

## THE FIRST ASCENT OF MT. WADDINGTON

BY FRITZ H. WIESSNER

THE story of the discovery and early surveys of Mt. Waddington, 'Mystery Mountain,' has been well told in *A. J.* 47. 288-99 by Henry S. Hall, jr.

These surveys have revealed that the Waddington massif is a long mountain ridge cut into two distinct peaks by a deep, precipitous notch while steep snow and ice couloirs lead down from it to the Dais Glacier on the S.W. and the Tiedemann Glacier on the N.E. The rocky S.E. peak is the culminating point, 13,260 ft., 60 ft. higher than the N.W. or snow peak. Except for some mountains on the Alaskan border range, Mt. Waddington is the highest in Canada.

After Mr. and Mrs. Munday's first ascent of the snow peak of the mountain in 1928,<sup>1</sup> seventeen further attempts were made to scale the highest point by different parties and from different sides. All of these attempts failed on the final rock-massif of the S.E. summit, partly because of great technical difficulties and partly because of unfavourable weather conditions.

On July 1, 1936, our party consisting of four members of the American Alpine Club, William P. House, Allan W. Wilcox, Elizabeth Woolsey and myself, left Vancouver, B.C., for another attempt on Mt. Waddington. At the same time another party consisting of members of the 'British Columbia Mountaineers' and members of the Sierra Club of California, some of whom had tried the mountain before, were on their way toward the same objective. Since this latter party had tried the peak before, we decided that our group would give them the first chance of making the ascent.

On July 2 we reached the Glendale Cannery in Knight Inlet by steamer from Vancouver. From the cannery we took a small motor-boat to the mouth of the Franklin River at the head of Knight Inlet, 30 miles further W. On July 3 after unloading 700 lbs. of equipment and provisions, prepared for a stay up to 6 weeks, we started with heavy packs on our first relay through the dense forest up the right bank of the Franklin River. These

<sup>1</sup> *A. J.* 41. 160-6. See also *ibid.* 40. 99-101, and maps *A. J.* 47. facing 85 and 298.

relays through the forest were very unpleasant work, the dense underbrush, fallen trees and swamps hampering our progress. Added to this was a heavy downpour which continued with short intermissions only during the first two weeks. It was not until our return from the mountain four weeks later that we found kind words for the fine scenery and forests of the lower Franklin Valley. Packing 30 to 50 lbs. through the forest belt while later carrying still heavier loads on the glacier, we transferred our provisions and equipment through the 7-mile forest belt and over 14 miles of the smooth lower part of the Franklin Glacier to Icefall Point, a spur on the right bank of Franklin Glacier.<sup>2</sup> Icefall Point served as a kind of main base and, on July 14, we established a comfortable camp on its lower slopes at tree line (*ca.* 5800 ft.). At this camp we were about 9 miles only to the S. of Waddington.

From Icefall Point we crossed the Franklin Glacier and then went over a low spur of the Mt. Cavalier group to avoid the icefall at the junction of the Dais and Franklin Glaciers. Three days of packing over this route were required to relay sufficient equipment to establish our camp on the Dais Glacier. In order to get the best possible start on the mountain, we then spent one more day in establishing a small, high camp on a snow shelf at 10,700 ft. just below the actual S.W. face of the peak. In the meantime, the British Columbia-Sierra Club party, working with over a dozen members, had made rapid progress in establishing their camps. The weather had now been good for five days, so on the same evening that had seen completion of our lower camp on the Dais Glacier the other group told us of their intention to make their first attempt on the next day. At noon, as we reached the location of our high camp, three ropes of three climbers each could be seen on two different routes on the S. face. One of them returned in the afternoon having found that their route had little chance for success. The other two ropes had planned to bivouac somewhere on a rock shelf and continue the next day. But, after reaching a point nearer the S.E. ridge and somewhat higher than that attained by the first rope, they encountered much rotten rock, some of it forbiddingly difficult. So they decided to retreat and started back during the afternoon, reaching our camp on the snow shelf late in the evening. Both parties told us that they had had their chance and that we ought to take advantage of the good weather and start our climb.

