

Anqosh Face of Huascarán

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I LOOKED OUT ACROSS the upper Llanganuco valley on a stormy day in June. It was one of those days when the clouds loom heavy and dark as they roll in full of moisture from the jungle. I was familiar with what I saw and felt. Sharon Wood and I were bivouacked beneath the southwest face of Chacaraju when it had begun to snow. All of May had given us nothing but unpleasant, snowy weather. I was growing more and more disappointed with my luck. Gazing at the towering walls of rock and ice, I realized I had never considered as very realistic an ascent of the huge face at the end of the Anqosh Valley. I had seen it before. It was in 1977 that I looked across for the first time. I had been climbing Huandoy with a team of Spanish Aragonese climbers. The leader of our team, Pepe Díaz, had been one of those who had made the first ascent of Huascarán Sur's east ridge in 1961. It was an impressive and long ridge, running from the Chopicalqui col at 5600 meters to the summit of Huascarán. It had been an impressive feat for the early sixties, and a route that has been seldom repeated.

It was two years later when I had climbed the Paragot Route on the north side of Huascarán Norte that the 1500-meter face which fell from the junction of the Spanish ridge and the main peak caught my attention again. The wall had reminded me of the Grandes Jorasses in France.

As we sat on our packs in the lightly falling snow, we could see that to merely gain access to the bottom of the wall one would spend a full day on the broken glacier above and to the right of Chopicalqui's west ridge Base Camp.

I now had three weeks of trekking work in front of me and time at the end of July for only one more attempt on a climb in the Blanca. This face, with all of its complications and size, did not seem like the most promising project. But Sharon was intrigued by the unclimbed wall and it was her curiosity which led us to catch a mini-van up to Llanganuco Lakes one month later. It was noon when we hopped off a dusty truck ferrying natives and hikers to Colcabamba over the Portachuelo de Llanganuco. We followed the Chopicalqui Base Camp trail leading up the east side of the Quebrada Anqosh. The path eventually crossed the Llanganuco Glacier and led us up the moraine to the Chopicalqui Base Camp. My shoulders ached. Trekking with a day pack for the previous three weeks had not prepared me for an alpine pack of sixty pounds.

Early on the morning of July 24 we traversed west towards the bottom of the face away from the normal glacier route up to the Huascarán-Chopicalqui col. Dropping down and around a toe of rock, we carefully made our way towards



PLATE 34

Photo by Carolas Buhler

Sharon Wood on the ice slopes beneath the 150-meter rock wall at the top of the East Face of Huascarán.

the face through large blocks of ice and séracs. Because of the shadow in the early morning hours, the entire wall was frozen and quiet. Route-finding was surprisingly easy through this terrain. We were very excited to find a good spot from which we could search for a feasible way through the initial 200-meter rock barrier which guarded access to the first icefield. Happily we were not disappointed. In the middle of the face, hidden to the right of a rock pillar jutting out from the wall, a narrow gully of ice led up and around to the foot of the icefield.

Sharon crossed the bergschrund by burrowing up through a ceiling of rotten ice on the upper lip and hoisted me and the packs up through the same hole. By the time this complicated maneuver was accomplished, the sun had begun to loosen the frozen rock near the top of the face. We were not long on these ice slopes leading into the gully before we heard the scary whining of falling rock.

We hurriedly front-pointed up the 45° to 50° slope and ducked into a secondary bergschrund at the base of our couloir. Sitting in this sheltered spot, we discussed the pros and cons of going on. Unfortunately we made the decision to continue.

On the pitch that followed, Sharon was hit on the shoulder by a baseball-sized rock while setting up her belay anchor on the ice. Her scream of pain shot through me like an electric current. Totally unable to help, I stood beneath the protection of the ice cliff forming the upper wall of the crevasse. Sharon was motionless for five long minutes; the silence was broken only by the occasional, high-pitched whistle of a rock careening down the face. As the pain subsided somewhat, she organized a rappel and lowered herself with one arm back down to my sheltered stance. We set up the bivouac tent where we were and decided to wait until early morning before making a move . . . either up or, most probably, down. We would not know for another two weeks that her right scapula had been cracked by the rock's impact.

