BRITISH-SOVIET PAMIRS EXPEDITION, 1962

II

By I. G. McNAUGHT-DAVIS

(*Four illustrations: nos. 33–36*)

THE first phase of the expedition was over and, psychologically seamed by failing to get up our training peak, Joe Brown and myself were forcing out a dangerous pace to our Base Camp sixteen miles down the glacier. The deaths of Wilfrid Noyce and Robin Smith filled our thoughts and forced back the decision we were soon to make—to stay or to return to England.

As we kicked our way through the loose moraines of the glacier, I came to the conclusion that the decision was not an emotional one, but rather one that could be resolved on fact alone. I summed up the arguments. The mountains were made of some biscuit-like material known by the Russians as 'moving rock'. The snow conditions were equally demoralising: soft, wet slush overlying ice, undoubtedly the cause of the accident. The weather was Welsh, the food inadequate and uneatable, and Peak of Communism was a long way up and away. A cast-iron case. Then came the doubts. It was so far away, perhaps the rock would be granite; the snow above 20,000 ft. must be good, or it would fall off; the weather could only improve, and the more people who returned the more food there would be. The mountain almost seemed to come closer. I must be tired, behind every decision there is rationality. Joe confused the issue momentarily by bringing up visions of sun-baked, golden slabs and fat, sizzling steaks. Discount the emotions.

Perhaps we were ill. Joe certainly was, which accounted for this remarkable pace when even the ground under foot hardly seemed to move. Therefore we were too unfit to go uphill. The premises was sound, the conclusion reasonable, and I lapsed into a less dynamic rôle as the scenery, drab at the best, moved monotonously by.

A rattling of stones woke me, and I found myself still lying on my rucksack, the recently discarded cigarette lying in a little pool it had melted in the ice. The two Russians ran up to us, and we gave them the whole of our three-word vocabulary, and several gestures, to explain our sloth, Joe's illness and the fate of our party. They smoked our cigarettes furtively, glancing at the séracs that surrounded us, fearful that Abalakov, their leader, should appear and banish them to the plains for breaking their 'sports plan'. Suddenly they became restless,

watches were produced and we knew the rigour of their 'sports plan was on them again. They jogged out of sight stripped to the waist, each muscle overdeveloped, fit and enthusiastic. I envied them.

We prised ourselves erect and limped after them. My eyes firmly fixed on Joe's heels, I slipped into automatic and went to sleep. I awoke as we started to cross a 200-ft. high moraine in the middle of the glacier, and queried this break in the routine.

'Too crevassed; it's bound to be better on the other side.'

'How do you know?'

'I don't, but it will be.'

