THE YUKON ALPINE CENTENNIAL EXPEDITION—1967

By LORD HUNT
With supplementary notes by W. S. DOCHARTY and J. V. HOEMAN

(*Three illustrations: nos. 8–10*)

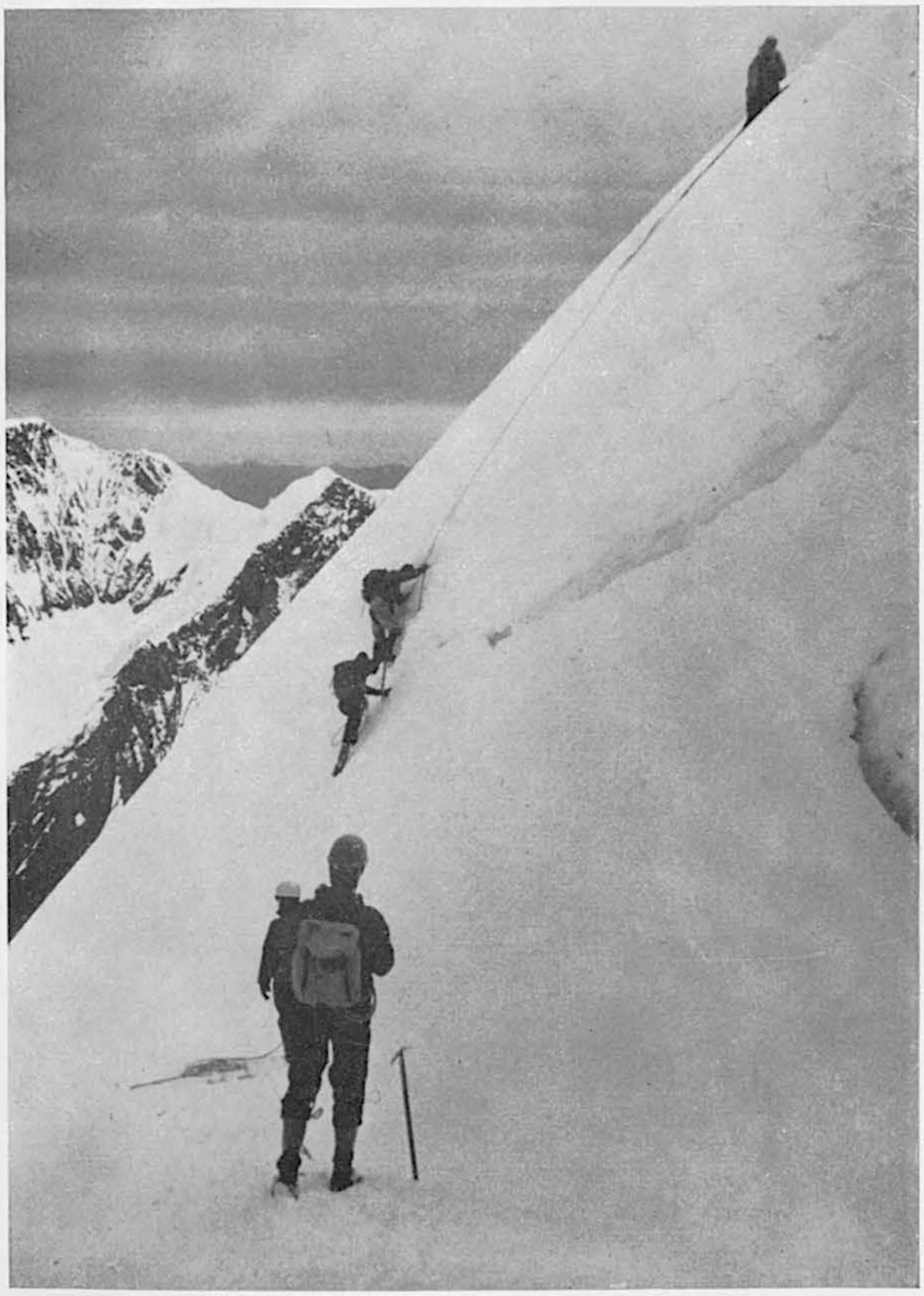
The Alpine Club of Canada traditionally runs summer camps in different parts of the Rockies and other mountain ranges in western Canada, in which as many as a hundred climbers and walkers take part. The centenaries of the Confederation of Canada and the Purchase of Alaska provided the opportunity for the Club to mark their 1967 camp in a special way and the Yukon Alpine Centennial Expedition (Y.A.C.E.) was certainly unique in its size, its scope and the ambitious aspirations of its organisers. It stands alone indeed, as a triumph of careful planning, for which the credit is mainly attributable to the Club's eastern Vice-President, David Fisher.

