

THE NORTH-EAST PILLAR OF NELION

BY BARRY CLIFF

(Six illustrations, including two of the East face: nos. 71-76)

EVERYBODY knew it was there. From across the valley it stood out like a sore thumb; it had waited for years for an ascent. People had been up to it, of course, but it was high, the start looked nasty and the top forbidding—it would obviously be more than a day's work—and so it was left alone. Five years previously, an eminent climber had drawn a dotted line on a photograph of the Pillar. The scene was set, but still it remained unclimbed.

Up to 1962, although there were some very hard routes on the main peak of Kenya, there was a set and accepted pattern for ascents. The climb should be started very early, the ascent should be fast, and the climbers should be off the mountain before night set in. A night out, it seemed, should be avoided at all costs. A few parties did get benighted and they described their experience as being very, very cold. Nevertheless, more hard routes were added to the list, all within a day's climbing with the climbers being off the peak for the night. Inexperienced parties on the normal route, ill-equipped for a night out and with the Top Hut in sight, carried on climbing down after darkness had set in; and there were accidents.

In 1962, however, two young German climbers came out from Munich. Quiet and unobtrusive, they announced that they were not particularly looking for new lines. They simply wanted to climb this very beautiful mountain by the 'best climbs'. Regardless of guide book advice and times, they approached the mountain with their own experience and initiative. Walter Welsch and Leo Herncarek aimed to get the most out of their climb by doing it in daylight and bivouacking somewhere near the summit. In two weeks on the mountain they did all the routes which interested them and, armed with a Zdarsky sack but with no duvets, they bivouacked on the summit no less than three times. After a leisurely breakfast they set out on the West face at 8 a.m. and encountered their hardest climbing on the verglas-covered summit rocks, reaching the summit at dusk. The three previous parties had all done their ascent in the month of January when there is little verglas on this side and had set out at 2 a.m. The Germans ended their sojourn on Mt. Kenya with a first ascent of Thomson's Flake, hitherto regarded as unclimbable. We in Kenya were startled at their record of success; their approach seemed to be the right one.

The North face season in 1963 opened with brilliant weather, and a cursory glance through binoculars showed the face to be almost free of snow and ice. The time had come to attack the Pillar.

Denis Rutovitz and I climbed the French Piton Wall to Badian and bivouacked above the Wall so that we could see the upper part of the Pillar in the early morning light. We saw a likely line through the overhangs at the top. Our ascent of the French Piton Wall had been the second, eleven years after the French in 1952, which gives some idea of the interest shown in this great face. We descended the Wall and pitched a tent at the foot of the North-east Pillar.

Beneath the Pillar, a 300 ft. wall faces east and abuts on to the Krapf glacier. At its extreme right hand edge a crack seemed to give the easiest line. We started at a point some 30 ft. to the left of the crack and traversed into it at about 80 ft. There was an awkward mantelshelf move into the crack itself, where to our surprise we found it was the perfect width for chimneying. We had to sack-haul for three pitches until the crack narrowed and was eventually sealed by a number of large unsafe blocks. We broke again on to the left wall and after a steep pitch gained the arête. The crack had taken us four hours.

Unexpectedly the rock was firm, much better than on any other part of the mountain, and here also there were odd little alpine flowers in the eastern facing corners. Above the wall the ridge offered mere scrambling before we broke left on to a rising traverse line which led to the foot of the Grey Pillar, the most prominent feature of the face.

From our French Piton Wall climb we had seen that the pillar was broken by two cracks on its northern aspect, so we scrambled round the foot of it until we could see the first crack. It looked possible. The first section was easy enough, but soon it steepened and we came to grips with an overhanging little nose which led to a recess at the foot of the last long pitch of the crack. After a few abortive attempts at the crack we decided to bivouack in the recess at the foot. A lump of ice in the corner provided us with water but, as we pulled the Zdarsky over us, we realised what a bad site we had chosen. The cold gradually crept in and we sat and shivered for the rest of the night.