The nature of the rock face and the difficulties that were to be expected made us decide even at first sight of the mountain that

<sup>2</sup> For an air-view of the Franklin Glacier, see *A. J.* 47. facing 77.

it would be advisable to send a party of two to reconnoitre and climb the actual rock face and then, if it proved practicable, the whole party might repeat the climb. Elizabeth Woolsey and Allan Wilcox thought that House and I should work together on this first attempt, but they generously offered their assistance in establishing and supplying our high camp. We therefore agreed that they should return to the camp on the lower Dais Glacier to bring up more provisions, while House and I would try the S.W. face the next morning.

On July 20 we left our camp at 3 A.M., crossed the bergschrund and entered the big snow and ice couloir separating the two summits. A deep, narrow trough in the middle of the couloir, formed by snow and ice particles blown almost continuously off the summit ridges and hurtling down into the trough, made the going easy on our Eckenstein crampons. The angle of the couloir averaged  $50^{\circ}$  to  $55^{\circ}$ , occasionally reaching  $60^{\circ}$ . I had carefully watched for falling rocks the day before, but nothing had come down, while the fan at the bottom of the couloir gave evidence that there was very little stonefall from the steep rock faces of the two summits. We followed the couloir until about 300 ft. below the notch and then tried to climb its vertical western wall, planning to make a traverse about 150 ft. higher into the upper part of the S.W. face. However, I was soon stopped by the extremely difficult and rotten rocks which, moreover, were glazed with ice. Disappointed by these unexpected difficulties and wondering whether the bad rock structure continued throughout the whole S.W. face, we retreated down the couloir and were back at our camp shortly after noon. Although forced to abandon this route for the present we decided to keep it in mind as a possibility should the weather stay fine for a longer period.

On turning back during the morning from the couloir step I was very depressed and annoyed because the mountain offered technical difficulties of a much higher order than we had expected, while the objective dangers appeared almost forbiddingly severe. Failure seemed easy to accept at that point. However, during the afternoon my mood changed completely. Thinking of all the efforts and sacrifices during the gruelling two weeks' approach, I determined to match against the mountain all the strength, skill and mountaineering knowledge I possessed in the attempt we now planned for the following day. I was clearly decided on one point—under no conditions would I abandon the principles of 'safety first' and would never indulge in an uneven match with objective dangers, no matter how desirable the goal might be.

With these thoughts running through my mind, I went to sleep in our little tent on the snow shelf.

We arose at 1.30 A.M., prepared our breakfast and left camp at 2.45. Again we crossed the bergschrund (*ca.* 11,000 ft.), but crossed the last snow slope at a point a little to the E. of the centre of the S.W. face and entered the large couloir furrowing the S.W. face to a notch in the S.E. ridge between the summit-tower and a savage, tooth-shaped pinnacle. It was the route which I had considered as the most promising when first I saw the mountain from Icefall Point, but which we had set aside in favour of the apparently shorter route tried the day before. We made fast progress up the couloir on crampons, both moving together most of the time. As in the main couloir which we had climbed the day before, a deep trough had been formed by the snow particles falling from the summit ridge. These particles were harmless, however, since the long fall had broken them up, and they felt like hail as they rushed down past us. We soon had to ascend over a short icefall in the couloir; 300 ft. above this icefall the couloir bifurcated, the main branch leading straight up to the notch between the summit and the tooth-shaped tower, the side branch leading to the left, N.W., to a system of narrow snow ledges. We chose the left branch as the main couloir held another long icefall above, which would have required some time in step-cutting. In addition the upper part of the S.W. face into which the system of ledges apparently led appeared to offer good possibilities for routes to the summit when we had looked at it the day before. The couloir, which up to here, with the exception of the icefall, had not been very abrupt, now steepened to about  $60^{\circ}$  and it led us into the steep snowy ledges soon ending in a step at the base of a large tower beyond which lies a steep, rock-enclosed snowfield almost exactly in the middle of the S.W. face. It was 7 A.M. when we reached this point. We took a short rest and then started to traverse on to the snowfield over the sides of the tower. After two rope-lengths, of 120 ft. each, over loose and rotten rocks partly hidden by ice and snow, we attained the snowfield. I had expected an easy connection hence with the notch behind the tower above, but we found the same uninviting conditions as the day before on the banks of the main couloir: almost vertical, rotten and glazed rock. We decided quickly on the other possibility, which was to cross the snowfield to its upper end at the base of a tower forming the end of a rib which branches from the summit-ridge and borders the couloir between the two peaks. The centre of the couloir was very exposed to falling pieces of hard-frozen snow from the summit-



*Photo, E. Woolsey.]*

MT. WADDINGTON FROM ICEFALL POINT, 1936.