The St. Elias Mountains which were chosen for the project, were ideal for the purpose. They are the highest land mass in Canada, partly covered by ice-cap, with Mount Logan (19,850 ft.) second only to McKinley on the North American continent. They are remote and, although exploration began in the 1880s—a notable expedition was that of the Duke of the Abruzzi in 1897—and despite the fact that groups visited the area almost annually since the early 1850's, hundreds of peaks and many glaciers remain untouched and unnamed; with few exceptions the summits of 12,000 ft. and under are still unclimbed. Outstanding among the pioneers is Dr. Walter Wood, a former President of the American A.C., and now the Director of Icefield Ranges Research Project conducted by the Arctic Institute. He is well nicknamed the 'Grand Old Man of St. Elias', and wrote *A History of Mountaineering in the St. Elias Mountains* (1967) for the Y.A.C.E. Access to the western valleys and glaciers is from the shores of the Bay of Alaska; to the eastern side, the Alaskan Highway. The distances, the rivers and the difficulty of some of the glaciers are such that a traverse from either direction to climb or explore on the far side would be a lengthy and difficult expedition. Air communications are beginning to reduce these problems, but bad weather—as we were forcibly reminded—has to be reckoned with, especially on the coastal flanks. All in all, climbing in the St. Elias Mountains retains the special flavour of a pioneering exploit. It is all the more to the credit of the A.C.C. that the Y.A.C.E., so boldly conceived, was so brilliantly accomplished.

Photo: Lord Hunt]

TRIPLEX (*c.* 11,000 FT.) AND THE UPPER TWO ICEFALLS OF "A" GLACIER. PEAK 5 IS ON THE RIGHT. (SEE *p.* 18.)

(No. 8)



NEGOTIATING THE BERGSCHRUND BELOW THE NORTH RIDGE OF TRIPLEX PEAK.

(No. 9)

The expedition, which lasted from mid-June to mid-August 1967, had three overlapping parts. The first was the climbing of a 15,000 ft. peak on the southern end of the Yukon–Alaskan border by a joint group of Canadian and American climbers. This was successfully achieved in June, the mountain being appropriately named Good Neighbour Peak (15,720 ft.). The second phase began in the first week of July, with thirteen four-man teams of Canadian climbers being flown by helicopter to three high bases on the south side of a hitherto unexplored range (now called the 'Centennial Range') in the centre of the mountain massif, to attempt its principal summits, most of them 12,000–13,000 ft. in height. The thirteen main peaks were named after the Provinces and Territories of Canada, with the highest having the distinction of becoming Centennial Peak. Considering that no previous ground reconnaissance had been made of this range; that the weather was very bad almost throughout the following fortnight; and that the peaks were by no means easy, it is a matter of astonishment that all but two of them—Manitoba and Saskatchewan—were climbed by the third week in July and the whole expedition of fifty-two climbers evacuated by air, without a single casualty. Centennial Peak resisted three attempts, falling at the last just before the final helicopter lift.

The third phase began on July 15–16, when 100 climbers were moved to a base camp at 5500 ft. beside the Steele glacier, from a staging camp on Lake Kluane, beside the Alaskan Highway. This mammoth undertaking was accomplished by a combination of coach, truck and finally two Bell (two-passenger) helicopters; the latter flew non-stop shuttle sorties over the last forty miles, and the last climbers arrived in the early hours each morning, with the aid of the daylight which makes reading still possible at midnight in mid-July. This large group stayed thirteen days in the mountains and was succeeded by a second group at the end of the month, for a further fortnight. Thus during a period of three months nearly 300 people—climbers, walkers and permanent staff at the Base Camp—were involved in Y.A.C.E.

