

## THE BRITISH CERRO TORRE EXPEDITION 1967/8

BY PETER CREW

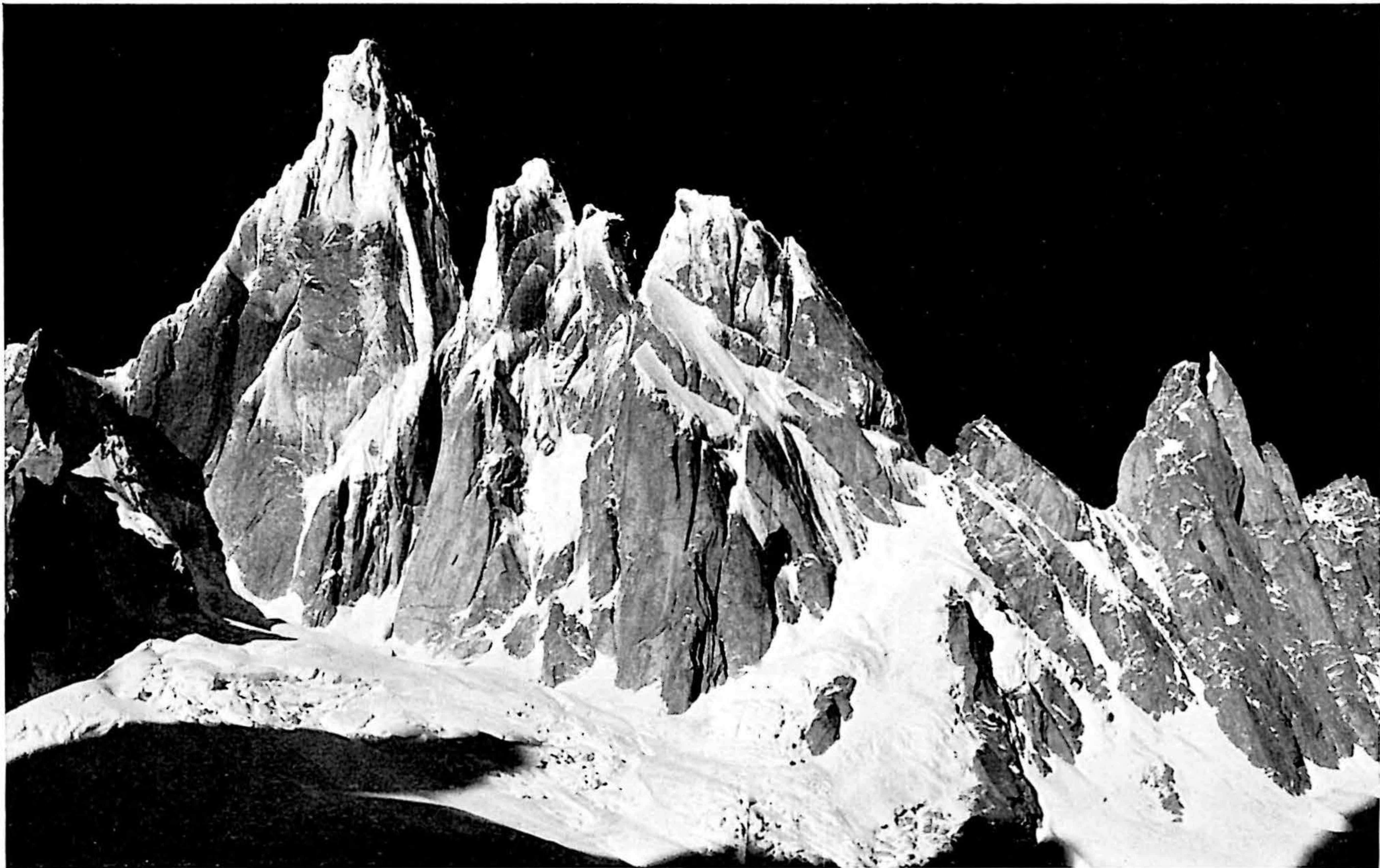
(Five illustrations: nos. 41-45)

At the Alpha Club dinner in 1966, Mick Burke asked Martin Boysen and myself if we were interested in joining an expedition to South America. Apparently Dougal Haston and Burke had been planning to go to the Paine Group, in the Patagonian Andes, to attempt the Fortress and the Shield, but as Burke had been in Switzerland all summer, he was behind on his climbing gossip and hadn't heard that Ian Clough was already organising an expedition with precisely these objectives in mind. We talked around the idea for some time, trying to decide on another suitable objective, then someone suggested Cerro Torre. We were all rather drunk at the time, so thought it a good idea. Dougal arrived in England a few weeks later and immediately agreed to the Torre and only a few days later, purely by chance, was invited to lunch by the *Sunday Times*, who offered to help finance the expedition.

Although none of us had been outside the European Alps before, we had quite clear ideas on the kind of expedition we wanted to go on. We are all experienced alpinists and wanted to go to a mountain which we could climb using essentially Alpine techniques. Cerro Torre certainly falls into this category. The access problems are almost nil—it is only five miles from the nearest *estancia* to the Base Camp, followed by only four miles of easy glacier approach to the foot of the mountain. This cuts the logistical problems, of establishing camps and ferrying loads, down to a minimum and allows one to concentrate on the actual climbing.

