

THE EIGERWAND DIRECT¹

By PETER GILLMAN

(Five illustrations: nos. 60–64)

THE best previous attempt on the Eiger North face direct was by Sorgato, Piussi, Desmaison, Bertrand and Harlin in June, 1964. The party followed the Sedlmayer-Mehringer line to the top of the Second Ice-field, where it was turned back by bad weather. Between 1961 and 1964 there had been six other attempts, in all of which the parties retreated because of bad weather or the threat of it. The biggest climbing problem was the steep wall below the First Ice-field.

Early in 1965, John Harlin and Dougal Haston made a three-day reconnaissance climb, exploring possible routes up the cliff now known as the First Band. They encountered several pitches of VI. They considered a line close to the windows of the Eigerwand station, as well as the Sedlmayer-Mehringer route further to the right.

Late that year Harlin began to plan for a serious attempt in the coming winter. He would be joined in a three-man team by Haston and the American, Layton Kor, in Europe for the first time. The team envisaged a ten-day climb. At this stage, there was no question of anything other than an alpine-style assault, with very heavy rucksacks and bivouacs on the face. The team rejected the Sedlmayer-Mehringer line in favour of one some 440 yards to the left, which had been considered by the four Germans who made the first winter ascent of the face in 1961. The new line, it was argued, covered almost entirely new ground, whereas the Sedlmayer-Mehringer route used the *voie normale* for part of the Second Ice-field; it followed a very definite line on the face; and, crucially, it was more direct.

The equipment was thoroughly planned. Key items were Le Phoque double boots; Mammoth perlon rope, known to resist freezing; and Chromolly hardware. Short-wave radios would be carried for weather forecasts. For bivouac rations they would take mineral and vitamin tablets and drinks, bacon and dried meat, dried fruit and candy bars. All three members conditioned themselves by ski-ing with no gloves all winter; Harlin carried snowballs *à la Buhl*.

On February 1 the team made a helicopter reconnaissance of the face. On February 4 they moved from Leysin to Kleine Scheidegg. On February 6 they were joined by Chris Bonington, who was to photograph

¹ The photographs illustrating this article appear in *Eiger Direct*, published by W. H. Collins.—EDITOR

