge. It was worth a try. We decided to start the next morning.

After sad farewells with Teresa, we crossed the pass and climbed up to the tiny east glacier of Cayesh. Our sacks were relatively light. We had no bolts, no hammocks or porta-ledges. Just eight pitons, six ice screws and food and fuel for three days. It would be done fast alpine-style or not at all.

Unroped, we climbed up the compact glacier. Suddenly, while traversing the lip of a deep crevasse my left leg sank into deep powder snow. I was moving and falling headlong into the void below. The wall of the crevasse was not quite vertical and I tumbled several times over before coming to a stop about forty feet down, where a small snow bridge spanned the two walls. I was all twisted around, upside down, looking straight up with my mouth full of snow. One arm was punched through the bridge, hanging precariously in space. For a moment I just hung there, trying to spit the snow from my mouth. Then, two heads appeared over the lip, staring down at me like a pair of pygmies examining the day's catch in the pitfall.

"Want a rope?" Neil shouted. "No", I answered, more embarrassed than anything else. I quickly regained my composure, planted my axes and climbed up out of the hole. The slip had come with no warning. I had been lucky. A hell of a way to start off a climb, I thought!

We made our first bivouac where the glacier met the ramp. Two hours of digging produced a platform suitable for our tiny tent. I still carry a small tent even on the most technical climbs in the Blanca. There is nothing better if you have to wait out bad weather at the base of the wall or on the summit ridge. Without poles, the tent serves equally well as a bivy sack.

That evening we were treated to a magnificent sunset on the distant Yerupajá and Cordillera Huayhuash to the south. To our west was the huge east face of Huantsán.

Morning dawned clear and cold. With numb toes we started up the long ice-covered ramp. Our altimeter read 15,200 feet. We climbed together up 1000 feet of moderate ice and snow. I felt confident to see Chuck and Neil climbing so well. Despite the great exposure they did not hesitate to move without belays.

PLATE 19

Photo by H. Adams Carter

**CAYESH from the south. Descent
was down west face on left.**



As the ice ramps came to an end another set of ramps broke back left through the rock. High above us we could see the ice columns hanging free in space.

Once on the rock it was necessary to belay. Having the most experience, and for the sake of speed and efficiency, it was decided I should lead the climb. This is the best way to climb alpine-style with each man doing his job so that a smooth rhythm is established.

At first I belayed both Chuck and Neil simultaneously, but soon the climbing became too difficult. The steep compact rock had few cracks and was often glazed with ice. I removed my sack and found myself switching from crampons to boots several times a pitch. Chuck and Neil jumared. Slowly we made progress up the ever steepening wall to the base of the first ice column. It looked like the fangs of some huge venomous serpent.

Tying off icicles for protection and working delicately to avoid breaking them, I climbed up the vertical column hauling myself into deep powder atop the first mushroom. I secured the ropes and Neil was up quickly. Then, while cleaning the pitch, Chuck's Jümars jammed. He was unable to move up or down, his heavy sack hauling him over backwards, exhausting his shoulders. Arms folded around the rope, muscles cramping, he dangled 1500 feet above the glacier.

It began to get dark. For what seemed like hours, Chuck struggled with his Jümars. Shivering in the darkness, I belayed him. Impatiently I yelled down, "Let's go" but he was doing all he could. Meanwhile Neil was busy hacking out a tiny stance.

At last Chuck managed to arrive at the ledge, totally blown from the ordeal. The tiny bivy ledge was hardly big enough for one to sit. A little higher up I crawled behind the column and sat on my pack. Chuck and Neil shared the chopped-out ledge. We pulled our sleeping bags around us and settled in for the night.

The second morning we started up the next ice column. Totally detached at its top, I was able to wiggle behind the column for a brief rest. I peered down to my companions, perched upon the tiny mushroom of ice. Black, over-hanging rock glistened wet above them. Below us a blanket of clouds had settled into the valleys.

Sometimes climbing free, sometimes aiding up tied-off icicles, with always a gross lack of protection, we followed the ice columns for two hundred more feet. They were a fine discovery, for without bolts, the overhanging crackless rock might have forced a retreat.

At last the wall kicked back and for the first time I could view the summit cornices. In my excitement I shouted down to my companions, "We should be off today!" I would soon be proven wrong.

An ice gully led to a traverse right and then to the first of a series of broad icefields. Diagonally up to the right-hand corner I belayed beneath a steep rotten band of rock separating us from the next icefield. It was frustratingly slow to find a belay in the poor rock. The pitons kept bottoming out and there was not enough

PLATE 20

Photo by Chuck Boyd

**Mark Richey leading on
overhanging ice on CAYESH's East
Face.**



ice for screws. "Have patience," I told myself. I managed to get in three shaky pieces. Climbing or jumaring, which ever proved faster, Neil and Chuck moved up to join me at the stance.

