

THE A.M.A. ALPINE MEET, 1959

By E. J. E. MILLS

IN MAY 1957 the Army Mountaineering Association came into being. The loss of easy access to the Himalaya had in no way diminished the numbers of post-war soldier mountaineers. As in civil life, mountaineering was gaining a larger following in the Army. Their enthusiasm had been demonstrated by the Parachute Brigade Expeditions to Ruwenzori in 1954 and Alaska¹ in 1956. These two ventures had also shown that if the right approaches were made, the War Office were prepared to give support and encouragement.

By early 1957 the planning of the Army-inspired British-Pakistani Forces Himalayan Expedition had begun and in that same year there were no less than seven major corps or regimental mountaineering clubs in existence. Mountaineering was still not, however, officially recognised as a sport by the Army and as such was denied the advantages—mainly financial—which other pursuits enjoyed. This was anomalous, for climbing was pursued far more actively and enthusiastically than many 'official' sports. It was therefore obvious that the interests of Army climbers would best be served by the formation of an authoritative body which could gain this recognition and foster mountaineering in the service.

The first moves to set up such an organisation were made by Col. Gerry Finch. The idea of the Army Mountaineering Association was largely his and, although supported by several officers, who were also members of the Alpine Club, it was through his efforts and enthusiasm that the Association came into being.

Since the Inaugural Meeting in May 1957, the Association has been extremely active. There have been numerous meets in the United Kingdom and an Alpine meet has been an annual feature. In addition, a joint British-Pakistan training expedition to the Karakoram, under the leadership of Capt. Tony Streather, was sponsored in 1959.² This year the Association has been instrumental in the organisation of the British-Indian-Nepalese party to Annapurna II, which is headed by Lieut.-Col. Jimmy Roberts.

From the beginning great emphasis has been laid on proper training and on encouraging competent rock climbers to extend their interest and experience to the Alps and greater mountaineering. In doing this the Association has shown considerable understanding of the financial

¹ *A. J.* 62. 121.

² *A. J.* 65. 37.

problems of young officers and soldiers by subsidising hut and guides fees, and by providing equipment.

Last year's A.M.A. Alpine Meet was typical of these activities. Only two days before it was due to begin, because of the sudden departure into hospital of the organiser, I found myself in charge.

