

THE MOUNTAINS OF WOKKPASH

The Royal Fusiliers Canadian Rocky Mountains Expedition, 1960

BY M. F. R. JONES

NORTH of the Peace River in British Columbia, the Canadian Rocky Mountains rise to three major groups of peaks. The most southerly of these, and the smallest in extent, is the Redfern group; the central, and probably the highest, contains Mts. Lloyd George and Glendower, and the Lloyd George Icefield; while the northerly mass, more varied and extensive than the other two, contains as its principal peaks Mts. Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin and Sylvia. In each of these areas the highest peaks rise boldly to over 9,500 ft., carrying sizeable snowfields and Alpine glaciers, but until recent years, before the building of the Alaska Highway, they were almost entirely unknown except to a handful of trappers and hunters, and no mountaineering had been carried out amongst them.

In 1947, Frank Smythe and N. E. Odell, together with a group of prominent North American climbers, spent a month based at Haworth Lake in the Lloyd George range and climbed the principal peaks in that area. Their expedition was unusual in that it reached the lake by floatplane, saving much time and expense by avoiding the traditional use of pack-trains to carry their supplies. While the floatplane was at their disposal they made a reconnaissance flight over the Churchill-Roosevelt-Stalin range, and noted that 'up to a height of 10,000 ft. there was every shape and condition of mountain, but there were few outstanding peaks . . . we flew over innumerable icy and snow-clad mountains . . . peak upon peak and range upon range . . . the country below us during the flight can only be described as terrific. . . .'

Since the Smythe expedition, it seemed that no further mountaineering had been done in these northern Rockies, leaving them as a largely virgin area for pioneer climbing. I had long been attracted by Smythe's descriptions and photographs of the area; and when the opportunity arose for me to organise a Regimental mountaineering expedition to Canada, the object of which was to go to unexplored terrain and attempt unclimbed peaks, the Churchill or Redfern ranges seemed to afford an ideal target. We finally chose the former as being probably more interesting, and at the same time more easily accessible from the Alaska Highway—an important safety factor, as we were unable to include a doctor in the party.

In the absence of detailed information about the mountains, our first recourse was to the air photographs of the R.C.A.F., which gave almost complete coverage of the area. There was also a map, on a scale of four miles to the inch, and this was contoured; but beyond showing the relative heights of the peaks the map was not a great deal of use in choosing climbing routes, the scale being far too small. In any case, the map had been built up largely from the air photos themselves, as no surveyors had penetrated beyond the outlying ridges of the area. The vertical photographs, amplified by a few horizontal ones taken from the outlying trig points, gave us a good idea of what to expect, and during the winter I did a great deal of armchair mountaineering, the stereoscope delightfully exaggerating effects of height and steepness to almost Himalayan proportions. The photos did not provide all the answers, but they were of the greatest value, and I would advise anyone who is thinking of going there to obtain some and study them carefully.

Our team was an unusual one. The only two Alpinists in the party were Major John Biginell and myself. The other four members were young N.C.O.s of the Regiment, all competent rock-climbers trained in Wales and Cornwall up to 'severe' standards of performance, but lacking experience of snow and ice work, or of expedition conditions. In addition, we had with us Lieut.-Col. S. W. Archibald, aged 66, of London, Ontario, a surveyor and ex-C.O. of our affiliated Canadian Regiment, and also his survey assistant, 'guide philosopher and friend' Sam Chappise, a stalwart old Cree Indian aged 78! Some doubts were expressed as to our wisdom in tackling such a formidable area with such a peculiar team, but I was personally convinced that with good planning, care, caution and common sense we could operate safely and even achieve a good deal. With the backing of the City of London, City Livery Companies, the Regiment, the Nuffield Trust and the Mount Everest Foundation, we amassed the £2,000 necessary for the enterprise, and after nine months of planning and with over a thousand letters in the files we set out in early July for Canada.

Our journey seemed likely to be bedevilled by the shipping strike, which broke out on the day we were due to sail, but thanks to the generosity of Canadian Pacific we were flown, with our ton of food and stores, direct to Edmonton, thus arriving in Canada five days early. At Edmonton, and thereafter, we came under the wing of the Canadian Army; and at Dawson Creek, the terminus of the Alaska Highway, we were luxuriously accommodated in the R.C.A.F. camp while we made our final preparations for the journey into the mountains. On July 18 we got ourselves and our stores into two station-waggon and a three-ton truck and set off up the Highway; a two-day journey up 456 miles

of gravel road to Muncho Lake, a well-known centre for fishing and sightseeing, and the base for floatplane operations in the area.

