

THE TRAVERSE OF SHKHELDA

BY HAMISH MACINNES

LAST year the Mountaineering Federation of the U.S.S.R. invited a party of British mountaineers to climb in the Caucasus in 1961 and a further party to climb in the Pamir in 1962. Due to the short notice of this invitation only three of us managed to accept the Caucasian offer: Michael Vyvyan from Cambridge, George Ritchie from Edinburgh and myself.

George Ritchie and I motored to Moscow in his Mini-Minor, whilst Vyvyan flew from London.

We found that the Muscovites are most helpful people and their city a magnificent combination of stately buildings and clean streets. Vyvyan joined us a few days after our arrival and members of the Mountaineering Federation organised our air passage down to the Caucasus.

We unbent ourselves like so many carpenter's rules at Spartak Camp after a dusty journey from the airport at Mineralnye-Vody and a cluster of officials met us, took our baggage and ushered us into the dining hall where we were fed. We could see little from the windows except the ghostly outline of the high Caucasus and from the inevitable loud-speakers came vaguely familiar and displeasing English jazz.

As most of you know, these Russian camps are run by the Trade Unions and anyone wishing to spend their holidays in the mountains can have a monthly deduction from their pay, and climb, so to speak, on the never-never. Usually the courses last three weeks and the training covers camping, first aid, river crossing, rock climbing and simple ascents. The following year you can go on a more advanced course and so on. The highest standard is, of course, Master of Sport, which can be obtained in gymnastics, etc., as well as in climbing. If one is proficient enough it is possible to become a Master of Sport in two to three years.

Life in the Caucasian camps is well organised—too well organised for undisciplined Scots, and our constant companion, the loud-speaker, at an unearthly hour told us to get up for P.T. and later to wash. Fortunately all this was in Russian, though a Master of Sport, whom we called the 'Shouter', made it his personal duty (the first morning only) to translate the instructions. He got such a bleary-eyed stare that he gave up immediately.

We had another haunting companion whom we christened the 'Wasp', because of his multi-coloured football jerseys. He was a correspondent of climbing, and from his many notebooks a fresh list of questions was born each day. Both George Ritchie and I, who spoke halting German, were fairly immune to this constant high pitched barrage, but Vyvyan, with his knowledge of Russian, was beginning to wither under the fusillade.

The weather was bad and we were restricted to short excursions from camp punctuated by tea thoughtfully brought from the old country by Vyvyan. We ate at the camp with the Russians and the food was not too bad, though much inferior to some of the other camps. There was an amazing number of attractive females at the camps and with really bad weather it would be possible to find some very agreeable pastimes.

However, we told ourselves (and we were told by the camp commandant) we came to climb, and with two Masters of Sport, Eugene Tur and Igor Banderoski we set off to conquer Chugan Bashi, 4,200 m. I asked Eugene if it was possible to take a bicycle up the peak and he said that he thought so. 'Then I won't need my ice hammer,' I said. 'Of course not,' he replied slapping me on the back, 'you vil manage fine.'

Our journey up to our base camp was broken at intervals with meals and mugfuls of milk from cowherds.

At our base camp there was a primitive tin hut used by the climbing courses and beside this, on a pleasant glade, strange bivouac sacks were unfolded. The Russians had a tent and willingly I joined them in this luxury, but George and Michael Vyvyan roughed it out in their weirdly shaped cocoons.

A walk in the early hours up a moraine rib took us to a glacier and in worsening weather we ascended steeper ice. We roped up and I found a stick in lieu of an ice-axe and by 10 a.m. we were on a plateau below the main ridge leading to the summit. The snow conditions were dangerous and Vyvyan, who was not feeling too well in any case, decided to return. Igor went with him. The rest of us continued in rapidly deteriorating weather and below the rock ridge, on a dangerous snow-slope, we decided to call it a day. Visibility was now down to 50-60 ft. and it was snowing. We returned to base camp and later that day we all went back to Spartak.

We were told at camp that it was not the done thing to turn back from a peak—despite the conditions—and for the first time at least we were in disfavour. The weather continued to be changeable with thunderstorms.

Eugene Tur mentioned one day that he proposed to do the traverse of Shkhelda that year and when I suggested that George and I should join him on this he was agreeable. It was decided that Igor should be

included in the party as well. Vyvyan was going to take this opportunity to visit the Bezingi area.

First of all permission had to be obtained and a control time fixed before we could depart on the climb. The control time is for one's own safety and if one is not back at the time specified a rescue team goes out immediately. It transpired that our control time was twelve days, though I had hoped to do the traverse in about three days. I was in open revolt when the two Masters of Sport decided to take a walkie-talkie in case of accident; we took flares instead, some for signalling progress and others for emergency use.

