AN EXPEDITION TO THE EMIN AND GESSI AREA ON RUWENZORI

By DAVID PASTEUR

(*Three illustrations: nos. 47–49*)

A spell of two weeks' local leave in January, 1963, gave me the opportunity to visit an area of Ruwenzori which had attracted me for some time. We were a party of nine: six were Ugandans, all of whom had climbed Kilimanjaro on an Outward Bound course as well as doing some rock climbing in Uganda; two were American teachers with no experience beyond hill walking; and lastly there was myself, the only person with previous experience of Ruwenzori and of climbing of the kind we hoped to do. Unfortunately I had failed to find a second leader to join the expedition, and this rather restricted the number of climbs that each member of the party could do.

The main object of our expedition was to climb each of the two peaks on Mounts Emin and Gessi and then to attempt a new approach to Speke from the east. As far as I could see from the records, the four summits of Emin and Gessi appeared to have been neglected by climbers since 1945, and none of the peaks had been climbed more than four times. I also noticed that very few of the ascents had been made from the Roccati Pass which seemed to be the obvious starting point for climbing on both mountains. Although Emin and Gessi, at 15,740 ft. and 15,470 ft. respectively, lack the attractions of their larger neighbours Speke, Stanley, and Baker and only have very small glaciers, I was anxious to see what they offered, and I had a feeling that they might provide the right kind of climbing for our novice party. I also wanted accurate descriptions of the routes up these peaks for the guide book to Ruwenzori that was to be prepared.

This element of exploration helped to justify the generous support which the expedition had from various sources, not least from the Ralph Naylor Expedition Fund which was started by the Mountain Club of Uganda to help Ugandans to go on climbing expeditions. We also had a few secondary objectives: we planned to photograph the glaciers on Emin and Gessi and the eastern side of Speke, and to mark the limits of one or two of them for the Makerere University College glaciological survey; individual members planned to collect soil samples at different altitudes, specimens of grasses, epiphytic orchids and various species of helichrysum; and I was going to make a film of the expedition.

We followed the normal approach route up the Bujuku valley for two

days as far as the Mountain Club hut at Bigo, where we branched right up the Mugusu valley. Late in the afternoon of the third day we emerged from the groundsel forest that clogs the valley between Emin and Gessi and squelched up the last stretch of grassy meadow towards the Roccati Pass. Just short of the pass, sure enough, we found the rock shelter reported by the last visitors to this area in 1959, and without delay we started to pitch our four tents on the driest patches of ground available. Wherever we turned the ground was like a sponge, but there was a plentiful supply of that invaluable Ruwenzori stand-by, dead groundsel leaves, and as dusk fell my tent was up and well insulated from the wet by a thick pad of leaves. The rest of the evening is a memory of sitting in damp boots and clothes, waiting for soup and rice to boil, but, whatever the discomforts, I was glad that we had got there successfully, and the rest day planned for the morrow would give us time to organise the camp, in which I had planned that the party would stay for the next week.

I certainly could not complain about the weather, I reflected, as I filmed various activities in our camp next morning. In fact, the sun had come out on the first day as we came up through the forest to the first hut and the weather was fine and clear for all but one of the next ten days. This was to be the longest spell of good climbing weather that I have experienced on Ruwenzori, clear and sunny right through to the afternoon on most days.

I had decided to keep four porters with us throughout the expedition, and Edward Wottima, custodian of our funds, paid off the sixteen others who had helped to carry up our food and equipment. Once they had gone we set to work on the rock shelter to make it as comfortable as possible for cooking, eating and sitting in. The fly of our large light-weight tent was erected on a framework of groundsel trunks and effectively kept out the drips from the overhanging rock above. There were two fires, one for the porters and one for ourselves, and our food was stacked in the corner and on 'shelves' at the back of the cave. More groundsel trunks were cut and a rectangle of benches of variable stability constructed round the fire.