The sea of cloud below us dispersed as the sun rose, giving the rock a golden hue and making the crack look much more friendly. It was long, about 120 ft. to the shoulder of the pillar, and it took us three hours to climb. Sitting on top of the pillar we surveyed the great towering orange buttresses of rock above us. The line we had picked from the French Piton Wall now looked impossible and the only way seemed to be to climb up diagonally right, to what appeared to be a traverse line running across just under the overhangs. Denis pegged his way up a steep right-angled corner, and we climbed up broken slabs until we reached the traverse line. There was only one way now. Above us was the great

wall of overhangs with occasional showers of ice coming over the top from the summit ice-slope. Beneath us was the wall sweeping down to the Krapf glacier and our tiny tent. The traverse was quite easy to start with, as we threaded our way round great boulders and blocks of ice. It soon gave way to harder climbing and before long we were confronted by a very steep, holdless slab. From here we could see that once the slab was crossed, a chimney led up to the shoulder of Nelion. We were almost there but for the slab. The crack on the right hand edge of the slab was hard, and from here it seemed that there was no suitable place for pitons along the upper edge of the slab. It appeared that the only way over would be to tension across with the aid of a high peg in the crack we stood in. Dusk started to fall so we retreated down the traverse line to a small niche beneath the overhang, where we spent our second bivouac.

In the morning, we sat in this natural sun-trap and ate our last food. We realised that we would have to get back down to the camp that day so we made an agreement that we would turn back at 2 p.m., wherever we had reached. With the urgency in mind, the slab was attacked with renewed vigour. Denis went up to put the tension peg in, one of his special wide American ones which he guaranteed. We tried that slab three times before it went. Since the peg was not really high enough for the distance across the slab, the last few moves had to be made free on very small footholds. It was a nasty feeling, letting go of that tension rope. An awkward chimney followed, then there was a broken gully. In our anxiety to reach the top we discarded the rope here, only to find that the mountain hadn't yet finished with us and we had to return to get it for another awkward little pitch above. Once over this, the snow-field led to the ridge between Nelion and the Gate of the Mists. On familiar ground now we clambered on to the summit. It was 1.30 p.m. A quick pause and we started the long descent. The slab (which we named the Catwalk) gave us an interesting time; then followed straightforward abseiling until darkness caught up with us just above the arête. We waited for the moon and then did the last three abseils down on to the Krapf glacier. It had been a great climb.