Cerro Torre is the second highest peak in the FitzRoy group, about two hundred and fifty miles north of Cape Horn and on the eastern edge of the Patagonian ice-cap. The whole area is a succession of fantastic smooth granite spires rising vertically out of the ice-cap, which are subject to some of the worst weather in the world. The continuous westerly gales which sweep across the region are saturated with moisture from the Pacific Ocean, causing heavy precipitation and an almost permanent cloud cover. The Torre is only 10,250 ft. high, but the weather amply makes up for this lack of altitude and creates a special, almost unique, set of problems for the climber.

The early attempts on the mountain are sparsely documented, but what literature there is underlines the terrible weather and climbing



*Photo: Herman Wolf]*

THE CERRO TORRE GROUP. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: CERRO TORRE, TORRE EGGER AND CERRO STANDHARDT. THE EGGER-MAESTRI ROUTE FOLLOWS THE RIDGE ON THE RIGHT OF THE CERRO TORRE. THE ROUTE ATTEMPTED BY THE BRITISH EXPEDITION (SEE PAGE 186) GOES UP THE COULOIR TO THE COL ON THE LEFT OF THE CERRO TORRE, AND THEN UP THE SKYLINE RIDGE (SEE ALSO ILLUSTRATION NO. 44).

problems. Cerro Torre became really well-known after the 1952 French expedition which climbed FitzRoy, and in Azéma's book on the expedition is this beautiful and frightening description of the mountain—'I seemed to be looking at supernatural monsters, a fantastic ride of the Valkyries; nightmare aiguilles stared across at us, hurled defiance and then vanished. From a bubbling devil's cauldron, where clouds heavy as pitch boiled up from the depths and eddies of snow chased each other in the gale, there emerged at intervals the summit of Cerro Torre and its satellites. Like immovable reefs in a raging sea the black slabs reared up towards the sky to be smothered by stupendous ice-caps, sparkling with fresh snow, which overhung on all sides—glittering lighthouses whose foundations were submerged in foam.'

The first serious attempts to climb the mountain were made in 1958, by two rival Italian expeditions. The first was led by Bruno Detassis, the well-known Dolomite guide, with Cesare Maestri and a group of climbers from the C.A.I. section of Buenos Aires. This was essentially an exploratory expedition and in fact Detassis pronounced the Torre impossible and forbade his team even to try to climb it. The other expedition was a private one, with Walter Bonatti and Carlo Mauri as the star climbers, financed by Folcon Doro D'Altan, a rich Italian living in Buenos Aires. According to Bonatti, the Detassis team refused to co-operate in a joint attempt and so they decided to attack the mountain from the west side. This involved an initial march of some forty miles over a high col and some difficult glacier terrain and from the beginning the expedition was beset with the difficulties of maintaining an adequate flow of supplies to the Base Camp. The disadvantage of climbing the mountain from this side is that it is completely exposed to all of the weather. Bonatti describes it in his book—'The storms which burst over the mountain are terrifying. Sometimes gusts of wind laden with sleet and ice crystals reach the terrific velocity of one hundred and twenty miles an hour and form permanent ice encrustations, even under roofs and overhangs, which jut out further than one would imagine. The white and bluish ice which covers the rocks can reach thicknesses of over ten feet, assuming fantastic and terrifying forms. Everything is of gigantic size and seems to hang miraculously in space.' Almost in desperation, Bonatti and Mauri tried to climb the mountain and much to their surprise the lower ice couloirs proved to be straightforward and they reached the col on the watershed ridge after only twelve hours of climbing. However, it was only from this point that they could closely inspect the final walls of the Torre, overhanging and plastered in ice, with only a very faint possibility of linking up a line of narrow couloirs threading through the huge summit mushrooms. After climbing a short distance above the col, they turned back, having realised how much they had underestimated the problem, in terms of danger,

difficulty, equipment and support. They named this point the Col of Hope, obviously intending to return as soon as possible to make another attempt.

No doubt Maestri was fired with similar feelings to Bonatti, for immediately on his return to Europe he began to make tentative arrangements for a return expedition. However, late in 1958, the French wrote to the C.A.I. to ask if they were going to sponsor an official expedition to Cerro Torre the following year. Following the failure of the Detassis/Maestri expedition, the C.A.I. opinion seemed to be that the Torre was impossible and they replied in the negative, leaving the field clear for the French. Jean Couzy, one of the leading alpinists of the 1950's, immediately set about organising an expedition, which was to have included the finest French climbers of the time. Despite the lack of support from the C.A.I., Maestri, and no doubt Bonatti also, still entertained private hope of another attempt. The race was on—for one of the finest prizes in modern mountaineering. Soon after, however, Couzy was killed in a climbing accident and French enthusiasm waned. Maestri immediately stepped into the breach, and with the eventual support of Toni Egger, mounted his own expedition. As they were paying for this expedition themselves, costs had to be kept down, and the rest of the team was recruited from Italians already living in the Argentine, some of whom had been on the previous attempt.

Finally the expedition reached the mountain, after immense difficulties caused through lack of finance and a breakdown in the transport arrangements. The story of the expedition followed the now well established pattern for this part of the world. After six weeks of effort, battling with continuous storms, they had managed to fix ropes on only the first 600 ft. of the climb. When the weather did clear, the upper part of the mountain was completely plastered in ice, but they decided to make a final attempt. Maestri describes how they were climbing on wafer-thin ice and cutting through it at intervals to insert expansion bolts in the blank rock, for protection and belays. The rock was so hard and so compact, that they had to use bolts all the time and they needed five hundred hammer blows to drill each hole. After three bivouacs they finally reached the summit, but the weather had broken by this time and the ice was beginning to melt and avalanche off. After two more days they had managed to descend to within 800 ft. of the glacier, and only 200 ft. from the top of their fixed ropes, when a huge ice avalanche from the summit mushroom swept Egger to his death. Maestri descended solo and was rescued several days later, almost unconscious, from a snow hole on the edge of a crevasse, which had barred his route.