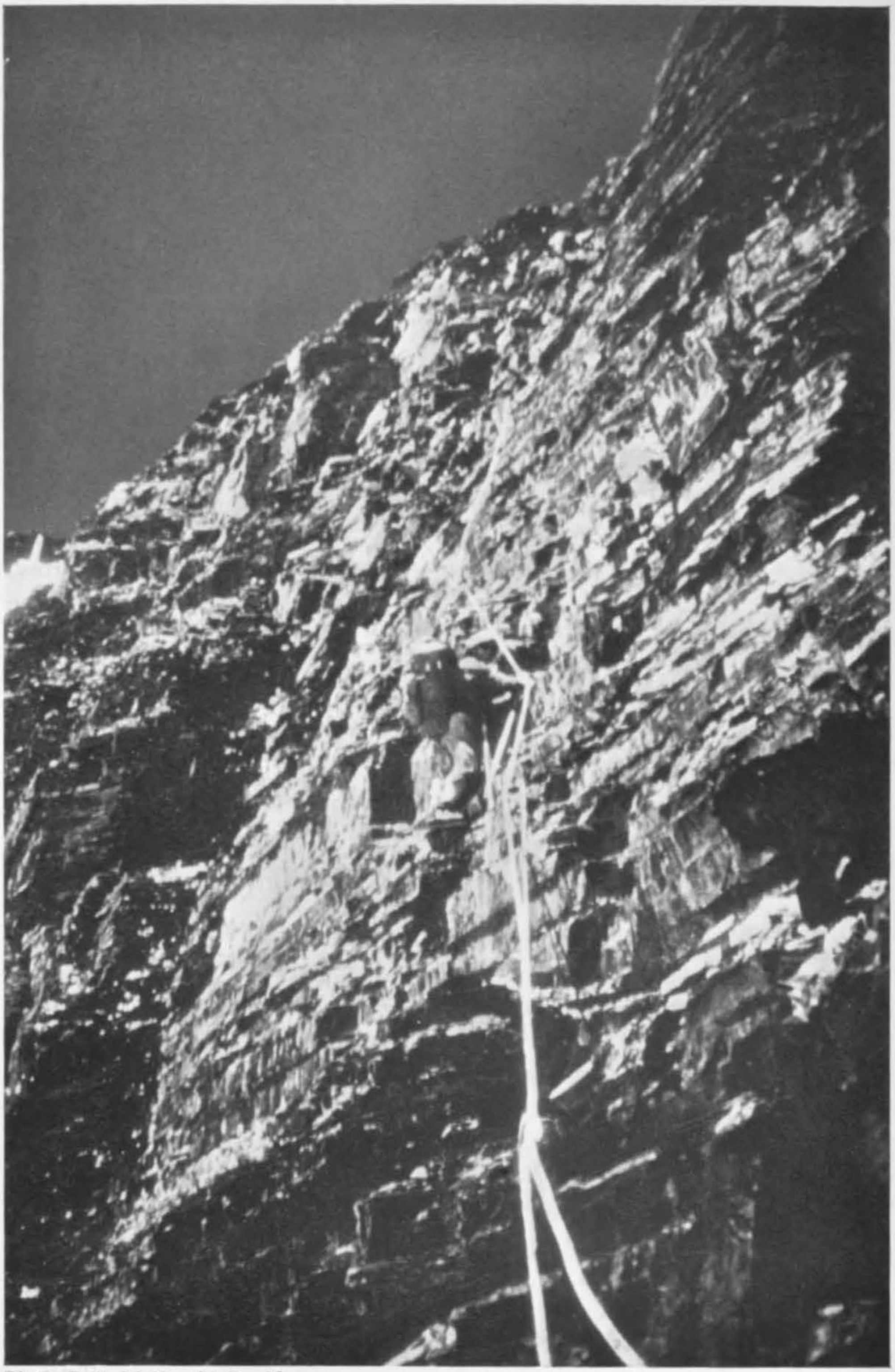
It was the M1, he was right. Then I realised that the pace had changed and we were scuttling along at full throttle. Four hours later, as we lay below the last rise before our camp, several things had changed. Joe was well, we were both fit and we had really enjoyed sorting out the glacier at a respectable speed. As we pulled on our cigarettes for the last time, there was a rattling of stones and the two Russians trotted into view. We were in exactly the same position as when they last saw us, and the expressions on their faces gave them away. We ran with them up the 500-ft. slope to camp and arrived gasping, laughing and slapping each other on the back. All they could get out in broken English was, 'How fast can Joe go when he is fit?' We had made a mark and I had decided, emotionally, to stay on.

John Hunt departed, leaving behind half the original party to continue the expedition[1]. The plan of action was resolved from one single axiom—to get up Peak of Communism as quickly as possible. Anatole Ovchinnikov produced a scheme which would, in theory, get us to the top of Peak of Communism, thirty miles away and 16,000 ft. above our Base Camp, in ten days, with five days to get down again. There would be no rest days, no fixed camps, no room for weakness, accident or illness. We had, after a month of astute evasion, at last been caught in the web of a Russian 'sports plan'. Malcolm Slesser and his Scottish colleagues, used to having to adopt similar measures to reach their native crags, were almost enthusiastic, the English trio were resigned and somewhat glum. Three days later, we were back at Camp III. From this point everything would be new, the scenery would change from the gloomy month of toil on the Garmo glacier, new problems would arise—but always the loads would be the same: 60 lb., give or take five or ten pounds.

Anatole had decided that for this form of attack a party of four[2] would be ideal, needing only one tent, one stove, one pan, one rope, plus food

[1] Malcolm Slesser, Ken Bryan, Ralph Jones, Joe Brown, Dr. Graeme Nicol, I. G. McNaught-Davis.