The traverse of Shkhelda was obviously regarded as a big undertaking by the Russians, so George and I decided to take three days' supply of food, and we decided that the four of us should sleep in one of the excellent Russian tents.

With rucksacks weighing about 50 lb. we bade farewell to Spartak, feeling rather sorry for Vyvyan who was going to Bezingi in the company of the 'Wasp'.

A short way above Spartak we went through Sputnik Camp, a cluster of tents on a shelf in the steep pine wood. The tents had electric light and proper beds, and on the latter recumbent females, scantily clad, strummed guitars whilst squirrels jumped from branches storing nuts for the long winter.

We left the pleasant verdure of the pines for the drab grey of the Ushba glacier moraine, but a great jewel sparkled ahead of us—Shkhelda. The sight of this great wall of ice and rock as one walks up the glacier is awe-inspiring. It is a massive crosscut of peaks, a mixture between the Himalayas and the Dolomites—a challenge.

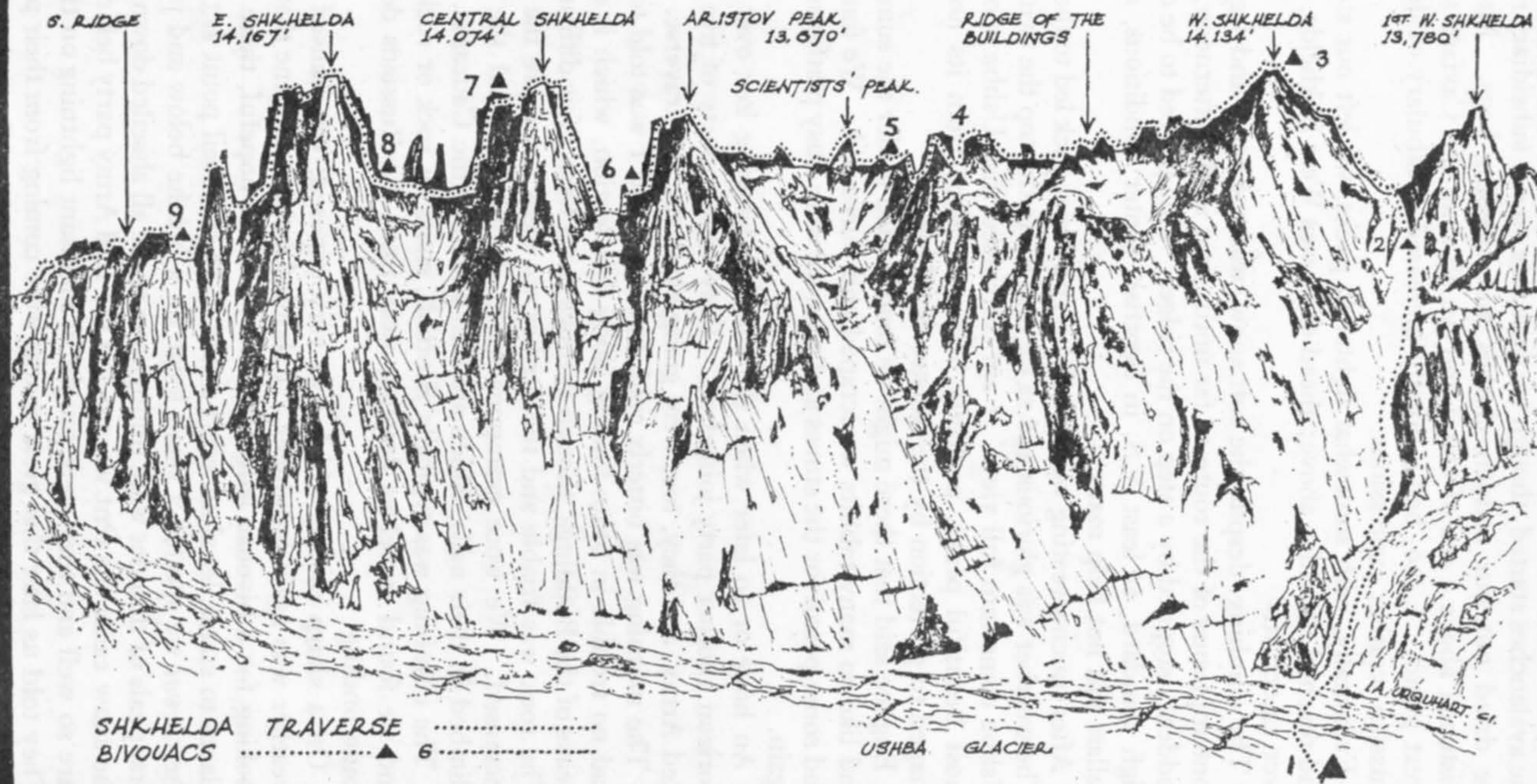
For some reason or other (the Russians never did explain) we camped on the Ushba glacier, when we could have ascended another 1,000 ft. or so that night. It was however a pleasant camp site and we had a fire going and ate some caviare and fried eggs. We turned in early and presently we forgot about Shkhelda and pack carrying.