Our plan for getting into the mountains was dictated largely by financial considerations. As our base we had chosen Wokkpash Lake, twenty-one miles in from the Highway, where the Beaver floatplanes of B.C.-Yukon Air Service could land; but our stores alone would require three flights to the lake, and we could not afford the fourth flight for eight bodies as well. We therefore left the bulk of our food and stores at Muncho Lake, with Sam, to be flown in on July 23, while the rest of us drove back to Mile 403 to start the walk-in on the 20th. We had with us food for six days, two rifles, and the minimum of camp and personal equipment; our packs, carried on metal Army manpack-carriers, weighed over 70 lbs. apiece, quite a trial for our untrained shoulders. Ahead of us lay the wide belt of darkly forested foothills, with the tall conical peaks of the main range standing, shawled in snow, in the distance—an exciting and inspiring sight, for of all the hundreds of summits awaiting us, only two or three of the lesser ones had been climbed.

A word of topographical explanation is now necessary. The range we were entering is shaped roughly like the letter 'E' lying on its back, with the three short strokes representing ridges running south to north. Of the two valleys between, the westerly one, much ramified in fact, was that of the Racing River, having the Mt. Churchill group at its head and the Roosevelt group to its west; while the easterly valley, which eventually links up with Racing River, contains Wokkpash Creek and Lake, and has the Mt. Stalin group at its head. The ridges surrounding the valleys are high, with few cols or passes, the peaks rising along them like turrets along a castle wall; the central and westerly peaks carry much snow and ice on their northern and eastern fronts, but to the east of Wokkpash Creek things seem much drier and the peaks, although rising to over 9,000 ft., have a red, desert appearance more reminiscent of Arabia than Canada. This was puzzling at first, but it was soon explained when we saw how the rain-clouds tended to blow up from the west and deposit their moisture on the first peaks they came to, often leaving the eastern ranges in sunshine when the rest were buried in the storm.

One of the most characteristic features of the area is the tilt of the strata. These tend to dip down to the south-west, forming scarp slopes to the north and east. The westerly dip slopes are therefore the obvious lines of ascent, but quite often these are themselves steep, loose and cliffy, and the best routes are more often found where snow and ice has collected in the cwms of the northern and easterly faces.

It is always rather a solemn moment when you leave the road and disappear into the 'bush', and the rugged nature of the country ahead

certainly gave us little cause for optimism. Luckily, a geological survey party had bulldozed a wide trail along the first eight miles of our route, and this gave us a flying start, although after the first few hours our progress became distinctly tortoise-like, with rests of ever-increasing frequency. In the afternoon we took to a narrow and indistinct pack-trail through a belt of high forest, crossed a swampy watershed, and descended steeply to the deep echoing valley of Wokkpash Creek where the swift river swirled around the buttresses of the outlying mountains. We had walked for $9\frac{1}{2}$ hours through a hot and mosquito-ridden day, and we were thoroughly tired.

Next day we slogged up the shingle flats of the creek, between the ghostly mountains of white contorted limestone that form the northern ends of the main ridges; and in the afternoon, just as we were getting weary, we had to push for four hours through a tangle of waterless bush above a deep and impassable box-canyon. This was a weird place, aptly named 'Devil's Canyon' by the trapper Elvin Larsen who discovered it in 1929; it was fringed along its length with rows of tall eroded earth-pillars, or 'hoodoos', which resembled nothing so much as petrified choristers standing along the nave of an enormous, roofless cathedral. It was a very tired party that finally stumbled down the escarpment to the stream at the end of the canyon, just short of Wokkpash Lake; but next day, after a good night's sleep, we set out refreshed to cover the last few miles along the lake shore to our camp site—chosen from air photos—situated on a wide flat promontory about a mile from the lake head. We arrived in a downpour of thundery rain which made the surroundings, consisting mainly of dripping spruce trees, seem rather depressing; but once the weather cleared we gained a magnificent view down the lake, and equally up the valley to the huddle of glaciated peaks surrounding Mt. Stalin, ten miles away. It was an ideal site, and we set to work energetically to provide it with other amenities besides scenery.