[2] Anatole Ovchinnikov, Vladimir Malakov, Eugene Gippenreiter, Nicolai Alkhutov.



Photo, I. G. McNaught-Davis]

JOE BROWN CLIMBING TOWARDS THE WEST RIDGE OF PEAK PATRIOT.

(No. 33)

and personal equipment. Since we were a party of six the extra tent, stove and fuel would add to our already unwieldy burden.

The first day into new pastures started badly. The Russians rose early and ate their food in silence; Slesser, in a flurry of camp activity, lectured Joe and myself on our sloth. Then, his Scottish temperament strained to the limit, he shouldered his pack and marched towards the rising sun. I thought of his martyred expression and felt guilty, Joe slept on. This was a routine that seemed destined to repeat itself day after day and, in the spirit of Anglo-Scots relations, I vowed to be an early starter the following day.

Two hours later we had caught up with the Slesser party and followed them up the glacier. The march to Camp IV was new ground, and with good weather our mood slowly changed. From the closed channel of the lower Garmo glacier we moved into the upper basin, surrounded by a formidable ice-wall, with Communism looking close and accessible.

Two days ferrying to Camp IV, then a further two days to Camp V, moved all our equipment and food to below the South face of Peak of Communism. At this stage we were poised to make a direct attack on the summit, three days to the top and two days down. Already, our last fixed camp was three days down the glacier. But things were not going well. Kenny Bryan had fallen ill with the same illness that had hit Joe Brown on our training peak, and it was evident that someone would have to take a tent and some food and accompany him back to Base Camp. Slesser had been going badly, clogged by food poisoning and mild dysentery, and seemed an obvious choice but Ralph Jones, who seemed to be the strongest of us all, volunteered to take Bryan down. This solved the problem; although we could be sure of Bryan's safe return, it certainly reduced our chances of success. That night fate struck again. Graeme Nicol, the expedition doctor, fell sick with the same illness that had weakened Slesser. It was obvious that departure the following morning was out of the question.

Early the next morning the Russians, remorselessly following their 'sports plan', wished us well and departed. We had two days' food in reserve, which Bryan and Jones had left, but unless we went on the following day there was no chance of catching up with Anatole and his team, who were moving fast and looked very strong and in high spirits.

The camp was in a crevasse formed, almost perfectly, into a parabolic shape, and it seemed that the full power of the sun was focused on our small tent. We melted snow and drank all day, watching Graeme and hearing his periodical medical reports. When the sun set and the temperature fell, we pulled on more and more clothes and eventually slid into our sleeping bags with very little hope of going any further.

Expedition Photo]

JOE BROWN ON PEAK PATRIOT.

(No. 34)

The following morning, however, the doctor pronounced himself fit, and we prepared for an attempt to overtake the Russians. The next stage of the climb was the Georgian couloir, starting just above the camp at about 17,000 ft. and running to a small col at about 20,000 ft. It looked steep and threatened by an almost unbroken line of ice-cliffs. For once the snow was perfect and, still with our 60-lb. loads, we moved slowly upwards. Snow and ice climbing, especially in open couloirs, is either boring or dangerous. The routine is unbroken, few difficulties present themselves and a slip means death or a laborious re-climb. For once the Pamirs were kind. The monotony was lightened by the interest of threading numerous ice-cliffs and negotiating small ice-walls. One of these gave us considerable pleasure as Joe Brown, reaching over the bulge, found his hand in a large Russian ring-peg. We were on their route, and they had not completely forgotten about us.