In the morning in the cold early light, we made our way up a small glacier which was to take us to the start of the ridge. The climbing was typically alpine, nothing difficult, but good route finding was necessary.

By early afternoon storm clouds were brewing up and George and I, who were ahead of the Russians, were told to look for a bivouac site. We found one, but the Russians said they had found a better one and whilst we were discussing the pros and cons the storm came upon us. We abseiled down to the Russians' site and set to work making a platform. It had started to snow heavily and we were soon all soaked. Eventually the tent was erected and like so many slimy sardines we crawled inside.

That storm lasted for two days and eventually the sun visited us and

SHKHelda



the avalanches started, though we were safe on our subsidiary ridge, and we dried out our sodden clothes and sleeping-bags. Mt. Elbruz glistened above a sea of cloud and we all sang the Caviare song with great gusto. I, too, had a greatly increased vocabulary of derogatory Russian weather expressions.

Eventually, with somewhat lightened packs, we left our stone eyrie and reached the ridge above; ahead of us was West Shkhelda, a peak of over 14,000 ft.

The climbing, despite the soft snow, was not hard, and I grew a bit contemptuous of the route so far until, later in the afternoon, we were suddenly stopped by a step on the ridge. This proved to be of quite a high standard, at least V.S. in Scottish winter conditions, and extra ballast did not help matters.

After much sweating we were all up and easier rock led to the summit. The weather was glorious and as we rose up to the top the twin peaks of Ushba came into full view. I am convinced that Ushba is one of the most beautiful peaks, perfectly balanced, aloof from its neighbours, shaped to perfection by the Master Sculptor.

Eugene said that there might be food buried under the summit snow and like so many rabbits we scraped and burrowed. We found some, and some petrol for the stoves and soon we were busy platform building again.

An hour or so later when the sun was hanging low over a golden horizon another party joined us. They were a party of five from the Red Army, and they, too, were going along the full traverse.

The morning was bitterly cold, but clear, and I was told to lead. I had no trouble in route finding along this section, which is called the Peaks of the Buildings, though at times there were a few difficult moves. The rock was friable and the further we went the more the exposure increased. We wore crampons most of the time and the Russians climbed in their nails, which are well suited to the Caucasus.

The climbing was typically Scottish, snow on rock or rock and ice, and we found ourselves drawing away from the Russians despite the route finding.

On a sharp *cheval*, which was very exposed, we realised that bad weather was again imminent. I shouted back to Eugene that we were looking for a bivouac ledge, but we were not hopeful, there were few places to stand, let alone erect a tent. At an abseil point at the end of the *cheval* we spotted a small ledge on a brèche below and just as the first peals of thunder were rolling over us we all abseiled down. Before the snow came the tent was up, but the Red Army party behind did not fare so well and they were caught in incessant lightning on the *cheval*. They told us later that great sparks were coming from their pitons and ice-axes and that they felt themselves being charged continuously. In



Photo, H. MacInnes]

USHBA FROM WEST SHKHELD: IGOR BANDEROSKI, MASTER OF SPORT, IN FOREGROUND.



Photo, H. MacInnes]

RED ARMY PARTY ABSEILING ON THE RIDGE OF BUILDINGS.

a blizzard they abseiled down to our ledge, but there was nowhere for them to pitch their tent, and it was only with some difficulty that they traversed round it. On a down-sloping slab they managed partly to erect their tent, though most of it overhung a frightening drop.

Despite the fact that the weather was bad in the morning we continued. An awkward gangway led diagonally upwards with a difficult move which necessitated a piton. Here in swirling mist I found another abseil piton which seemed to suggest an abseil into space, but there must be a ledge down there somewhere I told myself—there was. It took two 150 ft. abseils to reach the gap on the other side of this peak—one abseil was free and the other vertical.

On the col there was dangerous snow and the ridge continued up this. I found that it was rather difficult with no security and again the weather had deteriorated and it was snowing steadily and heavily. We gave a top rope down to the Red Army party.