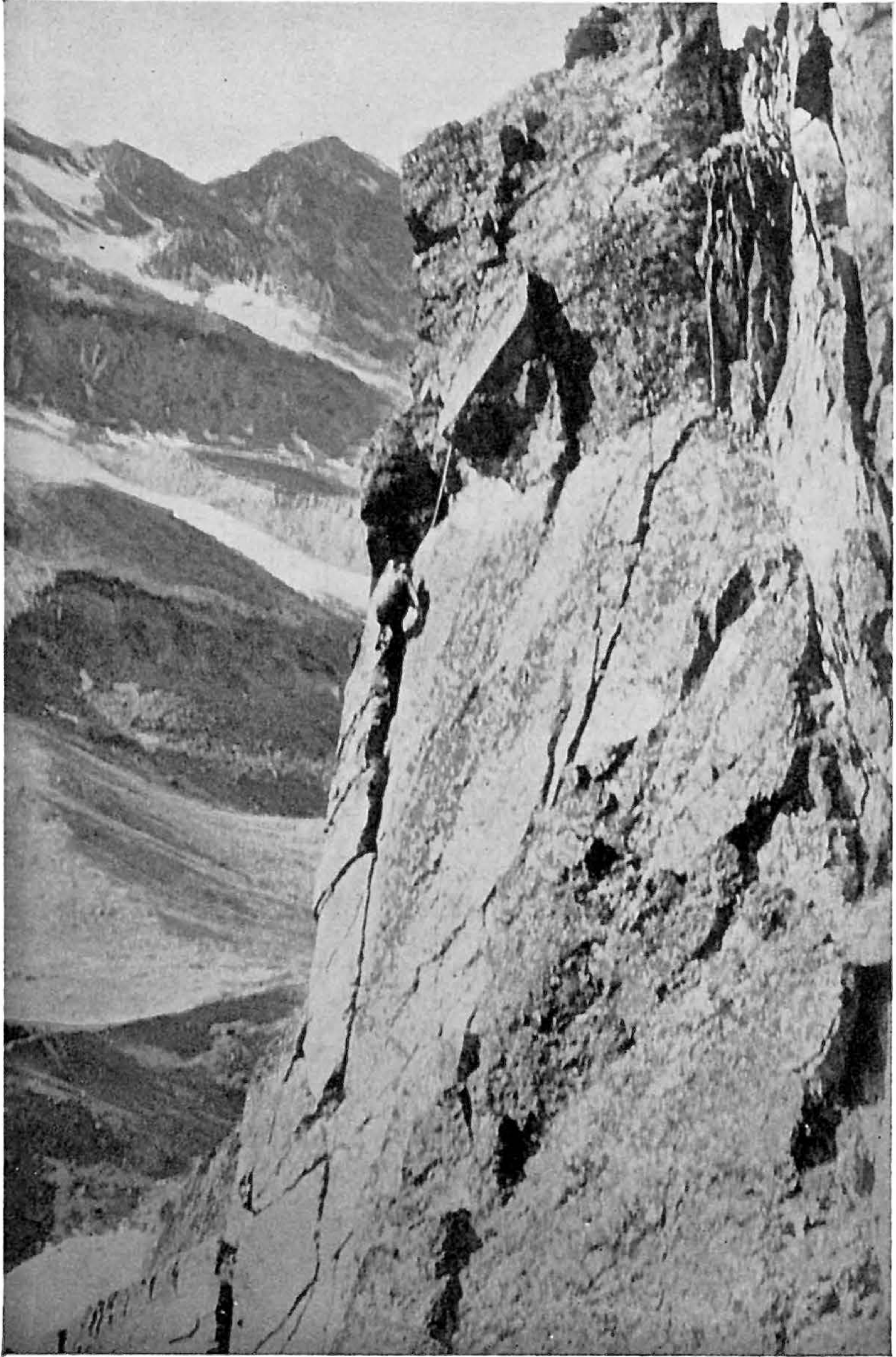
The initial difficulties inherent in this sort of situation were soon overcome, and on July 31 I left the great travellers' ant heap of Victoria encumbered by a conglomeration of tents and heavy, shapeless bags containing all manner of climbing equipment. In mid-channel, with the aid of the imperious Tannoy, I collected 2nd Lieut. David Willats, newly commissioned into the Royal Engineers from Sandhurst, and Sergeant John Thompson of the R.E.M.E. Their assistance, on the multi-change journey to Saas Fee, rescued me from the frightening problems of coping with the Frankenstein of the baggage. As we were wheeling our laden trolley up to the Saas Fee camping ground, an unmistakable English figure strolled across and asked, 'Are you the A.M.A. party?' It was Capt. Dick Jones of the Royal Fusiliers.

The following day, under a gently dampening rain, I practised the small party in step cutting, crevasse rescue, cramponing and several other basic skills, on the lower reaches of the Fee glacier. When we returned sodden and mud encrusted, we found that two more tents had appeared close by. In them Maj. Peter Dietz and Sergeant Leslie Shafford, from the R.A.C. at Bovington, were already brewing up. Later in the evening two Sapper subalterns, George Plummer and Roger Eagle, on leave from Germany, also put in an appearance, having just returned from the Weissmies hut.

I had already decided to look after the first season group and Dick Jones, who had some Alpine experience, very kindly offered to help and lead one rope. Plummer and Eagle, with two or more Alpine seasons to their credit, were therefore free to carry out their own programme of climbs. This arrangement was to work well throughout the Meet.

The six of us, in the first-season party, wound our way slowly up to the Langefluh hut the next afternoon. The clouds had vanished early in the morning and the sun now glowered down upon us. All the tops were clear, and there were long snow plumes rising steadily from the Täschhorn-Dom ridge. The walk up to the hut showed just how unfit the majority of the party were, and so my plans for the following day were not ambitious.

