ARRIGETCH

By MICHAEL WESTMACOTT

(*One illustration: no. 35*)

WHEN we arrived in New York in December, 1963, Sally and I soon got to know the New York climbing fraternity, the people who spend the winter planning treks and first ascents in the west and north-west. We skied with them, we climbed with them at the Shawangunks, and in the spring of 1964 we had two invitations to join expeditions. The first invitation we refused, regretfully; this was to take part in a quick raid on Huntington, aimed at forestalling the Terray party. It would have been a two-man and one-woman party. Reading the account of the first ascent, it is clear we wouldn't have had an earthly.

Still smarting from the pain of that missed opportunity, Sally and I got a second chance. A party of eight had been organised by our friends, the Bergens, to visit and climb in the virtually unknown Arrigetch group of peaks in the Endicott section of the Brooks Range of northern Alaska. A few weeks before they were due to leave, two of the party dropped out, and we were invited to join. There were phone calls, a brief negotiation with a sympathetic boss, a call for money from England, giving no doubt a final tilt to the balance of payments, and we were in.

Jeanne Bergen, administrative secretary of the American Alpine Club at that time, had been the first to contact us on arrival in the States—there had been a telephone message waiting for me at my hotel when I came in from Kennedy Airport. Jeanne, full of enthusiasm, bore the brunt of the expedition organisation and paper-work. Her husband, Brownell, had 'discovered' the Arrigetch eighteen months earlier through an illustration in *Arctic Wilderness*,[1] and in 1963 had led a group of four which reached the area—the first climbers to go near the mountains and possibly the first human beings to get right into them. This 1963 party had a tantalising view of magnificent granite peaks before being forced to retreat, in a hurry and starving, because they failed to find the stores which they had air-dropped into the valley a few days before. Now, in 1964, all four of the previous party were to revisit the area—Brownell Bergen, Chuck Loucks, Buck Cass and his wife Louise. Robley Williams, Jeanne Bergen, Sally and I completed the party.

From a climbing point of view the Brooks Range is, I gather, mostly pretty dull; there are rounded hills, heavily forested on the southern

[1] By Robert Marshall, University of California Press, 1956.

side, bare to the north. Doonerak, some ninety miles north-east of the Arrigetch, was once thought to be 10,000 ft. and the highest point. Unhappily for the party (including Alfred Tissières) who made the first ascent in 1952, it has since been demoted to about 8500 ft. and the high point identified as Mount Michelsen, much farther to the north-east.

According to *Arctic Wilderness*, the Arrigetch is the only granite group in the whole 700 miles of the Brooks. This seems a little unlikely, as exploration records are by no means complete, and granite-shaped peaks extend at least thirty miles west of our area. The Arrigetch are a similar region to the Bugaboos of Canada, or the less well known Logan Range.[2] They rise to about 7500 ft., and have small glaciers, comparable in size to those in a minor alpine region such as the Tarentaise.

Alaskan peaks are fairly accessible, but most of them only by air and at some expense. From New York it is certainly cheaper to climb in the Alps, unless you have the time to drive over 4,000 miles to Fairbanks; most of us did not, and on June 27, 1964, Jeanne Bergen, Chuck Loucks, Sally and I flew there and chartered a plane to Bettles, an important settlement with a population of fifty-one, just north of the Arctic Circle. After some overdue sleep, we were flown by the local bush pilot, James Anderson, to land on Lake Takahula, some seventy miles away. From Takahula, it was three days' bush-whack to our chosen valley in the Arrigetch, and the other members of the party had already reached the valley and set up Base Camp for us.

From Manhattan to the deserted shore of a lake above the Arctic Circle in a day—it would be hard to think of a greater contrast. As 'Andy' taxied away and took off for Bettles, the four of us were very conscious of being on our own. He had promised to come back in just under four weeks. It was reassuring that he would in a few days drop our remaining stores to us in the mountains, and that he had promised to fly over whenever he could; we had arranged with him a simple signal code in case we were in any trouble. The code was never needed—luckily, as he never had the time to fly over.

After Andy had disappeared over the hills, we shouldered our packs and started up the slopes of Sheep Mountain towards the Arrigetch. We were carrying far too much for desk-bound and classroom-bound New Yorkers. It was very hot, and the mosquitoes swarmed round us, but we began to enjoy ourselves. What is it that makes the most arduous hut-grind a pleasure? Perhaps it is the remembered association with the pleasures of subsequent climbs, but I don't think so. The climber needs not only to climb his peak, watching the world slowly sink beneath him, but to climb it with difficulty. He prefers 'technical' difficulty, but failing that a steep slope and a sizeable pack are better than nothing—at least until the shoulder straps really begin to bite.