As soon as one arrived, I was off, up the rock band. After several desperate attempts and failures to free-climb, I resorted to aid. I put a small sling in the top belay anchor, a Friend in a flared pocket. I hauled up and stood in it. A moment later the rock around the Friend exploded, sending me, crampons first, down upon my companions. I tore through Chuck's jacket and gloves, cutting his fingers. When the ropes came tight, I hung several feet below the stance. I took a deep breath. The belay had held on a #1 stopper and a tied-off knifeblade. Fortunately Chuck was not seriously hurt.

Back up again and this time success. Mixed terrain led to a steep traverse right over a big void. Grasping ice-covered holds and slinging little horns to hold on, the sharp edges of the rock punctured my jacket sending bursts of feathers into the air. The adrenalin was really pumping! Further and further I traversed from the last piece of protection, making delicate irreversible moves, waiting to come skating off the rotten rock in one big, shocking mess.

At last I was over, sinking my axes securely into the edge of the second icefield. That was twice as hard as the Ice Hose¹, I thought. Sixty feet higher I was enthusiastically driving good pitons for the belay.

It was a difficult and dangerous pitch to second. There was not enough rope to lower out over the traverse so Neil had to do a series of pendulums. I worried about the taut 9mm lines sliding over the sharp rock edges. I envisioned a body, suddenly cut loose, careening down the wall, wiggling grotesquely in space, then turning over and over, end for end, slowly disappearing out of sight. Back to reality as Neil and Chuck emerged safely on the icefield.

Another pitch up the icefield to steep snow led to our next bivouac beneath a vertical rock wall. We hacked and stomped like crazy in the soft, cold powder. At length we managed to cut a long two-foot ledge. Chuck lay down while Neil and I sat together pulling the tent around us to keep warm. We cooked our last meal that night. We had enough fuel to melt water for maybe two more days. We managed some sleep that night, waking frequently to the sensation of sliding off the ledge. At least no storms had moved in.

The third morning, clouds blew in but nothing serious. We started off quickly; no time for melting water. I was determined to make the summit that day. We made good progress all morning. We followed a rock ramp, then long straightforward ice runnels. As Neil belayed Chuck, I would lead the next pitch. By noon I thought we must be very close. But again the clouds obscured all views to the summit. One more pitch, practically tunnelling up through the deep powder troughs, led to rock again.

At this point two tiers of ice ceilings, projecting out horizontally thirty feet in some places, blocked our passage. The ceilings extended across the face and

¹ Ice Hose refers to crux section separating the 1st & 2nd icefields on the Eiger.

out of sight. Huge icicles hung from the lip, creating caves. In most places the icicles just barely reached the slope beneath, making them impossible to climb. A traverse to the right revealed no weaknesses. I went back to the left, a rope-length, to where a mass of icicles looked substantial enough to climb.

The two pitches that followed were technically the most difficult and strenuous of the entire climb. Tying off icicles and hooking axes in pockets of ice, I dared not swing them lest I should bring the whole mass down on top of us. Topping out each tier always proved exhilarating as the ice faded into vertical, unconsolidated snow.

Above the ceilings I observed an incredible sight. We had been climbing up through an enormous cleft in the cornices. And now as Chuck and Neil jumared up to join me, it was spectacularly apparent. The massive parallel walls of ice framed the climbers perfectly. One tier remained. This one, however, we avoided by traversing to the right and thus we emerged on the summit ridge at last.

We found ourselves on a 200-foot-long, smooth and flat section of the ridge. Viewing Cayesh from the valley you would never believe such a flat area existed. The pointed summit was still some 400 feet above us. We made camp and that night my thoughts went to Teresa, alone in the valley. We were already one day overdue.

The fourth morning we awoke, feeling sore and hungry. A cold wind whipped the tent, numbing toes and fingers as we prepared for the final assault. With no belays we climbed together up the steep corniced ridge. Our snow stakes disappeared into the soft snow under hand pressure. The cornices favored one side of the mountain so there was no way to straddle the ridge with our ropes. The tragic deaths of Slaymaker and O'Rourke came to mind.² It had happened in a situation identical to this.

Suddenly we stood on top! The summit of Cayesh was ours. It was 8:30 A.M. We snapped a few pictures and ten minutes later began the descent, the part of the climb I feared the most.

The south ridge, climbed in 1960,³ had been the only other ascent route to the summit. Despite my dislike for Andean ridgelines it seemed the logical way off. Within the first 100 feet of descent we encountered serious problems.

The ridge became a series of unstable mushrooms and vertical steps. Aiding each other with the rope as much as possible, we crawled to the edge of the mushrooms, then slid off into mid-air, landing on the ridge below. Chuck came last and had to loop the rope around the whole of the mushroom, lower down to a stance and then untie and pull the rope through. On either side of the ridge, short slopes terminated with overhangs and a 3000-foot drop to the glacier. Any fall would be disastrous. Our progress down was at a snail's pace.

After three hours we had descended only 500 feet. I stood atop another big mushroom with a 20-foot vertical drop to the ridge and many more such mush-

² Curry Slaymaker & Michael O'Rourke died on Nevado Parón, Cordillera Blanca in 1977.