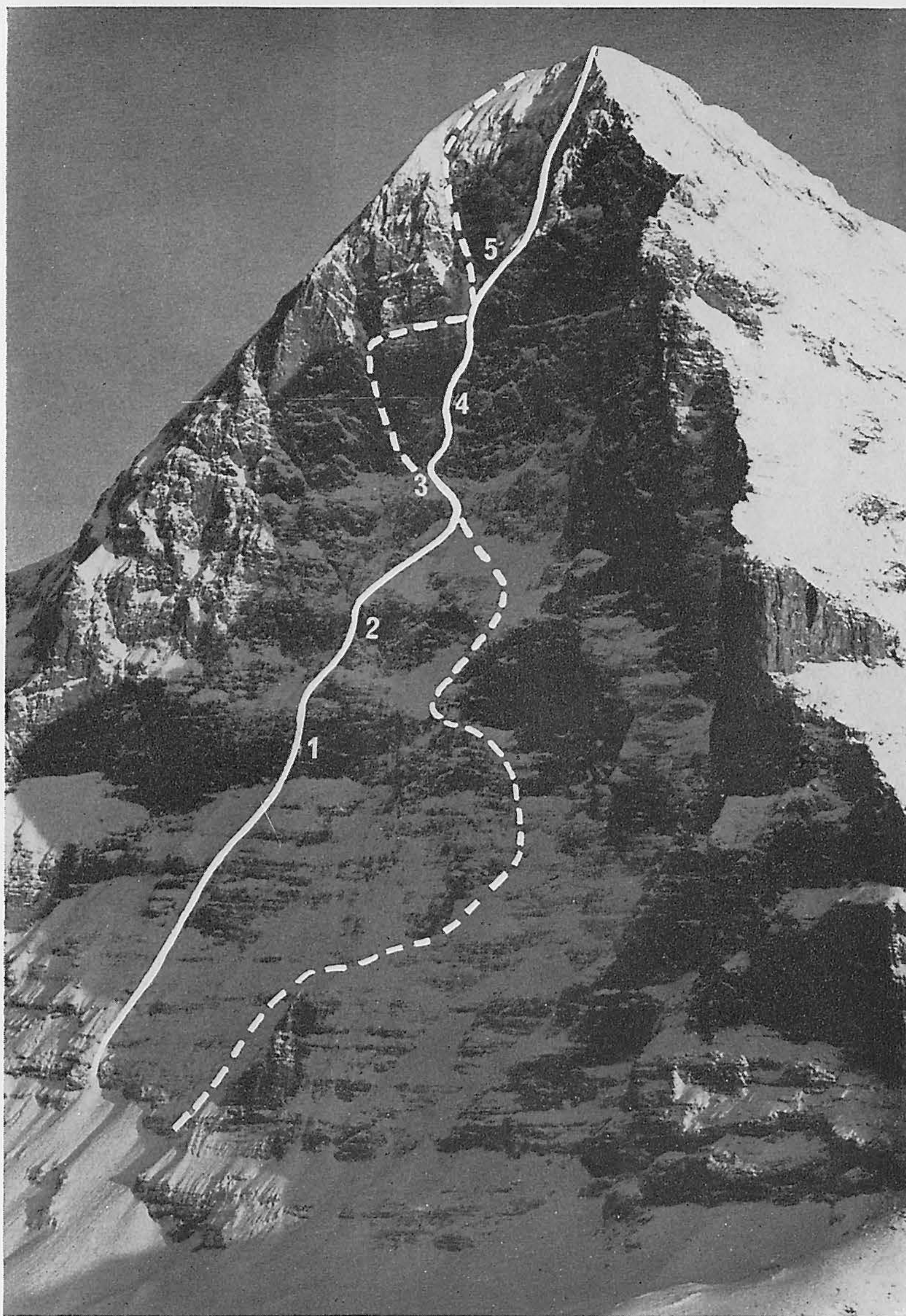


Photo: Christian Bonington]

EIGERWAND. CONTINUOUS LINE INDICATES THE DIRECT ROUTE, BROKEN LINE THE NORMAL ROUTE.