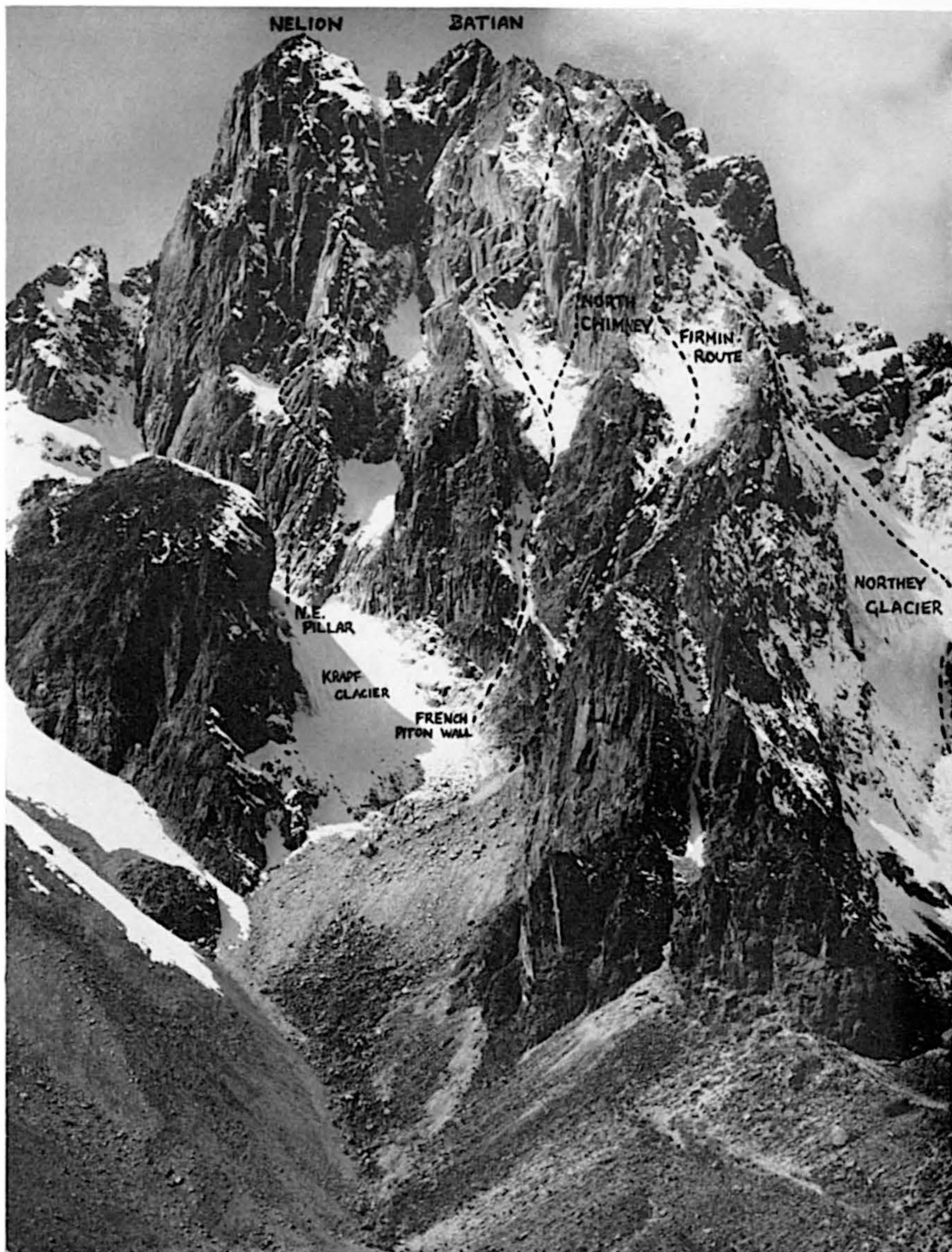


Photo: E. Schneider]

NORTH-EAST FACE OF MOUNT KENYA, SHOWING EXISTING ROUTES. WHITE CROSSES MARK THE POSITIONS OF THE TWO BIVOUACS ON THE FIRST ASCENT OF THE NORTH-EAST PILLAR OF NELION.

(No. 71)



Photo: E. Schneider]

MOUNT KENYA: EAST FACE OF NELION. THE EAST FACE ROUTE (LEFT) AND PART OF THE NORTH-EAST PILLAR ROUTE ARE MARKED.

(East face: IS=Inverted Staircase. RN=Raven's Nest. F=Funnel. BC=Black Crack. These features are not all mentioned in the brief account of this route given under 'Expeditions'; see, however, *Guide Book to Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro*, 1963 edition, p. 95. North-east Pillar: HC=Hourglass Crack. SC=Sinister Crack).



Photo: S. Aeberli]

EAST FACE OF NELION: HEINRICH KLIER IN THE BLACK CRACK.

(No. 73)



Photo: D. Rutovitz]

NEAR THE START OF THE NORTH-EAST PILLAR OF NELION. KRAPF GLACIER IN THE BACKGROUND.