The whole business obviously left a deep impression on Maestri. His short account of the climb, in *Rivista Mensile* and *La Montagne*, gives little technical information on the climb, but many references to

the appalling weather. Perhaps the following is typical—'Nous sommes extenués. Nous avons faim. Le vent qui toujours hurle. Les avalanches qui ne cessent de tomber. Nous passons une nuit d'insomnie le regard fixé dans le noir.' Soon after this ascent, Lionel Terray, who had been on the successful 1952 French expedition to FitzRoy, made the following comment—'The ascent of Cerro Torre, the more difficult neighbour of FitzRoy, by Egger and Maestri, seems to me to be the greatest mountaineering feat of all time.' This comment is particularly meaningful when one considers Terray's vast experience of climbing mountains in all parts of the world and in all conditions.

Partly because of the Maestri/Egger ascent, by the East face and North ridge, we decided well in advance to try a different route. The alternatives left to us were the South-east ridge, starting from the same side of the mountain as Maestri and Egger, or the west side of the mountain, which had been attempted by Bonatti. The major factor which made us decide upon the South-east ridge was the access problem. To reach the east side of the mountain involves very little in the way of approach—only five miles to a Base Camp and then four miles of easy glacier to the foot of the mountain. The West face of the mountain involves some forty miles of difficult travel, which is obviously out of the question for a small party in a part of the world where expeditions cannot rely on local help to transport equipment and food.

Early on in our preparations Eric Shipton, our patron, put us in touch with Gerardo Watzl, the President of the Club Andino Buenos Aires. Watzl suggested that we invite José Luis Fonrouge to join the expedition, partly because he had been twice previously to the FitzRoy area, but also because he wanted to climb Cerro Torre and there are no other good climbers in the Argentine with whom he could form his own expedition. Fonrouge is by far the best climber in the Argentine, partly because he has spent two years climbing in Europe, but also because he is well-off and can afford to climb all year round! There was mention of his father having a private plane, which might be used to carry the expedition into the mountains, but this never materialised. However, Fonrouge and Watzl were certainly very helpful in every possible respect and I am sure that without their assistance we would still be wandering round the docks in Buenos Aires!

The journey to the mountains was uneventful, except for the minor problems which most expeditions have. Haston and Burke sailed in early November, with all our equipment and were met in Buenos Aires by Fonrouge. Our gear was cleared by the customs and on board a lorry within half-an-hour of the ship docking, which must be a record. Fonrouge, Haston and Burke then flew to Comodore Rivadavia and then drove into the mountains in a Shell lorry, kindly loaned to us for three months. Boysen and myself flew out a month later, with Peter Gillman,

the *Sunday Times* correspondent, who was to live with us in Base Camp and send back periodical reports of our progress. We flew from Buenos Aires to Rio Gallegos, where we spent a pleasant day with Pedro Korchenewsky, the President of the local Club Andino. He lives in a tumble-down shack, typical of most of the poorer houses there, stuffs penguins for a living and breeds cats to eat! He arranged a lift for us over the remaining three hundred miles, in an army lorry carrying materials to a construction team building a new bridge over the Rio de Las Vueltas, the 'gateway' to the FitzRoy area.

After the drabness of the journey across the pampas, our camp in the FitzRoy valley seemed an oasis. We arrived to find the igloo and tents pitched in the middle of a superb meadow and surrounded by an indescribable mess of opened cases and gear strewn all over the place. There was no sign of the others, and half the equipment had gone, so we assumed that Base Camp was already well established. This was immensely satisfying—already established in the mountains in the first week in December, when we had expected to spend Christmas in Buenos Aires. I had visions of knocking the Torre off in three or four weeks, then doing another route on Poincenot or FitzRoy—but I had not yet met the weather.

The views from the valley are really incredible. All around the camp site were the walls of a continuous line of cliffs about 500 ft. high and above them, FitzRoy and Poincenot, completely dominating the valley with their huge granite faces; but the Torre is almost always hidden by storm cloud. The area is remarkably like Chamonix, with the same texture and colour of rock, but the aiguilles of FitzRoy are fewer and considerably larger than those of Mont Blanc.

By the time we arrived at Base Camp it was already well organised. Fonrouge had obviously been in the Boy Scouts—he had built a series of monster tents from our tarpaulin sheets, using enormous quantities of our nylon tape, which he had never seen before and must have imagined was brought for this purpose! The Base was situated in a narrow wooded valley, squeezed between the huge moraine along the side of Laguna Torre and the main ridge of the valley. At first we were rather displeased about the choice of site, as living in the trees was sunless and cold, but when the winds came roaring down the valley, sweeping across the tops of the trees like an endless express train, we were only too glad of the shelter.

The first three weeks of the expedition were spent mainly in sorting out our equipment and transporting it to our first camp, on the glacier at the foot of the mountain. This same site had been used by the Egger-Maestri expedition, under a huge rock in the moraine, and there were still plenty of signs of their occupation, mainly in the form of tin cans and discarded equipment. We saw little of the Torre in these early days,

for it remained hidden under a mantle of cloud. Although the weather at Base remained mild, if slightly unpleasant, for most of this period, on the glacier the wind howled continuously, usually accompanied by rain and snow. Whilst dashing up and down the glacier in between storms, we often wondered how much worse it would be on the ridge, 3000 ft. higher and much more exposed to the wind. After two weeks of ferrying, we were in a position to climb the mountain, but the weather remained so bad that in the Alps one would have hardly considered moving out of the hut.