My own experience was limited to the first general camp, in the activities of which my wife, Joy, and I took part between July 16 and 28. It is a truism that Canada is a big country. We left Toronto on the evening of July 14, but it was not till late on the 15th, after a succession of scheduled air flights to Whitehorse, and a 150-mile coach journey along the Highway, that we reached the staging camp. There was plenty of interest along the route, however. Edmonton, the bustling, thrusting and garish capital of Alberta, which has grown from a few trading huts beside the Saskatchewan river 130 years ago, to the home of 250,000 people today. Whitehorse, still retaining its shanty pioneering atmosphere from the intoxicating times of the Gold Rush of 1898; a few of the quaint old stern-wheelers are still shored up beside the Yukon river, and the

museum is crammed with relics. Dawson City, 300 miles up-river, Bonanza Creek, the Klondyke; the sourdoughs and tenderfoots seem still to tramp the trail.

We were in a second group of fifty to move up to the first General Camp. Stopping off at Mile 1054 we were delighted to renew acquaintance with Dr. Charles Houston of the 1953 K2 Expedition. Barry Bishop of Ama Dablam and Everest fame was also engaged there on the Icefield Ranges Research Project, but was away on Mount Logan.

Next day we travelled a further fifty miles up the Highway and then westwards into the forest, to the helicopter terminal. We were lucky to get an early lift over the last lap of forty miles; it was a perfect day and as we crossed the great, muddy Donjek river we began to appreciate the huge scale of these mountains. The snout of the Steele glacier was immediately ahead, and the summits of Mount Wood (15,880 ft.) and Macaulay rose grandly to the west. We were finally set down beside the glacier some four miles east of the camp, and were glad to be able to savour the approach on foot. The Steele is a glaciological phenomenon. Its snout ceased to move forward two years ago and with the continuing advance of the main ice stream, it is now in a state of 'surge', or chaotic upheaval as the pressure from above causes the ice to rise up like an erupting cake. The sides of the glacier rise 150–200 ft. above the lateral moraine in the vicinity of Base Camp and, such is the turbulence of the surface, that it would be a very lengthy and hazardous journey to cross its two-mile width.

We reached Base in the early afternoon, our eyes dazzled by the shining pyramid of Mount Steele (16,440 ft.), its eastern flank falling nearly 7000 ft. to the head of the glacier; it assumed the proportions of a small army camp, with large mess marquee, living, office and store tents, and areas for married, male and female climbers, and the Centennial, Canadian and Club flags fluttering in the breeze. The messing arrangements were outstandingly good, and there were many congenial and friendly people, hailing not only from different parts of Canada and the United States, but of recent origin from various European countries. Three guides, members of a Rocky Mountains professional guides' association, were among the group.

With such large numbers it was essential to organise the climbing, and this would undoubtedly seem irksome to many Western European climbers. Apart from the big peaks, such as Steele, Wood, Macaulay and Logan, there were numerous lower summits between 10,000 and 12,000 ft. nearer by, some of them accessible from Base and only three or four of them already climbed. Climbers placed their names on the lists posted each day, giving a first and second choice for peaks or glacier reconnaissances which, for want of names, were given numbers and letters respectively. A climbing committee, to which I was invited,