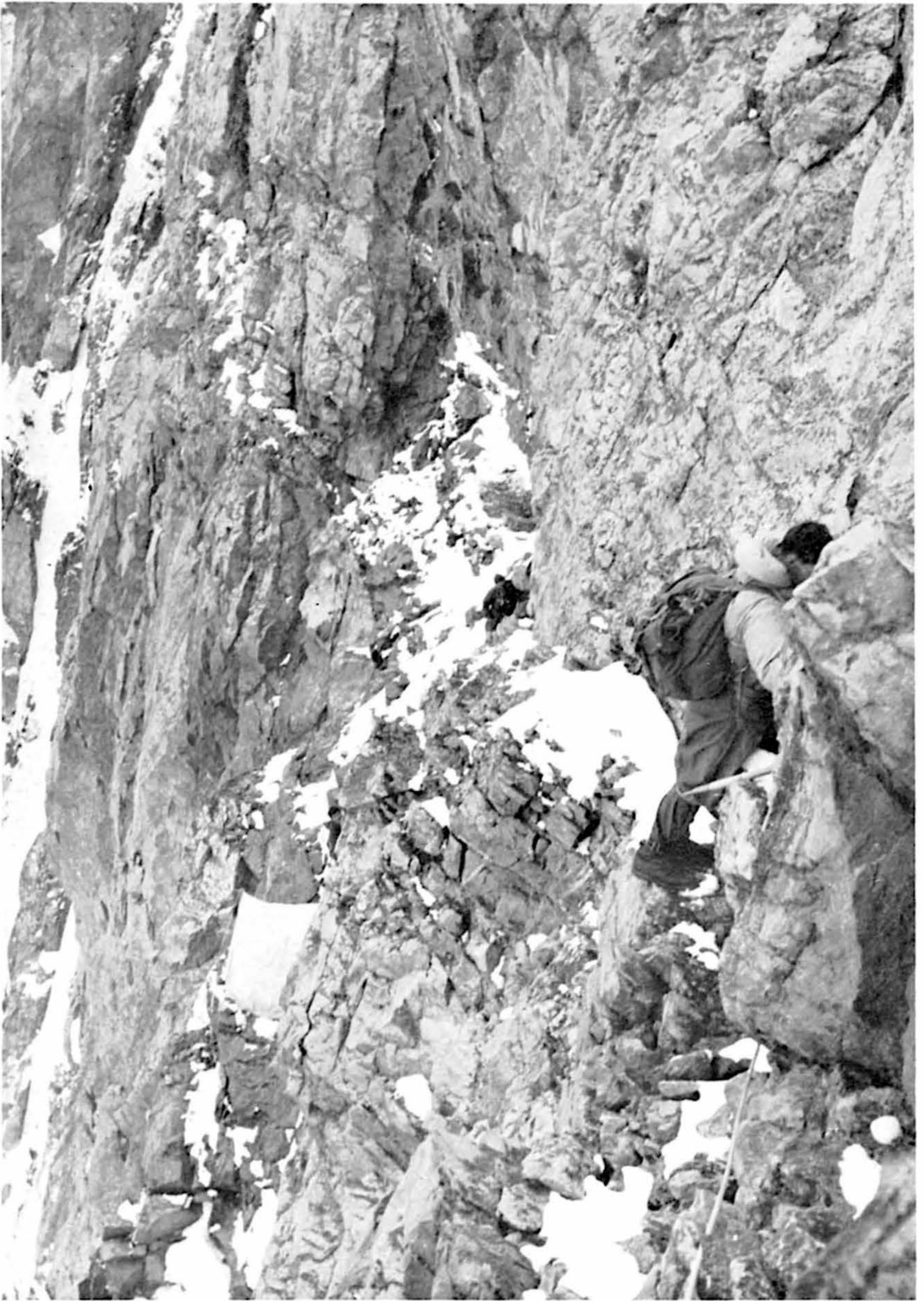
On a snow-ridge not far above the pinnacle we started to dig out ledges for the tents. We had only moved a little over a hundred yards that day, but already it was late afternoon.

Food was by this time desperately short and we were feeling the effects of hunger. The Red Army climbers, who were also very hungry, gave us two tins of meat, which were a god-send to us. This generosity is typical of all Russian climbers and this party knew that due to the bad weather they might be possibly another week on the traverse.

The next day we continued in indifferent weather over Scientists' Peak on easy snow-ridges, with a few awkward sections. By midday the clouds had again gathered and we prepared to pitch camp on a snow ledge, but conditions cleared when we had the tent up, so we took it down and continued. I suggested that the Red Army party should lead on to the next peak as I was getting very tired with leading all the time. We followed in their footsteps and near the summit we saw a party attempting the North face of Aristov Peak, 13,870 ft. It looked an impressive climb, though the party was having difficulty and the Red Army climbers were lowering their combined ropes to expedite the ascent. The party had already taken three days on the climb, which is normally done in two.

On the top we passed our Red Army friends and proceeded along a very narrow exposed summit ridge to an abseil point on the other side. Presently the others were down the 150 ft. rappel and I launched myself over the edge to join them on the small ledge below. Part of the abseil was free and when I was down about 30 ft. I happened to glance up and saw a rock hurtling towards me. I managed to dodge it and shouted a warning to the others below. It hit Igor on the leg and when I got down to the ledge he was doubled up with pain.