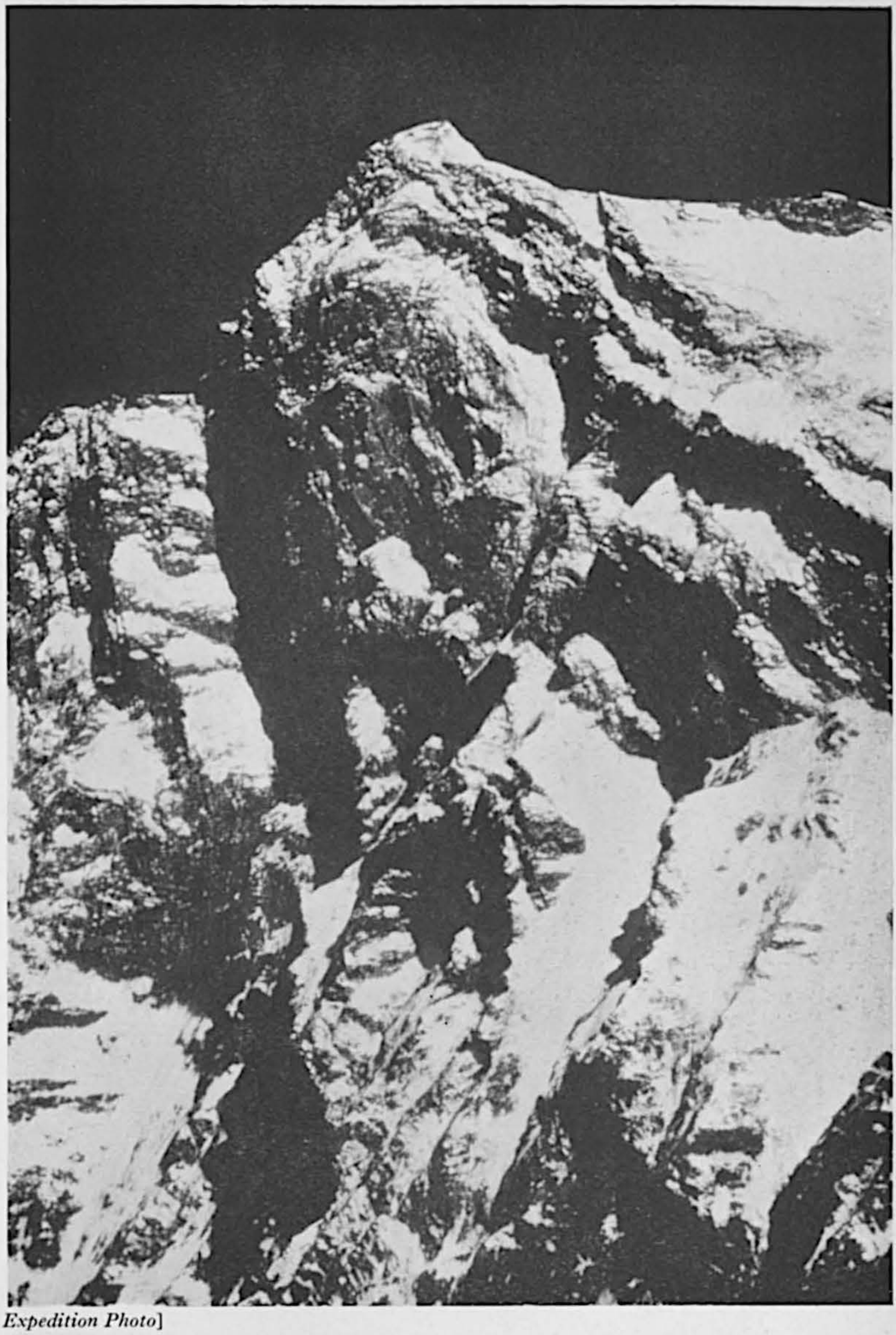
At about 19,000 ft. a small platform littered with debris meant that they had spent the night there or stopped for a prolonged rest. A distant cry solved the problem, and just at the top of a smooth ice-wall above a couloir we could see four figures waving. We had plenty of time and were only a few hours behind.

We crossed to the foot of the wall and looked up the 700 ft. of smooth ice leading to the col. The sight of a few steps brought little cheer, and when we found a fixed rope of nylon line some 300 ft. above we realised that the wall would be a very slow ascent by normal methods. Two people on the fixed rope at once would be folly, and as we had only one rope between the four of us the pitches we would have taken would have been short and we could never have made the col before nightfall. Joe solved the dilemma on good logical grounds. If we climb together and one slips we all fall, if we climb in pitches we lose a day, therefore we climb solo.