1 First Band; 2 Second Band; 3 Flat-iron; 4 Pillar; 5 The Fly.

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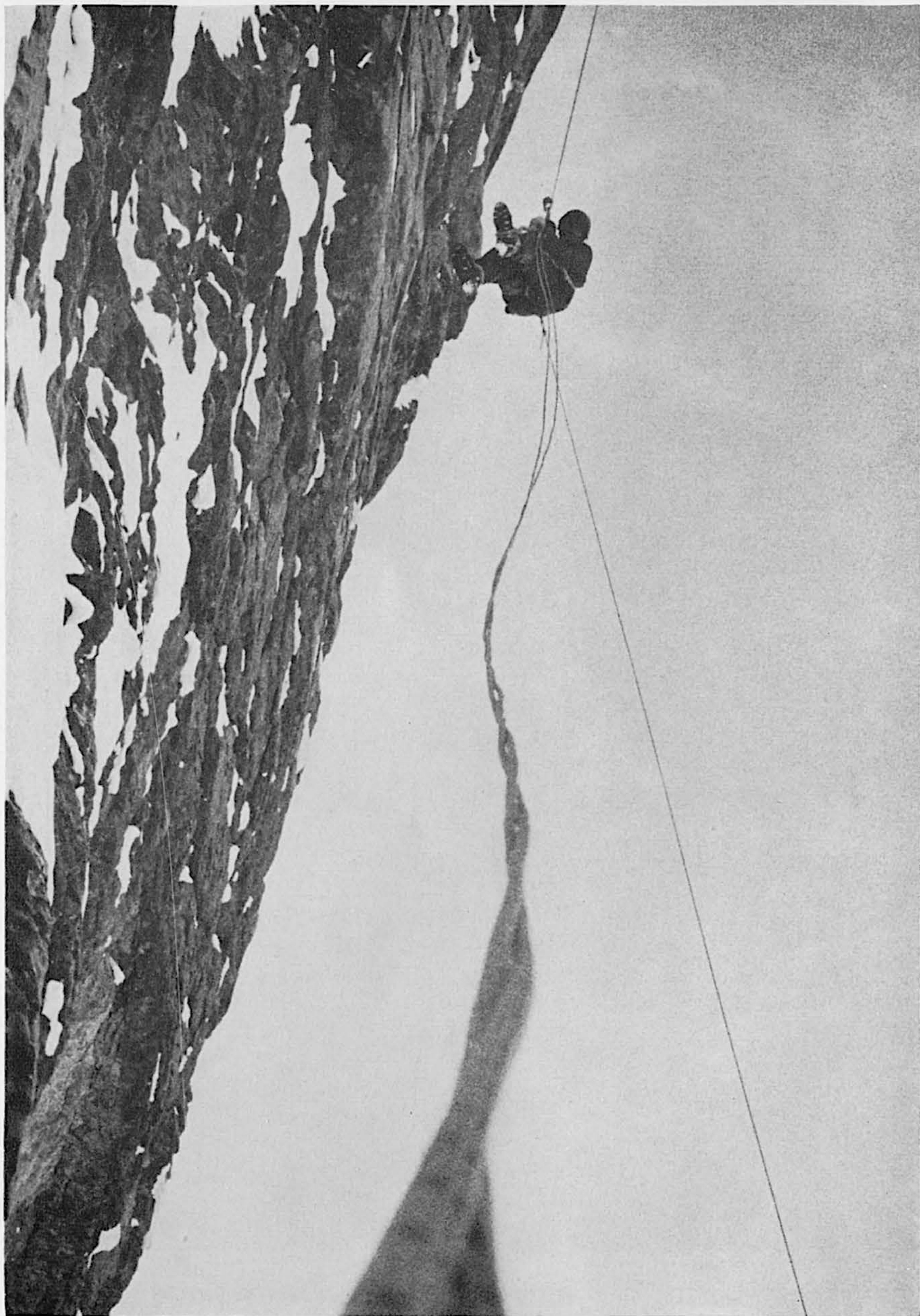


Photo: Christian Bonington]

EIGERWAND: LAYTON KOR PRUSIKING UP THE FIRST BAND. THIS IS THE LINE HE LED, DESCRIBED BY BONINGTON AS 'ONE OF THE THINNEST BITS OF PEG CLIMBING I HAVE EVER SEEN'.

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the climb for the *Daily Telegraph* group, which was giving financial backing. Bonington was also helped by Don Whillans and Mick Burke. I reported the climb for the *Telegraph*. On February 14 Haston and Bonington took the train to the Eigerwand station with the team's three rucksacks, each weighing 50–55 lb. Haston took them out onto the face so that they would be saved having to carry them up the theoretically easier, but extremely laborious, first third of the face.

On February 16 the eight-man German team arrived at Kleine Scheidegg. It became known that they intended to make a Himalayan siege of the route, fixing ropes for much of the way and bivouacking in snow-holes. Four of the team would act as an assault party, while the other four hauled supplies. They anticipated spending eighteen days on the climb. The two teams apparently planned to follow different lines from the foot of the First Band to the foot of the Flat-iron, but it was possible that they would converge there.

The German team started their attempt on February 16, the British-American team on February 18, but both retreated at the onset of one of the worst Oberland storms for many years, with gusts of 110 m.p.h. The Germans started again on February 25, the British-American team on February 28. The teams used the same fixed ropes on the first third of the face—in theory easy, but taking two days to climb. The German co-leader, Jörg Lehne, said he thought it was harder than the North face of the Triolet.

The First Band was led by Kor, who classified all three pitches A3. The rock was smooth and compact and he used a number of pitons, some of them 'tied off'. A strenuous overhang on the third pitch, he said, was the most difficult artificial climbing on the route. The team used no bolts for direct aid on the whole route. The German team used eight.

Because no clear ten-day weather forecast had presented itself, the British-American team decided to modify its tactics. Fixed ropes were left on the First Band and a snow-hole was dug at its foot, quite close to one dug by the Germans. A pair of climbers would lead for a section of the route, while another hauled supplies and sometimes returned to Kleine Scheidegg. Chris Bonington became for a time as much a full climbing member of the team as a photographer.