When the work was done I went with John Mukasa and Bruhan Kibalama over the crest of the pass, only three minutes walk from the rock shelter, and looked down at the mysterious Lac de la Lune. This inky black pool lies trapped in a hollow between the Roccati Pass and another slightly lower col joining Emin and Gessi a little further to the north. Steep moss-covered walls and slabs, nearly vertical in places, plunge into it on both sides, and I could see why Dr. Noel Humphreys after his extensive exploration of this area in 1926 and 1932, suggested that this might be the bottomless lake between the two peaks Crophi and Mophi which Herodotus describes as the source of the Nile.

Next morning John, Edward, Bruhan and I set off at 8.30 to climb Kraepelin, the peak on the northern end of Emin. The rest of the party

went up to survey the snout of Gessi 2 glacier. The South ridge of Kraepelin glistened with the new snow that still lay from the previous week. There was no record of an ascent of Kraepelin from this direction, earlier ascents having been from the Congo side by the de Grunne party in 1932 and from the north-west by Humphreys in the same year. We forced our way up through the carex tussocks and thick helichrysum, vile stuff to walk through, but beautiful in the sun, with frequent spikes of the silver-tufted lobelia *Wollastonii*. Helichrysum is always brittle when you want it to hold and obstinately tough when you want it to break. After an hour or so of this, the vegetation thinned out and progress was easier. Then a field of huge lichen-covered boulders thinning out into a long scree slope led to a small snowfield, which was later confirmed to be the last remnant of the East Kraepelin glacier. From the col on the main north–south ridge of Emin we looked across at Gessi and I took a panorama photograph of the mountain and its glaciers. The lower limits of the glaciers were obscured by the recent snow and the other party were not able to find the paint marks left by the Makerere expedition in 1959. In the other direction we had a fine view of Speke and Stanley and at our feet the western side of Emin plunged down into forgotten valleys rarely, if ever, traversed by man.

From where we stood the rock ridge rose steeply to Kraepelin and it looked as though it would make a fine climb. However, its steep and exposed start looked too serious an undertaking for the party and I knew that we should take the easier route which had revealed itself on our arrival at the col. This was a snowfield which skirted the ridge on the western side and extended up on the south-western face of the peak. Although this was an easy alternative to the ridge, it required some care, as the snow was soft and steep and not very deep when it came to digging in for a belay: in a drier year with less snow this might have been a rock face. The snowfield brought us up under the summit and 100 ft. of easy rock climbing landed us on the ridge just by the summit cairn. In the cairn was a 'Hero' tin with a decayed red, yellow, and black piece of material; was this a record of the first ascent by the Belgian expedition in 1932? My later discovery of an equally old record on Umberto led me to think that this was quite possible.

It was after 3.0 and we had climbed slowly, what with the altitude and the need to learn belaying technique on snow, but we were very pleased at reaching the peak at the first attempt, and somehow this luck managed to hold for the rest of the expedition. We took our fill of the view and then hurried down the mountain, reaching the camp at 6.30.

The next objective was Bottego, the northernmost summit on Gessi. Wilberforce Kabonge, John Potere and Edward Wottima came with me on this climb. The vegetation on the walk up to Gessi 2 glacier was far less arduous than on the approach to Emin. Half way up we halted to look

across at the eastern side of Speke and to photograph the glaciers. I also took some telephoto shots on the ciné camera of the route I hoped we might use to climb Speke later in the expedition. It certainly looked possible. In brilliant sun we walked up over gentle snow-covered slabs, rounded and smoothed by the action of the receding glacier.