We tied him on to a piton and I traversed down the face until I found



Photo, H. MacInnes]

EUGENE TUR FOLLOWING UP FROM CAMP 4. RITCHIE AND RED ARMY PARTY'S TENT
VISIBLE BEHIND.

the next abseil piton. It was another hundred feet to the ledge below and it looked as if we had to go over another overhang.

Within about half an hour we had a gangway rigged up from Igor to the point of descent, which consisted of a couple of footholds. It was a laborious business getting him down, but once there he felt that he could abseil. I gave him a tight rope as he went down the cliff and from his occasional groans we knew that it was a painful descent for him.

Soon we were all down and we started at once to make a bivouac platform under the overhang. It was a good site and immediately across from us was the face of Central Shkhelda, one of the main obstacles of the climb.

A closer examination of Igor's leg revealed a great bruise near the knee and it was stiffening up rapidly. We could do nothing but wait, perhaps it would be better the following morning.

The next morning the Red Army party was down shortly after first light and as Igor's leg was still stiff we decided to let them carry on and we would continue the following morning. It was very cold and from our camp we watched their slow progress up the face. It was obviously very difficult. Soon they were swallowed up in bad weather and we dozed in our sleeping-bags.

In the evening we heard voices from above the overhang—it was a party of seven climbers from Rostov who had set off as soon as the big storm, which we had experienced at camp 2, had cleared. They had ascended on to the start of the ridge by a quicker route.

About 30 ft. along the ledge they erected their two tents and later in the evening, after Eugene had sent up his nightly 'progress' flare, they invited us along for a party. Seldom are routes to a party so hazardous, and George, who was wearing duvet socks, found the sloping iced ledge very awkward.

It was an unforgettable evening and never have the crags of the frosty Caucasus rung with such song. Songs of Burns and the Western Isles, songs of the Revolution and songs of Kipling, sung by the Rostov party. Food at the party was of course limited, we had a biscuit each and a cup of cocoa and with the strains of 'Auld Lang Syne' echoing from Central Shkhelda, in both Russian and Scots, we returned to our own tent.

The following day (the tenth day of the traverse) was slightly better and we left our ledge early. A diagonal descent on a double rope took us to the main abseil point which took us to the col at the bottom of Central Shkhelda. The Rostov party followed behind.

I ascended steep snow-covered rock of moderate difficulty which could have been in Scotland, with the exception that I would have had some breakfast, and presently we gained the edge of the wall on the left. Another 150 ft. of rope took us to a gangway of ice leading up to the right. Above this a hideous iced chimney seemed to be the only key to



Photo, H. MacInnes]

CAMP 8, BELOW EAST SHKHELDA.

the rocks above. I started up, cutting as few steps as possible to conserve energy, and quite a few pitons were used.

The chimney was of a high standard and I was filled with admiration for the Red Army party. Their leader, Roberto, was certainly a fine ice climber. Eventually the chimney was below us and we were back on the edge of the face. We followed this up for about 200 ft. with quite a few awkward moves on rock and traversed to the right below a series of overhangs severed by a rock chimney. It had started to snow again.

The next few hundred feet provided difficult rock climbing and we continued to give the Rostov party top ropes. George and I were quite amazed at our two Russian companions for they climbed up the rope all the time, but perhaps they did this to save time.

In the early afternoon we reached the shattered summit of Central Shkhelda. Had the weather been better and if I had had a decent meal during the last week I might have appreciated it, but I did not, and I was getting a bit browned off with Shkhelda!

Again it was interminable ups and downs, occasional V.S. pitches and easier pitches of rotten rock which were worse. The weather, which we now accepted, grew worse. We tried to move faster to find a ledge for the night. Some of the snow-slopes were in dangerous condition.

Eventually I saw a snow-slope of about forty degrees which I thought would provide enough space for several tents. I went down on a double rope to investigate. It was not a good site, but there was not anything else and I shouted for the others to join me. We hammered a multitude of pitons into the rock wall above and started digging, chained by karabiners to the rock like Prometheus, but we had hunger gnawing at our stomachs instead of eagles.

It took hours to hack out three ledges and an airier spot would be hard to imagine. One of the Rostov party was suffering from exposure and exhaustion and we took him into our tent. There was no room to lie lengthwise, so we had to sit across the tent, our feet over the edge. Part of a ledge had collapsed under one of the Rostov tents so we had to keep our guest for the night.

The Russians had taken proper sleeping-bags, duvet suits and foam mattresses on the climb whilst George and I had only half-length sleeping bags and duvets. There was a space of about four inches between my duvet and my elephant's foot, and we had no groundsheets. During the night our tent and our boots froze, but there was never any delay in cooking breakfast!