On March 3 Kor and Harlin reached the top of the First Band and started on the iced-up gully system leading to the Second Band, a second cliff penetrated by gullies and chimneys. At this stage the two teams were almost at the same level. The Germans were following a line as much on rock as possible, whereas the British-American team had attacked the First Band at its narrowest point: they felt that although the ice above it would be difficult, it would go quickly. Lehne said he thought the ice-climbing envisaged by the British-American team was impossible.

On March 5 Harlin and Haston had to spend their first complete day in a snow-hole. The main problem lay in keeping out the clouds of spindrift that burst into the hole whenever a powder-snow avalanche came down the face. On March 6 they were able to climb again. Haston led one particularly difficult pitch consisting of crackless slabs plated over with ice, with very poor protection. They reached the foot of the Second Band that night, bivouacked where they were, and set off up a gully system cutting through the Second Band the next morning. The German climber Karl Golikow took a fall of thirty feet or more into snow on that day, and this appeared to lead the Germans to change their mind about following rock, for they traversed left to the British-American line. For a time Harlin and Lehne led separate ropes almost level up the same gully. Harlin reached the top of the Second Band ten minutes ahead of Lehne! Again he and Haston bivouacked at their high point.

On March 7 the British-American team decided to organise its supplies and restock rucksacks. Peter Haag and Günther Strobel traversed below the Flat-iron and climbed up the extreme left-hand end of the Second Ice-field. They attempted a new way up the rock band at the top of the Second Ice-field, but eventually traversed right to the pitch of V on the *voie normale*, bivouacking below it. The next day Harlin, Haston, Bonington and Kor climbed the whole way from the top of the Second Band to the Death Bivouac, taking with them five full rucksacks. In darkness and a storm they dug themselves a precarious snow-hole in a cornice at the very top of the Flat-iron. The Germans made themselves two snow-holes at the same level.

On March 9 the two teams diverged again. Haag and Strobel moved right and started up a crack system. Haston and Kor traversed left on to the Third Ice-field, and climbed two long, steep pitches to its top. A mixed pitch led to the foot of a high, smooth pillar that became known as the Central Pillar. There they met Haag and Strobel again, and then roped back down to the Death Bivouac.

It snowed that night, and more snow was forecast in the morning. It was decided that Kor should go back to Kleine Scheidegg (Bonington had gone down the morning before), while Haston and Harlin sat out the bad weather in the snow-hole. The Germans started to climb that day and had a desperate retreat when the storm hit the face, losing a rucksack full of supplies. Haston and Harlin spent five days in the snow-hole. For the first two they were plagued by spindrift, but eventually the entrance was blocked by snow. The cold, estimated at -20° to -25°C. , was tolerable. They avoided rheumatic pains by having foam rubber mattresses to lie on. On the third day Harlin reported to Kleine Scheidegg that he was not feeling well—he had fever, a fast pulse and weak breathing. *Five* doctors—all in the same party from Paris—were found, and they held consultations by walkie-



Photo: Christian Bonington]

EIGERWAND: LAYTON KOR LEADING ACROSS THE FOOT OF THE PILLAR—VERY DIFFICULT ARTIFICIAL CLIMBING BECAUSE OF THE LACK OF CRACKS.

(No. 64)