Gessi 2 is one of the four icefields on the western side of Gessi which still go by the name of glacier though they are not much more than steadily shrinking pockets of ice. We roped up and I decided to take a line slightly left, as the centre of the glacier was distinctly steep and had one suspicious patch where bare ice showed through the covering of snow. The snow was fairly hard and after a few minutes of kicking I took to cutting steps; we did not all have crampons. After this first steep section I bore right along the upper edge of the glacier, where it came up against a rock wall, until a short rock and snow gully with two pitches of climbing led upwards to the snowfield and the summit ridge of Gessi. Now we turned north and followed the gently rising ridge easily at first and then with one or two pitches of straightforward climbing to the summit. The rock scenery round the summit was splendid: a sheer drop on both sides and boulders, flakes and crevasses in plenty. It was only a pity that the rock was so plastered with lichen. The summit itself was a square flat-topped boulder seating four or five people and the belay went right round it. There was a cairn but I could find no record. This was probably only the fourth ascent and it seemed strange to think that no one had sat there since it was climbed by a Uganda party in 1945. The climb had taken a leisurely six hours and had provided, as on Kraepelin, just the right kind of climbing for the party. It took a little over two hours to return to the camp.

Awaking to another brilliant morning, I had no doubt that we should tackle Emin again. Henry Kasozi, who had suffered from altitude sickness to start with, had recovered, and with Willis Murray, Charles Good, Bruhan, John and myself made a party of six. I planned to get to the col south of Kraepelin by the route of two days before and then decide how many to take on the attempt of Umberto, leaving the rest of the party to look at the Kraepelin glacier. We made good time to the col, but an 8.45 start was too late, and at 12.45 when we finished lunching on the col, I decided I could only take one on the climb of Umberto if there was to be any hope of reaching it. John Mukasa, at twenty the youngest member of the party, came with me, and I could not have had a better partner on what turned out to be a fairly serious and very interesting climb.

Umberto had only been climbed twice before: the first ascent by the Duke of the Abruzzi in 1906 was from the south-west, and the second by Humphreys in 1932 from the north or north-east, by a route which may have been the same as ours. Kraepelin and Umberto are joined by a ridge which for most of the middle section is a knife-edge. There is a small

subsidiary summit in the middle of the ridge. The col from which we started was to the north of this point and we first climbed it to see if it was possible to follow the whole length of the ridge to Umberto. The knife-edge looked as though it would take far too long to negotiate and I saw that a good part of it could be avoided by dropping down about 300 ft. on the eastern side on to a U-shaped snowfield, and then rejoining the ridge much further along. We did this, and reached the ridge again at a small, corniced gap which looked vertically down on the western side. We now had a tricky-looking section of pinnacled ridge between us and easier ground leading to the summit. After leading out one pitch I came to a vertical drop which seemed to put an end to all our hopes. But on closer examination I decided that we could abseil down it, and as luck would have it, I had brought two ropes. The question was, would we be able to reverse it by prusiking or climbing back up the rope on the return journey ? There was no other way off the mountain and it was getting on for 2.30. I decided to risk it. After this there were five pitches of excellent ridge climbing of about Grade III and of a kind not common on Ruwenzori. There were good belays and fine situations with sheer drops on both sides. The strong wind brought thin veils of mist up from below but we could still see our peak ahead.

The ridge ended and we moved quickly up the snowfield leading to the summit. At 3.30 we stood by the monumental 4 ft. pillar of stone built by Abruzzi on the first ascent. We imagined how long they must have stayed there waiting for the mist to clear. The mist had closed in on us, too, but there were still fleeting glimpses through it and it cleared again later. Between two flat stones near the top of the cairn I found a folded wad of paper. Unfolding it I deciphered the initials of Humphreys and his party of 1932. It was incredible that this should be so well preserved and in the hope of preserving it still longer I put it into a plastic bag and replaced it between the same two stones, with our own record. According to the records there had been no other visit to this peak since 1932 and this was the third ascent. It was 4 p.m. when we hurried down the snow, then carefully along the ridge to the critical step. The wall rose vertical and utterly holdless for 12 ft. I tried pulling up the doubled rope on my arms with my feet on the wall, but this was too tiring, so I made loops for my feet with overhand knots and for a handhold used the only sling I had with me to make a prusik loop as high as I could reach. This did the trick and I pulled up into a wide crack which led easily to the belay point. The climbing was over, but now it was a race to get down to camp before dark. As we sped down the scree I called to reassure them that we were on the way, and we arrived to a welcome brew of soup as the last light was going at 7.15.