In one of the few breaks in the weather, Boysen, Haston and Burke went up to the foot of the mountain to prepare the couloir leading up to the ridge. The glacier approach proved to be easy, with few crevasses, but by the time they reached the foot of the couloir the weather had turned again and they came straight back down. On the descent, they had a great stroke of luck. The small glacier at the foot of the Torre runs out onto some smooth rock slabs and at one point the gap between the rock and ice opened out to form a large cave. This immediately solved our problems of having a good shelter near the foot of the route and our fibre-glass igloo, made specially for this purpose, was declared redundant (despite the fact that it had been left in the valley, because it was too much trouble to carry it up). By Christmas, the cave was fully established with two laboriously cut platforms, a tent, and a stock of equipment and food. Although our progress seemed hectic, we had not even started climbing the mountain and already a third of our allotted time had gone. During the whole of December, there had literally not been one day when it would have been possible to climb and we became rather despondent about the chances of getting any good weather at all. On one of Fonrouge's previous visits he had had forty days of continuous bad weather and our initial disbelief was now rapidly being replaced by a reluctant acceptance that the weather *was* incredibly bad.

Christmas was only a few days away, so Fonrouge decided to use the Shell lorry to spend the holiday in Rio Gallegos in a civilised manner, with one of his numerous girl friends. I walked down to the valley with him, to try and buy a sheep for a change of diet. After spending most of Christmas Eve getting hold of the sheep, I eventually arrived back at Base late at night in the pouring rain, to find that the lads had assumed that I had foregone the expedition for the delights of civilisation with Fonrouge—they had eaten our stock of Christmas goodies and drunk all the remaining spirits. At least I had the satisfaction of enjoying a fresh leg of mutton while they were all feeling ill.

It was fortunate that everyone was recovered by the 27th because the weather suddenly turned good. For the first time in a month the sky was clear and although it was obviously still very windy high up, we

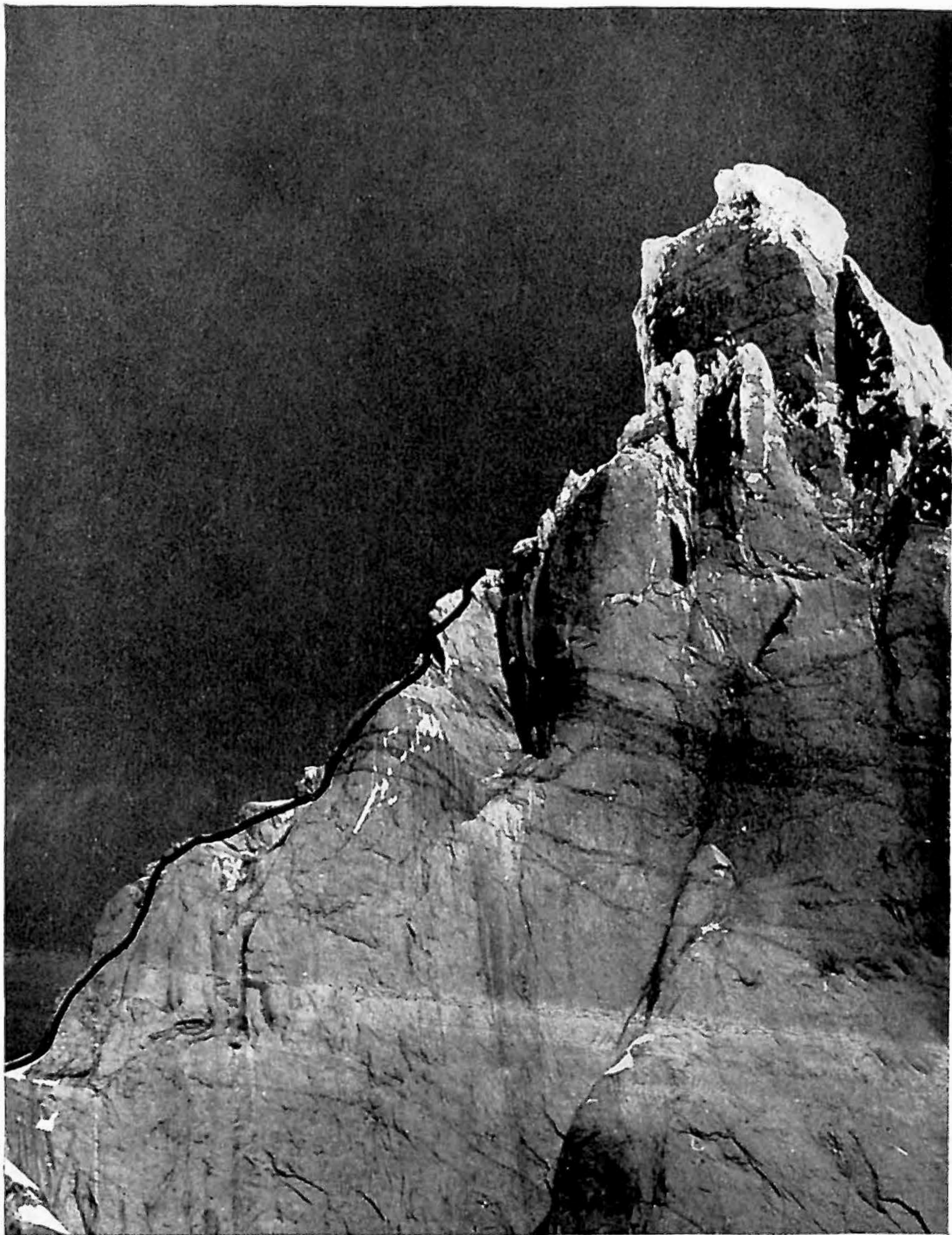
would at least be able to climb up the couloir to the col at the foot of the ridge. We all went up to the ice cave that evening full of expectations. However, as usual, the weather was poor again the following day, and we only climbed the first 500 ft. of the couloir. On the descent we fixed a rope through the barrier of séracs at the foot of the couloir, but the rope happened to be 60 ft. short, leaving a steep but easy slope leading down to the glacier plateau. Being the expedition snow and ice 'novice' I managed to fall off going down this slope and felt rather foolish at being given a lesson in elementary crampon technique.