It was an interminable night of cramps and cold and I welcomed the grey blur of dawn. It was still snowing. Another gangway led us round to the other side of Central Shkhelda and again it was more abseiling. Two long rappels took us down to a brèche on the other side and now Central Shkhelda was behind us.



Photo, H. MacInnes]

WALL OF CENTRAL SHKHELDA FROM CAMP 6. THE RED ARMY PARTY IS ON THE FACE.

By this time I was getting a bit fed-up with doing all the leading and being last down the dangerous abseils and I suggested to Eugene and Igor that they should have a spell. With some reluctance they agreed, but after climbing an easy snow-slope, which skirted a gendarme, they asked me to carry on.

My north wall hammer was by this time broken, so I borrowed Igor's; Eugene's was also smashed. Ahead of us we could hear the Red Army party.

There were two main gendarmes to turn and they provided some awkward problems, but shortly after midday we traversed round the second and reached the Red Army party's platform on a snow arête. They were now above us on East Shkhelda.

We were undecided whether to go on or to encamp for the night as we doubted if we could climb East Shkhelda before dusk, but we decided to spend the remainder of the day on the snow ledge and towards evening we were joined by the Rostov party.

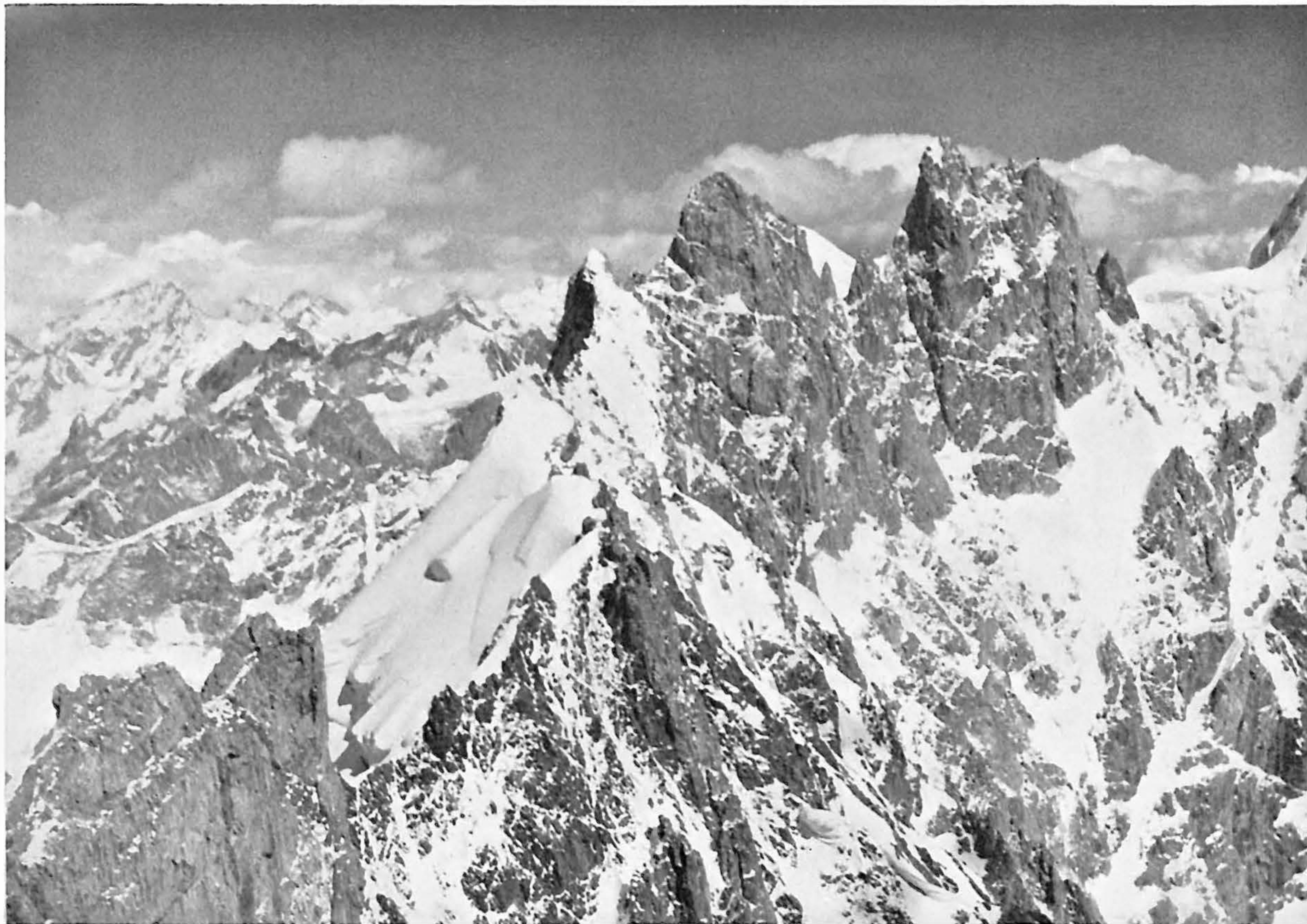
There was no singing that night, we had gone beyond the stage of trying to appear cheerful, we were famished and we had only enough petrol to melt some water for breakfast.