[2] Cf. *A.J.* 71. 23.

We made our way up through light scrub, then conifers, trying to avoid the thickest vegetation low on the slopes. It was not long before we ran into a few vicious belts of the Alaskan alder, whose branches grow obliquely from the ground and interlock across one's path. Not that there is any path. On this first day, however, it was not too bad and we made steady progress over the side of Sheep Mountain, down to a stream and up thickly forested hillside to more open country, where we camped at 11 p.m. in broad daylight. We startled a moose, which got up from our proposed camp site and galloped across the hillside.

Next morning we crossed a pass where there was turf under our feet, no thickets, no mosquitoes, and the first good view of granite spires to the north. It was too good to last. Soon we were down in the valley again, sweating, fighting like Laocöon with the alder, beating pointlessly at the clouds of mosquitoes. We tried to keep above the valley floor, out of the thickest bush, and found ourselves traversing very rough ground across the slope. Every time we came to a drainage line, there was an alder thicket to break through, then a steep boulder field, then scree; there was always something. We camped at last on two shelves on the hillside where there was just room for the tents.

By the third day, we had become accustomed to the life we were leading, and struggled on dourly. We found that it paid to follow game trails in the valley floor, breaking through thickets when they ran out. We followed first the main course of the Alatna river, then turned east into valley '4662', which leads into the Arrigetch. As we made height, there was less vegetation and the going was easier, though we were wet from gently falling drizzle and repeated river crossings. It was a great relief, at 7.30 p.m., to see Brown Bergen coming down the stream to meet us, and to hear that we were only half an hour from Base Camp.

The tents were on a pleasant meadow of reindeer moss by the stream. When we arrived, and for most of the next three days, the view was depressingly limited by chilling heavy cloud swirling around us. But we were not in critical mood, thankful only to be able to put down our packs and not to have to bush-whack tomorrow. We learned to our relief that this year's air-drop had been successful and that Robley Williams had even stumbled by accident over one of the 1963 packages; during the next few rainy days, a favourite pastime was to go and look for the other fourteen. Two tents, a lot of food, and other stores were recovered, and our camp grew to an impressive size. On one of these scavenging trips we disturbed a lynx, which bounded gracefully over the boulders at what looked like forty miles an hour.

We had no conscience about a rest after the rigours of the walk-in, and there was little incentive to climb, as the mountains were invisible and the weather consistently foul. We looked for air-drop, read and lay in our bags, ate enormously, washed ourselves and our clothes in the

icy stream—a mistake, as the clothes stayed wet for days. We were glad to have more than the minimum of two-man tents.

On the morning of the second day, we were abruptly woken by loud shouts from the Bergen tent 'Buck, Buck, bear; it's a bear, man. Buck, get up' and a stream of epithets of the type that used to be called unprintable. Buck Cass had the gun, brought for just this type of emergency, but he was a notably sound sleeper. By the time he was up, the grizzly had backed away from the Bergen tent—it had pushed its muzzle right in, waking them up—and was mooching deliberately round camp. Grizzlies are dangerous, inquisitive, destructive, and have no facial expression to give a clue what they are up to. We had been told that they would avoid us if we made a noise, so we blew whistles, clashed saucepans, and fired four rounds over the beast. Either we had been misinformed or this one was deaf, because there was no reaction whatever. As we stood nervously watching on the outskirts of camp, the grizzly decided to investigate a plastic water-container we had left in the stream a little way off. This was obviously thought to be a fish, and was scooped out and gutted with two sweeps of the claws. Finding the fish uneatable, the grizzly lurched purposefully back to camp, stalking us from behind the inadequate cover of the bushes in the stream bed. At this point we decided that there was no alternative to shooting him, as we'd never be able otherwise to keep him out of the food. Brown took over the rifle and most efficiently dropped the poor beast with a shot behind the right ear.

Two days later, on the Fourth of July, the weather at last began to clear enough to give us our first all-round views of the mountains and enable us to set out on our first reconnaissance. Dominating the head of the valley to the west was a lop-sided spiky peak we called the Wichmann Tower, after a glacier already named, which was obviously to be our main obsession. To the north was a row of shapely spires and ridges, golden granite when the sun shone; to the south a more complex system of peaks and subsidiary ridges, enclosing small glaciers. The valley, now that we could see it properly, was most beautiful, with the stream sparkling down among the boulders, and an astonishing range of flowers among the reindeer moss. On this first day's excursion, four of us aimed for a pass to the south of the Wichmann Tower, hoping to find some more promising ridge than the ones we could see from camp. It was an easy three hour climb to the col, and from it we could see the South-west ridge; this was long and turreted, but at least possible to approach after a long descent from the col. As we studied its lower reaches through glasses, the upper section being still covered in dense cloud, there was excitement as Buck spotted a herd of a hundred caribou resting on the snow in the valley far below us. We could see a great trench in the snow where they had approached our col and clearly

turned back from it. We watched for half an hour as we ate our lunch; then suddenly the caribou all started to move and streamed down the valley westwards.