Next day the stores were flown in, and I accompanied the plane on one of its return trips to get an aerial view of our surroundings. The row of peaks along the west side of the valley, with their bold snow and ice faces, seemed much more attractive than the bare and ruinous mountains to the east, and the key to their approach lay in two high side-valleys, each several miles long, debouching on the west shore of the lake. The most striking peak of all was a 9,000-ft. rock pinnacle at the south-west end of the lake, out-Matterhorning the Matterhorn in spiry elegance, but almost equally impressive was a massive glaciated mountain, rather reminiscent of the northern aspect of the Grand Combin, rising at the head of the southern side-valley. It was clear from this reconnaissance that there were numerous exciting objectives surrounding the lake itself, quite apart from the Mt. Stalin group and



RIVER CROSSINGS ARE A MAJOR PROBLEM. THIS IS WOKKPASH CREEK ABOVE THE LAKE.



THE SADDLE FROM MERCERS' PEAK.

its surrounding ice-field which we had not yet seen at close hand. Our original idea, which was to cross over to the Racing River valley in search of Mt. Churchill and other peaks, began to seem rather pointless.

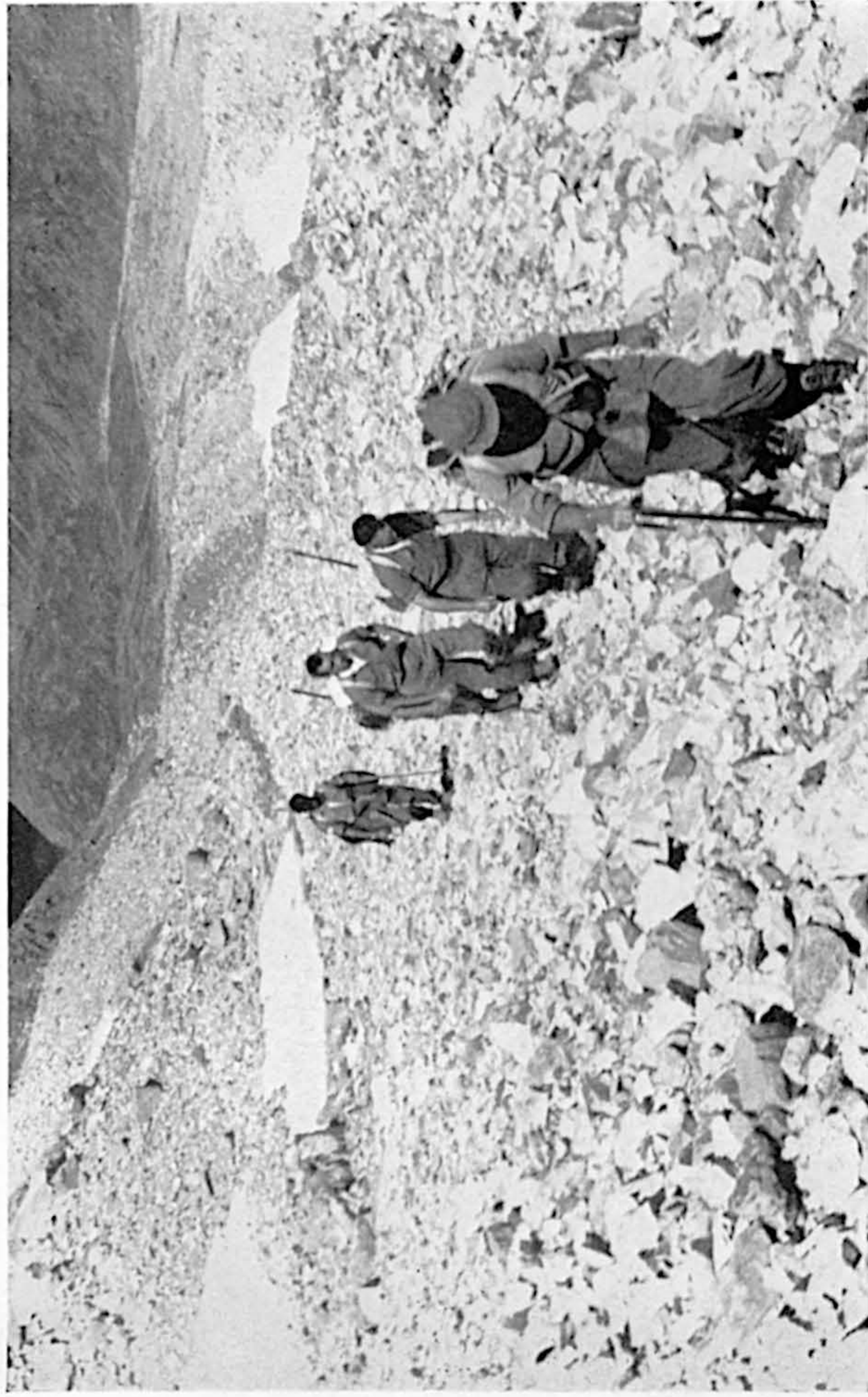
Rather illogically, in view of the attractions of the western peaks, our first climb (largely for training purposes) was an attempt on a fine but bare-looking nine-thousander on the east side of the valley, some five miles from Base Camp and 5,000 ft. above it. This peak, which from the lake is reminiscent of Corrag Buidhe of An Teallach, seemed to have an easy North-west ridge running down towards us; and after a long and tiring approach across limestone gullies and through thick birch-scrub, we gained the bouldery crest of the ridge easily enough and seemed set fair for the summit. However, at about 8,000 ft. the mountain began to show its teeth. The ridge abutted against the final rock tower of the mountain, which was steeper than it looked, consisting of belts of backward-tilted cliff composed of atrociously loose rock. It wasn't so much that the rock itself was brittle, as that it was built up of large chunks which weren't stuck together, so that when one tried to climb it, everything including the climber tended to slide off backwards down the dip of the strata. We ascended 100 ft. of this to the top of a gendarme, beyond which a deep gap separated us from the crazy-looking arête leading up to the summit ridge. It was now 4 p.m., blowing hard, and raining, and it was obviously going to take a long time to ferret out a safe route to the top. Without very much regret we called off the attempt, and descended 2,000 ft. of escalator-like scree to the valley below, vowing to concentrate on snow and ice peaks in the future.