*[To face p. 52.]*



*Photo, E. Woolsey.]*

S.W. FACE OF MT. WADDINGTON, 1936.

*[To face p. 53.]*

ridge and, as the rocks above were very steep, these pieces could not break up as they did in the couloir lower down. Consequently, care had to be taken when crossing this part, the more so because of signs of occasional stonefall. Moving one at a time on a long rope well belayed by the other, we crossed this part as quickly as possible, especially when traversing the steep trough in the centre. A few rope-lengths further on we reached a sharp snow-crest at the upper or eastern end of the snowfield at the foot of the tower. It was the place we should have reached the day before had we succeeded in climbing the banks of the couloir. Below us we could see the dark and dismal walls falling vertically hence into the main couloir. At this point, which jutted out somewhat from the S. face, we obtained the first good view of the upper 1000 ft. of the summit rocks. These seemed to overhang 500 ft. below the summit-ridge.

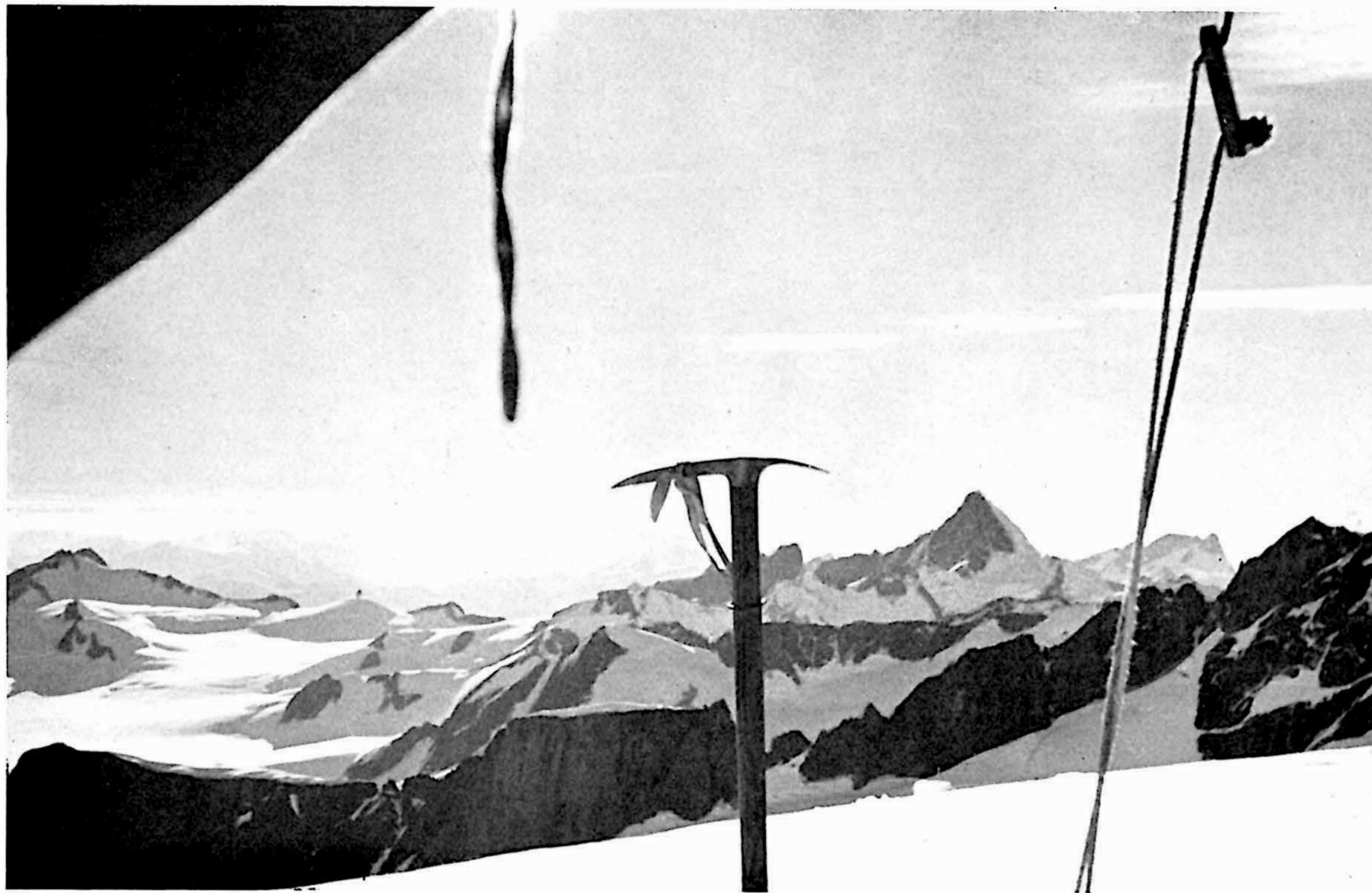
It was 10 o'clock and we had made surprisingly fast progress considering the difficulties encountered and the precautions taken. The next 1000 ft. looked worse than I had expected from below, but there seemed to be possibilities of finding a climbable route and, what was more important, no glazed rocks were visible. After studying the face, instinct made me confident that we could attain the summit, and I told my companion so. I was in the finest condition mentally and physically. I felt that nothing could stop me that day if the peak were humanly possible, and I was sure that the objective dangers could be met by climbing intelligently and exercising all safety measures. In short, I was keyed up to that high pitch reached occasionally when faced by a difficult problem.