(No. 74)

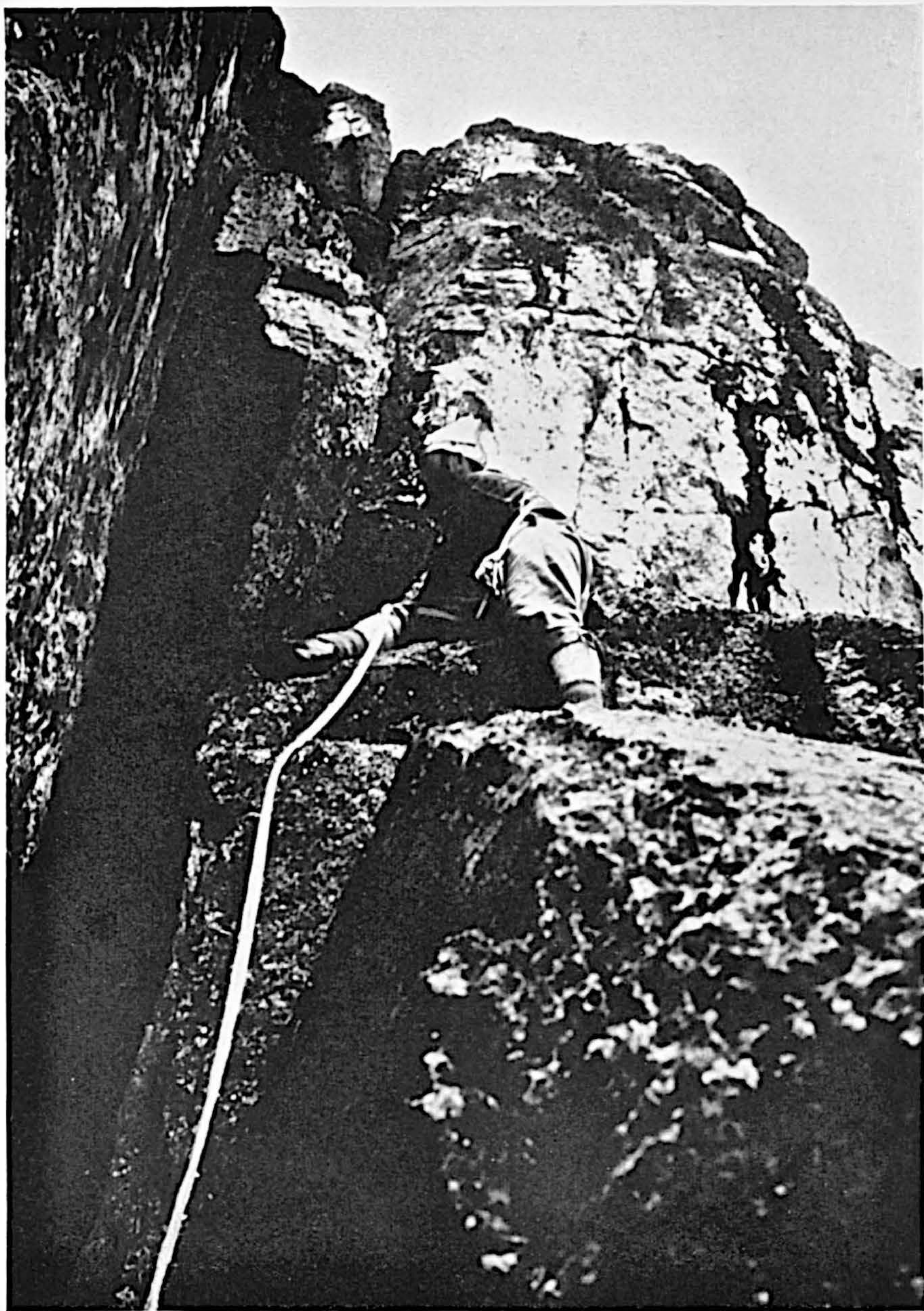


Photo: D. Rutovitz]

NELION: NORTH-EAST PILLAR. CLIFF ABOUT HALF WAY UP HOURGLASS CRACK.

(No. 75)



Photo: Barry Cliff]

NELION: NORTH-EAST PILLAR. RUTOVITZ AT THE TOP OF THE GREY PILLAR; THE PARTY'S TENTS ARE VISIBLE ON THE KRAPF GLACIER BELOW.