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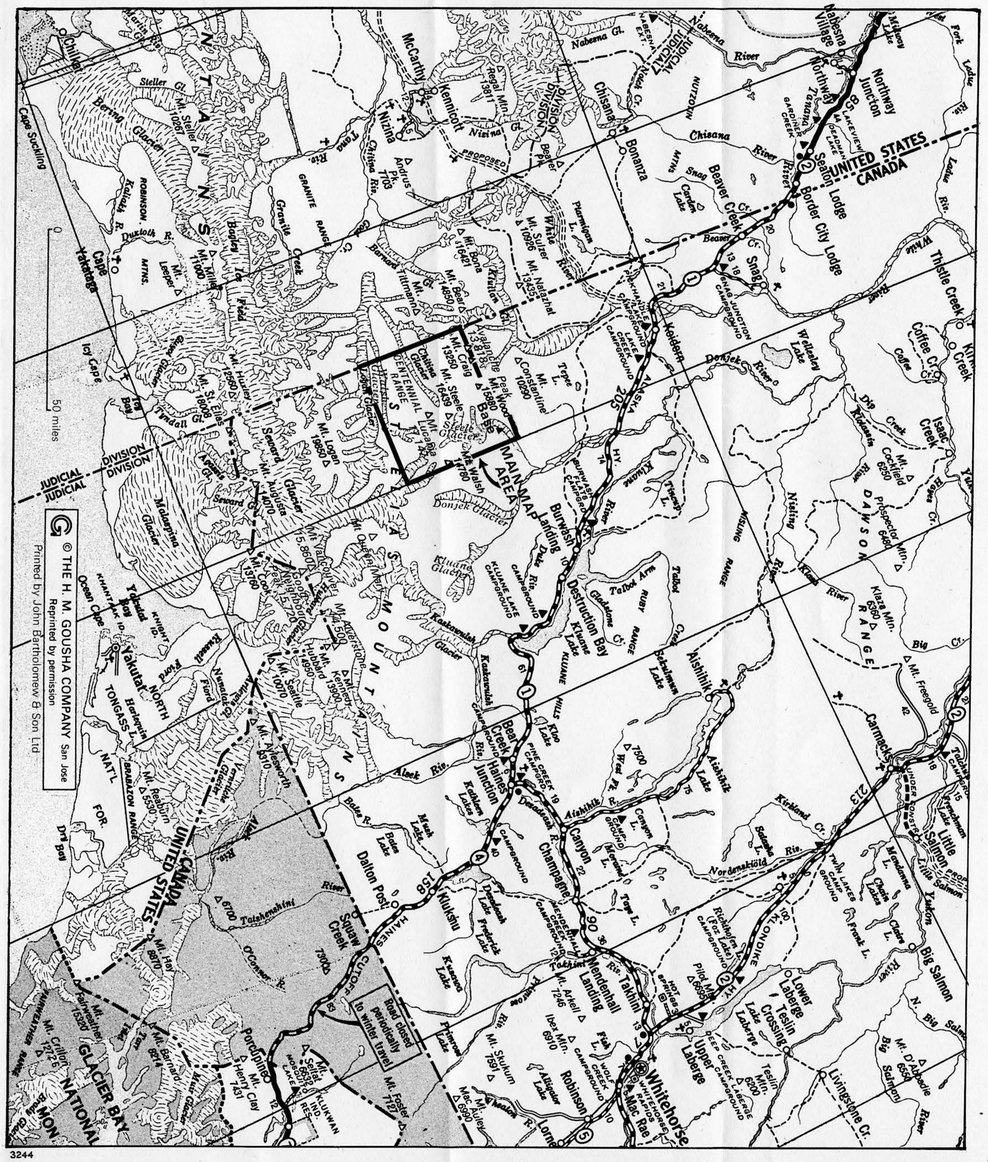