The next day was perfect again and Dougal and Martin set off very early to continue climbing the couloir. Mick and myself stayed behind to chop away some ugly bulges of snow inside the cave, which threatened to collapse with the rapid melting. Pete Gillman arrived at the cave, exhausted after the walk up, so I opted out of the climbing and went back to Base with him to carry another load up. The couloir was proving more difficult than expected. We had hoped to climb it in two days, but after three days we were still only just over half way up. After a preliminary easy section on snow, the couloir opened out into a series of smooth slabs, with occasional snow bands cutting across them. The climbing proved to be alternately easy and difficult, and one section of the slabs required artificial techniques.

At one point the lads climbed an apparently smooth snow slope, which next day melted to reveal a deep bergschrund with a 30 ft. overhanging back wall. If we had been a day later, the expedition might well have come to an end at this point, as the bergschrund stretched right across the couloir and it was certainly too big to climb over, even by artificial ice techniques. As it was, we all had desperate epics climbing the fixed ropes at this point. Eventually Haston and Boysen reached the col, and at long last we had climbed a significant section of the mountain. The couloir was about 2000 ft. of climbing and we were now faced with over 3000 ft. of steep and difficult rock climbing on the South-east ridge. During the days it had taken to climb the couloir, the weather had been clear and hot, but the wind was obviously blowing strongly above the col. Powder snow avalanches and occasionally blocks of snow and ice would be picked up by the wind from the upper section of the couloir and blown away over our heads. It was very strange seeing 'flying saucers' of ice floating out on the wind into the middle of the valley behind us.

Fonrouge returned during the latter half of this period and in fact went up to the col with Burke on the fifth day. However, it was so windy that they could hardly stand up on the col, so they dumped their loads and descended. We had already had a good spell of weather by Patagonian standards, but the wind was still too strong to climb on the exposed ridge. Although we felt that the weather might rapidly come to an





*Photo: Peter Crew]*

THE 3500 FT. SOUTH-EAST RIDGE OF CERRO TORRE, LOOKING STEEPLY UPWARDS FROM THE FOOT OF THE COULOIR. THE SNOW COL IS AT BOTTOM LEFT CORNER OF THE PICTURE. (SEE ALSO ILLUSTRATION NO. 41.)

(No. 44)

end, Fonrouge and myself went up to the col the following day, whilst the others stayed at Base for a welcome rest. We arrived at the col early in the afternoon, intending to climb the lower part of the ridge. However, the wind was still blowing very strongly and we had no choice but to dig a snow hole and bivouac at two o'clock in the afternoon. Both Burke and Haston criticised us later on for wasting this apparently perfect day, but with the wind blowing we would certainly have got no further than the first easy chimney on the ridge.

The view from the col was superb. I think everyone on the expedition felt that it was one of the best mountain views they had ever seen. Just across the valley we were confronted with the 5000 ft. vertical granite face of FitzRoy; to the west we could look over the peaks at the head of the valley and see the ice-cap and the San Lorenzo range far in the north; to the east, over the col, we could look down the magnificent North-east face of the Cerro Adela, down the glacier towards Base Camp and across the huge, hazy blue streak of Lago Viedma, stretching seemingly towards the horizon. The face of Cerro Adela from this angle was particularly impressive, looking like a combination of the Eiger and the Brenva face, with huge avalanches continually pouring down it. Perhaps the most impressive part of the scenery was the 3000 ft. ridge of the Torre towering above us—perfect red granite topped by the glistening white mushroom of ice thrusting out into space.

Despite the ugly looking fish-tail clouds, the wind dropped and we had a good night's sleep—so good in fact, that we did not wake until eight next morning, and were amazed to find that the air was completely still. As we sorted out the climbing gear, we could see the tiny dot of Burke ploughing through the deep snow on the glacier on his way up to relieve us. Boysen and Haston had already climbed the first chimney to the foot of a vertical wall, which was the start of the real difficulties. After an hour of sorting out the 600 ft. rope tangle made by the wind, Fonrouge climbed the wide crack up the wall at great speed using only two bongs for aid. This was very heartening, as up to this point we had had no idea at all how good he was on rock and although his techniques may have been a bit old fashioned, he climbed fast which is all-important on a mountain like this. I was so shattered after the long prusik with a 40 lb. sack and 800 ft. of spare rope, that we decided it would be quicker if Fonrouge did all the leading and I the donkey work. Our progress wasn't startling but we climbed steadily up the V and A1 pitches, spending most of our time in making sure the fixed ropes ran in as direct a line as possible. By the time we had climbed three pitches, Burke had arrived at the col and was busy taking pictures, shouting route directions to us and frantically digging a proper snow hole. By the late afternoon we had fixed all our ropes, so we dumped the pegs and rapidly abseiled back to the col. Fonrouge was really delighted with his alloy figure-of-8



*Photo: Peter Crew]*

CERRO TORRE: THE APPROACH FROM THE ICE CAVE TO THE FOOT OF THE CLIMB. THE SNOW COL CAN BE SEEN ON THE LEFT, JUST BELOW THE CLOUD BASE, NEARLY 3000 FT. HIGHER THAN THE CLIMBERS.