The following day was gloriously fine, a day for enjoying warm golden granite. Two parties set out to tackle peaks to the north of the valley. The Citadel, the easternmost peak, yielded to Chuck Loucks and the Bergens after a long but comparatively straightforward scramble—the first summit in the range to be climbed. The East ridge of the East Maiden[3] proved too hard for Robley Williams and the Westmacotts; we had to retreat about 300 ft. from the top, faced with severe slabs broken by overhangs, and returned to camp at about 10.30 p.m. after a most enjoyable day's climbing. In the Alaskan summer there is no worry about being benighted.

Now we turned again to the Wichmann Tower. A reconnaissance party found a way from the head of the valley to a hanging glacier under the summit, and investigated the East ridge. In gloomy weather we climbed a foul loose face to reach the ridge itself below an improbable gendarme. Chuck and I by-passed the gendarme to the north, but were stopped by a very hard pitch and the promise of several more ahead. There was absolutely no prospect on the other side of the ridge, and as we returned to camp we had to console ourselves with the hope that the West ridge, seen in profile from the glacier, might possibly be easier.

Two days later, Chuck, Brown, Buck and I made an early start for it. We were on the hanging glacier at 10.15, and descended about 2000 ft. to Charlie glacier, which lies to the north of the peak. We reached the col at the foot of the West ridge at about 1.30, after a short climb up ice and sodden snow from the glacier. After a short rest, there were two pleasant rock pitches, followed by a broad and straightforward section of the ridge. We enjoyed the spectacular rock scenery around us without having to rise to its challenge. On the right, we were joined by the jagged and unstable South-west ridge, beyond which the South face fell 2500 ft. sheer to the valley; on the left, broad sweeping slabs ran down to Charlie glacier. As the slabs steepened, we had to move pitch by pitch towards a great gash in the ridge. Arriving at the gash, we examined the next section with disfavour. A possible line went straight up, but it was certainly very hard, and moreover led to the top of a rock cornice which overhung the South face by about 15 ft. On the reconnaissance, we had seen and heard a few tons of rock break off the ridge near this point, drop down the South face and thunder down the screes below. We were sensitive about rock cornices. It now began to snow, and we were on the point of turning back.

Luckily the snow did not persist, and it was worth trying a traverse to

[3] None of these names is official. Anyone interested in their approximate location will find a sketch-map in the *Ladies Alpine Club Journal*, 1965.

the north to avoid the steepest section. The four of us now roped together. A thin crack for the feet, and just enough handholds, led us 100 ft. to the left. Another pitch, involving a few more very severe moves and some delicate negotiations with loose rock, brought us to rather easier ground. We were in a beautifully airy situation, the rock face falling sheer to Charlie glacier, and the sun now lighting up the peaks around it to the north and west. The two hard pitches took perhaps a couple of hours, but from there we climbed easily up the summit snowfield and at 6.30 p.m. scrambled excitedly to the top.

After a decent interval admiring the superb summit view, but noting with disappointment that our summit was lower than at least one other peak in the Arrigetch, possibly three, we discussed the descent. The way we had come was very long, and I thought I had seen enough of the east side of the mountain to risk a descent that way, towards Base Camp. Luckily the first two pitches supported my view. We climbed down cautiously, abseiling from time to time, and at length reached the highest point of our reconnaissance of two days before. We were tired and very slow—most of us being largely trained on rock outcrops, and not well practised in climbing down—and did not reach camp until 4.30 a.m. The sun was so hot on the tent that I slept outside my bag, with a towel over my eyes to keep out the light.

In our absence on the Wichmann Tower, Sally had led the others up the East Maiden by its West ridge, which turned out to be a fairly easy scramble. From the top it was possible to see that we had been within a couple of pitches of success on the East ridge a week before, and also that the East ridge of the nearby West Maiden looked feasible. This was our objective a day later. Chuck, Robley, Sally and I had a pleasant day's rock-climbing, ascending the easy East ridge and descending the much harder West ridge. The weather that day was characteristic of many days during our stay. It was continuously threatening but never really bad. Dark rain clouds were all around; there were frequent but very localised showers, only one of which hit our peak, making the lichenous surface greasy and unpleasant for a while. Patches of bright sunlight lit up a peak or a valley from time to time, while ridges and clouds formed a backcloth in shades of indigo. The air was clear, and range upon range could be seen under the clouds to the north and west. It was a spectacularly beautiful day, and we enjoyed our mountains to the full. There was probably no human being within 50 miles, 200 miles in some directions.