I watched Joe making his way up the thin rope, worried for him and apprehensive about my turn. I followed carrying the rope, the thin, icy line slipping through my gloves and the badly fitting crampons slipping on my boots. I was terrified. On reaching the stance I watched Graeme Nicol take his turn and, as he approached, it was evident that his sickness had taken a lot out of him. When he came in range I dropped the rope, and we climbed together to join Joe sheltering under an overhang and cuddling a tin of meat dropped by some earlier party.

The col was bleak and windy and the Russian tracks, only just visible, led round the side of Pravda Peak out of sight. They had their plan to follow. We camped for the night and, the following day, followed our own much modified plan.

An hour later we could see the camp site some 500 ft. below, and to our surprise we could see climbers littered almost at random over the



Expedition Photo]

SOUTH FACE OF PEAK OF COMMUNISM.

(No. 35)

basin below the final wall on Communism. It could only mean an accident. We slithered through the soft, deep snow as fast as we could.

A party from Leningrad had been preparing camps for a descent route before attacking the huge South face. One of them had had a slight heart attack and was being carried down. They were a powerful and self-sufficient team and, after Graeme Nicol had given help and advice, they decided that they could manage for themselves and we could carry on with our attempt. This misfortune had some advantages for us. Our four Russian friends had helped bring the man down, and we were now all united on the same 'sports plan'.

Two more days to the summit and three days down to our last food dump. I counted them like a prisoner counting his sentence. The Spartak party had cut an ice-cave some 3,000 ft. above our camp, which would ease our burden. Unfortunately it was by no means clear to us how big the cave was or exactly where it was, so we decided to carry our tent. Anatole was more trusting, and the following morning they left as lightly laden as possible. We toiled in their wake.

Joe was making good progress tagging at the Russians' heels, and at this stage the climbing was easy; so we all moved at our own pace. At the foot of the wall I could see Joe sitting below an ice-cliff smoking; Graeme, below, was making heavy weather. It was going to be a long day. Rather than move as a group of four, we cut the rope in the middle, almost a symbolic act, and as I roped to Joe I realised that whatever happened we were going to cover the 5,000 ft. that remained to the top in the next thirty-six hours.

The snow had frozen during the night and despite the ever-present burden of our loads we made good progress, sitting occasionally to watch for the two Scots to come into view. The climbing was straightforward: short ice-walls followed by steep ice-slopes, covered with a thin layer of reasonably firm snow. . Above the ice-cliffs, the face spread out into a featureless slab of snow, 2,000 ft. high, cut on the left by the vertical South face and extending almost without limit to the right. No features, no interest, just a long, hard slog. Clouds had blown across the face, reducing visibility to 100 ft. or so. The Russians were out of sight and their tracks, whipped by a brisk wind, had almost disappeared. We moved up monotonously, stopping frequently for short rests. A cry from below halted us, and we dug in to rest our loads until the Scots arrived. Both looked all in, and there seemed to be the mood in the air that we should turn back. Slesser suggested camping then and there, but a glance round the featureless 45 degree slope didn't encourage this idea. We seemed to be at a deadlock when Graeme, who looked grey with fatigue, stated emphatically that as long as he could put one foot in front of the other he was going upwards. It hardly seemed wise, but the climbing was never very difficult. To lighten Slesser's

load Joe took the tent, giving some food and gas to Graeme. I took the poles, filmed the scene, and we set ourselves back into the punishing routine.