(No. 42)

CERRO TORRE: MICK BURKE ON THE FINAL PITCH OF THE SECOND DAY'S CLIMBING (PAGE 194). THE SHADOWS ARE OF THE CERRO TORRE, TORRE EGGER AND CERRO STANDHARDT.

(No. 43)

*Photo: Peter Crew]*



descendeur, although he still spoke contemptuously of it, as of jumars, as a 'bloody toy', but we managed to descend the 800 ft. in well under half-an-hour.

Burke's snow hole was a palace by comparison, but Fonrouge's face fell slightly when he saw that it was only big enough for two people. We had agreed to spend two days each on the ridge, with one person coming up every two days to relieve one of the climbers. This would mean that we all had a decent rest and that there would be a continuous supply of provisions coming up to the col. Eventually we found out what was troubling Fonrouge—he didn't think that the weather would last more than a couple of days and he was worried that if he went down, he might miss out on a dash to reach the summit before the weather broke. As it was his 'rest period' that he was missing and we seemed to have enough food, we all squeezed in the hole and suffered for the night.

Next morning was perfect again and we made quick progress to the top of the fixed ropes. The first pitch of the day was up a narrow vee-chimney with a large ice bulge on one wall. One of Burke's ropes jammed under a flake and I had to climb up to free it. In the middle of this operation the ice broke off the side wall and crashed down onto the stance where I should have been standing. The next section lay up the blunt nose of the arête. It was steep and smooth but with one or two reasonable looking cracks. Burke led off, climbing very slowly on the difficult rock and reached up for the first crack to insert a peg. As the peg went in the flake started to expand and looked in danger of breaking off—so we had to resort to 'Welsh' techniques and use chockstones and nuts for runners. All of the cracks on this pitch turned out to be expanding flakes and it was over an hour before Burke eventually reached the stance. We were lucky to have such a perfect day to be climbing this section—we both felt that in anything under perfect weather conditions, this pitch would be almost impossible.

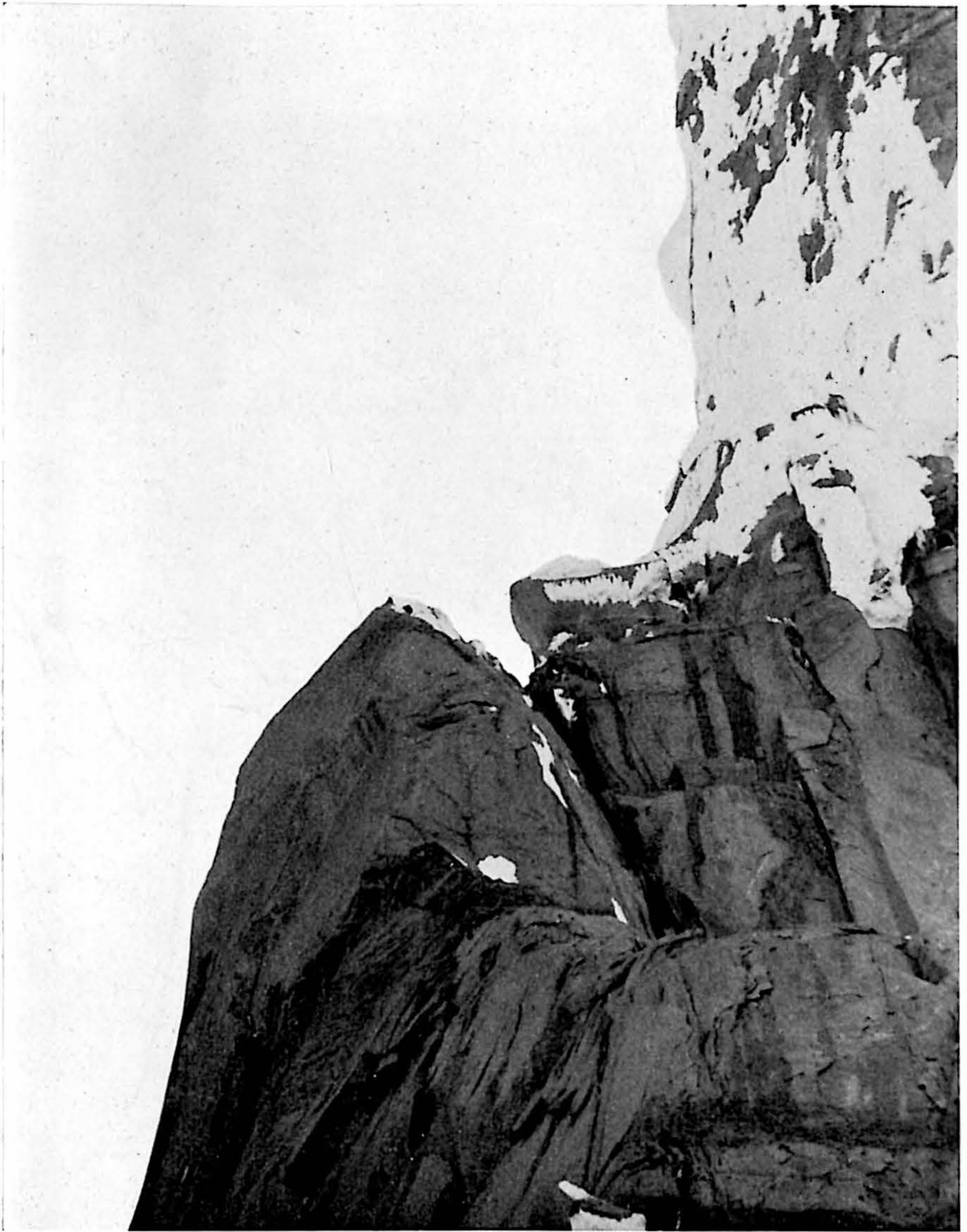
The route now took us on the top of the first step in the ridge and several easy pitches on snow covered slabs led to a vertical wall on the arête. This looked completely blank, except for a thin crack which ran out after 30 ft. The alternative seemed to be a long tension traverse into the back of an ice-filled gully on the right of the ridge. Not wishing to bivouac halfway up this, we decided to descend and let Haston do it next day. The barometer had risen again and the weather looked settled for a few days, so Fonrouge decided to descend to Base to fetch his ciné camera and I went down to the ice-cave for a day's rest. When we arrived at the ice-cave Boysen was there, on his way up to the col next day: he had brought our first batch of mail from the valley, which was a very pleasant surprise. As it was so hot in the daytime and the snow in such poor condition, Boysen decided to go up the couloir overnight.