Having climbed three of the rocky peaks on the northern rim of the valley, as well as the Wichmann, we turned our attention to the higher southern rim. In retrospect this concentration on the one valley seems unenterprising, but there was plenty to climb where we were, and three weeks did not allow lengthy excursions. During the next few days we

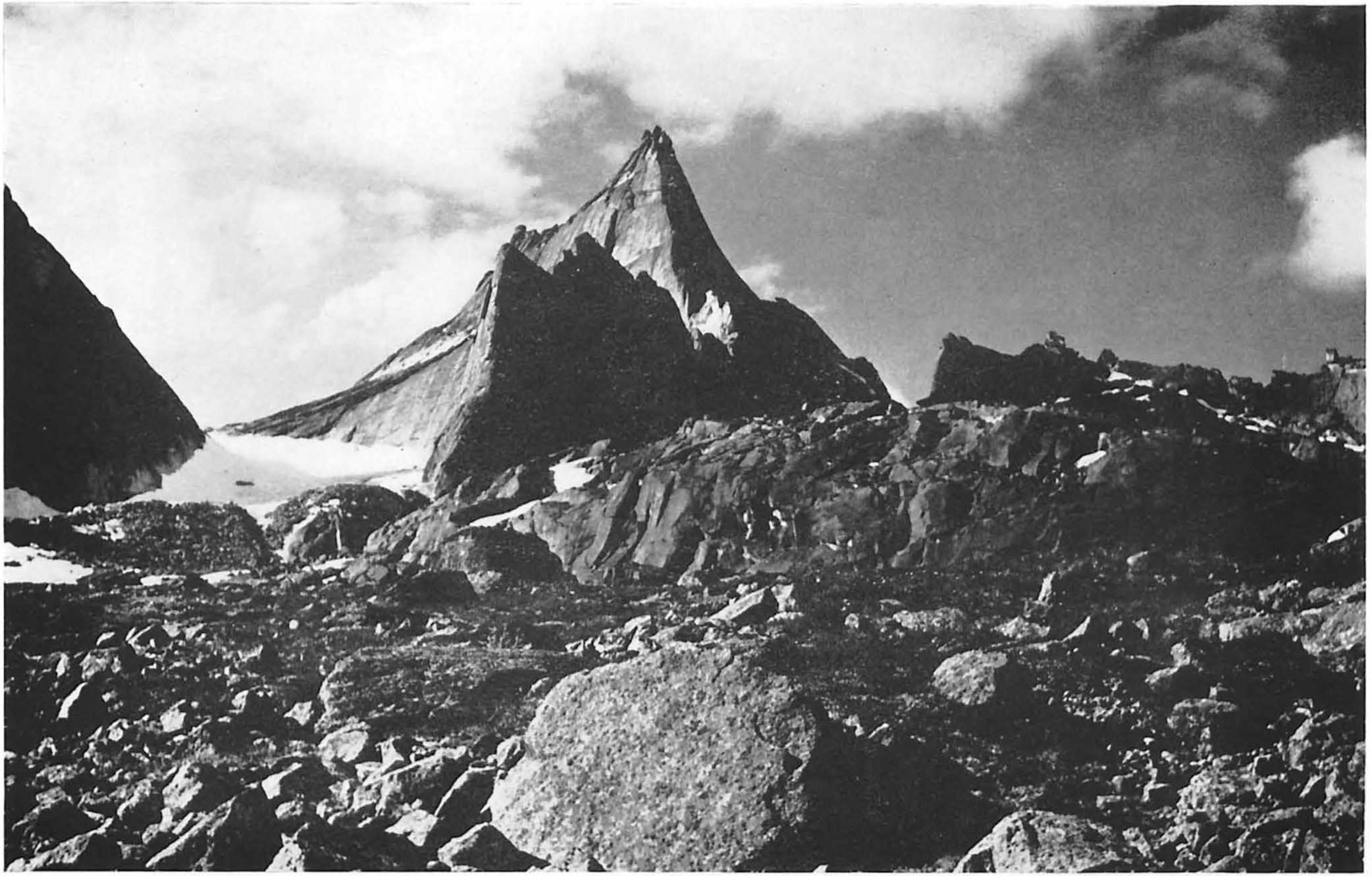

Photo: M. H. Westmacott

ARRIGETCH: THE PYRAMID, CLIMBED BY THE LEFT-HAND RIDGE.