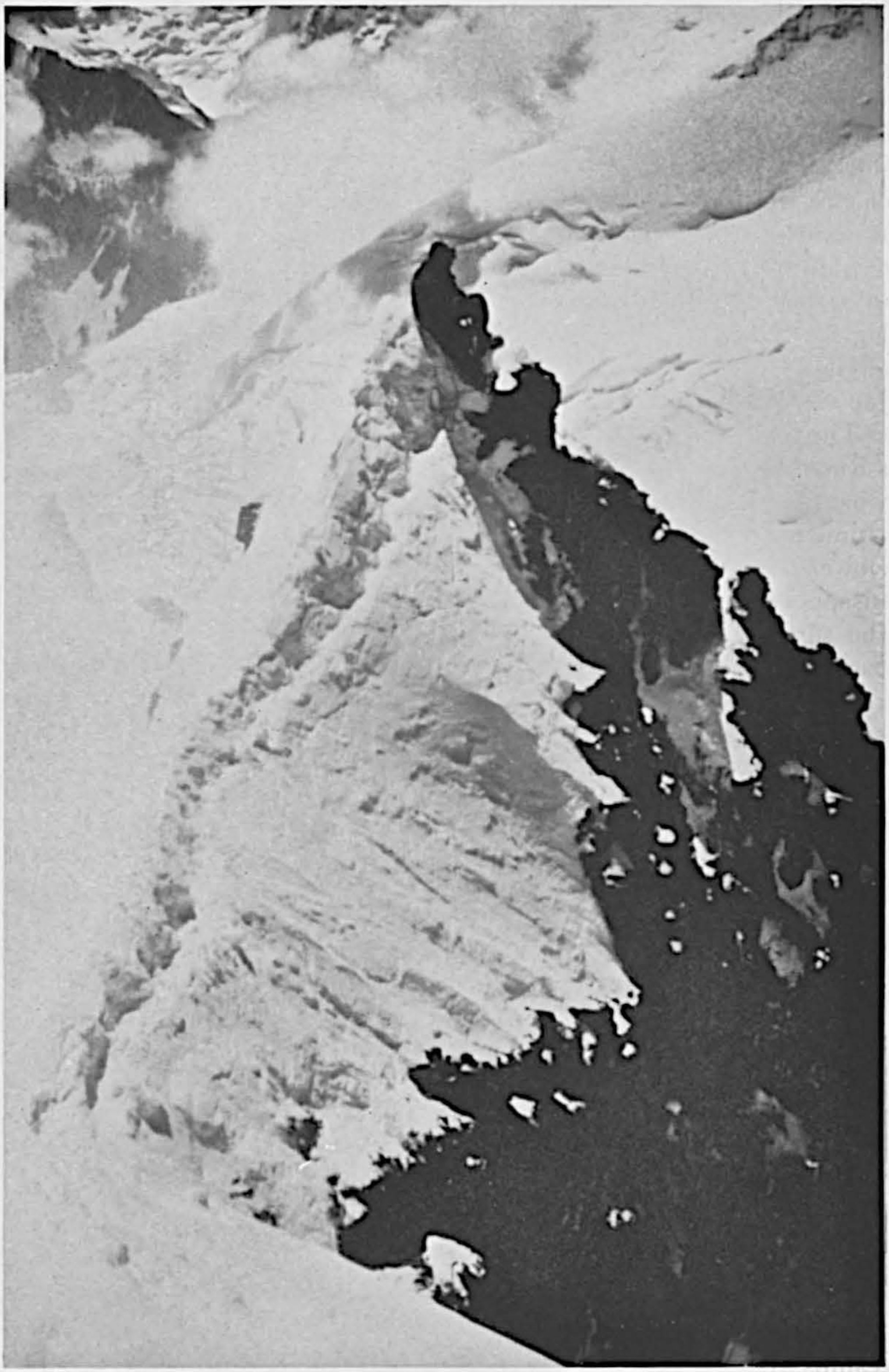
A gust of wind parted the clouds, and Joe saw a small, black flag marking the cave. In our excitement we almost burst our lungs, only to arrive and find nothing. No Russians, no equipment, only a small slit a foot high in the slope of ice. We shouted, with no reply, then Joe, a man of action, wriggled through the hole. When he didn't reappear we followed, to find him and the four Russians in high humour in a spacious cavern which the Spartak party had hacked out.

The cave would comfortably sleep eight and, as we cut away more ice to melt, it grew even bigger. Smoking was forbidden by Anatole, reasonably enough, since the atmosphere was already rich; however, we managed to reach a compromise and Joe and myself were planted near the draughty exit, where we could puff our smoke outside. We estimated that we were about 2,000 ft. below the summit. If the weather held and there were no more illness we would be on the summit tomorrow.

We awoke as the cold, grey light filtered through the exit slit. Joe suddenly kicked out of his sleeping bag and dived for the hole; half way out he stuck, and we watched his feet kick as he retched for several minutes; however, as he squirmed back into the ice-box we could see that he was determined to go on. Our food was low, so we ate sparingly leaving as much as possible for our return.