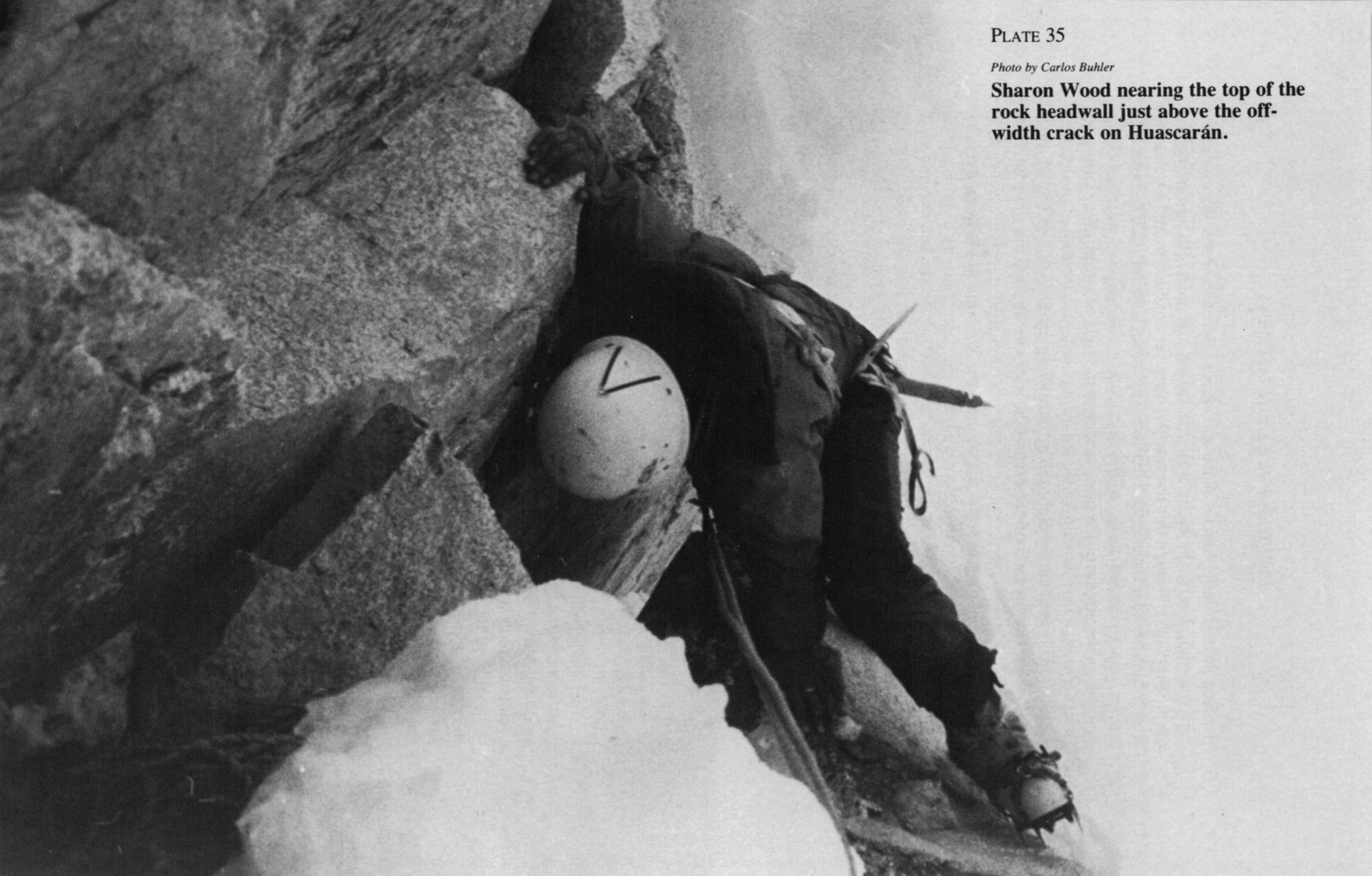
Incredibly, at three A.M., Sharon was optimistic. Even though the movement in her shoulder was restricted and painful, she wanted to go on. There is no doubt in my mind that part of her reasoning was to allow me the chance to complete a route during my otherwise unsuccessful season. In the dark morning hours of the 25th, we climbed up through the couloir and over the knife-edged arête of snow that connected the rock pillar to the main face. The following days dawned clear and cold but luckily the face became enshrouded by a thick mist about one P.M. every afternoon. Because of this our exposure to stonefall was limited to about three hours each day. These hours, between ten and one, the sun shone brilliantly, loosening the frozen water streaks and rock on the granite walls above us. As soon as the mist came the stonefall stopped within minutes and we could proceed with relative safety. From the 25th to the 27th of July we climbed up through a series of steep ice grooves and faces, separated from one another by large, unstable fins of fragile snow and sections of mixed rock and ice.