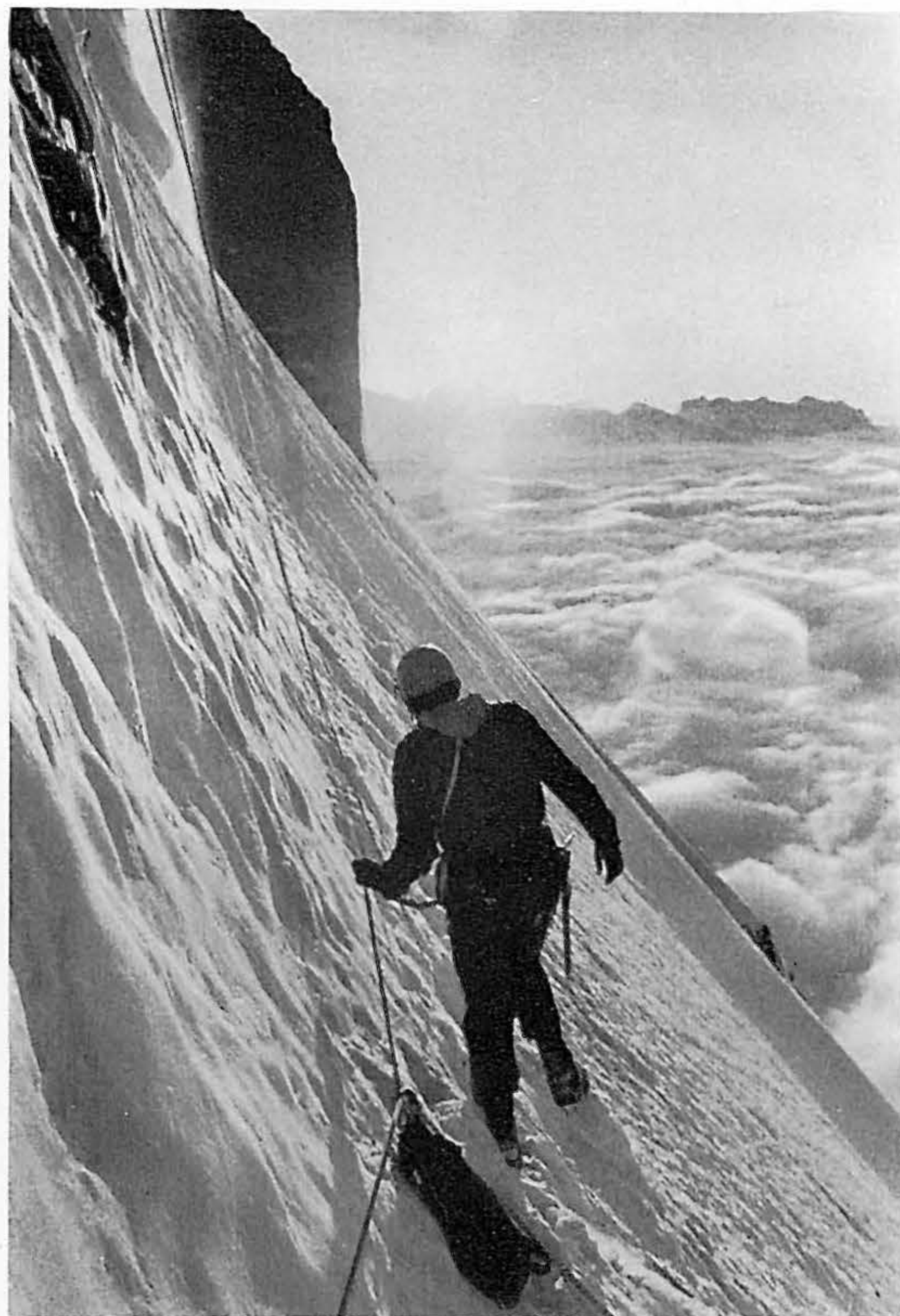


Photo: Christian Bonington]
 HASTON CROSSING TO SNOW-HOLE JUST BELOW FIRST
 BAND.

(No. 62)



Photo: Christian Bonington]
 JOHN HARLIN WITH WALKIE-TALKIE SET IN SNOW-HOLE ON DEATH
 BIVOUAC. KOR AND HASTON IN SLEEPING BAGS IN BACKGROUND.

(No. 63)

talkie. On the fourth day food ran out. On the fifth, Bonington, Whillans and Kor struggled to the foot of the face with food; Golikow and Lehne continued to the foot of the First Band, returning to Kleine Scheidegg at 10 p.m.