Our next move, therefore, was to take the four N.C.O.s up to the nearest glacier and train them in snow and ice climbing techniques. First we had to ford Wokkpash Creek above the lake, an unpleasant business involving immersion up to the waist in swift and icy glacial water; then we had to push some distance up the side valley to place an advanced camp within striking distance of the glacier. Next day, in the golden light of a cloudless dawn, we walked up the very beautiful and Alpine upper valley and practised ice-work on the steep lower nose of the glacier, overlooked by the white wave of the striking snow-peak first seen on my aerial reconnaissance. This was a real beauty, and rapidly became known as Fusilier Peak, thus taking on the nature of a personal challenge.

The following day we pushed up high under the final snow and ice-face of the mountain, stopping short at the bergschrund in the face of steep wet snow and an approaching thunderstorm. The summit ridge was barely 300 ft. above us, and seemed close enough to touch, but once again it was a case of having to make one of those 'sound mountaineering decisions' which are welcome at the time but seem



MERCERS' PEAK 8,750 FT. FROM SPYGLASS PEAK.



LONG APPROACH SCREES TYPICAL OF THE ROCKIES.

thoroughly feeble afterwards. We resolved to return to 'Fusilier' at the earliest opportunity, but having run out of food we had first to return to Base Camp.

It was at about this stage that the leader of the Expedition began to get a bit frustrated, as the mountains were not yielding as readily as desired, and the honour of the Regiment seemed to be at stake! Once back at Base Camp, therefore, we felt it might be more fruitful to make a four-day reconnaissance to the head of the main valley, in order to look at Mt. Stalin and its acolytes around the big central icefield. Surely, amongst that conglomeration of peaks, we would find something which we could climb! So after two days' rest we backpacked for eight miles up the valley, through a laborious tangle of scrub on top of dead trees on top of boulders, to a camp-site in view of this central knot of peaks. Even here things looked fairly formidable, since the way to the ice-field was barred by a steep banded precipice forming the headwall of the main valley, while many of the side valleys and glaciers were cut off at their lips by even more formidable cliffs. It was a wild place, with the western line of peaks rising in great crumbling walls, nearly 4,000 ft. high in places, from the green marshy flats of the upper valley.

Next day we were officially looking for a way up to the ice-field, but somehow we got sidetracked by an eastern side-valley, found ourselves on another glacier, and climbed a delightful conical snow-peak which we named Mercers Peak, after one of the Livery Companies who had helped to finance us. Near the top we encountered wet snow on ice, a common condition hereabouts, calling for careful handling. The team took it steadily and arrived at the top in good order. The summit, just short of 9,000 ft., gave a stirring view over the moraine-ribbed ice-field, three miles along and nearly two wide, to the scarped and tilted peaks of Stalin and his tall neighbours. This was in fact a most valuable reconnaissance, as it showed us a comparatively easy way up the 'back-stairs' of Mt. Stalin, which we would not have seen had we attempted a frontal assault from the head of the main valley. After this thirteen-hour exploration we all felt fairly tired, so that next day we contented ourselves with a subsidiary snow-peak, not more than 8,500 ft. high, which nevertheless gave us some hard slogging up through knee-deep snow, and rewarded us with further views across to Mt. Stalin and down the serried ranks of peaks flanking the Wokkpash valley. 'Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted', and in this instance we had had good value both in reconnaissance and in terms of actual mountaineering success.