We continued upwards, keeping to the left of the tower and the ridge of which it formed a part, encountering really difficult rocks for the first time. After climbing one rope-length, a steep smooth slab separated us from a ledge above. Nailed boots proving unsatisfactory I was forced to change to *Kletterschuhe*. I had also to transfer a second rope, carried in case of necessity of long *rappels*, to House, who from now on had the difficult task of following with a heavy and awkward load. The difficult climb from here to the summit would not have been possible for the leader if required to carry anything. On the slab it became necessary to use the first piton for belay purposes, no safe stances being available. In fact, all the platforms on the next 800 ft., with the exception of two, were insufficient for a safe belay and had to be made secure with pitons, to which the belaying climber could attach his rope and which would give him assistance in holding the other man should a fall occur. After the slab had

been climbed we bore upwards over a small snow-patch and an ice couloir. Two rope-lengths further on, we reached the side of a very marked and narrow ice couloir which lay between the last tower of the ridge, along the base of which we had been climbing, and the final vertical face of the summit. This couloir terminated in a small snowfield 150 ft. below us. Well belayed by House, I crossed the couloir and on its other side clambered on to the final rock wall. A shallow, chimney-like depression offered the best possibility although its lower part overhung, and there was a second overhang 100 ft. higher up. I succeeded in working up this depression, spreadeagling its lower part.

Much of the rock in this part was glazed with ice, the few safe holds were very small and everything else was of loose structure. Sometimes I could jam my arm into narrow cracks, their sides usually ice-glazed. After 100 ft. a small stance enabled me secured by a piton to bring my companion up, after hauling up the load. The next step above, which included the second overhang, also proved to be extremely difficult. It necessitated very careful and slow climbing in the rotten rock as House was standing vertically below me and, if I had loosened any stones, they might have hit him. For this reason we could not haul the load up this time and, as on most other parts of the climb, House had to scramble up carrying it. Before continuing from the next platform we made a short traverse to the right to a stance where House was out of danger from any stones I might loosen. I continued up the depression, and after another difficult rope's-length reached a sloping ledge with a firm stand. The depression continued overhead, ending in an overhang 125 ft. above on the summit-ridge at a point approximately 100 ft. below and to the E. of the highest point. The sides of the ridge above us were festooned with the famous 'snow feathers' as former parties had called this interesting snow formation peculiar to Mt. Waddington. They are not by any means snow feathers, but consist of *Firn* snow packed together and built up in layers as much as 2 ft. thick and many yards long. They appear even on the vertical rocks below the ridge, seeming like frayed-out flags. Small particles fell off almost continuously. For protection against them we stuffed our caps with handkerchiefs and scarves.