We crawled out over the contents of Joe's stomach, now frozen hard, to bright sunlight. A cold wind rustled the ice-particles across the face. The night's rest had done us all well and Slesser, with something like his low altitude vigour, led the way to the ridge a few hundred feet above. We had always thought that the final section to the summit was a monotonous slope of ice. To our delight we now found in front of us a crenellated knife-edge running up to the base of the summit pyramid. On each side beautifully fluted slopes of ice fell 6,000 ft. to the glacier. It was the most enthralling section of climbing we had found in the whole visit, as if enjoyment of the Pamirs was proportional to the agony suffered to find it.

At last we were on the final pyramid, the summit out of sight. My altimeter showed 24,000 ft.; I tapped it, hoping to gain a few feet without effort, then slipped it back in my pocket vowing not to look at it again until I had counted a hundred steps. A muttered phrase between a gargle and a cough broke into my oxygen-starved brain; with some effort I came to attention, and switched off my motor and slumped into the snow. Eugene, the irrepressible climbing commissar, was calling us to attention. 'We are going to have a union meeting.' I took out the heavy ciné camera and wafted it about, trying to look professional. I looked at the other five, the four Russians and Joe, buried deep in their



Expedition Photo]

ON THE SUMMIT RIDGE OF PEAK OF COMMUNISM.

(No. 36)

windproofs; below, Slesser and Nicol were labouring in the deep, soft snow, occasionally flopping over like stringless puppets.

Anatole was standing as if he had energy to spare. He spoke sparingly in English. The time is late, the snow is bad and we are far from the summit of the highest peak in the Soviet Union. To give us the best chance, the strong will climb with the strong, the weak with the weak . . . It sounded like a prepared speech and my concentration lapsed. I tried to decide if I were weak or strong. I flexed a few muscles surreptitiously and put on a 'hard man' expression, then crammed in a few boiled sweets to make up for the food we hadn't eaten over the past three days. Anatole droned on, the Russians listening with rapt attention. Joe seemed to be asleep.

The result of the meeting was for both Joe and myself to rope up with a Russian for the final section. We moved on, myself at the rear taking what film I could, quite sure as a result of Anatole's talk that despite the altimeter we were miles from the summit. Eugene and myself as the slower movers watched the other four draw away, and as the last one disappeared over a bulge some 50 ft. above I felt sure I should never see the summit. Anatole was right, I was weak. The ground became easier and we synchronised our movements, kicking in the claws with renewed vigour. Then quite suddenly the others came into view sprawled on a large, rocky platform. 'They've cracked; the weak shall be strong and the meek shall inherit the earth', I muttered at Eugene. He didn't hear and, looking at his face, it was evident why not. His plans over the past years had come to fruition and at least some of the party had reached the final objective. We caught our breath, then thumped each other, produced Buckingham Palace type flags for filming, took the note from the previous summit party to prove our ascent and left one of our own and generally went through a typical continental summit ceremony.

As we lay back flushed with whatever it is that makes people climb mountains, to our delight the two Scots rolled into view. We repeated the summit procedure for their benefit, and with our minds on food, comfort and England made our way back to the cave.

The descent during the following days was a mixture of agony and anticipation, enlivened by Joe Brown falling into a crevasse and myself doing some alarming antics on the fixed rope on the ice-face.

In retrospect, the climbing of Peak of Communism was a classical high speed ascent by the Russian method. With no porters or Sherpas to assist in carrying the amount of equipment necessary for a chain of camps, theirs seems to be a reasonable if somewhat dangerous solution. In the Russian eyes a successful expedition is one where all the members reach the summit. In this I agree with them, but how this would work out on new routes of a high standard of difficulty or in areas with less

stable climatic conditions remains an open question. Throughout the whole ascent we relied heavily on our Russian comrades, without them and the complete confidence they had in their 'sports plan', I feel sure we would never have attempted to climb a 24,600-ft. peak in fifteen days up and down from a Base Camp at 9,000 ft. and over twenty miles away. We have the strength and confidence of the Russian party to thank for the successful outcome of the expedition, particularly the skill and forceful leadership of Anatole Ovchinnikov, and although the climb was rarely pleasurable it was nevertheless unforgetable.