Late on the evening of the 27th, we were perched on a tiny ice pedestal chopped out beneath the 150-meter rock band that capped the top of the entire face. The next morning we began to traverse right, along the base of this wall,

PLATE 35

Photo by Carlos Buhler

Sharon Wood nearing the top of the rock headwall just above the off-width crack on Huascarán.



in hope of finding a weakness. It not only had to be a weakness in the rock, but also in the cornices above that hung out over the face eight to twelve meters along most of its length. As we traversed, the granite became broken by numerous ice runnels up to about mid-height. With some trepidation, we put our hopes on a sobering, 10-meter-high left-slanting, off-width crack which ran through the steepest section of the cliff about 40 meters above us.

In deep concentration I pulled up slowly on my handholds. My left boot tip rested on the edge of a fragile, detached flake running five feet up the vertical granite. After a half dozen tries, this time the feeling was just right. In one quick motion I twisted my other leg sideways and wedged myself into the off-width crack. Immediately I was struggling to breath in the rarefied air . . . Damn! But I was committed now to the next 10 meters. It was almost a relief.

I emerged from the crack fighting for air and mantled onto a quarter-meter shelf at the edge of the ice. The way up was clear. I knew in that instant that we had succeeded in climbing the face. This 40-meter pitch had taken me into a wonderful trance for nearly two hours.

I looked down through the fog at Sharon from my 6400-meter stance and was surprised at my position. I had completely closed my mind to the exposure below. During this last two hours I had even pushed the previous five days of climbing into a corner of my mind. Suddenly my thinking was clear and my thoughts were crisp. Reaching the crack and climbing past it, we had nearly used most of the daylight hours. We would soon need to locate a bivouac spot and settle in for the night.

Our long-awaited relief upon reaching the Spanish ridge was replaced with anxiety as it was very exposed and nearly impossible to protect with the equipment we were carrying. We managed only one 60-meter pitch along this spectacularly corniced ridge before the approaching darkness encouraged us to bivouac inside one of the horrendous, 10-meter, overhanging mushrooms of snow and ice. It was a spooky night. I was afraid to touch anything at all for fear the whole enclosure would collapse and drag us down the face we had just climbed up.

We began climbing early the next day in hope of crossing the summit and descending into the Garganta by late morning. We led several more pitches along the serrated Spanish ridge before an unusually early cloud covered the mountain completely. Thankfully, just there the ridge eased in difficulty and after 500 meters, flattened out into the main summit snowfields. Much to our dismay, in the white-out, we lost our sense of direction. Although it was still early, unable to locate the tracks of the normal route, we begrudgingly elected to bivouac for a final seventh night on the plateau. Our only joy was that we were able to set up our bivouac tent and stretch out completely in the warmth of our sleeping bags.

Fearing a similar white-out the next day, we started down at 3:30 A.M. under clear, stary skies. We crossed the summit plateau by headlamp and easily followed the hardened trail down into the Garganta. I vividly remembered stumbling down into this saddle from the slopes facing us with Don Anderson in

1979. We had climbed the last three days out of seven on the Paragot Route without food or water after dropping one of the packs with the stove inside. With my mouth dry from these recollections, Sharon and I were thrilled to be greeted by a Spanish Aragonese climbing team, one of whom had been with me on Huandoy eight years previous. They were also descending after having climbed to the summit via the normal route in the preceding day's white-out. We quickly joined forces and, of course, lost no time taking full advantage of the exquisite varieties of cheeses, nuts, and sausages they had unfailingly brought with them from Spain.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Cordillera Blanca, Peru.

NEW ROUTE: Huascarán, 6768 meters, 22,205 feet, via the Anqosh (East) Face to the Spanish Ridge, July 24 to 29, 1985 (Carlos Buhler, Sharon Wood).