We left the hut at four, and clattered our way, through the velvety, warm darkness, across the moraine to the side of the Fee glacier. We had no firm objective; except perhaps to reach a good height on the Alphubel. I wanted to make this a day of instruction and acclimatisation, and so we stopped often to practise one technique or



A GENDARME ON THE JÄGIGRAT.

another, or introduce some new facet of ice and snow work to the beginners. By eight-thirty, when we halted for a snack on the steep slopes of the East flank of the Alphubel, altitude and unfitness had begun to have their effect on the party. The silence of fatigue fell upon us, broken only by a shuddering groan from Peter Dietz, when he was offered a succulent oily sardine, and a lone voice offering up expressions of regret at leaving the valley. Nevertheless, I remained true to the maxim of acclimatisation 'climb high, sleep low', and we toiled up to a small plateau at about 3,800 metres. Here, with a splendid view of the progress of a vast crocodile of ropes on the Allalinhorn and a flawless prospect of the Weissmies, we turned back.

It was a brilliant day by now, and the snow had softened, making the steep descent somewhat dangerous. It was unpleasant, but some useful lessons in the art of climbing down were learnt. Once on the lower levels of the glacier, tiredness disappeared, and the hut was soon reached. We paused here only briefly; then on down to Saas Fee, where we sat on a shady terrace, sipping cool drinks and admiring our route up the enclosing wall of the Mischabel.

The Weissmies offered us a chance to see the other side of the valley and also an easy ascent, and so the party, now swelled by the arrival of 2nd Lieut. Dudley Read, of the K.O.Y.L.I. in Germany, and 2nd Lieut. Bob Langford, another Sapper, took the bus down the valley on the afternoon of August 5.

From Saas Grund, an hour's trudge along the sun-dappled path which wanders up the hillside through shady woods, brought us to the pleasant earth terrace of the Triftalp café. Here we enjoyed one of those idyllic pauses, which by its utter contrast with the long hours of constant effort, gives to an Alpine holiday its special charm, and in retrospect induces a deep nostalgia. Fanned by light breezes, we drank a delicious ice-cold apfelsaft, and gazed out across the narrow valley at the entrancing view. We left reluctantly and the long walk up the dusty track to the hut seemed endless.

We overcame the Weissmies somewhat slowly the next morning. M. Marcel Kurz's 'bien fort' snow slope above the glacier was, in fact, mainly ice, and required a chain of steps and an hour of cutting. Unfortunately this was our only excuse. From then on the long snow slopes and the sweeping steps of the ridge found our fitness wanting, and it was a well-spaced wavering line of weary climbers which finally dragged its way to the summit.

Revived by jam-snow and other concoctions, including a special A.M.A. Bouvier, the descent, by way of an alternative route across the head of the Trift glacier, was fast and steady. Further draughts of apfelsaft at the Triftalp completed a memorable expedition.

That evening I met Cesar Zurbriggen, the guide who had been engaged earlier by the A.M.A., and settled the details of the week's programme.

Only six of us left for the Britannia hut on the afternoon of the 7th. Bob Langford had gone off with George Plummer and Roger Eagle to the Mischabel hut, and Peter Dietz was a victim of crippling blisters. The party moved easily and smoothly on the ascent to the hut and I noted this sign of fitness with satisfaction. Cesar too, was obviously impressed by this first showing of his clients, for he allowed himself to express some grudging compliments. At three in the morning we began the long glacier slog, in a twinkling cavalcade of lanterns and torches, towards the Adlerpass and the Rimpfischhorn. A final steep snow slope and a short airy climb along the cold, icy rocks of the ridge brought us to the summit in well under the standard time. We celebrated the ascent of our second four-thousand-metre peak by taking breakfast on a sunny belvedere jutting out into space, above a white froth of cloud.

Cesar led off in an exultant mood, and there followed what I can only describe as a lighthearted frolic across the pinnacles of the ridge which strode towards the skyline. There was a flamboyancy and élan about Cesar's climbing which was irrepressible. Although not entirely suited to a party of beginners, in combination with a certain degree of British phlegm, and some instruction, which I managed to impart, it was extremely effective. The Gendarme with its steep but sound rock was a fitting climax to the climb. By comparison, the descent in steep snow to the Allalin pass and the misty plod down the soggy glacier to the hut, was boring.

It was raining when we started down the track to Saas Fee. Cesar, looking like a mountain demon with his hooded bivouac sack, pushed on, skipping along at a sharp pace. We swept down the track in a swift silent line and the Plattjen café was reached in 47 minutes from the hut. The rain had stopped and the clouds were clearing as we came up the main street of Saas Fee.

After seven strenuous days I felt that a rest would be beneficial before making a final three-day effort on the Dom and Täschhorn. Sunday was not, however, a complete day of rest for some nearby rock problems attracted most of us, and in the afternoon we were joined by Cesar.