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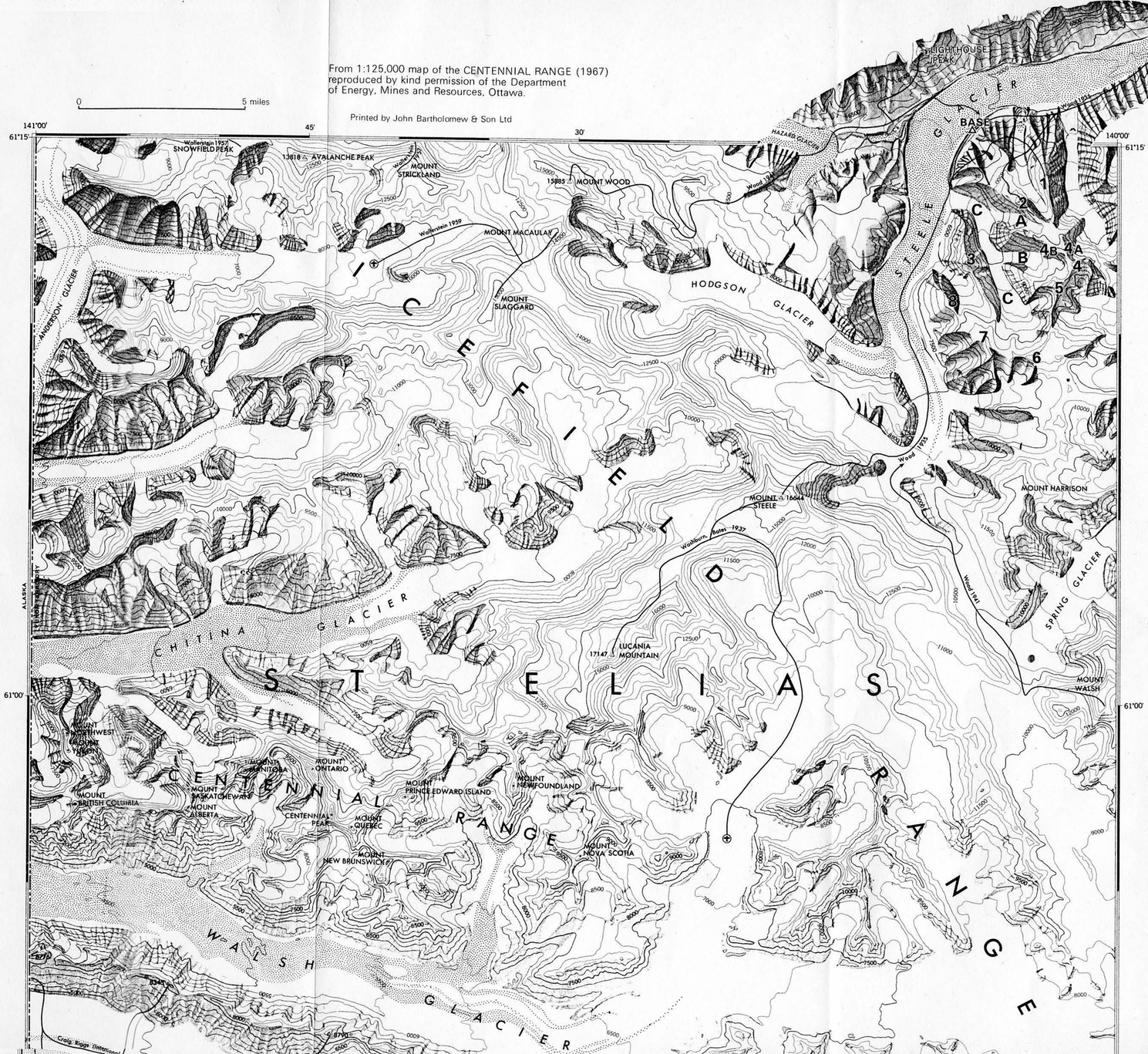

decided the leadership, composition and destination of the various groups; each evening an eager crowd gathered at the notice board to see what their personal allocations were to be. Strange though this arrangement seemed to me at the beginning, it worked fairly well. It meant, of course, that the less experienced sometimes had rather more than their fill of new situations and their technical solutions, while the most experienced undertook the role of instructors and guides. In these circumstances, it was scarcely possible to compose a uniformly strong party to attempt the more challenging peaks and routes.

In any case, the weather placed a severe restriction on ambitions. During the whole period of the first general camp, only two days—the arrival day and one other—were completely clear. Low cloud, high temperatures, rain and snow combined to make climbing conditions exceptionally bad and somewhat hazardous; the new snow was unable to bind onto the steep slopes and there were many avalanches. Moreover, the high peaks required the establishment of remote camps at about 10,000 ft. by helicopter airlift. With poor visibility, low cloud and rapidly changing weather conditions, this was a most difficult and unpredictable task. While we were there, two separate groups, in turn, spent four days and nights beneath Mount Steele, prevented by weather both from climbing the mountain and from being evacuated. A third group managed to climb Mount Walsh (14,780 ft.) in really bad conditions, but was then marooned in their high camp for a similar period. My wife and I were members of a second Mount Walsh party which, for the same reason, was unable to fly up the glacier at the last minute; in the event, we were thankful of it.