When I woke next morning I realised that the swelling of the face and accompanying lassitude which I usually get on Ruwenzori until I am fully

acclimatised had been aggravated by the exertions of the last three days and it was clearly time for a rest day. Willis and Charles went off to see if they could get round the edge of Lac de la Lune, a notoriously difficult task which defeated them, as it has any one who is not prepared to do a detour of 1,000 ft. up the flank of either Gessi or Emin. I photographed vegetation and spent a long time stalking the elusive sun-birds through the groundsel and lobelias. Sound recordings would have been no problem as their plaintive trill was constantly audible against the silence, with a mysterious beauty that I find is one of the treasures of Ruwenzori. But I could not see them and whenever I seemed to be getting nearer the sound it would suddenly be somewhere else. Clouds started gathering and the light went. I turned back to camp and by lunch-time it was snowing—the first rain or snow we had experienced.

The afternoon was spent resting in tents or talking in the rock shelter. Our four porters were expert at this last activity and their stream of conversation never dried up. I knew three of them well as they had been on earlier expeditions with me. One was Zedekia Bagenyi, one of the best Ruwenzori headmen, who was the first African to climb Margherita, with a survey party in 1956. He had his own climbing boots and rucksack, and if there had been another leader in the party I should have taken him up Emin and Gessi to gain experience, as with little difficulty he could be trained to guide parties up the standard routes of Speke and Baker. The porters were first-class carriers with tremendous stamina and capable of putting up with very hard conditions. They had been up in the Emin and Gessi area before, as well as to many other remote parts of the range, and I had selected them specially to come with us. As we sat round the fire with them in the evening they would sometimes start telling stories and, even though I could understand little of the very difficult Lukonjo dialect, it was a wonderfully restful experience. Looking out at the crescent moon and the groundsel candelabras silhouetted against the clear sky, I felt this was a better way of spending the evening than in a hut. In the pauses in the conversation one of them would turn one of the hyrax carcases roasting on spits over the fire—they had trapped plenty of these rock rabbits during the last few days—and another would roll a cigarette from home-grown leaf and a piece of banana fibre, and puff out the strong pungent smoke.

That evening we made plans to climb the last of the peaks, Iolanda on Gessi. Willis and Charles decided the same evening to go down the next day. I was surprised and disappointed that they were leaving, but they said they could not stand the constant dampness of the camp site and Charles had not acclimatised very well. The ground was indeed damp and the tents leaked unless carefully protected, but the conditions would have been a good deal worse if we had not had such good weather for most of every day so far.



Photo: D. Pasteur]

RUWENZORI: EDWARD WOTTIMA, BRUHAN KIBALAMA AND JOHN MUKASA ON THE SUMMIT OF KRAEPELIN.

(No. 47)



Photo: D. Pasteur]

THE EASTERN SIDE OF MOUNT SPEKE, FROM GESSI, SHOWING THE VITTORIO EMANUELE GLACIER. SUMMIT OF SPEKE IN CLOUD. THE 1963 ROUTE GOES BEHIND THE ROCK BASTION (LEFT CENTRE OF PHOTOGRAPH), THEN BEARS RIGHT UP THE GLACIER TO THE RIDGE.

(No. 48)



Photo: D. Pasteur]

PANORAMA OF MOUNT GESSI FROM MOUNT EMIN. ACCESS TO THE SUMMIT RIDGE WAS BY GLACIER IN THE CENTRE OF THE PICTURE. ARROWS INDICATE BOTTEGO (LEFT) AND IOLANDA (RIGHT).

