

A GERVASUTTI ROUTE: THE SOUTH FACE OF THE POINTE GUGLIERMINA

BY ALEX WEBSTER

AFTER leaving our spare food and equipment with the warden of the Franco Monzino hut, we set off up the Châtelet glacier in the early evening of August 15, 1967. The snow was very soft, making the going hard, but after a struggle we arrived at the Col de l'Innominata with the sky beginning to cloud over.

One 150-ft. abseil and some scrambling saw us on the Frêne glacier, threading our way beneath huge séracs and around the larger crevasses. Crossing the glacier was fortunately uneventful, and we soon reached our bivouac ledge at the foot of the face. While Dez Hadlum and Nat Allen collected water that was rapidly freezing up, 'Speedy' Smith and I made a six star bivouac site with small glacial moraine.

At first light we were awake, and soon had a stove going for 'Continental' breakfast. The sky was still overcast, but it didn't seem to have deteriorated since the night before, so we decided to climb at least as far as the base of the pillar. We left behind all the bivouac gear, ice equipment and cooking utensils and carried two light sacks—one per rope—in the hope of a fast ascent. The rock was extremely cold and our hands were very quickly numbed. When we reached the base of the pillar, after some easy slab climbing, the weather looked as though it would improve, so we decided to go on with the climb.

We started climbing just left of the crest of the pillar and I found myself on the sharp end of the rope. The first pitch was hard for so early in the morning, a V with a lot of rounded cracks with only pinch grips for the hands. At the end of the run-out, belay pegs had to be planted as none was to be found. The next pitch was Dez's, and leaving the sack with me, he led through. This pitch was as hard as the first and still we found no pegs for protection. We thought for a moment that we must be slightly off route, and we started looking for traces of pegs from previous ascents, but again none was to be found. A few more pitches followed with still no pegs, and the coldness of the rock making it quite hard climbing. However, the pitches were superb on beautiful rock, and with the sun now breaking through the cloud, we began to feel much happier.

After five or six rope lengths, we were faced with a wide steep chimney. It turned out to be my lead and was very thin to begin with. The second rope, of Speedy and Nat, who had never been very far behind, caught us

up, and, as the chimney was taking longer to climb than we would have liked, they traversed right to find an alternative line. Having run out sufficient rope for such a steep pitch, I decided to belay as there seemed to be no letting up in the angle. While Dez was climbing up to me, Speedy was now coming up on my left as I looked down onto the Frêne glacier. He joined me on a common belay after negotiating some overhanging rock. Dez now joined us, and leaving the sack, led through. Speedy was by now shouting down to Nat telling him to do a one-handed swing on some overhanging rock and get into a corner—it sounded desperate. We think that these were the pitches that Nicol and Wrangham found unclimbable when they did one of the early ascents in 1953.¹ They turned out to be the hardest part of the whole climb.

Dez was once more belayed, and I was again climbing up to him wondering what the next pitch would be like. After about 30 ft. of my lead, the flake appeared above my head, and I was soon clipping into the first peg we had found—a few more pegs in the flake and the pitch was over. Dez romped up this pitch and was soon leading the VI pitch above—the rope ran out at a steady pace and we were now leaping away. A few more rope lengths saw us sheltering from the wind on a big ledge to the right of a gully. Once out of the wind, the sun was quite warm and we had something to eat whilst we waited for Speedy and Nat.

We now traversed across the head of the gully and past some loose blocks. Below a steep wall, we found the A1 pitch leading to the diagonal abseil block. Dez, with the aid of a few slings polished this pitch off in a matter of minutes—he equally quickly rigged the rappel rope and was on his way across the diagonal rappel. A peg half-way across the pitch made it much safer and another peg at the end fixed the rope. All I had to do now was to swarm down it. Speedy and Nat followed on the same rope to save time, as the weather was once again looking nasty.

The second chimney pitch was sheathed in ice, with huge icicles hanging out into space—blows from a peg hammer refused to move them. Clipping into a peg, Speedy stood in a sling, clipped into another peg, pulled on the ice and quickly disappeared round to the left. Nat was soon following, and it wasn't long before we were all on the South ridge. A few hard moves at about V and several rope lengths led us to the summit.

'Gervasutti, it was a good route!' The descent was good as well, but that is another story.

¹ *C.C.ŷ.* 79, which also has a good photograph of the face.