(No. 35)

climbed two easy minor peaks and tried two others, much harder, one of which fell to Chuck and the Bergens at the second attempt. This was the Pyramid, the most elegant of the mountains around us. The ascent involved a hard rock-climb from the glacier up a crack system in the East face, a long rising traverse to the foot of the summit rocks, and a corkscrew route to the top. This day, too, ended at 4 a.m.

Two unsuccessful attempts were made on Sodden Peak, a little further east; both were stopped at the head of a steep and rather stone-swept snow-gully by a combination of steep holdless slabs and torrents of rain-water which came down them just as we reached the crux. We would dearly have liked to try also the Shot Tower, a slender granite spire between Pyramid and Sodden, but we were not strong enough as a party to embark on a route that looked as if it involved continuous very severe climbing, if not Yosemite nailing techniques.

The last climb of the expedition, snatched by Chuck, Robley, Sally and me while the others were dutifully packing up camp, was an ascent of the Camel, another of the rock peaks on the northern rim. We gained the long East ridge of the mountain by two different routes, one of them involving a few pitches of hard face climbing, the other an easy scramble to the low point of the ridge and a purist's traverse of every pinnacle on it. The weather was cold but sunny, we were fit, and the rock was superb. The ridge itself was in places knife-edged but never difficult, though melting snow made the lichen slippery in places. The closer we came to the summit, the more extraordinary it looked. From a distance it was like a blunted horn thrusting upwards and outwards, overhanging the South face by about 20 ft. When we got to it, we found that it was deeply undercut on the northern side, too. It was stable enough, but looked extremely hard to climb.

Putting off the evil moment, we sat down to a leisurely lunch. Afterwards, Chuck led round and under the summit block to look for a route from the west. He came back with no hope, so I attacked the block from our luncheon ledge. A little wall led to a slab, where I put in a good piton; the slab was severe and slightly greasy, but one could balance across to the right to reach a thin and rather indefinite crack on the north side, slanting towards the top only 20 ft. away. The crack was very delicate, with little in the way of proper holds. Two pitons went in half an inch before reaching bottom, to be used between forefinger and thumb. Otherwise it felt as if it was largely faith, until hands managed to reach the flat top and I could step up.

The summit was a particularly airy spot, but there was plenty of room and it was a fine view-point, so we spent some time there taking photographs and looking round at the peaks in our range, already with nostalgic eyes. Reluctantly, we at length abseiled back to the luncheon ledge and returned the way we had come. We were back in camp at 9.30 p.m.

The Camel had provided a splendid finish to the climbing. Now unfortunately we had to keep our date with Andy at Takahula lake in four days' time and return to civilisation. Next morning we cleared the camp, had a big bonfire, made a cache of spare food and some usable equipment and loaded up for the walk to Takahula. Air-dropping is an almost essential technique for the Alaskan bush, but it has one fundamental weakness—you can air-drop your kit into a valley, but you cannot air-drop it out again. We were too mean to leave behind anything remotely valuable we thought we could carry, so we left with mountainous loads. According to the airport scales at Bettles, Buck was carrying ninety-seven pounds in all, including the rifle, the other men up to eight-five pounds and the girls up to sixty-five. We suffered severely, as we plodded down the valley and fought our way through the undergrowth. We developed the technique of following game trails as far as possible, collapsing under our loads when the trail ran out, and sending one or two people ahead to break through the bush towards the next trail or clearing. We must have been fit, as it took us only two days to get back to Takahula.

We had a day in hand, which Sally and I spent lazily beside the lake, watching some of the others fish for lake trout and grayling, and occasionally having a rather cold swim. It was bright all day, and our three rods only brought in seven trout and one northern pike, after fishing for ten or twelve hours. The trout were wonderful eating, the first fresh food for a month. Takahula had signs of civilisation—two log cabins had been built the other side of the lake, though they were not used, and the Army had disfigured our beach by abandoning some oil-drums when a survey party had been there a few years before. But I was again impressed by the vastness and emptiness of the country. We were right out in the wilds, sitting by one of ten thousand deserted Alaskan lakes, a long, long way from over-populated Europe; the sound of a pack of wolves, the sight of fresh wolf and bear tracks a hundred yards along the beach did nothing to remove the sense of isolation.

That night we had superb sun and cloud effects, gold and indigo, with the Arrigetch silhouetted against the northern sunlight and reflected in the mirror of the lake. We were at peace with the world. It had been a wonderful month.