(No. 49)

Henry Kasozi had fully recovered from his mountain sickness and was fit to try his first peak next morning. Edward, Bruhan and I made up the party. Leaving at 9 a.m.—we seemed to be able to afford late starts in this weather—we gained the summit ridge by the route of three days before to Bottego and then turned south instead of north. As we lunched a short way along the ridge we revelled in a superb view of Speke with Stanley showing behind it. The cornices of Margherita and Albert were clearly visible and the whole range was spread out before us. The ridge was straightforward and gentle. Moving together and carrying coils we emerged at the top of a short rock wall onto the summit in an hour and a half. There was a cairn and in it a rusty Robinson's Barley Crystal tin, but no record. This was, I reckoned, the fifth ascent, and the first since that of the Uganda party of 1945. We had begun to move well and to get used to the technique of moving together with coils, belaying on rock and with ice-axes. This was reflected by the speed of the descent and we were back in camp at six o'clock, three hours from the top.

We had achieved our object of climbing all four peaks and I could not have wished for better luck with the weather or the climbing. As if to tell us to move on somewhere else there was a two-hour snowstorm early next morning. We packed in the rock shelter ready to go, but I had one more task to complete before going. I wanted to try sounding the Lac de la Lune, and I had got the porters the day before to cut some groundsel trunks to make a raft. We went over the pass down to the lake and started to lash the trunks together with a climbing rope. So wet was the wood, however, that, when launched, the raft of three criss-crossed layers of trunks barely showed above the water. Further resources were brought into action and two four-gallon size biscuit tins were tied on. This was not enough, so I lashed on my lilo, which might in fact have done by itself, but I would have got much wetter and also it would have been rather bare on its own out in the middle of the lake if anything went wrong. Secured to a safety rope, which I decided was probably a wise precaution in the circumstances, I launched out. The raft floated and I paddled out across the smooth, inky surface. My feet were resting on the logs down in the water, but the biscuit tin on which I sat was a good three inches out of the water. Fifty ft. out I sounded: only 7 ft. deep, and at 100 ft. it was only 15 ft. deep. Admittedly this looked like the shallow end of the lake, so I moved round to where the side walls plunged vertically into the water, but 120 ft. out from the side I only got a depth of 35 ft. I realised that I could not get far out into the lake with the limited length of the safety rope, and, in any case, things were beginning to get uncomfortable and I suspected that the biscuit tins were filling up. I called to the shore party to pull me in. The tug of the rope suddenly caught the stopper of my lilo, and I found myself sinking rapidly into the water. Clasping the groundsel trunks I was hauled ashore, soaked up to the middle, but none