Unfortunately, he couldn't get up the ropes over the bergschrund and spent a lonely night bivouacking on a square of polythene.

Next day Burke and Haston went up the fixed ropes to continue. They had a look at the 'long' tension traverse and found that it was nearly 300 ft. long and so had little alternative but to peg up the overhanging wall. The crack was the same size for 30 ft., needing all baby angles, so Haston had to climb up and down the pitch to use the same half-dozen pegs all the time. The next pitch was across a belt of smooth slabs with a short steep wall to finish onto a stance. This was all hard climbing, involving the use of a sky-hook, which Haston had faithfully carried in his pocket for the last few weeks. These two pitches took all day to climb, but they thought that one more pitch would lead onto the big shoulder at the foot of the final wall.

Our original plan had been to climb up the final wall direct to the top, but it was obvious now that this would take too much time. There were no continuous lines of cracks and it could only be climbed by very difficult artificial techniques. So from this point, we were hoping that it would be possible to traverse across the steep snow-field on the back of the mountain and hope that a way could be found through the steep ice gullies threading through the summit mushroom. Although we were only about 700 ft. from the top, we still had well over a thousand feet of climbing to face. As most of this was on snow and ice Haston, Burke and Boysen felt that if it was possible at all, it was worth trying in a dash, without fixing any ropes. So, next day, they set off with full bivouac gear and what food there was left on the col, hoping that Fonrouge and I would follow with more provisions.

From the top of the previous day's fixed ropes easy ground lay only sixty ft. away, but the intervening slabs proved to be too steep and smooth to climb free and there were no cracks for pitons. After seven hours of trying to climb this short section of rock, Boysen and Haston decided that they would have to come down and fetch another supply of bolts. Meanwhile, Burke had been sitting on the same stance making up songs about Haston—'*the man who dropped the bolts on Cerro Torre*' being the refrain. During this day I was coming back up the couloir, with more food and rope, hoping to climb the fixed ropes and catch up the others. At first I thought I could see figures on the rock, then as the day drew on and the figures were still in the same position, I assumed that I was seeing things. My eyes nearly popped out of my head when the bottom dot suddenly started to move and eventually materialised into the figure of Burke rapidly abseiling down the ropes. When the others arrived we had a quick discussion—we needed more bolts which were all down at Base and I was the only one reasonably fresh, so, after spending four hours laboriously struggling up the fixed ropes, I was off down again to Base. Burke also came down, to stay in the ice-cave, to



*Photo: Peter Crew]*

**CERRO TORRE: A TELEPHOTO OF THE UPPER PART OF THE RIDGE TAKEN FROM THE COULOIR. THE BLACK DOTS IN THE CENTRE OF THE PICTURE ARE BURKE, BOYSEN AND HASTON ON THE SMOOTH SLAB WHICH DEFEATED THE ATTEMPT. NOTE THE HUGE ICE BULGE CLINGING TO THE FINAL WALL.**

**(No. 45)**

take the bolts back up the couloir next morning after I had done the double trip down and up the glacier. Boysen and Haston stayed in the hole on the col to recuperate. The weather still looked good and we all felt that with a bit of luck we might reach the top in two or three more days.

As I was running down the glacier two hours later, the wind suddenly started to rise. I sat down to have a cigarette and watched the weather. Black cloud was pouring over Bonatti's Col and slowly filling the Torre valley. In another half-hour the weather was back to normal—high winds, cloud and rain. It was obvious that the weather had broken for a fairly long spell. Early next day Burke arrived, then Haston and Boysen after a descent from the col. In the time between Burke and myself descending, the séracs in the lower part of the couloir had avalanched, sweeping away the lower fixed ropes and covering the glacier with huge ice blocks. We were all relieved to find that everyone had arrived safely in Base and were not buried somewhere up on the glacier.