It was a cold clear dawn, too cold, everything was frozen solid. I started up from camp to the rock immediately above. Though it was only about V. Diff. standard I was so cold that I could not feel my feet or hands. On a sloping shelf of snow above I had to take off my boots to rub my toes. The others joined me, equally cold. Another pitch up we reached a ledge, which would have been big enough to take our tent if we had only known the previous night. Here, too, the sun reached us, and we sat down and rubbed our fingers and toes. But at least three of us had frostbite.

Reluctantly I put the rope on again and looked at the rock above, now pleasantly bathed in the golden light. The climbing was of a higher order and the rock was good. I found myself above an awkward chimney on a ledge where I took up the others. Ahead the rock looked more intimidating and there was more than a generous sprinkling of ice; we had also moved out of the sun.

I started up loose flakes and traversed into a chimney filled with ice and snow. The top of the chimney was overhanging and though a somewhat easier route lay to the left it meant that I would have to put crampons on to attempt it and my position did not lend itself to such an operation. By inserting a peg and using slings on small spikes as *étriers* I gained the lip of the overhang and pulled myself up. Above, on a small ledge, I put in a peg for a belay. Igor, who was last man, took a rope up for the Rostov climbers.

A steep ribbon of ice led up from the rock ledge in a single sweep to the summit of East Shkhelda and though this did not appear difficult



Photo, H. MacInnes]

RIDGE OF SHKHELDA FROM WEST SHKHELDA: RIDGE OF BUILDINGS ON LEFT.

from below it proved to be very awkward. The full length of the rope was run out with little or no protection. Thankfully I clambered over the top of the face and brought the others up. The Rostov leader then pulled himself up on the fixed rope we had attached to a piton. Igor, Eugene and George had carried on to look for possible food at the summit and when the Rostov climber came over the edge he handed me a small bar of chocolate and gave me a salute—we were both thankful to each other.

There was some food on the top, a very limited amount, for we left most of it for the Rostov party, but we received it with joy together with a flask of petrol. It was a glorious day and we felt that we could almost reach out and touch Ushba.

Though we were on the last peak of Shkhelda we still had a long way to go and soon we were picking our way with care over friable rock on the summit crest and down the other side. There was a series of difficult teeth on the ridge and from one of these George dropped his axe, now the only one intact. We lowered him on a long rope down to where it had fortunately stopped on a ledge and when he joined us we continued, sometimes abseiling and sometimes climbing round the gendarmes.