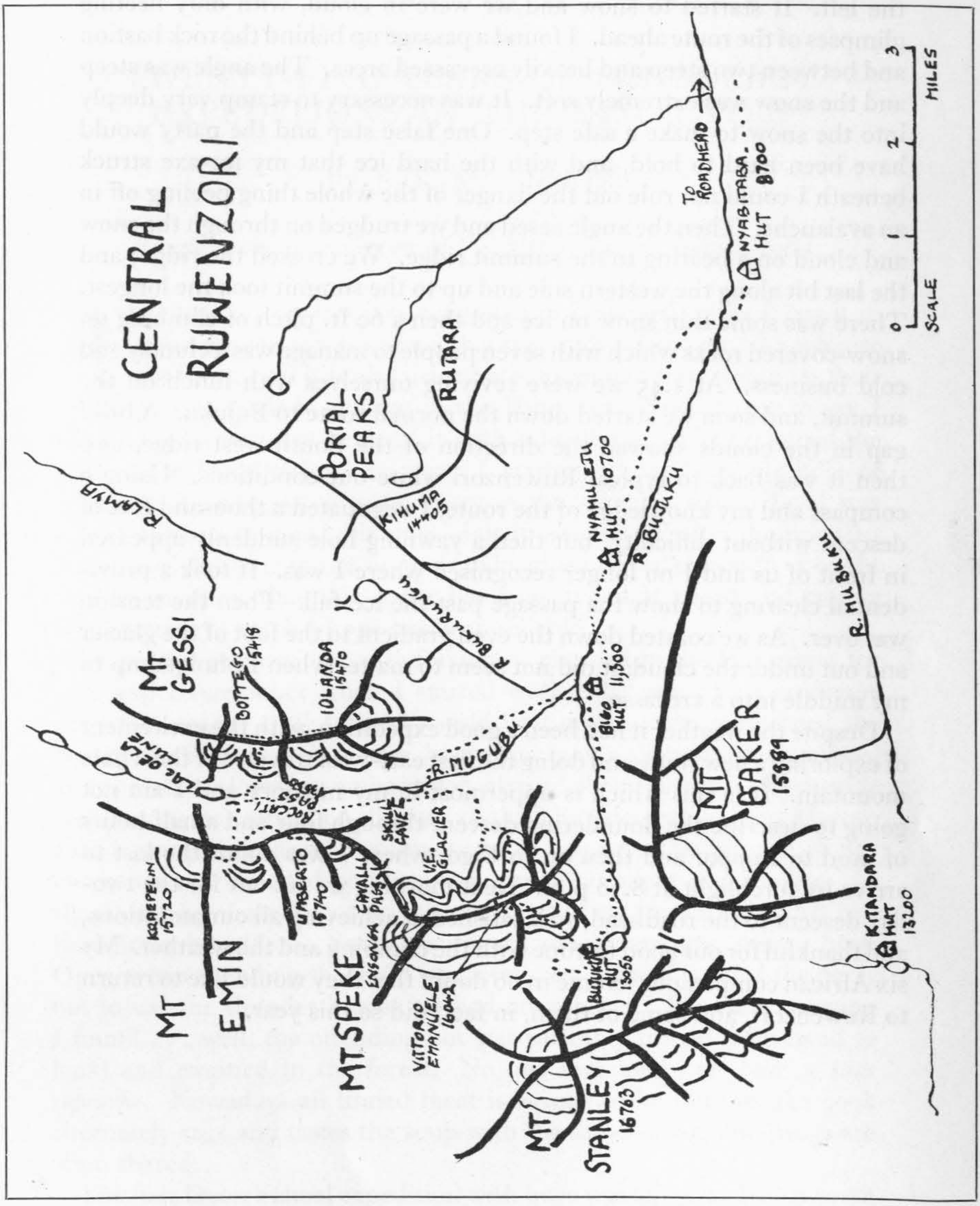
the worse for the adventure. I concluded that the lake might not be as deep as its banks suggested and that at the southern end at any rate it was filled with silt from ancient glaciers.

The party moved down to Skull Cave which was to be the base for attacking Speke. Skull Cave proper turned out to be a very inadequate rock shelter adorned with a skull—said to be that of a porter who died there many years ago. We used another shelter a short way off and pitched our tents on soft, dry moss. Around the camp were numerous dead groundsel trees, and a massive fire was soon burning by the cave.

The only recorded ascent of Speke from the Mugusu valley was by a solitary member of a Polish expedition in 1938 from the Cavalli Pass to Ensonga peak. It seemed that no one had ever set foot on the Vittorio Emanuele glacier. There seemed to be nothing specially attractive in the way of climbing either on rock or snow up this eastern side of Speke, but I felt that the extra interest of exploring a totally new approach and completing a traverse over the top of Speke would make an excellent final expedition.

It was necessary to reconnoitre the route, first to see if there was a rock shelter which would save us carrying tents, and also to see if there was a route up the mossy slabs zone to the foot of the glacier. Bruhan, John, and I did this reconnaissance and found what we were looking for. By next evening we had established ourselves in the most perfect little cave at 14,000 ft. on the side of Speke, as high and as cosy as we could have hoped to find. There are, in fact, few places on Ruwenzori where one fails to find a rock-shelter within striking distance of where one wants to spend a night, but this one seemed to have been made for us and was only a few hundred yards off our route up to the glacier. The porters went down from Skull Cave with the tents and other baggage to await us at Bigo. That night there was a lovely moonlight view of Gessi from our eyrie, but the moon itself was obscured by a film of high-level cloud, and it seemed strangely warm for a night in the open air at 14,000 ft.