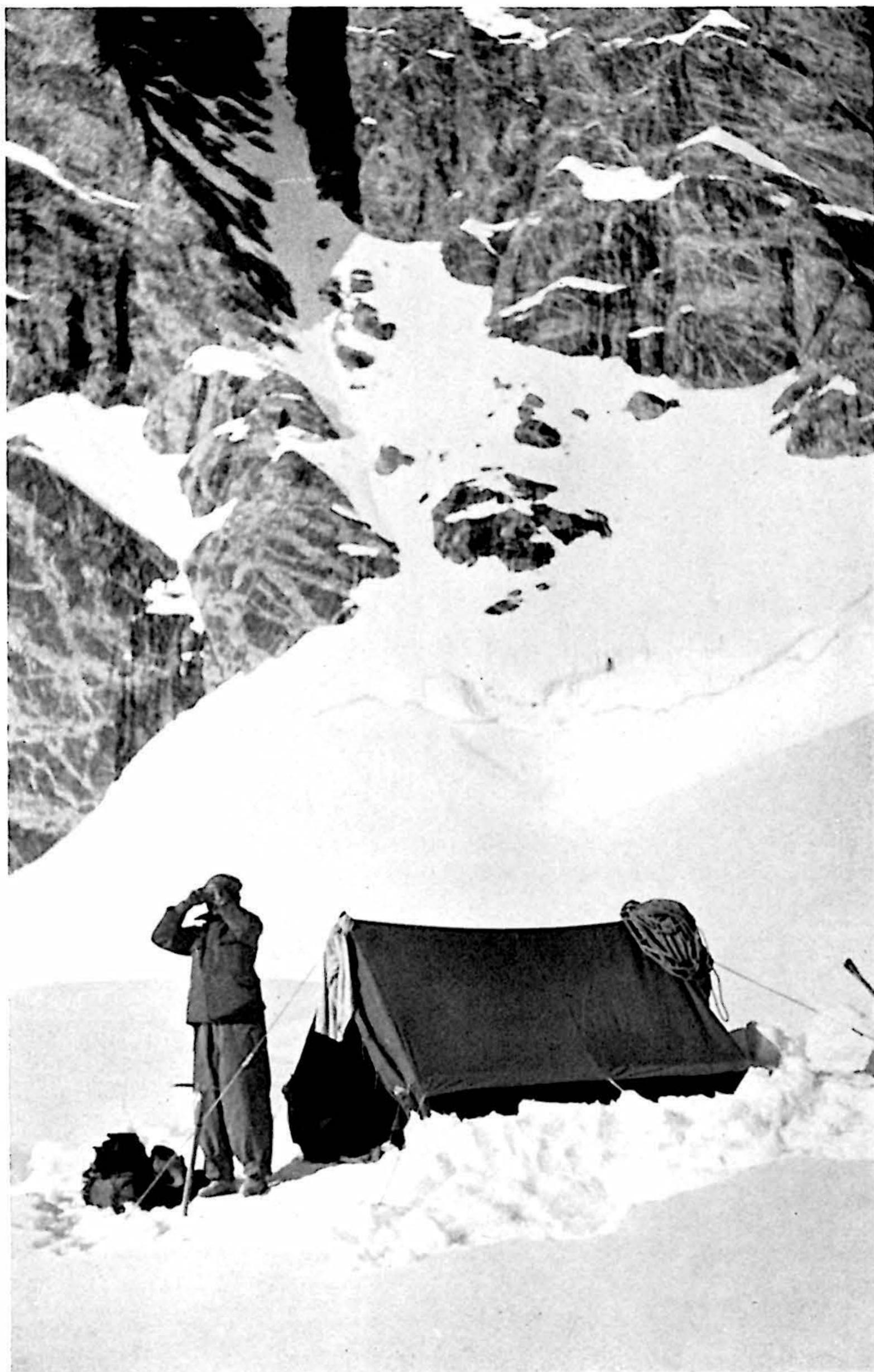
The last 250 ft. had taken approximately 3 hours because of the extreme difficulties and the great care and precautions necessary. A system of ledges led to the right into another depression ending a few yards below the highest point and to the right, E., of it. This recess seemed to be a much easier and better way than straight up to the ridge and we accordingly traversed into



*Photo, W. P. House.]*

VIEW TOWARDS W. FROM HIGH CAMP BELOW S.W. FACE. , MT. BELL ON LEFT FOREGROUND.

*[To face p. 54*



*Expedition photo.]*

HIGH CAMP, BASE OF S.W. FACE WITH MAIN COULOIR, 1936.