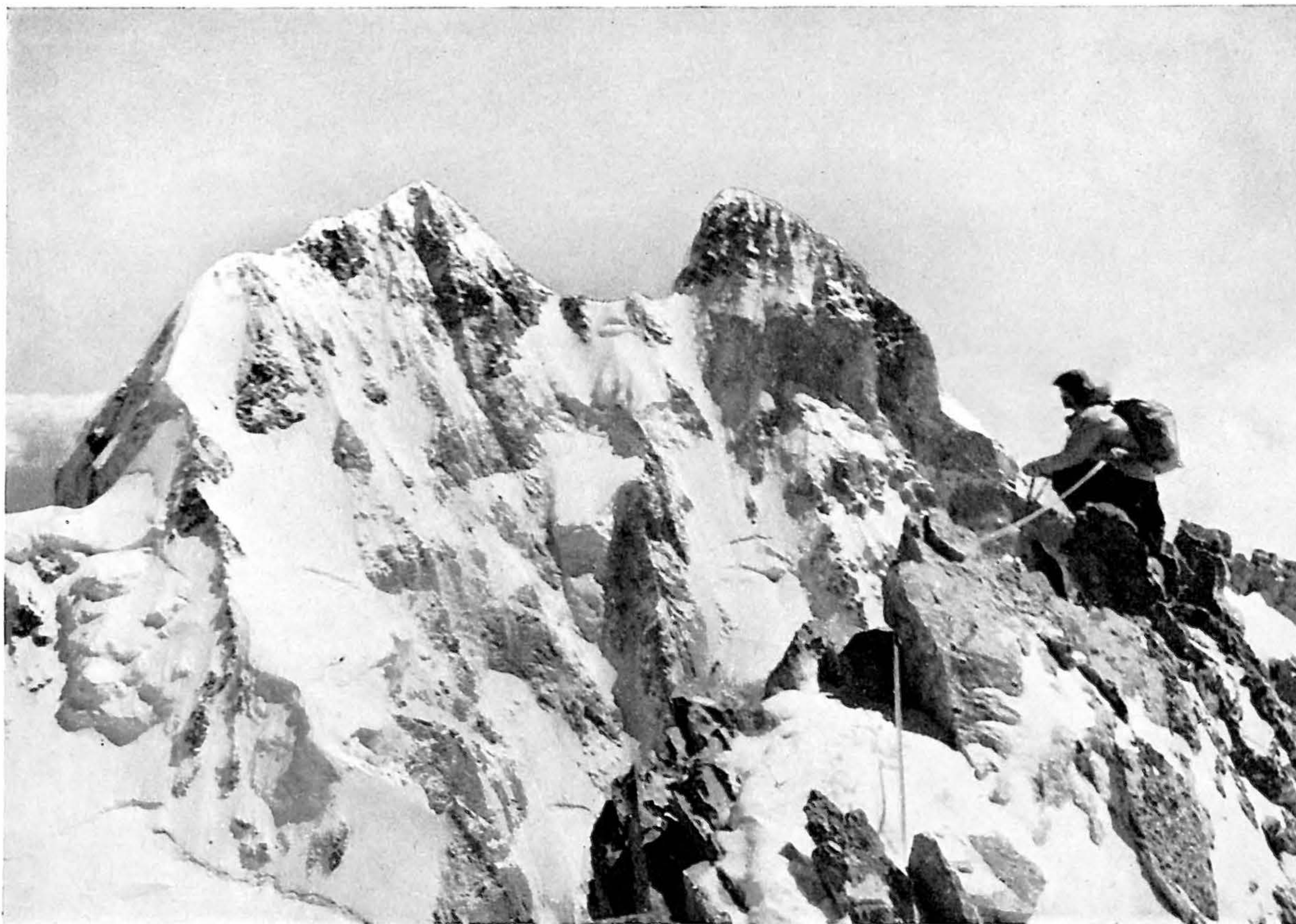
Two long abseils took us down off the main part of the ridge and ahead of us rose the Cock, a big gendarme, which proved quite awkward.

After three pitches I reached the top of this and brought the rest up, then two more long abseils took us down the other side. It was now dark and thankfully we stumbled on to a small ledge almost big enough to take the tent. The Rostov party was not so lucky, and when they came down they could find nowhere to camp so they spent the night on a ledge. It was a good night, however, and we realised that though we were not off the mountain the Shkhelda traverse was over—tomorrow would be the thirteenth day.

In the morning we continued down. It was now easy and at the top of a long snow-slope we said 'good-bye' to our Rostov companions. They were going back via Svanetia, whilst we decided to go down the Ushba glacier, though officially this was not recommended due to dangerous ice-falls.

We said good-bye to our companions in warm sunshine knowing that we had made true friends and suddenly realising our loss as they departed down a snow arête, whilst we dropped directly to the valley below.

In sweltering heat we reached the top of the Ushba ice-fall and working down through its complicated crevasse system reached an abseil point down an ice-cliff. We were soon down this and shortly afterwards ran the gauntlet through crumbling séracs and within about two hours from the top of the ice-fall reached the level glacier below.



Photo, H. MacInnes]

THE END OF THE TRAVERSE: RITCHIE ON EAST SHKHELDA, WITH USHBA BEHIND.



Photo, H. MacInnes]

NEAR THE TOP OF EAST SHKHELDA.

In the afternoon we reached Spartak Camp. The whole camp had assembled to meet us, they had seen Eugene's flare of the previous night so that they knew we were still safe and the control time had been cancelled.

Led by Eugene we marched to the front of the central building where the camp manager asked us if we had completed the traverse; when Eugene said that we had a rousing cheer went up and we were kissed on both cheeks and presented with large bouquets of flowers.

After a welcome shower we were led to the dining hall where a banquet was awaiting us and above our tables was a fine new oil painting of Shkhelda with 'Conquering Heroes' painted across it. We ate and ate. I had lost one and a half stones.

Now we were certainly back in favour again and that night in the assembly hall in front of a large audience of students Abalakov and others members of the Russian climbing hierarchy made George and me Mountaineers of the Soviet Union. The fact that we were the first foreign party to do a great Russian traverse pleased them enormously. We also had a deeper understanding of Russian weather and Russian mountains.

Two days later we had to leave and it was with a heavy heart that George and I accompanied by Igor and Eugene left Spartak. It was my most memorable holiday and in those frosty hills we had found true friends.

Perhaps George should have the last word in this account of Shkhelda, for at an age when I at least will be thinking of retiring he climbed uncomplainingly and sat unmoved when I felt like eating my boots and threatened to give up climbing altogether.