On Monday, Maj. Charles Marriot, who had arrived on Saturday, left early for the Mischabel hut, and we agreed to see him there that evening. It was not to be. By midday the clouds had rolled up the valley, and were swirling among the trees. Rain drummed heavily and incessantly on the tents. At the eleventh hour I conferred with Cesar and decided not to start. We conjectured, rather uncharitably,



APPROACHING THE LENZJOCH.

as to whether Marriot would survive until the morrow on his only rations of tea and sugar.

The loss of two days forced us to alter our plans and accordingly we staked everything on an ascent of the Dom. There still remained the possibility that if conditions were good, we might consider the traverse of the Lenzspitze and Nadelhorn from the Lenzjoch, then descend to Saas Fee by way of the Mischabel hut.

In rather more promising weather, on Tuesday, we went by road and train to Randa. Just over two and a half hours after lunching in the village we had climbed the 6,000 ft. to the Dom hut. Here our second casualty occurred (Peter Dietz was now the victim of food poisoning), when Leslie Shafford's knee succumbed to an old weakness and seized up. We left without him the next morning and in a procession trudged up the mist-enshrouded glacier. There was a cold wind, and light snow was falling. At the point where the glacier is forsaken for the ridge, all the other parties turned back except our own and one other. Farther up, when they saw our struggles on an ice-encrusted rock step, the remaining group faltered and came no farther.

The raw edge of the wind cut into us, and we were glad to keep warm by moving on steadily. When the rock gave way once more to snow, the mist began to withdraw its veil, and by the time we had halted for a brief snack, a few hundred feet below the summit, only a few white scarves of cloud trailed in the brilliantly blue sky. The snow on the great peak gleamed in the sun, but the cold was intense and we did not linger.

From the summit the world was spread before us. Far away in Italy the lakes twinkled, flinging darts of light back at us. The rest was a white fantasy of ice, snow and cloud.

Cesar was delighted. 'In Saas Fee,' he said gleefully, 'they will say we are madmen to have done this and Lenzspitze-Nadelhorn.' Already he had decided on the ridge. Caught up by the beauty of the scene and the jubilation of success, I thrust aside my doubts and agreed that, if the conditions looked good at the Lenzjoch, the party would be equal to the traverse.

At the joch it looked possible, and after lunch we began the ridge. The sun still shone and it was warm. 'The snow and ice will be off the rocks before long,' Cesar called out, over his shoulder, as he started off, leading the first rope. I followed on, with John Thompson and Dick Jones, hoping that he was right. I was still doubtful. Before we reached the top of the Lenzspitze the sun had gone, mist was about us, and the cold gripped us with frightening suddenness. On the descent from the summit, along the knife edge of the ridge, when mist made space indistinguishable from the snow, I began to wish that I had listened to the small voices which had cautioned me on the Dom.

A scuffle of feet; a shout; the rope jerking and running out, and Dick Jones was falling fast down the plunging East face. Astride the ridge I braced myself against the shock, and just as suddenly it was all over. Thirty feet below, Dick was hanging heavily on the rope. He soon regained the ridge and we continued rather more cautiously, everyone now fully aware that at any time we might overstep the fine line dividing safety from disaster.

Once the snow was behind, confidence increased and we quickened our pace along the misty towers and battlements of the ridge. Then a crescendo of surging rock spires and we were on the summit of the Nadelhorn.

With all tension gone from the party, and without a care in the world, we gambolled down to the Windjoch, across the glacier, and into the drowsy warmth of Mischabel hut. Revived by tea we descended through the dusk to Saas Fee, to reach the cobbled square 17 hours after leaving the Dom hut.

My leave was almost ended and the next afternoon I left with Roger Eagle and George Plummer. Bob Langford, bound for the A.C. and C.C. meet, had already departed with Peter Dietz and Leslie Shafford, who were *en route* to England. It was left to the remaining few, accompanied by Cesar, to close the Meet with an idyllic day of easy rock climbing on the Jägigrat.

The Meet, I believe, was a success. It had not been a story of grim, tense struggles on the great Alpine walls, but we had achieved our aims. Alpine beginners had been initiated; instruction had been given and army mountaineers had met and climbed together. Above all we had enjoyed each other's company, and the mountains.