After a day on some rock peaks near Base Camp, we returned to Fusilier Peak, this time pushing up our advanced camp to near the snout of the glacier. We left camp at 5 a.m., and under ominous,

fast-moving cloud climbed quickly up the terraced glacier to our previous highest point, where a bergschrund cuts across the face of the mountain some 3-400 ft. below the summit ridge. This ridge, unfortunately, broke away at either end in sheer and rotten-looking buttresses of rock, so that there did not seem much chance of getting on to it from the cols at either end, and the face above the bergschrund would have to be climbed. Luckily the snow was in slightly better condition than on our previous visits; much of it had in fact slipped off, leaving sheets of bare ice beneath, and this was largely to our advantage, although the final slope to the ridge looked extremely steep and difficult.

The first problem was to cross the schrund; this was done via an elegant but tenuous snow-bridge (or more accurately a cornice, as it didn't quite reach to the far side of the crevasse). Steps were then cut up a vertical and dripping ice-wall on the far side, through a slightly overhanging eave of snow, and so on to the upper face. This proved, or rather seemed, much steeper than expected; to start with the angle was around 70 degrees, easing off to 50 as one got higher, and the easiest line unfortunately traversed out above the 700-ft. ice and rock cliffs of the terminal buttress, thus making it extremely exposed. Pushing our crampon points with extreme care through the wet snow into the firm ice beneath, we advanced one at a time, belaying on an ice-piton every 90 ft. It was desperately slow and chilly, but with an inexperienced party it could hardly be otherwise, and everyone came up very steadily and safely. After 400 ft. of this sort of work, the angle easing all the time but the exposure increasing, we scrambled joyfully up on to the narrow snow crest of the summit ridge, which gave a delightful aerial pathway to the summit platform. The mists were swirling up all around us, and there was little view to enjoy, but it was a great moment. We estimated the height at 9,250 ft.; it felt higher.

We built a survey beacon on the summit, took the usual round of photographs, and then with some trepidation turned to descend the ice-face. The mental strain for the leader on operations of this kind is considerable, exceeded only by the strain on the knees and thighs as one crampons painstakingly downwards, stopping frequently to cut or enlarge steps at the worst places. It was with the greatest relief that I saw the party safely back on the right side of the bergschrund, the leaders being safeguarded down the steep bottom pitch by a doubled rope through a well-bedded ice piton. It had been a splendid climb; at the upper limit of the party's capabilities, but immeasurably worth while.

After this effort, the rest of our climbing came perhaps as a slight anticlimax. A period of bad weather confined us largely to Base Camp for some days, but thereafter we managed to explore into other recesses

of the western range and got to over 8,000 ft. on a fine ice peak before being seen off by a miniature blizzard. During this period, Colonel Archibald—who until then had stayed with Sam around Base Camp, surveying and cooking enormous meals for us during our rest periods—made the ascent of the 7,800 ft. Red Ridge above Base Camp and set up a survey station for three days on the summit; a fine effort in view of his age. We also did a good deal of rock and plant-collecting. The geological work seemed a little pointless, as two oil companies had geological survey teams working the area by helicopter, but we nevertheless collected assiduously and found some interesting fossil beds. The flora was beautiful and abundant, and we collected nearly 200 specimens into our presses; most memorable of all were the sheets of blue lupins and delphiniums clothing the upper meadows, and the rich mauve willow-herb fringing the lakes. Finally, we caught, and ate, a great many trout.

On August 20 Colonel Archibald and Sam left by air for Fort Nelson, and the rest of us set out again for the head of the valley, aiming this time for the ice-field and Mt. Stalin. We carried food for seven days, and the weather at the start of this 'march' was so unpropitious that we prepared for an extended siege of the mountain. However, luck was all on our side. The precipice at the head of the valley turned out to be built up of delightfully firm rock, with the strata dipping inwards to provide incut holds and ledges all the way up; the ice-field, although now heavily snow-covered, provided an easy white highway to the foot of a steepish but straightforward ice-fall; and the ice-fall in turn led to the South col of the mountain, beyond which a long, easy, but heavily snowdrifted, ridge ran up to the summit. We climbed the upper part of the peak in thick mist, which made the ascent of the long, deep snow-slopes even more exhausting than they would otherwise have been, and we were deprived of what must be the finest view in the area, over Smythe's 'peak upon peak and range upon range', now all heavily plastered in new snow. On the descent we took in a second summit 'Stalin II', beyond the col, and returned happily down the ice-field as a series of black and violent storms swept across in front and behind us, missing us each time by a few yards. We were back at our advanced camp twelve hours after we had left it, having had a most satisfying climb on what is probably the highest peak in the Wokkpash area, just under 9,500 ft.