Although we did not know it at the time, this was virtually the end of the expedition. The next thirty-five days were spent at Base Camp hopefully watching the weather. After a few days, we all became bored and devised our personal amusements. Haston spent most of the time in his tent reading. Boysen preferred the fire and experimental cooking to support our dwindling stocks of goodies. Burke went crystal hunting and looking for condors' nests. Fonrouge and I went for a walk around the area, visiting the various other expeditions. On one of the trips to the valley, Burke and Boysen were surprised to find that all our spare cigarettes had disappeared which caused a major crisis and reduced us to making 'rolls' from pipe tobacco and air-mail paper. Eventually our food ran out and we had to send Gillman back to the coast to buy more. After about twenty days, Boysen and Haston were so fed up that they even learnt how to play bridge. This gave morale a new boost and we spent most of the day and night playing cards. Much of the time was spent talking about the mountain and worrying about the fixed ropes. The winds were so violent at Base that we could not imagine what it must be like on the mountain. In the odd brief spells of clear weather, we caught glimpses of the Torre plastered white with snow and ice.

Finally the weather did clear. After two days enough of the snow and ice had melted off the lower part of the ridge to make it worth-while going up to have a look. Boysen had injured his foot, so couldn't climb for a few days and he wasn't very pleased at the prospect of being left behind, but we couldn't take another chance on the weather. We arrived at the ice-cave to find that part of the roof had collapsed and the tent was in a shambles. We had hoped to go straight past the cave and climb the couloir overnight, but after a month of inactivity all our fitness had disappeared, so we decided to stay in the cave and go up early in the morning.

The first unpleasant surprise was to find that the fresh snow on the glacier was about a foot thick and in really foul condition. Every step was painful, with a huge clod of wet, heavy snow clinging to our crampons. To avoid the deep snow, we tried to climb up the steeper slopes, where the snow had avalanched off, but the surface was very hard and I almost fell off again. The ropes at the foot of the couloir had been stretched tight by the weight of the snow, making it very hard to prusik. In case the ropes had been damaged by the wind, we decided to rope up on the fixed ropes. Haston knocked a stone off which fell straight onto Burke's head on the belay, bringing forth a gush of blood, which he quenched by packing snow on top of his head. Burke felt quite dizzy and weak after this, and we were all very tired, so progress was slow. The ropes over the bergschrund had disappeared under a mass of avalanche snow, which also blocked most of the hole. Haston just managed to get across safely, but the bridge collapsed under Burke and he disappeared up to his neck. I laughed and took photos whilst Burke struggled out. When it came to my turn, I tried in a different place—the bridge collapsed again and I disappeared completely and fell about 20 ft. into the hole. The laugh was on me. Everything seemed to be going wrong, and we had taken four hours to this point, which we normally reached in just over an hour.

The upper part of the couloir was a nightmare of waiting and slow progress, in scorching hot sun and with parched throats. As we gained height in the couloir, we could slowly make out the fixed ropes on the ridge. Instead of following the line of the route, they were all dragged to one side and stretched tightly around flakes and overhangs. Our worst fears had come true; the fixed ropes were useless—if the wind had managed to stretch them to such a fantastic extent they must have been in a very poor state. This was really rammed home to us when we found that the final rope below the col was almost completely cut through, by flapping up and down on a rounded bulge on a slab.<sup>1</sup> If the wind could do this to a rope in a sheltered place, what would it have done to those on the ridge, exposed to the full force? By this time, so much had gone wrong that the fixed ropes served only finally to convince us that we were not going to get any higher than the col.

Eventually we arrived at the col, pretty exhausted after spending twelve hours climbing what had taken only four hours previously. Our main concern now was to find our snow-hole, make a brew and sleep. We were so numbed to disappointment by this time that it was no surprise to find that the rope marking the entrance to the hole had been ripped away by the wind and was buried under several feet of clear ice at the foot of the ridge. We tried to estimate where the hole had been

<sup>1</sup> See p. 262 for technical note on deterioration of fixed ropes.



and started digging. After half-an-hour we decided that we must be in the wrong place, so we all started digging holes a few feet apart hoping that one of us would find the equipment in the hole, which included all our bivouac sacks, duvets, stoves and Fonrouge's Cannon camera. Another hour went by and Burke finally found some pieces of toilet paper and odd tea leaves. This seemed puzzling, as the hole was already 3 or 4 ft. deep, and then we realised that all the holes we had dug were in fresh snow deposited on top of the snow which was there when we had dug the original hole. During the last two hours the wind had been getting up and the weather was obviously breaking again. We had only half-an-hour to go before dark, so we decided that we had better abandon the search and bivouac in the largest hole we had dug, and continue looking for the equipment in the morning. The bivouac was grim to say the least, with nothing to drink except two tubes of milk and nothing to eat that we could face without a drink. Haston had the outside position in the hole and spent a sleepless night brushing the powdered snow off his face and sleeping-bag as it was blown in by the wind.

Next morning a howling gale was blowing and our only thought was to get down as quickly as possible. Our equipment in the hole was worth only about £100, so we hoped that Fonrouge's £300 camera was well insured! Three hours later we arrived back at the cave utterly exhausted, to find it occupied by an Argentinian team of climbers who had come up the night before, hoping to make their attempt on the Torre. They helped us carry all our equipment down to Base, and five days later we were on our way back to civilisation.

I suppose that the question which springs to everyone's mind is 'was it worth it?'—spending a year organising the trip, three months living in a hostile environment and losing a considerable amount of equipment and money in the process, just for ten days' climbing. Certainly one should not judge the success of an expedition—even if the expedition succeeds in its objectives—only by its climbing experiences. In our case, we had to be content with the consolations of having travelled half-way round the world, having met a lot of interesting people and having learnt a great deal about the other expedition members and ourselves in the process. This is the kind of experience one doesn't easily forget, and I know that we will all be very keen to go on another trip as soon as we have had our fill again of civilisation and its comforts. Climbing certainly takes one to strange places—but not Cerro Torre again, thank you!