On the sixth day—March 16—Harlin and Haston decided to come down. There had been severe storms for four days; the weather was improving, but powder-snow avalanches were pouring down. On March 17 Bonington and Kor returned to the Death Bivouac. Harlin went to Interlaken hospital, where he was told he was recovering from bronchitis. On the way, he and I went to the funeral of Hilti von Allmen in Lauterbrunnen. In the evening Kor and Bonington radioed to Kleine Scheidegg that the Germans had reached the top of the Central Pillar, but this turned out to be a misunderstanding. The next day Bonington and Kor could see that the Germans were attempting a chimney to the right of the Central Pillar near the top of which was a large, bulging snow overhang. Kor had already decided that he would attempt to traverse the foot of the Central Pillar. He did so on March 19. It was a full rope-length, mostly artificial on poor and brittle rock, classified by Kor as A3. This was one of the most important leads on the whole climb, as it opened up the route to the Spider. Bonington then led up steep ice to within a rope-length of the top of the Pillar. That evening Lehne told Bonington that they had decided their chimney was too dangerous, and he asked if Bonington and Kor would drop a rope when they reached the top of the Central Pillar. Bonington naturally agreed. The next morning—March 20—Lehne asked if Bonington would agree to join ropes instead, so Kor and Golikow climbed together up the gully to the left of the Central Pillar to its top. In his account of the climb in *Alpinismus*, May, 1966, Lehne ignores this episode. Diagrams in *Alpinismus* and *La Montagne*, April, 1966, show the direct route as following the German false line to the right of the Pillar, with Kor's key traverse not marked.

Kor now led an artificial pitch of 110 ft., negotiating an 8 ft. overhang near the top. On March 21 Bonington returned to Kleine Scheidegg, and Haston and Harlin returned to the face. Kor climbed with Lehne; Lehne led from the previous day's high point, and Kor led the next pitch up the right leg of the Spider and into the ice-field of the Spider proper. The British-American team's intention was to push for the summit on March 22. But on the evening of March 21 bad weather was forecast, so Harlin and Haston, joined later by Kor when he came down from the Spider, decided to postpone the push until good weather was again forecast.

On March 22 they confirmed the decision. Kor came back down to Kleine Scheidegg. But at lunch time the weather forecasts said the onset of the storm would be delayed by a day. When base camp radioed

that a German climber had reached the Fly, the smaller ice-field above and to the right of the Spider, Haston and Harlin decided to bivouac in the Fly themselves that night and go hard for the summit the next day. Kor would follow and join the German summit party.

Haston and Harlin started prusiking up the fixed ropes from the Death Bivouac to the Spider, Haston ahead. At 3.15 p.m. Harlin was on the penultimate fixed rope below the Spider, when it broke at the point where it ran over the edge of a slab. Harlin fell 4000 ft.

The immediate reaction in both teams was that the climb should stop. But that evening the climbers decided to continue. The clinching argument was that if the climb were called off, the weeks of effort and John Harlin's death would have been for nothing. Success would be John Harlin's memorial. The teams would form an international rope, and the route would be known as the John Harlin *Gedächtnisweg*, or the John Harlin route.

On March 23 the climbers decided to put all their efforts into getting one summit party to the top, particularly as the ropes below the Spider were seen to be worn in places. That afternoon Bonington and Mick Burke were dropped by helicopter on the glacier between the Eiger and the Mönch, making their way to the West face ready to meet the climbers. That night the storm came.

On March 24 the five made slow progress in the face of a hammering wind and bitter cold. From the West face, Bonington radioed that conditions were the worst he had ever known. A party of four Germans prepared to go up the West face as a precaution, in case the climbers on the face needed help—radio contact had been virtually lost. One of the few audible messages came at 9 p.m.; Lehne said that he had no idea where he was and that he was looking for somewhere to bivouac.

On March 25 the West face party set off. On the North face Haston led the second rope of himself, Siggi Hupfauer and Roland Votteler. The Zurich weather bureau later reported that the wind had been gusting at 95 m.p.h. with a temperature of -26°C . The summit ice-field, thought to be straightforward, presented severe technical difficulties. Lehne and Strobel reached the summit at about 4 p.m., followed an hour or so later by Haston, Hupfauer and Votteler. Haston and Bonington both suffered from frost-bite, but made complete recoveries after hyperbaric treatment in the London Hospital under Dr. Ward. Votteler and Strobel both lost all their toes, and Lehne lost one big toe.

The rope that broke was a 50 m. length of 7 mm. perlon—not Mammoth—and a section of it has been sent for testing by the examining judge at Interlaken.

In his route description, Haston lists seventy-six pitches, with eleven of IV and IV sup., twelve of V and V sup., one of VI; two of A₂, and four of A₃.