³ *American Alpine Journal*, 1961: First ascent south ridge, Cayesh.

rooms below. The thin winding ridge was piled high with fantastic shapes. It reminded me of something out of a fairy tale. The thought of descending it made me feel ill. On top of everything else the wind had picked up, the clouds had socked in and snow was falling.

The ridge was too dangerous to descend. That left only the east and west faces. I calculated our position on the ridge to be nearly directly over the overhanging section of the east face, to the left of our start. With our limited hardware it was out of the question. That left only the west face. It had been climbed by the New Zealanders⁴ but they had stopped short of the summit, traversing to the south ridge somewhere around our present location. The photos I had seen of the climb did not look that steep. Perhaps we would even find pitons left from their climb. In any event it was our only hope.

We down climbed 150 feet to good ice and made some rappels to the rock. We had five pitons, four ice screws, a couple of nuts and Friends and we were about to tackle a 2500-foot rock wall. It seemed lunatic. For an instant the clouds parted and I could see the glacier below. The photos had lied. It was steep. In fact, I could not see where the glacier met the wall. The next rappel devoured two of the precious pitons. While descending I thought I saw something below. I squinted my eyes to see through the fog. It was a rope, how long or how old I could not yet tell, but definitely there was a rope!

It was bright yellow, 12mm thick and anchored securely to a cluster of pitons. Below us we could see it snaking its way down the wall, anchored every 100 feet or so and then disappearing out of sight. What absurd luck, I thought! A gift from heaven. The New Zealanders had not left fixed ropes, or they would not have gone to the trouble of descending by another route. Perhaps another unsuccessful party had left them, in hopes of returning. At any rate, the ropes were there, in the middle of nowhere and we had stumbled upon them.

Making one rappel after another, using the anchors but our own ropes, we flew down the wall. Chuck and Neil did the hard work of pulling the lines while I set up the next rappel. Miraculously the ropes never jammed. Two rope-lengths above the glacier, the fixed line ended. With our remaining pitons we made the final descending rappels.

The ordeal was over, at least for the moment. We hurried down the long, smooth glacier. It would be dark soon and we were still on the opposite side of the Cordillera. A high glacier pass separated us from Base Camp. Both Chuck and Neil had taken falls on the glacier and were sore and exhausted. Chuck's ankle would later require a cast. They needed rest. We decided that I should continue that night, over the pass by moonlight, in hopes of reaching Teresa before she left Base Camp for help. Chuck and Neil would follow the next morning. In my haste to get going I forgot to give explicit directions on descending the pass.

⁴ *American Alpine Journal*, 1974: west face ascent to south ridge of Cayesh.

I had crossed this pass four years before. Below the pass several dead-end canyons lead to immense cliffs with waterfalls. Only one somewhat hidden canyon leads to the Carhuascancha valley.

The 200-foot climb over the glacier that night was splendid. Huge stars and a half moon illuminated my path. The snow was hard and I moved quickly in the cool air. Below the pass I made several tries before locating the short rock traverse that led to the hidden canyon. By midnight I arrived at the valley floor. Exhausted, I waded through thigh deep streams and finally staggered into camp. I startled Teresa. After five days alone in the clouds, she had given up hope. She was planning to leave that morning in search of help.

There is nothing worse than having to wait without knowing what has gone wrong, especially when you are waiting alone. Teresa described our reunion as like waking up after a nightmare. "But where are the others?" she asked. I recounted the story and then ate and slept.

The next day we prepared a splendid feast, ready to welcome the two other climbers. The hours passed. By four o'clock P.M. there was still no sign of them. We hiked to the foot of the canyons and screamed up into them. Our voices were lost in the roar of the waterfalls. It was too late to start an effective search. I feared the worst. They were either lost or had fallen.

Early the next morning I packed my sack and headed over the pass once again. After five hours I was at a point where I could see our last camp. I tried to follow the footprints but the hard glacier surface left few tracks. Again I yelled into the deep canyons, again no response.

Just then several large avalanches caved off the glaciers to my left. I began to despair. At least I had to keep searching. I climbed to the top of a little knoll from which I could see clearly down to Base Camp. Removing my goggles and squinting my eyes in the bright sunlight, I could just make out another tent. . . . the bivvy tent. They had made it down! I raced back to camp filled with joy.

Chuck and Neil had in fact gotten lost. They had come to a big cliff where they were forced to spend their sixth night. They said they could see our camp clearly that night from the cliff. The following day they had made several rappels and traverses across wet moss-covered slabs before they could safely descend.

That night around a crackling fire and endless food, we recounted the events of the climb. High above us the huge east face of Huantsán was silhouetted against the night sky. I wondered if enough time remained for another climb. How quickly we forget the pain, I thought.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Cordillera Blanca, Peru..

NEW ROUTE: Nevado Cayesh, 5721 meters, 18,770 feet, Second Ascent of the Peak; First Ascent of East Face. July 15 to 19, 1983 (Chuck Boyd, Neil Pothier, Mark Richey).