On the nearer, most attractive peaks south of Base Camp the Meet had some successes, despite the weather. A number of summits were climbed several times and by different routes; all but three of these were first ascents. We were able to find ways through some tricky ice-falls of two side glaciers in the course of these climbs. It would be tedious to describe particular routes; they were predominantly snow and ice in character, with some very steep slopes and hard technical problems to negotiate. The rock, mostly disintegrating granite, was appalling and, on some of the climbs, very dangerous. This is of course a feature common to other mountains in the polar regions.

As to our personal fortunes, we made three ascents, one of these being the first ascent of Peak 3 (see Map 2) by a particularly good and varied route, with Fritz Wiessner,[1] and his son Andy, Colin Godfrey, a post-graduate student of Harvard, and Ernst Rheinhold, a senior lecturer of Edmonton University. This involved us in a day of eighteen hours, including some fine crampon work on steep ice, a hazardous rock pitch

[1] A member of the German expedition to Nanga Parbat in 1932, and of the American expedition to K2 in 1939.

to gain access to the North-east ridge, a rickety half-mile of rock ridge and an elegant mile of curving snow ridge, before we set foot on the small, squat summit at 1 p.m. On another peak (4A in Map 2) we made several attempts on two separate days, which ended in honourable failure about 200 ft. below the summit. The mountain is guarded to an exceptional degree by séracs, gaping schrunds and crevasses.

During the last four days the weather became so bad that very little climbing was possible. Anxiety mounted on account of the marooned parties and the communications with the outer world; everything depended on the tenuous link provided by two small helicopters. We found some interest in studying the wild life. The big white Dall sheep were seen, often in large flocks, not far from camp. Someone sighted a grizzly bear. Smaller mammals (ground squirrels, lemmings, weasels, pikahs, etc.) became fearless and sometimes positively importunate.

So bad did the situation become that the whole programme for evacuating the first group of 100 climbers and replacing them by the second group, had to be postponed by at least twenty-four hours. The Alaskan Highway was cut in a number of places by flood water and landslides, the telephone lines to Whitehorse were broken and a crisis loomed near.

As I was tied to a programme of youth activities in Ontario, we were the first to leave as the crisis receded. We flew out on July 29 and were driven fast along the Highway to Whitehorse, only to see the plane on the scheduled flight to Edmonton take off as we approached the city. So ended a memorable fortnight in the far North-West. Despite, and even because of, its setbacks and misfortunes, it was a wonderful experience. We saw some splendid new mountains. We acquired a considerable respect for the North American climbers; what is more important, we found many new friends.

Mr. W. S. DOCHARTY was also present and wrote to the Hon. Secretary: 'I duly performed the pleasant duty with which you had charged me of conveying greetings from the Alpine Club to all assembled at the second general climbing camp. The little ceremony was warmly appreciated by all present'.

Mr. J. V. Hoeman writes:

The principal climb of the Y.A.C.E. was the first ascent of the border summit of Mount Vancouver, which has been tentatively designated 'Good Neighbour Peak'. At 15,673 ft.,[1] it was the highest unclimbed

[1] Readers will note that there are minor differences between these heights and those in Lord Hunt's article, which are based on earlier surveys.—Editor.

summit on the Alaska-Canada border, where it is second in height only to Mount Saint Elias, 18,008 ft. The higher north-north-west summit of Mount Vancouver, 15,820 ft., is the fifteenth highest mountain in North America, but it had been climbed only once before, by Dr. Alan Bruce-Robertson, William Hainsworth, Robert McCarter, and Professor N. E. Odell in 1949.[2] Selected for the 1967 climb to represent Canada were Montague E. Alford, Glendon Boles, Dr. Alan Bruce-Robertson (veteran of the 1949 climb), and Leslie McDonald. To represent the U.S. were Daniel R. Davis, George Denton, John Edward Williamson, and myself. Monty and I were designated co-leaders.