This success sparked off a veritable mountaineering marathon in which we climbed four more peaks of over 8,500 ft. in the next two days. Two of these were rock peaks, made awkward by much new snow although the climbing was fundamentally easy; one of these, named Devereux Peak, was reached at the unusual hour of 7.30 p.m. in the middle of a snowstorm, the conquerors (John Biginell and Corporal

Brian Holmes) not really having intended to climb it at all but being unable to resist it at the last minute. Our final brace of peaks were taken from the ice-field; one of them, Stalin's neighbour to the north-west, provided some pleasant work up through another ice-fall before the easy summit ridge was reached. It was a fitting climax to five weeks of excellent mountaineering.

After this, faced with disintegrating boots and increasingly insistent appetites, we returned to Base Camp; ate many large meals in quick succession; and prepared for the 'walk-out'. We finally left Wokkpash Lake on August 30, with snow falling down to lake level, and all the peaks hidden in a drifting pall of frosty cloud. Occasionally some rib or gully would be seen floating high up amidst the breathing mists, only to vanish again, ghost-like, into the universal whiteness. The climbing season was undoubtedly over.

Laden with 80 lb packs, we fairly raced back over our original walk-in route, and by 6 p.m. on the second day we were camped within sight of the Highway. It was nice to get back to civilisation again, with its baths, and dry clothes, and warmth without having to chop firewood; but, equally, we felt as if something precious had been shattered—peace of mind, perhaps. On the Alaska Highway one walks straight out of virgin bush into the world of cafés and juke-boxes, and it is a disturbing juxtaposition.

What had we achieved? We had attempted fifteen peaks and climbed thirteen, two of them over 9,000 ft., and all previously unclimbed. They had not necessarily been the hardest or highest ones, but we were primarily a training expedition, and our first rule was that there must be no accidents. In fact this did not affect the value of our efforts, as one of the distinguishing features of this range is that the summits all rise to very much the same level, and are very close together; thus, there is little to be gained from battering one's head against a particularly difficult peak when there is an equally high and much easier one rising just next door. Our guiding principle was to spread our ascents over as wide an area as possible, and by doing this we were able to make a useful assessment of all the neighbouring ranges as well as those surrounding our own valley.

It is not easy to form an accurate judgement of this area's usefulness as a mountaineering playground for the future. It is easily accessible from the Alaska Highway, and the approaches are straightforward enough, but the Highway is itself remote and the expense of getting there is considerable. (The cost of the trip was something over £300 per head.) For many years to come it will provide a magnificent reservoir of unclimbed peaks of all shades of difficulty, and for those who do not regard height as the sole criterion of worth-while climbing it is well worth a visit. Bad rock, as elsewhere in the Rockies, is a

snag and a deterrent, but there is more snow and ice around than one might suspect, and this will provide much intriguing climbing. And there are one or two peaks of outstanding aspect which may well take on the nature of 'last great problems', the approach often being as difficult as the actual climbing. Most attractive of all, the weather during the summer months seems to be pretty reasonable, which means that any expedition which goes there is assured of a good deal of successful climbing. It might be a good thing if less experienced parties could be diverted from the High Himalaya, or the Andes, to seek their goals in this wonderful Canadian Northland.

Future expeditions would find much to interest them remaining around Wokkpash Lake itself, including seven 'nine thousanders', all of which look awkward. Tuchodi Lakes would provide an alternative base for a 'fly-in', but they are much lower down (2,800 ft. as opposed to the 4,128 ft. of Wokkpash) and much further from the Highway. Mt. Sylvia, the southern part of the Stalin group, and an unnamed 9,500-ft. ridge would be accessible from there, if advanced camps were set up. The Racing River valley is penetrable by pack-train, and here there is a wonderful choice of peaks including Churchill and Roosevelt, although river-crossings will be a problem when the weather is warm. And finally there are the glaciated ranges in the deep hinterland towards the Lloyd George group, with all the attraction of extreme inaccessibility.

I hope many other expeditions will find their way there.