*[To face p. 55.*

it over somewhat easier rocks. The depression was reached at a little rock-pillar behind which we found the first place where we could sit down since leaving the large snowfield. We continued without a rest and climbed the last 150 ft. over the difficult rocks of the recess. An overhang just below the ridge was the last obstacle in our way. Above it I managed to change again to my nailed boots as ice work was to be expected onwards to the highest point. We climbed out of the depression and reached the ridge 25 ft. below the summit. One of us at a time, belayed from below, was able to climb up to the highest point over the awkward snow-layer forming a narrow ridge some 3 ft. thick and slightly corniced on one side. The top was so narrow that it was impossible for two men to stand on it. It was 3.40 P.M. when we reached the summit, 13 hours after leaving our little camp on the snow shelf of the upper Dais Glacier. The camp was visible as a dark point, and several other dots indicated the presence of our friends; they had followed our ascent through field-glasses.

Beautiful and impressive was the view of the highly glaciated Coast Range with its hundreds of peaks and the deep-tinted shadows of its valleys. To the N. lay the lower, dry interior of British Columbia, a rolling forest country where large smoke-clouds gave evidence of raging forest fires. To the S.E., parts of the Inland Passage and the mountains on Vancouver Island were visible.

We had hoped to find an easier route for the descent somewhere over the N. face or along the ridge which led down to the notch between the two summits. If the latter were possible, we could cross over the snow, N.W., summit and take the usual route thence for the descent to the Dais Glacier. However, the N. face did not appear very promising as its rocks were plastered with snow and ice, and the edge leading down to the notch is serrated into wild rock towers carrying layers of the snow feathers.<sup>3</sup> The N.E. side looked more inviting, but it might have been hard to find a way out in its lower part. As the hour was late, we could not very well chance it but decided that the safest proceeding would be to return by our line of ascent. With our spare rope of 300 ft. (8 mm. in diameter), we roped down in a more direct line over the 1000 ft. of the summit rocks, using rope-rings and pitons. Great care had to be taken in laying out each *rappel* because of rotten rock which might be loosened during progress or when the rope was pulled off. In most places we could not see where the rope ended because of overhangs below, but with

<sup>3</sup> See the striking illustrations, *A. J.* 47. facing 296, 297.

150 ft. available we could be sure of finding a place to continue with the next *rappel*. This manœuvre took hours, but it would hardly have been possible in the limited time available to climb down the extremely difficult places we had come up. At sunset we arrived at the large snowfield ; it was getting dark when we traversed out of it over the disagreeable rocks at the base of the tower flanking the snowfield at its S.E. end. We ought to have bivouacked here, but continued down over the steep snow ledges into the couloir, twice roping down over the steepest, icy places by fixing a piton in the rock wall on the side of the couloir. In the lower part of the couloir we again put on crampons and moved carefully downward belaying each other. At the junction of the main and side couloirs we heard rocks falling from high above, and a few seconds later they burst like shrapnel over our heads. This was probably the only serious rockfall on our route during the whole day. It was caused undoubtedly by a strong wind which had risen during the evening and swept the ridges above. Early in the morning we debouched from the couloir on to the last snow slope, crossed the bergschrund and attained the glacier. Another 10 minutes and we were back safe and happy at our little camp on the snow shelf, heartily greeted by the other members of our party.

As regards the route, I may say that it is difficult throughout and extremely so in the upper parts, but it can be climbed safely when all precautions are applied by a competent two-men rope. The strain is just as much mental as physical. Artificial means of overcoming the technical difficulties were not required during the ascent ; pitons were used only to secure good belays on platforms and on four occasions *between* stances so as to give the leader a safer belay over the most difficult parts. Of course the climb could be made without the use of pitons should the party object to their use as a matter of principle, but I feel that this would reduce the margin of safety to an unjustifiable degree. As for roping down, this *might* be eliminated should the party be opposed to such procedure and if it be strong enough and can spend the additional time.

From what I saw of the mountain, I believe that our route is the best and safest way of attaining the summit. However, there are other distinct possibilities. For example, one might find an easier line over the final rocks by going somewhat to the right, S.E., of our route providing traverses can be made round several great overhangs. It might also be possible to take the right-hand branch of our couloir, traverse the icefalls to the notch between the summit and the tooth-shaped tower, and thence to

the summit *via* the ridge or to the right or left of the same. Yet another possibility is to try a route up the N.E. face and, actually, this may prove to be the easiest line of all were it possible to reach this face direct from the Tiedemann Glacier or from further to the E. Nevertheless, Mt. Waddington is certain to provide a first-class climb regardless of the route chosen.<sup>4</sup>

We are in Mr. Wiessner's debt for his most interesting narrative.—EDITOR, *A. J.*

<sup>4</sup> *A. J.* 47. 83 and illustrations facing 77, 80, 81.