The evening of June 18 Monty, Alan, George and I were flown from the Kluane Lake headquarters of Walter Wood's Icefield Ranges Research Project across the great glaciers of the Saint Elias Range to land at 7000 ft. elevation on the Alaskan side of Mount Vancouver. As we stepped from the two ski-wheel equipped planes we became the first climbers to set foot on the 200 square mile drainage of the Valerie glacier. Weather is the major limiting factor in the Saint Elias, and the next day we left George in camp to radio for the planes to bring the others if the low clouds lifted. Meanwhile Monty, Alan and I pioneered the route through the ice-fall to the foot of the south ridge of the South-east buttress of Good Neighbour Peak (Illustration no. 10).

On the 20th at noon the planes brought Glen, Dan, Les, and Jed. Soon George and I with these four, wearing snowshoes, followed the trail of wands left the day before to fix ropes on the 20-ft. ice cliff and 30-ft. steep slope to the crest of our chosen ridge, and cache our loads there. The following day we abandoned Base Camp, taking the remainder of what we intended to use on our climb with us. At the base of the ridge we left our snowshoes and shifted to crampons. It turned out to be a long day, as the ridge crest was narrow, avalanchey snow followed by a long section of very fractured rock, but by evening we had gained the flat top of a ridge at 10,300 ft. Here we set up Camp I.

June 22 saw us bringing up supplies from the ridge cache to Camp I and fixing ropes along 500 ft. of the steepest parts of the route to Camp II whose site we picked at 11,800 ft. on the lower lip of a big sérac-forming crevasse near where its end could be turned. The next day we moved everything to Camp II and in the evening Les and I reconnoitred above to find our final camp site in another large snow-filled crevasse just below the crest of the South-east buttress. We put in another 100 ft. of fixed rope. Setting up this 14,000 ft. high camp the following day, we were ready to bid for the summits on the 25th. High cirrus and lowering atmospheric pressure predicted an end to our uncommonly long period of good weather. We knew we'd only have a few hours for the summits.

[2] See *A.J.* 57. 484.