This, it turned out, was the end of the fine weather, and when we left the cave at first light—the first proper early start of the expedition—the peaks were covered by thickening cloud. The Vittorio Emanuele glacier is a fairly featureless icefield which in its lower part forms four lobes separated by bastions of rock. I made for the second from the left which had seemed from a distance to offer the most direct route to the summit. It was also the best snout on which to daub the red paint which we had brought to mark the present limit of the glacier. I went up with Edward, leaving the rest of the party below in case the access to the glacier proved impossible, as I could now see that to get round the terminal ice wall might not be at all easy. We made our marks on the rock and hoped that some one would come and look for them again before the weather or the moss which chased the receding ice removed them from view.


CENTRAL RUWENZORI
MT EMIN
MT SPEKE
MT GESSI
MT STANLEY
MT BAKER
PORTAL PEAKS
KIMUMA 14705
RUTARA
R. LAMIA
R. BUKURUNGU
R. MUGUBU
R. BUKAKA
R. MUBUKU
NYAMULEGU HUT 10700
BIGO HUT 11,500
BUTURURU HUT 13050
NYABITABA HUT 8700
TO ROADHEAD
KITANDARA HUT 13200
LAC DE LA LUNE
KRAEPELIN 16720
UMBERTO 16740
CAVALLI PASS
SKUHL CAVE
VE. GLACIER
VITTORIO EMANUELE 16042
DOMENGO 15418
IOLANDA 15470
ROCCATI PASS 15353
SCALE
0 1 2 3
MILES

I decided that to get on to the glacier at that point might waste a lot of time with a party of seven, so we went round and up the next lobe to the left. It started to snow and we were in cloud, with only fleeting glimpses of the route ahead. I found a passage up behind the rock bastion and between two steep and heavily crevassed areas. The angle was steep and the snow was extremely soft. It was necessary to stamp very deeply into the snow to make a safe step. One false step and the party would have been hard to hold, and with the hard ice that my ice-axe struck beneath I could not rule out the danger of the whole thing peeling off in an avalanche. Then the angle eased and we trudged on through the snow and cloud on a bearing to the summit ridge. We crossed the ridge; and the last bit along the western side and up to the summit took the longest. There was some thin snow on ice and then a 60 ft. pitch of climbing on snow-covered rocks which with seven people to manage was a clumsy and cold business. At 1.45 we were reviving ourselves with lunch on the summit, and soon we started down the normal route to Bujuku. A brief gap in the clouds showed the direction of the South-west ridge, and then it was back to typical Ruwenzori white-out conditions. Using a compass and my knowledge of the route, I negotiated a thousand feet of descent without difficulty, but then a yawning hole suddenly appeared in front of us and I no longer recognised where I was. It took a providential clearing to show the passage past the ice-fall. Then the tension was over. As we coasted down the even gradient to the foot of the glacier and out under the cloud, it did not seem to matter when I plunged up to my middle into a crevasse.

Despite the weather it had been a good expedition, with the excitement of exploring a new route and doing the first east-west traverse of the whole mountain. It is this which is uppermost in my memory and I am not going to describe the floundering descent through four and a half hours of mud to Bujuku and then on to Bigo, where I was about the last to arrive by torchlight at 8.30 p.m. Next morning we set out for the two-day descent to the roadhead, well satisfied at achieving all our ambitions, and thankful for our good fortune with the climbing and the weather. My six African companions left me in no doubt that they would like to return to Ruwenzori, and some of them, in fact, did so this year.