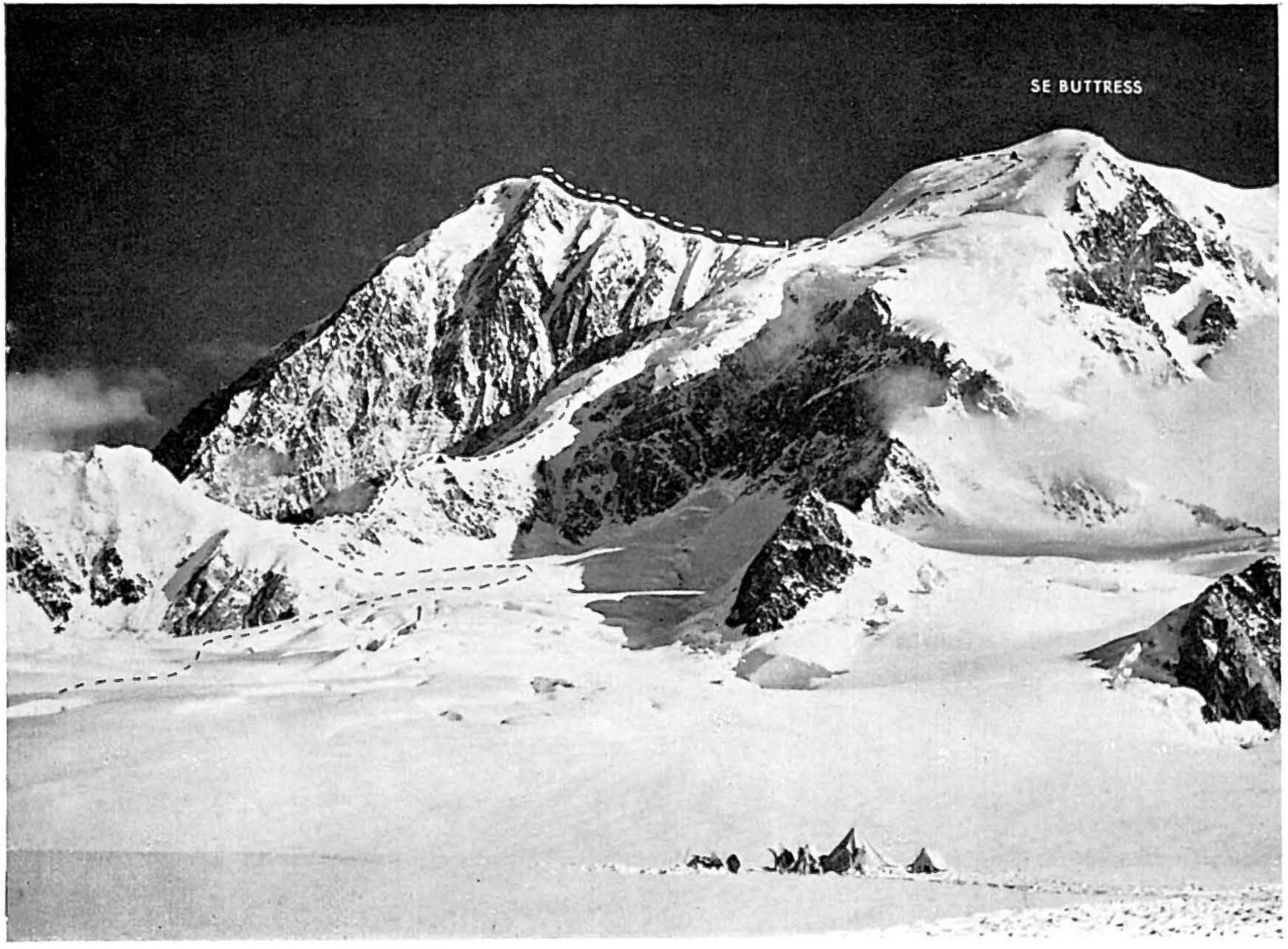

Photo: M. E. Alford]

THE BORDER SUMMIT OF MT. VANCOUVER (15,673 FT.) FROM VALERIE GLACIER, SHOWING THE ROUTE VIA THE SOUTH-EAST BUTTRESS. (SEE *p.* 22.)

(No. 10)

Les and I led out and found the ridge easier than we had expected. The steep steps in the ridge we had noticed from below were easily turned on one side or the other and by 11.30 we topped Good Neighbour Peak. Only the highest Saint Elias ships spread glacial sails above the sea of clouds, but ours was one of these, a five-master whose farthest sky sails nearly two miles into Yukon Territory beckoned highest. So we started across the intervening three summits and the gaps between them. The central of these was the highest, but the one beyond it the tougher to pass as we balanced between rotten cornices to the west and steep avalanche slopes to the east. At 3.25 in the afternoon we reached the summit of Mount Vancouver for its second ascent, by a wholly new route. Dan and George came after us, and an altimeter they brought showed 150 ft. difference between the summits which would make this one about 15,820 ft. I'd promised Professor Odell some rock specimens and gathered them from the highest exposed ones 100 ft. or more south of the summit. Monty had come as far as the Central Summit (everyone reached the border summit) with Dan and George, and he roped in with us returning. He and I went to the top of the South-east buttress, 14,300 ft., to watch for the return of our last two companions and reflect on our good fortune to have accomplished our summits before the storm which was obviously soon to pin us down. It was 2° F. (as low as we recorded) and the wind was beginning to gust.

That night we were all safe in our tents at 14,000 ft. when the storm hit with winds and heavy snowfall that continued interspersed with calmer periods of whiteout for the next two days, but on the 28th we were able to wade down through it to Camp I on the tongue and the next day carefully negotiate the snow-covered rock ridge, make a partially new route through the ice-fall due to collapsed snow bridges, and re-establish Base Camp. Not till July 3 did the weather permit our being flown out to the other world.